

U O W

***Older and first: Navigating the transitions of older students who are the first in their family to attend university***

CHEER Presentation: *Critical Perspectives on Transitions Into, Through and Beyond Higher Education*

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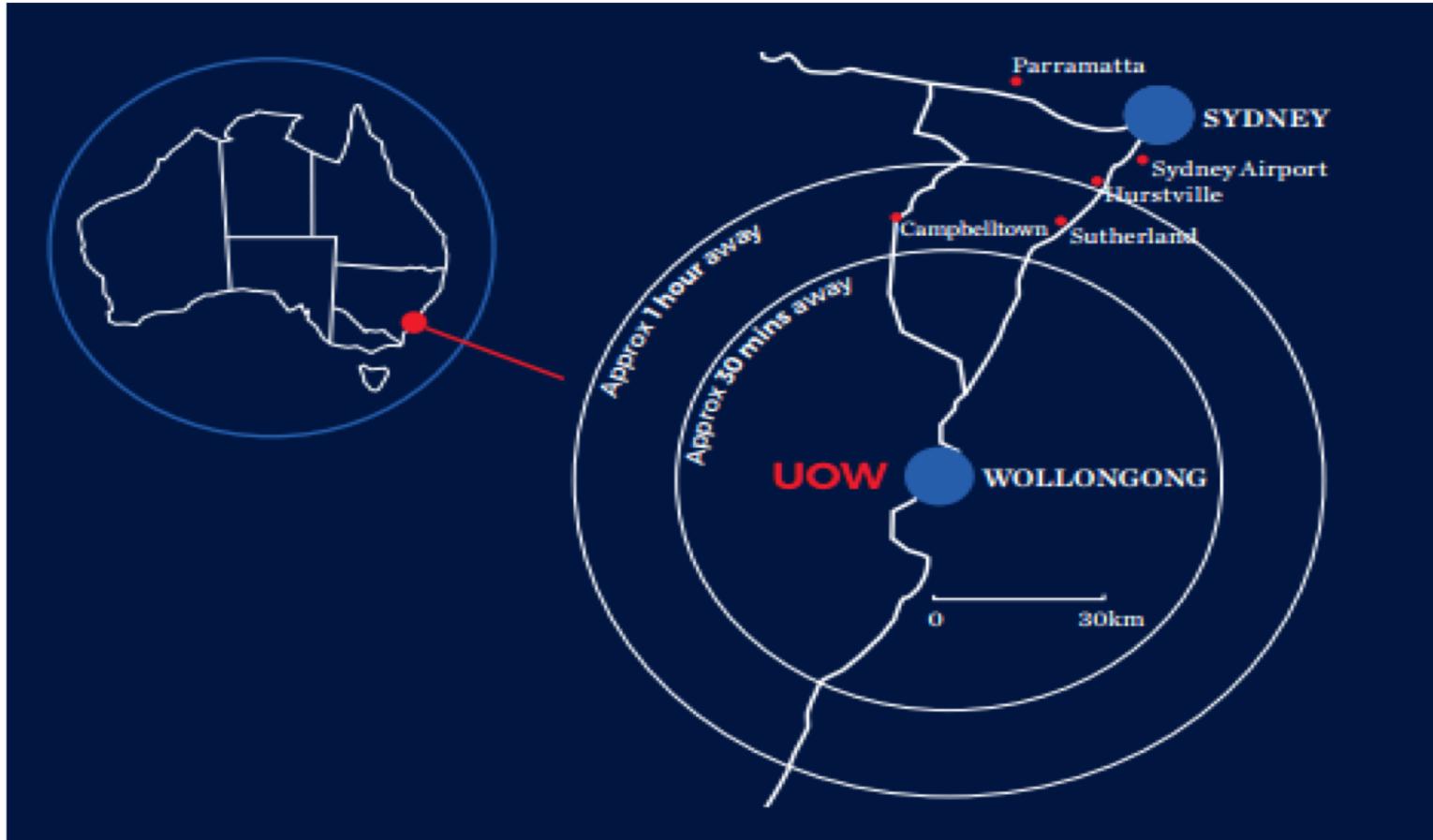
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# Today's Session

- Setting the scene: HE in Australia
- Background to the project: Exploring first-in-family students – the *who*, the *why* and *what* participants said?
- Older students and transition
- Capitals and Capabilities
- Family Capital and Student Capabilities
- Maximising Experiential Capital
- So what...?



