

# 'MIND THE GAP!' EXPLORING THE POST-GRADUATION OUTCOMES AND EMPLOYMENT MOBILITY OF INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE FIRST IN THEIR FAMILY TO COMPLETE A UNIVERSITY DEGREE

RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP REPORT



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# **‘Mind the Gap!’ Exploring the post-graduation outcomes and employment mobility of individuals who are first in their family to complete a university degree**

## **Final Report**

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This Fellowship considered university graduate outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds, with particular reference to those who are the first in their families to attend university. Adopting a mixed methods approach, the fellowship study examined national statistics on employment outcomes for specific student cohorts and collected qualitative data from surveys and interviews conducted with recent graduates, alumni and key stakeholders. This report complements a literature review on this area that was published in April 2019 and is available here: <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/fellowship-sarah-oshea-literature-review/>.

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## List of abbreviations

<b>AGCAS</b>	Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (UK)
<b>AGS</b>	Australian Graduate Survey
<b>ARC</b>	Australian Research Council
<b>AUD</b>	Australian dollar
<b>CHEEDR</b>	Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research
<b>CHEER</b>	Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research
<b>DLHE</b>	Destination of Leavers from Higher Education
<b>FiF</b>	First-in-Family
<b>GOS</b>	Graduate Outcomes Survey
<b>HEFCE</b>	Higher Education Funding Council for England
<b>HERD</b>	Higher Education Research and Development
<b>HESA</b>	Higher Education Standards Authority
<b>IRU</b>	Innovative Research Universities
<b>NAGCAS</b>	National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AUS)
<b>NCES</b>	National Centre for Education Statistics
<b>NCSEHE</b>	National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education
<b>NZ</b>	New Zealand
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>QILT</b>	Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching
<b>SES</b>	Student Experience Survey
<b>SRC</b>	Social Research Centre
<b>UES</b>	University Experience Survey
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UOW</b>	University of Wollongong
<b>US</b>	United States



## Executive summary

This report details the findings and recommendations from the NCSEHE Research Fellowship entitled *‘Mind the Gap!’ Exploring the post-graduation outcomes and employment mobility of individuals who are first in their family to complete a university degree*. This one-year study explored how learners intersected by a range of equity categories entered the employment market and how individuals experienced this entry qualitatively. Adopting a mixed methods approach, the study analysed statistics related to post-graduation outcomes for the general student population, comparing them to those of cohorts from key equity groups, including students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, students from rural and remote areas and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This data was complemented by qualitative interviews and survey responses provided by recent graduates and alumni, all of whom were first in their family to come to university. Stakeholders from Australia and the UK also provided input into this research via both surveys and interviews.

The **12 key recommendations** derived from this study are outlined below according to the targeted audience:

### Key stakeholder recommendations

1. University staff across careers/support services in conjunction with academic/teaching staff need to explicitly and repeatedly evidence the importance of participation in extracurricular opportunities (i.e. volunteer experiences; work-related or internship opportunities) whilst students are undertaking degrees. These opportunities should also be financially subsidised to enable everyone to participate.
2. University marketing and institutional administrators need to be upfront and clear about the length of time it takes to become established in a degree-related field of work. This clear messaging has to be complemented by the provision of timely support (both practical advice and financial resourcing) as students transition into the workforce.
3. Careers services in partnership with academic and technology developers (both in university and industry) should develop ways to move beyond traditional models of internships or “work experience” as being place-based, block, and daytime models. Seeking partnership funding or institutional grants to explore how virtual reality can be utilised to create workplace settings or scenarios will be key for future employability.
4. University equity and outreach providers should ensure that the “transition out” phase of the student life cycle is as supported and scaffolded as the “transition in”. Support should be offered by a diversity of mediums, in various modalities and timed to critical stages in the post-graduation journey. Support should not only be individuated but also focus on the groups most at risk of un/underemployment.

### Sector/policy recommendations

5. Independent university peak bodies should provide a realistic cost-benefit analysis for different fields of study so that students can make informed choices about the qualifications they pursue. Ongoing interrogation of the longitudinal “opportunity costs” of gaining a degree need to be prioritised to ensure that learners are clearly informed about the cost benefits of different qualifications.
6. University administration areas or policymakers need to ensure that student enrolment data on parent/guardian’s highest qualification level is accurately collected. This should include “unpacking” terms such as “first-in-family (FiF)” or “first generation” to ensure that all data is clarified consistently.

7. Government Departments (Australian Government Department of Education/Department of Industry, Innovation and Science) should work collaboratively to link statistics on employer demand, work patterns and degree-work transitions.
8. Government survey administrators need to consider the timing of the Australian Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS) and include opportunity for longitudinal measurement of university outcomes. Maintaining connection with graduates through critical life stages is now quite feasible given the availability of social media and also mobile applications: for example, via an app that would send graduates a short quiz to check in on their “job health” status.

## Research and data collection recommendations

9. The Australian GOS needs to include measures that focus on the quality and nature of graduate work. Questions that relate to the relevance and type of work obtained as well as how the job was gained are required to provide a more in-depth understanding of graduate trajectories.
10. Researchers in the careers and business fields need to foreground a more inclusive understanding of the skills and attributes that can benefit future employability, such as the resilience and determination that many equity or FiF students already possess.
11. Funding bodies should support research that seeks to consider and measure the more subtle, intangible or embodied benefits of higher education.
12. The Australian GOS needs to include questions that capture data on how participation in internships may affect employment outcomes, particularly for those from equity backgrounds. This includes asking explicit questions related to participation in internships and co-curricular opportunities so that participation can be linked to equity status and future employability.

## Keywords

First-in-Family students, graduate employability, higher education equity and access, social and cultural capital.

# Chapter One: Project overview

## 1.1 Introduction

*While securing a stable job is essential, dismissing the qualitative experience of learning and its extraordinary benefits is reductive. It boils higher education down to a credentialing scheme, rather than an innovation ecosystem that drives a smart economy and flourishing society. (Yezdani, 2017)*

Universities are complex ecosystems that defy simplistic analysis or linear perspectives. Instead, exploring how higher education manages and incorporates heterogeneous student populations requires a theoretical multiplicity that can capture the nuances of this setting. As Yezdani (2017) reflects, reducing higher education to simply a transparent system of 'credentialing' obscures these undercurrents. Undoubtedly the experience of learning is in itself a worthy endeavour, as the above quote identifies, but how the experience of university attendance and its benefits are defined at an individual level is similarly important. In seeking to unpack the experiences of students as they navigate from the university setting and enter the post-graduation employment market, the need to carefully scrutinise a diversity of perspectives is key.

The overarching aim of this Fellowship was to explore the post-graduation experiences and outcomes of students who are the first in their family to attend university. These "higher education pioneers" (May, Delahunty, O'Shea, & Stone, 2016) are a growing cohort of the student population (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013) and are often collectively intersected by a range of equity categories or markers of educational disadvantage. Growth in the First-in-Family (FiF) cohort can be partly attributed to increasing activities designed to 'widen participation' within the tertiary sector, including mandated government targets for participation rates amongst particular populations such as students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. Using a mixed methods approach that included statistical analysis of extant data, qualitative interviews with stakeholders and recent graduates and in-depth online surveys of stakeholders and alumni, the study provides a comprehensive exploration of how FiF students navigate the post-graduation landscape. The findings are rich and point to the multi-layered nature of learning in the higher education system, as Yezdani describes in the opening quote.

## 1.2 Background to the project

The catalyst for this Fellowship came from the varied stories and reflections that students had narrated to me during the course of their higher education journey. As a researcher in educational equity, I have been privileged to speak to more than 800 students from diverse backgrounds to conduct "close-up" research that is situated firmly within the authentic realities of university learners. During these in-depth interviews, students spoke of unfulfilled ambitions and desires for a future imaginary that would benefit from this higher education participation (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018; O'Shea, May, Stone, & Delahunty, 2017). Yet the qualitative understanding in the literature of how students fare after graduation is somewhat limited. While the statistics do tell a story, I was particularly interested to explore how the students themselves navigated this transition into post-graduation employment at an individual or felt level.

This Fellowship set out to fill a gap in understanding how students from recognised equity backgrounds, or those who may have limited familial experience of higher education, navigate the graduate employment landscape. While there has been a scholarly research focus on the ways students navigate entry into and through higher education, with particular attention on the constraints and negotiations such participation engenders, the knowledge of how those who graduate fare in the employment market remains somewhat limited (Richardson, Bennett, & Roberts, 2016). By adopting a mixed methods approach and

employing Bourdieuan concepts of capital and habitus in the analysis of qualitative data, this project sought to both explore how learners themselves conceptualised “success” post-graduation and the various capitals that underpinned the enactment of this success.

While the focus in this Fellowship was on student and alumni experiences, interviews and surveys were also conducted with key stakeholders and researchers in the field, across Australia and the United Kingdom (UK), to gain a more comprehensive picture. The focus on the UK was deliberate, as the public higher education system is comparable to the system in Australia, and the UK is also dealing with an expansion in student numbers similar to that currently seen in Australia. A total of 375 participants (students, alumni, academic staff, researchers and careers staff) participated across this study. All the students and a number of the staff were the first in their families to attend university, with many being highly intersected by categories of equity or broad disadvantage (O’Shea, 2016-2019).

This breadth of data allowed a comprehensive overview of this field to emerge, allowing the findings outlined in this report to usefully inform:

- the types of supports and initiatives that can be implemented across the student life cycle to support students from diverse backgrounds as they move from academic study to professional careers
- changes to policy foci or institutional discourses, including how data on post-graduation outcomes is collected and analysed
- a more nuanced understanding of how students from equity backgrounds navigate and engage with the employment market post-graduation.

### 1.3 Research design

This was a mixed methods study that combined the available national statistics on the post-graduation experiences of FiF students and other recognised equity groups (QILT, 2019a) with qualitative interviews and surveys conducted with alumni, current students and stakeholders. Each part of the data collection informed the others, with results from the quantitative data underpinning the types of questions asked in surveys and interviews. This allowed the Fellowship to delve deeply and provide a nuanced overview of how students negotiate post-graduation employment fields.

Aside from the national statistical data, the Fellowship also engaged widely across the sector to seek out the perspectives and reflections of participants ranging from students on the brink of graduation to “seasoned” alumni who could provide a retrospective account of this post-graduation trajectory. Equally important to this study were the voices of key higher education stakeholders, including those working in careers services, student support, teaching and research, who provided their feedback and perspectives via both interviews and surveys. Table 1 lists the various participant types and their mode of participation:

**Table 1.** Details of participants in the Fellowship (n = 375)

Participant type	Mode of participation	General (n)	UOWx only (n)
Student (existing or recent graduate)	De-identified interview	18	4
Student (existing or recent graduate)	De-identified survey	14	39
Alumni	Anonymous survey*	225	
Stakeholders (Australia)	De-identified interview	13	8
Stakeholders (UK)	De-identified interview	7	
Stakeholders (Australia)	Anonymous survey*	36	
Stakeholders (UK)	Anonymous survey*	9	
Stakeholders (NZ)	Anonymous survey*	2	
Total		324	51

Note. UOWx = University of Wollongong case study.

\*empty surveys not included in count.

The recent graduate survey and interviews were de-identified and all data, including interview transcripts, were imported into NVivo12, after which line-by-line coding was conducted across all the sources. Despite the diversity of participants, common themes emerged; these form the basis for the findings section of this report and the recommendations that follow.

## 1.4 Theoretical framing for the study

To deeply analyse the various perspectives in this project, two key theoretical frames were drawn upon: Sen's capability approach (1999) and Bourdieu's (1986) capital theorisation. This project usefully combined Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field and habitus with the capability approach's three key elements: functionings, capabilities and agency. In summary, functionings relate to outcomes (which may be both tangible and intangible) and capabilities are the actual freedoms that enable individuals to achieve what they value (Sen, 1999). Agency is then regarded as the ability or capacity for individuals to achieve their desired goals and objectives. When combined with concepts of capital, field and habitus, the capability approach can offer a deep understanding of how individuals activate cultural and social "conversion factors" to achieve their desired functionings in life. This capital can be economic, social or cultural in nature, and has traditionally included symbolic, educational and linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In understanding that individuals have different capital packages and capitals have different values depending on the field in which the individual is operating, the research analysed how a range of capitals are used in the pursuit of employment by graduates from various backgrounds. The proposed theoretical fusion (capitals and capabilities) enables exploration of *both* what graduates consider as important in the field of employment (capitals) and the relative significance of individual capabilities when achieving employment within a chosen profession.

This is not the first study to advocate blending Sen's and Bourdieu's work (Bowman, 2010; Hart, 2012), but this is the first project that usefully combines these approaches in the analysis of the transition from university to employment. While limitations have been noted in both approaches (Bowman, 2010; Pitman, 2013), in combination they enable the exploration of both the role of culture in the enactment of life choices and the effects of agency. Put

simply, while individuals *appear* to have the necessary ‘process freedoms’ to access and succeed at higher education, this accessibility can also be *partial*, as the opportunity to realise this achievement can be limited or even lacking entirely. In applying this perspective to the employment field, this study seeks, first, to unpack individuals’ opportunities or freedoms to achieve the fertile functionings they themselves value, and, second, to consider how the process of “getting a job” is enacted at an individual lived level.

## 1.5 Key research questions

Based on the gaps in research identified and the existing literature in this field, this Fellowship explored the following three key research questions:

1. How does obtaining a degree actually translate into employability within an increasingly competitive labour market?
2. How do learners from intersecting equity categories enter the employment market, and how is this “entry to employment” experienced at an individual qualitative level?
3. How do learners negotiate existing and new forms of capital to achieve competitiveness in shrinking employment fields?

These questions were designed to present a study that is nuanced in its exploration of whether “patterns of disadvantage persist after graduation” (Richardson et al., 2016, p. 8) as they relate to those who are the first in their families or communities to attend university. This is a close-up analysis that intends to build upon Richardson et al.’s (2016) study on equity and graduate outcomes in Australia, which calls for a more focused and detailed study in this field. The output from this Fellowship is both scholarly and applied, the latter including a series of recommendations for maximising the post-graduation outcomes of learners from diverse backgrounds.

In summary, there is differentiation in the types of degrees that students from equity backgrounds undertake and the careers they enter (Richardson et al., 2016), with choices of institution similarly demarcated across class and social boundaries (Edwards & McMillan, 2015; Reay, 2016). These differences in educational choices are based on access to economic and cultural resources long before students reach post-school options. This Fellowship deliberately focused on FiF students in recognition that this cohort is highly segmented by equity categories (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), and that FiF students encounter a range of obstacles entering higher education that persist until the culmination of their degrees (Jaschik, 2005). By drawing on the experiences of those who managed to complete university and focusing on their post-graduation landscape, the Fellowship provides insight into the lived experience of this journey, complemented by the perspectives of those involved in researching or working in this field. Combining this data with relevant statistical data provides a comprehensive and detailed overview of this undertaking, and so contributes to an understanding of the ways employability is enacted for those students who have a limited familial biography of attending university.

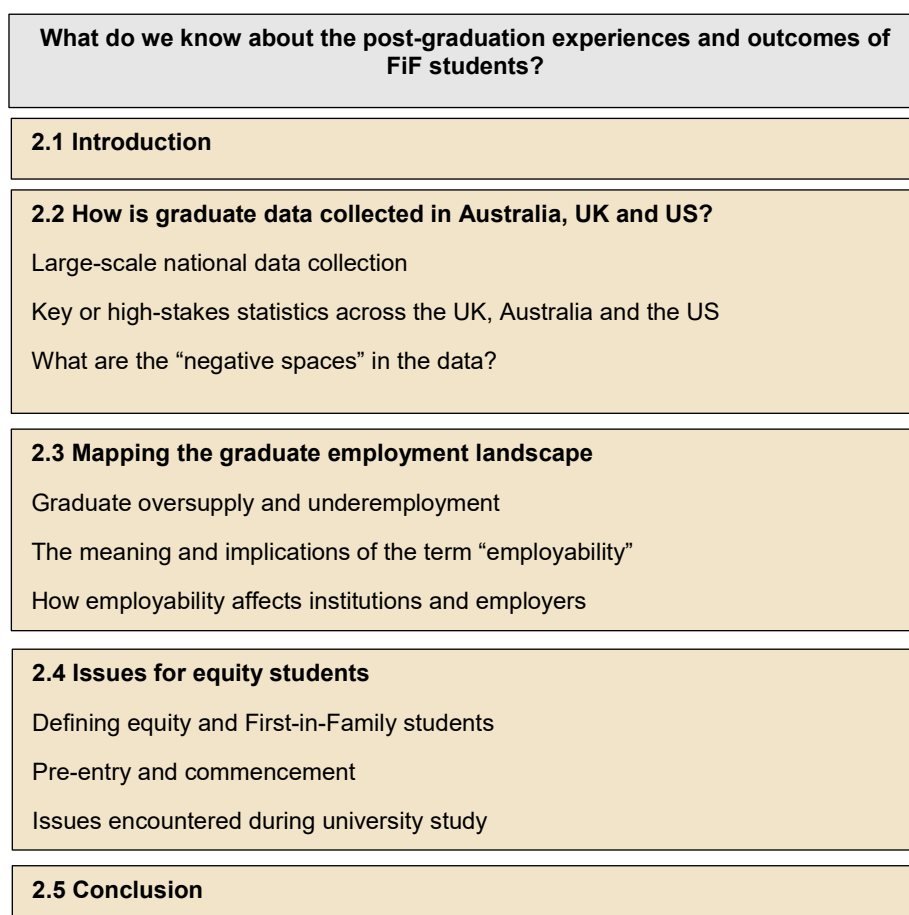


# Chapter Two: Literature review

## 2.1 Introduction

A comprehensive literature review was undertaken in Stage (1) of this project and published to the NCSEHE website (<https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/sarah-oshea-research-fellowship-literature-review/>). An abridged version is included here.

The overarching aim of this Fellowship was to explore the post-graduation experiences and outcomes of students who are (or were) the first in their family to attend university. The review begins by discussing the results of large-scale national survey into the post-graduation outcomes of graduates, with a focus on the quantitative outcomes of higher education for students from equity backgrounds<sup>1</sup>. To more deeply understand the qualitative post-graduation experiences of diverse students, the review then explores the graduate landscape faced by university students internationally. Finally, the lens is narrowed to focus on the range of issues that affect the graduate outcomes of students from equity groups, particularly those who are first in their family to attend university.



**Figure 1.** Diagram of chapter layout

<sup>1</sup> In Australia, there are six recognised equity groupings: students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds; students with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, non-English speaking background students, regional and remote students and women studying in non-traditional areas.



## 2.2 How is graduate data collected in Australia, the UK and the US?

This section describes how data is collected across the UK, Australia and the US, and presents the high-stakes statistics, which indicate the general trends in each country's graduate labour market. The section then looks beyond these statistics to the 'negative spaces': those statistics that are not emphasised in the reports but highlight the potentially unsatisfactory outcomes that some graduates experience.

### Large-scale national data collection

Graduate employment data is of high interest to government bodies, economic groups and political parties, as they are a partial indicator of the strength of a nation's economy and the success (or otherwise) of a government's economic policy. Higher education institutions also value graduate data as it helps them to understand the value of their product, report on their activities and compete in the tertiary education market. As a result, national data on graduate employment outcomes are collected in many countries in a systematic way, often jointly funded by governments and higher education bodies.

**In the UK**, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) administers and publishes the *Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education* (DLHE) survey on behalf of the UK Government and higher education councils (HESA, 2019c). Students of higher education are invited, 15 months after graduation<sup>2</sup>, to complete an online survey about their current situation and general wellbeing (HESA, 2019a). A range of data on graduate destination, salary, type and region of employment and occupation are compiled and published online in the *Destinations of Leavers* report (HESA, 2018b). **In Australia**, the *Graduate Outcomes Survey* (GOS) is administered by the government-funded Social Research Centre and completed by graduates of higher education institutions four months after completion (QILT, 2019a). The annual *Graduate Outcomes Survey National Report* details a range of data including employment rates, skills utilisation, salary and institutional outcomes (QILT, 2019a). **In the US**, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is the federal body responsible for collecting and analysing educational data (NCES, 2019d). The NCES's annual report, *The Condition of Education*, provides limited information on graduate employment, specifically employment rates and earnings (NCES, 2019e). Other US data is available from various reports on the website, though none as comprehensive, current and accessible as the Australian and UK national reports.

In addition to surveys of leavers, increasing numbers of longitudinal studies that follow graduates for years after completion are a rich source of data on graduate outcomes. In New Zealand (NZ), the *Graduate Longitudinal Study* (GLSNZ), jointly funded by the government and Universities New Zealand, surveyed final-year students in 2011 and followed them two and five years post-graduation, with an additional survey planned for 2021 (GLSNZ, 2019). In Australia and the UK, medium-term graduate outcomes have begun to be captured three years and three-and-a-half years post-completion, respectively (QILT, 2018).

While the UK and Australia have comprehensive, systematic systems for collecting graduate outcomes data, the US data is predominantly limited to employment and earnings, and focuses on younger graduates. Broader and richer information about graduate outcomes appears to be collected and shared in a piecemeal manner by individual institutions, states and regions (Cowan, 2015). For example, a longitudinal study by the NCES, *Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study* (B&B), examines the graduate outcomes primarily of teachers (NCES, 2019b). However, it is suggested that the data void on graduate outcomes in the US will soon be filled as institutions better collect and share their data (Cowan, 2015).

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<sup>2</sup> This approach to data collection is relatively new; thus the data reported on in this review is derived from a previous format in which surveys were administered six months and three years after graduation (HESA, 2019b).

This is already occurring in the Multistate Longitudinal Data Exchange (MLDE), a program enabling data sharing amongst states and institutions in one region of the US (Prescott, 2014).

The following section examines the broad outcomes of graduates in Australia and internationally. Each of the countries is diverse in outcomes and experiences for graduates; the next sections explore these differences across locations.

### **Key or high-stakes statistics across the UK, Australia and the US**

The outcomes for graduates reported in national studies across countries are primarily positive. In the UK, the US and Australia, graduate employment rates are improving, earnings are increasing, and graduates can regain in the medium term any employment shortcomings encountered immediately after graduation.

