RESEARCH PAPER

Family and social capital for the success of non-traditional students in higher education

Suzanne Macqueen*
The University of Newcastle, Australia

Widening participation initiatives have sought to increase the enrolment in higher education (HE) of students from groups who have previously been under-represented. This includes students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, from non-metropolitan areas, and those with low high school achievement. These 'non-traditional' students are often from the first generation in their family to attend university. Non-traditional students may struggle in the unfamiliar environment of HE, and face issues not encountered by their peers. Recent literature outlines the importance of considering the capitals these students bring to university in order to avoid a deficit view (Devlin, 2013). This paper draws on a recent longitudinal study examining the experiences of non-traditional students. Data were collected through interviews conducted over four years as they moved into, through or out of university. The ways that the students utilised family and social capital (Bourdieu, 1990; Yosso, 2005) in order to succeed in HE are discussed. The analysis shows that non-traditional students operationalise social and familial capital in ways not adequately recognised by traditional notions of cultural capital.

Keywords: non-traditional students; cultural and social capital; higher education; student equity; widening participation

Introduction

Widening participation initiatives are deemed to be 'successful' when there is increased enrolment in and graduation from universities by students from previously under-represented groups. In Australia, equity groups noted in policy have included people identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, those from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds , people with disabilities, from non-English speaking backgrounds, from regional and remote areas, and women in some areas of study (Bennett et al., 2015). While some non-traditional students are very successful in high school, others have not experienced achievement at school, and a proportion have not completed high school (Bennett et al., 2015; Lamb, Jackson, Walstab & Huo, 2015). Some students will therefore enter university via alternate pathways. Many non-traditional students, as they are often called, belong to more than one of these groups, and are usually First-in-Family (FiF) or of the first generation in their family to attend university (O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2017). Traditional students, by contrast, completed secondary schooling and are most often from middle-class families who can support them while they study, have parents who attained University level education, and are less likely to be from

minority groups (Reay, Davies, David & Ball, 2001).

Research has investigated the challenges faced by non-traditional students, and according to this literature, they are more likely than their traditional counterparts (i.e., students not belonging to any equity group) to struggle at university and to drop out (see for example, Collier & Morgan, 2008; Martinez, Sher, Krull & Wood, 2009; Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010). The reason given in much of the research is that non-traditional students do not possess the resources (capitals) (Bourdieu, 1984) valued in HE. This paper draws from work using Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (specifically family and social capitals) as well as subsequent development of the concept by Yosso (2005) and others, as explicated in the following section. It seeks to answer the question of how non-traditional students utilise and develop cultural and social capital through family and friends in order to succeed at university. Through exploring this question, the capitals of non-traditional students might be better recognised and understood. Universities may then be able to utilise this information to improve the HE experiences of non-traditional students. This study employed narrative inquiry with 13 non-traditional students, collecting interview data over four years. From the interviews, narratives were collated about each student's experiences at university. Analysis of the interviews suggests that we need to move beyond the traditional iterations of cultural capital utilised by Bourdieu and others, to consider the many and varied types of support which family and friends can provide despite their unfamiliarity with HE. In the section below I outline traditional notions of cultural capital as used in Bourdieuian studies, then consider Yosso's alternate framework, before outlining my study and its findings.

Concepts of capital

Bourdieu (1986) argued that capital could take both economic and symbolic forms, the main forms of the latter being cultural capital and social capital, which exist as advantages possessed because of one's family and/or societal position.

> Those who are deprived of capital are either physically or symbolically held at a distance from goods that are the rarest socially. They are forced to stick with the most undesirable. Their lack of capital intensifies the experience of finitude; it chains one to a place. (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 127)

In the context of higher education, cultural capital encapsulates knowledge about and skills relevant to the practices and processes of the institution. The linguistic and cultural competence which forms the cultural capital required by educational institutions is less evident among disadvantaged groups (Dumais, 2002). Bourdieu's concept of capital has been used to explain why non-traditional students may encounter difficulty in accessing and completing HE, but it does not explain why or how they succeed. He considered successful working class HE students to be lucky survivors (Bourdieu, 1988) but this explanation does not explain the current success rate of non-traditional students (Gale & Parker, 2017).

