Higher Education
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-026-01636-y

"We've got a bit of a family mantra that you don't give up": A cross-national study of first-in-family students' persistence at university

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Received: 3 May 2025 / Accepted: 22 January 2026

Abstract
Numerous studies consider the reasons why students, particularly those from historically underrepresented groups, decide to depart university prior to completing their studies. Much of this attrition research focuses on the problems students encounter during their studies and the ways these issues might curtail their ability to sustain academic engagement. In this paper, we instead focus on the ways in which students, all of whom are first in their families to attend university, persist in their studies. Drawing on cross-national qualitative data from three discrete but complementary studies ($N=174$) we conceptualise and use the lens of 'mantras of persistence' to investigate how broader processes of socialisation help students to enact persistence, which we identified in our research via the sayings, 'maxims,' or stories that learners applied to their university journeys. Our narrative data highlights three dominant mantras utilised by students, suggesting that there are fundamental commonalities in the norms, values, practices and discourses that first-in-family learners draw on to navigate higher education, despite differences in age, gender, field of study, and geographic context. However, we also demonstrate how these mantras are interwoven with neoliberal relations of power as well as the hidden emotional and affective work that first-in-family learners often engage in during their studies. We argue that recognising the importance of such mantras and how these may diverge from the normalised values or expectations within higher education settings is key, particularly if universities genuinely wish to improve the retention of students from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

Keywords University retention · Persistence · First in family · First generation · Qualitative research · Higher education

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Published online: 18 February 2026

Introduction

Departing early from university can have short- and long-term financial, emotional and social repercussions for both learners and their families (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018; Pitman, 2013). For those who are the 'first' to attend university, the impacts of this early departure can be particularly profound (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). First-in-family (FIF) students often act as 'educational trailblazers' (Storlie et al., 2016) or 'innovators' (Smith & Lucena, 2016) by demonstrating to other people that university is a possibility (O'Shea et al., 2015), meaning that early departure can play a critical role in (re)shaping the perceptions of family, friends, and even communities, influencing decision-making within and between generations (Wainwright & Watts, 2021).

Although university enrolment for many underrepresented equity groups has increased in recent years, the retention rates of FIF students have remained persistently low (Henderson et al., 2019; Nuffield Foundation, 2020). As such, FIF students are generally regarded as being at a higher 'risk' of early departure than their peers with university-educated parents, a trend that is evident in different forms of data internationally. For example, in Australia, a recent national survey highlighted that approximately 20% of FIF students expressed intentions for early departure, a significantly higher rate than their continuing-generation peers (QILT, 2022). Research from the United Kingdom (UK) has also established that even when prior educational attainment, individual characteristics, and socio-economic status are considered, FIF students have a higher probability of dropping out of university before graduating (Henderson et al., 2019). Similarly, in the United States (US), FIF status has long been associated with lower retention, even when other factors such as gender, ethnicity, income, and Grade Point Average are held constant (Alger, 2024; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Stebleton & Soria, 2012).

In recent years, intense social, spatial, and temporal changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, devastating global conflicts, and the rising costs of living have further compounded FIF students' persistence at university, accelerating inequities both within and outside the education sector (Marczuk & Lörz, 2023). Arguably, we have now entered 'VUCA times'; that is higher education – and modern society more broadly – have come to be characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (Panthalookaran, 2022; Raciti, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the fragility of our systems: health, education and social (O'Shea, 2025). However, such exposure has also created spaces to question the 'taken for granted' with renewed scrutiny and it is within this framing that we approached the ongoing challenge of FIF student persistence.

While research has long examined retention and persistence through the lens of institutions, in this paper we deliberately turn our attention to exploring persistence through the eyes and minds of students (Tinto, 2017). This standpoint aligns with calls to recentre student voice and the actual act of persisting in research (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Bangeni & Kapp, 2017), which we contend is particularly important in relation to the experiences of FIF learners, who have traditionally been portrayed in both research and practice through a deficit perspective (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2024). As Smit (2012) argued over a decade ago, employing such a perspective to address a structural problem like persistence only acts to perpetuate stereotypes, alienate students, and minimise the role of the institution in (re) producing barriers to success. In more recent years, research has increasingly drawn attention to the strengths and assets of FIF learners in terms of their access to, and participation

in, university, shifting away from locating difficulties within the individual and, instead, reframing the problem as a reflection of broader systemic inequities (for example, Bangeni & Kapp, 2017; Gofen, 2009; Mobley & Brawner, 2019; Revelo & Baber, 2018). However, there remains a pressing need to continue to challenge dominant narratives that still, to this day, position FIF students as inherently problematic, manifest in generic attrition data and metrics that place undue emphasis on the shortcomings of this cohort (see, for example, Alger, 2024). In the current VUCA climate, such reductive portrayals are not only inadequate for genuinely supporting students, but potentially harmful (Raciti, 2022).

