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'Mind the Gap!' Exploring the post-graduation outcomes and employment mobility of individuals who are first in their family to complete a university degree

CONTEXT PAPER FOR 2019 RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

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March 2019

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2019 NCSEHE EQUITY RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP:
PROFESSOR SARAH O'SHEA

**Context paper: 'Mind the Gap!' Exploring
the post-graduation outcomes and
employment mobility of individuals who
are first in their family to complete a
university degree**

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Executive Summary

Globally, the numbers of students accessing higher education is increasing; Marginson (2016) reports that between 1970 and 2013, the worldwide number of tertiary students multiplied by 6.12. This drive to access university is largely defined in terms of obtaining better employment opportunities and also, a more secure financial future (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2019; O'Shea, Stone, May, & Delahunty, 2018; Marginson, 2016). However, how obtaining a degree actually translates into employability within an increasingly competitive labour market needs further consideration. Labour markets are largely stratified and success within these contexts can be defined by existing social status and also, economic power (Reay, 2013). For many students, particularly those from more diverse backgrounds, the "relations between higher education and work are fragmented" (Marginson, 2016, p. 418). The increasing costs of attaining a degree coupled with the limited guarantee of employment post-graduation (Ingham, Abrahams, & Bathmaker, 2018) suggests that we need to carefully examine whether higher education is delivering employment objectives for our diverse student populations.

This proposed project addresses a gap in our understanding about how learners, intersected by a range of equity categories, enter the Australian employment market and how "entry" is experienced qualitatively at an individual level. Adopting a mixed method approach, this Fellowship will combine statistical and qualitative data in order to address the following questions:

1. How does obtaining a degree actually translate into employability within a competitive labour market?
2. How do learners from intersecting equity categories enter the employment market and how is this "entry to employment" experienced at an individual qualitative level?
3. How do learners negotiate existing and new forms of capital to achieve competitiveness within employment fields?

The findings from this project can usefully inform the Australian university sector in a number of ways, including:

- the types of supports and initiatives that can be implemented to support students from diverse backgrounds
- changes to policy foci or institutional discourses including the ways in which data on post-graduation outcomes is collected and analysed
- a more nuanced understanding of how students from equity backgrounds navigate and engage with the employment market post-graduation

Introduction

Access to higher education has reached unprecedented high levels. Almost a third of the school-leaver age cohort worldwide now attend university and, more broadly, all high-income countries and most middle-income countries are approaching or exceeding 50 per cent participation across the population as a whole (Marginson, 2016). While such high levels of access appear to reflect more equitable and universal educational outcomes, deeper analysis of how “widening participation” plays out in the lives of students and their learning outcomes needs to be considered.

This Fellowship is focused on the post-graduation experiences and outcomes of students who are the first in their family to attend university. These “higher education pioneers” (May, Delahunty, O’Shea, & Stone, 2017) are a growing cohort of the student population (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013) and are often collectively intersected by a range of equity categories or markers of educational disadvantage. Growth in the First-in-Family (FiF) cohort can be partly attributed to increasing activities designed to “widen participation” within the tertiary sector, including mandated government targets for participation rates amongst particular populations such as students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds.



Older graduate: Photo by [Esther Tuttle](#) on [Unsplash](#)

The term “widening participation” has been used to describe activities designed to encourage or support learners from diverse backgrounds to consider university as an option in their post-schooling futures. While appearing to be embedded with social justice and equality discourses, the term is itself a contested and politically loaded one; as Stevenson, Clegg and Lefever (2010) describe, widening participation (or WP) can be regarded as a “contradictory and unstable amalgam of economic rationality and social justice arguments” (p.105). For some, WP activities represent an uncomfortable dialectic, wherein higher education institutions invite and encourage students from a diversity of backgrounds to participate in further learning but equally expect these individuals to both wholly fund this endeavour and also adapt themselves to conform to institutional expectations of the “successful learner” (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018). Within a neo-liberal context, the student is positioned as solely responsible for their own achievement and academic success. Whilst not wishing to undermine the construct of being an “independent” and self-directed learner, it is important to recognise that those from more diverse or disadvantaged backgrounds may

not have acquired the necessary capitals that underpin success and achievement in this educational domain. This does not assume that such participants are in a position of lack, but rather than the capitals they hold may be in a different “currency”, one that is not necessarily valued by higher education institutions (Reay, David, & Ball, 2001, p. 870).