**Graduate employment in the UK** looks promising, with graduate employment up, unemployment down and more graduates acquiring full-time, professional-level jobs over the short and medium term. The most recent results from the DLHE survey indicates that six months after graduating, 71 per cent of graduates from UK universities are in employment (HESA, 2018b), an increase from the previous year (AGCAS, 2017). The longitudinal study of 2015 graduates indicates that, encouragingly, this rate rises to 86.4 per cent three years later (HESA, 2018a), revealing that many graduates unemployed shortly after completing their degree do manage to find employment within the next three years. In combination, the statistics reflect a continued strengthening of employment outcomes in the last five years. The data on the type of employment held by graduates six months post-completion show that 59.2 per cent of leavers were employed full-time, which increased to 73.6 per cent three years later (HESA, 2018a). These figures are regarded as indicating that a large proportion of those who begin in part-time work do move into full-time work (HESA, 2018a, 2018b) over a period of time. Additionally, more employed graduates are in a professional-level job six months after graduating: 73.9 per cent, up from 71.4 per cent the previous year; this rises to almost 85 per cent three years on (AGCAS, 2017; HESA, 2018a). Thus, over time, 60 per cent of graduates who start out in non-professional roles make the transition to professional employment (HESA, 2018a).

The recession experienced by the **US** between 2007 and 2009 affected the employment outcomes of most of its citizens, with the economy only now gradually recovering (NCES, 2019c). Generally, both employment rates and earnings are worse when compared to rates prior to the recession, but have been improving every year since 2010 (NCES, 2018b, 2019a). There is limited information about how graduates are faring in this post-recession economy. The NCES reports only on young graduates (those aged between 25 and 34 years of age). While somewhat limited, the statistics do indicate that in 2017 the unemployment rate for young people with a bachelor degree or higher was three per cent, slightly lower than just after the recession in the previous year, when it was 3.1 per cent (NCES, 2018b, 2018c). The median earnings of full-time employed young adults with a bachelor degree were US\$51,800 in 2017, a slight increase from US\$50,000 in the previous year (NCES, 2018a, 2019a). However, these statistics provide little understanding on the whole cohort of graduates, as there is no reporting on graduates who are older than 35, or further information about graduates who may continue with further study, work part-time or undertake other activities.

In **Australia**, the outcomes of higher education graduates are also, at first glance, positive (QILT, 2018, 2019a). The continued improvement in undergraduate employment since 2014 has continued, with 87 per cent of graduates employed four months after completion (QILT, 2019a). Encouragingly, this rate improves over the medium term, with the overall employment rate of graduates at 92.4 per cent after three years (QILT, 2018). Levels of full-time employment also improve over time. A survey of the 2015 graduates conducted three years after graduation indicated that half of those employed part-time or unemployed

immediately upon graduation were able to secure full-time jobs within three years (QILT, 2018). As a result, in the medium term, 89.2 per cent of graduates were in full-time work (QILT, 2018). These strong rates of graduate full-time employment are found across the sector, with all institutions in 2018 reporting full-time rates above 81 per cent (QILT, 2018) and some universities indicating full-time rates exceeding 92 per cent; these include CSU (93.6 per cent), Murdoch (93.2 per cent), UTS (92.7 per cent) and ANU (92.2 per cent) (QILT, 2018). Salaries have also continued to improve for graduates employed full-time from every study area. Indeed, in 2017, the median undergraduate salary was AUD\$61,000, an increase of 1.7 per cent from the previous year (QILT, 2018, 2019a). Furthermore, the 'weaker' employment outcomes immediately after graduation experienced by graduates in some fields of study, particularly those degrees that are more general in focus, seem to diminish or narrow longitudinally (up to three years) (QILT, 2018).

The next section examines statistics from the national surveys that are not widely reported, or may not even be calculated, but are important in understanding the outcomes for all graduates. The percentages discussed here are those that represent groups of graduates that may be experiencing unsatisfactory graduate outcomes.

### **What are the "negative spaces" in the data?**

While there are many positive trends in national data, a close examination of the "negative spaces"—those statistics that are not calculated or stated in the national reports—provides another perspective on graduate outcomes. For example, in the latest Australian GOS (QILT, 2019a), an unemployment figure has not been calculated, nor is the percentage of graduates who are not in suitable employment explicitly stated. This is an example of a negative space, as the data offers limited understanding about those graduates who are not employed, or are not employed in their preferred work role. In this section, unemployment, underemployment and underutilisation are all explored to bring to the foreground those population cohorts that may be experiencing below-average outcomes relative to the broader population.

Despite having a degree, some graduates remain unemployed in the short and medium term; that is, they are available for employment but unable to find full-time, part-time or casual employment (QILT, 2018). Shortly after completing their degree, this group numbers in the tens of thousands. In the UK, approximately 5.1 per cent of respondents ( $n=412,300$ ) were unable to find paid work (HESA, 2017), while in Australia this figure was 13 per cent of respondents ( $n=120,564$ ), or a total of 15,673 graduates. National surveys of graduates do not explain who these people are or why they do not obtain work straight after their degree.

Another under-addressed issue in the national reports is that of 'underemployment', which refers to graduates who are in paid employment fewer than 35 hours a week and would prefer to work more hours (QILT, 2019a). There is evidence that underemployment could exist for a proportion of Australian graduates (QILT, 2019a). The Australian government's definition of underemployment is part-time work when full-time work is required (QILT, 2019a), but underemployment can also result from the underutilisation of skills and qualifications.

Internationally, there is evidence that graduates are not fully using the knowledge, experience, skills and university qualifications that they acquire in their post-graduation employment. High numbers of employed graduates in Australia report that they are not being employed in professional and managerial occupations requiring "a level of skill commensurate with a bachelor degree or higher" (QILT, 2019a, p. 23). A similar situation is found in the UK, where 15 per cent of graduates fail to obtain a professional job in the medium term, instead often populating sales and customer service occupations (HESA, 2017). In Australia, four months after graduation, almost 30 per cent of full-time and 40 per cent of part-time employed graduates did not work in jobs appropriate to their level of skill (QILT, 2019a). A reasonably high proportion of Australian students felt that their qualification

was "not at all important" (22.6 per cent) or "not that important" (14.5 per cent) for their current employment (QILT, 2019a). Graduates responded similarly in the UK, with the importance of graduates' qualifications in gaining their current employment being either "not very important" (21.2 per cent) or "not important" (15.5 per cent) (HESA, 2018a). It is suggested that in the US there is also a skills mismatch, where workers and job candidates have more education than their current job requires (Cowan, 2015). Clearly these are important statistics that indicate that many graduates are not fully using the knowledge, skill and experience they derive from their degree, and as a result may not be fully realising the benefits of their university education. This data will be presented in more depth in Chapter Four with reference to the most recent GOS data.

The next section seeks to explore these areas in the context of the available literature in the field, to further add depth to our understanding of the graduate employment market.

## 2.3 Mapping the graduate employment landscape

In countries such as Australia, the UK and the US, growth in the numbers of students participating in higher education, shrinking graduate labour markets and an increasing emphasis on the need for students themselves to improve their own employability have all affected the post-graduation landscape (O'Connor & Bodicoat, 2016). This section explores each of these key areas by focusing on the following broad themes:

- graduate oversupply and underemployment
- the meaning and implications of the term "employability"
- how employability affects institutions and employers.

These themes have been chosen to provide a high-level overview of the current post-graduation employment field, and each is expanded upon in the larger published Fellowship literature review.

### Graduate oversupply and underemployment

As a result of initiatives globally, there has been an increase in the number of students undertaking university study and graduating with a degree qualification (Marginson, 2016; OECD, 2001). This increase in formal university qualifications has a number of implications for graduate employment. The rise in student numbers has not been matched by employer demand, resulting in an oversupply of graduates and intensified competition for employment across the world, including in Europe, North America, China and India (Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth, & Rose, 2013; Purcell et al., 2013; Roulin & Bangerter, 2013). As highlighted by Robertson, Weis and Rizvi (2011), education is a positional good, and once everyone has a particular credential, the value of the credential diminishes. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that there is a mismatch between levels of qualification and their market utility (Tomlinson, 2008). As a result, the returns that graduates can expect from higher education are more volatile (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006b); that is, the rewards of higher education are becoming more unevenly distributed as the relationship between education, jobs and entitlements becomes increasingly reconfigured (Allen et al., 2013).

An important implication of this is that any unified concept of a "graduate labour market" is increasingly redundant, as graduate employment is segmented into zones of greater or lesser security, with differing levels of correspondence to graduate-level skills (Morrison, 2014). Graduate outcomes across the globe are increasingly related to the field of study (Carroll, Heaton, & Massimiliano, 2018; Norton & Cherastidham, 2014), but within each broad field of study exists a range of graduates, some more employable and successful than others. The following section closely examines the concept of employability to further explore the reasons for such differences between graduate outcomes.

## **The meaning and implications of the term “employability”**

It is clear that with an oversupply of credentialed graduates, a degree is no longer enough to secure well-paid and highly skilled employment (Abrahams, 2017). To compete in oversupplied labour markets, graduates need to set themselves apart from other applicants and offer potential employers more; effectively, individuals need to strive to be *more* employable than the competition (Tomlinson, 2012).

The term “employability” is commonly used to refer to those attributes that make individual graduates inherently more attractive to employers (Boden & Nedeva, 2010), or successful in the labour market (Tholen, 2015). In most countries, governments are focused on ensuring graduate employability; this is not surprising given that participation in higher education is equated to national economic growth (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006b; OECD, 2016; Zajac, Jasinski, & Bozykowski, 2018). Yet the term “employability” is not a neutral one; instead the politically loaded nature of employability needs to be explored and exposed.

The demonstration of employability assumes that an individual is capable of moving self-sufficiently within the market to independently realise potential through sustainable employment (Allen et al., 2013). Employability should then be conceived as a set of achievements, skills or understandings that all individuals possess (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). Yet, importantly, these skills or understandings are made up of both relative and subjective dimensions (Roulin & Bangerter, 2013), some innate but others learnable (Williams, 2005). If employability is constructed as a set of personal attributes, this arguably perpetuates or even accentuates, rather than alleviates, social injustice (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). This occurs because the employability discourse brings personal and circumstantial differences to the fore, which allows for the (re)production of (dis)advantage (Allen et al., 2013) and ignores systemic inequities that may exist in the graduate employment market.

Current government policy that is constructed around employability then largely positions learners as wholly responsible for gaining work, rather than this being an outcome of the wider structures of the labour market (Fejes, 2010). This situation affects not only the individual student but also the employers and universities. These effects are detailed in the next section.

## **How employability affects institutions and employers**

The employability discourse has altered the role of higher education institutions. Traditionally, universities educated elites for leadership and prioritised critical thinking and intellectual ability, but Boden and Nedeva (2010) claim that today a major role of universities is the production of an appropriately trained workforce. This workforce is expected to address employers’ needs so that each nation can better compete in the global knowledge economy. As a result, universities are charged with the responsibility of ensuring that their graduates have the requisite knowledge and skills to be competitive and employable (Andrews & Russell, 2012; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006b; Tran, 2015). However, the knowledge and skills “required” and “valued” in different fields of study, geographic regions and socioeconomic areas, are subjective and can potentially (re)produce (dis)advantage.

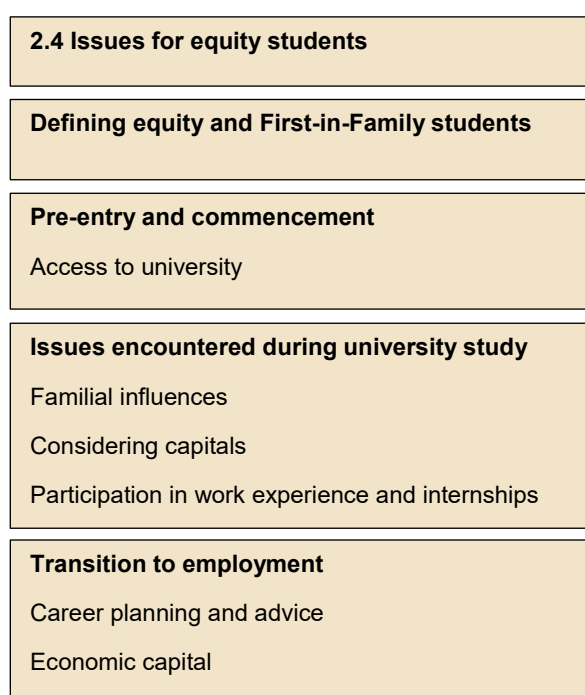
This discourse has also been charged with contributing to the commodification of higher education (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Tomlinson, 2008). In this relationship, the modern student population is cast as a customer and education as an investment, an affiliation that has, in turn, considerably reduced the agency of most universities over the employment skills they develop, their curricula and the type of education and graduates they produce (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). Universities competing in a marketplace may, intentionally or unintentionally, shape their degree programs around employability (Andrews & Russell, 2012; Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Pouratashi & Zamani, 2019); however, this equally may reinforce the stratification of higher education. For example, prestigious universities such as Oxford ensure that their students are highly employable by educating them with broad-based

knowledge and endowing them with cultural capital, whereas newer technical universities address employability by teaching very specific skills on behalf of employers (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). In this way, the discourse of employability has been regarded as accentuating social inequity.

The following, and final section, draws on literature to identify some of the issues faced by students traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

## 2.4 Issues for equity students

Situated within the context of the broad graduate and educational landscape described above, this review narrows its focus to the exploration of the qualitative post-graduation outcomes experienced specifically by students from equity groups. This section traces the equity student experience through the higher education life cycle from pre-entry and commencement through university study and beyond, with a focus on issues related to employability.



**Figure 2.** Diagrammatic representation of the literature themes

This section begins with an orientation to equity students, with close attention to those who are first in their family to attend university.

### Defining equity and First-in-Family students

As mentioned earlier, there are six equity groups within Australia; being the first in the family to attend university is not recognised within these equity definitions, but can usefully be designated as a “supra” group (O’Shea et al., 2017), as this cohort is intersected by multiple equity markers (O’Shea, 2016–2019).

For the purposes of this Fellowship, being FiF means that no-one in the student’s family has previously attained a university qualification. Within Australia, where FiF is largely defined in terms of parental educational levels, this is a large and growing student cohort, currently estimated at 51 per cent of the student population (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013) but one that is characterised by substantially poorer university outcomes and more complex journeys into and through university (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013; Australian Institute of Health

and Welfare, 2014; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). This cohort's contribution to the university population and lower rate of academic success is not unique to Australia; it is replicated across a number of countries (Cataldi, Bennett, Chen, & RTI International, 2018; Universities New Zealand, 2018). High departure rates are particularly noted in countries such as the US (NCES, 2012), Canada (Lehmann, 2009) and the UK (HEFCE, 2010). Collectively, research indicates that those who do not have a history of higher education attendance are less likely to go to university and, after arrival, may not perform to the same level academically as their second- or third-generation peers (HEFCE, 2010; NCES, 2012).

While it cannot be assumed that all FiF students encounter the same barriers (much like any other equity grouping), the following sections will explore the issues faced by this cohort throughout the higher education journey that might affect their achievement of appropriate graduate outcomes. Given the intersectionality of the FiF cohort, in addition to literature on FiF students, the discussion will draw on (largely Australian) research on equity students more broadly, as well as regional and remote students and those from low SES backgrounds.

### **Pre-entry and commencement**

Prior to commencing university and in the first transitional year of study, students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education may face a range of issues including access to institutions and limited exposure to university environments.

*Access to university:* Geography is an important factor in the Australian higher education environment, with communities categorised as metropolitan, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote based on their relative access to services (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019a). Australian youth in remote areas face high levels of unemployment, which shape their post-school opportunities and aspirations (O'Shea, Southgate, Jardine, & Delahunty, 2019; Youth Action, 2018). Indeed, the unemployment rates in some remote areas are much worse than the national average of 12.2 per cent (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2018). However, many young people value their close-knit and supportive communities and the attractiveness of their locality (O'Shea et al., 2019; Webb, Black, Morton, Plowright, & Roy, 2015). The decision whether to stay or relocate can create tension for students and youth in regional and remote areas. Many will have to relocate to undertake higher education, with flow-on effects for movements after graduation; for example, whether they seek work in their communities, near their campuses or in other metropolitan areas.

Students from regional and remote areas who relocate to take up further study also encounter logistical, financial and emotional challenges (Burke, Bennett, Bunn, Stevenson, & Clegg, 2017; Gore et al., 2015; Halsey, 2017). The challenge of financial hardship causes stress, affects wellbeing and contributes to attrition (Nelson et al., 2017). Furthermore, work and family commitments leave less time for co-curricular and social activities (Pollard, 2018), which compounds emotional and social repercussions. Those who do choose to stay in their home communities and study via distance face different issues that are no less inhibiting. Online/distance/external students have poorer outcomes than internal students, and part-time students fare worse than full-time students (Nelson et al., 2017; Stone, 2017), but regional students are taking up these approaches to study in greater numbers than metropolitan students (Pollard, 2018).

Given the challenges and poorer outcomes experienced by regional students accessing higher education, a newly released *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (Naphine, Graham, Lee, & Wills, 2019) aims to halve the disparity between regional and metropolitan students in relation to tertiary education by 2030 through a series of comprehensive recommendations. These include innovative approaches to education such as Regional University Centres (formerly known as Regional Study Hubs) (Department of Education, 2019c), which may offer a more supported environment for external learners. These community-owned study spaces are facilities that regional students can use to study



tertiary courses by distance and include study infrastructure and administrative, academic and student support services (Department of Education, 2019c). Currently 16 centres have been established around Australia, with funding for five more centres being awarded in 2019 (Department of Education, 2019c).

The following section further explores the challenges faced by diverse students in relation to employability as they progress through their studies.

### **Issues encountered during university study**

Students from equity backgrounds progress through higher education with familial pressure to succeed, undervalued capitals and challenges participating in work experience and internships.

*Familial Influences:* External to their studies, but potentially highly influential on them, are the challenges equity students experience resulting from familial responsibilities and influences. FiF learners are not only the “educational pioneers” (May et al., 2016) of their family and community, but also frequently undertake difficult and complex negotiations to achieve degree completion. There may be many others watching on the sidelines to see how those in this FiF cohort fare (O'Shea, 2016b); thus, they are frequently operating under an added burden to succeed. Additionally, such students must undertake the emotional work of managing existing identities or relationships (Brine & Waller, 2004; Waller, Bovill, & Pitt, 2011), which includes the emotional work involved in handling caring responsibilities (Giles, 1990; Gouthro, 2006 ; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Pascall & Cox, 1993).

Family and friends can be highly supportive and be a source of social capital while at university; however, the capitals possessed by equity students may be undervalued or insufficient in their higher education journey. Having no higher education imprint within the family, or “transgenerational family scripts” (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002, p. 57), is regarded as affecting FiF students' educational preparedness. In related research (O'Shea, 2016a), commencing FiF students reported “feeling isolated and lonely, feelings that were exacerbated by uncertainty related to university language, expectations and protocols of behaviour” (p. 62). These factors make the FiF cohort particularly vulnerable to attrition and disengagement from university.

*Considering Capitals:* Equity students may not hold the needed capitals required within the higher education environment. For equity students, financial constraints can have a long-term negative impact on their higher education journey (Bassett, Brosnan, Southgate, & Lempp, 2019; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018; Oldfield, 2012), including not participating in internships or volunteer opportunities and the presence of increased stress (Bassett et al., 2019). These are factors that may lead to higher levels of attrition or early departure for these equity cohorts (Coates & Ransom, 2011; Rubio, Mireles, Jones, & Mayse, 2017; Spiegler, 2018; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

The issue of capitals also underpins equity students' participation in work experience and internships whilst at university; this is explored in the following section.

*Participation in work experience and internships:* Undertaking work experience is increasingly recognised as a valuable resource for boosting employability and obtaining post-graduation employment (FYA, 2018a). Work experience may include programs such as internships, practicums, clerkships, residencies and clinical experience (NCES, 2018d). Internships are also recognised as being the norm before taking on a formal employment role (Montacute, 2018), particularly in certain industries such as the creative sector, where these roles are a “widespread phenomenon” (O'Connor & Bodicoat, 2016, p437). Relevant paid employment can speed the transition from full-time study (both vocational and university) to full-time work, with this experience recognised as resulting in a faster transition to employment (FYA, 2018b).

However, participating in these types of opportunities relies on having the necessary financial support and temporal conditions that facilitate such involvement. For those students who have family obligations or who need to support themselves financially, participating in an internship may not be possible. Having economic capital is important to participating in work experience, as many internships are unpaid (Montacute, 2018), and an Australian media report suggests that young people can be out of pocket approximately AUD\$6,000 from doing an unpaid internship (Sinclair, 2019). Students with economic capital enjoy a greater choice of placements because they have greater resources to fall back on (Allen et al., 2013), can afford to work in different geographical locations even when the internship is unpaid and may not need to earn money to cover their living costs (Allen et al., 2013; Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller, 2013; Macmillan, Tyler, & Vignoles, 2014).

Also, internships are often unadvertised, and thus are awarded to those with existing social connections (Montacute, 2018), or they are targeted at more selective universities where students are more likely to come from higher SES backgrounds (Ashley, Duberley, Sommerlad, & Scholarios, 2015). Another barrier to participation can be that in some institutions, work experience hours are compulsory for course completion but finding placements is the responsibility of the student. Self-sourced placements favour those with larger developed social networks, and so perpetuate poor access for those members of the population who do not have links to professional or employment networking opportunities (Paull, Lloyd, Male, & Clerke, 2019). Lastly, having insufficient knowledge about whether an unpaid internship is a worthwhile investment for one's future career might prevent students from participating in these opportunities (The Bridge Group, 2016). Indeed, it is indicated that low SES students continue to assume that success in the employment field is ultimately decided by the quality of the degree held (Bathmaker et al., 2013). In this scenario, participating in internships may be regarded as "taking time away" from the degree itself. Students may focus on achieving high grades to the detriment of participating in extra- or co-curricular opportunities (Watson, 2013).

Therefore, students from non-traditional backgrounds face issues in participating in internships, an increasingly critical strategy whilst at university for a successful transition to graduate employment. The following section examines other issues that equity students face as they transition to employment.

## **Transition to employment**

The influence of career planning and advice as well as economic capital are highlighted in this section as being particularly influential on students' transitions to desirable graduate employment. Each of these themes will be dealt with separately in the sections below, with further detail available in the extended literature review available [here](#).

*Career planning and advice:* The transition from higher education to work is potentially hazardous for most graduates and needs to be negotiated with astute planning, preparation and foresight (Tomlinson, 2012). Navigating the complexities of this employment market appears to require access to both "hot" and "cold" knowledge sources. Ball and Vincent (1998) explain that "hot" knowledge is more socially situated—usually derived from family members, peers and colleagues—whereas "cold" knowledge is formal in nature, usually obtained from institutional sources of knowledge. Exploring how students obtain the knowledge needed for employment will be one focus of the research highlighted in this report.

