# Inclusive education community of practice event: Sarah O'Shea 30 October 2019

## Transcript

MARY DRACUP: OK. So, again, welcome everybody from on all our campuses. I'd like to start by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we're meeting. So in Burwood that's the Wurundjeri people, and we also have the Gunditjmara, Wadawurrung, and the Boon Wurrung people for our various campuses. I'd like to pay my respects to the elders of these Traditional Custodians and acknowledge that their right to our land has never been ceded and also, I'd like to welcome everyone who is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander to the presentation today.

I'd also like to welcome Professor Sarah O'Shea, and thank you for sharing your in-depth knowledge of this area and your insights with us today.

There are just a couple of housekeeping matters. This session is being recorded. And we will be interacting by Slido. So there's a code on the screen there. It's 5399. If you go to slido.com and go to the Join Meeting area and put in the code 5399, then there's a field there where you can just post questions for Sarah or comments in response to Sarah's questions. And please do feel free to use that because we really do value audience interaction. This is supposed to be a community of practice.

Sarah, I'd like to introduce you to Sarah. Sarah, having spent over two weeks teaching— sorry, over two decades—[LAUGHING]—teaching and researching in the higher education field, Professor Sarah O'Shea is regarded as an expert in educational equity. Her research, with funding over $3 million, advances understanding about how underrepresented student cohorts enact success within university, manage competing identities, and negotiate aspirations for themselves and others. She's currently leading an ARC discovery project, exploring the persistent behaviours of first-in-family students, and is working as a research fellow with the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, examining post-graduate employment opportunities for equity students. So, Sarah, over to you.

SARAH O'SHEA: Thanks, Mary. I hope everyone can hear me OK. I've got my lapel mic on.

I'd just like to echo Mary's acknowledgment. I'd also like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land, wherever you may be, and also here at Burwood, and pay my respects to elders, past and present.

I'm going to talk, apparently, for 30 minutes. But we're going to try and make this as interactive as we possibly can. And, with that in mind, what I'm going to cover today is I'd like for you to spend just a few minutes on introductions. And we'll get to that in just a moment.

For those of you who are, maybe, in a location on your own, you may have to introduce yourself to yourself. I don't know. Maybe just think about the questions, as well.

I'm going to talk today about first-in-family students. Mary's asked me if I could sort of speak to that topic. And this session is sort of a blend of some of the research that I've done in that area and also, towards the end, it's sort of more practical initiatives that you may be able to apply within your professional or teaching context.

The first one of the areas that I'm looking at, in terms of the first-in-family, is around the concept of intersectionality. And I'll explain that to you. If you're not familiar with that term, we will talk about that, as well.

And then really talking about the importance of family. And all this will become clear as the session goes on. And then, finally, sort of reflecting on academic success and some practical applications, as I said.

I'm going to just ask, if you haven't muted your mics, apparently that is something that you have to do because we're getting a bit of feedback here at the central where we are located. So, if you could mute those mics, that'd be great.

To start with is a little bit of an introduction. So, as I said, I'm hoping that, at each of the locations, you could either just think about why you're here, what you hope to get out of the session. And, as Mary explained at the beginning, there is a Slido. And, if you wouldn't mind just, actually—as you're talking, just maybe getting someone to just type in a few areas that you're hoping to get out of today.

I've put a picture of Kiama Rock Pool up here because this is where I would probably like to be at this moment, not that I'm not happy to be here, as well, but I'm sure all of you have a special place, and this is mine because I live in Kiama. And so I'd just like you to spend maybe three or four minutes introducing yourself to the people around you if you've got people around you but also thinking about why it is you're here, what you're hoping to get out of today. What I'm going to do is I'm going to get the people in the room here to do that for two minutes.

You only get two minutes. You get slightly longer at the other locations. And then I'm going to ask them to maybe tell me why they're here. And then, at the end of the session, I'm hoping I can go to the Slido comments, as well. So two minutes for everyone in this room and a little bit longer for those in the other rooms. Why are you here? What are you hoping to get out of the session?

… MARY: I'll just share some of the responses that have come in via Slido. Can you hear me OK? Good? OK.

So we've had a response from Petra. Petra says I'm here today because I'm very interested in the challenges that first-in-family students face and also some practical ideas to support them. Sarah, have you got a response to that?

SARAH O'SHEA: I do. And I'm going to say that it's all coming because that's exactly what I'm going to talk about in the latter half of the presentation. So I'm really pleased, Petra. So I'm doing that. Yeah. I don't want to spoil it, though.

MARY: All right. And also a posting from Julia who says specific issues could be identity-related. I've worked with education students who feel like imposters.

