

Thesis abstract

On “being first:” reconsidering Australian higher education equity policy through a comprehensive analysis of the aspirations of prospective first-in-family students

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In the pursuit of greater equity and expanded access to higher education, a discourse of widening participation has been foregrounded within the Australian higher-education sector in recent decades. This agenda has largely focused on moving towards proportional representation for six equity target groups that have been inscribed within policy for more than 25 years: people from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, people from regional and remote areas, people with disabilities, people from non-English-speaking backgrounds, women in non-traditional areas of study, and Indigenous people. While the higher-education landscape has transformed over this period, these groups remain core to conceptualisations of equity within policy and practice, fundamentally shaping how educational inequalities can — and should — be addressed.

This thesis contributes to current debates calling for reform of the national higher-education equity framework by investigating a group of students who have received comparatively little attention within the widening participation agenda and the Australian context more broadly — students who would be “first in family” (FiF) to hold a university-level qualification. Drawing on data collected as part of a four-year longitudinal project (2012–2015), this mixed-

methods study augments policy interest in school students’ aspirations, as part of the widening participation agenda, by focusing on *prospective* FiF students (aged 8–18 years) enrolled in primary and secondary government schools in New South Wales. Moving beyond the simplistic notion of “raising aspirations” that has been embedded within this agenda, a sociological lens was used to frame the study, with Arjun Appadurai’s theory of the “capacity to aspire” and Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of “capital,” “habitus,” and “field” utilised to develop a theoretically informed understanding of access to higher education for prospective FiF students. Quantitative data in the form of annual online surveys completed by students ($n = 6,492$; categorised as prospective FiF or non-FiF) from 64 schools were linked with socio-demographic and prior academic achievement records, in order to establish a portrait of prospective FiF students and their educational aspirations. Qualitative data in the form of focus groups conducted in a subsample of 30 schools were utilised to gain a deeper understanding of the formation of aspirations for university among prospective FiF students ($n = 198$).

Collectively, these data challenge existing policy by showing that FiF status constitutes a distinct equity category. While my

analysis demonstrated that many prospective FiF students had overlapping socio-demographic characteristics with one, or a number of, the existing equity target groups, FiF status did not simply overlap these categories. Specifically, prospective FiF students were more likely to identify as Indigenous and come from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds in comparison to their non-FiF peers. However, FiF students were more likely to come from English-speaking backgrounds, which is in contrast to the equity policy focus on students from language backgrounds other than English. In addition, some prospective FiF students did not fit into any of the existing equity categories at all.

Moreover, my analysis illuminated the nature of FiF status beyond its relationship with the existing equity target groups. Overall, non-FiF students were more likely to aspire to university in comparison to prospective FiF students at all year levels covered in the study (Years 3–12 inclusive), even when taking into account factors such as those defining the existing equity groups, and measures of academic achievement. Many of the prospective FiF students who aspired to university faced limited access to knowledge of higher education within their families, with their parents imparting support and advice through the promotion of values and attitudes. In addition, the capacity to aspire to higher education varied *among* prospective FiF students depending on the capital they could access and deploy via their familial and non-familial networks, which in turn brought some students closer to higher education.

Given this analysis, I argue that FiF status should be recognised within higher-education policy and practice as discrete from the

existing equity categorisations. My study draws attention to ways in which school students who are “first” in their families to pursue higher education may need extra support. Greater recognition of this population of students must not only occur once they have arrived at university, but also during the period of early aspiration formation over the course of primary and secondary schooling. My study brings to light this period as an important juncture for supporting prospective FiF students, with schools and universities playing a critical role in informing, nurturing, and resourcing aspirations, and thus facilitating pathways into higher education.

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