We know that this movement into and through higher education can be a difficult one as learners from more diverse backgrounds may have a low sense of “belonging” to this environment (O’Shea, 2016), may struggle to unpack the “hidden curriculum” of the institution (O’Shea, 2015) and may be required to negotiate complex identity and relational shifts (O’Shea, 2014). In adhering to an understanding of “individualised life choices” the higher education system valorises the learner as independent and responsible for their life goals and ambitions, but in emphasising the individual, inherent and somewhat invisible barriers and boundaries remain largely ignored. If the individual learner is responsible for their educational choices and activities, any failure then becomes individualised and can be blamed upon lack of abilities, planning or understanding rather than external constraints. As Lehmann (2007) explains: “Inequality is explained by personal qualities and abilities rather than ... unequal life chances rooted in social class differences” (p. 632).

Our understanding of inequality within the higher education sector has largely focused on the ways in which students navigate their entry into and through higher education, with particular attention on the constraints and negotiations such participation engenders. However, our knowledge of how students who successfully manage this journey to graduation and how they fare in the employment market, remains somewhat constrained (Richardson, Bennett, & Roberts, 2016). This is a complex issue that cannot be understood by employment figures or graduation rates alone. This Fellowship adopts a mixed methods approach that will not only draw on available statistics related to post graduation outcomes but also, include in-depth narrative biographical interviews (O’Shea, 2014) and surveys with graduated students and key stakeholders in the field. Drawing on Bourdieuan concepts of capital and habitus, the Fellowship will deeply explore how learners negotiate existing and new forms of capital to achieve “success” post-graduation, bearing in mind the various ways that “success” may be enacted at an individual lived level. Participants will be those who are the first in the family to attend university — this categorisation based on the recognition that many of these students are intersected by various equity categorisations (O’Shea, 2016–19). Student interviews and survey will be complemented by input from key practitioners and researchers in related fields to consider the application of best practice within the higher education sector.

Context/Background

There are subtle ways in which power and privilege work to ensure that influence is retained by a professional, financially advantaged elite. These demarcations are most starkly reproduced within the United Kingdom (UK) where a persistent and ongoing correlation exists between those who occupy high-status professions and those who attended prestigious private education or sandstone universities within the UK. As Kirby (2016) reports, while approximately seven per cent of students attend private schools, almost a third of British MPs are derived from the private school setting with the majority attending the most prestigious universities. Kirby (2016) points to a number of professions that have similarly skewed/inequitable distribution of educational resources amongst its professional members. This key report calls for further research that considers “why those with particular educational backgrounds remain at the top” (p. 1).

Within Australia, our data on the graduate outcomes of students from less advantaged backgrounds remains relatively limited and national records are not kept on how established professions (such as law and medicine) are demarcated by demographics. The Graduate Outcomes report, administered by Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT)¹ across the sector, has recently published its 2018 findings which report that overall graduates in some fields of study, particularly those degrees that are more generalised, continue to have “weaker” employment outcomes immediately after graduation, but longitudinally (up to three years) these differences seem to diminish or narrow. The report also highlights that between 2015 and 2018, the full-time employment rates for graduates had improved across the sector with all higher education institutions in 2018 reporting full-time rates above 81 per cent (QILT, 2018) and some universities indicating rates exceeding 92 per cent such as Charles Sturt University (93.6 per cent); Murdoch University (93.2 per cent); University of Technology Sydney (92.7 per cent) and The Australian National University (92.2 per cent).

However, there are some limitations to this survey as it focuses on broad collective outcomes and does not include any open comments that would capture detailed specifics on the nature and type of employment gained. Interestingly, a significant number of respondents (27 per cent) reported that their university skills were not being fully utilised three years after graduation, which suggests either a mismatch between the skills learnt or perhaps an inability to enter the specific field of their degree. The report further indicates that 27.9 per cent of these respondents reported that this absence of utilisation was wholly due to a lack of employment within their field. However, without contextual and qualitative commentary to enrich this response, it is difficult to unpack why gaining employment in the preferred field was difficult for these respondents. Richardson et al. (2016) identify that without “nuanced data collection instruments” (p.7) our understanding about the range and type of employment that students obtain, including whether this was in the field of their completed studies, remains partial and incomplete.