SARAH O'SHEA: Yeah. And I have to say that I don't specifically talk about identity today, but, certainly, that imposter syndrome and the issues around sense of belonging are key to first-in-family students. So I'm hoping that some of the literature that I'll refer to—and I've written a bit about this, as well, around the specific imposter syndrome.

And, often, with first-in-family students, the first sort of sign that they actually do belong at university is, often, around their marks on their assessments. So it's not really until that first assessment that the students actually feel that they should be at university, even if they've done quite well and/or have overcome a lot of obstacles to get there. But some of the literature that I'm going to refer to in this presentation does go into a lot more depth on the issues of identity.

MARY: OK. And a final one. Here because of interests in inclusion in higher education (teaching support policy).

SARAH O'SHEA: OK. Again, I'm going to be talking about that broadly, as well. And I will explain a little bit later on in the presentation why I use the framing of first-in-family. So that will become clear. And, again, I don't want to give it all away yet.

MARY: I think there's one final one. How are other universities responding, supporting first-in-family students? How could learning centres at Deakin support first-in-family students?

SARAH O'SHEA: OK. Really good question, and I'm pleased to say that I have a slide on that. And I also have done some research over in the UK, the States, and Canada looking at what they're doing with first-in-family students. And so, while I don't go into that in great depth today, I can certainly point you to the report for that particular project, as well, which highlights the kinds of things that are happening. But I will talk about that in relation to UOW, in particular, because it's only this year that UOW has really started to engage heavily with their first-in-family students.

OK. I'm going to just ask now, in this room, if anyone had anything that they wanted to share.

PARTICIPANT: Teamwork. One of the things I'm interested in is the concept of how—and it's a big question—and about differentiation—in first-year curriculum design. It's a really hard task. But is there good work going on in that area?

SARAH O'SHEA: Yeah. I mean, my go-to would still be Sally Kift's work on this field. So Sally Kift actually developed a transition pedagogy. And I believe the link is transitionpedagogy.com.au.

And I recently went on there myself to have a look at what she's done. She's added quite a lot of additional resources. Well, they were additional to when I was last on the site and, certainly, I've found her cheat cheats were really good, which were really practical initiatives that you could build into the curriculum, in terms of dealing with diversity.

So I'd be like, go to Sally. And, later on, I will do a little bit of self-plugging, as well. So, yeah. OK. Anyone—oh. Right.

PARTICIPANT: Hi, I'm Matt. And I put a thing up on Slido just before, just picking up on the impostor comment. I've been part of higher education for about 25 years in various shapes and forms. And a first-in-family participant myself, but I still feel like an imposter. And I just kind of wonder whether or not we can have some discussion as to how long this imposter syndrome is likely to last for, whether it will ever go away, how broadly-shared it is, and whether or not this is something that comes through your research, as well?

SARAH O'SHEA: Yeah. I think that might be something really interesting to pick up at the end if you—yeah, we could certainly have a chat about that. I'm not saying that I have the answers to that question but yeah.

I'm going to get going with the presentation. I probably should make it clear now that, when I talk about first-in-family students, I don't use what the general sort of common definition is. The definition that's currently being used by universities is the parental educational level. So, if a student's parents haven't been to university or haven't got a degree then, technically, they're classed as first-in-family.

And the interesting thing is that, when I started doing this research, I mean, I repeatedly found that universities didn't have the data. And it's only really in the last two to three years that the data has started to be collected. But it is on parental educational levels, which I think is a little bit flawed. It's great that it's being collected, though.

Mainly because the students that I've talked to have told me that they often don't report on the parents' educational levels because they're adults. So I'm talking more about our older and more mature age students, which are currently 39% of our student population. So they often don't answer that question because they feel that their parental educational level isn’t relevant.

So, when I talk about first-in-family students, I'm really talking about those where no-one in the immediate family of origin, including—including siblings, children, partner, parents have previously attended higher education or completed an education degree. So that's really for the purposes of my research.

But taking the other definition, which is on parental educational levels, we are currently—we estimate, nationally, we've got about 51% of our student population who are first-in-family. And that's not really that surprising because we all know we've had this massive widening participation outreach. So we're really working very hard to get students in to university. And, as Mary mentioned, one of the things that I'm looking at now in my research is really what's happening to them at the end of their degree, and how they're managing that transition-out phase. And so I've been collecting quite a lot of data around that.

And one of the things that has been interesting me, in relation to that, is the SES data, the Student Experience Survey. So the most recent Student Experience Survey is collecting data on first-in-family, which is great. They only collected on the first-years, though.

And those first-years are considering leaving university in greater proportion than their non-first-in-family peers. So, based on a little bit of number crunching, it is that first-in-family are thinking—around 20%—as opposed to non-first-in-family, which is 18.5%. So not a huge difference but still a difference. And, again, this data is still very early on. We've got nothing to benchmark against it because it hasn't been collected before.