# Where have I come from?

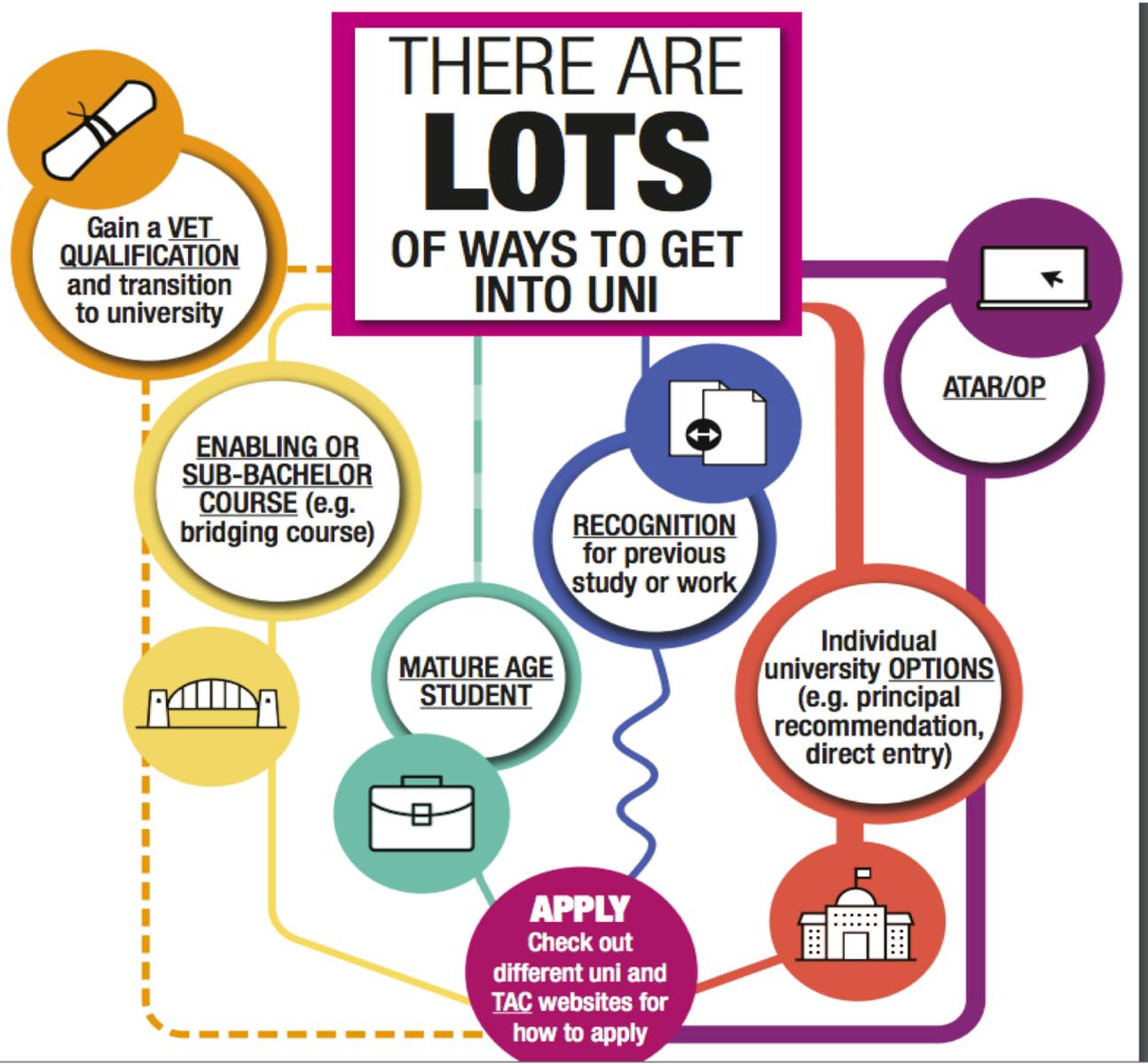


# A little about Australian HE

- 38 Public Universities and 3 private universities
- Approximately 1.3 million students
- Bradley Review of HE
- Attrition rates remain high (15% nationally)



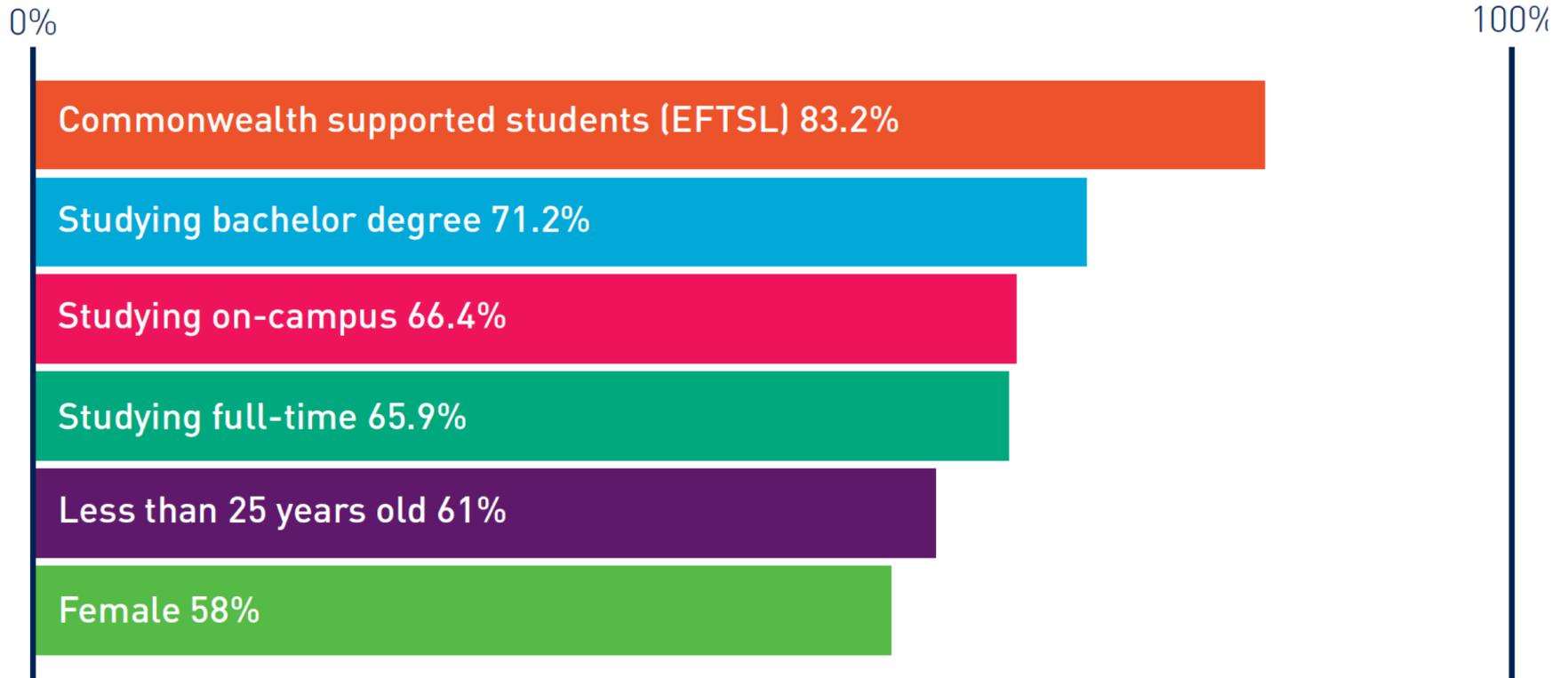
Images derived from Universities Australia: Data Snapshot 2017. Available from:  
<https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/australias-universities/key-facts-and-data#.WgAyTpOWYb0>