The 2018 QILT report, however, does report on the relative socioeconomic backgrounds of graduates and correlates this to graduate outcomes. This analysis reveals that high SES graduates performed better across all employment areas in the 2018 survey data compared to those from lower SES backgrounds. For example, 74.9 per cent of those in high SES had obtained full-time employment compared to 69.8 per cent of those in low SES brackets. There is similar disparity recorded in terms of overall employment with those from more advantaged backgrounds indicating 88.1 per cent participation compared to 84.7 per cent of those from low SES backgrounds. While this differentiation is noted, again the significance

¹ Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching is a website funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training to provide advice and ‘transparent information’ to prospective and current higher education students. The QILT is administered by the Social Research Centre at Australian National University (ANU), Canberra.

of this cannot be measured without qualitative insights that focus on the students themselves and the experiences they have had post-graduation.

There is also differentiation in the types of degrees that students from equity backgrounds undertake and the careers they enter (Richardson et al. 2016), with choice of institution similarly demarcated across class and social boundaries (Reay, 2016; Edwards & Macmillan, 2015). These differences in educational choices are based on access to economic and cultural resources long before students reach post-school options. One international study indicated that those children with

... professional parents are approximately three times more likely to enter a high-status university (rather than a non-high-status university) than those with working class parents. This holds true for Australia, England and public sector elite colleges in the United States (Jerrim, 2013, p. 3).

Such disparity in opportunity is similarly echoed by Lamb, Jackson, Walstab and Huo, (2015) who report that in Australia, only 17.3 per cent of those from the lowest socioeconomic bracket actually gain entry to higher education, leading these authors to conclude that:

The opportunity for higher education study, and the professions to which it often leads, is far from evenly shared (p. 75).

McKnight (2015) refers to this type of restricted entry as a form of “opportunity hoarding” (p. 41) which means that those from higher income brackets or more privileged backgrounds have increased access to career success regardless of ability or aptitude. This greater access is founded upon more developed social networks of capital that assist both entry into more prestigious educational spaces and employment fields:

If highly educated parents are using their better access to career success, based solely on connections to help their children find good jobs. This amounts to opportunity hoarding and results in fewer opportunities available for equally able, but less connected children (McKnight, 2015, p. 40).

McKnight (2015) also argues that the financial security that comes with advantage has a direct impact on career opportunity for those from high income or high social class backgrounds. In other words, those with higher fiscal worth ultimately possess “more of the resources at their disposal that are linked to later labour market success” (McKnight, 2015, p. 39).

Bowen, Cingos and McPherson (2009) extend this argument and explain that there is an implicit expectation that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds move seamlessly into a higher education environment and use “effort and ability” to succeed, while simultaneously expected to play “by rules that favor the wealthy in the first place” (p. 288). This type of educational stratification has been argued not only to be imposed upon learners but also self-imposed. Thomas and Quinn (2007) describe how individuals from similar social class backgrounds may elect to attend educational institutions that are regarded as being in proximity to themselves — geographically, socially, ethnically and culturally. This is echoed by Reay, Ball and David (2005) who indicate that university choice for UK working class students is governed by conceptions of “fit” with the chosen institution. However, this sense of “fit” is not an issue unless attending these institutions results in hidden advantage within the employment market.

There are a limited number of studies in Australia that have explored how the prestige and characteristics of the university attended may impact upon future employment and earning potential. The results of this research exist in some disparity. For example, Carroll, Heaton and Tani (2018) explain that while there is a “premium” associated with the more elite or

Group of Eight (Go8) universities within Australia, this difference is not statistically significant when the final exam results of the students are considered. This leads the authors to conclude that such salary premia are simply reflective of better “quality students” as measured by final exam scores. On the other hand, Koshy, Seymour and Dockery (2016) have indicated that their statistical analysis indicates “negative earning premiums” for females who are studying outside of the more elite institutional categories. In response to this finding Carrol et al. (2018) argue that as Koshy et al.’s study did not control for selection bias; this finding may result from “differences in the quality of student cohorts rather than differences in the quality of universities” (p. 4). Yet, Carrol et al.’s critical assessment fails to engage with the social stratification of the higher education sector within Australia where prestige universities, such as those within the Go8, largely recruit from the private school setting. This educational environment is resource-rich, and the potential for “opportunity hoarding” amongst its participants is considerable, representing an invisible and persistent advantage post-graduation. As Cherastidham and Norton (2014) reveal, this advantage may be accrued over time, evidenced by their research finding that “graduates of sandstone universities and of technology universities earn about six per cent more than graduates of other universities over a 40-year career” (p. 3).

