

First in Family Project (Phase One and Two), 2015 - 2016

Belinda Cameron and Clare Schonfeld

Online Marketing, Marketing and Student Attraction, University of Southern Queensland

Dr Nancey Hoare

School of Psychology and Counselling, University of Southern Queensland

Abstract

The necessity for Australian universities to offer sustainable support to First in Family (FiF) students is paramount, with over 50% of Australian university students being the first person in their family to attend university (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). In 2015, 60% of the University of Southern Queensland's (USQ) student population identified as FiF students, increasing from 56% in 2013 (Higher Education Information Management Systems data, Department of Education and Training, 2015). In an effort to enhance FiF students' learning journeys and to combat the higher attrition rates experienced by FiF Australian university students (Coates & Ranson, 2011; McMillan, 2005), the First in Family Project team extended upon work conducted and insights gained during the First in Family Project (Phase One) in 2015. Market research and subsequent online initiatives implemented to reduce the disparities faced by the FiF cohort are discussed in this report.

Aim

The purpose of the USQ First in Family Project (Phase One) was to investigate and further understand the FiF cohort in greater depth, through the facilitation of a variety of outreach and engagement activities with the FiF cohort, their family members and support networks.

The purpose of the First in Family Project (Phase Two) was to contribute to reducing the disparity for FiF current and prospective university students and ultimately contribute to increasing the participation and retention of these students in accredited undergraduate qualifications. In 2016, the FiF Project team amplified outreach and engagement activities undertaken with the FiF cohort during 2015, harnessing insights gained through the implementation of three online initiatives designed specifically for FiF current and prospective university students.

Project overview

In 2015 the USQ Online Marketing team delivered the First in Family Project (Phase One), outreaching and engaging with the FiF cohort via a number of initiatives including the facilitation of 21 focus groups, two on-campus events for FiF school leavers, and two webinars on the topics of self-confidence and resilience. This outreach work was undertaken to gain greater insight into FiF cohort beliefs, values, barriers, myths and perceptions regarding university.

Findings from research conducted by Luzeckyj, King, Scutter and Brinkworth (2011) have shown that FiF students experience educational disadvantage because their cultural and social

capital does not readily align with that of a university. Pascarella et al. (2004) concluded that FiF students are disadvantaged in terms of preparedness for, and knowledge of, university. O'Shea, May, Stone and Delahunty (2015) found there were a number of myths in relation to university within the FiF cohort, which added to FiF student anxiety levels. Insights gained by the First in Family Project team throughout 2015 support these findings.

Common themes emerging from outreach with the FiF cohort during 2015 included; time management and work/study balance, workload expectations, enrolment procedures, accessing support resources, importance of peer networking, family understanding of workload requirements and overall student independence, confidence and resilience.

In 2016, additional Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funding enabled the First in Family Project team to implement online initiatives, extending upon insights gained via outreach and engagement activities with the FiF cohort throughout 2015. The first component of the Project aimed to address the disparities often experienced by FiF students by raising awareness of university processes and experiences through the design and dissemination of 31 online resources which were drafted in close consultation with the FiF cohort during Phase One of the Project. Additionally, these resources aimed to address the range of myths that exist in relation to university. The second component of the Project comprised of a FiF stand-alone microsite which was developed and implemented to bring together FiF inspired resources, providing relatable and relevant information for the FiF community, and the opportunity for users to register their interest to receive further information. These resources were disseminated to the FiF cohort via a targeted online marketing campaign throughout South East Queensland and associated communication plan (via USQ's Customer Relationship Management System), which was in market from August until November 2016. The online nature of the Project provided cost-effective, efficient outreach to the FiF cohort across regional Queensland, allowing people to anonymously access the resources provided.

The third component of the project encompassed a pilot online program facilitated in collaboration with Dr Nancey Hoare (Psychology Lecturer, USQ School of Psychology and Counselling). The Headstrong online program aimed to enhance the psychological wellbeing of current first year undergraduate domestic FiF students in an effort to improve factors that ultimately impact upon student retention and completion rates within the FiF cohort at USQ. The impact and effectiveness of this of this pilot online program was examined by Dr Nancey Hoare.