For equity students, and particularly FiF students, access to "hot" knowledge may be relatively constrained, as often they do not have access to family members or peers with the requisite knowledge and experience to assist in the transition to the workforce (Bassett et al., 2019; Purcell et al., 2013). Unfortunately, careers services do not appear to be a strong source of advice for students either (Nguyen & Blomberg, 2014; Purcell et al., 2013). Students from low SES backgrounds and Indigenous students regard university teaching

staff to be their most important source of information on careers and professional characteristics (Richardson et al., 2016). This reliance on academic staff is worrying in a higher education system where increasingly staff are casualised and often very time poor (O'Shea, Lysaght, Roberts, & Harwood, 2015).

Even if students are armed with good-quality careers advice, their economic capital can also interfere with their attainment of desired graduate employment.

*Economic capital:* Financial insecurity influences graduate decision-making as financial shortfalls at the end of university create extra pressures and strains on students which impacts what they feel that they can and cannot do (Vigurs, Jones, Everitt, & Harris, 2018). Economic capital is a financial and psychological safety net that allows graduates to have short-term financial stability, engage in a longer job search and realise post-graduation goals (Macmillan et al., 2014; Vigurs et al., 2018). Those without financial capital can experience anxiety about gaining graduate employment and be driven to seek non-graduate employment (Vigurs et al., 2018), postponing their transition to the graduate labour market and compromising their short-term graduate outcomes (Vigurs, Jones, Harris, & Everitt, 2019). Given the influence of financial security on graduate transition, it is obvious that the same graduate options and transitions are not open to everyone. Indeed, Vigurs et al. (2019) suggest that an uncertain and delayed transition to graduate employment for students with constrained access to economic capital may lead to longer-term inequality that threatens to increase social stratification.

## 2.5 Conclusion

While national reports of the graduate outcomes of higher education indicate high levels of employment and increasing graduate salaries, also evident is the unemployment, underemployment and underutilisation of skills and qualifications that some graduates experience, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Those outcomes occur within the context of an increasingly competitive and stratified graduate labour market, a discourse that places responsibility for employability with the individual and an intensified requirement to participate in work experience or internships at the same time as university study. Given these conditions, and the range of other barriers and challenges faced by equity and FiF students, it is clear that there are many hidden injustices within the graduate landscape, and that not all students are experiencing smooth transitions, successful outcomes and equitable returns from their participation in higher education. As (Tomaszewski, Perales, Xiang, & Kubler, 2019) so succinctly argue: "In the contemporary Australian context, social origin continues to play a role in shaping up the labour-market and personal outcomes of university graduates" (p. 17).

These differences in experiences need to be distinctly analysed for all learners, but particularly those who come from groups that have been historically underrepresented in higher education settings. In Australia, this includes the six nominated equity groups, but this review has also reflected upon the issues encountered by the growing number of students who are first in their families to attend university. Ultimately, a deeper understanding of how different student cohorts experience this transition out of university and, hopefully, into employment will add to an understanding of the whole student life cycle. This focus is of growing importance as more students are encouraged and welcomed into Australia's tertiary education environments. The next chapter details how this research was undertaken with students and stakeholders to provide a detailed analysis of how individual learners navigate this "transition out" phase.

# Chapter Three: Research design and methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

This Fellowship was complex in the sense that it drew upon a diverse range of data derived from participants in both Australia and the UK. As a mixed methods approach, the research also required careful design to ensure that all facets informed each other across the collection and analysis phases. This chapter will provide an overview of the particular theoretical approaches that have informed this research before detailing the various facets of the research and the data analysis processes undertaken. This will give a context for the presentation of findings that follows in the next chapter of the report.

## 3.2 Theoretical framing

This Fellowship deliberately adopted a mixed methods approach to explore the research topic from a range of perspectives, as the international literature base has indicated that this is a multi-layered experience. In order to do justice to the qualitative data, Bourdieu's concepts of capitals, habitus and field were combined with Sen's capability approach in the analysis of the data. The following sections provide a summary overview of this theoretical combination and detail how the approach will contribute to the project.

### Capitals, field and habitus

Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), the research detailed in this Fellowship sought to explore how dynamics of power are subtly played out within the graduate employment landscape. Bourdieu's social theory has been largely concerned with identifying how economic and non-economic criteria work together to create social status and hierarchies, in recognition that the social world is more complex than simply being based upon economic wealth or materiality. Bourdieu (in Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) similarly recognises educational institutions including higher education as being powerful forces in the reproduction of inequality and social stratification. To define and expose how this inequity is negotiated, Bourdieu (1977) developed the concepts of "field", "capital" and "habitus".

Bourdieu identifies 'fields' as being social spaces that are structured by shared rules and relationships, with an individuals' movement and successes within these fields being governed by the capital possessed. Capital can be economic or cultural, the latter defined by family or social position (Bourdieu, 1986). Habitus is informed by an individual's socialisation, which influences thinking, acting and behaving in particular ways, often without regard for the constructed nature of these actions or behaviours. Capital, in particular, has been rigorously applied to understandings of power and domination, and Bourdieu identifies various forms, which include social, cultural and symbolic capital; the latter generated through manifestations of prestige. Bourdieu (1986) combines field, capital and habitus to explore how institutions like universities engage in social reproduction; in short, higher education is regarded as a type of "sorting machine" that selects students "according to an implicit social classification and reproduces the same students according to an explicit academic classification" (Naidoo, 2004, p. 459).

While Bourdieu's work provides a means by which to deeply examine the social arrangements within which individuals exist, and it has usefully informed further theoretical developments, it is not without its critics (Goldthorpe, 2007). Bathmaker (2015) indicates how Bourdieuan concepts have been criticised as being too deterministic, failing to emphasise the agency of individual actors. This is not to undermine the important contribution made by Bourdieu, but rather to highlight that these theories can be

conceptually built upon to further an understanding of power and domination within social spaces. As Bathmaker (2015) explains, it is the “work after Bourdieu, which has sought to develop and adapt his thinking tools, [that] shows the value of building on and beyond his work” (p. 65). Noting these perceived limitations, this Fellowship will also draw upon Sen’s capability approach to more deeply understand how individuals maintain some level of agency, but are equally constrained by invisible forces or structures within their social setting.

### **The capability approach**

Amartya Sen (1993) developed the Capability Approach as an alternative to economic determinism; Sen is both an economist and a political philosopher with a particular focus on the evaluation of human wellbeing. Sen’s approach moves away from simply equating wellbeing to the ownership of material wealth or achievement of a certain lifestyle or standard of living; instead, Sen (1993) questions the nature of these measurements and proposes alternative perspectives that consider individuals’ actual freedoms to “be” and “do” what is desired.

Capability is then defined as “a person’s ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being; ... represent[ing] the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be” (Sen, 1993, p. 30). In other words, wellbeing is defined by the autonomy or liberty an individual has in life and in living. Sen developed the concepts of capability and “functionings” to consider how structural constraints can interact with the agency of individuals. *Capability* is defined in terms of the autonomy or liberty an individual has to choose their pathways in life and define the type of living conditions they wish to have. *Functionings* relate to outputs or outcomes; in other words, what someone actually achieves given the constraints within which they operate.

Applying this understanding to the Fellowship means that while graduating FiF students seem to have achieved the same or similar functionings of the field (i.e. successful degree attainment, on track to graduate etc.) as their more advantaged peers, these functionings may hide some very different capability sets. As Walker and Unterhalter (2007) explain:

*The capability approach requires that we do not simply evaluate the functionings but the real freedom or opportunities each student had available to choose and to achieve what she valued. Our evaluation of equality must take account of freedom of opportunities as much as observed choices. (p. 5)*

Adopting this approach has required close examination of agency and identity, in combination with considerations of structural stratification. In recognising the agency of individuals, attention is also paid to the variable nature of context and personal circumstance for each person. This framing then underpins the understanding that having access to higher education is not sufficient on its own; instead, a close examination of the actual capability that individuals have to enact their preferred freedoms is also required (Sen, 1993).

## **3.3 Qualitative data collection**

The qualitative part of this Fellowship was informed by surveys and in-depth qualitative interviews. Recruitment for participation in this part of the research was completed through online media that included email, Twitter and e-newsletters. Participants in this study included existing university students, recent graduates and alumni, all of whom identified as being the first in their family to attend university, complemented by the participation of key stakeholders, including those working in the graduate employment field, researchers of employability and equity practitioners.

Table 2 highlights the various participants, numbers involved and recruitment approach used to target them.

**Table 2.** Details of Recruitment

<b>Participant type</b>	<b>Method of recruitment</b>
<b>FiF students (existing or recent graduates)</b>	<i>Email invitation based on participation in previous research as UG (amendment to ethics applied for)</i>
<b>FiF alumni</b>	<i>Email invitation distributed via alumni network of a university</i>
<b>Stakeholders (Australia and UK)</b>	<i>Targeted emails sent to key stakeholders in the field</i> <i>General call for participation sent via existing networks in Australia (HERD/NAGCAS) and UK (CHEER/Eurostudents)</i> <i>Use of Twitter to invite participation from further afield</i>

*Note.* FiF = First-in-Family

All participants (except alumni<sup>3</sup>) were offered the choice between participating in an interview (approximately 45–60 minutes) or completing a survey (approximately 30 minutes) made available via a SurveyMonkey link. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via phone; details of the interview questions for stakeholders and students are available in Appendices 2 and 3, respectively. The majority of participants elected to complete the survey, which, given time and geographical constraints, is not surprising. This form of data collection proved to be richly detailed, as the surveys contained a number of open questions to which many participants responded in significant detail. Equally, these surveys enabled the inclusion of a broad diversity of participants, particularly amongst the student cohort, as shown in the demographic tables in Appendix 4. Four surveys were used, each aimed at a different audience (stakeholders, alumni, students and UOWx<sup>4</sup> participants), with variations in the questions depending on the target audience.

Extant data was also used in this project. This data had been collected as part of an ARC Discovery Project (2016–2019: DP170100705) that explored how FiF students use existing capitals and capabilities to enact persistence at university. In the interviews and surveys collected as part of this study, participants also reflected on their post-graduation futures and how prepared they felt for life “after” university. This was a significant data set, consisting of 306 interviews and 72 surveys conducted with students in the final year of their studies. This data provided important additional insights to the topic of this Fellowship.

The next section details the data analysis and organisation of all the qualitative data used in this project; this forms the basis for the findings detailed in the next chapter.

### 3.4 Qualitative data analysis

This section briefly explains how each data set was handled in the analysis stage of the Fellowship. The three discrete but related forms of data were interview data; survey data;

<sup>3</sup> Given the time and distance constraints for alumni (particularly as many would be working), I made the decision to offer the survey option only for this cohort.

<sup>4</sup> UOWx is a university-wide strategy designed to connect undergraduates with the co-curricular activities offered at the University of Wollongong. UOWx also offers employment-related training and records participation in activities to ensure that this is included on students’ testamurs upon graduation



and extant survey and interview data. Given the diversity of sources, each form of data underwent a slightly different analytical process and so will be detailed separately.

1. *Interview Data:* All recorded interview data was transcribed and de-identified, with names of people, locations and institutions replaced with pseudonyms. The transcripts were sent out for member checking and, once approved, were imported into NVivo 12. Line-by-line coding was then conducted, with each transcript studied carefully to enable themes and ideas to emerge inductively from the data. This process was complemented by the researcher memoing a reflective journal that encouraged the interrogation and close examination of emerging themes. The initial pass over the data resulted in 30 high-level codes, 18 of which were broken into “child” or subsidiary nodes that further developed the overarching theme.
2. *Survey Data:* The survey data was collected via surveys developed using the SurveyMonkey program. Separate surveys were developed for existing students, alumni and stakeholders in the field. Each survey had the overarching theme of exploring how the post-graduation labour market is qualitatively experienced by FiF students and the ways in which this cohort felt supported (or not) in this transition. While broadly similar, surveys did differ in the types of questions posed and how these questions were articulated (the Appendices contain copies of the surveys). All the survey data was exported out of SurveyMonkey and into the existing NVivo 12 project (which housed the interview data), and the open responses were coded using the line-by-line method. This coding was also inductive and led to the creation of new themes as well as new codes for the themes that had emerged from the interviews.
3. *Extant data:* This data set was already in NVivo and had been thematically coded under the auspices of DP170100705. Each of these existing themes was analysed, and the data under each explored in the context of the Fellowship project. A number of these themes were deemed to be relevant to the Fellowship (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Details of existing relevant themes from DP170100705

<b>Overarching node</b>	<b>Definition or specific “child” nodes used</b>
<b>Strong future imaginaries</b>	<i>Having a clear idea of what the future will be like and the need for sacrifices, skills, knowledge or plans needed to achieve this future</i>
<b>New definitions of the self</b>	<i>An articulation of how a reorientation of the self has occurred that depended on the process of taking further study</i>
<b>Engagement with industry and discipline</b>	<i>The blending of experience in both the industry and academic discipline effectively</i>
<b>Life without university</b>	<i>With specific reference to the child node “poor or limited career”</i>
<b>Improvements to university experience</b>	<i>With specific reference to the child nodes “practicums” and “career-related”</i>
<b>Expectations of university</b>	<i>With specific reference to the child node “career readiness”</i>
<b>Concerning success (in university)</b>	<i>With specific reference to the child node “career-related”</i>
<b>Motivations to start</b>	<i>With specific reference to the child node “career”</i>



These overarching nodes and relevant child nodes were then copied into the existing NVivo project along with the relevant data (student demographic sheets etc.).

Once all the data had been coded into new or existing themes, the entire project was reviewed and nodes with limited content or those that seemed to overlap were removed. The result was 27 high-level themes, with 17 of these having “child” or sub-nodes under the overarching theme. Appendix 8 provides details of these nodes and some of the hierarchies that emerged, and Figure 3 provides an overview of the final set of nodes.

Current Nodes 070919	
	Name
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Barriers to grad employment
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Being FiF - impacts on family and community
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Career post graduation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Changes since becoming a worker
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Considering employment expectations
<input type="checkbox"/>	Considering the hidden capitals of the degree market
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Describing employment to family
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Family or community reactions to degree and post-graduate employment
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Future Selves folder for Janine
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Good quotes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Imagined career
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Imagining the future post-graduation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Impacts of FiF status on employment options
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Improvements or recommendations
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Internship participation why or why not
<input type="checkbox"/>	Issues moving through the degree for employability
<input type="checkbox"/>	Levels of Preparedness
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Negatives of university attendance
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Not attending university - how would life be different
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Opportunities that have assisted
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Personal Qualities that assisted
<input type="checkbox"/>	Quotes related to the creative industries and employment
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Reflections on current employment
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Skills, knowledges experience that assisted employment
<input type="checkbox"/>	The working class ethic
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	What is success after graduation
<input type="checkbox"/>	What might they do differently
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Why attend university - the benefits

**Figure 3.** Details of final nodes for Fellowship

As Figure 3 indicates, a wealth of data was collected, and each of these nodes was carefully investigated using the NVivo Query function, which allowed the data to be “sliced” according to participant, mode of response and key demographics. The queries run on the project included matrix coding, word-frequency counts and compound coding searches. Interrogating the data according to different items and perspectives provided a much deeper understanding of this field, which was further grounded in the theoretical lens adopted for

this study. Iteratively moving between the nodes, student narratives and the theories of Sen and Bourdieu provided the means to consider this data in new ways. The process of analysis was further complemented by the inclusion of key literature that was also imported into the NVivo project and coded against the emergent themes. Overall, this was a rigorous and unfolding analytical process that provided a diversity of perspectives on this data. The discussion section of this report details those findings pertinent to the Fellowship research questions, with additional publications under preparation to provide insight into broader themes.

The following section provides an overview of how the quantitative analysis was undertaken, as well as details of the sources of data used in this part of the project.

### 3.5 Quantitative data collection

As part of the mixed methods design of the project, quantitative data was sought to complement qualitative data constructed through interviews and surveys. Such data is already collected by the Australian Government Department of Education through the Social Research Centre (SRC) in Canberra. Each year, the SRC administers three national surveys (the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching survey suite) aimed at gathering large-scale, national information on the student experience and graduate outcomes of Australian's higher education institutions (QILT, 2019b). The quantitative data for this Fellowship comes from two of these surveys: the GOS and the Student Experience Survey (SES). This section details how the data collected by the Social Research Centre was sourced and analysed to address the Fellowship's primary research question.

#### Sources of data

The quantitative data for the project came from two sources: data from the GOS and the SES. The GOS and SES are part of the QILT survey research program administered by the Social Research Centre on behalf of the Australian Government (QILT, 2019a, 2019b). The QILT federal budget measure was introduced in mid-2014, and from 2015 the SRC implemented a survey-research program aimed at collecting student feedback from current students (SES), graduates (GOS) and employers of graduates (Employer Satisfaction Survey) (QILT, 2019a). The surveys are conducted annually, and reports published on the QILT website.

*Graduate Outcomes Survey:* In 2016 the GOS replaced the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS) and associated surveys and publications previously administered by Graduate Careers Australia (QILT, 2019a). The GOS provides information on labour-market outcomes and further study activities of graduates of Australian higher education institutions (QILT, 2019a). According to QILT (2019a, p. 1) the GOS "continues the long tradition established since 1974 of measuring the labour market experience and destinations of recent higher education graduates". In the annual GOS National Report, graduate outcomes are reported in a variety of ways, including by demographic groupings such as gender, age, Indigeneity, home language, disability, study mode, socioeconomic status and location, but *not* by FiF status (this data is collected but not reported).

*Student Experience Survey:* The SES was originally known as the University Experience Survey (UES), and from 2011 to 2014 it was part of a national framework for collecting feedback on the higher education student experience. Since 2015, the SES has collected data on multiple facets of the undergraduate coursework student experience (QILT, 2019a). In 2017, the survey was expanded to include postgraduate coursework students as well (QILT, 2019a). The *Student Experience Survey National Report* is published annually to the QILT site. Unlike the GOS, SES results are reported for the demographic category of FiF; however, as discussed below, only in a limited way. Positively, the sample of respondents achieved in the SES closely matches the overall population of FiF commencing students, as indicated by QILT: "As was the case in 2017, it is evident that many of the characteristics of

respondents in 2018 very closely match those of the in-scope population, especially with respect to ... first in family to attend a higher education institution ..." (QILT, 2019a, p. 65).

Being large-scale, comprehensive and timely, the QILT surveys offer insight into the experiences of students and graduates of Australian universities. However, neither report speaks directly enough about how FiF students experience higher education and the transition to employment. Therefore, statistical data from the GOS and SES on the FiF cohort pertaining to specific questions of interest to this project were requested from the Social Research Centre. The request was redirected to the UOW Statistical Consulting Centre and the data was obtained from UOW in April 2019. The data was received in Excel spreadsheets (nine tables for the GOS data and three for the SES data). The data was in the form of frequency counts for each question separated into counts for *FiF* and *ALL* respondents.

### 3.6 Quantitative data analysis

Before analysis commenced, duplicate files for each of the GOS and SES data were created that could be manipulated during the analysis phase without disrupting the original data files.

As stated previously, for each question, frequency counts had been received for *FiF* respondents and *ALL* respondents (Table 4 shows an example).

**Table 4.** Undergraduate employment and study outcomes before analysis

	FiF	All
In full-time employment	804	27850
Overall employed/Total employed	1448	44120
In labour force	1705	50595
In full-time further study	562	9822

*Note.* FiF = First-in-Family

To begin the analysis, it was necessary to create a new category to allow the responses of the FiF group to be compared to those of the other respondents. The new category was created by subtracting the frequency counts of the *FiF* category from the frequency counts of the *ALL* category. For the GOS tables, this new category was called "Not identified as FiF"; for the SES it was called 'Non-FiF'. The differentiation is highly important. Ideally, the new category in the GOS tables would be comprised of students who were not first in their families to attend university; however, as later analysis revealed, in this particular survey, only 3.5 per cent of respondents were identified as being FiF, a small proportion of the 44.7 per cent of graduates who are actually FiF (QILT, 2019a). As the new category consisted of a large proportion of FiF students, it could not be called "Non-FiF", and so was given the name "Not identified as FiF". (The limitations of this problem are discussed in more depth in Section 4.2). This problem did not exist for the SES, however, and the sample of respondents achieved in the SES closely matched the overall population of FiF commencing students (QILT, 2019a, p. 65).

Using the calculated frequency counts for *Not identified as FiF/Non-FiF* and *FiF*, totals by category were obtained for each question and percentages calculated (Table 5 shows an example). This was done for each of the nine tables of GOS data and three of the SES data.

**Table 5.** UG and study outcomes after analysis

	FiF		Not identified as FiF		All	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
In full-time employment	804	41.6	27046	50.9	27850	50.6
Overall employed/total employed	1448	74.9	42672	80.3	44120	80.1
In labour force	1705	88.2	48890	92.0	50595	91.9
In full-time further study	562	29.1	9260	17.4	9822	17.8
Total respondents	1933	100.0	53115	100.0	55048	100.0

Note. FiF = First-in-Family

Each of these new tables was then examined carefully for statistics that stood out as interesting or noteworthy and potentially significant in light of the literature and theoretical framing of the project. Eighteen statistics were identified as important to the study; a summary of these statistics was used as a basis for consultation with other quantitative researchers and statisticians to obtain advice and interpretations of the results. A meeting with the UOW Statistical Consulting Centre discussed the weaknesses and limitations in the QILT data (outlined in Section 4.2) and supported the initial analysis. To strengthen the results, a recommendation was made to undertake further analysis and test for statistical significance.

Inferential statistics can be used to generalise the results of a sample to an entire population (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). For the GOS, the response rate (or sample) was 43 per cent; for the SES, the response rate was 48.9 per cent. To make inferences about the entire population of university students (SES) and graduates (GOS), a test of statistical significance needed to be applied. A *z distribution* can be used to determine the level of statistical significance of an observed difference between sample proportions; for example, between FiF and non-FiF students. A *z test* of statistical significance is used to determine whether a null hypothesis can be rejected (Gall et al., 2007). For this data, the null hypothesis states that there is no difference between the proportions of *FiF* and *Non-FiF/Not identified as FiF* respondents. Z tests for statistical significance were completed using an online z score calculator at a confidence interval of  $p < .05$ . A small p-value (typically  $< .05$ ) indicates strong evidence against the null hypothesis (that there is no difference), leading to its rejection. The results are indicated in the far-right column of each table. An asterisk \* indicates a significant result. In this study, many results were very strong ( $p < .001$ ), indicating a highly significant difference between the proportions.

