



# First-Generation Tertiary Students: Access is not the Same as Support

Krystal Campbell and Bhuva Narayan, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia<sup>1</sup>

This paper argues that despite the various psychosocial factors affecting the mental health of first-generation students (FGS) in higher education, an integrated support system at the institutional level can help students overcome many of the barriers to success at university. The literature points to such factors as the social incongruity between their different worlds, lack of cultural capital, stigma of social status, and psychological factors such as imposter syndrome, and achievement guilt. All these lead to stress and anxiety, and the additional stigma associated with mental health discussions compounds the issue, and worsens the effect of these factors. The paper is based on a collaborative, relational auto-ethnographic analysis by a dyad of two women, three decades apart in age, but brought together in their roles as FGS student and educator. Despite initial difficulties experienced by the FGS student, we report successful outcomes, mainly due to the influence of key actors, especially teaching staff, who were both empathic and supportive to these students. This findings from this study point toward a more holistic approach to student mental health and wellness in higher education.

## Keywords

First-generation students, low SES students, first-year experience, student mental health



## 1. INTRODUCTION

It has been argued that the widening accessibility of university education to a diverse range of students does not inherently translate to a supportive transition experience (Engstrom & Tinto, 2010). With reference to students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, Engstrom and Tinto (2010) argue that there are too many complex forces shaping the success of students (p. 47), a statement which could be justifiably extended to FGS.

Often, limited knowledge of the range of degree programs and services available cause FGS to start off on the wrong course, and broader responsibilities (work, family, commute travel etc.) make matters worse. Compared to their fellow students from other demographics, families of FGS are unable to provide help in identifying and resolving role-based problems or to help them understand and meet the university's expectations. This influences the student's emotional and scholastic engagement, often resulting in stress and other factors impeding completion.

The work of universities to increase student retention during the first year has seen an emphasis on increased contact, involvement, and engagement both in- and outside the classroom (Tinto, 2007). Indeed, the literature supports the fact that teaching staff are an overwhelming influence on the transition experience of students (Devlin & O'Shea, 2012; Whannell, Allen & Lynch, 2010; Nelson & Kift, 2005; Kift, 2015). However, the earliest attempts by universities to increase support during the first year of study often fell to student affairs services rather than faculties and teaching staff (Tinto, 2007), treating transitional support for students as a supplementary activity rather than one that is integrated within their learning experience.

In developing and evolving transition pedagogies for the first year experience (FYE), Kift (2015) recommends the strategic implementation of these pedagogies throughout the whole of an institution's programs and services. These pedagogies, a series of curriculum principles which account for transition challenges and the diversity of students, support 'the commonality of curriculum in the student experience, rather than problematising dissimilarity' (p. 59).



## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature suggests that there are various factors that play a part in the challenges faced by first-generation students in higher education. These include socio-cultural factors such as a lack of cultural capital, mismatch between university expectations and student expectations, increased work and family commitments, and psychological factors such as achievement guilt and imposter syndrome.

### **2.1 Socio-Cultural Factors**

#### **2.1.1. Cultural Capital**

On a cultural level, FGS are unlikely to share in the experiences, cultural awareness, and worldviews that may be expected of them, lacking an assumed degree of social or cultural knowledge. Pierre Bourdieu described this knowledge as cultural capital – the ownership of and an ability to appreciate and replicate culturally valuable artefacts and attributes (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural capital may include books, music, art, and language, linguistic styles, personal style, and any other cultural codes or practices that are valued and rewarded by a dominant class (Bourdieu, 1984; Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; Collier & Morgan, 2008).

Luzeckyj et. al. (2011) examined cultural capital within the transitional experience of FGS, suggesting that these students are less likely to share the cultural capital of their peers who have had the advantage of assimilating an awareness of academic culture into their own cultural capital. There are many suggested deeper reasons for this divide in cultural capital which are linked to the FGS experience: that these students are often older; that students from a regional or remote area are more likely to be the first in their family to attend university; and that these students are more likely to come from a low-socioeconomic background (Luzeckyj et.al., 2011). Such factors contribute to a divide between these students and the cultural capital that is assumed by their university, their teachers, and their peers. This is not to say that such a socio-cultural divide means that FGS are lacking in cultural capital, only that their own cultural capital may not align with what is expected of them in a tertiary environment, a divide that is likely to grow over their time at university (Luzeckyj et. al., 2011; Aschaffenburg & Maas 1997).



