Funded, fed and fit, and academically disadvantaged: First in Family students and cultural mismatch in higher education

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Abstract

A growing body of research indicates that students who are the first generation in their family (FiF) to attend university face distinctive challenges. At UNSW Canberra, where nearly all undergraduates are trainee officers, 38% of students report that neither parent has a university degree. However, they do not face the same challenges as their FiF peers studying elsewhere. They receive a salary to study and most live on campus where meals, health care and an extensive network of support is provided. Despite this support, an annual survey of first year experience conducted at UNSW Canberra between 2013 and 2016 shows that FiF students achieve lower grades in first year than their non-FiF peers: 30% of FiF students report that they received an average grade of 60% or below compared with 19% of non-FiF students. In this paper we suggest that 'cultural mismatch theory' (Stephens et al, 2012) may contribute to an understanding of FiF underachievement.

Introduction and literature review

Universities in Australia, as in many other countries, are seeking to broaden access to further education (See for instance Gale & Parker, 2013; Kift, 2009; McKay & Devlin, 2015), and this trend has led to increased diversity in the student body including greater numbers of students who are the first generation in their family to undertake higher education (HE) (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis, 2015; James, Krause & Jennings, 2010). Studies suggest that "first-in-family" (FiF) students tend to struggle more at university than their non-FiF peers (Banks-Santilli, 2014, 2015; James et al, 2010; O'Shea, 2016b; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson & Covarrubias, 2012). A number of reasons for this disparity have been identified. FiF students are more likely to have attended under-resourced government schools (James et al, 2010) and in Australia this educational disadvantage is acknowledged in HE. Many universities offer students bonus entry points on their final school results in recognition of it (Gale & Parker, 2013). In the US, research also indicates that disadvantaged schools provide fewer opportunities for students to take advanced courses (Stephens, Brannon, Markus & Nelson, 2015) and these schools may have fewer resources to support students to develop the academic practices valued in HE (Palmer, Levett-Jones, Smith & McMillan, 2014). In addition, FiF students often experience financial challenges while they are studying (James et al, 2010; Luzeckyj, McCann, Graham, King & McCann, 2017; O'Shea 2015, 2016b); Stephens et al, 2012, 2015). Learning is frequently coordinated around the competing responsibilities of paid employment and/or caring for family and home demands which can contribute to a fragmented experience for FiF students who move between what O'Shea (2015, drawing on the work of Acker, 1983) has evocatively called the demands of "greedy institutions".

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Moreover, FiF students may have reduced familiarity with the context of HE and less access to role models who can help to ease the adjustment to university (Stephens et al, 2015). FiF students frequently report a sense of isolation through losing connection with their traditional support groups, particularly if they move from their home town to study elsewhere (O'Shea, 2015). University can feel like a "foreign place" and FiF students can experience a "greater mismatch between their initial expectations" and their experiences of university life which may make it more difficult to develop a sense of belonging (Luzeckyj et al, 2017, p.2). They may conclude that they are not well suited to university and this can contribute to decreased motivation for study (Phillips, Stephens & Townsend, 2016; Stephens et al, 2012). Furthermore, FiF students have been shown to under-perform academically compared with their non-FiF peers (Phillips et al, 2016) and they may feel that they are less academically able than students who are not FiF (Banks-Santilli, 2014). Studies from the US suggest that these challenges may not disappear as students progress through higher education and can result in "social class gaps in academic achievement and subjective status, even among students who graduate" (Phillips et al 2016, p. 29).

However, a growing body of researchers are expressing concern that, so far, much of the attention on FiF students appears to focus on what they lack–what they do not bring with them to higher education (Banks-Santilli, 2015; O'Shea, 2016a). For instance, students may be deemed under-prepared, under-resourced, or lacking social capital (O'Shea, 2016a). HE institutions typically attempt to address "gaps" for FiF students and others such as students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds through remedial programs and resources designed to address "learning shortfalls" (McKay & Devlin, 2015; O'Shea, 2016a). Such programs aim to "raise standards" so that FiF students can compete on an equal footing with their non-FiF peers. Efforts are often concentrated on changing the students to better cope with the existing university environment. As O'Shea (2016a, p.10, original emphasis) explains, such attitudes can lead to university remedial programs that "work on students" to address perceived deficits "rather than working with them" as equal partners in a joint initiative. These deficit discourses contribute to some learners being blamed for their lack of success at university and they permeate education journals and conversations by some HE staff. We have ourselves used this language in previous work because we struggled to find effective alternatives. Recently, we were introduced to a body of research from the US which employs a different framework to describe the challenges facing FiF students. This research suggests that part of the challenge for FiF students may result from a cultural mismatch between the student's family norms and the norms of HE institutions (See, for instance, Stephens et al, 2012; 2015).