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# A snapshot of Australian students

DOMESTIC STUDENT PROPORTIONS BY CATEGORY 2016



Source: DET, Selected Higher Education Statistics - 2016 student data and uCube

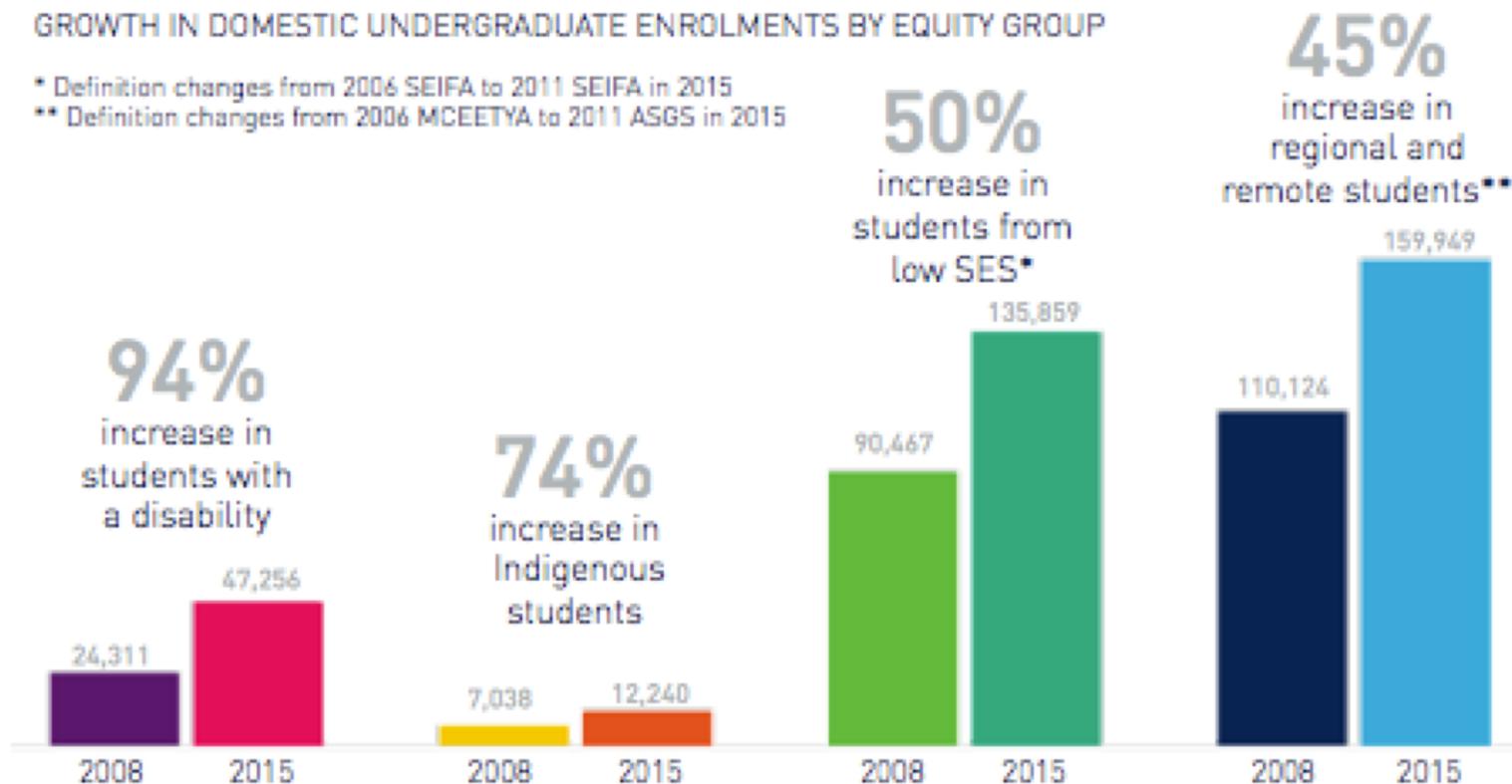
Images derived from Universities Australia: Data Snapshot 2017

# Increases in diversity – but not parity

## GROWTH IN DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE ENROLMENTS BY EQUITY GROUP

\* Definition changes from 2006 SEIFA to 2011 SEIFA in 2015

\*\* Definition changes from 2006 MCEETYA to 2011 ASGS in 2015



Source: Selected Higher Education Statistics - 2015 Student Data

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Images derived from Universities Australia: Data Snapshot 2017.