Our specific focus in this paper is to uncover the ways in which FIF status is actually 'lived' when it comes to persistence; that is, how it is etched into the psyche, assisting students to persist in their studies. Expanding on the work of Bangeni and Kapp (2017), we argue that developing a meaningful understanding of *why* and *how* FIF students persist requires deep insight into the societal structures and discourses that nurture and fuel their progress, which are potentially patterned in systemic ways in terms of the "socially and discursively available resources" (Thomson, 2009, p. 160) learners draw on, derived from their social location. To achieve this aim, we develop and use the conceptual lens of 'mantras' to tease out how broader processes of socialisation help FIF students to enact persistence, which we identified in our research via the sayings, 'maxims,' or stories that learners applied to their university journeys, firmly rooted within their life biographies. By closely examining the agency of students demonstrated via these mantras, we unpack how FIF status can underpin the psychic work of persistence, recognising both the symbolic strategies students draw on to foreground their persistence as well as the institutional constraints they operate within (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Marshall & Case, 2010).

The paper is structured into four sections. First, we outline key research on the persistence of FIF learners, bringing to light the contribution of our approach and framing. Second, we tease out our conceptual lens of 'mantras.' Next, we highlight the unique data analysed in this paper, generated through three complementary international studies located in Australia, Austria, Ireland, and the UK. Finally, we construct three dominant mantras utilised by the students in our research and offer conceptual and practical insights for research and practice in this area.

Persistence and the first-in-family learner

While there is a wealth of literature investigating the experiences of FIF learners in higher education, it is generally skewed towards exploring and understanding the challenges they experience as they transition into, and persist, in their studies. As noted above, much of this research has, historically, tended to position FIF learners as somehow 'deficit' or 'lacking' in comparison to their peers from university-educated families (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), with an overarching narrative focused on their shortcomings. For example, studies have drawn attention to this cohorts' 'lack' of academic preparedness (Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017), 'problematic' social and cultural integration in the university environment (Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017), 'lower' academic engagement (Stebleton & Soria, 2012), and 'issues' with familial support and expectations (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Sy et al., 2011).

Research has also shown how this population often encounter additional and largely *hidden* obstacles that shape their educational participation. These obstacles can stem not only from very real material disadvantage, but from limited access to the forms of academic capital that are tacitly required to succeed within the higher education environment (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2024; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Much of this knowledge – the conventions, expectations, and linguistic codes of the university – constitutes what has been described as a 'hidden curriculum' (Snyder, 1970), which privileges those who already possess the cultural and linguistic familiarity to interpret subtle cues. For FIF students specifically, the absence of a 'knowledgeable other' or 'guide on the side' means that the taken-for-granted practices of university life can appear opaque or even exclusionary (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2024). The specialised language of higher education, with its shifting terminologies and institutional variations, exemplifies this opacity: what is common sense to insiders may be bewildering to those whose backgrounds and experiences have not been shaped within the boundaries of such academic contexts.

Often, the responsibility for 'fitting in' and deciphering this 'hidden curriculum' has been placed on the individual FIF learner rather than considered relative to the structures or expectations of institutions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, common reasons for attrition identified in research have often centred around the individual and their situation, such as low levels of family income (Ishitani, 2006), working full-time while studying (Lessky & Unger, 2022), and lacking cultural and linguistic familiarity, or capital (Lehmann, 2007). Placing the onus on the individual to 'fit in' has also been shown to result in individuals feeling like they need to 'shape shift' to mask 'belonging' within the higher education environment (Forsyth et al., 2022), with the resulting pressure to change and adapt inevitably leading to the decision to leave for some students (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021).

Moving beyond this narrative, increasing attention has been paid to recognising the assets, knowledge, skills and resources that FIF students possess to facilitate success within dominant university norms, stressing the need to better support the increasing diversity of the student body (Marshall & Case, 2010; Smit, 2012). In particular, this line of research has uncovered different kinds of 'capital' that FIF learners draw on to enact persistence, which is not generally *valued* in the higher education environment but is still *valuable* to learners themselves. For example, in their study on students at a US community college, Mobley and Brawner (2019) found that parental emotional support and a family's financial instability served as important forms of capital that inspired some students to persist in their studies, while other learners drew on existing industry experience as a form of experiential capital. Comparably, Revelo and Baber (2018) identified the use of resistant capital in the university journeys of Latinx students, who were motivated by broader goals of social justice and subsequently worked together to increase the number of Latinx students in their discipline through role modelling and community outreach, fostering their drive to succeed.

In a similar vein, research has also established a strong counter-narrative to the long-standing deficit view of FIF students. Specifically, studies examining students' motivations for study have brought to light the way FIF students can be influenced by the work ethic held by their family (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014), a need to 'do better' or obtain a 'better job' than their parents (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005), or to pursue educational opportunities that their parents were denied or unable to accomplish (Norodien-Fataar, 2016). In specific relation to enacting success in the higher education setting, the strategies and resources embodied in a family's way of life have also been shown to act as a key resource for FIF

learners, with Gofen (2009) proposing that some FIF students ultimately succeed *because of* – rather than *despite* – their familial context. As such, while FIF learners might not have access to the dominant forms of cultural and social capital valuable in higher education, they often draw on other forms of socialisation to foreground their journeys into, and through, this environment.