Some of the key issues for first-in-family students—and I know that we have a question on this on Slido, as well—if we imagine this is our first-in-family student here—I'm not being gender biassed, but this was the only cartoon I could find that I could use. First of all, one of the key issues is that they don't have an educational memory.

What Ball and Vincent talk about is there's sort of no educational memory, no educational biography, if you like, of higher education participation. And that can be limiting because there's a lot of knowledge that we assume. We take for granted that students will know. And, repeatedly, again, students have said to me, when I've asked them to reflect on being the first in the family, they talk about that there are certain knowledges that they didn't know before they came to university and also while they've gone through university.

And, actually, now that they're—I'm talking a lot to our graduates and first-in-family alumni—they're talking about how they didn't know things that their non-first-in-family peers did. And the things they're talking about now are really around the importance of co-curricular opportunities for their postgraduate market.

But that's all coming in a report. I shouldn't—that's a spoiler. But that, to me, was really interesting, so this sort of follows them through their educational journey.

They have no guide on the side. Again, students have told me that they are reluctant to go and talk to lecturers or academics mainly because they already have quite a low sense of belonging at the institution. And they feel that, if they're going to ask questions, that that just compounds the fact that they shouldn't really be there.

And so they don't have that person available to them to just go and ask a question to, which is also a factor that makes them at risk of attrition. They lack that insider knowledge that I mentioned, so that sort of hidden curriculum, sort of taken-for-granted knowledge. And, according to the OECD figures, non-first-in-family students are almost twice as likely to go to university. So there's a couple of issues around this particular cohort.

For me, though, the reason I'm really drawn to this particular focus is that I'm not certainly someone who would say everyone has to go to university. But I think everyone should have the same opportunities if that's the choice that they wish to make. And there's a particular bit of research that I actually didn't do—but we wrote a book around it—where an interviewer asked John—John's a 15-year-old, and he lives in Adelaide. He's disengaged from formal learning environments. And the interviewer says, "When was the last time you heard someone chat away about university?" And John said, “I don't think I have ever had anyone ever talk about it.”

So, for John, his educational future is completely—it's already restricted. He's never, ever had anyone speak about university, not in school—he's no longer in school in this particular context. So the chances or the opportunities for him to understand university are really limited.

Oh. And that quote sort of slipped off the slide. I apologise for that. OK. I don't know what's happened there. [LAUGHING] Anyway, that quote, basically—where the quote is talking about, for first-in-family students, university is often beyond the boundaries of possibility because that agenda has never been set. It's never been discussed. And so university just seems like something beyond what is possible.

So, I think for first-in-family students, when they actually get to university, we often forget that their trajectory to get there is probably quite a discontinuous one. It's certainly not a seamless one. And so the fact that they've actually got here is a cause for celebration. And I'm going to loop around to that point again at the end.

The data I'm drawing on at the moment and Mary mentioned is a project that I'm leading, which is looking at the persistence strategies of first-in-family students. So this was actually interviewing students in the final year of their degrees, and surveying them, and asking them what it was that had helped them to persist. So, given that they're a group that are at higher risk of attrition—not just here in Australia. That's sort of internationally-recognised that they encounter difficulties getting into university, that they may encounter obstacles as they proceed through university.

I was really interested to look at—right. “Well, OK. You're at the end of your degree now. What is it that's helped you to persist?”

And so, to do that, I conducted surveys and interviews. And I was lucky enough that nine Australian universities were represented across all states, except the Northern Territory. And I then went over to the UK, and Ireland, and Austria because I was interested to see whether the stories and the experiences of the first-in-family cohort here in Australia, whether that resonated within Europe, as well.

OK. We've lost it again. Sorry, everyone. We just keep losing the slides here. OK. We're back.

And then the follow-up phase, which is about to happen next year, is I've developed what I'm calling a persistence capabilities framework. And, actually, that's a very practical tool where I've identified the capabilities that the students have talked about. And then, behind each of those capabilities, I'm going to have a suite of resources that may already be available but are quite disparate to sort of say, right. This is what the student said. Help them to persist.

And these are the types of tools that, maybe, people can use to help that. But we're not quite at that phase yet. I've developed a framework, and I'm just getting it peer-reviewed by an independent panel at the moment to check that my theorization isn't completely off the wall, and I haven't just made it up as I go along, which I hope I haven't.

So one of the things that came out of that research, quite unintentionally, was this. And it's the intersectionality of the student. So when I recruited the students to participate in this study, I asked them if they were first-in-family. That's what I asked them.

But, within the survey and also the interview, I wanted to dig down a little bit deeper to get a sense of, OK. They're first-in-family. But are there other equity categories that may be intersecting?

So I've done a bit of reading around intersectionality and to sum it up in a nutshell—and I'm sure that many of you are familiar with the term—it basically means that we tend to define our students in boxes. So we've got students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. We have students from rural remote areas. We have students from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, students with disabilities.