# First-in-Family: Who?

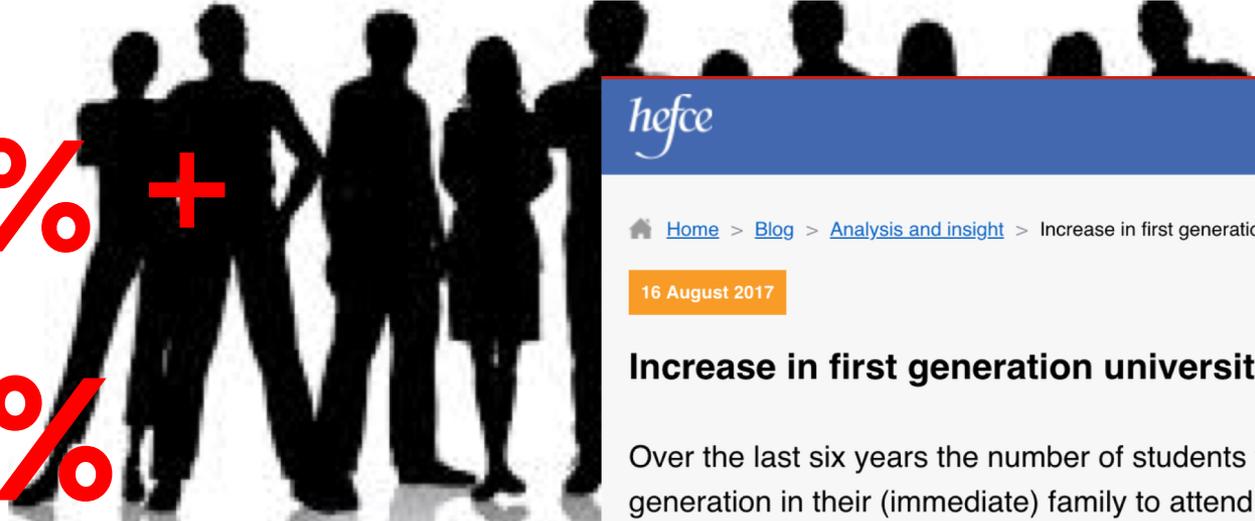
For the purposes of this research, first in family status has been defined as:

***no-one in the immediate family of origin including siblings, children, partners or parents having previously attended a higher education institution or having completed a university degree.***



# First-in-family: Why now?

- 50% +
- 26%
- 34%



hefce

Home > Blog > Analysis and insight > Increase in first generation university students

16 August 2017

### Increase in first generation university students

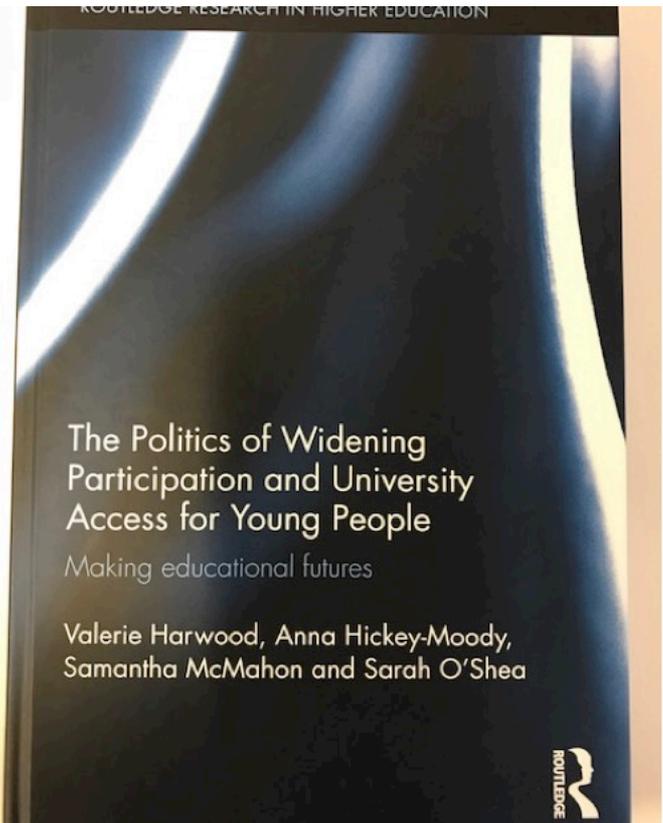
Over the last six years the number of students who are the first generation in their (immediate) family to attend university has grown.

# First-in-Family: Why for me

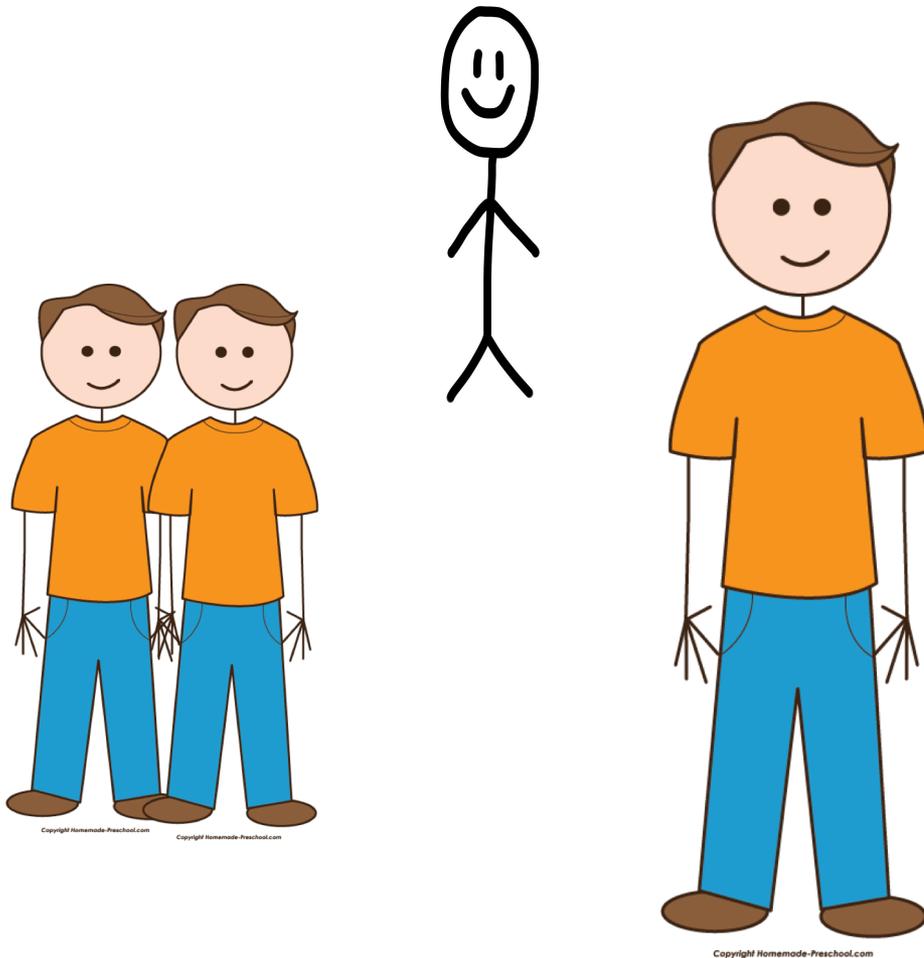
Interviewer: *When was the last time you heard someone talk about university? ...economic and cultural factors may limit the boundaries of what individuals consider possible for themselves in such a way that a decision*

