

First-in-Family Students

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About the author

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Foreword

Nick Hillman, Director of HEPI

When the author of this piece, Harriet Coombs, then an undergraduate student at the University of Bristol, approached HEPI seeking an internship to look at first-in-family students, we jumped at the opportunity. It felt like a topical and important issue on which HEPI had said too little.

Moreover, our past experience with student interns had always been positive: for example, past HEPI reports on issues such as student mental health, fees and funding and the decline in language learning all benefited enormously from the insights that their student authors had brought to the projects.

When taking on a student intern, it is tempting to think the intern is bound to benefit more than the host organisation. That has never been our experience. We have always learnt at least as much from our interns as they have from gaining experience in the workplace – and never more so than with this project.

For example, Harriet's work highlights that a majority of students are first-in-family (FiF) and that, on many issues, FiF students perform less well on average than others – for instance, they are less likely to complete their degree. But it also shows the category has too many shortcomings to be a reliable basis for big decisions affecting people's lives. Some FiF students have plenty of social capital while some non-FiF students face big challenges.

In short, FiF is simultaneously useful and flawed, as with so many other higher education metrics.

So Harriet recommends that, despite its faults, a tightly-drawn FiF indicator should continue to be used for low-stakes widening participation activities. But she also argues it should only be used alongside a basket of other measures for higher stakes activities, like contextualised offers.

Given the evidence showing FiF students take time to assimilate and can face extra challenges in the labour market, her policy recommendations at the end also focus on what more can be done to improve their retention and progression.

Another important lesson in the pages that follow is how little transparency there is on existing policies for FiF students. A group of people who could benefit from a simple, understandable and transparent process for the transition to higher education are often expected to deal with a complicated, varied and opaque one.

Mind you, the heterogeneity of both first-in-family students and the institutions that make up the higher education sector together mean there are not always simple solutions to the knotty challenge of how best to support them. So we hope, above all, that this paper makes it easier to think such difficulties through.

Many education and training opportunities for young people have been badly hit by COVID-19. This is one reason why higher education applications are running hot and why non-continuation rates among students have, against expectations, fallen during the crisis.

But for students from disadvantaged families, who are very often FiF, the obstacles to success after graduation can prove insurmountable. That is why the Government and the Office for Students are now putting a new focus on progress in the labour market.

So if I might add one more policy recommendation to those proposed here, it would be to phase out unpaid company internships and offer more paid ones instead. Unpaid posts give those with the most social capital and the most financial capital another boost while shutting out those with less of both.

Executive summary

- In the UK, students who are the first in their family to attend a higher education institution make up roughly two-thirds of young graduates.
- First-generation students are less likely to attend a highly selective institution and are more likely to drop out than those with graduate parents.
- First-in-family students are also more inclined to choose degree subjects with seemingly relatively straightforward routes to the labour market.
- There are clear differences in the level of disadvantage and other socio-economic measures between first-generation graduates and their peers. Compared to those with graduate parents, for example, first-generation students come from households with lower incomes and are more likely to have qualified for Free School Meals.
- The use of the term 'first generation' is often used as a proxy for low-income. However, the term first-generation does not accurately capture individual-level socio-economic status and it also applies disproportionately to those from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, who attend higher education at higher rates compared with young people whose ethnicity is White British.
- When it comes to support, parental education is likely to be a useful indicator for lower stakes policy interventions but it is less appropriate for higher stakes activities, such as contextual offers, when other factors also need to be taken into account.

- Policies that could be usefully adopted to provide more support for first-in-family students include:
 - demystifying contextual admissions at highly selective institutions;
 - providing more outreach engagement for the parents of groups that are under-represented;
 - more mentoring by continuing undergraduates of first-in-family students;
 - accommodation allocation schemes that give priority to students from groups most vulnerable to non-completion; and
 - easier routes to re-entry and providing base-level qualifications for those who leave their course early.

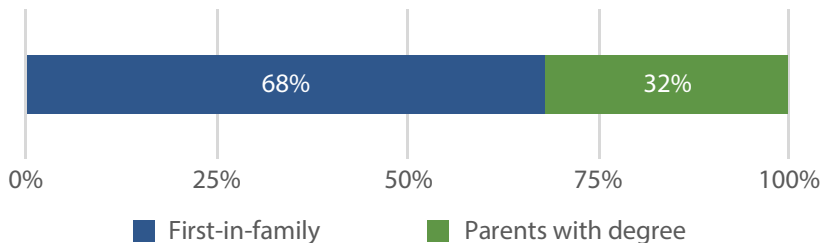
Introduction

Universities can provide opportunities and advancement for talented students regardless of background. Yet for those who are the first in their family to attend higher education, elite institutions can seem like bastions of privilege, with unspoken academic norms and social rules. This report draws on a range of material to uncover lessons on the challenges of being a first-generation student. It ends with some policy recommendations on how first-generation students can best be supported.

