

Beyond the economics, benefit and cost of higher education: First in family student perspectives

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Abstract

Internationally, higher education is considered key to individual and societal economic success. Using a narrative inquiry approach, this paper broadens our understanding of the benefit and cost of participating in higher education (HE) beyond employment opportunities and tuition fees. The qualitative study on which this paper is based explores the lived experience of eighteen First in Family (FiF) students to create a collection of narrative accounts. On the basis of this evidence, we argue that the benefit of HE extends to encompass the strengthening of FiF students' sense of competencies and confidence, contributes towards broadening of social experiences, and transforms perspectives. Furthermore, associated non-monetary costs of HE includes the requirement to balance competing life demands and the adoption of poor health behaviours. The study highlights the importance of both monetary and non-monetary factors when assessing overall return on investment of HE.

Background

Higher education (HE) is recognised as a key determinant in the international economic progress of a nation (Bradley, 2008). To date, the Australian Government's recognition of this economic role is evident through the 2009 *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* policy (Australian Government, 2009). A policy which aimed for a 'highly educated workforce' and provided Australians of all backgrounds with an opportunity to attend university (Gale & Parker, 2013). Despite 'first in family' (FiF) students not being explicitly recognised within the policy, FiF students represent the diversity encompassed by the identified target groups including low socioeconomic status, mature-aged, regional and remote, and indigenous students (Bui, 2002; Engle, 2007; Luzeckyj, King, Scutter, & Brinkworth, 2011; Thomas & Quinn, 2006). FiF students are generally defined in an Australian context as being the first member of their family, including siblings, to participate in HE (Luzeckyj et al., 2011) and arguably have an educational disadvantage as a result of a lack of social and cultural capital pertaining to HE (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Grayson, 2011).

Regardless of student background, the decision to pursue further education is largely an economic one, based on expected return on investment through improved employment opportunities (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011) with university qualifications perceived as the key to long term prosperity (Lehmann, 2009). The relative monetary cost for FiF students to attend HE is considered to be a more significant burden in comparison to their intergenerational peers, with many FiF students required to shoulder associated costs due to their low SES or mature age backgrounds (Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, & Pierce, 2012). FiF students are reported to juggle a higher number of employment hours with study than intergenerational students (Reay, David, & Ball, 2005), combining two significant challenges of HE, being lack of time

and money (Bowl, 2001; Stone, 2008). Consequently, the expected benefit of attending HE becomes an increasingly important factor in FiF students' decision to pursue further education (Lehmann, 2009; McMahan, 2009).

Despite the emphasis by government and many in society on the economic benefit of HE, a body of literature which argues that the benefit of HE extends beyond the financial to encompass a range of non-monetary benefits that contribute towards society and the individual also exists (Chen, 2012; Lochner, 2011; McMahan, 2009). The focus of non-monetary benefits has predominantly been at the macro level of society and the association between education and health, longevity and reduction of crime (Brunello, Fort, Schneeweis, & Winter-Ebmer, 2012; Lochner, 2011). Our research acknowledges that these non-monetary benefits are also at play at the micro level where they contribute towards student day to day lives and well-being. The benefits of HE are derived through personal growth and development due to strengthening the FiF students' sense of competency and confidence (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011), the transformation of perspectives (O'Shea, 2013), and the broadening of social experiences through widening their social network and meeting new people (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011). Accompanying these benefits is the associated non-monetary cost of balancing multiple life demands (Reay et al., 2005; Stone & O'Shea, 2013) often impacting on other leisure and social activities (Robotham, 2009). Contrary to the long term relationship shown between education and improved health (Brunello et al., 2012), studies show that students health deteriorates whilst they are at university due to poor nutrition, reduced exercise and increased substance use (Bewick et al., 2008; Ruthig, Marrone, Hladkyj, & Robinson-Epp, 2011).

Through the analysis of 18 FiF student interviews, this paper explores the non-monetary cost and benefit of participating in HE from the perspective of FiF students studying at three different Australian universities. On the basis of our evidence, we argue that a number of broader non-monetary factors influence students' decisions to participate in HE, and conclude that these broader considerations should be made more explicit within university communications with prospective students, families and the general public (McMahan, 2009).

Method

The present study is part of a broader research project being conducted across three South Australian universities. Students who had previously self-identified as being FiF from earlier research were invited to participate. From the initial responses, a cross sectional representation of university students based on age, gender and disciplines were selected for interviewing. The result was a total of eighteen FiF students interviewed during second semester 2014, with one participant subsequently removed due to not meeting the FiF eligibility criteria. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with participants, who were encouraged to expand on their responses so that they built a picture of their lived experience as university students. According to Hesse-Biber and Levy (2011, p. 94) in-depth interviews require "active asking and listening" between partners who are participating in a process of "meaning-making" which allows deep and rich descriptions to emerge. Questions asked in the interviews were developed based on themes which had been uncovered through a detailed exploration of the literature. The participants narrated their own stories with guidance from our questions and discussed both their experience of being at university and how they anticipated their university studies would help them in the future.