In terms of supporting persistence, Bangeni and Kapp (2017) aptly suggest that institutions must therefore develop a better awareness of FIF students' sense of self in order to harness their agency, given that their available resources are uniquely different – but not deficient. Using this idea as springboard, in this paper we consider the lived, agentic strategies FIF students employ to persist in higher education, with a particular focus on the social and discursive resources utilised to foreground, guide and drive their educational journeys (Thomson, 2009). In today's climate, many countries have significant participation goals for students from diverse backgrounds, including those who are the first in their family or community to attend university. However, the drive to widen participation should never rely solely on "the mechanisms of fair competition" (Marginson, 2011, p. 30) as this ultimately fails to consider the 'capacity' of learners to function or compete equally once within higher education. Like Marginson (2011), the research detailed in this paper provides a deep and unwavering focus on the actual ways that learners navigate what can often be alien and difficult environments. The students in our research had all managed to 'persist' in their studies, so focussing on the ways this persistence was enacted allows us to move beyond institutional metrics to develop a more empathetic and humanising understanding of how – for this cohort – persistence is shaped by a complex amalgam of identity and social location.

Conceptualising 'mantras of persistence'

Offering a new theoretical perspective to the literature, in this paper we establish and use the conceptual device of 'mantras' to unpack and explore the cultural, linguistic and symbolic tools FIF students draw on to make sense of their experiences, construct their identities, and aid in their navigation of higher education (Thomson, 2009). In common parlance in many Western nations, a 'mantra' is often taken to mean a slogan, catchphrase, or statement. However, our conceptualisation goes much deeper to recognise the powerful ways mantras act as an 'instrument of the mind' (Alper, 1991), connecting an individual to their social-cultural milieu by theorising the way norms, values, practices, stories and discourses circulating within families, communities and society are used by individuals to position themselves and make meaning (Thomson, 2009). This conceptualisation speaks directly to the etymological roots of the word 'mantra' as derived from Ancient India and Iran, with the word believed to originally stem from the Sanskrit root 'man' (meaning, 'to think') and the suffix '-tra' (denoting 'tool' or 'means') (Cresswell, 2021). Quite literally, then, a mantra can best be understood not merely as an internal affirmation, but as a culturally embedded tool and even a performative act of identity (Thomson, 2009); a means for "creating, conveying, concentrating and realising intentional thought" (Gonda, 1963, p. 255) that reflects broader social structures, socio-cultural traditions, and collective histories.

Conceptualised in this way, mantras can be understood to hold psychic properties, which is particularly relevant for FIF learners entering the unchartered territory of university (O'Shea et al., 2023). In the early Verdic age in Ancient India, there was a particular

fascination with the inspirational and divine power of poems, verses, musical chants, and utterances (Staal, 1996), eventually giving rise to the word 'mantra' to denote a "weapon of supernatural power" through formulated and expressed thought (Gonda, 1963, p. 268). Mantras can therefore be considered 'magical' (Burchett, 2008) because they connect to, and can be etched within, the psyche – an individual's deepest thoughts, feelings, and beliefs – producing an almost 'hypnotic influence' (Staal, 1996). In this light, any one person's thoughts, feelings and beliefs must be recognised as both deeply internalised and socially patterned, with the powerful influence of mantras patterned in systemically in terms of the social structures available to different groups (Thomson, 2009).

Here, our conceptualisation of mantras speaks to Archer's (2003) theorisation of internal conversation – a reflexive process that enables individuals to engage in ongoing inner dialogue. This dialogue may, in some cases, provide a way for learners such as FIF students to understand their social situation as well as how they engage in new or difficult terrain (Wang, 2014). As such, mantras arguably function as reflexive tools that help FIF students interpret their social location within the field of higher education, mediating between inherited values and dispositions, the norms, narratives, and discourses circulating within their families and communities, and the new expectations they encounter.

Positioned within this conceptual grounding, our specific focus in this paper is to tease out how socialising forces beyond the university, particularly in terms of the family, school and community, are intimately tied to FIF status as part of an individual's psyche, leading to the creation of sayings, 'maxims,' or stories that help learners enact persistence. While socialisation occurs over the life course, it is well-recognised that family and schooling usually act as the key sites of socialisation for young people, through which they learn norms, values, behaviours, and expectations, as well as stories and narratives about what 'people like us' do (Archer et al., 2012). We see 'mantras' as being part of, and connected to, this socialisation process, acting as 'memorable messages' (Wang, 2014) that encapsulate shared expectations and collective histories (Thomson, 2009). To this end, we position the concept of 'mantras' as a way to connect the educational journeys of individual learners to the world outside, and beyond, university, acting as a symbolic 'anchor' that helps FIF students interpret and story their educational journey. In turn, we use the analytical insights generated through this conceptual work to make recommendations on how to better support FIF learners in higher education, particularly in the current VUCA climate.