Stephens et al (2012; 2015) argue that HE institutions tend to operate on middle-class and upper-class norms which create hidden disadvantages for students who come from working class backgrounds. In a study of 50 top US universities, administrators and leaders stated that their institutional cultures valued "individual development, personal choice and self expression". Students were expected to be independent learners and thinkers – values compatible with middle and upper-class students' home values. This compatibility, the authors suggest, provides a close cultural match for middle and upper-class students who are raised to work and learn independently and express their own ideas (Stephens et al, 2012). In contrast, students who are first generation at university are more likely to have been raised in homes that favour interdependent values. An interdependent orientation tends to promote the importance of being part of a community, being connected to others, fitting in and being responsive to the needs, preferences and interests of others (Stephens et al, 2012).

Cultural mismatch theory thus locates the challenge many FiF students experience in class structures and a mismatch between what the students bring–the strengths that they have developed which work in their homes and communities–and university expectations and cultural norms. This cultural mismatch creates a hidden disadvantage for first generation students, and a hidden advantage for students from middle-class and upper-class backgrounds. Cultural mismatch theory provides an alternative discourse for describing the challenges many FiF students face in HE. In addition, using cultural mismatch theory as a lens, it becomes clear that at least some of the responsibility for assisting student transitions to university lie with institutions of HE themselves. As the student body becomes increasingly diverse, universities may need to do more to link the "beliefs, understandings, relationships and activities that are part of the educational experience to students' selves" in order to provide students with "a sense of fit and empowerment" (Stephens et al 2015, p.3).

Background and Method

This study of FiF students was conducted at UNSW Canberra, a campus which is unique in several respects and can therefore provide an interesting counterpoint to other FiF studies. Almost all undergraduate students on this campus are navy, army and air force cadets who are simultaneously studying for their degree and training to become officers in the defence forces. Apart from a small number of "advanced" students, who are already serving officers, all students are accommodated and fed on campus, and are paid a wage as trainee officers. If they pass both their military training and their degree course, the cadets are guaranteed employment in their respective service. The student body is also rather different from most other universities in that only 35% of students are women, and there are few undergraduate international students. In addition to full time academic study, the cadets have to maintain a high level of fitness, study for their military career and fulfil numerous military duties.

The data reported here is drawn from a survey of the first year experience conducted every year for four years (2013 – 2016) at UNSW Canberra. The survey was closely based on the national First Year Experience Survey conducted every five years from 1994 to 2014 (see James, Krause & McInnis (2010) and Baik, Arkoudis & Naylor (2015)). The UNSW survey was distributed by email to all first year students two weeks after the beginning of second semester, with an average response rate of 32%. The survey included the question, drawn from the national survey: "Has either of your parents completed a university degree?" This question provided our definition of FiF students. The survey also included three open-ended questions, focusing on suggestions for improvements, reasons for considering withdrawal (if applicable) and reflections on why students might find it hard to get motivated (if applicable). Approval for the study was granted by the UNSW Canberra Human Research Ethics Committee.

The quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics, while the open-ended responses of students who identified as FiF were systematically coded and recoded to allow dominant themes to emerge as suggested by Charmaz (2014).

Findings

Of the total 402 respondents, 153 identified as FiF (neither parent had a university degree). There were some important demographic differences between the FiF and non-FiF students at UNSW Canberra, although both groups were similar in gender distribution: 69% male and 31% female. Similar to other studies of FiF students (eg. O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2015; Luzeckyj et al, 2017), the proportion of mature age students was higher among FiF

students: 46% were 20 years old and above. Also, the proportion of FiF students drawn from rural, remote and regional areas was much higher: 67% for FiF students as opposed to only 42% for non-FiF. Another key difference was that 50% of FiF students had attended government schools as opposed to 32% of non-FiF students.