### 3.7 Conclusion

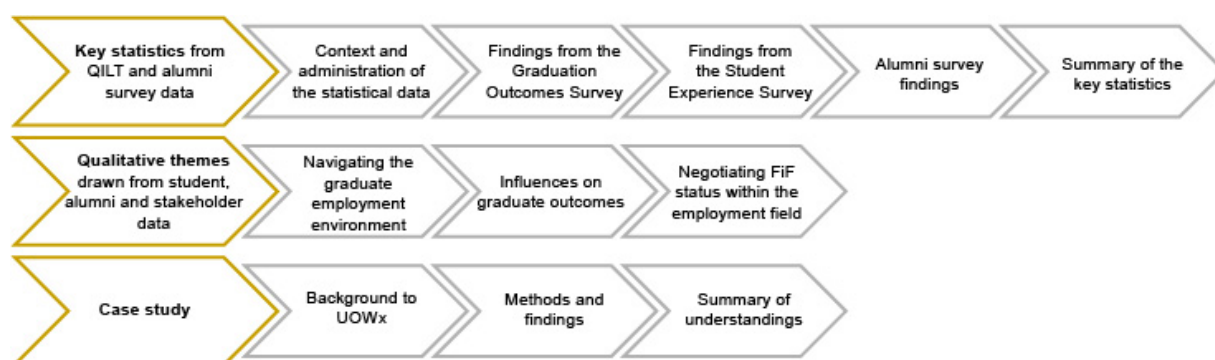
This chapter has highlighted the stages of data collection and analysis. As the chapter demonstrates, each stage was informed by the previous stage and embedded in the next stage, to produce a mixed methods study on graduate employment outcomes according to demographic background. The next chapter presents the findings from across the qualitative and quantitative data, providing context to the discussion in Chapter Five.

# Chapter Four: Findings

## 4.1 Introduction

As outlined in the previous section, the Fellowship employed mixed methods to carefully explore the post-graduation outcomes of FiF students from a range of perspectives. First, statistical data from both the 2018 GOS and 2018 SES were analysed to ascertain the status of the post-graduation landscape from a national, quantitative perspective. Second, students (current and recent graduates), alumni and key stakeholders in the field in both Australia and the UK were surveyed and interviewed to obtain their qualitative experiences and opinions on the research questions. A case study was also undertaken to explore one example of an institutional approach to supporting FiF students' employability. As a result of this methodology, the Fellowship has obtained rich and layered findings that are distinct from each other but also overlapping and interconnected. Overall, the findings present a comprehensive and revealing picture of the experiences of the transition from study to work for students from a range of equity backgrounds, including those who are first in their families to attend university.

This section will present the study findings in three main sections, which are derived from the data sources described above. Figure 4 shows the structure and content of this section.



**Figure 4.** Details of the structure of this chapter

After the findings are presented separately in this way, they will be drawn together in Chapter Five in a discussion of key issues and themes as these relate to the three overriding research questions.

## 4.2 Statistical findings from surveys

This section presents the key findings from three sources: analysis of 2018 GOS data and the 2018 SES data and the survey of university alumni (2019) conducted within this Fellowship. Throughout the remainder of the report, these data sources will be referenced as *GOS data 2018*, *SES data 2018*, and *Alumni data 2019* respectively. This section is divided into five themes:

- context and administration of the statistical data
- findings from the GOS
- findings from the SES
- alumni survey findings
- summary of key statistics.

Before any findings are presented, contextual issues related to the collection of the statistical data (both QILT and alumni survey data) will be outlined; this context is important for the findings that follow.

## Context and administration of statistical data

The following section addresses the weaknesses of the quantitative data obtained from QILT and from the survey of FiF alumni from this project, and how these limitations have been dealt with during the analysis phase of the project.

### *Issues with the QILT data*

The QILT national surveys are large-scale, high-quality research tools administered by the Social Research Centre on behalf of the Australian government. They are a source of timely and reliable information about the higher education experiences of Australian students and graduates. They include information about graduate outcomes and the student experience of all graduates as well as how certain equity groups fare. However, currently, information about the experiences of FiF students and graduates is relatively limited due to incomplete demographic data.

The GOS and SES responses are pre-populated with data held by higher education institutions (Social Research Centre, 2019a, 2019b). FiF status is determined by examining each parent's highest level of educational attainment. If neither parent nor guardian has attended university, the student is considered to be FiF. The problem with linking GOS and SES responses to enrolment data is that the demographic information appears to be incomplete in relation to this data element. Although the reasons for this are unknown, two factors might contribute. First, highest educational attainment of parent/guardian has only been collected through HEIMS, the Department of Education's electronic information system for higher education and VET, since 2010 (Department of Education, 2019a, 2019b). This might mean that this data was not recorded for students who enrolled prior to 2010. Second, anecdotally, students have indicated in interviews that they do not see the relevance of questions pertaining to their parents' educational level to their own university experiences, particularly for older students, and students may not have completed this field upon enrolment. With this in mind, an alternative or more direct question could be used to identify this status.

*Implications for GOS data:* In the 2018 GOS, only 1933 out of 55048 respondents (3.5 per cent) were recorded as being FiF. However, FiF students as a percentage of the total student population is 44.7 per cent (QILT, 2019a). Unfortunately, this means that most of the FiF responses to the GOS cannot be identified and remained hidden amongst the "not identified as FiF" group. Given the small percentage of responses identified as FiF, analysis and interpretation of the GOS data regarding FiF students has been completed with caution and readers need to be aware of this limited nature.

*Implications for SES data:* Absence of FiF demographic information in student enrolment data also poses a problem for the interpretation of SES data. The SES is completed by first year ("commencing") and final year ("later year") university students (Social Research Centre, 2019a). However, highest level of parental attainment was not given for the "later year" students; thus only the "commencing" student group can be analysed according to FiF status. Therefore, unlike other demographic categories, all statistics included in the SES report (and those reported here) are limited to those who are *first-year* undergraduate FiF students.

### *Limitations of alumni data*

As explained in detail in Chapter Three, the alumni survey, which was set up in SurveyMonkey, contained a range of demographic and thematic questions in open and closed formats (Appendix 6 contains screenshots). While the survey attracted a reasonable completion rate ( $n = 225$ ), participants skipped some questions, resulting in response rates for the quantitative questions of between 58 and 95 per cent. The questions with low response rates came at the end of the survey, suggesting that fatigue led participants to skip

some of the final questions. Consequently, the statistics calculated and presented below are based on the number of participants who answered each particular question, often a number fewer than the 225 participants. With such limitations noted, the following sections present the findings, beginning with those from the GOS.

## Overarching findings from the Graduate Outcomes Survey

The findings from the 2018 GOS are presented under the following headings:

- employment rates
- reasons for part-time work
- utilisation of skills and qualification.

### *Employment rates*

The 2018 GOS data showed that six months after course completion, FiF graduates from undergraduate courses were less likely to be in the labour force than those not identified as FiF (88.2 per cent versus 92.0 per cent), and much more likely to be in full-time further study (29.1 per cent versus 17.4 per cent) (Table 6).

For those FiF who were in the labour force, the 2018 GOS data indicated that they experienced significantly poorer graduate outcomes. Specifically, FiF graduates have lower rates of overall employment (74.9 per cent versus 80.3 per cent) and much lower rates of full-time employment (41.6 per cent versus 50.9 per cent) than those not identified as FiF. Obviously, given the limitations with the data outlined earlier, these statistics need to be interpreted with caution.

**Table 6.** Undergraduate employment and study outcomes 2018

	FiF		Not identified as FiF		z value	p value
	n	%	n	%		
In full-time employment	804	41.6	27046	50.9	-8.06	<.001*
Overall employed/total employed	1448	74.9	42672	80.3	-5.88	<.001*
In labour force	1705	88.2	48890	92.0	-6.08	<.001*
In full-time further study	562	29.1	9260	17.4	13.10	<.001*
Total respondents	1933	100.0	53115	100.0		

*Note.* FiF = First-in-Family

\*significant at p<.05

### *Reasons for part-time work*

In the 2018 GOS, graduates who worked part-time hours were asked to state the main reason for not working more hours. Almost two-thirds of FiF respondents to this question (62.7 per cent) desired more hours than they currently had; for example, they sought full-time work from a position of part-time work. The group that was working part-time but *not* seeking more hours largely did so because they were studying (73.2 per cent of respondents) (Table 7).



Of the group that was seeking more hours, almost half (43.8 per cent) cited labour-market factors as the reason for not working more hours. The primary labour-market factors included *no suitable jobs in my local area* (9.7 per cent), *no jobs with suitable number of hours* (17.5 per cent) and *no suitable jobs in my area of expertise* (14.6 per cent). These statistics show that a significant group of FiF graduates are working part-time and cannot obtain full-time hours because of a lack of suitable jobs. Table 7 shows that approximately one-third (32.8 per cent) of FiF part-time working graduates were constrained from obtaining more hours by the commitments of further study.

**Table 7.** Main reasons for not working more hours for FiF and non-FiF

Main reason given	FiF <i>not</i> seeking		FiF seeking	
	more hours		more hours	
	n	%	n	%
<b>Studying</b>	134	<b>73.2</b>	101	<b>32.8</b>
Personal factors such as illness or caring responsibilities	18	9.8	14	4.6
<b>No suitable jobs in my local area</b>			<b>30</b>	<b>9.7</b>
<b>No jobs with a suitable number of hours</b>			<b>54</b>	<b>17.5</b>
<b>No suitable jobs in my area of expertise</b>	9	4.9	<b>45</b>	<b>14.6</b>
Considered too old by employers			6	1.9
Other	22	12.1	58	18.9
Total	183	100.0	308	100.0

*Note.* FiF = First-in-Family  
Only graduates who provided an answer to this question are counted.

### *Utilisation of skills and qualification*

While having similar proportions of employment in managerial roles, FiF undergraduates were employed in professional roles (43.9 per cent versus 55.0 per cent) at significantly lower rates than those not identified as FiF (Table 8). At the same time, they were being employed in “other occupations” in greater proportions (19.1 per cent versus 13.2 per cent). These “other occupations” include positions such as sales workers, machinery operators/drivers and labourers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019b).

**Table 8.** Occupation levels 2018

	FiF		Not identified as FiF		z value	p value
	n	%	n	%		
Managers	92	6.6	2405	5.8	1.32	.187
<b>Professionals</b>	<b>608</b>	<b>43.9**</b>	<b>22811</b>	<b>55.0</b>	<b>-8.20</b>	<b>&lt;.001*</b>
Technicians and trades workers	66	4.8	1454	3.5	2.49	.013*
Community and personal service workers	210	15.1	5112	12.3	3.15	.002*
Clerical and administrative workers	143	10.3	4196	10.1	0.25	.803
<b>Other occupations</b>	<b>265</b>	<b>19.1</b>	<b>5459</b>	<b>13.2</b>	<b>6.40</b>	<b>&lt;.001*</b>
All	1384	100.0	41437	100.0		

Note. FiF = First-in-Family

\*p<.05

\*\* Only graduates who provided an answer to this question are counted.

Unsurprisingly, given the results presented above, the employment obtained by FiF graduates is less likely to require university qualifications than that obtained by those not identified as FiF. A lower proportion of FiF graduates stated that their qualification was *very important* for their current employment than those not identified as FiF (27.8 per cent versus 36.3 per cent) (Table 9). At the same time, a higher proportion felt that their qualification was *not at all important* for their current employment (27.9 per cent versus 22.5 per cent).

**Table 9.** Importance of qualification for FiF and non-FiF

	FiF		Not identified as FiF		z value	p value
	Total employed		Total employed			
	n	%	n	%		
Very important	345	27.8**	13609	36.3	-6.18	<.001*
Important	141	11.4	4816	12.9	-1.56	.119
Fairly important	203	16.3	5246	14.0	2.33	.020*
Not that important	206	16.6	5365	14.3	2.24	.025*
Not at all important	347	27.9	8421	22.5	4.52	<.001*
All	1242	100.0	37457	100.0		

Note. FiF = First-in-Family

\*p<.05

\*\* Only graduates who provided an answer to this question are counted.

Closer analysis reveals that university qualification is less important for the employment of part-time employed FiF graduates than full-time employed FiF graduates. Those employed full-time rate their qualification as *very important* in significantly greater proportions compared to those not employed full-time (34.8 per cent versus 18.8 per cent). Correspondingly, FiF graduates not employed full-time rate the importance of their qualification to their occupation as *not at all important* in much higher proportions when compared to those employed full-time (42 per cent versus 16.8 per cent) (Table 10).

**Table 10.** Importance of qualification for full-time employment FiF versus non-FiF

	FiF Employed full-time		FiF Not employed full-time		z value	p value
	n	%	n	%		
<b>Very important</b>	<b>242</b>	<b>34.8</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>18.8</b>	<b>6.25</b>	<b>&lt;.001*</b>
Important	95	13.7	46	8.4	2.90	.004*
Fairly important	130	18.7	73	13.3	2.54	.011*
Not that important	111	16.0	95	17.4	-0.66	.509
<b>Not at all important</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>16.8</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>-9.83</b>	<b>&lt;.001*</b>
All	695	100	547	100		

Note. FiF = First-in-Family

\*p<.05

In the 2018 GOS, graduates were asked to state the main reason for working in a job that did not fully utilise their skills and education. The results of the analysis show that there were slightly different influences on full-time and part-time workers. Studying had significantly less influence on the job choice of full-time employed FiF graduates than part-time employed FiF graduates (16.4 per cent versus 45.9 per cent), but both groups were affected by labour-market factors, most commonly *no suitable jobs in my local area* (14.6 per cent FT, 12.7 per cent PT) or *in my area of expertise* (22.1 per cent FT, 18.2 per cent PT) (Table 11).

**Table 11.** Reasons for doing a job that underutilised skills

Main reason given	Employed FT		Employed PT		z value	p value
	n	%	n	%		
<b>No suitable jobs in my local area</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>14.6</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>12.7</b>	0.66	.509
No jobs with a suitable number of hours	10	4.4	12	3.3	0.69	.490
<b>No suitable jobs in my area of expertise</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>22.1</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>18.2</b>	1.15	.250
Considered to be too young by employers	11	4.9	8	2.2	1.77	.077
Considered too old by employers	3	1.3	2	0.5	1.00	.317
Not enough work experience	9	4.0	14	3.9	0.07	.942
Cannot find a job NFI	7	3.1	6	1.7	1.16	.246
My job is temporary/casual only	3	1.3	2	0.5	1.00	.317
- Subtotal — labour-market factors	126	55.8	156	43.0	2.99	.003*
Personal factors	35	15.5	23	6.4	3.61	<.001*
<b>Studying</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>16.4</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>45.9</b>	<b>-7.32</b>	<b>&lt;.001*</b>
Other	28	12.4	17	4.7	3.41	.001*
Total	226		362			

Note. FT = Full time; PT = Part time

\*p<.05

The next section presents the findings obtained through an analysis of the statistics derived from the SES.

### Findings from the Student Experience Survey

The findings from the 2018 SES are presented under the following headings:

- rates of first-year students' considerations about leaving university
- influences on FiF education and career decision-making

- differences between FiF and non-FiF influences on education and career decision-making.

#### *Rates of first-year students' consideration of leaving university*

Analysis of the 2018 SES data shows that first-year FiF students considered leaving university in their first year at higher rates (20.2 per cent) than non-FiF commencing students (18.5 per cent) (Table 12).

**Table 12.** Total first-year students considering leaving university 2018

	FiF		Non-FiF		z value	p value
	n	%	n	%		
Total considering leaving**	7617	<b>20.2</b>	10061	<b>18.5</b>	6.53	<.001*
Total respondents	37736		54493			

Note. FiF = First-in-Family

\*p<.05

\*\*Total headcount that chose Yes for the question "Have you seriously considered leaving the institution?"

#### *Influences on FiF education and career decision-making*

The reasons first-year FiF students consider leaving university early are multiple and complex. The 2018 SES asked students who had considered leaving their university to select their reasons. The 17,678 respondents to this question (both FiF and non-FiF) selected 83,098 reasons, an average of 4.7 reasons each.

The overarching reasons for considering departure selected by first-year FiF students included stress, health and personal issues; the struggle to balance study with other aspects of life including earning an income; and the workload of the first year. Specifically, almost half of those considered dropping out for reasons of *health or stress* (47.5 per cent), with other reasons distributed as follows: *study/life balance* (34.8 per cent), *need to do paid work* (31.9 per cent), *workload difficulties* (30.3 per cent), *personal reasons* (26.9 per cent) and *financial difficulties* (26.8 per cent) (Table 13).

**Table 13.** Top 15 selected reasons for considering early departure among FiF domestic undergraduate commencers 2018

Reason	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Health or stress</b>	<b>3616</b>	<b>47.5</b>
<b>Study/life balance</b>	<b>2650</b>	<b>34.8</b>
<b>Need to do paid work</b>	<b>2433</b>	<b>31.9</b>
<b>Workload difficulties</b>	<b>2306</b>	<b>30.3</b>
<b>Personal reasons</b>	<b>2051</b>	<b>26.9</b>
<b>Financial difficulties</b>	<b>2042</b>	<b>26.8</b>
Need a break	1780	23.4
Boredom/lack of interest	1664	21.8
Paid work responsibilities	1655	21.7
Change of direction	1467	19.3
Family responsibilities	1448	19
Career prospects	1349	17.7
Expectations not met	1327	17.4
Commuting difficulties	1068	14
Academic support	1018	13.4
Gap year/ deferral	891	11.7
Other	885	11.6
Fee difficulties	796	10.5
Quality concerns	731	9.6

*Note.* Multiple response question.

### *Differences between FiF and non-FiF influences on education and career decision-making*

One of the key findings from this analysis was the difference between FiF students' and non-FiF students' reasons for consideration of early departure. In summary, FiF students were significantly *more likely* to consider dropping out of university in their first year than non FiF students due to *financial difficulties* (26.8 per cent versus 19.3 per cent), *need to do paid work* (31.9 per cent versus 25.9 per cent), *paid work responsibilities* (21.7 per cent versus 16.8 per cent), *family responsibilities* (19.0 per cent versus 14.5 per cent), *health or stress* (47.5 per cent v 42.1 per cent), *study/life balance* (34.8 per cent versus 30.3 per cent), *workload difficulties* (30.2 per cent versus 26.0 per cent) and *fee difficulties* (10.5 per cent versus 8.1 per cent). (Table 14 summarises these results, and Appendix 9 contains the full analysis).



**Table 14.** Selected reasons for considering early departure among domestic undergraduate commencers 2018

Reason	FiF	%	Non-FiF	%	z value	p value
Health or stress	3616	<b>47.50</b>	4233	<b>42.10</b>	7.16	<.001*
Study / life balance	2650	<b>34.80</b>	3050	<b>30.30</b>	6.30	<.001*
Need to do paid work	2433	<b>31.90</b>	2603	<b>25.90</b>	8.85	<.001*
Workload difficulties	2306	<b>30.30</b>	2620	<b>26.00</b>	6.22	<.001*
Financial difficulties	2042	<b>26.80</b>	1944	<b>19.30</b>	11.79	<.001*
Paid work responsibilities	1655	<b>21.70</b>	1689	<b>16.80</b>	8.31	<.001*
Family responsibilities	1448	<b>19.00</b>	1458	<b>14.50</b>	8.03	<.001*
Fee difficulties	796	<b>10.50</b>	810	<b>8.10</b>	5.40	<.001*

Note. FiF = First-in-Family

\*p<.05

Total Considering Leaving is the total headcount that chose Yes for the question "Have you seriously considered leaving the institution?"

Multiple response question.

At the same time, FiF students were statistically significantly *less likely* to consider dropping out because of *boredom/lack of interest* (21.8 per cent versus 26.3 per cent), *academic exchange* (8.1 per cent versus 11.0 per cent), *other opportunities* (7.5 per cent versus 10.2 per cent), *social reasons* (9.0 per cent versus 11.6 per cent), *institution reputation* (5.5 per cent versus 7.5 per cent), *change of direction* (19.3 per cent versus 22.5 per cent), *received other offer* (5.3 per cent versus 7.2 per cent), *quality concerns* (9.6 per cent versus 11.6 per cent), and *career prospects* (17.7 per cent versus 20.1 per cent). (Table 15 summarises the results, and Appendix 9 contains the full analysis).

**Table 15.** Selected reasons for considering early departure among domestic undergraduate commencers 2018

	FiF	%	Non-FiF	%	z value	p value
Boredom/lack of interest	1664	<b>21.8</b>	2644	<b>26.3</b>	-6.80	<.001*
Change of direction	1467	<b>19.3</b>	2267	<b>22.5</b>	-5.28	<.001*
Career prospects	1349	<b>17.7</b>	2026	<b>20.1</b>	-4.07	<.001*
Quality concerns	731	<b>9.6</b>	1163	<b>11.6</b>	-4.18	<.001*
Social reasons	686	<b>9</b>	1167	<b>11.6</b>	-5.57	<.001*
Academic exchange	614	<b>8.1</b>	1106	<b>11</b>	-6.51	<.001*
Other opportunities	574	<b>7.5</b>	1022	<b>10.2</b>	-6.02	<.001*
Institution reputation	419	<b>5.5</b>	758	<b>7.5</b>	-5.37	<.001*
Received other offer	404	<b>5.3</b>	723	<b>7.2</b>	-5.00	<.001*

*Note.* FiF = First-in-Family

\*p<.05

Total Considering Leaving is the total headcount that chose Yes for the question "Have you seriously considered leaving the institution?"

Multiple response question.

These figures illustrate the diversity of influences that affect students' university participation and the many factors that sway educational decision-making. Specifically, FiF students are highly influenced by their work, family and financial responsibilities and the stress of juggling those with study, a finding supported by other research in the field (for example, O'Shea et al., 2017; Rubio et al., 2017). FiF students also differ from non-FiF students in that they are less likely to consider leaving university due to boredom with their course, to change direction or take up other opportunities. This perhaps is unsurprising given the boundaries that such students often must cross to attend university in the first place and the pride that FiF students often feel in their university student status (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018; O'Shea, 2019).

Lastly, FiF students differ from non-FiF students in that they are less likely to consider leaving university due to concerns over the reputation of the institution and the quality of education they receive. This may be partly explained by large numbers of FiF students being from regional, rather than metropolitan, areas, and the trend for them to attend university at adjacent regional centres with university campuses (Cardak et al., 2017), limiting options to change institutions compared to the choices available to metropolitan students.

The next section focuses on the quantitative findings derived from the survey of alumni administered as part of the Fellowship.

### Findings from the alumni survey

The survey administered to alumni participants in this project was primarily qualitative in nature, in that participants were asked open-ended questions. However, in nine questions, participants were asked for a yes/no response before providing further detail qualitatively. This section presents the findings in relation to those closed responses. The qualitative comments were imported into NVivo and thematically analysed; this analysis will be

presented alongside the interview data from recent graduates and stakeholders later in this chapter.