Methodology

The data analysed in this paper are drawn from three complementary qualitative studies, deliberately taking an international perspective to understanding FIF students' persistence. This kind of international analysis is something that is manifestly missing from the current literature and research in this field, which tends to focus on FIF students within distinct institutions or national contexts. Given the aim of many Western governments to expand and widen enrolment in higher education, we are arguably in the 'era' of the FIF learner (O'Shea et al., 2023). As such, within this paper, we focus on what students have in common across borders by treating FIF entry as a global phenomenon. This empirical focus directly aligns with our conceptual lens, in which mantras are seen as socially embedded and patterned, rooted in cultural and discursive repertoires (Thomson, 2009). By examining the

mantras articulated by FIF students across Australia, Austria, Ireland and the UK, our goal is to identify similarities in the norms, values, practices, stories and discourses that underpin the persistence of FIF learners. This cross-national lens allows us to move beyond localised understandings of persistence to instead foreground the shared symbolic, emotional and affective labour FIF learners engage in to remain enrolled.

Data

The first study, funded by the Australian Research Council, occurred between 2017 and 2022. The project explored how FIF learners manage to successfully persist in their studies and reach graduation. Students were recruited from across Australia as well as the UK, Austria, and Ireland. In total, 92 students were interviewed from 12 universities, with most of these institutions ($n=9$) being in Australia. The universities were located in both urban and regional settings, each also had a broadly diverse student population. The international focus of the project was unique and sought a more global understanding of the FIF student experience. This project provided an overarching framing for the two other studies.

The second study explored issues of access, persistence, and retention among students at one Australian university during 2023. This university is located in an urban setting and has a strong focus on equity, with one in two undergraduate students being first in family. In total, 44 students were interviewed. The third study investigated the FIF student experience in Austria, focusing on four public universities between 2018 and 2024. In total, 38 students were interviewed in urban and rural settings. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the data collection across the three projects and the various locations.

Of note, while the countries represented in these studies are vastly different in size and location, they share similarly significant numbers of FiF learners. Each of the countries have committed to widening the participation of under-represented groups in tertiary settings and each is contending with higher attrition and lower success rates when compared to more advantaged student populations (FMSRE, 2017; Henderson et al., 2019; Nuffield Foundation, 2020; QILT, 2022).

In all three projects, interviews were semi-structured focusing on the biographies of FIF learners and their past and present educational experiences. Questions variously focused on students' personal background, reasons for enrolling in the degree and university, experiences of studying and student life, perceptions of the labour market and graduate outcomes, aspirations and goals, and barriers/enablers to achieving these aspirations and goals. Interviews took place either via Zoom, phone, or face-to-face on-campus, lasting between one-four hours.

Table 1 Sample characteristics

Project	Country	Number of Universities	Date of data collection	Sample
Project 1	Australia	9	2017–2022	69
	Ireland	1		7
	UK	1		4
	Austria	1		12
Project 2	Australia	1	2023	44
Project 3	Austria	4	2018–2024	38
Total		**17**		**174**

Analysis

A narrative inquiry lens was initially applied to the data as each project aimed to foreground the biographies and lived experiences of FIF learners. Interview data for each project was coded separately using the NVivo software program, with the three authors of this paper subsequently meeting at regular intervals to discuss common themes and divergent insights.

The initial coding procedure was carried out by each researcher independently. Next, coding structures were compared and discussed amongst the research team. In the next step, common themes were selected and hermeneutics was applied for further in-depth analysis and interpretation. Hermeneutics was chosen to shed light on latent structures of meaning underlying the respective text (Reiter & Sardadvar, 2025). These structures are not wilfully produced by actors but are grounded in the context of their utterances, allowing for an examination of congruences and associated experiences related to persistence from an actor-centred perspective. Through this step of the analysis, such structures of meaning, which we conceptualised as mantras, were reconstructed. Next, the findings of the interpretative sessions were merged with findings from the coding procedure. Finally, the mantras were reconstructed by focussing on selected empirically grounded codes, ultimately resulting in three dominant mantras, as detailed below.

Findings

The three dominant mantras embedded in the students' narratives and biographies were: (1) the mantra of strong work ethic, (2) the mantra of defiance, and (3) the mantra of hopeful imaginings for a 'better life'. It is important to acknowledge that some learners drew on multiple mantras and, as such, that these overarching classifications are likely to be intertwined and interrelated. Nevertheless, we present them here as analytically distinct in order to gain in-depth insight into how each of these mantras help facilitate persistence in the university environment.