### **2.1.2. University Expectations and the “Student Role”**

The degree to which cultural capital might impact a student's success is debated. Collier and Morgan (2008) summarise the major criticism of cultural capital theory as a question of the degree to which cultural capital, especially upper-class values, directly translate to advantage in social interaction for non-first generation students. To address this criticism, Collier and Morgan (2008) conceptualise the theory of role mastery as a form of cultural capital, and a process which informs the interactions of students in higher education. Role mastery refers to the ability to perform customised or context-specific versions of a particular role, requiring a nuanced ability to evaluate interactions with others, anticipate their expectations or assumptions, and use their own cultural resources to respond to those expectations or assumptions. It is then not simply a matter of ability but how well a student is able to communicate that ability using their mastery of roles to manage the expectations of the university and its teaching staff.

In a 2014 study of Australian university students through an online survey of 227 students enrolled in education, nursing and liberal arts degrees at a large public university, it was found that FGS are far less likely to know people who have attended university, even outside of their immediate family (Southgate et. al., 2014). For a FGS who has not had the opportunity to assimilate any awareness of university and academic expectations, it becomes more difficult to understand how to master the role of a student, affecting their ability to reproduce, embody, and perform that role. This in turn affects how their speech, behaviour, and knowledge may be perceived by their peers and teachers (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Stephens et. al., 2012; Southgate et. al., 2014; Kift, 2015).

In examining the first-year experience of incoming tertiary students, it has been observed that FGS tend to come to university with a lack of expectations or ill-informed preconceptions of their course (Nelson & Kift, 2005; Kift, 2015). FGS are far more likely to form their expectations of university on the advice of school counsellors and teachers, or the content of university recruitment material rather than the advice of family, depriving them of a more personalised and supportive experience (Luzeckyj et. al., 2011). Southgate et. al. (2014) credit unrealistic expectations of university as a cause for the lower achievement and higher attrition rates of FGS, as these students are less likely to have developed the skills in fulfilling the role of a self-directed and self-regulated learner that is expected of them in higher education. However, a study by Devlin and O'Shea (2012) found that some of the most crucial



factors of overcoming FGS barriers to success in university involved teaching staff, especially their availability, approachability, dedication, enthusiasm, and rapport when communicating their expectations and requirements. Similarly, Whannell, Allen, and Lynch (2010) observed that for FGS, the teacher takes a dominant position over family and friends in the ability to influence academic engagement, and fostering their capacity to manage university expectations and to cope with the curriculum and course requirements.

### **2.1.3. External and Familial Commitments**

While it is common for any first-year student to have trouble balancing study with their employment and family responsibilities (Nelson & Kift, 2015), these circumstances tend to be exacerbated by the FGS experience. With fewer financial resources, FGS are considerably more likely to work one or more jobs during their time studying (Stephens et. al., 2012; Luzeckyj et. al., 2011). Furthermore, FGS are more likely to have responsibilities for the care of family members (Luzeckyj et. al., 2011). The average FGS tends to spend more time interacting with family members compared to their non-FGS counterparts due to a family dynamic that is built more on inter-dependence. As a result, they are more likely to prioritise the needs of the family unit over the needs of themselves as individuals and by extension their studies (Covarrubius, Romero & Trivelli, 2015; Luzeckyj et. al., 2011; Stephens et. al., 2012).

## **2.2 Psychological Factors**

### **2.2.1. Family Achievement Guilt**

In one of the earliest studies of first generation African-American university students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, Piorkowski (1983) observed a pattern of anxiety relating to feelings of guilt, isolation and frustration which she conceptualised as a form of survivor guilt. While survivor guilt refers to shame or guilt at having survived a traumatic situation or event where others did not, Piorkowski noted that these students exhibited similar emotional responses to the perception that they were attempting to escape poverty by attending university (Piorkowski, 1983). This guilt was typified by a number of experiences: difficulty consolidating academic efforts and successes with the status quo of their family unit; a sense of shame on account of trying to succeed where their family had been unable; feelings of abandonment of the family, both financially and through increased time apart; the



belief that to talk about their higher study with their family is disrespectful or even narcissistic (Piorkowski, 1983). Piorkowski observed the emotional toll this guilt took on the students, leading to depression and anxiety, withdrawn behaviour at university, and difficulty focusing on their studies.