The argument according to Bourdieu is that the families of non-traditional students are unable to transfer the cultural capital of HE to the students, because the world of HE is usually unfamiliar to the whole family. This is of concern, since families are considered the highest source of support by almost 80% of young Australians (Wyn, 2011). When HE has not been part of the family's world, the non-traditional student encounters university as an environment where they are a 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979 cited in Reay et al., 2010, p. 117). Not only are they unfamiliar with the practices and processes involved in HE, but they have no existing social relationships which can ease the way for them. Family members cannot provide

advice on how to access services, utilise processes or complete required work. Often, there is no-one in their immediate social circle who has attended university and could provide guidance (Smith, 2011).

Despite the lack of traditional forms of HE cultural capital possessed by non-traditional students, many do succeed at university (Pitman, 2013). Gale and Parker (2017) noted that recent retention rates for non-traditional students have been similar to those of their peers. This positive outcome should not be allowed to obscure the fact that they may face challenges that are not experienced by traditional students (Devlin, 2010; Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010). *How* non-traditional students succeed is an area which has been of increasing interest in the current widening participation era. By uncovering the factors or practices which enable them to succeed, we can put structures into place which can facilitate more equitable experiences for other non-traditional students. In order to do this, it is important that we avoid taking a deficit view of these students (Devlin, 2013). Rather, we need to start at a point of considering the capitals they bring to HE as a direct result of their backgrounds and prior experiences (Meuleman, Garrett, Wrench & King, 2015) which Gale (2011) termed recognition of difference. Both Reay (2001) and O'Shea (2016a; 2016b) argue that non-traditional students do not enter HE *without* cultural capital, but rather that it is cultural capital in a different form to that which is traditionally valued by universities. For more traditional students, cultural capital is 'embodied in their dress, demeanour and attitudes, in particular, their attitudes towards learning and their degree of confidence and entitlement in relation to academic knowledge' (Reay, David & Ball, 2005; Reay et al., 2010, p. 109). With improved recognition of the capitals brought to HE by non-traditional students, we can begin to investigate the ways they utilise their own cultural capitals in terms of resources from family and social connections (Bourdieu, 1986), to help them succeed at university.

Bourdieu considered formal education to be an institutionalised form of capital, with education systems operating to transmit and reward the capital of the dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1984), and that different forms of capital interact. In HE, cultural capital includes knowledge about systems and practices within the institution. Cultural capital in HE is seen as inherited from parents, gained through social connections or certain types of schools and prior academic achievement. Thus, the cultural capital required by educational institutions is less evident among disadvantaged groups (Dumais, 2002). The importance of cultural capital with regard to exploring college choice, HE access and success, transition and retention, has been noted in studies in the United States (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). According to UK research, traditional students master the student role expectations easily by virtue of their cultural capital (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Cultural capital in HE engenders a feeling of belonging, leading to social integration, which is linked to retention and success (Rubin & Wright, 2015; Thomas, 2012).

Social capital is the benefit arising from one's 'durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). For HE students this can include connections both inside and outside the university. Traditional students are more likely to begin university studies already knowing other current or past students who can provide advice. Once enrolled, all students may develop beneficial relationships with academics, support staff and fellow students. Friendships at university can provide social capital and be highly beneficial (Rubin, 2012), but small, homogenous social groups can be restrictive, through the reinforcing of 'low volume social capital' (Ball, 2003, p. 83). Non-traditional students' experiences of university may be enhanced and support can be increased through the development of wider social circles (Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander

& Grinstead, 2008). For example, dissemination of the cultural knowledge of the dominant classes in HE (Bourdieu, 1984) can be facilitated through new relationships with traditional students including recent school leavers with high levels of school achievement.

Students from non-traditional backgrounds do succeed in HE, despite often entering university with limited (if any) possession of the types of capital valued in that field. For example, some may not have mastered academic reading and writing skills (Marks, 2009) or be independent learners (Meuleman, Garrett, Wrench & King, 2015). Gale (2011) has extolled the need for institutions to value the qualities (or capitals) which *are* brought to HE by under-represented groups. Certainly, there is a need to better understand the capitals non-traditional students bring to HE, and how these help them to succeed. Yosso (2005) employed concepts of capital from Bourdieu and others to determine the capitals brought to HE by students of Colour in order to challenge a deficit view of cultural wealth for African American communities and students. Using Critical Race Theory and drawing also from literature about other ethnic minority groups, she defined six types of capital which enabled students of Colour to succeed in education. These capitals are: familial, social, community, aspirational, resistant and navigational capital. According to Yosso (2005), such capitals have been developed by people of Colour in order to survive historical and contemporary struggles. I concur with O'Shea (2016b) who claims that Yosso's concepts of capital are also relevant to a range of other under-represented or disadvantaged groups. In this paper I focus particularly on students' use of social capital as Yosso (2005) describes it; contact networks (and I argue that this includes family) which emotionally and practically support those navigating institutions such as universities. This allows me to move beyond more traditional notions of cultural capital as explored by Bourdieu, and to instead consider the many types of support provided to non-traditional students by family and friends.