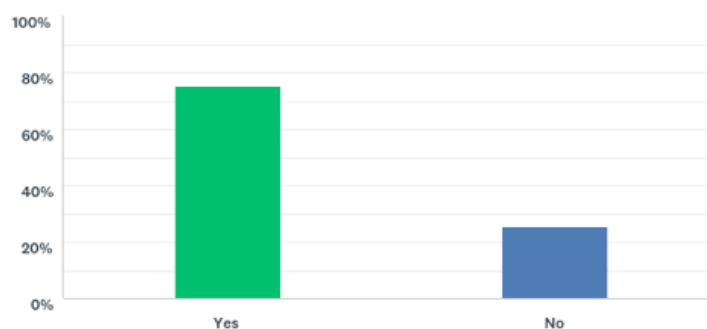
The alumni survey was completed by 225 participants, most indicating that they were first in their family to attend/graduate from university ( $n=198$ ). Nearly three-quarters of the respondents had graduated with a bachelor degree (70 per cent,  $n=158$ ), almost a quarter with a postgraduate qualification (23 per cent,  $n=51$ ), and 16 with a Higher Degree Research qualification (seven per cent). The number of years since graduating ranged from one to 38, with the majority of respondents (78 per cent) indicating that they had graduated 10 or fewer years ago. Participants were aged between 21 and over 51, with the majority being in the 26–40 age range ( $n=125$ , 55 per cent), and 23 per cent ( $n=52$ ) being over 51.

#### *Employment in field of study*

The majority of respondents to the survey had graduated 10 or fewer years ago, and the median year range since graduating was *six to 10*.

Almost three-quarters of all respondents were working in the same or similar field as their degree, but just under one-quarter ( $n=53$ ) were not, with 19 per cent still trying to secure work in their field of study ( $n=41$ ).

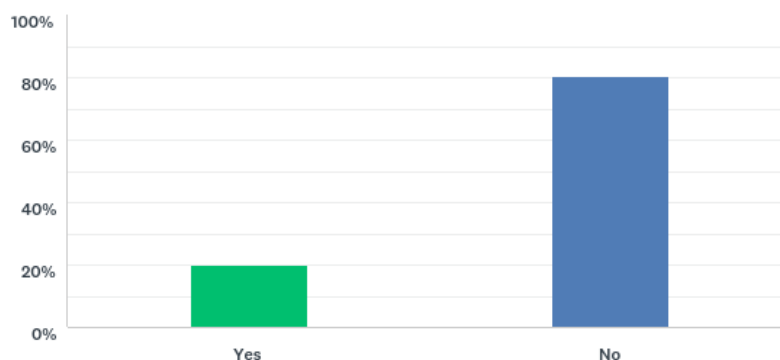
**Q11 Are you working in the same / similar field to your degree**



*Yes = 160 (75 per cent), No = 53 (25 per cent) [Nil response = 12]*

**Figure 5.** Alumni working in the same field

## Q14 Are you still trying to secure work in the same / similar field of your degree



Yes = 41 (19 per cent), No = 171 (81 per cent) [Nil response = 13]

**Figure 6.** Alumni still trying to secure work

When the data is examined by the length of time since graduation, some interesting patterns emerge. Finding work in the same/similar industry as their university qualification took time for these respondents. Two-thirds (66.7 per cent) of students who had graduated two or fewer years ago were working in the same or similar industry as their degree. This percentage increased for each year after graduation until 10 years after graduation, when three-quarters of these alumni (74.4 per cent) were working within their field of study (See Table 16).

**Table 16.** Alumni working in same/similar industry by time since graduation

Time since graduation	Cumulative number of respondents	Yes	%	No	%
<b>2 years or less</b>	39	26	<b>66.7</b>	13	33.3
4 years or less	58	39	67.2	19	32.8
5 years or less	80	54	67.5	26	32.5
6 years or less	97	68	71.1	29	29.9
8 years or less	125	90	72.0	35	28.0
<b>10 years or less</b>	160	119	<b>74.4</b>	41	25.6

*Note.* Only alumni who provided an answer to this question are counted.

Responses to the question about whether or not alumni were still seeking work in the same/similar industry as their qualification revealed a very different pattern. A significant proportion (65 per cent) of recent graduates (two years or fewer since graduation) **were still trying to find work in their industry**. However, within four years of graduation this proportion had halved to 30.5 per cent. This aligns with the findings of the GOS, which indicate that, for all graduates, low rates of employment in the short term (six months after graduation) improve in the medium term (four years post-graduation) (See Table 17).

**Table 17.** Alumni still trying to obtain work in the same/similar industry by time since graduation

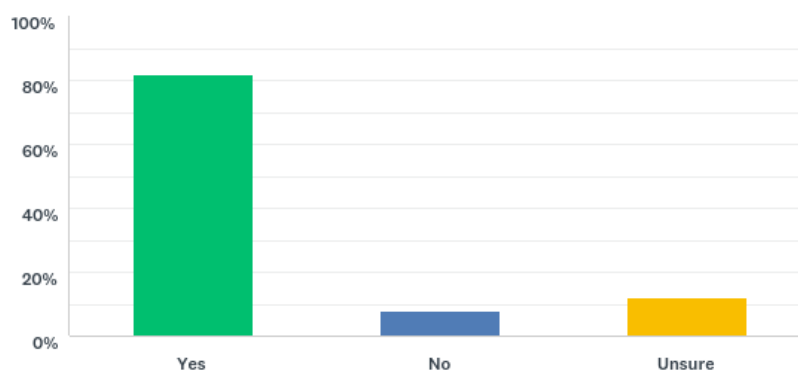
Time since graduation	Cumulative number of respondents	Yes	%	No	%
<b>2 years or less</b>	20	13	<b>65</b>	7	35
<b>4 years or less</b>	59	18	<b>30.5</b>	41	69.5
5 years or less	81	24	29.6	57	70.4
6 years or less	98	28	28.6	70	71.4
8 years or less	123	31	25.2	92	74.8
10 years or less	161	36	22.4	125	77.6

*Note.* Only alumni who provided an answer to this question are counted.

### *Enjoyment of current job*

When asked if they enjoyed their current job, 84 per cent answered “yes”, and only three per cent said “no”.

### Q40 Do you enjoy your job?

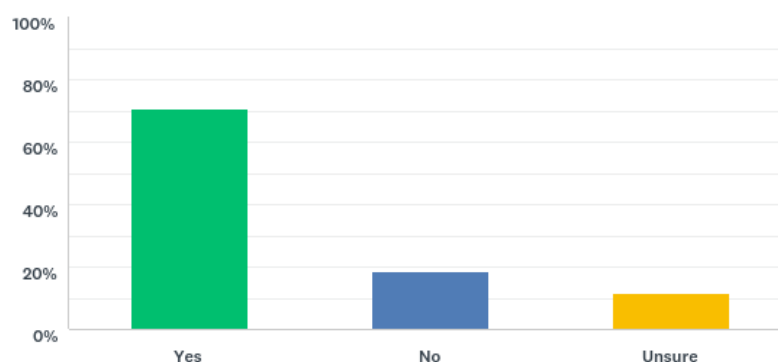


*Yes = 76 (84 per cent), No = 4 (3 per cent), Unsure = 50 (38 per cent) [Nil response = 95]*

**Figure 7.** Alumni enjoyment of job

While almost three-quarters (72 per cent) of these alumni participants indicated having a strong sense of belonging within their career and workplace, 18 per cent indicated that they **did not have a strong sense of belonging** and 10 per cent were unsure.

Q37 Do you have a strong sense of belonging within your career and workplace?

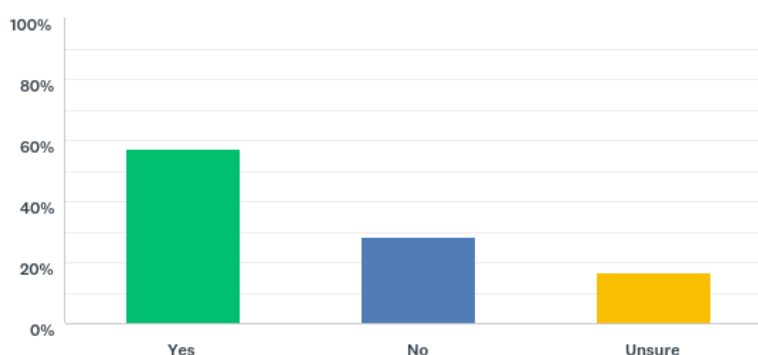


Yes = 105 (72 per cent), No = 27 (18 per cent), Unsure = 14 (10 per cent) [Nil response = 79]

**Figure 8.** Alumni sense of belonging

Interestingly, just over half (56 per cent) of participants felt some commonality with colleagues but almost one third (27 per cent) did not.

Q38 Do you have a lot in common with your colleagues in the workplace?



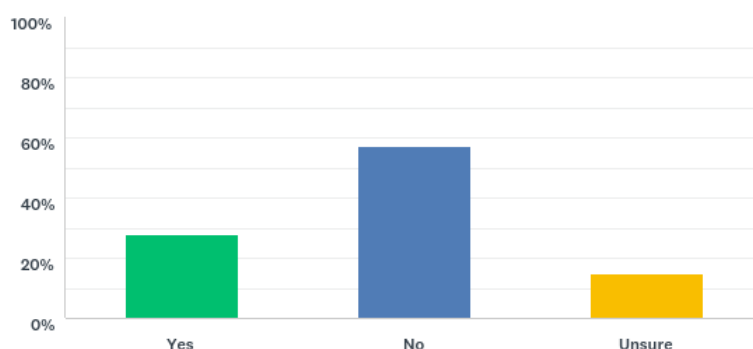
Yes = 84 (56 per cent), No = 40 (27 per cent), Unsure = 25 (17 per cent) [Nil response = 76]

**Figure 9.** Alumni commonality with colleagues

### *Reflections on graduate outcomes*

When survey respondents were asked if they considered themselves a “successful” graduate, most who responded agreed (78 per cent). Only seven per cent of people who answered the question felt that they were not successful. Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of respondents (57 per cent) would not change the focus of their degree, but 27.7 per cent of these alumni indicated that they would alter their field of study

### Q39 If you could change your degree focus would you?



Yes = 41 (28 per cent), No = 85 (57 per cent), Unsure = 22 (7 per cent) [Nil response = 77]

**Figure 10.** Alumni who would change degree focus

#### *Employability activities*

During their studies, only 22.0 per cent of FiF alumni participated in internships or cadetships. Three-quarters of respondents (78.0 per cent) did not. Further analysis of responses by time since graduation (Table 18), did not reveal a significant difference in this proportion. Even alumni who had graduated recently (within two years and within four years) had low participation in internships and cadetships (25.0 per cent and 26.3 per cent respectively).

**Table 18.** Alumni participation in internships and cadetships by time since graduation

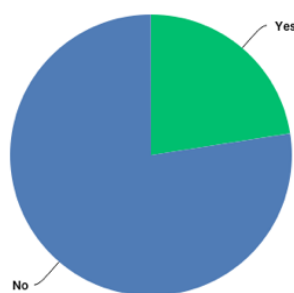
Time since graduation	Number of respondents	Yes	%	No	%
2 years or fewer	20	5	25.0	15	75.0
4 years or fewer	57	15	26.3	42	73.7

*Note:* Only alumni who provided an answer to this question are counted.

These figures represent a significant difference but, on a cautionary note, it is possible that the survey may have used inappropriate terms. The question asked about participation in “internships” and “cadetships” but did not use the terms “work experience” or “practicum”; more participants might have indicated “yes” if those terms had been used.



Q15 At university did you participate in internships or cadetships?



Yes = 47 (22 per cent), No = 166 (78 per cent) [Nil response = 12]

**Figure 11.** Alumni participation in internships/cadetships

### Summary of the key statistics

The statistical findings presented above are summarised under two broad themes, both of which are expanded on in Section 4.3, which details the qualitative findings. The two overarching themes are:

1. Navigating the graduate employment environment
2. Influences on graduate outcomes

#### *Navigating the graduate employment environment*

Based on findings from the analysis of the GOS, FiF graduates from undergraduate courses had lower rates of overall employment (74.9 per cent versus 80.3 per cent) when compared with graduates not identifying as FiF (GOS data 2018). However, given the limitations of the data outlined in Section 4.2 above, these statistics need to be interpreted with caution.

Analysis of the 2018 GOS data shows that six months after graduating, FiF students were more likely than students who did not identify as FiF to be working in part-time positions that did not fully use their skills and qualifications. This situation is supported by a variety of statistics. First, FiF graduates have lower rates of full-time employment (41.6 per cent versus 50.9 per cent) than those not identified as FiF (GOS data 2018). Also, almost two-thirds (62.7 per cent) of those without full-time work desire more hours than they currently have (GOS data 2018). These graduates are thus underemployed due to a lack of hours. In addition, 42 per cent of those FiF graduates in part-time work said that their qualification was *not at all important* for their employment (GOS data 2018), so for these graduate respondents, underemployment has resulted from a complete lack of utilisation of skills and qualifications. Lastly, as presented in the section on *utilisation of skills and qualifications* (page 37), FiF undergraduates are more heavily represented in positions as sales workers, machinery operators/drivers and labourers when compared with undergraduates not identified as FiF (19.1 per cent versus 13.2 per cent) and are less likely to be in professional roles (43.9 per cent versus 55.0 per cent) (GOS data 2018).

The main reasons for not being able to gain more than part-time hours and being in a job that did not fully utilise their skills and qualifications related to the labour market. Influential reasons included: *no jobs with suitable number of hours in my local area*, *no suitable jobs in my area* and *no suitable jobs in my area of expertise* (GOS data 2018). These reasons illustrate the competitiveness of the graduate labour market that students currently face.

Further understandings about the graduate outcomes of FiF were obtained through the survey of alumni (Alumni data 2019). For example, when asked if they enjoyed their job, 84

per cent of alumni replied in the positive. However, 18 per cent indicated that they *did not have a strong sense of belonging* within their career or workplace, and almost one-third (27 per cent) *did not feel some commonality with colleagues*. This lack of “common ground” is a theme that will be revisited in the qualitative component of this study.

### *Influences on graduate outcomes*

Analysis of the 2018 SES data shows that FiF students considered leaving university in their first year at significantly higher rates (20.2 per cent) than non-FiF commencing students (18.5 per cent). The reasons first-year FiF students consider leaving university early are multiple and complex. Understanding the influences on educational decision-making is key to developing a detailed picture of FiF students’ transition through university and beyond.

FiF students reported that they had considered leaving university in their first year for reasons related to the workload of the first year, the stress and its impact on their health and the struggle to balance study with other aspects of life, including earning an income (SES data 2018).

While non-FiF first-year students were also influenced by issues of health or stress, study/life balance and workload difficulties, they also appeared open to other dynamics that could affect their educational trajectory. Specifically, these students considered leaving university due to other opportunities and offers that might have been more interesting or more attractive career-wise or offer a change in their direction, or they might have been interested in another institution with a better reputation or quality of education (SES data 2018).

This comparison is interesting because it suggests that FiF students are under additional pressure financially and must juggle competing demands from family and work; these demands constrain their choices and aspirations. This finding is important in light of findings from the alumni survey that show that finding work in the same/similar industry as their university qualification takes time for FiF students. Within two years of graduating, 65 per cent of the alumni respondents were still seeking work in the same or similar industry as their qualification (Alumni data 2019). However, within four years of graduation this proportion had halved to 30.5 per cent (Alumni data 2019). The pressures of finances, family and life may mean that FiF graduates are unable to undertake a prolonged job search and must take work that is only part-time, unrelated to their degree or both. Research suggests that students without financial capital are driven to seek non-graduate employment, which postpones their transition to the graduate labour market and compromises their short-term graduate outcomes (Vigurs et al., 2018; Vigurs et al., 2019).

The next sections provide further depth to these findings and draw upon the qualitative data generated from surveys and interviews conducted between March and August 2019, representing both student and practitioner perspectives

## **4.3 Qualitative findings from surveys and interviews**

This section presents the findings from the interviews conducted with recent graduates and key stakeholders. This qualitative interview data is complemented by responses to the open questions within the surveys completed by alumni and stakeholders. This data was uploaded to NVivo and coded line by line. Quotes were de-identified but include the source (interview/survey) as well as demographic details including field of study/work and years since graduation or in current role.

The themes presented in the next section embody the major issues that emerged as significant, on their own and in light of the literature in the field. While all themes emerged from the qualitative data, the first and second themes can be related to the quantitative data, whilst the third provides a richly descriptive context to the FiF graduate experience.

### **1. Navigating the graduate employment environment**

2. Influences on graduate outcomes
3. Negotiating FiF status within the graduate employment field

Given the depth and richness of this data, each of these themes has also been explored within a number of journal articles that are currently under preparation. The sections below present the summary findings under each of these themes, with discussion and analysis presented in the next chapter of this report.

## **Navigating the graduate employment environment**

Alumni (n=225) and recent graduates (n=18 interviews and 12 surveys) reflected at length about the various issues and negotiations they encountered when moving from the university sector into graduate employment. These perspectives are further enriched by the stakeholders who were interviewed (n=21) and surveyed (n=47), all of whom worked across careers, outreach and research. These diverse perspectives have been grouped according to whether there was perceived to be personal/internal issues or external constraints/forces with which individuals had to contend and which they had to overcome in the transition to employment.

Graduates, alumni and stakeholders considered a range of *personal* issues that affected this movement out of university studies and into the post-graduation employment field; these have been collectively considered under two main overarching themes: feeling like an “imposter” and negotiating “insider” knowledge. These themes are considered in detail below.

### *Feeling like an ‘imposter’*

Having lower levels of belonging is something that has been noted in relation to FiF students during the transition into and initial movement through university (Longwell-Grice, Adsitt, Mullins, & Serrata, 2016; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Martin, 2015). Yet despite having successfully attained university degrees, both recent graduates and alumni in this study indicated that having a sense of belonging did not necessarily increase upon graduation. Instead, they reflected on the repercussions of this “imposter syndrome” in surveys and interviews, often discussing how this syndrome affected employment outcomes or even perceived opportunities. For some, this was an inherent constraint that did not necessarily diminish even after gaining employment:

*Impostor syndrome. My own psychological pattern of doubt about my accomplishments, which is persistently internalised as a fear of being exposed as a ‘fraud’. (Female, +51, Business, graduated 1yr<sup>5</sup>, #130<sup>6</sup>)*

*I often feel like I have imposter syndrome and that I should be just grateful for even having a seat at the table. (Female, 26–30, Commerce, graduated 5yrs, #178)*

Feeling like an imposter was often attributed to lower levels of confidence or associated with coming from a background or context that did not include experience of university study or professional careers, as one alumni respondent explained:

*Feeling as if I belonged took a while, as I had come from a class/family that were somewhat marginalised’ (Female, +51, Arts, graduated 32yrs, #174).*

<sup>5</sup> This refers to the total number of years since graduation as at 2019

<sup>6</sup> This figure refers to the number allocated to each participant of the anonymous alumni survey, and to which demographic data and responses are attached.

*Importantly, not all the alumni perceived this lower level of belonging as being a negative, with some regarding it as being an incentive to work harder and to persist in a competitive graduate market:*

*I did not have confidence. My writing skills were poor. I was not a good student. BUT I was stoic and worked hard. (Male, +51, Science, graduated 38yrs, #24)*

*I learnt perseverance. I was returning to employment after spending the previous six years as a stay-at-home mum and student. (Female, +51, Commerce, graduated 12yrs, #31)*

*Being poor — straight out of university I worked minimum- or low-wage jobs at first. Thus I had to continue living in shared housing and be quite creative ... it took me a while to see that my variety of experiences [was] giving me valuable skills (Female, 31-40, Science/Education, graduated 5yrs, #153)*

Stakeholders also reflected upon this sense of belonging and articulated how this might particularly affect those students who were the first in their families to attend university. Adriana, who worked as a careers consultant at an Australian regional campus, reflected on how this FiF cohort often did not have that “*belief in themselves*” which in turn limited their ability to “*sell themselves in a way that they can really believe in what they’re pitching at an interview level or putting in an application as well*” (Adriana, Careers Consultant, 2–5yrs<sup>7</sup>, Australia).

This perspective was echoed by Bridget, a UK academic and researcher, who referred to how students from families where attending university is not the norm “*have quite low expectations or perhaps don’t have that self-confidence to go for the higher jobs, or have high expectations that come out of their degree*” (Bridget, Researcher/Academic, 6yrs, UK).

Laura (Researcher/Academic, 6yrs, Australia) reflected on how this sense of belonging was based on generational propriety where students, from backgrounds where attending university was the norm, experience a “*right to be in certain roles*”. Laura described this as a confidence that is “*built into families where they might have to be three generations of professors or three generations of lawyers — they’re just expected to succeed; whereas for First-in-Family students, the family might even not understand why they want to succeed.*” Remedying this situation required deliberate and overt practices, as Researcher/Academic Camille explained:

*... presenting yourself, talking about yourself, giving a presentation at interview, even how to dress for interviews. For example, our employability service actually gives them clothes for interviews, so if students come along and they don’t have an interview suit, we have a kind of wardrobe of stuff that we will dress them for their interview and they get to keep elements of that if they want to. It’s really practical things like this that I think are sometimes overlooked, and kids from backgrounds where they’re not seeing this around them all the time — we sometimes don’t recognise how important those softer skills are when you go into an interview situation. (Camille, Researcher/Academic, 10yrs, Australia)*

This practicality of interventions was echoed by Selena (University Manager, 10 mths, Australia), who also argued that these should be deliberately targeted at FiF students, in recognition that “*they haven’t had a family member who’s gone down that path before, they’re not sure where they’re going is right, what they’re doing is right, so I think it’s really that confidence building, and until they do find out that they are doing the right thing in terms of ‘No, this is correct; you are doing it right’ — that gives them that confidence to keep*

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<sup>7</sup> Time spent in current role

*succeeding*". The need to equip learners with necessary skills and knowledge will be explored further in the next section, under the theme of "insider knowledge".