In an era of neo-liberalism, universities are expected to exist within the marketplace, where students are positioned as “consumer-investors” (Marginson, 1997, p. 64). Yet our knowledge and insight about the actual “value for money” a degree represents for our general student population is somewhat limited. For example, the ways in which educational, economic and social disadvantage play out in the post-graduation employment field cannot be properly assessed unless there is a much stronger foci on the qualitative experiences of these learners. Research also needs to avoid unintentionally problematising people from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those who have not “traditionally” attended university, as being different from the norm. Instead, what might be more insightful would be to problematise privilege and compare the qualitative experiences of diverse student cohorts as they move out of university and into the employment market. This should include drawing on statistics as well as interview and survey data that seek to explore a more nuanced understanding of this transition. Research underpinned by sociological theories is needed, in order to reveal how such movements are experienced at a personal level, including the ways in which students navigate elite professional fields.



Aerial view credit: Photo by [rawpixel](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Applying a Sociological Lens

The proposed research will adopt a sociological framing to critically unpack the data and findings in this field. Sociological perspectives favour critical interpretations concerning taken-for-granted behaviours or accepted perspectives. For example, the term *social mobility* has been applied to the higher education sector somewhat un-problematically with attendance at university often equated to equal opportunity to economic and social resources. Yet, this is too simplistic a correlation as it assumes a commonality amongst our student populations, assuming equal access to necessary resources and also, desires or hopes that map against neo-liberal discourses.

Southgate et al. (2017) explored how FiF students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds navigated entry into the elite medical field and the troubling emotional toils or personal negotiations such navigations can engender. The authors describe how, despite demonstrating high academic skills and abilities, these medical students often lacked a “sense of entitlement” to be studying such a high prestige degree. While the study focused on the experiences of studying to gain entry to elite professions, it highlights how complex these “extreme journeys of social mobility” (Southgate et al., 2017, p. 243) can be. Lehmann (2009), in his research with low-income students, explained that this cohort may be “forced into positions of cultural outsiders” (p. 632) and he defines the issue as particularly problematic for FiF students, who may have little sense of belonging within the university based on cultural biography or prior affiliations. As Lehmann (2009) elaborates:

Inequality is explained by personal qualities and abilities rather than ... unequal life chances rooted in social class differences (p. 632).

This ideal of social mobility assists in sustaining the tenets of capitalist society; with the promise of reward for hard work comes the utopian ideal that anyone can make it and everyone has the power to succeed regardless of their birthright or background. The only qualification for success then becomes marked by the concept of “hard work” and aspiration — yet Reay (2013) argues that this is a form of “symbolic violence” that is perpetuated against those in the lowest economic tiers of society. This becomes a means of explaining the foreclosure of their economic and educational horizons. Such understanding indicates how necessary it is to “problematise narratives of social mobility” rather than simply regarding these as “meritocratic tales of rewards for intellect and industry” (Reay, 2013, p. 669).

In adopting a sociological framing, this Fellowship will problematise accepted discourses around achievement and opportunity. Importantly, combining statistical evidence with analysis of actual experiences of students, graduates and key stakeholders in the field, the Fellowship will ultimately provide a more holistic perspective of this field. The following section outlines the key questions to be addressed before the theoretical framing adopted by this study is presented.

Key Research Questions

Based on the gaps in research identified and the existing literature in this field, this Fellowship will explore the following three key research questions:

1. How does obtaining a degree actually translate into employability within an increasingly competitive labour market?
2. How do learners from intersecting equity categories enter the employment market and how is this “entry to employment” experienced at an individual qualitative level?
3. How do learners negotiate existing and new forms of capital to achieve competitiveness in shrinking employment fields?

These questions are designed to present a study that is nuanced in its exploration of whether “patterns of disadvantage persist after graduation” (Richardson et al., 2016, p. 8) as this relates to those who are the first in their families or communities to attend university. This is a close-up analysis that intends to build upon Richardson et al.’s 2015 study on equity and graduate outcomes in Australia, which calls for more focused and detailed study of this field. The output from this Fellowship will be both scholarly and applied, the latter including a series of recommendations for maximising the post-graduation outcomes of learners from diverse backgrounds.