And they're sort of discrete categories. But there's not a lot being done on our students that are highly-intersected. So they may well be from low socioeconomic backgrounds, also rural remote, also with a disability, maybe Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students. So these are highly-intersected students.

And so we asked the students in the study if they could identify where they sort of fell. And we had the traditional activity categories. We also then had other categories, as well. So, for example, so parent, mature age, a whole range of additional things that they could identify, as well as other general demographics. And we fed all this into this rather interesting diagram, which you're probably looking at, thinking, wow. This is way too colourful.

But this is a core diagram. And I have to thank Wendy Firth who helped me to develop this. So, when you look at that—and I know it's very, very busy—it gives you a sense of where all these students—where they were crossing over. And I've just done a close-up of one section. So this is where our traditional equity categories—we have to create new categories.

So we have to create a category A, for example, low socioeconomic and rural. B, rural and non-English-speaking background. C—you can see that I've put the little thing down the side, as well. And then this just shows you the intersections across those particular categories.

So when you see something like this where you've got a loop with a space in the middle, that means all of those students were disability. But, in order to fit the red one in, they had put a gap there because I had to spend a long time looking at this diagram to work it out. But, on a purely high level, I think what it does is it just demonstrate how intersected these students were.

So I'm going to stop there for a minute because I'd be really interested to get your ideas or your feedback on the concept of intersectionality. And so I've got a couple of questions here. The first one is, do you think that intersectionality is a useful lens to consider your student population?

Mary was very interested in this and, in fact, may be able to give you some stats when we're talking about this because I put it out there, really, as a poser. I'm certainly not saying that Wollongong's doing a lot in this space, but I'm suggesting that it would be a good idea to really get a sense of who our students are. So the second question is, are you aware if Deakin identifies how students are intersected? And is anything happening in the space that assists this intersected population?

So I'm going to give you three or four minutes. And everyone in the other locations, again, sorry it would be a Slido. If you have any comments, or any feedback, or a question on what I've presented on so far, it's also very welcomed at this point. Over to you and your conversations.

… OK, everyone. I'm just going to ask, first, in the group here, and I've got Janet with the mic. So is there any of those points—would you like to feedback on any of those points?

PARTICIPANT: One of the things we've been speaking about is, I suppose, where's the evidence? And do we understand whether or not intersectionality makes a difference, in terms of risk of failure or risk of attrition, et cetera? But, also, if one were to employ an intersectionality approach, you then have quite a large fragmentation of the number of groups that you could be taking a look at. So that introduces challenges, in terms of having support services to those that need it?

SARAH O'SHEA: Yeah. I mean, I think really good points. Yeah. I mean, I can't quote exact references. But the research would indicate that students that are more highly-intersected do encounter more issues because they've got more things to contend with.

From my perspective, which leads me into the first-in-family category, I sort of feel that that's a great way to engage with students in a non-deficit way. So, for me, first-in-family is a way to tap into, potentially, those who may be highly-intersected but without assuming that they are because we know that first-in-family students are not necessarily falling into any equity groups at all. They can quite often be from quite privileged backgrounds and may encounter initial difficulties when they come to university. But with that sort of material resource behind them, will usually overcome and do fine.

But, for me, first-in-family is fairly key to this because it is a way of actually engaging with students in a really positive way without necessarily assuming that they fall into an equity group. But, at the same time, you can capture those who do. So that's sort of where I come from on it. Yeah.

PARTICIPANT: And I think we—the fact that, if people have picked up in some stream or another, that is an intervention that will help them no matter how many streams they paddle. You know what I mean? So there is a benefit with following a particular path with a student and finding out what their needs are. But you, maybe, don't need to know the whole thing because you’re providing the basic core skills that they'll need.

SARAH O'SHEA: Yeah. Yeah. Thank you.

PARTICIPANT: I was just thinking when you were saying that, we had that big push by the government to get everyone a place in education a few years ago now, but it was that come across from TAFE to uni, which, obviously, had differential effects to the trades, which they're trying to catch up on now, too. This isn't a political thing, but could there be something coming more from governments to encourage the people to go through to make it more normal for everyone to expect that that's something? Rather than are you talking about people once they're here, or are we trying to educate them before they even think about coming to university?

SARAH O'SHEA: Yeah. I mean, I think it's across the continuum of education. I think my personal position on this is that, if universities and I agree that the big push has been for the demand-driven, and we open the floodgates, that has gone to a certain extent. But my moral position is we're actually going to actively go out and recruit students to come to university then.

Each university is responsible for doing as much as they can to ensure that they move through or that they leave if that's what that student wants to do. But there should be enough support in places. And I think—look, you know, as Mary said, I've worked in universities for 25 years. And I've seen huge changes in that period.