Methodology

This paper presents data from a longitudinal study on the experiences of non-traditional students attending the University of Newcastle in regional Australia. The university has a strong equity focus, with a number of enabling pathways and attracts higher than the national average percentage of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. In Australia, SES is divided into four categories or quartiles. People in the lowest 25% are considered to belong to the low SES category. Many teacher education students at the university are also FiF. Over 30% of teacher education students, and almost 30% of all students at this university are from low SES backgrounds. First year teacher education students with a variety of non-traditional indicators who signalled a preparedness to participate in a series of interviews over four years were invited to participate in the study. Narrative interviews were conducted early in their first year of the teacher education degree, then at the end of the first, second, third and fourth years of the study. This enabled data to be collected over the duration of university enrolment for students who remained enrolled full-time in a teaching degree and others who transferred to different degrees. Some students left university or declined to continue in the study while others were still enrolled at the end of the four years. The study included recent school leavers through to mature age students with children. Thirteen participants provided multiple interviews. For this paper I have omitted the three mature age students, as family support has different dimensions for students with parental responsibilities, and cultural capital may differ for those who have had extensive life experience post-school. I have therefore chosen to focus this paper on the experiences of students who left school and/or home within the six years prior to beginning university. For these students, home and parents had been the main source of support and capital (Wyn, 2011) prior to their university enrolment.

Here I report on 10 non-traditional female students (the only male in the study was of mature age), seven of whom entered university directly from school (two of these completing an enabling course prior to enrolling in the teacher education program), and three who took a gap of one to six years between school and university. One student lived on campus, her family home being three hours' drive away, one lived independently, and two with boyfriends (their families living some hours away). The remaining participants were living with family members (including at least one parent) when the study began. The students' university entry scores (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank [ATAR] from their final high school assessment or equivalent) ranged from 60 to 83 out of a possible 100. Eight participants completed their studies within the expected four year timeframe for a full-time student or had transferred to a different degree and were approaching completion when the study concluded. One participant left university early in the first year, then completed Certificate level courses through Further Education (FE) institutions but remained in the study, and one remained enrolled but was struggling to progress by the end of the four years. Eight participants stated that their parents were highly supportive of their studies, while two stated that their parents were moderately supportive. Table 1 provides more detail on the study participants.[1]

Table 1: Participant characteristics (n=10)

Participant	Age in the first year	Pathway to HE	ATAR or equivalent	Parental support	Status after 4 years
Karen	19	Enabling	81	High	Completed
Anna	19	School	76.5	High	Completed
Ebony	18	School	76	High	Completed
Jane	18	Enabling	56>83[2]	High	Completed
Lacey	19	School	70	Moderate	Soon to complete different degree
Briony	18	School	60	High	Completed other Further Education
Lani	19	School	63	Moderate	Soon to complete different degree
Lenore	19	School	78	High	Soon to complete different degree
Jessica	24	Mature	70 (via Technical & Further Education)	High	Incomplete
Simone	20	Exam (Special Tertiary Admissions Test)	61	High	Completed

During initial interviews, participants were asked a life story question (Clandinin & Connelly,

---

[1] Pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper.
[2] Jane's high school ATAR was 56. She then undertook an enabling course and received an ATAR equivalent of 83.

2000) about how they had come to enrol in a teacher education program. In subsequent interviews students were again asked a life story question to detail their experiences as students (or otherwise) in the period of time since the last interview. Interview transcripts were read and re-read, with one narrative compiled for each participant from all of their interview data. The narratives were then analysed for emerging themes including sources of capital. The discussion below examines interview data related to the ways in which family members, partners, friends and fellow students are reported as providing support to participants during their HE journeys. Drawing on concepts of capital (Bourdieu, 1990; Yosso, 2005), I consider the manifestations of support provided and how these affected the students' ability to meet the challenges and issues they confronted whilst undertaking their studies. I make a distinction between active and passive family support and elucidate ways students developed social capital via peers. Finally, I demonstrate the extreme difficulties experienced by students who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to draw on or establish sufficient capital through family and friends.