On many parameters, FiF and non-FIF students report a similar experience of study. For example, about 45% of students, both FiF and non-FiF said that they found it hard to get motivated to study; a similar proportion of FiF and non-FiF reported that they liked being university students, that they were enjoying their course, that they enjoyed working with other students on areas of difficulty, and that university staff were approachable. Unlike some other studies of FiF students, FIF students at UNSW Canberra were just as likely as non-FiF students to discuss their work with members of their family. However, as with other studies such as O'Shea (2016c) they reported that their parents had little understanding of what they do at university (48% of FiF students agreed with this as opposed to 33% of non FiF students), and FiF students were less likely to have been influenced by family in choosing to go to university (37% as opposed to 45% of non-FiF students).

Interestingly, in terms of their reported attitudes to study, the data suggests that FiF students were more serious – or perhaps more committed and/or anxious – about their study than non-FiF students. 60% of FiF students reported that they really enjoyed the theoretical content of their course as opposed to 40% of non-FiF. They were likely to find lectures a valuable source of learning (65% as opposed to 58%), less likely to come to class unprepared (24% as opposed to 31% for non-FiF students), and were more likely to think they were being encouraged to be independent learners (87% as opposed to 78%). The FiF students also found studying at university more fulfilling than at school (56% as opposed to 47%). Another interesting area of difference between FiF and non-FiF students was in seeking support. 55% of FiF students reported that they regularly seek advice from staff, as opposed to only 31% of non-FiF students. In addition, FiF students were more likely to report that they had supportive friends (87% as opposed to 80%), and that they felt a sense of belonging to the university (58% as opposed to 47%).
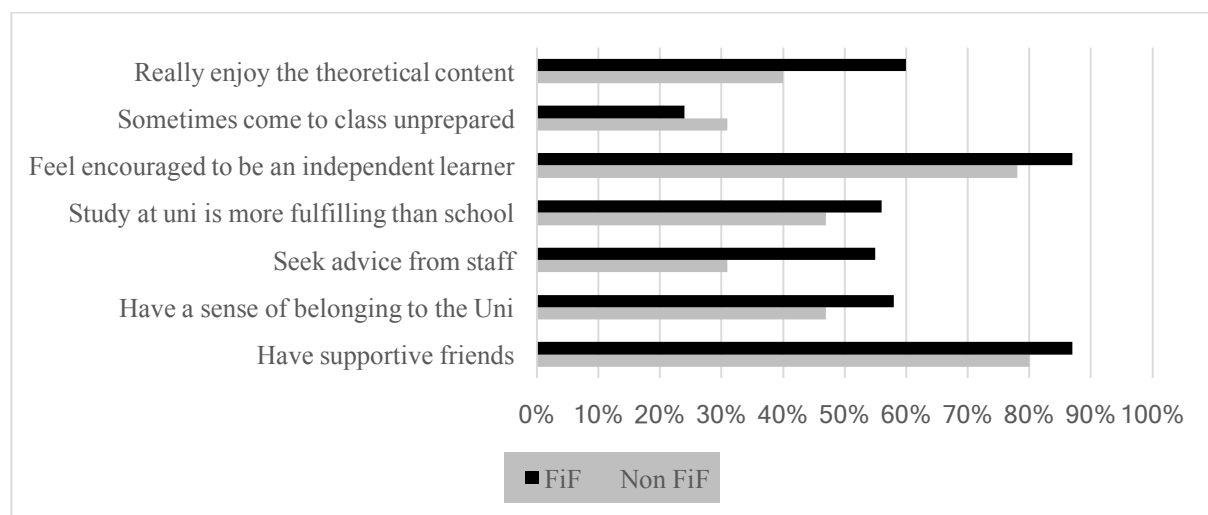