### *Negotiating 'insider' knowledge*

The term "insider knowledge" is used to convey understanding of, or familiarity with, protocols of behaviour that are often regarded as being accepted or taken for granted. The term "insider knowledge" has been used by a number of researchers (Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander, & Grinstead, 2008; O'Shea, 2019) to convey an inequity in access to implicit understandings, which can affect an individual's success or achievement within different domains. In the context of this project, the term is used to refer to implicit knowledge capitals that may influence the experiences of FiF students within the graduate employment market. Reflections on this "insider knowledge" differed between the stakeholders and the graduates or alumni. For the students, "unpreparedness" or a lack of clarity about what came after the degree was largely conveyed in terms of their own personal shortcomings or restrictive environmental factors rather than wider, invisible social constraints. In other words, understanding or negotiating university and post-graduation employment was largely articulated as being the responsibility of learners rather than reliant on wider social or cultural factors. The following quotes highlight this responsibility, with references to personal agency bolded for emphasis:

*Being the first in my family was quite a big deal for me and challenging at times. I **was constantly comparing myself** to my ... peers, who all had parents who had gone to university, so therefore had better support emotionally and financially. I **found this hard** sometimes and wished my parents were different ... I **had honestly had no idea what I was doing**. (Female, 26–30, Commerce, graduated 3yrs, #17)*

*Expectations is such a hard one for First-in-Family ... because it is 'expectations' themselves which are often missing for FiF children ... I **had no idea what to expect employment-wise** as nobody in [my] parents' circle had attended university — I didn't know where it would lead to (if that makes sense?) ... (Male, 31–40, Creative Arts/Science, graduated 14yrs, #102)*

*I **could have made more of my university experience** if I had known at the time where I wanted to direct my career. Perhaps if someone else in my family had graduated and embarked upon a professional career, they also could have given me advice about building the foundations early, such as doing internships and volunteering in places (Male, 2630, Arts/Law, graduated 6yrs, #104)*

*I **was very ignorant** [about] what came after (Female, 2630, Commerce, graduated 6yrs, #126)*

Interestingly, stakeholder interviews and surveys indicated a more critical understanding of such "insider knowledge", which was regarded as being determined by social standing and access to necessary capitals. In other words, it was conveyed as being more "external" to the student rather than internally controlled. Bronwyn (*Researcher/Academic, graduated 20yrs, UK*) described how FiF students "*haven't got the social connections who can help them to do it [gain employment] and they're sort of a bit high and dry when they finish university*". Bronwyn contrasts this to "*middle-class*" students who already "*know how to package themselves, or they've got people around them that help them to do that*" (Bronwyn). Similarly, Bridget (*Researcher/Academic, 6yrs, UK*) referred to this "insider knowledge" as personal "*know-how*", explaining how access to this knowledge set similarly affected access to the creative industries:

*[P]eople in the arts who come from families that have arts in their background are more likely to know the connections to make, actually how to sustain*

*themselves in the creative industries. You know, it's that know-how. (Bridget, Researcher/Academic, 6yrs, UK)*

Not having access to this “insider knowledge” could ultimately preclude graduates from membership of the creative community, as it may confirm that working in the arts is ultimately “*not for the likes of us*” (Researcher/Academic, 6yrs, UK).

The following section draws upon the interviews and surveys conducted with stakeholders, alumni and graduates with a focus on the *external factors* that affected learners’ post-graduation employability. The data is presented under two overarching themes: financial issues, and places or spaces.

### *Financial issues*

Perhaps not surprisingly, financial considerations featured strongly in participants’ responses. For the alumni and recent graduates, having restricted access to material resources affected not only their experiences within the degree but also the choices they had after graduation:

*Lack of finances, difficulties finding employment. Moving 16 hours away to a remote rural town just to obtain employment in my area of study. Solved the finances and employment problem, caused many others including isolation, depression, insomnia and anxiety. (Female, 21–25, Nursing, graduated 5yrs, #69)*

*I felt burdened by knowing that my parents still had to support me (and there were two siblings to follow me). This influenced the type of course I took and my plans for postgraduate study. I got there eventually (money issues thwarted one of my plans to study at a later point). My career is rewarding anyway — but the feeling of being unsupported and needing to work to reduce the burden on my parents was always on my mind. (Female, 51+, Arts, graduated 38yrs, #177)*

Not having access to finances affects graduate opportunities in a diversity of ways, including not having the financial means to travel for an interview or not having appropriate clothes for interviews or meetings. As Alison (Campus Manager, 10yrs, Australia) explained: “*I’ve got a student, for example, sitting outside my door now who can’t afford the clothes to wear to a job interview and he doesn’t own an iron and he doesn’t have a washing machine*”.

Equally, a number of the alumni and graduates indicated that they had to maintain employment throughout their degree program and that this, in turn, limited their availability for additional experiences in their degree such as the uptake of internships or volunteer options. This inability to participate in internships also had unforeseen long-term repercussions in terms of their employability post-graduation:

*I assumed the degree would be all I needed from the marketing when I first enrolled ... Also the academics in my schools/faculties failed to explain their [internships] importance. All the kids who had parents that had been to uni knew this. (Female, 26–30, Science, graduated 5yrs, #114)*

In terms of navigating the employment field after graduation, this limited exposure to relevant professional experience not only curtailed job opportunities but also left many of these respondents feeling disillusioned upon graduation. The same alumni respondent explained: “*I had no idea that one did internships or volunteering during university to build skills and resume. I worked my butt off at a part-time job and assumed the degree would be all I needed*”. (Female, 26–30, Science, graduated 5yrs, #114)

This assumption that simply obtaining the degree would inevitably secure or guarantee employment after graduation was echoed by the stakeholders in both interviews and survey responses. Bronwyn (Researcher/Academic, 20yrs, UK) explained how this was particularly

the case for those students from underrepresented groups, who generally “put an awful lot of energy into getting their studies finished”. This focus, while commendable, also meant that individuals might not be highly competitive in the employment market, as Bronwyn further explained:

*[E]ven though they’ve been told and they tell the story that the degree is not enough to simply get you a job, actually there’s an assumption that it will, for them, be enough to get a job, and that there will be a job that is waiting for them. (Bronwyn, Researcher/Academic, 20yrs, UK)*

The alumni and graduates who participated in this study largely did not experience any job “waiting” for them; instead, they reflected upon new choices and dilemmas, many of which had been unforeseen. The next section explores these considerations under the broad theme of “places or spaces”.

### *Places or spaces*

The term “places or spaces” is being used to convey how spatial considerations affected how FiF participants navigated the post-graduation environment. Given the size of the Australian continent, it is not surprising that geographic distance plays a key role in securing employment. How rurality plays out in terms of university access and participation has been highlighted in the research and literature (Coulter, van Ham, & Findlay, 2015; Farmer, 2017; O’Shea et al., 2019), with lower rates of university retention and involvement recorded for students from rural and remote areas (Pollard, 2018). Participants in this study also reflected on the difficulties of securing employment in rural or regional contexts, but this section focuses more explicitly on the sense of dislocation and the accompanying hardship that this need to be mobile required.

Being willing to move for work was a requirement for a number of the alumni and graduates in this study, and often this was expressed in terms of loss, and as being a necessary but somewhat unwelcome decision:

*Moving to another city ... with no family support or money. Feeling like you have nothing in common with your family and nothing to talk about with them. They do not get your life or understand what you do. (Female, 26–30, Commerce, graduated 3yrs, #17)*

*The painful truth is that living in a regional area means that my qualifications are not directly relevant to the work that is available here ... so the only way to achieve any type of career progression ... is to relocate to a metropolitan area — something I am unwilling to do while my children are in school. It is a difficult thing to reconcile at times. (Female, 31–40, Arts, graduated 2yrs, #87)*

Participants reflected upon the emotional and financial toll that this movement incurred, but equally indicated that moving from existing “places and spaces” entailed hardship not only for themselves but for family members. Reflections included descriptions of breakdown in relationships, financial risks as well as loneliness and isolation, in some cases this mobility leading ultimately to a “dislocation of place of abode” (Director Academic Governance, 6mths, UK, #KS21<sup>8</sup>).

For some in this study, there was a clear delineation between different “places and spaces” in their lives, which could result in constrained conversations or limited communication with others. Evelyn, a recent graduate, described how the “mobility” demanded by her graduate status was both physical and emotional in nature, leading to not only geographic shifts, but also relational ones:

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<sup>8</sup> The abbreviation KS refers to the Key Stakeholder survey and the related demographic data and responses



*There's generally been a massive disconnect from family which has been challenging for me because I come from a very big, close family. The move to [INTERSTATE CITY] has been great because there's the separation from family but also, like, the finding of myself that also has been negative, in that I'm feeling the loneliness of where I am and the isolation of not having anyone here. My sisters especially were very competitive ... and sometimes the girls get a bit like they don't want to tell me stuff or I'm not kept in the loop because, 'Well, don't tell Evelyn because she'll just do this, or she'll just say this', or, 'She's in INTERSTATE CITY; what can she do?' There's other things too, like, 'You think you're smarter than all of us'—I get that a lot — 'just because you've got a degree'. (Evelyn, 38, Commerce, graduated 1yr, #2019 interview)*

Responses from alumni and graduates also indicated a sense of being “caught between two places”, an uncomfortable dialectic between their life as a university graduate and their position within the family or community:

*I would like to belong — but I then found that I spent less time with people who questioned my choice and more time with those with whom I shared my educational experience. It can be difficult to share the thrill of that with others who have not taken that route. (Female, 51+, Arts, graduated 38yrs, #177)*

This sense of being “caught between two places” was echoed by the stakeholders who saw this as an external but sometimes hidden constraint faced by those who were the first in their family or community to come to university. Being a higher education pioneer could result in pervasive but subtle resistance from others:

*Barriers in their social circle; they might be moving out of ... or have others perceive that they're moving out of their equity group. I've come across that a lot, you know — 'My friends think I think I'm too good for them now' or things of that sort. (Alison, Campus Manager, 10yrs, Australia)*

*[T]here's also some issues and I guess mistrust from families and communities when people are seen to be moving away or moving on from what they know. (Beth, Researcher/Practitioner, 10yrs, Australia)*

This could also be an isolated journey, with a resulting rupture of relationships and connections. Evelyn (38, Commerce, graduated 1yr) further reflected how she had successfully gained employment in her field only after taking a “risk” and moving interstate. Despite this apparent success, she also referred to the loneliness of this endeavour, reflecting on an unexpected and deep loss:

*I'm very much a realist, but I'm a lonely realist because the world is smaller for me now, and I wonder if that's the same experience for a lot of other First-in-Families who haven't been able to bring their families with them. (Evelyn, 38, Commerce, graduated 1yr, #2019 interview)*

## Summary

Navigating the employment environment can be a difficult process for most university graduates, but this section has shown the broader issues affecting those who are the first in their family to attend university and complete higher education studies. This is not to suggest that the factors outlined are only encountered by FiF students, but rather that there are nuanced and subtle differences at play for this cohort.

On an internal or personal level, FiF graduates and alumni indicated how having a “lower sense of belonging” might not only pervade their university participation but equally affect graduate ambitions and achievements. Interestingly, feeling like an “imposter” was not only perceived in negative terms; some also characterised it as providing an edge within the

workplace and that this feeling of insecurity prompted hard work and persistence. Their awareness of the unique nature of this “imposter” syndrome prompted some stakeholders to recommend targeted and deliberate support to ensure that FiF students not only recognised this construct but, importantly, used such emotions in a positive and purposeful way. The term “insider knowledge” has been used to convey the accepted or taken-for-granted discourses that may remain institutionally embedded or hidden from certain populations. The responsibility of acquiring and recognising this knowledge was discussed, and the ways this acquisition might affect navigation of the graduate employment environment highlighted themes that will be revisited later in this chapter.

In terms of external factors, issues related to finance and negotiations around “places or spaces” have been defined. While financial issues affect the nature of the degree experience (Mamiseishvili, 2010; Martin, 2015; Rubio et al., 2017), participants in this study also reflected on the longer-term impacts of such material constraints. These impacts included not only limited fiscal resources for practical interview needs such as travel and clothing but also lower participation in extracurricular activities at university due to existing commitments. The theme “places or spaces” was also used to discuss the pervasive geographic and spatial factors that affect graduate jobs within Australia. Again, while having to move for employment is not uncommon amongst graduates, the focus was on the emotional or embodied toll that FiF alumni and graduates reflected on, particularly concerning the relational implications of such shifts.

The next overarching theme qualitatively considers how FiF status or more general equity markers were considered to influence graduate outcomes. The data includes the open-ended survey responses from the alumni, graduates and stakeholders as well as the interview data.

### **Influences on graduate outcomes**

This section narrows focus to specifically explore how participants experienced the initial post-graduation period and how both students and stakeholders considered graduate outcomes. The findings are presented under three themes: “making do”; graduate oversupply and competition and the value of a degree.

#### *“Making do”*

As the previous section highlighted, moving into the post-degree work environment was not necessarily seamless or straightforward. Instead, there were many detours and disruptions en route, with resulting compromises in some cases. Nicole (47, *Education, graduated 2yrs, #2019 interview*) described how her current temporary job was a “stepping stone” that was needed to “*make ends meet for the time being*”. Like Nicole, other participants reflected upon a need to “make do” or compromise their employment expectations to ensure that basic financial needs were adequately covered:

*I've even 'lowered the bar' and applied for more remedial-type work just to get my foot in the door, all to no avail. (Male, Science, graduated 2yrs, #185)*

*I've just been looking at literally anyone that will pay me and not a lot of luck. (Baillie, 27, Arts/Law, final year student, #2019 interview)*

It is perhaps not surprising that recent graduates might have to “make do” with what is available initially after graduation, while planning to move into more relevant employment over time. However, what was striking was that for these respondents, sometimes “making do” was a longer process than they had initially desired or expected:

*Still working in casual hospitality jobs (Female, 26–30, Health, graduated 3yrs, #148)*

*Still searching for the perfect job (Male, 31–40, Arts/Law, graduated 10yrs, #46)*

“Making do” could also contribute to feelings of inadequacy or despondency, resulting in a cycle of self-blame, with a number of quotes highlighting how some respondents took responsibility for choosing to simply “make do”:

***I don't think I did enough to further my experience and to make myself more appealing for job opportunities. (Female, 26–30, Commerce, graduated 6yrs, #126)***

*Compared to friends who didn't attend university, I would have expected my earning potential to be higher than theirs. But this is quite the opposite. I believe this could be due to my lack of bargaining in my workplace ... (Female, 26–30, Commerce, graduated 5yrs, #178)*

***I often feel like I am wasting my time and am very unfulfilled in my current working circumstances. I want to do more and make a difference, really do something to contribute to society and genuinely help people. Going from school to university, there is a lot of looking through rose-coloured glasses at the world and future prospects; what you realise when you get older is that life doesn't work that way and sometimes you just need to do what is required to get through. (Female, 31–40, Science, graduated 14yrs, #181)***

“Making do” was also sometimes attributed to circumstances or personal choices, including a reluctance to move interstate or away from the local community:

*I could have earned a lot more money but would have had to move to [METRO CITY]. At the time I enjoyed living where I am, didn't want to move, so took [lower-] paying jobs. (Male, 41–50, Science, graduated 12yrs, #131)*

*I didn't pursue things very aggressively, I only really pursued job prospects that were convenient to me. I was reluctant to move away from my hometown after university, which left me with far fewer job opportunities, compared to if I had moved to a bigger city. (Female, 26–30, Communications, graduated 6yrs, #118)*

While every person's story is unique, a number of patterns in this data emerged. The next section reflects on how alumni, graduates and stakeholders perceived the post-graduation job market, with particular reference to perceptions of an oversupply of graduates and the resulting competitive nature of the field.

### *Graduate oversupply and competition*

Globally, the number of individuals attending university has increased dramatically over the last two decades (Marginson, 2016), an expansion regarded as necessary for national economic growth and prosperity as well as equality and social mobility for citizens (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006b; Productivity Commission, 2019; Purcell et al., 2013). This increase in student numbers has not necessarily been matched by growing job opportunities, and, as shown in Chapter Two, in some fields there is an oversupply of qualified applicants. However, for many of the alumni and graduate respondents in this study, it was not the competition that was surprising but the intensity of this competition. Survey responses indicated a level of surprise, even shock, about the difficulties encountered when obtaining employment in their field:

***I knew it would be tough to find work, but not this tough. I have had several interviews over the past months, and have been in the final few/two applicants. I have resorted to volunteering to keep my skills and knowledge sharp, and to help offset my increasing despondence. (Female, 31–40, Health, graduated 1yr, #182)***

***It took me six months to find a job after university, and even then it was only casual work. It was a very depressing time after being told that university will***

*help you get a job. The thing that was missing from university was the real-life skills of finding a job and presenting yourself in an employable way. At the end of the day the qualification was a tick and flick. Employers wanted previous experience. (Male, 26–30, Communications, graduated 6yrs, #199)*

The quotes included above are just two examples of many that indicated not only how locating relevant employment after graduation involved an unanticipated level of difficulty but also how such challenges could inculcate a deeply emotional response in the individuals involved. Emotions varied from the despondency or depression mentioned above to anger or disappointment often targeted at the university and the level of preparation provided for a competitive market. The alumni were particularly critical of this saturated market, and many felt that the sector could be addressing this issue in a more proactive manner:

*Just getting my first law job was tough. I think universities have a lot to answer for, with the oversupply of law graduates. (Male, 26–30, Law/Arts, graduated 3yrs, #18)*

*The degree needs to be capped for places Australia-wide to match supply with demand (too much sausage factory certificates/cash cowing). (Male, 26–30, Science, graduated 3yrs, #206)*

*I didn't realise how hard it would be to get a job straight out of uni. I don't believe enough support is offered to graduates to find employment. I was completely underprepared. (Female, 31–40, Arts, graduated 12yrs, #75)*

While all graduates enter a contested market, the difference for these FiF students was that they frequently did not have the social capital or networking opportunities available to their second- or third-generation peers. Respondents mentioned not only limited understanding about how to participate in an interview or complete a job application but also not having family connections within their profession as factors that had a negative effect on their job search.

The precariousness of this employment market also obstructed post-graduation opportunities or choices. As one stakeholder explained, for the students on their campus, the insecurity of employment post-graduation meant that many opted to retain the casual employment gained whilst studying, reflecting that some income was better than none:

*Many of our students continue on in their part-time/casual roles that they were doing whilst studying and have become so dependent on that 'secure' income that they are reluctant to really push themselves to apply for degree-related graduate roles. (Australia, Career Education Consultant, 5yrs, #KS17)*

An alumna made a similar observation:

*In three years, I've made very few connections at all and fear that if I ever did leave, it would be like starting from scratch ... my employment prospects have failed to meet my expectations in spectacular fashion. (Female, 21–25, Communications, graduated 5yrs, #76)*

Given the difficulty of securing employment in the field, the next section explores perceptions around the “value” of a degree, with the term “value” being used to encompass fiscal, reputational and personal values bestowed on the degree qualification.

### *The value of a degree*

When the value of a degree is considered, it is often related to the financial gains that possessing it may bestow; however, as the last section highlighted, this is no longer an outcome that is taken for granted, or even necessarily achievable, by all students. In considering the value of a degree it is important to consider this in terms of both the personal

and the public. In this section, the *public* value of the degree refers to how this degree was perceived on the marketplace and how different factors influenced conceptions of worth, while the *personal* value relates to how students themselves considered the value of the degree in terms of its impact on self and others. Each will be considered separately below.

*Public Value:* Within the graduate marketplace, the value of a degree seems to continue to depend on the institution that it is derived from. Within Australia, qualifications from the elite or sandstone institutions still seem to be more highly regarded by employers. This situation is explained by Evelyn, a recent honours graduate with a commerce degree, who defined her university as “regional”. She described how there was a “stigma” around attending a regionally located institution: “[T]here’s a bit of a stigma ... well, I mean it’s an invisible stigma.” She explained how this “stigma” is exacerbated by the fact that “the people I work with have all gone to Harvard, Oxford — one of them has been to Cambridge” (Evelyn, 39, Commerce, graduated 1yr, #2019 interview).

The concept of stigma amongst FiF learners has been explored in previous research (Bassett, Brosnan, Southgate, & Lempp, 2018; Southgate, Grimes, & Cox, 2018), with participants in the current study reflecting on how this sense of stigma could influence how they were perceived within the institution and how the degree was valued externally, in the graduate marketplace.

*I had no idea what I was doing or how to negotiate anything. I have had to tap around in the dark. I also had a learning disability that was diagnosed while at uni ... so all of these things I think didn't help. I felt for the most part like I had no idea. (Female, 31–40, Education, graduated 7yrs, #196)*

*When I was in high school and university no one made a point of telling the truth. Just having a degree doesn't get you a job. No one thought to tell me, a kid from a family where no one had gone to university, that internships, volunteering, padding out your resume like a preppy sod would make you employable. (Female, 26–30, Science, graduated 5yrs, #19)*

A number of the alumni and recent graduates reflected how the degree in itself was not valuable enough to ensure that they were competitive within the market. Nicole, a recent education graduate, explained how the value of her degree was curtailed as it was not accompanied by necessary social networks or capital:

*I don't think principals want to take too many risks on the new people. They're happy with who they know or they're happy with a reference of, you know, 'Billie knows Mary, so taking that on board, we would trust that reference'. Yeah, it's a bit of 'try before you buy'. (Nicole, 47, Education, graduated 2yrs, #2019 interview)*

In Nicole’s case, the value of the degree had been diminished as she admitted to not understanding “*how to play the system, how to play the game.*” Nicole was not the only participant to reflect how lower levels of social capital effectively diminished the value of their degree; some of the alumni survey respondents also indicated that this was a factor in their post-graduation experiences:

*Not having any connection with anyone in top workplaces, unlike the kids from privileged families. (Male, 31–40, Science, graduated 9yrs, #1)*

*... had no contacts or family connections to open doors so had to work way up slowly. Had to get used to rejection and disappointment as still even with a degree don't really fit in with most people's experiences, as many just assume everyone has equal resources—opportunities and resources—but this is far from true. (Female, 51+, Psychology, graduated 10yrs, #159)*

Similarly, all the stakeholders in the project made reference to how the value of a degree could be diminished when unaccompanied by social and cultural capitals. Some reflected upon this situation in more critical terms, perceiving this devaluing as a product of prejudice and racism. As Laura (*Researcher/Academic, 6yrs, Australia*) explained: *"I think unconscious bias and racism is still a big problem in Australia"*. Similarly, Brooke (*Head of Careers, 1yr, Australia*) explained: *"[I]f you come from a very low socioeconomic background and you put that on your resume, you don't know what sort of prejudice people have."* Such explanations reflect how degree attainment is valued publicly and not only determined by the actual qualification but equally by the institution that bestowed the qualification and the background of the person who acquired it.

*Personal Value:* While the publics' value of the degree could be affected by the context of the institution and the demographics of the individual holder, how degrees were valued on a personal, embodied level was more consistent. While a number of alumni and graduates indicated that their experiences of getting work post-degree may not have met their expectations, there were very few that absolutely regretted undertaking further studies. Instead, the positives of studying at university were extolled, with many unanticipated but welcomed benefits defined, including personal growth, intergenerational outcomes, new perspectives on life and unexpected opportunities. However, these were often realised reflectively and over time as opposed to being recognised whilst studying:

*A belief in my ability and confidence in being able to engage with and contribute to society. (Female, 51+, Arts, graduated 32yrs, #174)*

*Coming from a low socioeconomic background and having the opportunity to attend university has made a huge impact on the quality of my life and what I've been able to achieve. No-one in my large extended family [has] gone on to university. However, for my own children, university was automatically there for them as an option. It certainly wasn't for me. (Female, 51+, Education, graduated 25yrs, #190)*

*To be able to have your eyes opened to a whole new world that I never knew existed. You begin to realise how very little you know and just how clever so many people in our world have been and continue to be. (Female, 51+, Arts, graduated 13yrs, #163)*

While gaining employment was key for most of the participants, it is important to note that not all the graduates or alumni were necessarily seeking a vocational outcome. Instead, attaining a degree was sometimes deeply tied up with personal biographies, including the opportunity to create a different life narrative to that which had been assumed or predicted. This alternative "value" often remains hidden within the higher education landscape, perhaps because it does not fit with the dominant "employability" discourse borne out of the neo-liberal agenda. However, pointing out such unexpected, but equally valued benefits whilst students are studying, may assist in broadening conceptions of success and what this means at an individual level.

