First-in-family data ‘lacks robustness’

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They are the First Fleeters of the university world: household pioneers trailblazing a brave new world of higher education. They wear the “first-in-family” status as a badge of honour, signifying breakthrough and huge personal achievement.

But questions are emerging over just what “first-in-family” means, and whether it should be considered a coherent group.

While data is limited, about half of Australian university students are deemed first-in-family. An international literature review on the topic, conducted in 2013 by German social scientists, concluded that about 50 per cent of Australian students met the description.

However, the researchers questioned their own estimates, citing “international incommensurability of data” because of differences in how “first-generation” students were defined.

A Grattan Institute analysis, based on federal Education Department data on domestic undergraduates starting in 2015, concluded that 49.9 per cent did not have university-educated parents.

Grattan higher education program director Andrew Norton said the category was “not very meaningful” because, historically, a relatively small proportion of people had degrees.

Last year’s Student Experience Survey National Report, compiled by the Education Department, concluded that about 48 per cent of respondents were first-in-family. They were slightly more likely than others to consider dropping out, with 20 per cent of commencing students saying they were considering departure, compared to about 17 per cent of those not classified as first-in-family.
However, the department’s definition of first-in-family students is based on the highest level of their parents’ education. Consequently, the category includes students with other family members who have attended university.

Andrew Harvey, director of La Trobe University’s Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, said it also included people whose parents had attended institutions later rebadged as universities under former education minister John Dawkins.

“Pre-Dawkins parents are likely not to have gone to university even if they are teachers, nurses or pharmacists,” Dr Harvey said.

“There would be a lot of people with parents who went somewhere that technically wasn’t university, but really was.

“I’ve always been sceptical of first-in-family data because I don’t think it’s very robust.”

Complicating matters further, many students do not disclose their parents’ education levels on enrolment forms.

University of Wollongong education researcher Sarah O’Shea, who has co-written a book on first-in-family students, said many mature-aged students could not see the relevance of their parents’ education.

Dr O’Shea applies a more specific category in her research. “The definition I take is first out of everyone — parents, siblings, children, partners, grandparents.

“It’s a much more generational definition.

“When I’ve interviewed students that belong to that category, they talk about how they come to university without that insiders’ knowledge of what university’s going to be like.”

Dr O’Shea said it was impossible to estimate what proportion of students met this narrower definition. Nevertheless, she said first-in-family was a useful category because unlike socio-economic status measures, it did not rely on a “deficit way of thinking”.

“It doesn’t have to be a negative label.

“It’s a nice way of identifying students rather than focusing on what they lack, which is what a lot of our equity definitions do.”
University of Toronto tertiary education researcher Leesa Wheelahan said SES measures were problematic and “crude”. “Government should base equity funding on SES, but universities need to have strategies to identify students who are first in their family to attend university.”

RMIT University policy analyst Gavin Moodie said the existing first-in-family measure had value, despite its limitations.

“Parents’ level of education is a very strong predictor of higher education participation, so it is quite a good indicator of educational equity.”