Active family support

Despite having no university experience of their own, some family members were able to provide active support for students, including assisting the learning process and supporting work on assessment tasks. Simone, for instance, was given a range of practical support from family to assist with her studies. Her mother helped her revise content: 'She would ask me all the terms and things like that. I'd have to tell her what they were back, until I had them all down pat.' Her boyfriend, a tradesman, also assisted, looking for information on the internet while Simone worked on assignments. Simone also coordinated support from other family members:

> I often send my assignments to my aunty, and she gives them back to me on the day that they're due. We [Simone and her boyfriend] go through it and edit all my grammar and things like that she thinks needs fixing up, so he sits there and reads them out and I type them in.

Karen's boyfriend filled a similar role:

> I always would just read assignments to him … and looking up spelling mistakes and stuff and especially if there was assignments that I wanted anyone to read and understand, it was really good. So like if it was something that you didn't have to have been at uni to understand what I was talking about. I wanted to make sure that he could gather what I was talking about. So that was helpful.

Family members also provided support through physical and emotional comfort. While some researchers see emotional support as different from social and cultural capital (Bathmaker et al., 2016) it does fit within Yosso's (2005) definition of social capital. Jane appreciated her family being around when she 'needed them to comfort me'. Likewise, Simone liked to have someone in proximity while she studied:

> I know it sounds silly but when I was having a really bad moment with my assessment, I just wanted Mum to sit there with me while I typed. I didn't need her to say anything, I just needed her to sit at the table and not do anything too fun because otherwise I'd want to do it too, but just sit there next to me so that if I wanted to talk, I could talk to her.

On the whole, participants in this study were from backgrounds with limited financial resources. Occasionally, however, parents (and even one ex-partner) provided additional financial support.

This help tended to occur at critical times. For example, Karen's parents provided some monetary support when she was undertaking Professional Experience which meant that she had to cut back on her part-time employment, and the government payments she received were not enough to survive on: 'it's sort of like rent, and then everything else I've got to pay for, and then it's food at the end. My parents have been helping me out once a fortnight, just to get enough groceries'.

She was also somewhat financially reliant on her partner once they began living together:

> I think he was just like "can you just hurry up and finish and earn some money" because he's always been pretty helpful like especially when I need it. But you know, it's not really fair on him as well to have to have to put his girlfriend through uni.

Jessica, too, was financially reliant on her partner. When their relationship broke down, he continued to provide financial assistance until her government subsidy began. In another example, Simone's father (who lived overseas) paid her fees for a condensed course which she could complete over summer, thereby easing her study load during a crucial semester. As these examples show, active support does not require previous experience of HE, but can make HE more manageable for non-traditional students. The following section examines family support which takes a more passive form.

Passive family support

All students in this study reported that their parents were at least 'somewhat' supportive or 'very' supportive of their studies. Some students stated that their parents were 'proud' of their university enrolment. However, in many instances family support seemed almost invisible. Several students did not mention their parents or other family members in relation to their university studies unless asked directly about them. Family support was mostly shown through meeting students' basic needs; that is, six out of the ten students lived in the family home, so had shelter and food provided for them. Even this basic level of support was valuable for the students, many of whom could not have managed full-time study without it. This is evidenced by the fact that several of the students stayed living in the family home for the duration of their studies despite a commute of between 40 and 90 minutes to and from campus. Perceived family support has been said to have a positive effect on the success of HE students who enter through diverse pathways (Benson, Hewitt, Heagney, Devos & Crosling 2010) and seems to be particularly important for female students (Cheng, Ickes & Verhofstadt, 2012).

In addition to the provision of a home and meals (and often cleaning and laundry services) some parents made other concessions to support their child's university studies. Simone was required to do fewer chores around the house (to her younger siblings' displeasure). She worked almost full-time in addition to study, as she was required to pay her fees up front due to being a non-Australian citizen, so this home concession made her workload more manageable.

Jane's family would 'purposely make the house quiet or leave the house for a couple of hours so I could get things done'. They 'sort of stay away and let me do my thing'. Similarly, Jessica, who lived with her boyfriend, explained that he would try to keep the home environment conducive to study. With regard to their friends, Jessica noted that 'if I'm studying he takes them away'. In addition to making study easier, these approaches demonstrated the value placed on university study by family members.