2015 Outreach and engagement activities

In 2015 the First in Family Project team conducted market research with the FiF cohort by way of 21 focus groups across regional South-east Queensland, to develop a better understanding FiF current and prospective students and their key influencers. Findings from focus groups were used to inform key recommendations regarding content and resources that would be developed throughout the First in Family Project. For the purpose of this market research, the FiF target market was defined as students who were the first in their immediate family to attend university or to consider attending university. The Project team reconnected with the same focus group participants later in 2015, after a suite of online resources had been drafted, to gain feedback to ensure that the Project team accurately acknowledged and interpreted the key themes previously identified, ensuring the content created was relatable and relevant to the FiF cohort.

Fifteen face to face interviews were conducted with FiF current USQ students and alumni. Not only did these interviews provide great insight into the barriers, myths and perceptions experienced by the FiF cohort, these interviews were recorded which resulted in the creation of a suite of FiF videos. These videos allowed interviewees to provide first-hand accounts of common struggles and subsequent advice to assist in normalising the experience of university for FiF current and future students and their family and support networks. These videos are currently housed on the university website and the firsttouni.com.au website, in addition to being utilised throughout the pilot Headstrong online program discussed later in this report.

The 2015 Project team facilitated two on-campus events for current FiF Year 12 students. Unlike any other event previously offered by the university, the events aimed to raise the aspirations and self-belief of FiF high school-leavers, empowering them to approach the next phase of their lives with optimism and confidence. These one day events facilitated a program incorporating presentations and interactive sessions ranging from mindfulness to career mentoring. These events provided opportunity for the facilitation of in-depth, face to face discussion around what it's like to be FiF which was extremely valuable.

The Project team had originally planned a series of Coffee and Confidence workshops (four in total), which aimed to assist in raising aspiration and self-confidence in prospective FiF mature aged students. While interest in these workshops was very high, actual conversion of registrations to attend were limited, which may be attributed to the self-confidence levels of the target market. To improve the conversion of interest into actual registrations, and allow for easier access and participation it was decided to convert the workshop concept into two online webinars. This approach worked extremely well with 84 registrations for webinar one – Self-confidence with Sonia McDonald, and 74 registrations for webinar two – Resilience with Cathy Knight. Retention rates for both webinars exceeded expectations, with a 97% retention rate for Webinar one, and a 100% retention rate for webinar two. Webinar presenters were out-sourced and were selected based on possession of relevant qualifications, skills and experience to discuss self-confidence and resilience. These consultants have worked with numerous higher education providers and are well regarded by other industries.

Additionally, in March 2015, the First in Family Project team outreached with Dr Sarah O'Shea by way of a teleconference, to discuss findings from the Breaking the Barriers project (2015) which had sought to explore the experiences of FiF students and their family members and support networks. This communication confirmed common findings such as a perceived lack of confidence and the range of myths that exist in relation to university (O'Shea, May, Stone, & Delahunty; 2015).

Together, this body of market research, in addition to the findings of O'Shea et al. (2015) provided a strong knowledge base to design future project deliverables.

Phase 2 Project deliverables - 2016

Deliverable one - Suite of FiF inspired online resources

Deliverable one aimed to contribute to raising knowledge and awareness of university experiences and processes within the FiF community through the design and dissemination of a suite of FiF inspired online resources to FiF current and prospective students and their

families and support networks. These resources were drafted in close consultation with the FiF cohort during Phase One of the Project in 2015.

The resources have been made readily accessible to FiF current and prospective students and their families/support networks via a landing page housed on the university's Social Hub website (social.usq.edu.au/fif) and the FiF microsite (www.firsttouni.com.au). The Social Hub FiF page includes a variety of blogs, infographics, slideshares and videos, featuring advice from current FiF students and alumni. These resources have taken a relaxed approach, with a social tone, discussing and addressing topics raised by the FiF cohort during Phase One of the Project in 2015. Topics include how to tell your family that you are going to university, understanding university jargon, study fees, how to create a new normal, to name a few.

Deliverable two - Stand-alone FiF microsite

The FiF microsite (www.firsttouni.com.au) was designed to bring together FiF inspired resources for future FiF students and their families and/or support networks, providing a comfortable, non-intimidating space for the FiF community to find relatable and relevant information about university.

The Project team outsourced the design of this microsite to USQ's tendered creative agency due to financial constraints and the associated human resources required. The microsite was created using a 'journey' design which takes viewers through a logical progression of information regarding what university is really like, starting with talking about the number of great firsts that life offers, from one's first holiday, first car, first job, through to taking the leap to being the first person in your family to attend university. The microsite then progresses to the topics of support, how to balance study and family life, how to talk to friends and family about university, and provides real life testimonials from FiF current students and alumni.