John: *is never taken and the agenda need never be set... university [is] simply not within the bounds of possibility, either culturally*

*or economically.*  
(John, 15 years, Adelaide; Harwood, Hickey-Moody, McMahon & O'Shea, 2011, p. 106, emphasis added)



# First-in-family students and transition



**Educational  
Memory**

**“Insider knowledge”**

# First-in-family students and transition

FiF students have to do additional and often invisible 'work', such as the need to:

***...perfect themselves as educated and employable; reassure the family that they have 'invested wisely'; open up the aspirations and horizons of the family and its community; represent a triumph of social egalitarianism and 'prove that everyone can make it'***

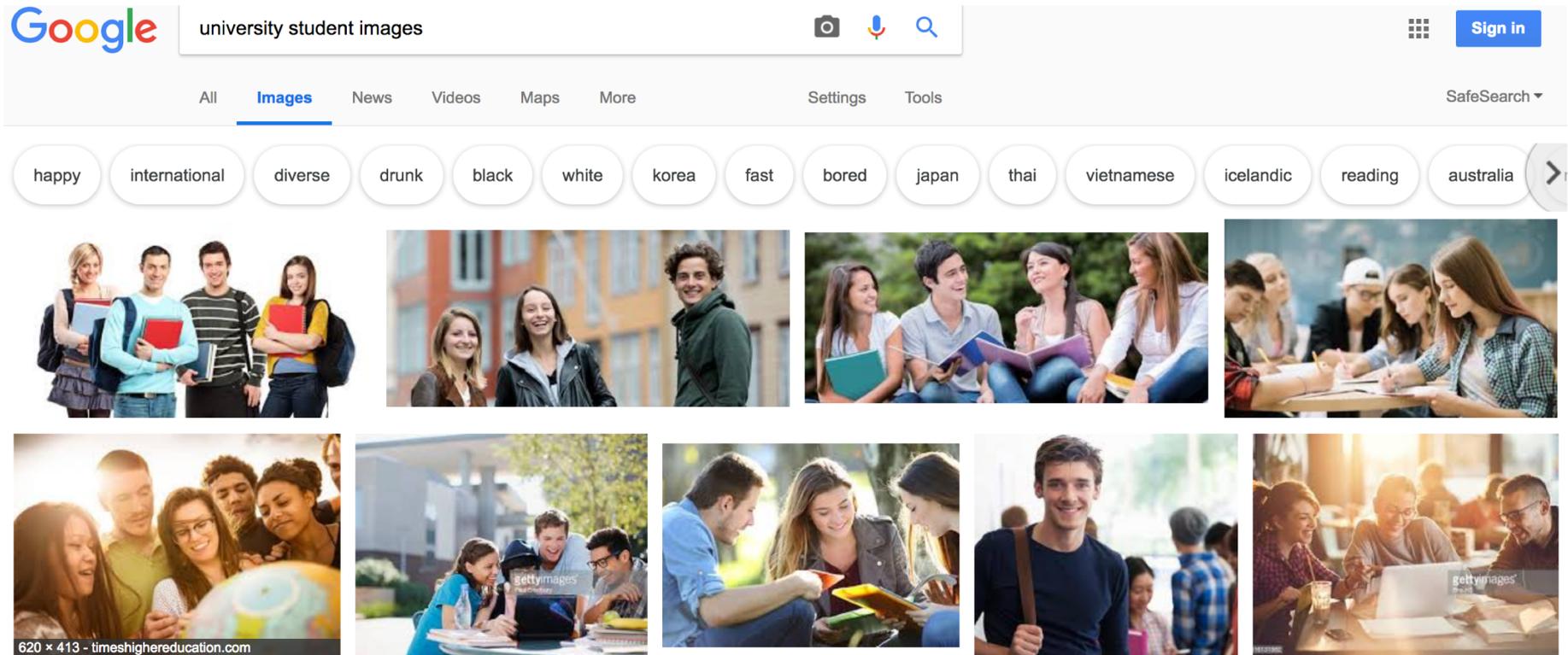
(Thomas & Quinn, 2007. p59 – emphasis added).

# Australian HE – in a state of change and flux

- Approximately 75% of students enter HE on a non ATAR pathway (2016 data)
- This means that Australia no longer has a ‘comprehensive’ sorting system based on school results (Bathmaker, 2014)
- Increasing numbers of older students attending but this cohort still depicted in terms of a ‘narrative of disadvantage’ (Woodfield 2011, p. 410).
- Given this diversity we need ways to consider the experiences of this cohort in less deficit ways



# The 'invisible' older student



# The 'invisible' older student...



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# In defence of the annoying mature-age student

*Stephen Owen*

ST

## Mature students: lifelong learning on life support?

Matthew Reisz talks to academics about their experiences of teaching older learners, while Holly Else analyses the decline in the number of mature students

New research shows mature students struggle to adjust to university and experience high levels of social isolation.