Table 1: FiF and non-FiF students' reported experience of first year

However, the survey shows that the study experience was substantially more challenging for FiF students than for non-FiF students, with a higher proportion reporting difficulty in adjusting to the style of teaching and learning (53% as opposed to 37%); difficulty in

understanding the reading (40% as opposed to 29%); and 30%, as opposed to 19% of non-FiF, reporting an average grade of 60% or below. (See Table 2).
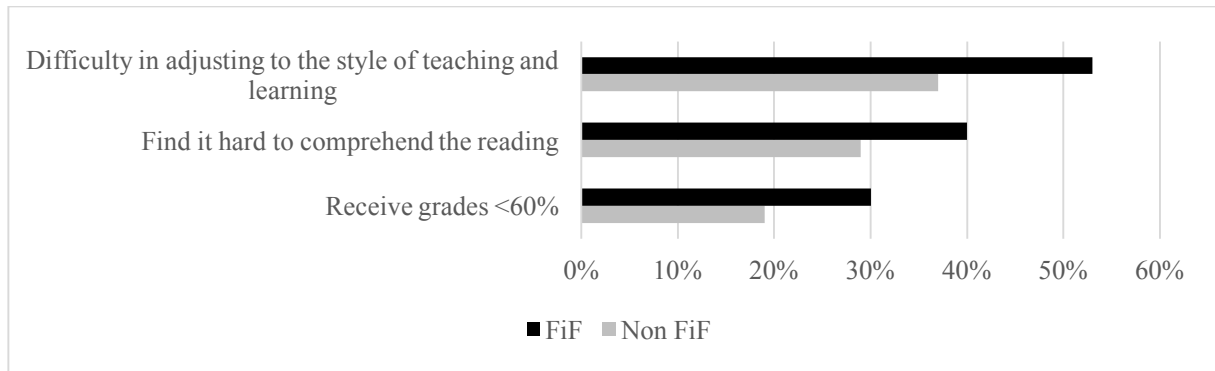

Table 2: FiF and non-FiF students' reported adjustment to study in first semester at UNSW Canberra.

WHY ARE FiF STUDENTS UNDERPERFORMING DESPITE THE SUPPORT AND FINANCIAL SECURITY?

An analysis of responses by FiF students to the open-ended questions in the UNSW Canberra FYE survey provided deeper insights into their experience of HE.

137 responses were submitted from the 153 FiF students who completed the survey over the four years of the study. A number of student responses included several comments on different topics, some of which were double-coded, generating 215 separate coded comments in total.

The responses were in answer to three questions:
- Do you have any suggestions for improvements? (86 responses)
- If you find it hard to get motivated can you explain why? (41 responses; asked in 2015 and 2016)
- If you have considered discontinuing, can you explain why? (10 responses)

A small number of comments (10) simply expressed how good these students' experience of first year had been: for example, "Very impressive"; "I absolutely love it!"

Forty-two comments concerned the challenge of balancing the military and academic sides of life at the institution. Many complained of exhaustion resulting from these competing demands, or frustration at having to combine military activities such as room inspections and fitness training with academic study.

The remainder focused specifically on the students' academic experience (159). Of these, 83 comments related to institutional factors. In particular, 26 students commented that the level of interest and engagement of teaching staff had a major impact on students' experience of the course: an enthusiastic teacher who organised interactive and engaging learning activities made all the difference to the students' experience, while teaching staff who appeared disinterested in the students and bored with their delivery attracted some vitriolic comments. Poorly organised courses were particularly harshly criticised and compared unfavourably with courses where staff presented carefully sequenced learning activities. Another major

issue for some students was the shock of the fast pace of content delivery (28 comments), as one student put it, "the content and info dump method". Students also commented on the importance of seeing how their course related to their future careers, and a desire to know how the theoretical content of the course related to practical applications (14 comments). Several students commented on their preference for well-organised, interactive small group learning. For example, if the staff set tutorial questions and pre-readings, students expected these to be addressed in class. They also commented on how much they valued staff who were available and supportive.

Another major theme emerging from the data was the call for greater scaffolding within courses to assist students with the adjustment to tertiary study. A number of suggestions (13) called for greater clarity of assessment expectations, while others asked for better and more timely feedback and/or opportunities to practice before being assessed.