The structured approach to the microsite was guided by feedback received from the FiF cohort during Phase One of the Project in 2015. FiF focus group participants described feeling overwhelmed by the large volume of information housed on traditional university websites. Throughout the journey there is opportunity for users to link out to other online resources for deeper content and information including blogs, infographics, slideshares and a video covering the following topics which resulted from conversations and interactions with the FiF cohort throughout 2015:

- What is First in Family?
- Benefits of going to uni
- Talking to friends and family
- How does uni work?
- Balancing study and family life
- Overcoming self-doubt
- Understanding uni lingo

Deliverable three - Headstrong online program

The development of Headstrong was informed by the results of data collected during Phase One of the First in Family Project in 2015, which identified confidence and resilience as key components for FiF current students and alumni when taking the leap to attend university, and successfully completing their university study. Conclusions drawn from research conducted

by O'Shea (2015) suggest that the process of students arriving, surviving and succeeding at university are characterised by personal growth and change, which further supported the concept of this online initiative, which encompassed a range of activities to promote personal growth. The objectives of the Headstrong online program were to develop, deliver, and evaluate an online program based on an evidence-based psychological approach called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to first year, FiF, undergraduate USQ current domestic students (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012). The Headstrong online program aimed to contribute to increasing participants' levels of self-confidence, resilience, psychological flexibility and the ability to take action in line with important values. The program also aimed to contribute to decreasing levels of perceived stress; in an effort to contribute to participants' psychological wellbeing and ultimately to improve FiF student retention and completion rates at USQ.

Additionally, the program aimed to assist students in building their own support networks, deemed as a vital part of student success by participants in FiF focus groups, and further supported by research conducted by Southgate et al. (2014). This was achieved via a closed Facebook group where student interaction was encouraged and conversation was facilitated by the Project team, including exclusive competitions created to inspire student participation. In addition, a program specific Moodle site allowed participants the opportunity to interact via online forums.

The program was facilitated between 8 August and 2 September 2016, with 71 participants registering to take part. While 174 students expressed interest in the program, only 125 students were eligible to participate (FiF, first-year, undergraduate, domestic students), resulting in a participation rate of 56.8%. Those students ineligible to participate were provided links to FiF inspired online resources housed on the university's Social Hub website. It is interesting to note that 22.4% of ineligible students identified as international students. Fifteen students confirmed that they had met the criteria, and expressed interest in participating, however failed to complete the pre-program survey within given timeframes. Thirty-nine students who expressed interest and failed to register did not respond to subsequent follow-up.

Demographics

- Gender - 81.7% female
- Employment status – 59.2% employed
- Age – mean age of 32 years old, standard deviation of 10.26

The mean age of Headstrong participants was 32 years, which is in line with the current USQ population, average age 31 (USQ Data Warehouse, 2016 data).

The high percentage of female participants in comparison to the general population of USQ (53% female, USQ Data Warehouse, 2016 data) deserves further consideration. One possible explanation is that male university students are less inclined to seek what may be perceived as support/counselling (Erkan, Ozbay, Cihangir-Cankaya, & Terzi, 2012).

The online nature of this program was guided by the fact that over 77% of USQ's student population study online (USQ Data Warehouse, 2016 data). Additionally, research conducted by Wohn et al. (2013) concluded that Facebook connections can help FiF university applicants believe in their ability to succeed in higher education, and that this social media channel is beneficial in shaping the perceptions of FiF students' university aspirations.

Headstrong program content was developed by Dr Nancey Hoare in consultation with Belinda Cameron. The program was housed on a USQ OpenDesk Moodle site. The content was adapted from an existing Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) protocol written by Feros, Lane, Ciarrochi, and Blackledge (2011), with permission from Dr Joseph Ciarrochi. The content consisted of a 'Welcome and Overview of the Program' module, which welcomed the students, provided an overview of ACT, and provided instructions for how to complete the program, along with six self-paced modules, aligned with the six core processes of ACT. It is beyond the scope of this report to provide details of the ACT core processes; therefore, interested readers are referred to Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson (1999) for a comprehensive overview of ACT.