And I think we're doing really well. There's a lot of such good stuff going on. But we've still got students leaving. So I just think it's something we've got to keep working at and keep thinking about, in order to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities. Yeah. Which doesn't really answer your question but gives you a sense of where I sit on it all.

Yeah and look—yeah. I'll repeat. Yeah. So you were just saying it was good when it was free. I agree with you.

Of course, we're now entering into a new funding year of performance-based funding, which will be assessed on student experience, and postgraduate outcomes, and also equity of students. Now, the funding isn't huge, but it may grow. So I think universities will be looking more at this space and, particularly, at post-graduation outcomes because that's going to be quite key, as well. No longer will the responsibility end at grad. There will be, I think, more push to support students as they enter the labour market.

OK. Anything on Slido?

MARY: Just one question about what Deakin's doing about intersectionality. I don't think we're doing much in terms of tracking intersectionality or what group students are in if they're in multiple groups. We do have statistics, though.

So we have 33.7% of students in 2018 were members of one equity group, and 10% were members of two equity groups. Then it drops right down to about 2% were members of three groups. And then just 0.1% were members of four equity groups.

So they're not high numbers. I'm actually surprised. I thought they would have been higher.

SARAH O'SHEA: Yeah. But you were saying quite high numbers of first-in-family students you have here.

MARY: Well, combining domestic and international students, 63% of our students are first-in-family.

SARAH O'SHEA: OK. All right, most of the people. OK, I'm going to keep going.

So I'm going to talk a little bit about success now because this is another area that I've become really interested in and really thinking about that concept of success because success is sort of, often, constructed in a certain way within higher education. I think this quote from Paz suggests that. So Paz was put on a Vice-Chancellor's list being the top 1% of the whole university. But he doesn't even know who a Vice-Chancellor is.

Now, Paz is in his fourth year as a first-in-family student. So, for Paz, he would define himself as a successful student. But it's not really—he doesn't quite understand what that means in the context of what the university sees as successful, which I think is indicated by this quote.

So a lot of understandings about success in higher ed are arranged around merit, and grades, and achieving a certain grade in your assignment. And it's very economically-focused. So success is about getting that job.

And it's really about learning and knowledge in very fiscal terms. And this is just an example of—I could've put up loads of things of how universities are marketing themselves and presenting themselves. So this one is about how much you're going to earn after you graduate certain universities.

So it's very much we're going to prepare you for this marketplace. You're going to get a job. And, therefore, that's success.

But one of the questions that I asked in the project was, I asked the students how they defined success and whether they saw themselves as being successful students. And the results were really interesting because the ways that these students defined success was quite different. And so I got very interested in this area of study.

And one of the ways they defined success was defying the odds, which isn't really that surprising, given the biographical details that they'd shared with me. So they saw themselves as being successful because they've defied the odds and managed to get to the end of their degree. They also saw success as a form of validation that they had made the right choice to come to university. And, also, it was a very emotional success.

And now Shay's plus—I've written a couple of articles on this, which are all freely-available I have to say, if you want to read more about it. But I thought it would be interesting to come and just talk a little bit about this, in relation to the first-in-family cohort. It just is an interesting tangent on it.

So, talking about defying the odds, these are the kinds of quotes and references where students talk about—remembering that the question was simply, how do you define success—so it was being able to complete everything but also achieve things that I thought were sort of possible, but I didn't think they were possible for me. It's about completing something that I never thought possible and the first in my family to have done a degree."

So these are just some examples. I could put loads up there. It was a form of validation. And that was around being able to negotiate feelings of otherness. And it feeds into this idea of being an imposter.

So, again, it was when they got a good mark. The mark was great. But, actually, it was about feeling like they belonged. So they felt more successful because they had a greater sense of belonging.

And then there was quite a very emotional language and terms used around success about passion, about being happy, about being excited. And so this was really interesting. And one of the articles that we did was actually doing a linguistic analysis of the use of language around how the students sort of talked about success in that regard.

So what? What's so important about that? But I think what is important is that being academically successful has been very much constructed in terms of grades, this knowledge acquisition.

But what the students were sort of saying is they had a more expansive sense of what success was in their lives. And I've sort of argued that we need to think about this in terms of diverse student populations because, if they're judging their success at university more broadly, then there needs to be some acknowledgment of that, in order to enable them to have a greater sense of belonging. Which leads me to, how is this success enacted?

So I also asked students about how they enact success. And this was from a previous project that I did. And I was interested to see that—the question we asked them in this study was, at moments of crisis, who or what helps? And you'll see that it's, largely, the family and myself. So they have talked about support services, talked about friends. But it's myself or family members that this particular cohort—a small cohort.