More recently, Covarrubius, Romero, and Trivelli re-framed this phenomenon as “family achievement guilt”, an experience of guilt or shame that makes students feel ‘uncomfortable for having more higher education opportunities and college success than their family members’ (Covarrubius, Romero & Trivelli, 2015). Where Piorkowski’s initial theory encompassed students who had experienced trauma and familial dysfunction in their home lives which contributed to their sense of guilt for having “escaped”, family achievement guilt looks more broadly at cases where this guilt was experienced merely in the student experience, without necessarily focusing on cases where extreme family dysfunction was also a factor (Piorkowski, 1983; Covarrubius, Romero & Trivelli, 2015).

Family achievement guilt has been more characteristically observed in students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and first-generation backgrounds than otherwise. Covarrubius, Romero and Trivelli suggest a twofold cause for this: first, that FGS on average spend a higher amount of time with their families, for both practical and cultural reasons. The second is that family achievement guilt is characterised by the uncomfortable feeling of having surpassed or abandoned their families, which is more typical of FGS circumstances, in contrast to non-FGS circumstances which are more likely to encourage and prioritise individual achievement (Covarrubius, Romero & Trivelli, 2015).



### **2.2.2. Imposter Syndrome**

While family achievement guilt affects the FGS in relation to their family dynamic, one psychological factor affecting the FGS in relation to their peers is that of imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome is a well-documented concept referring to a sense of dissociation from, and an inability to internalise one's success or achievements (Stebleton & Soria, 2012; Gardner & Holley, 2011). In an academic setting, this manifests in a number of ways. A student might feel that any achievements they earn were circumstantial and not truly deserved, which may then lead to a belief that their success is built on deception or fraud (Gardner & Holley, 2011). This leads to an insecurity that they might be exposed in the future for the fraud they believe themselves to be within a given setting. On a social level, this imposter syndrome may also manifest in an inability to gain acceptance to, or belonging within, a desired social network (Gardner & Holley, 2011). Research has linked a sense of belonging in an academic setting to a more successful adjustment to the university experience (Soria, Stebleton & Huesman, 2013).

Research into FGS-specific experiences with imposter syndrome are minimal, and this is an area that requires further study and examination. However, given the experiences explored in this reflective auto-ethnographic study, it is a critical concept to define.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

Auto-ethnography is a reflexive investigation method, which connects one's autobiographical reflection of experiences to the cultural, social, and political through research and writing. It is a genre of writing in which authors, drawing on their own lived experiences as insiders, connect the personal to the cultural and place themselves and others within a social context; 'the term has a double sense – referring either to the ethnography of one's own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest' (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p.2), where the researcher is 'a complete member in the social world under study' (Adler & Adler, 1987; Anderson, 2006). In this paper, the first author had full participatory access to the world of experience of first-generation students and kept a journal which is the basis of the narrative in the next section. Being 'a relational pursuit' (Turner, 2013) auto-ethnography can extend sociological understanding through highly personal accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher (Sparkes, 2000, p.21). Auto-ethnography 'opens up a space



of resistance between the individual (auto-) and the collective (-ethno-) where the writing (-graphy) of singularity cannot be foreclosed' (Lionnet, 1990, p. 391). Analysis can come from story and dialogue as much as from empirical research, and can be evocative and personal, and in the first person, although this can also make the researcher feel vulnerable (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). According to Denshire (2014) 'writing and reading auto-ethnographic accounts threw [her] around emotionally, stirring up unresolved grief and questions to do with class beginnings, gender and belonging' and hence she recommends that making opportunities to de-brief after dealing with confronting materials is important. The second author, who shares aspects of this experience in her own past, engaged in interactive conversations with the first author which elicited shared experiences through 'pooling their stories to find some commonalities and differences and then wrestling with these stories to discover the meanings of these stories in relation to the sociocultural contexts' (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2016). This dialogic process helped the researchers move from the specific experience to reflexive analysis and from an emotional resonance to an 'inter-subjectivity of mutual understanding' (Habermas, 1979).

#### **4. AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE**

##### **4.1 The Student Experience**

My experiences as a FGS are informed by two attempts at university study. In 2012 I attended a prestigious university and experienced barriers and circumstances which I now recognise to be typical of the FGS transitional experience. I studied for one year before these circumstances became overwhelming and I withdrew from the course. After a two year break from study, I re-applied at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) where, despite facing many of the same experiences that led to my withdrawal from previous study, I have found considerably more success. This, I believe, is due to a pattern of teaching strategies that account for a diverse range of needs in the first year transitional experience.