In contrast, Lenore, who moved four hours' drive away from her family to attend university,

pointed out that family support may not always be forthcoming because of limited understanding of university demands:

> You need your family to support you but you also need to understand that if they've never had anyone go to university before, you need to be ready that they can't understand what you're going through really. And you need to keep them as an emotional support but seek out friends and teachers and staff that will help and any services that you need.

These examples show that even passive support from family can be beneficial for non-traditional students. The following section demonstrates how support from family can be supplemented by support from peers, sometimes being people who students know on entering university but also those whom they meet during their studies.

Existing or developing peer support

According to participants in the study, knowing other students on commencing university studies provided a level of comfort for recent school leavers. Most of the students knew a number of people from their high schools who were attending the same university, although these other students might have commenced a year ahead. In some cases these 'friends' were studying in the same program and others were enrolled in different degrees. Some of these relationships were sustained for the entire enrolment, while others faltered. In any case the support from existing social networks was often augmented by developing relationships with new peers. Despite several participants living in towns 30 to 40 minutes away from campus (and others from some hours away), all but four participants in this study knew others from their schools and towns who were also at the university. The exceptions were Simone and Jessica who had attended school overseas and interstate respectively, and Anna, who came from a town where 'nobody really goes to uni'.

Most participants made friends in their courses without much difficulty, and Lani also met people through a church group on campus. Anna noted the benefit of meeting a diverse range of people at university and making friends in her program:

> It's made it a lot better. It means I have people who I can go to if I'm not getting a concept and they are, or see how they're going with assignments and after Uni, when we're on breaks we still catch up and it's good to have someone who you can talk to who's doing the same thing that you are.

Lani found that it was 'good working with friends' and made 'a huge difference'. Jane said it was 'relatively easy' to develop friendships at university, and these were 'pretty helpful'. Ebony hinted at the importance of quality friendships when she explained that having 'some really good people' in her classes and groups for assignments had helped. Ebony mostly completed her work alone but had one friend who 'gets me through' and maintained contact with others through 'our Facebook group and stuff' to obtain 'clarification of things'. However, not all friendships affect study positively, as Lani found with one 'slacker friend' with whom she would 'skip' classes.

As in life, friendships changed over the years at university. Lacey began university with a close group of friends from her home town, but they had 'all kind of gone … separate ways' during first year, before she went on to form new friendships after transferring degrees. Lacey felt this was part of 'growing up, you know, figuring out who people are' and life was 'not about hanging out with your friends any more'. Friendships were sometimes difficult to sustain with each

semester bringing a new timetable. Simone made two friends in first year, but shared no classes with them after that. They did, however, maintain contact and would text each other late at night when working on assignments. The two friends she made at university also worked long hours and completed their assignments late at night. Lenore initially found it difficult to make friends, but by third year had found a small group, including one friend who 'isn't very good at studying and I find tutoring her makes me do my study'. In Simone's and Lenore's cases, these are examples of Ball's (2003, p. 83) 'low volume social capital'. The friendships were helpful, but perhaps not as helpful as relationships with those of higher cultural capital could have been. That is, experiences and support may have been increased with wider social circles (Crozier et al., 2008) including school leavers and non-FiF students, as they would expose non-traditional students to the cultural knowledge of the dominant classes in the field (Bourdieu, 1984).

Not all study participants found it easy to make friends at university, especially shy students, in a large cohort. Briony, who left university after only a few weeks admitted that she had 'sought out old school friends' who were enrolled in other degrees rather than making friends in her course, and felt that this did not help her in attending classes. She knew no-one who could help with what she was doing. Simone rarely saw the same students in more than one class. By the end of first year, Jessica had made acquaintances she could 'say hi' to on campus and later found them to be a positive support; completing group tasks, talking about assignments and being able to unwind together. She eventually realised that fewer people had known each other in first year than she thought, and found group work was a great way to make friends. Jessica was initially scared to talk about the difficulties she was having with university friends as they would 'think I'm a failure', but eventually found them 'really supportive' and they helped her map out a plan to progress. After her relationship broke down she moved in with one friend, who also told her about support services she had not known existed.