To gauge the effectiveness of this ACT-based pilot program, data were collected from participating students prior to them commencing the online program and again upon their completion of the program. Participant recruitment for the program was managed by Belinda Cameron and Clare Schonfeld and occurred via various channels, such as email outbounds to students, posters placed across USQ's three campuses, Social Media advertising, phone calls and promotion by USQ first year course lecturers. Ethics approval for the research component of the Headstrong online program was granted by the USQ Human Research Ethics Committee.

Phase 2 Project outcomes

The FiF Project (Phase Two) met all deliverables on time and within budget, demonstrating positive results as outlined below.

Deliverable one - Suite of FiF inspired online resources

A total of 31 FiF inspired online resources were designed as part of the FiF Project (Phase Two) including a combination of slideshares, white papers, blogs, infographics, videos and webinars. This suite of FiF inspired online resources gained 2,753 views collectively from 1 August – 30 November, 2016, demonstrating the reach and increased awareness that these resources facilitated. Qualitative feedback has been extremely positive with commentary from the FiF cohort captured via an online feedback form resulting in 92% of respondents stating that they found the resources 'very' or 'extremely' relevant.

Additional qualitative data collected through the facilitation of three focus groups with seven current FiF students and six USQ employees from across the university has also been positive, with all participants agreeing that the suite of FiF resources will contribute to FiF students and their families/support networks in gaining knowledge around university experiences and processes.

Of particular note was the positive commentary received regarding the videos that have been created with FiF current students and alumni, such as:

“The Youtube clips of actual real life USQ students from a broad range of backgrounds and ages has been helpful as it helps me to relate to everyone's situations and feel that I am not the only person on this planet that experiences what and how I'm feeling.”

Comments such as this clearly demonstrate that these resources were found to be relatable and of relevance to the FiF cohort.

The facilitation of several internal stakeholder meetings enabled the Project team to consult with over 80 USQ internal stakeholders to gather further feedback on the suite of FiF online resources. These interactions highlighted that USQ employees feel that the FiF resources would also be beneficial for the general student population, and should not be restricted to the FiF cohort. Current student focus group participants also expressed this view.

Overall, evidence suggests that the suite of online FiF inspired resources has been very well received and perceived as providing value to students in terms of increasing knowledge around university experiences and processes.

A FiF indicator in the university's Customer Relationship Management System has been implemented to facilitate identification of FiF students across core university systems, triggering an email series directing FiF students to FiF inspired resources. This indicator is a permanent addition to university systems and processes providing a sustainable approach to disseminating FiF specific resources, support and information to this growing cohort.

Deliverable two - Stand-alone FiF microsite

The FiF microsite was designed, implemented and launched on 7 August, 2016, gaining 9,559 views between launch date and 30 November, 2016, with 108 users registering to receive more information about university processes and experiences within the same timeframe. An overall open rate of 57.6% for subsequent email outbounds is considered an exceptional result in comparison to the 2016 Education and Training Industry Standard email open rate of 21.96% (Leszczynski, 2016).

Qualitative data collected through the facilitation of three focus groups with seven current FiF students and six USQ employees reflected the simplicity and easy navigation of the site. One participant noted that the microsite made them feel like they were part of a community, a very positive result. Constructive feedback around the 'Join our Community' button at the bottom of the site resulted in a change being made to the microsite to provide more context as to what 'Join our Community' really encompassed. A simple change resulting in the word 'Register for more info' instead of 'Join our Community' with context given, will hopefully encourage a larger number of users to click on the register button to receive further information. This will continue to be monitored by the Online Marketing team in-kind throughout 2017.

Deliverable three - Headstrong online program

Figure 1 below highlights the positive outcomes of the Headstrong online program. Grounded in ACT processes, Headstrong aimed to increase participants' psychological flexibility. Specifically, psychological flexibility involves contacting the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and using this awareness to live a life in harmony with deeply personal values. The Headstrong program also aimed to enhance students' ability to cope with stress, be less vulnerable to the effects of stress, feel competent in their academic abilities, and become better equipped to overcome barriers that they might face in their studies. Results showed that after engagement in the Headstrong online program, students had a statistically significant increase in their psychological flexibility, resiliency, career confidence, stress competency, and general self-efficacy.

It was particularly rewarding to see such a positive increase in psychological flexibility, self-efficacy and resilience, as these were common themes detected via focus groups with the FiF

cohort during Phase One of the First in Family Project in 2015. During focus groups, many participants stated that they felt their self-confidence was lacking when it came to university study, and additionally, current FiF students reported that their level of resilience was a key factor in their success at uni, particularly during their first year of study.