I am the first in my immediate family to attend university in any capacity, and I come from a low-socioeconomic, working-class household. None of my immediate family members completed high school or pursued more than a diploma-level qualification, and my only extended family members to





have studied were distant, and therefore not influential to my expectations of university. I was not exposed to university-educated influences in my personal network even beyond my family. As a result, although I knew from a young age that I intended to finish school and go on to university, I was unable to assimilate any awareness of academic processes or jargon into my own worldview.

My first exposure to the range of universities, disciplines, and courses was in my final year of high school, where I relied heavily on the advice of my careers advisor, the official University Admissions Centre guide, and materials gathered from university Open Days- an information-seeking behaviour especially common to FGS students who are unable to rely on familial expertise. During this process, my family were unable to help beyond being supportive; they had not experienced university applications and admissions themselves, and knew little more than I did. University application was an isolating process, as is my transition into tertiary study and academia to this day.

The lack of foundational knowledge about course programs made the application process incredibly stressful; whereas the debt deferral and enrolment appeared a simple process to my peers with a little help from their parents, I was quickly overwhelmed with a sense of information overload, a feeling that would become constant throughout my first year. It fed into an anxiety of imposition and displacement, as it seemed that I alone was experiencing this feeling of being overwhelmed among my peers. This application process was not necessarily any less stressful the second time, though the familiarity of the process paired with the assurance that I had once completed it successfully made this process seem like less of a barrier.

At the first university, being an aspiring artist, I studied Art. Nevertheless, despite being good at Art, I felt that I was not meeting the standard of basic knowledge required to succeed. It seemed at times that I lacked a level of social awareness, especially when it came to the cultural movements, political events, and historical periods discussed in classes. Furthermore, on a yet more fundamental level, I found it difficult to communicate my understanding of core course concepts to my teachers and peers. Linguistically, coding my understanding of the material using the sophisticated language, phrases and buzzwords used by my teachers and peers was extremely difficult, and I quickly became acutely aware of my shortcomings as an art student.



The lengthy commute to an isolated, small campus with so few amenities served to only widen the void between my expectations of university and my experiences. I found myself unhappy with the degree I was in, with few opportunities to discuss my options. This was exacerbated by my minimal expectations of university services, making it difficult for me to identify the appropriate department from which to seek advice. While the smaller campus life made social connections easier, allowing me to develop my own personal network easily, I found that the campus peer support network was small to the point of being non-existent. With seemingly so few channels through which I could seek help, and so many anxieties over my sense of belonging at the campus, I withdrew from the course after completing my first year.

In 2015, I enrolled at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and started first year all over again, but this time as an older student. On this second attempt, I found that my transition was smoother, and I felt more confident and found more success. Immediately upon this second attempt I felt more included and present in the learning experience. In my first year, all my tutors used Facebook groups for supplementary class activities, taking communication to a familiar platform. Dr Narayan went so far as to embed Facebook engagement into her class plan, with weekly challenges and activities to be shared on our class' private Facebook group.

In this second attempt at university, I found myself more easily understanding course material and assessment requirements, a fact which I initially attributed to the few extra years of life experience and maturity I had gained since my 2012 studies. Although there were a few instances in my first semester of misunderstanding assignments, the mistakes made were explained by the tutors and contextualised within the course material in a way which made it easier for me to learn from these errors and avoid repeating them in the future.

This successful second attempt has not been without its psychological or social challenges. With any success or recognition came an overwhelming sense that it was undeserved, as though by deception or by accident I had led others to believe I am more capable than I actually am. This anxiety led to the belief that I would inevitably encounter a challenge that would be too difficult, and I would be exposed as deceptive and incompetent to my peers and teachers. This belief has not lessened as I near completion of my degree; it has in fact grown more prevalent as I transitioned into a professional role



working part-time within the library, finding it difficult to confidently speak with any authority to my co-workers, or to university students in the information literacy classes I teach as part of my job.

In a cyclical process, this feeling of being undeserving of my place at university both fed into and was made worse by a sense of separation from my peers. In my first semester at UTS, a fellow student in a tutorial remarked jokingly that she thought it funny that I was attending university when I was from a “ghetto”. Though this was an extreme and offensive comment, and not one that has been repeated by any of my peers since, it contributed to an ongoing sense of displacement, wherein I felt I did not belong at the university and didn’t fit in with my peers.