"If you start something, finish it": The mantra of strong work ethic

Many of the FIF learners talked about a strong work ethic in their families, which they applied directly to the university context. This mantra was particularly expressed through a strong desire to not give up on what had already been started and was often built on the belief that hard work and perseverance were important aspects of life. These values had been nurtured early in the familial environment and embodied by the students in the way they approached university life:

> Mum and Dad always stressed the mentality of "If you start something, finish it, no matter what it is. If you say you're going to do something, if you tell someone you're going to do something, do it. Stick to your word" kind of deal. (Lucas, 3rd (final) year, B. Arts, aged 20, Australia)

> Very strong work ethic – got that from my parents, got them to thank for that. The resilience, yep, that affects everything else. (Donna, 3rd (final) year, B. Arts, aged 39, Australia)

> I didn't want to start anything and not finishing it, […] and erm that's why I had to finish it somehow. (Peter, 4th Year, B. Medicine, aged 25, Austria)

Some students attributed this mantra to their working-class background. Specifically, they mentioned that they were aware of the barriers confronting them at university due to their social location, knowledgeable that they had to work harder than others and that they were unable to rely on the level of financial support as their more privileged peers. Here, there was also recognition that the responsibility to 'unpack' and understand the 'hidden curriculum' of the university environment lies predominantly with the individual learner. Applying this strong work ethic to the university context was therefore a useful tool to combat any perceived shortcomings, providing an underlying foundation for persistence:

> You just keep on going because that's what you want; you don't give up – it's what you do and it almost comes naturally. It's very organic within our family… It was something that everyone in our family has; it was something that we were taught when we were younger that if you really want something, nothing in life is ever going to be handed to you on a silver platter and that's probably because of that working class ethic in our family, just to never give up – where there's a will, there's a way. (Erin, 3rd (final) year, B. Arts, aged 32, Australia)

> I like to talk about the fact that I'm persistent. It's probably a strength of character that I did get from my working-class family. Persistence is probably one of the greatest gifts that we're given in the ability to succeed at anything that we undertake. (Brett, 3rd (final) year, B. Business, aged 33, Australia)

Students also critically reflected upon this mantra, recognising that it could lead to a degree of pressure given that not finishing something could sometimes be perceived as a weakness within their families. In some instances, this feeling was manifest in the sense of being misunderstood by parents:

> For me, that was actually always a burden… this "my parents want me to get on with my studies". Not that they pushed me, but my parents have no idea what goes on at university. (Paul, 4th (final) year, B. Business, aged 32, Austria)

Some students subsequently described how they were beginning to question this mantra:

> It's a process I'm currently going through (laughs). This "slow down", so to speak… And looking back, I just grew up with this "always being busy and always having to be active and not even being able to sit for an hour for no reason, so to speak." And I'm just trying to integrate that into my life without feeling guilty… And now, looking back, I realise how I've slowly let go of this idea of always having to be working

> hard. And it's still a bit difficult that I'm basically 'just' studying. (Melanie, 2nd year, B. Education, aged 28, Austria)

> I was just a total high achiever for so long. My whole school life, yes. But that just comes from a much more personal corner. So it's simply about father issues, mother issues and so on. And that's just a strong inner conflict, because I simply realise "I don't have to perform anymore. I don't want to do it anymore. I just want to be me." (Lisa, 2nd year, B. Education, aged 33, Austria)

Those who were questioning their strong work ethic tried to partly transform it. For example, some students had started to incorporate rest periods into their daily academic routines, while others tried to feel less guilty when they were not consistently striving for high academic performance. In sum, the findings indicate that this mantra facilitated persistence at university by instilling a strong belief in the ability to achieve one's goals through hard work and not giving up. For some learners, however, this mantra can equally create invisible pressures.

"I'll prove them wrong": The mantra of defiance

The mantra of defiance manifested as an underlying goal expressed by FIF learners to prove to others that they were capable of succeeding at university, despite others attempting to foreclose their educational aspirations or holding limiting views. This mantra thus symbolises students' capability to translate challenging experiences into a source of power, fuelling their desire to continue in their studies and ultimately achieve success. For example, students across all three studies reported negative experiences with teachers during their formal schooling. However, instead of interpreting such experiences as a reflection of their own lack of ability, they used their educational journey and what had been communicated to them to demonstrate that they had been misjudged:

> There were some teachers of mine who didn't think much of me, let's say, who didn't believe I would go to university. That's why I thought to myself: no, I'll prove them wrong. (Laura, 2nd year, B. Education, aged 23, Austria)

> I'm mainly studying to prove to myself that I can do it… And maybe to others, too. It would be nice if the elementary school teachers could see it. Because they had already written me off when I was still little. (Lukas, 3rd year, B. Education, aged 25, Austria)

This narrative was sometimes applied to the family and community context, with some students describing a similar narrative of low expectations from parents and friends. In many of these instances, such beliefs fuelled students' underlying goals to complete their studies, wanting to prove their family and friends wrong:

> University wasn't really something that was ever told to me that I could do. So, I just want to graduate and prove to the people around me that I've done it… they thought I didn't have the ability to go. That was the general idea I was getting from friends and family. (Jessica, 4th (final) year, B. Speech Pathology, aged 26, Australia)