Theoretical Framing for the Study

This project usefully combines the concepts of capital, field and habitus with the capability approach's three key elements: functionings; capabilities; and agency.

In summary, functionings relate to outcomes (which may be both tangible and intangible) and capabilities are the actual freedoms that enable individuals to achieve what they value (Sen, 1999). Agency is then regarded as the ability or capacity for individuals to achieve their desired goals and objectives. When combined with concepts of capital, field and habitus, the capability approach can offer a deep understanding of how individuals activate cultural and social “conversion factors” to achieve their desired functionings in life. This capital can be economic, social or cultural in nature, and has traditionally included symbolic, educational and linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In understanding that individuals have different capital packages and capitals have different values depending on the field in which the individual is operating, the study will explore how a range of capitals are employed in the pursuit of employment by graduates from various backgrounds. The proposed theoretical fusion (capitals and capabilities) enables exploration of both what graduates consider as important in the field of employment (capitals) and the relative significance of individual capabilities when achieving employment within a chosen profession.

This is not the first study to advocate blending Sen and Bourdieu's work (Bowman, 2010; Hart, 2012) but this is the first project that usefully combines these approaches in the analysis of the transition from university to employment. While limitations have been noted in both approaches (Bowman, 2010; Pitman, 2013), in combination they enable the exploration of the role of culture in the enactment of life choices and also, the effects of agency. Put simply, while individuals appear to have the necessary “process freedoms” to access and succeed at higher education, this accessibility can also be partial as the opportunity to realise this achievement can be limited or even lacking. In applying this perspective to the employment field, this study seeks to unpack individuals' opportunities or freedoms to achieve the fertile functionings they themselves value and consider how the process of “getting a job” is enacted at an individual lived level.



Research Design

The research proposed for this Fellowship is mixed methods and draws upon extant qualitative and quantitative data as well as targeted data collection via surveys and interviews across alumni and stakeholders within the sector. The project has been organised according to three stages which are not discrete but instead overlap in intent and focus:

Stage One (Jan – April 2019)

This stage sets the context for the research that is proposed under this Fellowship. Essentially, *Stage One* focuses on the existing scholarship and research in the field and will review published reports and empirical research related to graduate outcomes and employability broadly. In addition, this systematic review of the literature will consider research that applies a lens of educational equity and social justice to the broad field of graduate opportunity, referring to local and international literature. To maximise engagement with the field, this systematic review will include materials that are regarded as “grey literature” including conference presentations, newspaper articles and institutional unpublished reports. This activity will provide context for the Fellowship activities and, also, identify gaps in understanding and service provision. The literature will be imported into NVivo 11 for thematic analysis across key areas of exploration.

To complement analysis of the literature, *Stage One* will also review existing statistical data on graduate outcomes to explore this phenomenon in terms of numerical and quantitative indicators. With the assistance of NCSEHE and CHEEDR, this extant data will be examined to provide a numerical understanding of the field with particular reference to the recorded outcomes for those students from a range of equity backgrounds.

Stage Two: (May – July 2019)

The activities detailed in *Stage One* provide the context for the next part of this study which is largely focused on the qualitative component of the research. Drawing on interview and survey methodology with both graduates and key stakeholders, this stage will seek to explore some of the “gaps” in our understanding as identified by the literature review with particular reference to the following three broad areas:

- the ways in which individuals utilise or consider existing capitals as a resource to navigate the employment market
- how students explain their positionality within the employment field and how they relate to the habitus of the workplace
- defined gaps in understandings or networks that individuals consider have disadvantaged them in their pursuit of employment.

Student interviews and surveys will be complemented by productive conversations with key “agents of change” (Raciti, 2018) within this field that include scholars/researchers, practitioners and policymakers across Australia and the UK. The purpose of this stage is to establish some of the key findings globally and also identify existing best practice that might be applied to the Australian higher education sector.