Analysis was conducted through an interpretative lens, involving the identification of patterns and commonalities through the manual line by line review of interview transcripts (Patton,

2002). A thematic analysis approach was adopted with the initial reading being deductive to ensure that identified research themes were addressed, and a second reading that involved an inductive approach allowing for the analysis to be data-driven. The result was a rich diversity of themes that not only addressed research objectives but allowed for the emergence of broader themes, such as the ones discussed in this paper.

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Field of study |
|-----------|-----|--------|--------------------------------------|
| Carl | 19 | M | Podiatry |
| Todd | 18 | M | International Relations |
| Kerry | 41 | F | Commerce |
| Brendon | 18 | M | Law/ Management |
| Travis | 20 | M | Media Arts |
| Alison | 17 | F | Graphic Design |
| Pete | 69 | M | Arts |
| Sue | 18 | F | Teaching |
| Nina | 35 | F | Midwifery |
| Marg | 43 | F | Government and Public Administration |
| Roxie | 33 | F | Speech Pathology |
| Jen | 26 | F | Arts |
| Gail | 20 | F | Science |
| Denise | 38 | F | Psychological Science |
| Brad | 17 | M | Mathematics |
| Cory | 17 | M | Engineering |
| Rowan | 31 | M | Psychological Science |

Table 1: Participant demographics and field of study

Findings

Three core themes relating to the benefit of HE emerged from the analysis of participant interviews. These themes included personal growth, social experiences and increased understanding of broader society.

Strengthening Competencies & Confidence

Regardless of age, the transition into HE was identified by all participants as a process of entering into an unknown arena that triggered a range of emotional responses, that Brad described as being ‘scared, worried and completely overwhelmed’. Despite the initial difficulties which most participants described as disappearing half way and towards the end of first year, all participants successfully integrated into the university environment and recognised their associated personal growth. For Alison, Sue and Carol, leaving home and relocating to Adelaide to attend university had a significant impact, associating the move out of home with ‘growing up’.

I think especially coming from the country just that experience, not even university, but just moving out and you might be uncomfortable at first but it's going to help you in the long run..... so many life skills and budgeting and all that kind of stuff, cooking for yourself and the little things that you take for granted at home, but once you move out are huge I think. (Alison)

Even for participants who were not required to leave home, the realisation of the requirement to become independent from their families played a significant role in their personal growth.

I don't think it hits you until perhaps after exams that now I have to be independent, I have to be doing this stuff myself, I can't just rely on my parents. (Brad)

It was a little bit hard, but I just sort of thought if everyone else can do it, I can do it as well. I realised that this is just going to be what life is going to be like, having to be independent and make your own choices on the spot. (Cory)

On reflecting whether they thought university had changed them, a number of participants identified personal attributes that had been positively shaped through their university experience. Carol, an international student from Singapore recognised the contribution that university has made into her becoming a more open and confident person.

It (university) teaches you to be independent, especially for an international student. Well for me, personally I used to be very, very quiet and I think being overseas it helped me learn to, you know, I have learnt to speak out if I want to get something done or if I want to buy something. I have learnt to speak out and it built my confidence. (Carol)

Similar personal attributes were identified by domestic students, echoing the benefit of university developing them into more open and confident individuals. As a rural student who relocated to Adelaide to study, Brad recognised that being forced to establish new networks contributed towards his development.

Social networking definitely helps a lot with developing you as a person because you come out of your shell a little bit more, helps you to be a little bit more confident, a little bit more outgoing, so it definitely helps a lot. (Brad)

Broadening of Social Experiences

Broadening their social horizons and making new friends with similar interests was identified as a key benefit by the majority of participants. Gail who attended a lower socio-economic high school was the only one from her high school friendship group to continue on to complete further studies. On reflecting on how HE had changed her, she identified the establishment of different social circles as a result of her studies.

I did keep in contact with my high school friends in the first year and part of the second year and quite regularly we'd catch up and that sort of thing. But then I guess as the degree progressed I became closer to people in the degree that had similar interests and just a bit more in common. (Gail)

For Nina, a mother of seven and constantly juggling family and study commitment, found that her major support network came from her friendship groups developed at university.

The girls that I initially started my studies with – they’ve finished now, they’re working, so I kind of go to them sometimes if I need help or support with anything, seeing they’ve been there done it and got through it – they work on anything that they can to pull me through. (Nina)

The benefit of broadening social and academic experiences was not only recognised as beneficial to participants themselves, but also identified as being beneficial to other members of their immediate family. Both Rowan and Nina expressed aspirations for their children to do what interests them, with university being a recommended pathway. As FiF students, these views indicate the development and transmission of a different form of cultural capital not previously present within their families. Similarly Brendan, Cory and Alison discussed the influence that their pathway to HE has had on younger siblings, with university now seen as a viable and valuable option.