In 2017/18, the higher education participation rate for people in England aged between 17 and 30 surpassed the symbolic target of 50 per cent set by Tony Blair in 1999.¹ Of this group, 'about two-thirds are FiF [first-in-family]'²

In other words, most recent graduates from universities in England are the first in their family (excluding siblings) to do so. This result reflects the improvements in educational achievement over time. It also indicates that, for a sizeable cohort of students in the UK, there is still little or no family tradition of supporting students, and few expectations of the unfamiliar territory of higher education.

What proportion of graduates in England are first-in-family?



The expansion of higher education in this country has been partly encouraged by policymakers' and universities' longstanding commitment to widening participation. The aim of widening participation is to improve access to university for disadvantaged groups, including first-generation students, by encouraging universities to reach out to under-represented groups. The process of expansion of UK higher education and increasing use of participation targets has certainly resulted in a more heterogeneous composition of students in terms of social and family background. But despite dramatic growth in student numbers and individual institutions' commitment to widening participation, an educational advantage remains for those from more advantaged socio-economic groups.³ More than half a century on from the Robbins report, the research is clear: the UK's expansion of higher education has benefited young people from richer backgrounds far more than those from less well-off families.⁴ This fact has clear implications for first-generation students, who are considerably more likely to qualify as low income than their peers.⁵

Generally defined as those where 'neither parent has had access to university education and completed a degree', first-generation students are less likely to attend an elite institution and are more likely to drop out of their course than those with graduate parents.⁶ This is in line with the trend of horizontal stratification of higher education in Britain, where students from poorer backgrounds are less likely to access highly selective universities and study for high-status subjects.⁷

Though there is an extensive literature on socio-economic gaps in access to higher education in the UK, there has been comparatively little research looking directly at first-in-family

students. A study of 129 first-generation undergraduates found that friendships were a major factor in determining their success in terms of school and at university, providing a sense of belonging and serving as a source of academic and emotional support.⁸ A 2016 report by the University of Southampton revealed that first-generation students struggle in forming networks, developing cultural capital and successfully navigating routes to the labour market.⁹

What we know

There are clear differences in affluence and broader measures of socio-economic background between first-in-family graduates and those who are not the first in their family to obtain a degree.

Research by the University College London Centre for Longitudinal Studies found that, compared to those with graduate parents, first-generation students:

- had lower household incomes;
- were less likely to have attended an independent school; and
- were more likely to qualify for Free School Meals.¹⁰

The research also showed the share of first-generation graduates varied by subject choice and higher education institution. The subjects attracting the highest share of first-generation students were:

- Education (87 per cent are first-in-family);
- Business and Administrative Studies (79 per cent);

- Subjects Allied to Medicine (76 per cent); and
- Law (75 per cent).

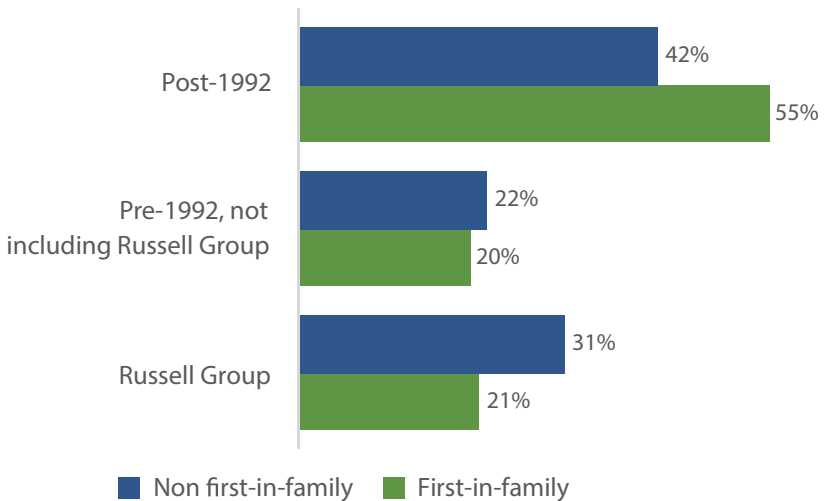
Overall, the data suggest first-generation students may tend to choose subjects that offer moderately good labour market prospects but are not overly competitive, rather than subjects associated with either very high entrance requirements or very low wage returns. First-generation students' narrower focus with regard to subject choice reflects their motivations for attending university, frequently cited as to 'get a better job'. While this is a rational strategy, it would be concerning if first-generation students were not pursuing less vocational subjects, such as the humanities, for fear of their poor labour market outcomes.

With respect to institutional choice, first-generation students are less likely to enter attend Russell Group universities compared to those with parental experiences of higher education. Data from the 2021 HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* suggest non first-in-family students are 50 per cent more likely to attend a Russell Group university.¹¹ Correspondingly, first-in-family students were 25 per cent more likely to attend a post-1992 university.