But they talk about—so that, in a way, brings me to my last sort of point in this little presentation, which is about the importance of family. And I talk a lot around this, that engaging with the family for first-in-family students, I think, is key because the students have told me that, often, it is the family that they turn to in times of crisis. And so, again, just some quotes.

And this was across the age groups—the younger students and the older students. For the younger students, it was around just having the family there and even when they were not supportive. Even if they were not giving positive support, it was still something that would motivate them to continue. I haven't included those quotes, but it was very clear that parents and family members were quite key to this.

And, again, with the older students, many of whom were parents or had had children, they talked about it, as well, but in a different way. So their motivation was coming from setting a good example for their children and doing something better for their children.

And that's interesting because in the literature on first-in-family students, often the family is seen as being unnecessary, additional baggage. It's a deficit. And, of course, within universities, we often deal with learners in quite decontextualized ways. We deal with the learner. We don't necessarily deal with what's behind the learner. And, yet, when the students have talked to me, they sort of bring that up and talk about the family as being key.

So my other point, I think, is to think about the family—intersectionality but also the family and all of this because if the student has got to university then, in a way, the family and the family's situation is somewhat exceptional because, if the parents have not gone to college, then the pattern is that the children won't go either.

And I sort of talk a lot about family capital and how students use that family capital. And I've talked about it in terms of that persistence framework, as well, because family capital is talked about a lot. And it's really more than just financial resources. It's that habits, priorities, belief systems, and values is really important.

So different ways that the family capital assists in that success. It acts as a motivator, as I said. And, again, this is just one example—wanting something better, wanting something better for the children. It's a source of resilience. Even when family is not positive, it can help with ensuring that the student continues. And they can sort of instil that resilience.

And, also, the family members—I've also interviewed family members to sort of get a sense of what it's like when someone in the family goes to university. How does that impact on their conversations? How does that impact on their perceptions?

And, again, it's sort of they're witnessing change and transformation, as well, and sort of rejoicing in that, as well. Not always. I mean, there wasn't always a positive response.

And that leads me to the last thing in the presentation, which is really around the resources that I mentioned. So, based on various projects that I've done with colleagues, we've developed a first-in-family website. And so this website is freely-available. And if you put in first-in-family, all one word, into Google, you should get this off as the first hit, if you like.

And the reason we created this is because there is really nothing out there. There are pages that are sitting within university pages. So, often—I'm not sure if Deakin has one—but I've seen universities, and they'll have a page, maybe, for the parents of students. Or they might have a page for first-in-family. There's a couple that have popped up.

But this is a completely open access resource, so it's not barred in any way. Our University is already linked to it. You're very welcome to put it up there if you think it's useful.

And it has a range of resources on there, one of which is developed out of a fellowship that I have with the Office of Learning and Teaching, where I really focused in on ways that we can engage more productively with the family. And some tips around how that might be done, all evidence-based, based on interviews and surveys I've done with families and students.

And, as well as that, I wanted to put different quizzes and things like that up there. And I found that there was nothing out there. So I developed a load of some quizzes, and tool boxes, and basically a whole array of resources, including tips for educators, again, based on what the students have said has worked for them.

And then, finally, just a little bit on what's happening elsewhere. So, as I mentioned, I did get the opportunity to go over to the UK, and the US, and Canada to see how it is that they're engaging with their first-in-family students. And these are just examples from the UK. I could have given examples from the States, as well, and Canada.

But they are targeting their first-in-family students very, very overtly. And you can see the congratulations card. Basically, it's a celebration. And I was really heartened to see this because, to me, that should be the central pivot of any engagement and outreach to first-in-family students.

It should be about success. It should be about celebration. It should be about congratulations.

The picture on the far-right is staff badges that staff wear to identify themselves as being first-in-family. Apparently, this is at Manchester Met. The VC is also first in his family. He has a gold one, though. The staff only have the silver ones.

The green handout there, that was from another university, York St Johns. But I suppose what was interesting was this very deliberate targeted approach. The first generation campaign, which is the one there and the second one. It was Manchester Met and, basically, they were targeting first-in-family students pre-entry, scaffolding them through the whole university on to post-graduation.

So they had first-in-family mentors who were already graduated mentoring young people into university and through university. And those mentors who are alumni were all volunteering. They'd also set up scholarships for the first-in-family. Again, the scholarships were from their alumni. Not huge amounts of money, but that was a really interesting programme.

And then they targeted particular careers events, learning support, academic support all at their first-in-family students. And, often, they were really just repackaging what was already available but targeting it at that cohort and inviting them, particularly, to come along.

So, at Wollongong, we've just started in a way. And I should say we in a very loose sense because I'm not based with the equity and outreach field. But I've worked with them a lot around this programme.