Participants reported that there were advantages to having friends in the program in addition to being able to discuss course content or work on assignments together. For example, Jane was able to stay at a friend's house near campus one night a week throughout her degree to save the hour or so travel each way, also saving money on fuel. Anna found that her long-term friend with whom she shared a home town, university, sport, and at one time work, made university enjoyable. They even travelled together for their out-of-area practicum. Anna felt that if one of them were to go to part-time enrolment the other would too. Having established that support from family and peers is valuable for students, whether it takes active or passive form, I now examine situations where students are unable to access adequate support.

Exceptions – when support is insufficient

The majority of participants in the study were adequately supported by family and experienced few difficulties in completing their studies. In contrast, two students left home towards the end of their studies when situations within their family homes began impacting negatively on their studies. There were another two students, however, for whom the support family could provide was not enough. In the latter cases the students were faced with multiple challenges.

Anna and Simone both moved out of their family homes in the latter parts of their university studies, due to changes occurring at home which threatened their progress. Anna's parents separated, then divorced, and this meant that she took on extra responsibilities within the home, helping to care for her mother (who had a disability) and younger siblings. Her mother's new partner later moved in, and Anna found the changes disruptive to her studies, so she moved in with her boyfriend. One of Simone's siblings experienced mental illness, and while this was being diagnosed and treated, there were regular incidents which made study impossible. As

much as Simone wanted to support her mother and siblings, she would not have been able to complete her degree while living there, so she also moved in with her boyfriend.

For both Anna and Simone new living arrangements meant additional financial pressure, and would not have been possible without the option of support from their partners. Both students were strongly committed to their studies and willing to make sacrifices in order to graduate, but their situations may have been different had they not been able to share living expenses in this way. This is borne out by Briony's story. Briony lived in a country town, over an hour away from campus. Her mother had died when she was in high school, and she lived with her father and one year older sister. After their mother's death, the girls were responsible for running the home, with Briony's sister expecting her to carry most of the load, as the sister was completing her final year of high school. During Briony's final year of school, her sister had university studies to focus on, and consequently, Briony's school results were negatively impacted. Briony explained that she realised early in her first year of university that her domestic arrangement was unsustainable: she could not work part-time to support herself, commute a three hour return journey to university, study *and* maintain the household. After six weeks at university, she left. However, she did not give up on study, instead enrolling in a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) course in child care which was closer to home and less demanding, and followed this with higher certification in the same area. She did not discount the possibility of a return to university studies, but recognised that she needed to be more financially secure before that could happen as she was now living independently. Briony's situation demonstrates the way that family capital is not always distributed evenly among children (Swartz, 2008), and may differ in effectiveness according to microfamilial contexts (Conley, 2004).

The student facing the most challenges was Jessica, who had a history of anxiety. She had been 'stressed out' by the demands of high school and left without completing Year 12, but completed TAFE courses after leaving school. She had moved interstate with her boyfriend, so was living several hours away from the support of family and friends, and knew no-one at university when she enrolled. She was very shy, did not make new friends easily, and lived 40 minutes away from campus. Finding social and emotional support is a concern for non-traditional students like Jessica who relocate to study (Rubin & Wright, 2015). 'Living without material, emotional and social support from friends and family presents further challenges that impact on the transition experience' (Meulemen, Garrett, Wrench & King, 2015, p. 505). Jessica managed her first year at university, passing every course, despite acknowledging that her learning style was different to that expected at university. Early in her second year, some traumatic events occurred for friends and family in her home town. Being a seventeen hour drive away, Jessica could not immediately go home to be with her loved ones; she had to wait until the end of semester. The strain of this situation on Jessica meant that she lost focus on her studies. She withdrew from one course in first semester and failed two courses the following semester (she had enrolled in five – one more than usual in an effort to make up for the dropped course). This put more pressure on Jessica and her anxiety increased, creating a negative spiral. People like Jessica who do not feel socially and emotionally connected to a community are at increased risk of stress and depression (Cacioppo & William, 2008). She failed more courses, eventually being unable even to submit assignments, and eventually did not re-enrol to complete her degree. It is clear from Jessica's story that a lack of adequate support can be the result of studying at a distance from family and broader support networks. This means that many students from remote and rural areas are more vulnerable to the challenges presented by university study. Whilst the majority of students completed their studies, the non-traditional students who were unable to access adequate levels of support left university without completing a degree.