*It's like it's [university study] pulled the best parts of my being and who I am as a person and wrapped them all up in theories and studies and all that kind of stuff, and it's hopefully going to spit me out the other end. (Molly, 39, Social Work, student, #2017 interview)*

*I'm doing this because I want to have a voice in my world, I'm doing it for personally ... I'm enjoying that personal growth and that awareness of my world and how I can impact it and how I can be on that journey with other people. And then, separate from that personal thing, there's that process of helping empower other people, I suppose. (Michelle, 62, Social Work, student, #2019 interview)*

## Summary

This section has provided a detailed exploration of the initial post-graduation phase under three broad but related headings: “making do”, graduate oversupply and competition, and the value of a degree. These themes emerged from the data collected from the graduates, alumni and stakeholders, providing an up-close and nuanced perspective on how the graduate employment market was negotiated and experienced. This deeply subjective perspective adds depth to the quantitative findings presented in the last chapter and provides some insight, albeit partial, into the reasons for these findings.

The theme “making do” explored how graduates and alumni often had a non-linear pathway to full-time employment, including having to compromise their ambitions to fulfil basic financial or material need in the short term. This type of negotiation could have negative emotional impact and could be a surprising and unwelcome situation for those who expected a seamless transition into their desired professional field. In some responses, the use of personal pronouns indicated how individuals (both graduates and alumni) took responsibility for choosing to “make do”, articulating this as a personal failing or lack on their part.

While there have been increases in the number of university graduates globally (Marginson, 2016), how this oversupply is negotiated at an individual lived level remains somewhat under-researched. By far the most common theme was participants’ shock or surprise at the competitive nature of this employment market; the unexpected severity of competition could lead to feelings of depression and low self-worth as well as anger and frustration. The precarious nature of job opportunities also provided little incentive for graduates to move beyond the relative stability of the part-time jobs they had held during their studies, perhaps resulting in the “underemployment” reported in the QILT survey and indicated in the alumni survey.

The final theme, the value of a degree, considered how qualifications were valued at both a personal and public level. The use of the term “value” was deliberate in order to consider how this was conceived beyond just monetary definitions, and instead incorporated broader public and private influences on perceived value. While public benefit could be affected by issues related to stigma and bias, private benefits could include different self-perspectives or even altered life course. These differing values of a degree are perhaps particularly significant for those students who are the first in their families to attend university. Not only might personal choices and opportunities be relatively curtailed or predetermined for this cohort, but navigating the employment field may have its own particularities. The next section contextualises how alumni and graduates themselves conceptualised this FiF status and how they considered this positionality to affect personal attitudes, choices and decisions post-graduation.

## Negotiating First-in-Family status within the employment field

Previous research conducted with FiF undergraduate students points clearly to how this cohort encounter a variety of obstacles in their journey into and through higher education (Altbach, 2013). These factors include not only financial or material constraints but also academic, relational and emotional issues (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018; O’Shea et al., 2017; Oldfield, 2012; Waller et al., 2011). Importantly, many FiF students are intersected by a diversity of equity categories that affect their university experiences. Both the alumni and graduate respondents who participated in this study were similarly traversed by such a diversity of characteristics, as indicated in the demographic details presented in Appendix 4. However, little is known about how highly intersected FiF students negotiate the post-graduation employment field, including how this status may impact job opportunities and decisions.

In order to understand this negotiation, it is necessary to consider the educational and life experiences that these respondents reflected upon in surveys and interviews. Educational



pathways prior to university may have been disrupted and curtailed, respondents also referring to the premature foreclosure of educational options after schooling by both self and others, the latter clearly articulated in the following quote:

*So many people from where I am from are told they are not good enough. In Year 10 when given the mandatory single careers advisor meeting at my underprivileged high school I was asked what I planned to do on leaving school and I said 'go to uni' the wretched woman LAUGHED and said, 'Yeah, try again. Kids from here don't go to uni.'... Some of the students were told they were 'unemployable'... Education is so often the only pathway to a future for our young people. It was definitely my only way out and I truly believed that if I didn't get out I would not survive. (Female, 41–50, Science/Business, graduated 12yrs, #52)*

As mentioned previously, a number of the participants reflected on having limited access to necessary “insider knowledge” that was implicitly embedded in the institution and which affected the transition into university and their experiences within that environment. Importantly, this restricted or limited access did not necessarily improve upon graduation; instead, alumni reflected on how their understanding of the job market was similarly compromised and restrictive. For example, one survey respondent explained how neither she nor her family had any “*idea of the jobs I could apply for. We all thought I could be a scientist. Because scientist is a job, right?*” (Female, 26–30, Science, graduated 5yrs, #19). The question mark at the end suggesting a rhetorical question, perhaps yet to be answered. Another survey respondent referred to seeking employment after graduation as similar to “*navigating uncharted water*” and continued by explaining:

*... my family have no idea about how to prepare for these types of jobs or interviews or who to talk to for assistance. As a 21-year-old I now see that if they had insight, it would have been easier for myself to further my career or even pick a different more highly sort [sic] after degree (Female, 26–30, Nursing, graduated 8yrs, #65)*

Such statements were not isolated:

*I think had someone else from my family followed the path to completion I may have had a better insight into what going to uni means, rather than subscribing on the uni business model of 'a pathway to success'. (Male, 31–40, Science, graduated 2yrs, #79)*

*I had no family members who could help advise or explain the landscape. I had very little understanding of how the corporate world worked. I was very much trying to piece together this information on my own. (Female, 31–40, Communications, graduated 10yrs, #164)*

This feeling of being different based on their first-generation status did not necessarily dissipate upon engaging in the workplace. Evelyn (39, Commerce, graduated 1yr, #2019 interview) explained how she was working with “*a lot of people who do come from money, who have gone to the right schools, who have gone through the right things and some of the conversations I hear, and the way some people speak*”. Similarly, Bailie (27, Arts/Law, Final Year student) reflected on the divisive nature of conversations in her internship:

*But when I've done summer internships there's talk of family, drama with private schooling kids, the air conditioning tech is late ... I was basically homeless at the time and living on soup. (Bailie, 27, Arts/Law, Final Year student, #2019 interview)*

In Evelyn's case, she made a conscious choice to challenge the pervading status quo within her workplace and rather than remain silent, she adopted the role of “*the 'Yeah, but' person*”

*who sits at the table ... Like, I think it's important that sometimes the people I work with are made aware that not everyone got the silver spoon or not everyone got the private school education or whatever" (Evelyn, 38, Commerce, graduated 1yr, #2019 interview).*

Like Evelyn, not everyone perceived "being the first" as necessarily a negative; there was also recognition that having this status could positively affect the enactment of employability. While conceding that there might be less access to necessary insider knowledge, respondents referred to capabilities and capacities that this FiF status bestowed. Wade (22, Science, graduated 2yrs) explained how he considered his status of "being the first" as a positive characteristic within the employment market:

*Being the first, you have to kind of carve your own way through and find the answers to your questions without any guiding hands perhaps ... So, yeah, being the first in your family, it's as much a positive as it is a negative and it will change who you are. So, in the end, it's made me a more self-sufficient person and I'm grateful for it. (Wade, 22, Science, graduated 2yrs, #2019 interview)*

Similarly, Sophie, who had graduated in 2018 and was in her early 20s, reflected on the need to "have to go that extra mile to get your leg in the door, because then once you do get your leg in the door, you're a much more competitive candidate and because you've worked for it, you kind of value it more, I guess" (Sophie, 20, Science, Final Year student, #2019 interview).

There were a number of quite creative ways that these students negotiated this FiF status from Molly (39, Social Work) who regarded this as building her resilience, through to those who reflected retrospectively upon the resourcefulness they had developed in order to achieve success:

*Being first in family and from low [SES], I had limited financial and family support. I am stronger, more resilient and [competitive] in the field as I have life experience. (Molly, 39, Social Work, graduated 1yr, #2019 survey)*

*I didn't have exposure to formal settings growing up and had to self-learn by finding my own models. I was an avid reader growing up, which taught me to put myself into unfamiliar scenarios and 'act'. (Female, 51+, Education, graduated 38yrs, #143)*

Overall, responses coalesce under a common theme of self-reliance in both surveys and interviews, recent graduates and alumni indicating how achieving success within the post-graduation field was largely determined by the self rather than reliance on others. The ability to sustain motivation and determination was not regarded as being easy, but for many, it was necessary and often garnered from social status and background:

*I was told by people I wasn't smart enough to finish university, but I graduated without failing any subjects. When things get difficult at work, I remember I am capable of pushing forward and achieving my goals. (Female, 31–40, Science, graduated 8yrs, #197)*

*Starting and finishing something regardless of struggles and hardships or time it takes, especially in comparison to privilege all around you, where most people have academic and financial or practical support and understanding of challenges of studying. (Female, 51+, Psychology, graduated 10yrs, #159)*

As the data presented in this section indicates, being the first was a complex status perceived as both limiting and assisting individuals within the employment field. Importantly, these findings show that this status is clearly something that is reflected upon and negotiated by learners; this is not necessarily perceived as a deficit but is recognised as a factor that contributes to a different post-graduation experience. This complexity is probably best

summed up by Aleisha, who stated, “*I’m pretty proud of where I’ve got to, even though it’s taken me a long time*” (Aleisha, 38, Education, current student, #2019 interview).

The following summary provides an overview of the main points outlined in relation to how participants negotiated being FiF, with particular reference to their post-graduation experiences. The chapter concludes with a précis of a case study on a specific co-curricular intervention.

## Summary

This section of this findings chapter has provided a deep exploration of how individuals conceived being the first in their family to attend and graduate university, and how they personally negotiated the post-graduation landscape. Both these findings and the broader literature (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006a; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Rubio et al., 2017; Spiegler, 2018; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013) articulates the myriad of ways that being FiF could affect the *undergraduate* university experience, but little scholarly research has specifically explored these impacts post-graduation and within the employment environment. Importantly, the alumni and recent graduates who participated in this study were highly intersected, and their FiF status is recognised as a collective category that successfully captures the diversity of the graduate population, without necessarily positioning individuals in terms of deficit.

Alumni and graduates reflected upon a perception of “difference” that was implicitly and overtly experienced within the workplace. For some, this was tacitly linked to being the first to graduate and, as a result, not having someone they could follow or who could model appropriate or expected behaviours. This limited access to insider knowledge within the workplace or employment field was seen as a hindrance but not an insurmountable issue. A number of the respondents reflected upon creative and deliberate approaches designed explicitly to address any perceived gaps in understanding. Equally, being the first was not simply regarded as being an encumbrance; rather, the qualities and capabilities that this status bestowed could also be regarded as an asset.

Clearly, what this section and the others have indicated is the deeply complex nature of this status. The next section discusses this in a more detail with reference to a single case study on a co-curricular opportunity offered at University of Wollongong entitled UOWx. An abbreviated version of the case study is presented next, with a full overview available in Appendix 10. This case study has been chosen in recognition of the importance of co-curricular opportunities for post-graduation employment, a recognition that was highlighted across both the quantitative and qualitative data.

This is followed by Chapter Five, which provides an integrated discussion of the findings and the necessary context to the 12 recommendations detailed in the final chapter.

## 4.4 UOWx Case Study<sup>9</sup>: FiF and equity student participation in co-curricular activities

*I wanted to branch out my university life. I also wanted to be involved with relevant activities that could benefit myself and the community. Specifically, being involved with In2Uni was important for me because I actually was involved in their programs when I was in high school and I knew how supported I felt because of that experience. I became involved in SaPiM program because it is made by university students, for university students. (Female student, 21, Survey#30)*

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<sup>9</sup> A more detailed case study is provided in Appendix 10; a précis is presented here.

## Background to UOWx

UOWx is an example of a university-wide approach that connects students with valuable co-curricular activities. The UOWx service includes providing formal recognition of participation; promoting the personal and professional development gained through participation and offering training designed to develop employment-related skills. The purpose of this case study was to investigate how equity students, particularly those who are FiF, consider co-curricular offerings and how they conceive their participation in such opportunities. The questions guiding this inquiry were:

- 1) Why do FiF/equity students participate in UOWx?
- 2) What barriers are there to participation in this service?
- 3) How could representation of FiF/equity students be improved within UOWx?

## Method

Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and open questions in a survey. This approach was deliberate to enable FiF students to narrate their own experiences of participating in the program. Interview data from outreach staff supplemented student perspectives.

## Findings

The UOWx case study draws upon responses from 39<sup>10</sup> student surveys, four student interviews (a total of 43 students, 33 female/10 male) and interviews with eight staff. Table 19 provides an overview of the student participants:

**Table 19.** Demographics of research participants

Age range		Anticipated year of completion		Degree	
18 to 20	14	2019	15	Bachelor's	36
21 to 25	18	2020	18	Master's	6
26 to 30	5	2021	7	PhD	1
31 to 40	3	2022	1		
41 to 50	0	2023	1		
Over 51	3	(skipped)	1		

Thirty-seven students selected at least one equity category as reflective of their circumstances, with 23 selecting two or more categories (Appendix 10 contains details). It is worth noting the age group of participants: it appears that despite the relatively high numbers of mature-age students at UOW, it is younger students who are largely attracted to this program.

Staff roles included various student-outreach and equity roles, with the average time in current UOW positions being 1.8 years, although some had had previous experience outside of UOW. This is noteworthy because many of the staff were employed in contract positions, and so had somewhat precarious employment conditions.

<sup>10</sup> Six surveys were removed due to being incomplete, or not being FiF.

This summary will focus on three broad areas:

- 1) Reasons for involvement in UOWx
- 2) Life-related barriers to participation
- 3) Institutional barriers to participation

### *Reasons for involvement*

There were varied reasons given for participating in UOWx, including as a means to gaining a more meaningful experience at university, “standing out” in the employment market, developing skills or giving back to the university community (or beyond). Some student participants indicated that volunteering or extracurricular involvement was inherent in their personal values prior to university: “*I was going to be doing that stuff anyway*” (Ian, 18). Individual or internal benefits, including personal growth, enjoyment, building self-confidence and developing social/interpersonal and other skills, were also motivators, as were more-practical factors such as the need “*to earn more of an income*” (Female, 18, #27).

Reaping the benefits of co-curricular involvement largely depends on the opportunities provided by the institution, the ease with which these are visible and accessible and the stability and continuity in the programs offered.

### *Life-related barriers to participation*

Participants identified an extensive number of life-related barriers to taking up co-curricular opportunities. These were broadly themed as: Other commitments/life complexities, Personal barriers and Opportunity cost (choosing one alternative at the expense of other opportunities). Themes and key subthemes are summarised in Table 20.

**Table 20.** Themes and subthemes from the data

Themes and Subthemes	No.
<b>Other commitments and life complexities</b>	<b>28</b>
work	12*
family	7*
caring responsibilities	5*
life complexities	4
<b>Personal barriers</b>	<b>29</b>
lack of various capital(s)	15*
mental health/anxiety	5^
social	4^
stress	2
family expectations	2
clothing (dressing for success)	1*
<b>Opportunity cost</b>	<b>32</b>
financial constraints	13*
time constraints/management	10^
transport/travel-related	9*
<b>Overcoming barriers</b> (mentioned by students)	<b>8^</b>

Note: \*asterisk indicates proportionally more from staff comments; ^ indicates predominantly from students

Students also reflected on a range of emotions that affected their participation in co-curricular activities, including stress, social anxiety, fear of not being accepted and mental health concerns. Many shared how they had overcome some of these, such as “panic disorder” or managing their time better, to participate in the activities offered by UOWx. Financial barriers to co-curricular involvement were often closely connected to transport or travel issues, such as “*the cost of petrol*” or having to “*use a parent’s car or...a friend’s car, or [being] reliant on public transport*” (Sally, staff). Other commitments were also likely to play a role in often complex decision-making about their capacity to participate:

*Well, it causes a bit of stress because of my competing demands. I wear many hats which can be hard to juggle: full-time student, part-time worker, PASS leader, wife and mortgagee, HUGS exec, volunteer at Green Connect and Bushcare. I feel the biggest challenge is managing stress and [the] financial challenge of opportunity cost. (Female, 26, #14)*

Barriers to participating in co-curricular activities for equity or FiF students can occur through a lack of familial experience of the university environment. Students may not have the assumed types of capitals to draw on, as some staff members noted:

*There is, I guess, a bit of insider knowledge required for different aspects of the uni; the language can be quite confusing. (Tasha, staff)*

*[B]eing able to navigate the terms and the way people talk, the different roles, the names of different programs — it can be quite confusing if you're not aware of the landscape that you're going into and how to interact with it. (Ben, staff)*

Others come to university with prior experience of involvement in community or other activities, and clearly understand the benefits of involvement:

*[M]y parents always would push me to do extracurricular things when I was a kid, so I would try my hand at different things, see what works, and try to bring those skills back in and use them at a different area ... So, I guess it came from the fact that I was doing extracurriculars before then and I felt very lazy if I didn't do other stuff. (Max, 21)*

The complexity that arises from life circumstances and constraints needs to be balanced with targeted support addressing identified challenges, clarity of processes, and flexibility to assist equity students in participating in opportunities such as these.

### *Institutional barriers*

Participants identified a level of complexity in navigating the co-curricular space, summarised in Table 21. This included lack of clarity in knowing how to become involved, finding relevant information, uncertainty about the meaning and benefits of involvement and a lack of availability or meaningful opportunities at regional or metro campuses:

*I am still not sure what it all means. I'm not sure how it will benefit me. I'm unsure how to proceed. (Female, 31, #19, metro campus)*

**Table 21.** Details of themes and subthemes on barriers

Themes and Subthemes	No.
<b>Institutional barriers</b>	<b>40</b>
complexities (processes/navigational)	10*
lack of clarity	10^
limited availability/opportunities	6
regional/metro campus-related (limited opportunities)	3
language (inaccessible)	3
assumptions/institutional ignorance	3
continuity of programs/planning	4
transitions	1

Staff also recognised that institutional complexity contributed to the creation of barriers for equity students:

*[F]or equity students in particular, there's a lot of barriers they face when they enter higher education, and I think ... in that integration to the university or higher education space, it can be quite confronting and present its own set of unique challenges for those students. And I think it's sometimes too much — too much to take on, given that gap... I mean, essentially, I think universities are middle-class institutions, and when you step into that, particularly the first-in-family*

*student, you've got no experience of the discourse, and that's a particularly tricky field to navigate. (Suzanne, staff)*

A number of the staff also reflected upon the lack of clear pathways to participation and the onerous task of gaining recognition. While these may be general issues, the added complexity for equity students is magnified through the number of “moving parts” in the process of gaining recognition:

*... the complexity involved... even an interested student has to do quite a level of research to figure out how they can get the recognition for something that they do because there's multiple ways that it happens; it differs — every activity is quite unique to itself. (Tasha, staff)*

Institutional barriers need to be addressed in a holistic manner; otherwise there will continue to be inequitable access and participation in particular activities, to the detriment of equity students.

### **Summary of understandings of the case study**

This case study involves a small sample of 43 FiF students and eight staff members from one university. However, the perspectives gained have merit in the rich data and themes that collectively emerged. Student participants in this case study were actively participating in co-curricular activities, and mostly understood the personal and social benefits as well as the value added to their university experience, skills development and resumes. Despite this, there was consensus that processes and navigation were sometimes complex additions to already quite complex lives, where students had competing demands on their energies and attention. A number of recommendations have been drawn from this case study; these are detailed in the final chapter of this report.

## **4.5 Conclusion**

The quantitative and qualitative findings from this mixed methods study were presented in chapter 4. Two overarching themes emerged from the data: navigating the graduate employment environment, and influences on graduate outcomes. In addition, a third theme, negotiating FiF status within the graduate employment field, further contextualised the data derived from interviews and open-ended survey questions, highlighting the particular qualitative nuances of the post-graduation landscape for the FiF cohort. Finally, a summary case study was presented to offer a “close-up” critical analysis of one co-curricular opportunity and the way staff and students negotiated this at a particular point in time. The following chapter situates these findings in relation to literature in the field, providing further context to the recommendations detailed in the final chapter of this report.



# Chapter Five: Discussion

## 5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided an overview of the findings that emerged from the Fellowship activities, based upon data derived from both quantitative and qualitative sources. This final chapter will bring together these findings with the relevant literature in relation to the overarching questions for this study:

1. *How does obtaining a degree actually translate into employability within a competitive labour market?*
2. *How do learners from intersecting equity categories enter the employment market, and how is this 'entry to employment' experienced at an individual qualitative level?*
3. *How do learners negotiate existing and new forms of capital to achieve competitiveness within employment fields?*

Each question will be explored separately in the sections that follow; this discussion will provide the context for the final chapter, which presents a series of recommendations for institutions, academic and professional stakeholders and policymakers.

## 5.2 Translating a degree into employability

The findings in this study build upon a central argument highlighted within broader literature and research in the employability field: that finding appropriate or related post-graduation employment may take time, and involve not only persistence but also a level of creativity. The analysis of the 2018 GOS results points to apparent differences in the amount of time required to obtain employment between different graduate groups, including those graduates who are first in their family to go to university and those who are not. Despite the limitations of the data outlined in Section 4.2, it is important to note the lower rates of employment reported by FiF graduates (41.6 per cent versus 50.9 per cent) and the higher likelihood that this cohort would return to further study after graduation (29.1 per cent) compared to their second- and third-generation peers (17.4 per cent). Equally, a reasonably high proportion of this FiF cohort were employed part-time and seeking further hours of employment (62.7 per cent) (QILT, 2019a).

This difficulty in securing full-time employment was echoed in the alumni survey that was administered as part of this Fellowship. Despite the fact that these FiF alumni respondents were an average of six to 10 years post-graduation, one quarter were still trying to secure work in their field. Similarly, a significant proportion (65 per cent) of recent graduates (two years or fewer since graduation) were still trying to find work in their industry. However, within four years of graduation this proportion had more than halved to 30.5 per cent of respondents seeking work in their field of study. This data provides some indication of the lengthy nature of seeking employment in a specific field. Other recent research confirms that initially weaker work outcomes are experienced by graduates from low SES backgrounds but that this fades at around four years post-graduation (Tomaszewski et al., 2019), further highlighting the time it takes for graduates from equity backgrounds to achieve desirable post-graduation outcomes. Whilst only a snapshot of the graduate market, these findings point to the clear need for longitudinal studies of post-graduation outcomes with a focus on those from diverse or equity backgrounds.