Stage Three (Aug – Oct 2019)

The data from surveys and interviews will be imported into NVivo 11 and line-by-line coding will be conducted. The emerging nodes will then be mapped against the literature to situate the findings in relation to the broader research field. Based on this analysis and mapping, a set of key recommendations will be developed, which will be framed within a whole of student life cycle model of support with the focus on the “transition out” phase. A number of these recommendations will be distributed for feedback at the University of Wollongong as this institution is currently implementing a “student life cycle” framework for all students from

low socioeconomic backgrounds. This feedback cycle will provide preliminary data on the feasibility of the recommendations which will then be further refined for inclusion in the final Fellowship report.

While the Fellowship is in its initial stages, progress on a number of areas has been made and so the following sections detail the progress to date (February 2019), which includes:

- preliminary literature search
- initial ethics approval and survey instrument designed
- preliminary analysis/organisation of existing qualitative data.

Preliminary Literature Search

The initial literature search included both academic publications as well as “grey” literature including conference papers, newspaper articles and unpublished reports. This search was internationally orientated and followed steps that are outlined below:

Step 1: A series of database searches were conducted to obtain a broad overview of the field these included combinations of key words such as “post-graduation”; “equity”; “higher education” (1,000+ resources) also “graduate outcomes”; ‘equity’; “university or college” (1,200+ resources). Resources included newspaper articles, books reports and traditional published articles.

Step 2: Search terms were limited to published peer-reviewed articles and reports. The references in these were then used to locate other relevant resources.

Step 3: Open access e-newsletters (for example, *The Conversation*; *University World News*) were explored to locate key resources on related topics and embedded links within the articles were consulted for further possible sources.

This search gathered a range of materials spanning the global field of inquiry and also, present a range of perspectives that incorporate researchers, government policymakers, charities and not-for-profit organisations and practitioners. This search informed the initial analysis of the literature and these resources are providing additional materials for inclusion. The literature search is an ongoing activity with final literature synthesis to be completed by the end of April, 2019.

Initial Ethics Approval

Preliminary analysis of existing qualitative data has been approved, this will permit further contact with students who participated in the Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery project entitled: *Capitals and Capabilities: Rethinking higher education persistence*. These students were all first in the family to attend university and in the final year of their studies when they participated in in-depth interviews or qualitative surveys about their persistence behaviours in higher education. At the culmination of the study, 67 participants agreed to be contacted for further information and feedback related to the research. The approved amendment to ethics has permitted email contact to include an invitation to participate in an interview about their post-graduation experiences or complete an online survey.

An additional ethics application is currently under preparation, this application seeks permission to contact stakeholders in the UK and Australia to participate in a survey or interview. The contact groups include identified stakeholders across the equity and graduate employability field. In addition a more general invitation to participate will also be distributed via key networks such as Higher Education Research and Development (HERD); Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA), the NCSEHE, International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSoTL) and National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (NAGCAS). As part of this process, these stakeholders

will also be asked to distribute a survey via their institutional alumni networks to graduates. The institutions that agree to participate will then send out a survey link to their alumni who have graduated in 2018/2017. The research is interested in the immediate negotiation of the job market and, hence, will focus on those that have recently graduated to seek their reflections on transitioning from higher education into employment. While this survey will be sent out to the general alumni population, a series of demographic questions will ask students to identify any equity markers or particular demographic characteristics, this type of self-identification has been used successfully in previous studies (O’Shea, 2016–19).

Preliminary Analysis of Existing Data

Preliminary analysis of extant data has occurred to provide an empirical basis from which to design and develop the survey instrument and interview schedule. This data was collected as part of ARC DP170100705 and includes 72 in-depth interviews and 306 surveys conducted with FiF university students in their final year of study. While this project was focused on the persistence behaviours of this student cohort, the interviews and surveys explored related areas including perspectives on success (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018; Delahunty & O’Shea, 2019), developing a sense of belonging in the community (Groves & O’Shea, under review) and negotiating implicit and invisible boundaries (O’Shea, under review).

The data from the ARC project was revisited with the following questions framing this analysis:

- What were the types of issues students referred to when considering either getting a job or preparing for a career post-graduation?
- How did students “imagine” or describe their career post-graduation? What difficulties did they perceive in gaining employment?
- Did students feel prepared for the post-graduation market? Did they refer to any strategies for gaining employment?
- How did students describe making career decisions — who seemed to be influencing or informing them in this regard?

The following section provides a broad overview of preliminary findings; this data will be thematically refined over the next month.