My academic career often comes at the cost of time spent with family. Though my commute now is nothing compared to the 5 hours I spent travelling every day in 2012, I still live a considerable distance from university, and the demands of my degree in addition to work and commuting mean that I spend a significant amount of time out of home, and often cannot dedicate time to family even when I am at home. My family are respectful of the time I spend on academic work, but the separation from my family takes an emotional toll. This is then compounded by the fact that my experiences are difficult to communicate to my family. As a FGS, at university I am exposed to new concepts, information, and ways of thinking that have broadened my worldview in a manner I find difficult to communicate to my family. As a result, it is often difficult to discuss areas of research or even my own newly informed worldviews with them without a degree of frustration and miscommunication. It has become something of a status quo in interactions with many family members that the particulars of my course material and academic research are not frequent topics of conversation.

These issues have been further compounded by a predisposition towards depression and anxiety which affects my everyday life. In 2012, I was less aware of anxiety as a condition and that I was experiencing its symptoms, which included anxiety attacks, a sense of isolation from many of my peers, and heightened emotional responses to any form of stress. Lacking an understanding that I was experiencing Generalised Anxiety Disorder, I believed my emotional response to my struggles in university were a result of the “fact” that I did not belong there, and were therefore a completely rational response to the circumstances. Although counselling services were available to me as a student, they did not operate from my campus, feeding my belief that in many ways those services were not intended for me. My struggles with mental health challenges compounded my already



difficult transition process, not only making my emotional responses to my lack of cultural capital and imposter syndrome considerably more extreme, but also rationalising my belief that I did not belong at university, informing my decision to drop out.

#### **4.2. The Student Reflection**

Though I was unaware at the time, my experiences with the transition to university and certain challenges I faced are common for the FGS experience, and align closely with trends in the literature. My lack of university-educated influences on my life from an early age impaired my decision making when it came to application and enrolment, a circumstance I would later learn is quite typical of FGS backgrounds (Southgate et. al. 2014). I relied entirely on university recruitment materials and the University Admission Centre's (UAC) guides to inform my decisions while lacking nuanced expectations of what a course might involve, leading to incomplete and inaccurate expectations (Luzeckyj et. al., 2011; Nelson & Kift, 2005; Kift, 2015). This led to me enrolling in a course which, while in the Fine Arts stream, was not the type of course I had wanted and ultimately contributed to my withdrawal from the course, an unfortunately common factor for FGS attrition (Southgate et. al., 2014).

My inability to establish any sense of belonging during my first university experience in 2012 was a manifestation of the difference in cultural capital, though this was through no fault of the university, my course, or the teaching staff. My inability to perform the cultural artefacts and traits, especially language and cultural knowledge, of my fellow students broadened the already present insecure distance I felt from them, which along with my dissatisfaction with my course solidified my certainty that I did not belong at the university (Bourdieu, 1984; Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Luzeckyj et. al., 2011).

It would not be until 2016, the second year of my studies at UTS, that I would begin to understand why my transitional experiences were smoother on my second attempt. I became involved with the First Year Experience (FYE) community, a network of UTS teaching staff, coordinators, librarians, and support staff who meet every three months with the singular focus of optimising the transitional experiences of first-year students. The FYE community offers small grants to course coordinators and other departments to develop innovative teaching, learning, and accessibility projects, of which Dr.



Narayan was a recipient. It was through Dr Narayan that I was given the opportunity to share my experiences at these forums, and became involved with the FYE network. The ideology behind the FYE community is built on the six curriculum principles of Kift's transition pedagogies (transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment, and evaluation and monitoring), recommending best practices in implementing these principles in teaching and learning (Sparks et. al., 2014; Kift, 2015). Using these principles, the FYE community embeds best practices for successful student transition in the university faculties at a class level.

Though unaware at the time, the integration of these principles into my classroom experiences made a critical difference in how I interacted with the course material and my teachers. Expectations and protocols were explained; learning outcomes were discussed and explored; points of communication were clearly offered to students; course material was contextualised within the field and the industries we would be going into; our learning was contextualised in the continuum of our degree; diverse backgrounds were welcomed and the varied levels of entry-level knowledge were addressed.