Rv 1

IN-Focus

stay

Yet they are not getting the

## Mature-Age Student Survives Lecture Without Asking A Single Question

# Older FiF students and transition

Moving into HE is a particularly 'risky business' - as Hinton Smith explained, this return is both 'tentative and fraught with fear of failure' (2009, p.115)

- **Relational risks:** a 'non-normative transition' (Mercer, 2007, p.30) that occurs at an unexpected point in life and so this may result in less support
- **Identity risks:** Identity work for this older cohort can be particularly difficult, as they have been described as performing this from a position of 'stigma' defined by age and maturity (Mallman & Lee, 2014, p.9).



# The data

- Survey and interview methodology
- Interviews with students (n=90) & student surveys (89)
- This data was derived from three related studies (ESDF, 2013; URC 2014-2015; ARC DP, 2016-2019)
- Data collection is ongoing and includes UK, Ireland and Austria



# Guiding Questions

The questions guiding this presentation include:

- (1) What knowledges and skills did students reflect upon as assisting them in their transition to university? and
- (2) In what ways did existing social and cultural capitals and capabilities translate into and interact with the university environment?



# Walking with Bourdieu and Sen...

- Combining the work of Yosso (2005) with those who are working with Sen's Capability Approach
- Yosso (2005) builds upon traditional interpretations of Bourdieu's work in order to better understand the intersection of student and institutional capital.

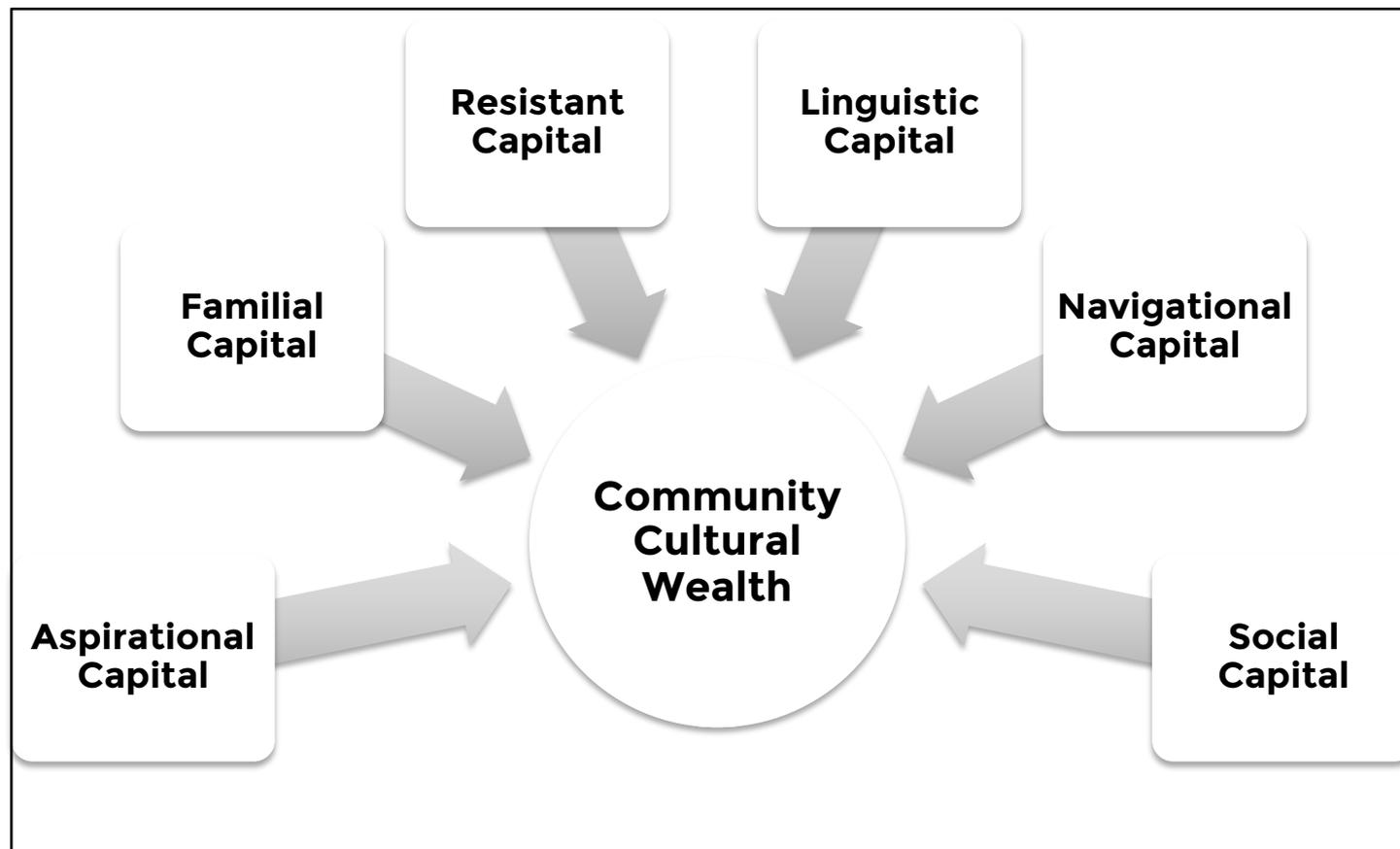
*Traditional Bourdieuan cultural capital theory...place[s] value on a very narrow range of assets and characteristics.*

(Yosso, 2005, p.77).

- Not discrediting Bourdieu but rather 'thinking with and beyond Bourdieu' (Bathmaker, 2014, p62)



# Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Framework (2005)



***Aspirational capital:*** individual's ability to 'maintain hope and dreams for the future' despite 'real and perceived' obstacles (p.77) -this involves 'nurturing a culture of possibility' (p.78).