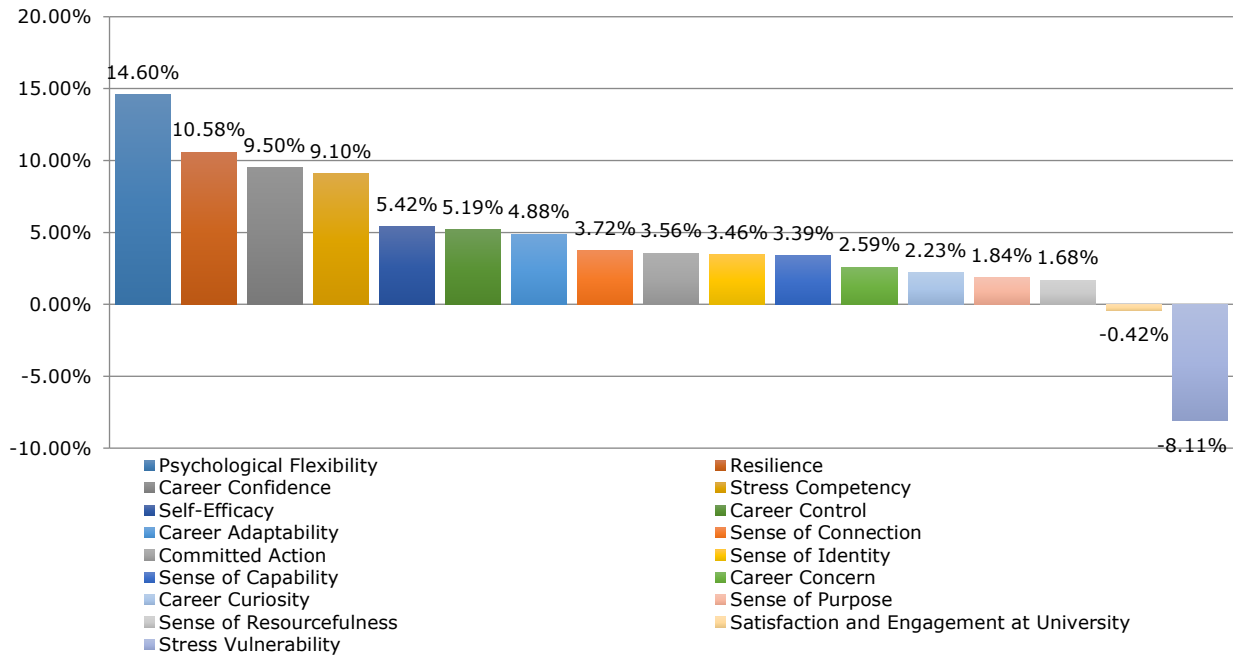


Figure 1. Percentage change in participants' mean scores across psychological measures from pre-Headstrong to post-Headstrong

Moreover, students were observed to have statistically significantly less vulnerability to stress. This was considered an extremely positive result given the time of year during which the program was facilitated. Mid-August to early-September is a very heavy assessment period for students, however this was the only timeframe feasible for the program due to HEPPP funding timeframes and staff availability. It is pleasing to see that the program had an effect on helping to reduce students' vulnerability to stress, and it is assumed that this would have had a positive impact on their studies. It should be noted that this pilot research project did not include a control group, and as such further research on the Headstrong program using more robust methodology will be implemented in 2017 to ascertain if results are replicated.

Qualitative feedback regarding Headstrong was captured via an online survey, which was distributed to participants via an emailed link at the completion of the program. Twenty-eight of the 71 Headstrong participants completed the survey, resulting in a 39.44% response rate.

Fifty-nine of the 71 Headstrong participants completed all six modules. The majority of respondents found all modules either 'extremely useful' or 'very useful', a very positive result with no students responding to 'not useful' or any of the other negative responses. This positivity has been reflected in commentary on the Headstrong Moodle site forums, Headstrong closed Facebook group and in focus groups conducted at the completion of the program.

While the longitudinal data required to capture increases in retention and completion rates was unfeasible within the scope of this Project, the Project team would like to monitor participants'

progress and success throughout their student learning journey, subject to resource availability, to ascertain if the program has contributed to increases in student retention and completion.