These practices were integrated and embedded within the curriculum and classroom activity, with external support and university services offered as a supplementary source if it was required. However, these support services were similarly integrated: rather than expecting students to seek out this support when needed, coordinators and lecturers anticipated this need and would schedule assignment workshops, information and digital literacy classes with the library, referencing classes, and demonstrations from other support services in advance. For me, this normalised any apprehension I may have had about assignments, communicating to me that my anxiety was common, shared, and expected, but that there were avenues on offer to help me overcome them.

But the most overwhelmingly positive effect of these principles was the effect they had on my interactions and relationship with the teaching staff. In promoting and optimising student-teacher engagement, the FYE transition pedagogies emphasise the importance of being approachable and helpful, listen to student needs, and offering feedback. Though the impact of these principles varied, the teachers who were especially empathetic and enthusiastic in this approach to interaction had the most positive influence on my student experience, and it is the ongoing support of such teachers that fostered resilience against the psychological and social barriers to engagement that I experienced.



In examining the academic outcomes of FGS in Australia after the first year, Southgate et. al. (2014) stated that while integrated transition pedagogies do scaffold the academic achievement of FGS in their first year, as these scaffolds are gradually withdrawn and removed from curriculum in subsequent years of study, the learning quality and engagement of FGS decreases (p.39). The implications of this align closely with my own experiences in my second and third years of study, wherein I have found the greatest deal of success with teachers who continue to integrate the principles of the transition pedagogies into their curriculum and teaching strategies well into the subsequent years.

By the time I re-entered university at UTS in 2015 I had become aware that I was experiencing Generalised Anxiety Disorder and learned of some methods for managing this. This had a positive influence on my ability to contextualise my experiences, benefitted my transition into university on the second attempt, and was an advantage I did not have in 2012. In addition, I sought out the support of campus counselling services at UTS, which taught me new techniques to manage my anxiety in a crisis. However, this is not to say that my second attempt at university was easier, and the triggers for my anxiety were considerably more varied given a whole new set of circumstances. I find that my course content and area of research are incredibly difficult to communicate to my family. I am on a considerably larger campus with a greater cohort of students, and I am now three years older than the majority of my first-year peers. I found it difficult to make friends, and felt isolated for the first few semesters. I still felt that I didn't belong in my course. In my first semester, feeling a sense of déjà vu both in my experience and my emotional responses, I questioned whether I had made the right decision, and considered withdrawing from my course again. Ultimately though, it was the implementation of transition pedagogy practices outlined above which created a supportive and reassuring environment that ultimately contributed the most to my continued success.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The literature suggests that FGS do not share the cultural capital of non-FGS students. Cultural capital relates to the ownership and ability to appreciate cultural artefacts and knowledge while emphasising the ability to reproduce culture as part of a personal style. The university sector needs to develop a greater understanding of the human capital that students bring to their studies to structure experiences in ways that facilitate the success of all, including FGS, and also to integrate the already established and successful first-year transition pedagogies well into every aspect of new learning, even beyond the



first year. While such strategies may not erase the challenges faced by FGS, especially where these challenges are compounded by struggles with mental health, this paper argues that by fostering a supportive and reassuring learning environment through embedded transition pedagogies, universities can minimise the impact of these challenges on the student experience, and also reduce the attrition rates of FGS students. This is in line with past studies whose evidence indicates that the nature of the student-teacher relationship is the only aspect of students' social context that significantly contributes to academic achievement.