***Resistance capital:*** values and dispositions used to inform oppositional behaviours.

***Linguistic capital*** recognises the strengths of communication skills including story telling, bilingualism and the 'ability to communicate via visual art, music or poetry' (p.79).

***Navigational capital:*** assists movement through social institutions and is premised upon both 'individual agency' and 'social networks'.

***Social capital:*** refers to networks that surround people providing both embodied and practical support.

***Familial capital:*** recognises those 'cultural knowledges nurtured among familial (kin)' (p.79), this includes 'extended' family and friends.

# Applying CCW to this research

CCW allowed me to:

- Deeply explore the ‘voices’ of this older cohort of FiF students.
- Think ‘differently’ about first-in-family student experience and to interrogate data in terms of what first-in-family individuals bring to the university environment and how these types of capitals potentially enable them to enact success.
- ‘Think alongside’ the data and identify gaps or ‘silences’ in this framework



# Applying Capability Theory

- Focus on the individual and the ‘substantive freedoms’ (or capabilities) that enable individuals to achieve what they value (Sen, 1999, p87).
- Applied to WP, the Capability Approach looks beyond ‘access’ to university forcing us to consider **each person’s capability to function** equally in this environment, in other words their ability to not only access but also participate and succeed.

*“It is important to give simultaneous recognition to the centrality of individual freedom and to the force of social influences on the extent and reach of individual freedom.”*  
(Sen, 1999, pxii)

# Combining Cultural Capitals and Capabilities

Broadly, these can be regarded as complementary:

- Sen's capability approach recognises individuals as diverse and complex entities rather than making generalized assumptions about access to resources or ability to act on these.
- But it has been suggested that **the role of culture has been overlooked** (Bowman, 2010) in this enactment of life choices and actions

So...

**Combining Capabilities with**  
**Dual Focus.** Exploring both what individuals  
 understandings from capital theory  
 'actually do' (the capabilities and freedoms  
 they are able to access) but also recognise  
 enables a much richer understanding of  
 how individuals activate conversion  
 how access is impacted by other  
 factors that provide the capability to  
 fundamental but often invisible factors  
 both aspire and also succeed at  
 (social, economic and cultural structures)

# Considering 'transition' for this cohort

- The emotionality of this return
- Powerful intergenerational implications
- The importance of family capital
- Experiential capitals that include motivation, resilience and persistence



# Emotionality of this return

This was an embodied move, leading to feelings of ‘displacement, anxiety and guilt’, but also emotions such as ‘hopeful anticipation, pleasure and self-esteem’ (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell & McCune, 2008, p.569).

*“ I’m just really enjoying being opened up and being given these different perspectives ...Now, when I’m being opened up to new insight and different perspectives, I’m just absolutely in awe or I’m just finding it really appreciative... I’m enjoying the ride.*

(Nick, 39 year old father of four (ages 1, 12, 14, 16), B Education )

*“...now at age 45, coming back to going to university, just to see how it can extend one’s spirit influence or voice...”* (Liana, 45 years old, (B Arts, regional campus)

*I sort of say the thing that’s motivated me is the fact that I feel like if I hadn’t done it, I would have died inside because I’d just got to that point where life just, to me, had no real meaning anymore.* (Danielle, 32, Single - identified as being from low SES background, B Health)



# Powerful intergenerational influences

Repeatedly participants reflected upon how this return was situated within family and opening up educational futures

*“....getting divorced, or separated. ... I thought I deserved better than being a single mum, **wanting more for myself** and growing up in housing commission and seeing how some kids can go so, I thought if I set the path for my kids then fingers crossed, they’ll be able to go to uni and get a good job themselves.”* (Elle, 33 year old single mother of three (aged 5, 9, 11) (B. Arts)

*“**I want something better for my children**”.* (Ally, 39 year old single mother of 2 (3, 9) (B. Psychology)

*“I definitely think it’s [university] showing them [children] if you want something you’ve just got to do it; not everything is fun – you’ve just got to do the hard yards and get it done”.* (Hannah, 33 year old mother of 5 (3, 5, 8, 12, 13) (B. Nursing)

# The importance of family capital

- Previous research reflects on **the family as being a deficit** to the student or as Gofen (2007) explains portraying first-in-family students 'as succeeding *despite* their family background' (author's emphasis, n/p).
- Children provided both an impetus to return to higher education and also, an encouragement to continue particularly with regard to future financial security
- The duality of this - familial capital had also been enriched because of this attendance.



# Ripples throughout the family

*So, it's been a positive experience for my children as well. Like I said there's no-one on our family that does go to uni and so my kids now are saying "Well, I actually want to do a university degree" which is something that sort of was, not "frowned upon" but they were just saying, "Well you're not capable of that" but it's clear that if I'm capable, anyone's capable.*

(Pippa, 39 year old single mother of two (aged 13 & 16) (B. Engineering)



# Considering ‘experiential capital’ in relation to transition

- While not having experience of HE – these learners often had experience of overcoming alien or precarious spaces in life
- It seemed these experiences could provide an experiential ‘tool box’ to navigate an environment which participants variously described in terms of ‘foreignness’ or unfamiliarity.