The success of the Headstrong online program, coupled with the large volume of qualitative feedback received from participants suggesting that the Headstrong online program would be beneficial for all university students (not restricted to FiF students), has resulted in the program being offered to all current USQ students in 2017. Funded by the Student Amenities fee, the program will be slightly modified to encompass all students, removing references to FiF, and will be delivered in both Semester One and Semester Two, with the goal of reaching over 400 students in total. In 2017 the efficacy of the program will again be measured to ascertain if Headstrong is, in fact, generalisable to all university students.

Conclusion

Outcomes of the FiF Project (Phase Two) suggest that the Project has had a positive impact in terms of several Students Transitions Achievement Retention and Success (STARS) topics. The dissemination of the suite of 31 FiF inspired online resources and development of a stand-alone FiF microsite align with the STARS topics Students, Transitions and Success. These resources were created in close consultation with the FiF cohort in an effort to address questions, concerns, myths and perceptions regarding university processes and experiences to reduce the disparity for FiF students and their families/support networks. In line with feedback received on the generalisability of these resources to all current and future students, their families and support networks, the suite of online resources and FiF microsite will continue to be made readily accessible to all, regardless of FiF status.

The Headstrong online program provided current FiF, first-year university students with the opportunity to learn strategies to help them achieve and succeed at university, in an effort to assist in improving student retention rates (aligning with the topics Achievement and Retention). Focusing on psychological wellbeing, results from the program demonstrated statistically significant increases in participants' psychological flexibility, resiliency, career confidence, stress competency and general self-efficacy, thus aligning with the STARS topic Success. The generalisability of this program will be evaluated during 2017 with the online program being offered to all current USQ students regardless of their FiF status and year of study. The Project team are keen to determine if the program positively impacts all students, not just those who identify as FiF students transitioning to university.

The First in Family Project has been deemed a success as outcomes achieved are believed to have contributed to increasing the retention and completion rates of the FiF cohort at USQ. Additionally, this Project has added to the university's research efforts and contributed to raising knowledge and awareness of university experiences and processes within the FiF community in an effort to assist in reducing the disparity experienced by FiF students and their families and support networks.

References

- Australian Government. (2015). *Higher Education Management Systems Data*. Department of Education and Training.
- Coates, H., & Ransom, L. (2011). Dropout DNA, and the genetics of effective support. *AUSSE Research Briefings*, Volume 11, (1-16).
- Erkan, S., Ozbay, Y., Cihangir-Cankaya, Z., and Terzi, S. (2012). The prediction of university students' willingness to seek counselling. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, 12(1), 35-42.
- Feros, D. L., Lane, L., Ciarrochi, J., & Blackledge, J. T. (2011). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for improving the lives of cancer patients: A preliminary study. *Psycho-Oncology*, 22(2), 459-464. doi:10.1002/pon.2083
- Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (1999). *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy the process and practice of mindful change* (1st ed.). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (2012). *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy the process and practice of mindful change* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Leszczynski, M. (2016). *The State of Email Marketing by Industry*. Retrieved from <https://www.getresponse.com/resources/reports/state-of-email-marketing-by-industry-2016.html>
- Luzecy, A., King, S., Scutter, S., and 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.
- McMillan, J. (2005). *Course change and attrition from higher education*. LSAY Research Report No.39. Melbourne: ACER.
- O'Shea, S. (2015). Arriving, surviving and succeeding – first in family women and their experiences of transitioning into the first year of university. *Journal of College Student Development*, 56(5), 499-517.
- O'Shea, S., May, J., Stone, C. & Delahunty, J. (2015). *Breaking the barriers: Supporting and engaging first-in-family learners and their families*. Final Project Report. <http://firstinfamily.com.au>
- Pascarella, E. T., Pierson, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., and Terenzini, T. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 75(3), 249-284.
- Southgate, E., Douglas, H., Scevak, J., Macqueen, S., Rubin, M., and Lindell, C. (2014). The academic outcomes for first-in-family in an Australian university: An exploratory study. *International Studies in Widening Participation*, 1(2), 31-45.
- Spiegler, T., & Bednarek, A. (2013). First-generation students: what we ask, what we know and what it means: an international review of the state of research. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 23(4), 318-337.
- Wohn, D. Y., Ellison, N., B., Khan, M. L., Fewins-Bliss, R., and Gray, R. (2013). The role of social media in shaping first-generation high school students' college aspirations: A social capital lens. *Computers & Education*, 63, 424-436.