This dynamic with the family was also nuanced. For example, when there was a defiance relative to academic success, students' mantras were often couched in terms of demonstrating to others that university was attainable and achievable. For example, Eleanor explained that she was defiant on behalf of her younger adopted brother who had already foreclosed the possibility of university, having deemed himself 'not clever enough.' As such, Eleanor was determined that her own academic journey would provide inspiration for his future educational endeavours:

> I have a younger brother who was adopted out and I've talked to him a little bit about it… he's just got to believe that he can do it and that university is just as accessible to him as it is to me. There's so many people from middle-class backgrounds and upper class backgrounds at university that are, you know, as thick as bricks and I'm baffled that they get through their degree… It's like it's an institution that we don't feel like we belong in and that we're not good enough to go to. So I try to tell him, you know, like there's heaps of people that are at uni that are not even half as clever as he is and they're doing it and they go onto Masters or things so he can definitely do it. (Eleanor, 3rd (final) year, B. Community Services, aged 29, Australia)

At a broader level, students also described feeling motivated by narrow societal expectations. In one of the starkest examples, Boja, a migrant from a war-torn country, explained how undertaking higher education was an act of defiance relative to the gender expectations of her home country. As she navigated an alien higher education environment, she continually reminded herself that this educational trajectory would not be possible if she was still in her country of origin, which she expressed quite bluntly in the following defiant statement:

> You see, you patriarchal warriors! You thinking I should have married and celebrated Christmas! No. I did it. I got my diploma. (Boja, 3rd (final) year, B. Community Youth Work, aged 48, Ireland)

Given these challenging experiences, students' pursuit of higher education tended to hold symbolic significance. For some learners, completing a university degree initially seemed unlikely. However, gaining admission to university had come to represent a significant personal achievement. Such experiences led students to develop confidence in themselves and believe in the power of their capabilities:

> There was a stage where I just went, "I actually think I can do this and I want to prove to everyone – especially my husband – that I'm not this silly, dumb person that can't put one foot in front of the other." (Heather, 5th (final) year, B. Arts, aged 59, Australia)

> And that was the first thing she [someone from career counseling at university] said: "Absolutely not, you'll never find such a term-time job in a million years. No one will hire you." That was her way of saying it. And I'm that kind of person, I like to prove people wrong, because no one can say something like that. I know what I know, and this person has seen me for maybe ten minutes and claims that I can't do it. I don't believe it. And then I went and found this job. I would have loved to go back to her

and show her my contract. (Sandra, 3rd (final) year, B. Education Sciences, aged 23, Austria)

Some of the interviewed students considered university education as a means to process and overcome past negative experiences, such as those described above. They took satisfaction in having achieved something that their teachers, parents, significant others or broader community had deemed them incapable of. Through their progress and academic success, they demonstrated that these beliefs were wrong, which further served as a motivating factor for their studies.

"I'm not doing it just for a piece of paper": The mantra of hopeful imaginings for a 'better life'

Finally, the third mantra captures the hopes attributed to higher education in terms of having a better life. This desire was often more than simply obtaining financial security or a rewarding job, but was linked instead to intrinsic value, as Jennifer explained:

I just have to convince myself every now and again of the reasons why I chose to go to university and then remember that I'm not doing it just for a piece of paper – there's a reason why I want to be a primary school teacher, there's a reason for my family why I want to have the opportunity to have a successful career and be able to contribute to society. (Jennifer, 3rd year, B. Primary Education, aged 28, Australia)

Such 'imaginings' were often linked to intergenerational opportunity within the family. Fuelling this mantra was strong links to students' home lives, with parents constructing narratives around higher education in terms of denied opportunity and deferred dreams:

My mum most of all has been my inspiration to keep going because she always wanted to be a teacher but never had the opportunity to go to university. (Nathan, 3rd year, B. Primary Education, aged 21, Australia)

Another powerful component of this mantra was observing parents' struggles with work, finance, housing, and food. Many parents had articulated that university would lead to jobs with better working conditions or had stressed the need to not make the same mistakes they perceived they had made:

My Mum and Dad both finished in Year 10. We come from a low socioeconomic background so I always just wanted to be better. Not better, but I don't know, have more opportunity I guess, which I thought that university would give me. Although I didn't really know what I wanted to do, I just knew I wanted to go to university. (Leyla, 6th (final) year, B. Law, aged 27, Austria)

From the failure before and from my parents, kinda. They've worked hard… like they've gone from when I was born – they had me pretty young−23, and they've gone… even my Dad, I remember him telling me he was working as a window cleaner for years and he was like, "I remember that time wrapping a tea towel around you

> because I didn't have money for nappies", you know? So, when you hear stories like that from them and he's… and then they worked so hard for years while having four kids, you know, it just kinda rubs off on you, like your influencers, the people that you have around, and then from what you learnt, the past from failures and stuff like that. (Kiera, 4th year, B. Science (Honours), aged 25, Ireland)