So, in 2019, at the beginning of this year, they rolled out a first gen targeted approach. So they started that with a big afternoon tea where they invited the students, and their parents, and their family, or caregivers—not just parents—any member of their family to, basically, celebrate their entry into university. And now for the next cohort, and they had a really positive response. For the next year now, they're looking at, again, the badges idea, stickers so that the fact that a lot of staff at Wollongong are first-in-family. So it's about actually normalising this to let people know that other people have been through what they've been through. So, in a way, I think it creates a better sense of belonging. And Shay Greg who is coordinating all of this is a contact though. If anyone's interested in that, yeah.

Yeah. Oh, sorry. We've lost a slide. So if anyone wants to contact Shay, she knows that I'm talking here today and that I've put the photos up. So please do get in contact with her. She'll be able to give you the lowdown on that and how they are doing that in the particular approach that they're taking.

So, based on what we've talked about today, and just any comments you might have? I'm just going to—just the last sort of two minutes because we're sort of coming to the end now of the presentation, if there's anything you'd like to share on Slido or here now, and any questions you might have, that would be great.

MARY: Yeah. Well, what we normally do at this point—

SARAH O'SHEA: Do you have the mic?

MARY: I'm OK. … What we normally do at this point is talk amongst ourselves for 10 minutes and then come back to Sarah's responses, so that we can generate some discussion on campus and, perhaps, choose the most pointed questions to send through on Slido for Sarah to respond to.

I should say thank you very much, Sarah. That was really great.

SARAH O'SHEA: Sorry, a lot bit of information overload.

MARY: So I'll mute—if we could just stay muted for the next 10 minutes and come back. I'm sorry, about 10 past.

… I'm sorry. I think we've got a leaf blower outside, so this is going to be really annoying. But, anyway, please bear with us. And Sarah's going to, now, take questions and comments.

SARAH O'SHEA: Apparently it's a concrete cutter. So I don't know if anyone has any questions here or—

MARY: We could start with a Slido one, actually.

SARAH O'SHEA: Yeah. We might start with a Slido one. Yeah.

MARY: So a question is, have you noticed any differences with different cohorts e.g., international students, and domestic, and students with Indigenous backgrounds?

SARAH O'SHEA: Yeah. So my disclaimer with this is that I haven't looked at international students at all because I sort of feel that that is a different context. So all the students that I work with are domestic students. So they're classed as a domestic student.

And sorry. What was the second part of the question?

MARY: Students from Indigenous backgrounds, as well.

SARAH O'SHEA: Yeah, OK.

MARY: In fact, there are two questions on Indigenous background students.

SARAH O'SHEA: OK. So, basically, with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students, I think there's a whole array of additional depth and complexity around these students. I mean, I think family and community play a huge role and also a commitment to family and community. The students who have indicated to me that they're Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander have said that they often have a sense of having to give back to community, as well, because they've come to university.

So, to me, there's a lot of additional complexity and an invisible sort of pressure, if you like, there to not only achieve at university but also to—sorry. I'm lost for words for a minute—but to ensure that they're fulfilling cultural and family commitments. Yeah. I don't know if that answers the question, though.

MARY: Yeah. I hope that answers the question. Perhaps, if you have further questions on that, you could put them up via Slido, as well, whoever asked that question?

OK. Another question is, do institutions that focus on first-in-family students risk alienating other students? Is there any research looking at this?

SARAH O'SHEA: No would be the answer to that. But, again, talking about why I focus on first-in-family students is that, because we've got more proportions of them, we—I'll give you an example of it through a story. So I've got some HEPPP funding to do a project. But, of course, HEPPP funding, it was linked to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

And we did a terrific project where we set up students with academic mentors. And so we found the students that were classed as low socioeconomic, according to postcode, and sent them a postcard, basically, inviting them to join the programme. And then they were paired up with an academic mentor for a year. And then we evaluated the programme, based on students and the academics.

But what happened from that programme was that we had a whole lot of students contacting us, saying, well, my friend who lives down the road from me, they are doing this programme. Can I do it? And, of course, they were located outside of the postcodes, so we had to say no.

And so we couldn't explain why because we didn't really want to sort of disclose the fact that the reason that the friend had been targeted was from—because they were from a classifiable, low socioeconomic background. So that brings me, in a very long-winded way, to the point that, with first-in-family, if it's treated in the right way, you can say, well, the reason that person was targeted is because they're first-in-family.

And we want to support them in their journey. And we can treat this as a sort of a form of celebration, as opposed to a deficit. But I haven't found that students have indicated to me. But I mean there's very little research on first-in-family students in Australia, anyway. So whether the non-first-in-family cohort feel that they are disadvantaged, I don't think that that's really being even focused on. Yeah.

MARY: OK. Just a comment. A non-deficit approach by focusing on first-in-family is celebrated. It's great.