Preliminary Discussion

Thinking about life after graduation

We know that the transition from higher education to work is difficult for most students, characterised as a process that requires astute planning, preparation and foresight to ensure positive outcomes (Tomlinson, 2012). Yet for some final year students, post-graduation employment was referred to in quite vague terms with broad goals articulated, such as Drew who wants “... to start working out of psychology somewhere” (Drew, 22, B. Psych, Final Year, low SES, Rural²) or Mel (21, B. Science, Final Year) who simply states: “I want to do 3D printing maybe”. Only a small number of comments by these near-completion students demonstrate a clear pathway or plan for obtaining a graduate job. An absence of talk about specific plans, goals and pathways to obtain a job is concerning, given the competitiveness of the current labour market.

² Demographic details about respondents relied on self-selection and so the amount of information varies across each individual, all participants identified as being the first in their immediate family to attend university (i.e. first out of parents, siblings, children and partners)

In general, however, students did seem to be aware of the employment opportunities and the competitive nature of this in their fields:

Being able to get a job in your field, especially in the journalism field — it's so hard and even just to score an internship is like one in a million. (Lily, 21, B. Communications, Final Year, NESB)

These students also reflected upon the need for a university degree in today's labour market and acknowledged that the massification of higher education had increased competition between qualified individuals. "A degree now is a dime a dozen" (Eleanor, 29, B. Human Community Service, 3rd Year, Disability, low SES, Rural). The interchange between Sam (21, B. Science, Final Year) and Lucy (20, B. Biology, Year 3) below similarly highlighted a certain sense of trepidation about entering this competitive job market:

Sam: *there are a lot of jobs available to me but there's also a lot of Bachelor of Science graduates that I'm competing with.*

Lucy: *It's not, "Do you have the qualifications?" It's "Do you have more qualifications than everyone else?"*

Sam: *... than the 100 other people that are waiting in line.*

Even at this early stage in their progression to post-graduation employment, these FiF students expressed a variety of challenges related to the workplace. Successfully negotiating the application process and recovering from rejections are issues for students such as Brett and Evelyn:

Having been through a round of graduate applications, job applications, and not being successful, I really did take that as a real kick in the guts. (Brett, 33, B. Business, Year 3, low SES)

I think I'll be applying for a few grad programs. I applied for one this year which was a little bit silly; I should have applied for a few more but I was pegging my hopes on one. I think that's a bit of a rookie mistake. (Evelyn, 38, B. Commerce, Final Year, Disability)

What did university offer?

In terms of preparation for graduate employment, attending university is generally characterised as providing students with the opportunity to acquire hard currencies: marks; course work; qualifications; practicums; and work placements. A number of these students also indicated that they valued opportunities to make connections with the real world of work through assignments, fieldwork and workshops:

Having all units specifically catered to my interest was great, and helped me see the real-world applications of my career. (Survey Respondent, Female, 31-40, low SES)

Increasingly, many graduates are turning to voluntary work, internship schemes and international travel to increase their employability (Tomlinson, 2012). However, placements, practicums, unpaid internships and the related travel can all represent an additional and difficult financial burden for students from equity groups. Many of these students have family, work and financial commitments which place them under additional constraints, particularly in regard to attending a practicum or placement which is geographically distant or which conflicts existing responsibilities:

Placement will cost me financially and will cost me the ability to apply for employment. (Survey Respondent, Male, 30-40, Disability)

Placements, they're pretty hard on financial aspects of things ... like "It's tough luck, sorry that you got placed six hours away, you're just going to have to deal with it." (Lisa, 21, B. Nursing, Final Year, Rural)

For older students like Miriam, it is her life experiences that she perceives as giving her the edge in her employability.

I think I've got a lot to give, you know, I've had life experiences that other people haven't had and I think if I can use that in a positive way, yeah, I mean that's going to... and for what I want to do. (Miriam, 53, B. Social Work, Year 3, Disability, Rural)

It is argued that students from equity groups may be less skilled at reading the demands of employers than traditionally middle class graduates who are more adept at exploiting their pre-existing levels of cultural capital, social contacts and connections (Tomlinson, 2012). Interestingly, some of the students in this study like Sophie did not see the university sufficiently growing and supporting the development of strengths and the soft currencies required of the workplace:

So, I feel like they're good at building like research and the learning side of things but in terms of people and communication and leadership, yeah, I don't really see that in my degree. (Sophie, 20, B. Biology, Year 3)