As these quotes show, parental biographies and stories influenced how learners perceived their own university education, and the role of higher education more broadly. The act of witnessing hardships or difficult working contexts provided the impetus for learners to persist, despite the obstacles they encountered. Equally, the difficulties of the past manifested as university being seen as an exit route from hardship or low socioeconomic status. In this light, for some students, university was presented as the only way they would have to achieve a better life:

> So, I was already predestined by the whole family: "You have to study. That's the only thing that helps and we see all the successful ones we know - they have all gone to university, and you should do it too"… I never really had the choice to decide what I want to do. (Peter, 4th Year, B. Medicine, aged 25, Austria)

The quote above, however, reflects the tension that can arise between seeking possible upward mobility via university, on the one hand, and the desire for autonomy on the other. While the mantra of hopeful imaginings is deeply connected to the hopes that are attributed to higher education in terms of gaining a better life, it can also create pressure for students to achieve.

Discussion and conclusion

With the persistence of FIF learners remaining a key structural challenge across many nation states (Henderson et al., 2019; Nuffield Foundation, 2020; QILT, 2022), this paper has explored how FIF students – as a cohort – draw on deeply internalised 'mantras' as lived, agentic strategies that help them to persist in higher education. While FIF students have long been the focus of research (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), studies have largely examined the experiences of FIF learners at an institutional or national level, obscuring potential insights into the shared, socially patterned ways in which FIF students navigate and make sense of their educational journeys. By drawing on cross-national data from Australia, Austria, Ireland, and the UK, we have been able to tease out a number of key similarities amongst FIF students a global level that offers a unique and timely contribution to the field, demonstrating that there are fundamental commonalities in the norms, values, practices, stories and discourses circulating within families, communities and society (Thomson, 2009) that are used by FIF learners to foreground persistence. Interestingly, these social and discursive repertories are utilised by FIF learners to drive their educational journey despite differences in age, gender, field of study, institution and geographic context, revealing core social logics at an international level, with important ramifications for policy and practice.

While acknowledging our students' capacities to persist in their studies by conceptualising and exploring these 'mantras of persistence', we turn to look at these mantras critically. Collectively, we contend that the mantras not only signal the hidden emotional, symbolic

and affective work that FIF learners often engage in during their studies that tends to remain invisible (O'Shea et al., 2015), but also how this work is interwoven with neoliberal relations of power (Mendick et al., 2018). First, the mantra of 'strong work ethic' directly relates to the belief that hard work and perseverance are key to success. In some regards, such beliefs are inherently tied to embodied class identities and/or social location. However, these beliefs arguably also constitute the 'hard work zeitgeist' that currently pervades global society, where discourses of individualism and meritocracy are pushed onto youth as a way for them to overcome structural inequality (Mendick et al., 2018; Patfield et al., 2024). In our research, this mantra was sometimes grounded in a sense of pride and confidence for learners, but it could also lead them to critically reflect on the pressures they were under and the psychic implications related to this labour (Smith & McLellan, 2023). Indeed, the FIF learners in our various projects were engaging in reflexive work to make sense of their position and sustain persistence as part of an internal conversation (Archer, 2003). Through such dialogue, students constructed personal narratives deeply connected with broader social structures and collective working-class histories, reaffirming their commitment to 'staying the course.'

Second, the mantra of 'defiance' captures how students transformed previous negative experiences or negative perceptions of their capabilities into a rich source of power. These learners reflected on how implicit and explicit limitations imposed by teachers, family structures, friends and society were used to 'rewrite' or reject accepted destinations or life scripts, with higher education providing both a means and an end to prove others wrong or to encourage others to consider higher education as a viable option. Here we gain a sense of the psychic damage inequalities can inflict on FIF learners, which is also intricately connected to class, gender, and other markers of socio-cultural identity (Reay, 2017). In recognising and attempting to rise above the feeling of being in a subordinate position within education, their family, or society, these learners are engaged in aspirational individualism yet are also equally confronted by the difficult task of reparative work in order to see themselves (and their family members) as good enough and reclaim personal value (Reay, 2013).

Third, the mantra of 'hopeful imaginings for a better life' details how FIF learners' persistence is also grounded in a desire to 'give back' to family or to achieve something that was denied to others. University – and achieving success at university – is thus seen as a way to attain a different or 'better' pathway in life. This desire to 'do better' and to pursue educational opportunities denied to parents are common themes in research on FIF learners (see, for example, Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Norodien-Fataar, 2016). Through a critical lens, however, this mantra points towards the unequal conditions of FIF students' learning, reflecting the way university has become positioned in political and societal narratives as a necessary way to achieve 'the good life,' although it is increasingly unable to deliver on this promise (Jaremus et al., 2023). Bathmaker et al. (2016) have gone so far to suggest that the social mobility that is assumed to come from university is now "fantasy rhetoric" (p. ix). However, when educational institutions continue to be exhorted to expand opportunities in society (Marginson, 2015), we must recognise the hope FIF learners place in university and how buying into meritocracy represents an accessible means of trying to reach normative visions of success (Patfield et al., 2021).