One question is from Matt. What can universities and interested staff, such as those here today, do to support your research and its application?

SARAH O'SHEA: Oh. Thanks, Matt. [LAUGHING] Well, I mean I'm all about normalising first-in-family. So one of the things I did at Wollongong, which I think most universities could do, is actually talk to staff who are first-in-family. I think, certainly at Wollongong, we did a series of videos with staff where they talked about being first-in-family or staff—academic staff, professional staff, anyone who wanted to be involved could be involved.

And I think that's really, really nice because a lot of students still have the ivory tower myth. And for a student to know that, actually, maybe the person who's teaching them or the person who they encounter in the faculty is first in the family, and that they've actually got through university, I think is a really positive thing.

And yeah. I suppose—so, for me, it's about normalising it. I have had feedback from academics. And one of the questions they ask at the beginning of a lecture if they're in a face-to-face or even online is, how many of you are first-in-family?

And if people put their hands up, they say, well, welcome. Well, congratulations for being here. And that has had really good feedback from the students.

This particular person who told me said that, at the end of the semester, one of the students came up to them and said, look. I really appreciated that because I was feeling like I didn't really belong. And, when I looked around and realised there was other people in the room that were also first in their family to come, it just made me feel a little bit better.

And I think there are very small things that can make a big difference. Just normalising the fact that 51% or, in the case of this university, 63%. In the case of mine, I think we're around 70%. I think that that would make a difference to a student's sense of belonging.

MARY: OK. Do we have any questions from the room, please?

SARAH O'SHEA: No.

MARY: There was one question earlier about learning services and what they could be doing better to support first-in-family students. And I think you actually covered a lot of those points. I know there are a few learning services people here today. Do you feel sort of that that question has been adequately addressed?

PARTICIPANT: Speaking of student resources, perhaps, that we could include some messages or suggestion to talk to students about who's first-in-family. That's something, but I'm not sure what's happening with consultations and stuff like that. But that's something we can take back to our team, perhaps, and other learning advisors.

MARY: Yeah.

SARAH O'SHEA: And, as I said, I think you've all got the slides. So Shay's contact details are there. And, at Wollongong, that unit is adopting a very good framework of student life cycle. So they are joining the whole dots together from pre-entry to graduation. And they're working very closely with learning support, academic support to make sure that it's all connected. That's the goal, that it's all connected for students.

So, for the first-in-family students, it's a connected approach. And it's not about reinventing. I think that's important. Certainly, the universities that I visited in the UK and the US, they're not reinventing what's there. But what they're doing is they're outreaching and proactively contacting the first-in-family students and saying, this might be a great opportunity. They're using a very positive language but, have you thought about this?

One of the universities sort of says, we have a number of places available for first-in-family students, and they're filling up fast. Why don't you register? But it's actually things that are already going to be offered.

I'm thinking that student support and things like that. It's just a sort of slight re-framing. But it's very important that it's done in a very positive way. Yeah.

MARY: There was one comment or take-home message that intersectionality was something that was really an interesting point that was raised today. And we have a real need to understand who our students are and what sort of characteristics they have before we can really understand what kind of interventions in particular supports to put in place for them. So that's a really good take-home message to have, I think.

Are there any further comments? Because, if not, we can close off this sort of video-conferenced part of the session and then return to the campus groups to finish up. Any final questions?

SARAH O'SHEA: I just have one final point. You might be wondering why there's a great big picture of Winston Churchill on the final slide. That's not because I'm some secret Churchill fan.

But the research I mentioned that I did in the US, and the UK, and Canada was actually funded by the Churchill Trust. So the Churchill Trust, they basically will fund things that, if you're passionate about something, you can make an application to them. And they clearly found that I was passionate about first-in-family students.

But that report is available. And it sort of details more about what's happening overseas and what they're doing in this space.

MARY: OK. That's a good point. Thank you for that, Sarah.

[LAUGHING]

OK. So thank you very much, Sarah. It was a really thought-poking and rich discussion. And thank you to everyone for participating, for bearing with us with our technical difficulties, and leaf blowers, or concrete cutters, or whatever it was. And thank you, also, for the campus facilitators. You've been really wonderful support there and forwarding through comments from Slido and just making sure everything runs well on your campuses.

There's just a note. In a few days, I'll be sending you all a link to a short survey, which I'll be seeking your responses to a few questions evaluating the Community of Practice. So please look out for that email. And please take the little time that it will take you—I promise—to complete that because we do need to understand what sort of impact the Community of Practice is having, what things people, particularly, are appreciating, and using, and learning from. And, also, how it can be improved for next year. So we're in the planning for next year already, and we've really appreciated your company this year and look forward to having you again around the table next year.

And, now, with that, if you'd all like to un-mute your microphones please, let's all give Sarah a big thank you and applause.

[APPLAUSE]