Other comments relating to the students' academic experience located the source of difficulty in adjusting to tertiary study in the students' own perceived lack of preparedness (73 comments in total). A substantial number of these comments (35) called for better assistance in terms of study planning, or developing study strategies for university. In particular, some mature age students and some students from Queensland felt that they were disadvantaged in terms of preparation for university, and called for better bridging programs (especially in Maths and Physics) before commencing first year, and/or for better orientation to academic study (33 comments).

In contrast to other FiF studies, only four comments expressed a sense of isolation.

Discussion

Our data suggests that FiF students at UNSW Canberra, like their FiF counterparts at other universities (James et al, 2010), are diligent students who work consistently at their studies. As reported above, these students are less likely than their non-FiF peers to turn up to classes unprepared and more likely to be enjoying the experience of university compared with school. As educators, we would expect this time spent by students on their studies would contribute to academic success. In addition, at UNSW Canberra students do not face the financial challenges reported by FiF students in other research. UNSW Canberra students are paid while they study and do not finish university with a large HECS debt. They are enrolled in full time, face-to-face courses, and almost all live on campus with easy access to the Library, reliable and free internet and other services. Thus they do not face the challenges poverty brings for some of their FiF peers at other universities. UNSW Canberra FiF students also report having a clear sense of belonging to the university, and with supportive friends with whom they live and work, they do not tend to experience the isolation reported by FiF students at other HE institutions (James et al, 2010; O'Shea 2016c). We would expect that this interdependent experience could help the students to feel more at home in the university environment, perhaps ameliorating the sense of not belonging at university reported by students in other studies (See for example, Phillips et al, 2016). The highly collaborative environment at UNSW Canberra is something that the students value (Wilson, Devereux & Tranter, 2015) and which other studies suggest may contribute to academic success for FiF students (Stephens et al, 2015). Yet, despite these many advantages, UNSW Canberra students who are of the first generation in their family to attend university report that they underperform academically compared with their non-FiF peers, a finding consistent with other studies. This underperformance is surprising given the unique support UNSW Canberra students receive, and it confirms that the barriers to academic success for FiF students are

complex and multifaceted (Phillips et al, 2016). Is there, perhaps, some deeper cultural mismatch between the students' expectations and the university's expectations taking place as suggested by Stephens et al (2012; 2015)?

As discussed above, Stephens et al (2012, 2015) argue that FiF students in the US bring a more interdependent set of cultural values and experience to the university as opposed to the middle class values of independence typical of the university, and that this cultural mismatch creates barriers to FiF student success and retention. The responses to our survey offer insights into the FiF students' experience at UNSW Canberra which suggest that this could also be the case in Australia. For example, the survey data shows that FiF students feel more "stretched" by the challenge to become independent learners than their non-FiF peers. The quantitative data indicates that the FiF students experience more difficulty adjusting to the style of teaching and learning at university and comprehending the reading requirements than their non-FiF counterparts. In addition, the qualitative data highlights the struggles a number of FiF students experience in managing the pace of learning and the quantity of information covered in their courses. Perhaps these are indications that the students know less about how HE works than their non-FiF peers. It may also suggest that the students would like a more interdependent approach to learning where there are opportunities to test their knowledge and expectations with their peers and in discussion with staff rather than having new information provided to them to learn individually. The FiF students' greater reliance on seeking support from staff, and their call for more interactive, small group learning may be further indications of their preference for an interdependent learning style.

The open-ended responses in our study show that the FiF students expect their lecturers to provide structure and scaffolding for their learning to help them make the transition to tertiary study, and the students feel frustrated when this is not forthcoming. Their emphasis on the need for well-organised courses (and very strong complaints about courses which are not well-organised) may suggest that they are looking for an interdependent, well-guided learning experience where their needs are identified, respected and responded to. Unfortunately, staff who may be unaware of the potential for cultural mismatches for students from diverse backgrounds, may misinterpret this need as *dependence*.

The FiF students in our study also report that they would benefit from more help in planning their study time and developing good study strategies. Several students in our survey commented on what they saw as the disadvantage of coming from Queensland, something which some staff at UNSW Canberra have suggested to them is a problem. Stephens et al (2012) point out the effect of such negative stereotyping on student success. As others have found (see for instance Banks-Santilli, 2015), the use of deficit language, where students are blamed for their own lack of success, is demotivating to students.