These FiF participants also suggested that universities could do better by recognising their individual strengths and weaknesses and previous work experiences:

The university system greatly views each student as just a number a lot of the time. Especially as an education student our individual qualities/strengths/preferences are very rarely taken into account. (Survey Respondent, Female, 20–25)

In my degree—this is probably just true of nursing and maybe health in general—but there's really no accommodation or room to individualise, like recognise individual strengths and I guess weaknesses. Like when you train someone to become a nurse, you want them to be able to do the same thing as the nurse next to them so they're just creating a bunch of nurses that can do the same sort of thing and you don't get a choice where you're placed or a preference or anything so you don't really get to explore what you think you might like. (Lisa, 21, B. Nursing, Final Year, Rural)

The feeling by near-graduates that their individual strengths and interpersonal skills had not been developed at university might suggest that students are not being equipped to successfully participate in the workplace and compete for limited positions. This aligns with an employability discourse that places much of the onus on the individual student to develop their knowledge and skills for employability (Tomlinson, 2012). Whether students from more diverse backgrounds need additional or different support in the development of these skills than their more advantaged peers is also something that this Fellowship will be exploring.

Conclusion

This framing paper is designed to introduce and define the parameters of the 2019 NCSEHE Research Fellowship: *'Mind the Gap!' Exploring the post-graduation outcomes and employment mobility of individuals who are first in their family to complete a university degree* being led by Professor Sarah O'Shea (UOW).

This is a mixed method study that will explore the statistics on post-graduation outcomes and employability of students from a range of backgrounds whilst contextualising this with in-depth survey response and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders, students and alumni. The first key output will be a literature review, which will then be followed by a period of data collection and analysis.

The following timeline provides an overview of the Fellowship and progression to date and I look forward to providing bi-monthly updates on Fellowship activities.



Woman at laptop: Photo by [Andrew Neel](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Timeline and progress to date

STAGE	ACTIVITY/MILESTONE: <i>Dissemination via online social media, institutional visits/consultations will be ongoing.</i>	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Prep	Staff recruitment, human research ethics, liaison via CI's existing relationships with outreach/equity staff in the higher education sector across Australia and the UK and form international project advisory group.												
	Milestone: All preliminary tasks are completed to enable study to proceed with ethical approvals, contracts executed and staff employed.												
Stage 1	(i) Review published reports and also key empirical data that situates this issue within an international context. (ii) Organise the statistical analysis of extant data on graduates from diverse backgrounds and establish the key findings.												
	Milestone: Preliminary literature review completed and also the initial statistical analysis completed.												
	(iii) Synthesise this literature into a written review that includes suggested applications for the Australian context. (iv) Develop the conceptual framework for the project and articulate the protocols for data analysis.												
Milestone: A synthesis of literature completed and an overview of the conceptual framework of the study completed.													
Stage 2	(i) Conduct in-depth interviews (n=30) with First-in-Family graduates utilising a snowball sampling technique that commences with recruitment of participants from a current ARC DP (O'Shea, 2017).												
	Milestone: Recruit First-in-Family graduates for in-depth interviews and conduct these either via face-to-face or via phone – a survey option will also be available to students if an interview is not possible. Complete Fellowship Interim Report (June).												
	ii) Conduct interviews with key stakeholders and scholars in relevant fields (n=10–15) across Australia and the UK to explore best practise in supporting equity students beyond graduation												
Milestone: Complete interviews with stakeholders and researchers in the field and import all data into NVivo for coding and analysis.													
Stage 3	(i) Code data applying the analytical framing developed at the commencement of the project. (ii) From this initial pass over the data develop a series of recommendations and seek feedback from the expert advisory group. (iii) Organise for feedback or trialling of key recommendations within UOW based on their "whole of student" life cycle approach — with a focus on the "transition out" phase of this cycle.												
	Milestone: A series of draft recommendations developed and a trial and /or feedback on these organised at UOW												
Dissem.	(i) Write up one quality article based on the findings of the study targeted at the <i>Higher Education Research & Development</i> (HERD) journal (IF 2.0) or a journal of similar ranking. Conduct conference presentations/seminars on findings. ii) Further validation of the recommendations from stakeholders in the UK/Ireland. iii) Complete Fellowship report and submit.												

Key: indicates a completed task, a task in progress and means yet to be achieved

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