There are many reasons why obtaining employment has become particularly difficult for the FiF cohort, but as the findings detailed in this report highlight, the post-graduation journey is a particularly complex one, as reflected both quantitatively and qualitatively. For example, the 2018 GOS survey reveals that 27.9 per cent of the FiF respondents indicated that their degree qualification was *not at all important* for their current employment, compared to 22.5 per cent of non-FiF graduates. In the alumni Fellowship survey and interviews, graduates

similarly indicated that they might default to simply “making do” with whatever job they already have or what is available locally — which in some cases was an existing “student” job such as sales or manual work. This point again seems evidenced by national statistics that indicate higher numbers of FiF students (19.1 per cent) are recorded as being in “other” positions (sales/manual) compared to their non-FiF peers (13.2 per cent) (QILT, 2019a).

The qualitative comments in the alumni survey also indicated how many of these FiF respondents took responsibility for choosing to “make do”; this was regarded as a lack or limitation on their part. Such positionality of “self-blame” is indicative of an implicit adherence to a discourse of “individualised life choices”, which essentially positions learners as unfettered actors or agents and ultimately responsible for their educational choices and activities or lack thereof (Opengart & Short, 2002). This perspective then assumes that failure or non-attainment of expected post-graduation goals is an individual responsibility — a result of lack of abilities, planning or understanding, rather than external constraints (McKay & Devlin, 2016). However, as Moreau and Leathwood (2006b) have explained, social class, gender, ethnicity, age, disability and the university attended all affect the opportunities available. Material and financial circumstances can dictate the opportunities available to graduates and may significantly influence their early career paths. Similarly, existing identities and dispositions shape graduates’ action frames, including their career planning and decision-making (Tomlinson, 2012).

One such decision that may affect the post-graduation landscape is whether students take advantage of internships or placement opportunities whilst studying. Internships are regarded as key to the post-graduation employment environment (Allen et al., 2013; Macmillan et al., 2014). For example, UK research indicates how candidates who have not gained work experience through an internship will have a lower or no chance of receiving a job offer into top graduate programs, regardless of academic qualifications (Montacute, 2018). Interestingly, the Australian GOS does not collect data on participation in internships even though research has indicated that graduates with no work experience are more likely to be in non-graduate jobs or unpaid work (Purcell et al., 2013). This participation data is, however, collected in the US, where those graduates who had undertaken a work experience program were more likely to be employed (81 per cent) compared to those who had not undertaken one (74 per cent) (NCES, 2018d).

The Fellowship alumni survey also indicated the low uptake of such work experience opportunities amongst the FiF cohort; for example, 78 per cent of the alumni respondents did not participate in an internship or work placement during their degree. Reasons for this non-participation largely focused on the need to retain paid employment and the limited time for such endeavours. However, respondents equally referred to misunderstanding the requisite need for internships within the graduate market. The critical nature of this participation was not made explicit to many of these respondents; as one female respondent explained: *“I assumed the degree would be all I needed.”* Such miscommunication is echoed in the international research. In Vigurs et al.’s (2018) UK study, limited opportunity to access graduate work experience and paid internships stemmed from *both* an absence of opportunities to participate *and* poor communication about them.

There is undoubtedly a need to ensure that diverse student cohorts are provided with targeted and explicit advice not only on the competitive nature of the post-graduation employment field, but also on the specific need to take advantage of internships or co-curricular opportunities. Such offerings should be financially subsidised for those who are disadvantaged by financial or existing employment constraints. Finally, creativity in how such experiences are offered is also necessary. Rather than relying on traditional models of “nine-to-five” weekday internships, there may be opportunities for experiences in a virtual space (for example using virtual reality) or leveraging online technologies to overcome the tyranny of distance and the additional costs and time demands of travel. The potential of online

innovations in promoting career readiness is increasingly being recognised. A recent report on emerging technologies points to their potential for diverse student populations:

*Existing and emerging technologies could allow for students from equity groups to interact with virtual agents that are like them and facilitate access to actual professionals in a range of fields who share a common background or set of life experiences. (Southgate, Smith, & Cheers, 2016, p. 10)*

This is an evolving field that needs to be suitably embedded within the actual nuances and complexities of the Australian employment sector; however, as the findings in this report indicate, the need to provide more effective and accessible intern opportunities is vital in this competitive graduate market.

### 5.3 How entry into employment is experienced qualitatively

This question is focused on how students themselves considered their entry into the post-graduation employment field and how they negotiated this admission. While recognising that this is a very unique and subjective experience, some commonalities in the data were apparent.

The notion of “underemployment”, or working fewer hours than desired, was noted in the most recent GOS data analysed for this project, which reported that 62.7 per cent of FiF graduates wanted more hours of employment but were unable to obtain them. Underemployment also occurred where FiF graduates were not in professional roles at the same rates as those not identified as FiF (GOS data 2018). From the data reported in the GOS, and analysis of other national data concerning graduates from low SES (Tomaszewski et al., 2019), it appears that many FiF graduates are simply not finding the desired full-time, professional-level employment that fits their qualifications and skills. Similar sentiments were echoed in the alumni survey:

*Most people expect my university education to have resulted in a concrete 'job' or career. The most common question I get is 'What will that get you?' I find this incredibly frustrating, as the open-endedness of the answer is not because of my academic choices, but is also tied to our regional location. (Female, 31–40, Arts, graduated 2yrs, #89)*

In terms of qualitative data, both alumni and recent graduates described a similar recognition that there were no guarantees of employment after graduation. This realisation was not only disappointing but, for some, unexpected and significantly financially disadvantaging. Limited opportunity locally was reflected on in some depth in the qualitative data, where participants described how “place and space” imposed restrictions on graduate outcomes. These observations have been noted in the literature (Cardak et al., 2017; Halsey, 2017; Naphthine et al., 2019); however, the data presented in Chapter Four indicates the emotional undercurrents of these restrictions. The alumni and graduates indicated a sense of being “caught between two places” in the sense that relocating might lead to gains in opportunities for employment but equally might result in loss in terms of relationships or connections. The frustration of such situations was palpable in survey responses, as the promises of university education had certainly not been delivered for some:

*The universities just pretend that getting that piece of paper is all you need, like they are selling ice cream. (Female, 26–30, Chemistry, graduated 5yrs, #21)*

While the official statistics indicate that Australian graduates are performing well in terms of post-graduation employment, the qualitative data in this study indicated that managing entry involved negotiating feelings of being an imposter and engaging in the difficult work of translating “insider knowledge”. This is certainly not the first study to highlight the inequity of belonging and knowledge within the post-graduation employment field. A recent UK report provides evidence that disadvantaged university students often do not apply for the top

career opportunities on offer (All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility, 2017). Such decisions reflect confidence issues (All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility, 2017) and students' feelings that they will not fit in with the organisational culture (Ashley et al., 2015) or that they are inferior (Southgate et al., 2018).

Richardson et al. (2016) report how a magnitude of disadvantage is hidden in aggregated data. The Fellowship data, as well as other data sources, suggest that a guaranteed economic return for university studies is not necessarily the reality for all graduates (Allen et al., 2013; Daly, Lewis, Corliss, & Heaslip, 2015). Allen et al. (2013) illustrates this point within the UK context:

*While increasing numbers of young people are investing in [higher education], its rewards are becoming more unevenly distributed as the relationship between education, jobs and entitlements is being reconfigured. (p. 432)*

While financial success can no longer be considered a guaranteed outcome from university studies, this expectation, perhaps unsurprisingly, remains an enduring goal for many students from disadvantaged or equity backgrounds (O'Shea, Stone, Delahunty, & May, 2016), and participants in both the survey and interviews conducted as part of this Fellowship reflected on it. The current competitive graduate employment situation is particularly disadvantageous for those students who may have taken on significant debt to complete their degree, assuming that financial and employment rewards were guaranteed upon graduation. These graduates may be forced to take on employment that does not fit their qualification or ambitions, whereas, according to Morrison (2014), more-privileged and economically viable graduates can consider a more leisurely and multiple set of career moves.

## 5.4 Negotiating existing and new forms of capital within employment fields

The term "capital" is being used to refer to specific social, cultural and economic resources that empower those who possess them by offering membership to a particular field. Those who do not have the requisite forms of capital may be relatively disempowered and excluded from such membership (Sellar & Gale, 2011). Chapter Three described how this study drew upon the lens of cultural capitals and capabilities to better understand FiF graduate employment experiences. Viewing qualitative data through this lens provided insight into the complex and multi-layered nature of this field, one where FiF participants are aware of their restricted access to certain fields.

Participants not only perceived being the first to attend (and graduate from) university as limiting their assumed knowledge of appropriate protocols and expectations within professional contexts, but also regarded it as affecting their sense of belonging within these settings. For these participants, it was largely the universities' responsibility to ensure that graduates had the requisite knowledge and skills to be competitive and employable; an expectation echoed in the literature (Andrews & Russell, 2012; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006b; Tran, 2015). Instead, upon graduation, participants perceived gaps that led to some having a sense of being different; a number of the respondents in this study were unable to "accumulate and mobilise capitals" (Bathmaker et al., 2013, p. 732) like their second- and third-generation peers. Like the UK participants in Bathmaker et al.'s study, these Australian FiF students also referred to an implicit "social capital advantage" that they did not possess when competing in the employment field (Bathmaker et al., 2013, p. 737); this disadvantage was clearly articulated by the following survey respondent:

*I did not expect anything from life. I had learnt better at a young age. I expect nothing now. I still have no safety net, as I have only just finished off paying for my education — expectations are a luxury item. Where I come from you work hard to try and get a chance at a better life. We have no contacts, we have no*

*networks. We have no shortcuts. Expectations are for those who have support.  
(Female, 41–50, Science, graduated 12yrs, #54)*

Currently, there is little in-depth understanding of how equity-defined learners uniquely or individually navigate their way into employment after graduating university. This Fellowship study, while limited in scope, did point to how some FiF learners used their first-generation background to “construct uniquely working-class moral advantages” (Lehmann, 2009, p. 631). While Lehmann’s study focused on FiF undergraduates, his participants expressed a range of “moral dispositions”, each of which was “rooted in their social background and upbringing” (p. 631). For the participants in this Fellowship, these dispositions were largely expressed in terms of “self-sufficiency” or “motivation”; for example, Molly explained that she is “*stronger, more resilient and [competitive] in the field as I have life experience*” (Molly, 39, *Social Work, graduated 1yr, #2019 survey*). However, such qualities are often not valued or highlighted in university discourse, which still largely refers to the “rational, technical and utilitarian” (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006b, p. 310). Like Abrahams (2017), this study highlights the need for emphasising a more inclusive understanding of the skills and attributes that can benefit future employability, including the resilience and determination that underpin certain behaviours within the employment market.

Finally, as more and more universities move towards a “student life cycle” approach to supporting learners, additional focus on the “transition out” phase of university participation is very much needed. While the initial transition into university is recognised as being key to student retention (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordstrom, 2008; Kift, 2009; Naylor, Baik, & Arkoudis, 2016), the data presented in this report indicates how certain student cohorts may grapple with a highly competitive and somewhat segmented employment market. This support should be deliberate and targeted to ensure that if institutions are inviting students to participate in higher education, these students are amply supported into employment or their post-graduation goal. This is a moral obligation that needs to be fulfilled. A number of the alumni described the types of support they would have appreciated both during this period of transition and after graduation, which included proactive careers advice; ongoing mentoring; opportunities to have meaningful contact with professionals with similar backgrounds to their own; and explicit teaching about protocols and expectations within a professional workplace environment. Similarly, stakeholders reflected upon examples of emerging or anticipated initiatives within the sector, some of which are detailed in the final recommendations chapter.

## 5.5 Conclusion

The Australian post-graduation landscape is a differentiated one: the research detailed in the last two chapters indicates how experiences of this field vary according to educational and biographical background. While this report only offers a “snapshot” of this environment that is explicitly focused on those who were the first in their family to attend university, the findings indicate how expectations and knowledge of the employment field differ dramatically to what might be assumed or expected. This differentiation has been discussed according to three key themes: how qualifications translate into employability for the FiF cohort, how “entry into employment” is experienced at a deeply qualitative level, and how learners negotiate new and existing forms of capital within a competitive employment field.

The breadth and depth of this data mean that this report provides only the high-level findings and key discussion elements, with deeper analysis to be presented in a series of planned journal articles. The final chapter presents details of the recommendations emanating from this study, which have been delineated according to whether they are targeted at stakeholders, the sector/policy or broader research.



# Chapter Six: Recommendations

## 6.1 Introduction

The findings of this 2019 NCSEHE Research Fellowship inform 12 high-level recommendations under the following broad categories:

- Key stakeholder recommendations
- Sector/policy recommendations
- Research and data collection recommendations.

These high-level recommendations are further contextualised by five targeted recommendations focusing on co-curricular opportunities. All the recommendations presented are empirically validated by the data presented in this report, extant literature and other contemporary scholarly investigations within the field.

## 6.2 Key stakeholders

### Overview of findings

A key finding from this research is that not all students realise the importance of participating in internships or work-related opportunities. Instead respondents in this study indicated that as undergraduates they were playing by the “old rules of the game”, which centred on getting good grades rather than extending themselves in terms of co-curricular opportunities. Participants reflected upon the need to be explicitly told about the “new work reality” (FYA, 2018b); that is, that participation in work experience speeds the transition from study to employment (FYA, 2018b). Increasing awareness of the need for this participation is critical if all students are to achieve equitable outcomes from higher education studies.

In this project, graduates also expressed a lack of awareness regarding the duration of the job-search timeline and the need for ongoing support in navigating job search and decision-making. Financial support in terms of one-off scholarships or stipends for those most in need would somewhat ameliorate this disadvantage. Many FiF students have financial commitments and this may result in a need to “make do” and accept positions that are unsuitable, but which allow them to pay the bills. Even limited financial support would allow students to realise their post-university plans in a more careful and considered manner (Vigurs et al., 2018). Specifically, a small grant or stipend would enable students to have an extended job search and perhaps more freedom in their job-related decision-making.

Given the difficulties (financial/geographic) of accessing internships/work experience detailed by participants, there is also scope to explore more creative approaches to undertaking work experience activities. These approaches should creatively leverage new technology in order to overcome limitations due to place or geography. For example, focussing more resources on how virtual reality can be utilised to create workplace settings or scenarios would assist in ameliorating this disadvantage.

Graduates also reflected upon the need to have more assistance and support as they transitioned out of the higher education setting and into the workforce. This type of supported transition might include telephone contact with a career advisor or mentor. However, this scaffolding should be proactive and timely utilising a range of messaging (telephone, social media) to ensure that there are multiple supported touch points within this graduate journey.

Based upon the UOWx case study, a number of specific issues were identified in relation to how co-curricular activities should be offered and structured. These include the need to ensure that these activities do not sit outside the main curriculum as when positioned as “add-ons”, they may unintentionally exclude students who have extra demands of work,

carer or other responsibilities. Embedding co-curricular activities within the actual subject or program curriculum essentially provides an equitable means of supported participation not only for equity students, but for all.

Equally, these opportunities need to be contextualised to local settings and broader community contexts. For example, this might include ensuring that opportunities are created in communities with an economy that supports university graduates and considering practicalities of travel and access to private or public transport, as well as distances needing to be travelled to take up opportunities.

Finally, regular and substantive funding is needed to support these co-curricular offerings. This funding security would also enable longer-term planning, creative solutions and longitudinal evaluation to ensure that benefits for students are not unintentionally restricted to those with the necessary material resources.

### **Stakeholder recommendations**

1. Staff across careers/support services in conjunction with academic/teaching staff need to explicitly and repeatedly evidence the importance of participation in extracurricular opportunities (i.e. volunteer experiences; work related or internship opportunities) whilst students are undertaking degrees. These opportunities should also be financially subsidised to enable everyone to participate.
2. University marketing and institutional administrators need to be upfront and clear about the length of time it takes to become established in a degree-related field of work. This clear messaging has to be complemented by the provision of timely support (both practical advice and financial resourcing) as students transition into the workforce.
3. Careers services in partnership with academic and technology developers (both in university and industry) should develop ways to move beyond traditional models of internships or “work experience” as being place-based, block, daytime models. Seeking partnership funding or institutional grants to explore how virtual reality can be utilised to create workplace settings or scenarios will be key for future employability.
4. University equity and outreach providers should ensure that the “transition out” phase of the student life cycle is as supported and scaffolded as the “transition in”. Support should be offered by a diversity of mediums in various modalities, and timed to critical stages in the post-graduation journey. Support should not only be individuated but also to focus on the groups most at risk of un/underemployment.

### **Targeted recommendations for co-curricular activities**

- Academic developers and academic staff need to incorporate co-curricular activities as core components within degree programs.
- University policymakers need to ensure stable and long-term funding to maximise continuity and consistency in co-curricular opportunities (across campuses).
- Marketing staff should work with equity and outreach units to ensure that the targeted advertising and marketing of co-curricular activities recognises the diversity of student populations and clarifies the benefits of undertaking co-curricular endeavours.
- Careers and equity support staff should collaboratively ensure that co-curricular opportunities are contextualised to the community and geographic context of the university.
- Staff involved in offering co-curricular opportunities need to remain vigilant about unintentional barriers to participation and ensure that all processes are streamlined and visible.

## 6.3 Sector/policy

### Overview of findings

Research findings indicated a genuine and ongoing need for greater clarity around expected cost benefits for degree participation. Many of the participants in the study felt that they had been the victim of a hard sell in terms of their degree, and that they had been misled as to the employability outcomes of their qualification, some indicating that gaining full-time work was elusive and beyond their grasp after graduation. Clearly, more consistent and rigorous data on the “opportunity costs” and the long-term benefits of university study is needed and importantly this should be produced by independent university research bodies or organisations.

In order to gain a better understanding of our diverse student populations, more targeted and explicit data gathering is required. This accurate recording should not only include a more direct question regarding FiF status but also clear explanations of the exact terms that are being used to define the category of FiF. There is a problem of missing data from the GOS and SES (acquired from individual institutions) that prevents FiF status from being calculated. Full and accurate collection of this information by institutions is necessary for the QILT surveys to foster understanding of this FiF group.

Increasing the frequency and method of collecting of this data would also benefit our understanding. Data collection should be timed over the life course so that qualitative and deeper understandings of the longer-term impacts of degree attainment can be obtained. The benefits from a degree are “slow burning”, and for the alumni in this study, it was only with time and hindsight that an understanding of how university had impacted their careers emerged. Collecting data over time also ensures a more comprehensive understanding of how graduates manage the employment market and importantly, the changes in thinking and attitudes that emerge longitudinally.

Other gaps in our understanding of the graduate job space include the actual market value of certain degrees and the demand for graduates in specific fields. Combining data available from the Australian Government Department of Education along with data available from the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science would provide better depth and breadth to existing data sets to enable students to make more evidence-based decisions. This evidence base is particularly important for those students who are making a significant economic investment in their degree with limited fiscal resources behind them. Such data should be housed on an accessible online site that provides current statistics on both the demand and projected need for workers in different sectors so students are not undertaking qualifications that are linked to flooded employment markets.

### Sector/policy recommendations

1. Independent university peak bodies should provide a realistic cost-benefit analysis for different fields of study so that students can make informed choices about the qualifications they pursue. Ongoing interrogation of the longitudinal “opportunity costs” of gaining a degree need to be prioritised to ensure that learners are clearly informed about the cost benefits of different qualifications.
2. University administration areas or policymakers need to ensure that student enrolment data on parent/guardian’s highest qualification level is accurately collected. This should include “unpacking” terms such as First-in-Family or first generation to ensure that all data is clarified consistently.
3. Australian Government Departments (Department of Education/Department of Industry, Innovation and Science) should work collaboratively to link statistics on employer demand, work patterns and degree-work transitions.
4. Government survey administrators need to consider the timing of the Australian Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS) and include opportunities for longitudinal



measurement of university outcomes. Maintaining connection with graduates through critical life stages is now quite feasible given the availability of social media and also, mobile applications: for example, via an app that would send graduates a short quiz to check in on their “job health” status.

## 6.4 Research and data collection

### Overview of findings

Findings detailed in this report indicate the need for further research that focuses on the quality of post-graduation experiences. Specifically, questions on the GOS survey need to explicitly ask about the employed graduates’ sector, the type of employer, contract type and how work was attained. Such interrogation will inform an understanding of the extent to which graduates are using their higher education qualifications. Furthermore, neither of the QILT surveys collect data on participation in internships even though research has indicated that graduates with no work experience are more likely to be in non-graduate jobs or unpaid work (Purcell et al., 2013). Thus, inclusion of questions about internships and work experience will enable a better understanding of the connection between student extracurricular activity and graduate outcomes to emerge. Equally, the addition of fields into which qualitative comments can be made would also enable a broader diversity of information to supplement the statistics.

Further targeted research that foregrounds the skills and attributes that students from more diverse backgrounds utilise to obtain and sustain work is also needed. Making explicit connections between these qualities and those required within the current employment market can reframe how students reflect upon their biographies. Careers services could assist students in identifying these qualities within themselves, and the qualities themselves can also be showcased to employers as attributes that make students valuable employees.

Linked to the point above is the need indicate how attending university not only leads to new skills or knowledges for learners, but also results in change at a more embodied or personal level. Specifically, a large number of students referred to increased confidence and self-belief. There is a clear need to develop meaningful and targeted ways to measure and report on these changes, as this fundamental shift may not necessarily result in work outcomes but can contribute to the community and the economy in a tangible and positive sense. Emphasising such unexpected, but equally valued, benefits that these participants indicated may assist in broadening conceptions of success and what this means at an individual level.

### Research and data collection recommendations

1. The Australian GOS needs to include measures that focus on the quality and nature of graduate work. Questions that relate to the relevance and type of employment as well as how the job was gained are required to provide a more in-depth understanding of graduate trajectories.
2. Researchers in the careers and business fields need to foreground a more inclusive understanding of the skills and attributes that can benefit future employability, such as the resilience and determination that many equity or FiF students already possess.
3. Funding bodies should support research that seeks to consider and measure the more subtle, intangible or embodied benefits of higher education.
4. The Australian GOS needs to include questions that capture data on how participation in internships may affect employment outcomes, particularly for those from equity backgrounds. This includes asking explicit questions related to participation in internships and co-curricular opportunities so that participation can be linked to equity status and future employability.

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