Stephens et al (2102, 2105) suggest several strategies to address the cultural mismatch which first generation students in HE experience – strategies which reflect O'Shea's (2016a) call for working WITH students rather than working ON them. At the institutional level, communication materials, such as welcome letters to new students, mission statements and graduate attributes, could be redesigned to place more emphasis on the interdependent values that will serve students well in future team-based work environments. Stephens et al. also suggest that courses be redesigned in ways which are similar to those proposed by Sally Kift in her "transition pedagogy". Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010) urge universities to put in place first year courses which are carefully-paced, interactive, and suffused with the kind of scaffolding which we also have advocated in previous papers (Devereux & Wilson, 2008; Devereux & Wilson, 2011; Wilson & Devereux, 2014). Kift (2009) suggests that students

want, and indeed, many of the FiF student comments in our study specifically asked for, learning situations that are engaging, active and collaborative, qualities which are also compatible with the interdependent orientation which seems to be characteristic of FiF students.

Furthermore, as our results demonstrate, a number of UNSW Canberra FiF students felt that they were underprepared for the demands of HE. They suggested that the university could do more to bridge the cultural mismatch through more effective orientation programs. As Kift (2009), Devlin, McKay, Kift, Nelson & Smith (2012) and others have found, the most successful approaches to building student capacity permeate the whole university rather than being offered through short orientation programs where students are overloaded with information without enough context to make sense of it all. In addition, O'Shea (2016b) suggests students also need to feel that what they bring–their cultural background–is valued rather than feeling that they embody a gap to be filled by superior others. In one successful intervention in a US university, first generation students were specifically educated about how social class backgrounds can matter in HE. The students attended a panel discussion led by senior students who explained the strengths and strategies FiF students brought to their learning as well as potential obstacles to success. The students who took part in this intervention gained higher GPAs and sought out more HE resources than students who had not taken part (Stephens et al, 2015). McKay and Devlin (2014) suggest such measures help to demystify HE for students who are FiF at university. Respectful, targeted interventions can help to make visible the hidden culture of the university, and alert both students and staff to the potential for cultural mismatches.

One of the key suggestions made by a number of researchers who have examined the experience of students who are FiF to attend university (see for instance the work of Devlin et al 2012, Kift, 2009, Stephens et al, 2015) is that HE institutions themselves need to do more to understand and adapt to the cultures and values that students bring with them rather than simply expecting students to assimilate to the hegemonic culture of the university. In fact, many universities have already made dramatic shifts because they have had to adapt to a predominantly FiF student body.

Conclusion

There are many inter-related factors which have the potential to impact on the experience of FiF students as they transition to university and it is beyond the scope of this paper to adequately address this complexity. It is clearly an area ripe for continued investigation including further study to tease out how cultural mismatch theory might contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the FiF student experience in a variety of HE settings. At UNSW Canberra, it would be helpful, for instance, to undertake further analysis of potential differences which might emerge between the open-ended responses of non-FiF students and FiF students. However, the limitation of our survey of first year students at UNSW Canberra is also its strength. Although this survey was conducted on a single, small campus, the unique characteristics of UNSW Canberra allow us to see more clearly that FiF students may struggle not only for financial and/or social reasons. Although these have been shown to be major issues for FiF students elsewhere, these are factors which do not play a role for UNSW Canberra students who are "funded, fed and fit".

Rather, we suggest suggest that FiF students' difficulties in transition may result from a cultural mismatch, as suggested by Stephens et al (2012). While the university calls for a strongly independent, individualistic approach to learning, the FiF students in our data seem

to express a preference for a more INTERdependent approach. Thus, rather than couching the struggle of FiF students in deficit terms, it may be more productive to see it as a factor of cultural adaptation where the university and the students work together to achieve success through a whole of institution approach. As universities change and develop, they may need to do more at an institutional level to work <u>with</u> students from diverse backgrounds rather than expecting the students to do all the work of addressing cultural mismatches. There is still a need, as O'Shea (2016a, p.9) argues, to ensure that "structural inequalities within universities are not masked as individual deficits". This will take a whole-of-institution approach such as that promoted by Kift (2009) where staff (both adminstrative and academic) and students work together to ensure that FiF students achieve their full academic potential.

Acknowledgements

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