Conclusion

The stories of study participants demonstrate that emotional and social support are essential for non-traditional students who are already feeling like 'fish out of water' (Reay, et al., 2010, p. 117) in the unfamiliar environment of HE. Cultural capital (from family) through practical and emotional support, and social capital through relationships with fellow students proved important to the students, but were seen in ways not deemed valuable by traditional views of cultural capital in HE such as those noted by Bourdieu (1984). Rather than the families providing first-hand knowledge and familiarity with HE through past experiences, non-traditional students' families provided what we might term 'in the moment' support, providing practical and emotional support that was useful at a particular time. Those students without university social connections on enrolment were able to gain adequate support from fellow students in the same situation within the first year of their studies. Social circles did not need to be extensive to be useful, with Simone being supported adequately by just two friendships, and with most contact via phone text. Support from her mother and partner appeared to compensate for this limited social network. Although the majority of the students were able to manage their studies without 'hot' knowledge about HE, that is, information and understanding easily acquired from friends and family who had attended university previously (Smith, 2011), the benefits of such insight cannot be underestimated for its ability to ease settling in, especially in first year, and progress throughout study years.

Social capital from family members varied, rarely taking traditional forms. Only two participants had close relatives who had experienced study after high school. One of those was Briony, who left university very early in her enrolment, while her older sister completed successfully. The support from such sources was often less important than the incidental assistance provided by parents and partners who would, without specific background or 'hot' knowledge, support the students in whatever way they could (Yosso, 2005). Family members, including partners, activated a wide range of supportive strategies for the students, including testing them on content, reading over their work, helping find information online, removing distractions and just being there. The exceptions provided by the stories of Briony and Jessica reinforce the importance of social support from family. In those cases, where the family could not provide the support needed, for whatever reason, and where alternate forms of support were unavailable or inadequate, HE progress was hindered or halted.

This paper has demonstrated that support provided by families can make a substantial difference to the HE experience of non-traditional students. Developing on Bourdieu's work, Yosso (2005) argues that such support can be regarded as a form of cultural capital and should be recognised, in its many forms, as valuable in its ability to provide the kind of encouragement and care that can help a student succeed no matter what their background. It is also essential that non-traditional students build their own social capital, in the form of friends and peer networks, in order to facilitate their success, especially if they begin with little of the types of cultural capital valorised in higher education. Successful non-traditional students such as most participants in this study are able to provide cultural capital and hot knowledge to others in their families and social circles, as also noted by Gofen (2009). This then helps to break the cycles of disadvantage which may operate in non-traditional students' home communities.

References

Ball. S. (2003). *Class Strategies and the Educational Market. The middle classes and social advantage*. London: Routledge/Falmer.

Bathmaker, A-M., Ingram, N., Abrahams, J., Hoare, A., Waller, R., & Bradley, H. (2016). *Higher education, social class and social mobility: The degree generation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bennett, A., Naylor, R., Mellor, K., Brett, M., Gore, J., Harvey, A., James, R., Munn, B., Smith, S., & Whitty, G. (2015). *Equity Initiatives in Australian Higher Education: A review of evidence of impact*. Newcastle, NSW: Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education, University of Newcastle. Retrieved from https://www.newcastle.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/261124/REPORT-FINAL.pdf

Benson, R. Hewitt, L., Heagney, M., Devos, A., & Crosling, G. (2010). Diverse pathways into higher education: Using students' stories to identify transformative experiences. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 50*(1): 26-53.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In J.G. Richardson (Ed.), *The handbook of theory: Research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1988). *Homo academicus* (P. Collier, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *In other words: Essays towards a reflexive sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1999). *The weight of the world: Social suffering in contemporary society*. Oxford: Polity.

Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. (1992). *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cacioppo, J., & William, P. (2008). *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Cheng, W., Ickes, W., & Verhofstadt, L. (2012). How is family support related to students' GPA scores? A longitudinal study. *Higher Education, 64*: 399-420.

Clandinin, J., & Connelly, M. (2000). *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Collier, P., & Morgan, D. (2008). "Is that paper really due today?": Differences in First-Generation and Traditional College Students' Understandings of Faculty Expectations. *Higher Education, 55*(4): 425-446.

Conley, D. (2004). *The pecking order: Which siblings succeed and why*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Crozier, G., Reay, D., Clayton, J., Colliander, L., & Grinstead, J. (2008). Different strokes for different folks: diverse students in diverse institutions – experiences of higher education. *Research Papers in Education, 23*(2): 167-177.