My brother’s in year 12 at the moment and he wants to do medicine. Strange because that’s not what anyone else has done in the family I guess, it’s not that usual. And also for the school that we went to as well, I don’t think anyone’s gone straight from the school that we went to do medicine. And there’s not that many people who have done engineering. (Cory)

Transformation of Perspectives

Alongside the acquisition of knowledge relevant to their discipline, participants also identified two additional key benefits, being improvement in communication skills and the ability to see other peoples’ perspectives. Pete a retiree who chose to participate in HE to fulfil a lifelong ambition, recognised that although he already possessed the skills to see others’ points of view, he recognised that university provided him with the skills to be able to better articulate his thoughts.

My wife and I can converse at a different level now that I couldn’t have done before. Not on science but on life, the universe and everything. We might even stop a TV program and discuss that point and this point – play with the drama and relate that. (Pete)

This evidence of an increased understanding of broader society also appeared to influence student motivation beyond HE which Alison described in her narrative surrounding how university had changed her.

Probably it’s just my ambition for life I think. Before when I was in high school I kind of had the mentality that ‘finish high school, stay in [small rural town], get a retail job in [small rural town] and just kind of be there forever’ and now I couldn’t think of anything worse to be honest. Now I want to finish university and I want to travel and to live overseas and work overseas and I just want to do so much more than I ever wanted to do. (Alison)

Personal Costs

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Despite the identification of a range of benefits that HE has provided beyond improved job prospects, participants also acknowledged a number of personal costs that have arisen as a result of attending university; with lack of time, particularly during first year, and the requirement to balance competing demands being a common connection. Fourteen of the eighteen participants commented on the challenge of balancing study and paid work.

I was working 15 hours a week during 2011 and doing 4 subjects ... it was pretty hectic, I had a very understanding boss who was willing to negotiate around hours of work... balancing out the amount of study I had to do with the amount of work I had to do to make ends meet. (Rowan)

With the challenge of juggling multiple demands and changing priorities, physical activity appeared to be a common factor that students neglected.

So I really loved squash when I was in [small rural town] and unfortunately the pressure of university meant my first year I couldn't get back into it because there was just not enough time. (Brad)

Carl articulated similar sentiments, expressing that he missed playing footy, an aspect that Cory also related to.

In terms of other costs, I guess I feel like I don't have as much time as I probably used to have when I was at school, just to do my own thing. I still have plenty of spare time and catch up with my friends and stuff, like I just haven't been exercising as much. In early high school I was playing soccer and just keeping fit in general. But at university it's sort of very on and off, so I'll get into a good routine and then we have heaps of assignments due and then I'll just stop and I struggle to get back into the routine again. (Cory)

Further to adverse exercise behaviours, Alison recognised the importance of eating properly, admitting that she 'didn't eat well for most of the first year'. Likewise, Jen identified poorer eating habits along with the loss of physical activity as major changes as a result of attending university.

My one cost that I regret is my fitness, I used to, before university I went to the gym about three to five times a week, I had personal training, I ate really well. The first two years of university was really trying to understand what to do and I've finally gotten to that point where I go yeah, I just know what to expect. But being so frantic to understand meant that I was either working or I was studying and so it was either work, study or it was what time I could give to friends, family, partner. That didn't leave a lot of room for cleaning the house, for going to the gym, for cooking healthy meals, for going to the shops. I went to the deli a lot to get my lunches so I could then rush back and do what I needed to do, so and I've gone from a size ten to a size fourteen, so it really has been a cost to my fitness. (Jen)

In addition to a negative impact on health and fitness, a common theme discussed by participants was the limited time and attention they were able to spend with family and external friends.

I've had a partner for 13 years now, we've certainly grown apart over the last 4 years, we don't have as much time to spend together and the time we do have together is often spent trying to manage the difficult things that are happening. And my partner, seeing the way that he has created this life that doesn't involve me, it's sad and it's awful but that just again makes me go, "oh just finish this thing get this done so that we can go back to having a life together". But even the negative things have had a positive influence on me going forward. (Roxie)

Socially there is certainly a cost because I will often say no to things because I've got an assignment due or I need to study. I can't say I've lost friends but I've probably just lost that regularity of contact, I suppose with people. (Kerry)

Further to the challenges discussed above, a number of participants talked about the requirement to occupy dual identities as they transitioned through HE, highlighting the complex lives that present day students function within. Brendan portrayed himself as 'generally identifying as a university student or part time employee', a dual existence that was reaffirmed by Rowan, Alison and Roxie. Evident in mature age participants who were also parents, was the concern regarding the potential cost that study may have on time spent with family.