At a theoretical level, our work conceptualising these 'mantras of persistence' brings to light a way to capture the societal structures and discourses that nurture and fuel progress (Bangeni & Kapp, 2017), answering the call for more nuanced sociocultural perspectives to

understand and support persistence (Ajjawi et al., 2020). This theorisation aims to recognise the complex ways life biographies interact with the university environment. This approach thus avoids treating persistence as a one-dimensional 'choice' (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2024) instead recognising that norms and practices within families, communities and society more broadly not only foreground the way FIF learners construct identity, but also create meaning in the higher education environment (Thomson, 2009). Theoretically, mantras are thought to have an almost 'magical' quality (Burchett, 2008) because they are etched within the psyche and can result in mental and/or physical strength to achieve a goal or even guide a course of action (Rai & Borah, 2012). In our research, this sense of 'magic' was evident in the ways the students drew on various forms of socially patterned 'power' to foreground their persistence, one that extends far beyond the individual in quite complicated ways. Of particular note, these mantras are grounded in both positive and negative aspects of students' lifeworlds – which often intersect and overlap – from the valuing of hard work, to the desire to combat familial and/or societal expectations, to the harsh realities of economic hardship, physical labour, and struggle.

At a practical level, our findings help to understand the longstanding challenges of improving the retention rates of FIF learners. The data not only foregrounds how these reconstructed mantras facilitate students' persistence at university but also illustrate how inequalities play out in invisible or subtle ways in this environment. For example, the ideas of working hard and hopeful imaginings are arguably examples of learners playing by the 'old rules' of the game (Bathmaker et al., 2016), meaning that students may invest heavily in academic achievement without realising that implicit knowledge about how the game is being played (such as the importance of accruing social capital) is equally vital but largely hidden. While not explicitly covered in this paper, some of the interviewed students realised that their existing mantras did not necessarily lead to the rewards they expected, unless they had access to 'the right' forms of capital. While these mantras helped them to persist, it is therefore important to note that students are affected by very real material barriers, which can sometimes result in feelings of frustration and exhaustion (Threadgold, 2020). To be clear, the issue here is not with the mantras that these learners drew upon but, rather, the unequal structuring of the higher education space that puts them at a disadvantage. While acknowledging the role of student unions and student led campaigns, the participants in these studies did not reflect on the impact of such extracurricular activities or supports in any great depth. Instead, the students we interviewed were cognizant of the need to be self-reliant and independent, manifested through personal mantras or narrative disclosures designed to reaffirm commitment to "'staying the course" despite feelings of misfit. Yet when students depart early, the effects reverberate beyond the individual, sending discouraging signals to families and communities observing their journey. We aim to address the ramifications of this disadvantage in more detail in a subsequent paper.

Finally, our study expands on current literature where students have often been decontextualised from their social environment through a simplistic focus on 'high' rates of attrition. Shedding light on the actual *act of persisting* signals that there are fundamental shifts that need to occur within the academy to better support these learners execute their mantras and complete their degree. One example is the importance of validating learner's previous life experiences (and that of their family), not as a problem that needs to be fixed but as a source of strength and resilience that can have real currency within the university environment. Relatedly, careful thought is needed about the skills and capitals currently valorised within

higher education settings, including interrogating whether these are implicitly reflective of certain class or culturally based assumptions. This process should be complemented by an intentional and structured approach to educating learners, university educators and staff on how diversity can be an instrument of success within the tertiary setting, helping to fuel institutional change.

To conclude, the mantras detailed in this paper undoubtedly provided FIF learners with the necessary concrete and stable cornerstones to explain and rationalise their ability to persist. However, there is still a great deal of work to be done to ensure these mantras can be recognised, valued, and utilised across the sector. We contend that such matters are particularly crucial in these 'VUCA times' (Panthalookaran, 2022), where learners, and indeed graduates, are increasingly challenged by volatile and uncertain social contexts characterised by complexity and ambiguity. These mantras can possibly act as a personal arsenal relative to these factors, providing the capacity for individual learners to continue in their studies despite the sometimes hostile terrain.

Author contributions Lessky – initial conceptualisation, theoretical development, data collection, analysis, literature review, findings, writing, editing, argument. Patfield – theoretical development, data collection, analysis, literature review, writing, editing, argument. O'Shea – data collection, analysis, literature review, writing, editing, argument.

Funding Studies reported on in this paper were partly funded by: the Australian Research Council (DP170100705), the Teachers and Teaching Research Centre of the University of Newcastle, and the Vice-Rectorate for Research of the University of Innsbruck as part of the Early Stage Programme.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate Study 1 was approved by the University of Wollongong Research Ethics Committee (approval no. 2017/078) on the 14th March 2017. Study 2 was approved by the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee (H-2021-0420) on the 7th February 2022. Study 3 was approved by the University of Innsbruck Research Ethics Committee (approval no. 13/2023) on the 21st February 2023. Across all studies, participants provided verbal or written consent before taking part in an interview.

Competing interests The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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