## References

- Adler, P. A., & Adler, P. (1987). *Membership roles in field research* (Vol. 6). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publishers.
- Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373-395.
- Aschaffenburg, K., & Maas, I. (1997). Cultural and educational careers: The dynamics of social reproduction. *American sociological review*, 62(4), 573-587.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F., & Hernandez, K. A. C. (2016). *Collaborative autoethnography*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Collier, P.J., & Morgan, D.L. (2008). "Is that paper really due today?": Differences in first-generation and traditional college students' understandings of faculty expectations, *Higher Education*, 55(4), 425-46.
- Covarrubias, R., Romero, A., & Trivelli, M. (2015). Family achievement guilt and mental well-being of college students. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24(7), 2031-2037.
- Denshire, S. (2014). On auto-ethnography. *Current Sociology*, 62(6), 831-850.
- Devlin, M. (2013). Bridging socio-cultural incongruity: conceptualising the success of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds in Australian higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(6), 939-949.
- Devlin, M., & O'Shea, H. (2012). Effective university teaching: Views of Australian university students from low socio-economic backgrounds. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17(4), 385-397.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In Ellis, C., Bochner, A., Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research* (733-768). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publishers.
- Engstrom, C., & Tinto, V. (2008). Access without support is not opportunity. *Change: The magazine of higher learning*, 40(1), 46-50.
- Gardner, S. K., & Holley, K. A. (2011). "Those invisible barriers are real": The progression of first-generation students through doctoral education. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 44(1), 77-92.
- Habermas, J. (1979). *Communication and the evolution of society* (Thomas McCarthy, Trans.). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Kift, S. (2015). A decade of transition pedagogy: A quantum leap in conceptualising the first year experience. *HERDSA Review of Higher Education*, 2, 51-86.
- Lionnet, F. (1990). *Auto-ethnography: The an-archic style of dust tracks on a road*. In: Gates H.L. (eds) Reading Black, Reading Feminist. New York: Meridian, pp. 382-413.





- Luzeckyj, A., King, S., Scutter, S., Brinkworth, R. (2011). The significance of being first: A consideration of cultural capital in relation to “first in family” student’s choices of university and program: a practice report. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 2(2), 91-96
- Nelson, K. & Kift, S. (2005). Beyond curriculum reform: embedding the transition experience. In Brew, A. & Asmar, C. (Eds.). *Higher Education in a changing world: Research and Development in Higher Education*, 28, HERDSA.
- Piorkowski, G. K. (1983). Survivor guilt in the university setting. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 61(10), 620-622.
- Reed-Danahay, D. E. (Ed.). (1997). *Auto-ethnography: Rewriting the self and writing the social*. Oxford, UK: Berg.
- Soria, K. M., Stebleton, M. J., & Huesman Jr, R. L. (2013). Class counts: Exploring differences in academic and social integration between working-class and middle/upper-class students at large, public research universities. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 15(2), 215-242.
- Southgate, E., Douglas, H.E., Scevak, J., Macqueen, S., Rubin, M. & Lindell, C. (2014). The academic outcomes of first-in-family in an Australian university: An exploratory study. *International Studies in Widening Participation*, 1(2), 31-45.
- Sparkes, A.C. (2000) Autoethnography and narratives of self: Reflections on criteria in action. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 17(1), 21–43.
- Sparks, J., Bennett, I., Crosby, A., Egea, K., Griffiths, N., Aitken, A., Parker, N., & McKenzie, J. (2014). *Successful student transition: A guide to teaching students in their first year at university* [pamphlet]. Retrieved from <http://m.uts.edu.au/research-and-teaching/teaching-and-learning/initiatives-and-projects/first-year-experience-project-2>
- Stebleton, M., & Soria, K. (2012). Breaking down barriers: Academic obstacles of first-generation students at research universities. *Learning Assistance Review (TLAR)*, 17(2), 7-19.
- Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., Johnson, C. S., & Covarrubias, R. (2012). Unseen disadvantage: how American universities' focus on independence undermines the academic performance of first-generation college students. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 102(6), 1178-1197.
- Tinto, V. (2007). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 8(1), 1-19.
- Turner, L. (2013) The evocative autoethnographic ‘I’: The relational ethics of writing about oneself. In Short N et al. (eds) *Contemporary British Autoethnography* (pp. 213-229). Rotterdam: Sense.
- Whannell, R., Allen, B., & Lynch, K. (2010). Casualties of schooling? 18 to 22 Year old students in tertiary bridging programs. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(5), 1-17.



---

**Author Affiliations**

**Krystal Campbell**

University of Technology Sydney  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, School of Communication  
P: +617 406 964 122  
[Krystal.Campbell@uts.edu.au](mailto:Krystal.Campbell@uts.edu.au)  
[orcid.org/0000-0002-4817-6537](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4817-6537)

**Bhuva Narayan**

University of Technology Sydney  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, School of Communication  
P: +612 9514 2718  
[Bhuva.Narayan@uts.edu.au](mailto:Bhuva.Narayan@uts.edu.au)  
[orcid.org/0000-0001-8852-5589](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8852-5589)

**Correspondence to:**

Krystal Campbell  
University of Technology Sydney  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, School of Communication  
P: +61 406 964 122  
[Krystal.Campbell@uts.edu.au](mailto:Krystal.Campbell@uts.edu.au)