Devlin, M. (2010). *Non-traditional university student achievement: Theory, policy and practice in Australia.* Keynote address delivered at the 13th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, Adelaide Australia, June 27-30.

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.

Dumais, S. (2002). Cultural Capital, Gender, and School Success: The Role of Habitus. *Sociology of Education, 75*: 44-68.

Gale, T. (2011). Student equity's starring role in Australian higher education: Not yet centre

field. *Australian Educational Researcher, 38*(1): 5-23.

Gale, T., & Parker, S. (2017). Retaining students in Australian higher education: Cultural capital, field distinction. *European Educational Research Journal, 16*(1): 80-96.

Gofen, A. (2009). Family Capital: How First-Generation Higher Education Students Break the Intergenerational Cycle. *Family Relations, 58*, 104-120.

Lamb, S., Jackson, J., Walstab, A., & Huo, S., (2015). *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out.* Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute. Retrieved from http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/reports/educational-opportunity-in-australia-2015-who-succeeds-and-who-misses-out/

Marks, G. (2009). The influence of cultural capital on the early educational and early labour market outcomes of young people in Australia. In K. Robinson & C. Sanders (Eds.), *Quantifying theory: Pierre Bourdieu* (pp. 89-103). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.

Martinez, J., Sher, K., Krull, J. & Wood, P. (2009). Blue-Collar Scholars?; Mediators and Moderators of University Attrition in First-Generation College Students. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*(1): 87-103.

Meuleman, A., Garrett, R., Wrench, A. & King, S. (2015). 'Some people might say I'm thriving but …': Non-traditional students' experiences of university. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 19*(5): 503-517.

O'Shea, S. (2016a). Avoiding the manufacture of 'sameness': First-in-family students, cultural capital and the higher education environment. *Higher Education, 72*(1): 59-78.

O'Shea, S. (2016b). Navigating the knowledge sets of older learners: Exploring the capitals of first-in-family mature age students. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 18*(3): 34-54.

O'Shea, S., May, J., Stone, C., & Delahunty, J. (2017). *First-in-Family Students, University Experience and Family Life Motivations, Transitions and Participation*. London: Springer.

Pascarella, E., Pierson, C., Wolniak, G., & Terenzini, P. (2004). First-Generation College Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education, 75*(3): 249-284.

Pitman, T. (2013). 'Miraculous exceptions': What can autobiography tell us about why some disadvantaged students succeed in education? *Higher Education Research and Development, 32*(1): 30-42.

Reay, D. (2001). Finding or losing yourself?: Working-class relationships to education. *Journal of Educational Policy, 16*(4): 222-346.

Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2010). 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': Working class students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal, 36*(1): 107-124.

Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2010). 'Strangers in Paradise'? Working-class Students in Elite Universities. *Sociology, 43*(6): 1103-1121.

Reay, D., David, M.E., & Ball, S. (2005) *Degrees of choice: Social class, race and gender in higher education*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

Reay, D., Davies, J., David, M., & Ball, S. (2001). Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice? Class, 'Race' and the Higher Education Choice Process. *Sociology, 35*: 855-874.

Rubin, M. (2012). Social Class Differences in Social Integration Among Students in Higher Education: A Meta-Analysis and Recommendations for Future Research. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 5*(1): 22-38.

Rubin, M., & Wright, C. (2015). Age Differences Explain Social Class Differences in Students' Friendship at University: Implications for Transition and Retention. *Higher*

Education, 70(3): 427-439.

Smith, L. (2011). Experiential 'hot' knowledge and its influence on low-SES students' capacities to aspire to higher education. *Critical Studies in Education, 52*(2): 165-177.

Swartz, T. (2008). Family capital and the invisible transfer of privilege: Intergenerational support and social class in early adulthood. In J.T. Mortimer (Ed.), *Social Class and transitions to adulthood. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* (pp. 11-24). Jossey-Bass, Wiley Periodicals.

Thomas, L. (2012). *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change. Final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Retrieved 4 November, 2016 from https://www.phf.org.uk/publications/works-student-retention-success-final-report/

Winkle-Wagner, R. (2010). Uses and Abuses of Cultural Capital in Educational Research. *ASHE Higher Education Report, 36*(1): 23-57.

Wyn, J. (2011). The Sociology of Youth. *Youth Studies Australia, 30*(3): 34-39.

Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of Community Cultural Wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 81*(1): 69-91.