The kids – I don't think they've suffered by me being here but I did actually start to think the other day "am I missing the best years of their life?"... I'm thinking "have I actually decided to study right in the best years of their life and maybe given too much of my time to study rather than to them?"...but I also look on the other hand that I'm instilling them with some really good values. (Kerry)

Discussion

In summary, participants described a range of benefits that HE contributed including an increased sense of competence and confidence, broadening of social experiences and transformation of their world views and perspectives. Accompanying these benefits were a number of costs to participants' lives, including adopting poor health behaviours and experiencing a lack of time to foster social relationships with friends and family external to university.

These findings are consistent with previous research on FiF students experiences of university (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Bowl, 2001; Engle, 2007). The FiF students involved in this study indicated that the development of new social groups aligned with their own interests and beliefs, potentially reflecting an awareness of changing social capital (Dukhan, Cameron, & Brenner, 2011). Furthermore, sibling expectation and ambition to attend HE provided evidence of changing cultural capital within the family (Collier & Morgan, 2008). The resulting social and cultural capital has the prospect of being advantaging siblings and children by easing their transition into university. Despite the potential positive transformations described by participants, alternate studies argue that changing social and cultural capital can be a perceived cost as FiF students negotiate simultaneous identities between 'home life' and 'student life', potentially creating conflict with friends and family (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Orbe, 2004).

The cost of balancing multiple demands and increased time pressure was an experience highlighted by the majority of participants. These reports related to limited time are consistent with earlier studies conducted by Bowl (2001), Reay et al. (2005) and Stone (2008) that found

FiF students are often required to juggle work and/or family commitments with study. Of concern is the short term decline of health, particularly in the first year as students negotiate new demands of university study. Although research findings suggest an association between improved long term health and education (Brunello et al., 2012; Lochner, 2011), negative short term health implications for university students is evident both in our study and in other research (Deasy, Coughlan, Pironom, Jourdan, & Mcnamara, 2014; Wrench, Garrett, & King, 2014).

The insight provided by participants identifies that the cost and benefit of HE goes beyond mere economic outcomes. Whilst intergenerational students may have similar experiences to those of FiF students, the decision to participate in HE carries with it a level of complexity not faced by students with family who have attended university before them. The value of intergenerational knowledge cannot be underestimated, particularly in relation to the valuable insight that an individual's social and cultural capital provides (Aspelmeier et al., 2012; Collier & Morgan, 2008). In regards to the three key benefits of HE identified within this study, it is argued that intergenerational students arrive at university already in possession of many of the required social and cultural norms associated with being at university (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011; Grayson, 2011; Vuong, Brown-Welty & Tracz, 2010). Possession of the social and cultural capital place them in a more educationally advantaged position compared with FiF students. FiF students are therefore required to not only adjust to the transition to university, but are also required to 'catch up' with their intergenerational peers in order to maximise the full benefits that HE can provide (Bui, 2002; Dukhan et al., 2011).

This study has several limitations including a representative sample consisting only of successful students who had either completed or were near completion of an undergraduate qualification. We suggest future studies investigate the benefit and cost of HE for FiF students who discontinued their studies. Given its explicit focus on FiF students, the implications from our findings are more widely applicable. It is recommended that universities consider the relevance of the experiences voiced within this study, to determine whether more comprehensive information needs to be provided to students, families and the public on the overall return on investment that participation in HE provides.

Conclusion

Overall, the results of this study support earlier findings that suggest the benefits of HE outweigh the costs, providing evidence of enhanced life experiences that go beyond improved employment opportunities. Notably, the qualitative nature of this study explores the benefits of HE at the micro-level, and aspects of student life often forgotten in larger quantitative studies.

For FiF students, the non-monetary costs of HE are arguably magnified due to a lack of social and cultural capital that might otherwise provide a buffer for this cohort as they navigate unfamiliar territory. Accompanying these costs are the magnification of the non-monetary benefits of HE, which include gaining insight into the value of travel; increased ambitions "for life"; having greater confidence in themselves and feeling more capable of conversing with anyone at a greater range of social levels and on a greater range of topics. Many of these benefits are also attributable to a students' FiF status.

These findings are important considerations in future government policies surrounding social inclusion and increased participation rates in HE. Furthermore, university support programs

addressing student health behaviours and managing multiple life demands would improve student experience by alleviating some of the associated costs of university life.

This exploration of FiF students' perspectives provides valuable context to an under recognised student group. In revealing these personal narratives we provide first hand insight into their experience of the HE environment, adding strength to the argument that affordable access to universities contributes towards society as a whole, even in its smallest form.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) for funding the broader research project of which this paper was produced. We would also like to express our appreciation to the participants for sharing their experiences.

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