*...the really kick-ass exciting thing about this is I feel that I've been able to put a lot of the experiences that I've had in a toolbox, you know, it's really exciting because I thought the worst thing that could ever happen in my life is if I ever ended up just being a victim of it and I'm not.*

(Michelle, 61, final year, Disability, Rural/Isolated)



# Experiential Capitals: Desires and Motivations

Experiential Capitals located in apriori work and life experiences

*... I'm not just doing it because my employer's sent me to uni...I'm doing this for me'. (Elaine, 36, single mother with 5 children, B Commerce)*

*'I always had my father in the back of my head going "You're a silly girl, you'll never get anywhere." And there's that little child part that just wants to go "Nah nah, got there'. (Yvonne, 38, single mother of two (11, 19) B Arts)*

*'All I need is my foot in the door and I'll drive a wedge through that until I get what I want because at the end of the day, if you're not doing it for what you want, you'll end up just falling by the wayside because other people's dreams and goals will just be succeeding and overtaking yours. (Leon, 36, Partnered with 1 child (under 1), B Engineering)*



# Experiential Capitals: Tenacity, Perseverance and Persistence

*'Tenacity, stubbornness and thinking I'm not going to let this beat me... And I think when you get older too, you find ways around things where maybe as a younger person your "Oh my God, I'm stressed, stressed." As an older person I don't care. "I'll just go and see the coordinator. Don't get excited." You live and you learn.'* (Adele, 62 year old single, two adult children (BNursing))

*I like to talk about the fact that I'm persistent. It's probably a strength of character that I did get from my working-class family is persistence is probably one of the greatest gifts that we're given in the ability to succeed at anything that we undertake.* (Brett, 33, single, B Business)

*My perseverance. My perseverance - never to give up. It was something that everyone in our family has; it was something that we were taught when we were younger that if you really want something, nothing in life is ever going to be handed to you on a silver platter and that's probably because of that working class ethic in our family, just to never give up - where there's a will, there's a way.* (Erin, 32 year old single parent of one child (7), B Arts)



# So What...? Capabilities and Capitals

**Combining the lens of the Capabilities Approach with understandings of capitals allows alternative understandings of how individuals' flourishings are enabled through learning; offering a counter narrative to meritocratic measurements of the neo-liberal university**



# So what?

Reframe what is valued in universities, shifting from a traditional focus on the emphasised graduate outcomes of **wealth and professional success** to consider what people themselves regard as being important in their lives.

This would support each individual's 'ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being' (Sen, 1993, p. 30).



# So what?

Question the expectation that learners must move into an environment and use 'effort and ability' to succeed but also play 'by rules that favor the wealthy in the first place.'  
(Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009, p288)

By recognising alternative capitals and capabilities provides for new ways of understanding and conceptualizing older learners

# For Transition...

- Understand learners in a more holistic sense, which includes recognising (and celebrating) personal and employment biographies
- Recognise the mature age cohort not in terms of a 'narrative of disadvantage' (Woodfield, 2011) but rather as a 'valuable commodity within a university' (Shaw, 2014, p. 841)
- Deliberately foreground the cultural wealths that FiF learners arrive with in order to 'open up' this understanding for both learners and staff.



# Practical Initiatives

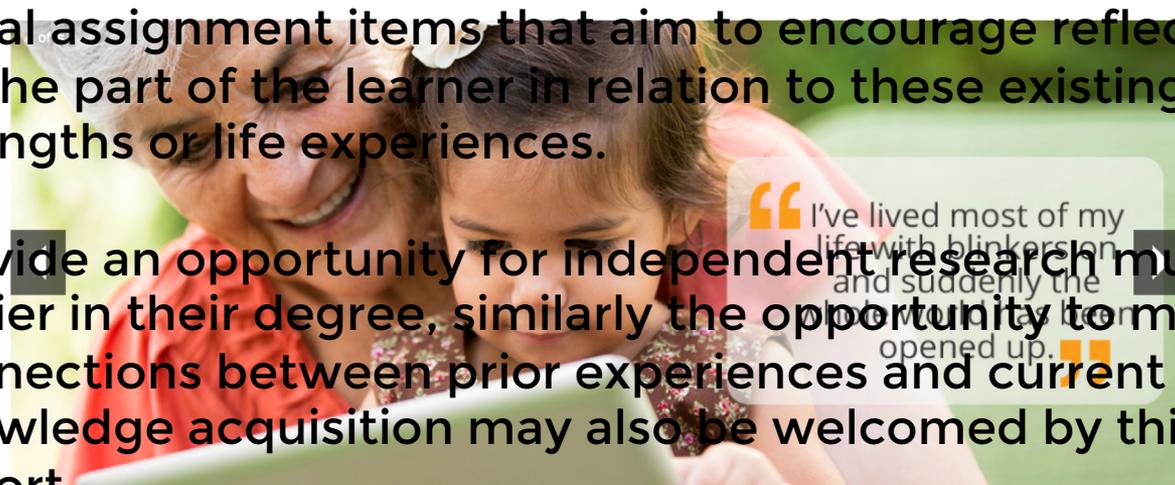


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- Using mentors, with similar biographies and life experiences, to demonstrate how these knowledges have assisted them to navigate and engage with the HE institution.

Scroll down to learn more about this project. We warmly welcome your feedback about the site.

- Initial assignment items that aim to encourage reflection on the part of the learner in relation to these existing strengths or life experiences.
- Provide an opportunity for independent research much earlier in their degree, similarly the opportunity to make connections between prior experiences and current knowledge acquisition may also be welcomed by this cohort.



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# Practical Initiatives

- Kift's Transition Pedagogy: <http://transitionpedagogy.com/>

## Transition Pedagogy

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## Diversity

**The first year curriculum embraces and supports the diversity and reality of students' backgrounds, previous experiences and preparedness for university.**

Good first year curriculum design acknowledges student diversity because diversity may exacerbate transition issues and, in the current massified sector, few assumptions can be made about students' entering knowledge, skills and attitudes. Diversity in this context is very broad and includes, for example, membership of at-risk or equity groups, non-traditional cohorts, and students' various patterns and timing of engagement with the first year curriculum (e.g., mid-year entry).

## Transition

**The first year curriculum explicitly assists higher education and the new discipline**

Good first year curriculum design aids transition to the nature of learning in higher education long learning journey.



# Questions / Feedback

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