Challenges faced by first-generation students

Upon entering a university environment, most students encounter a cultural shock as they transition into a new realm of social and academic experiences. Students bring different levels of social capital into their new settings, which have been established in previous contexts.

Share of first-in-family student by institution type



Deficit in social capital – meaning the degree of ease and familiarity one has with the dominant culture of a society – is the most significant reason first-generation students feel like outsiders at institutions typically including a majority of middle-class students. For second-generation students, cultural capital is often transmitted through their parents. Although first-generation students overcome traditional barriers to social mobility in being admitted to university, they nonetheless experience challenges in navigating a system in which they have historically been excluded. In particular, first-generation students are disadvantaged by their lack of support systems with privileged knowledge of university life. Within this dislocation, first-generation students at highly selective universities both experience insecurity about entering a new environment and are forced into positions of cultural outsiders. This creates a sentiment

in which many students feel that 'people like us don't go to university'.¹²

There has been a push for universities to establish specific programmes for first-generation students.¹³ Social mobility as a means to address inequality and exclusion has risen up the policy agenda and become embedded in political discourse. For example, Michelle Donelan, the Minister for Higher Education, has said, 'when it comes to social mobility, for me, real social mobility is as much about getting on as it is about getting in'.¹⁴

1. Defining first-generation

While the term 'first generation' may seem self-explanatory, its simplicity masks a great deal. At its most basic, the definition of 'first-in-family' refers to someone who attends higher education but whose parents did not achieve a university degree.¹⁵ The term has been used for decades in the US, where the Department of Education defines first-generation status in at least three different ways: one legislative definition (no parent has a bachelor's degree) and two used for research (no education after high school, no degree after high school).¹⁶

Institutions in the US have also adopted different definitions. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*:

*on one campus, a student whose parents graduated from community college would be considered a first-generation student. On another, a student whose parents took one postsecondary course class would not be.*¹⁷

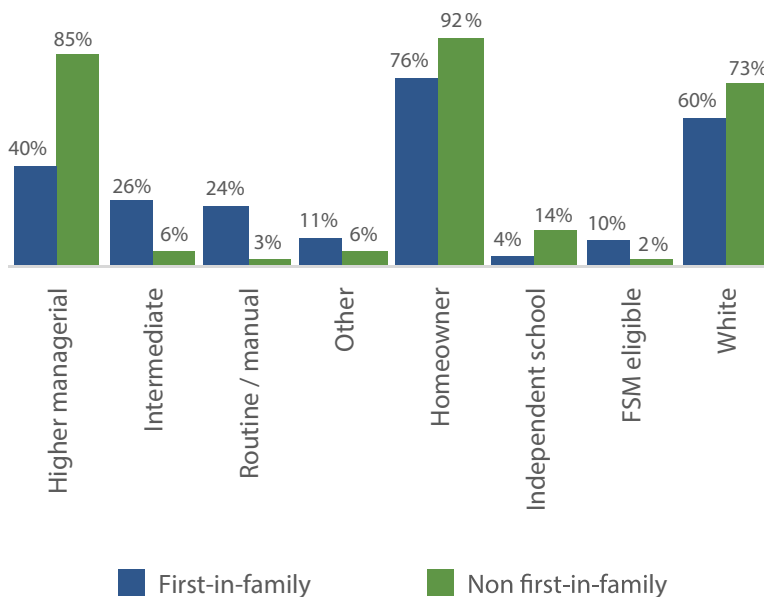
A project using data from the United States constructed eight different definitions of the term and found that the proportion of students who could be labelled first-generation ranged from 22 per cent to 77 per cent, concluding:

*The fact that the size of the FGCS [First-Generation College Students] population varies considerably by definition is important for policy makers, educators, and governments to know as they develop support programs for FGCS.*¹⁸

Graduates in England whose parents did not obtain a degree are less likely than others to have attended an independent school (4 per cent versus 14 per cent), less likely to have a parent working in a higher managerial occupation (40 per cent

versus 85 per cent) and less likely to own their own home (76 per cent versus 92 per cent).¹⁹ On average, they took fewer A-Levels and were more likely to be eligible for Free School Meals during their time from school.

Social Class



Despite these findings, first-generation students are not necessarily low-income students, and low-income students are not always the first in their family to graduate from university. Moreover, a first-in-family student may come from a family that is economically poor but culturally rich – one qualitative study among FiF students in the US notes about one study participant:

To assume that because he was a full financial aid recipient he must also enter college with a lack of cultural

*or social capital would be both incorrect and potentially personally insulting.*²⁰

This all presents a challenge to universities which have been using first-generation as a code for low-income or underprivileged.

Is first-generation a useful categorisation?

Little is known about how well the measure of first-generation captures individual-level socio-economic status. The issue most likely to constrain information about parental education in contextual admissions is that it is typically based upon students' (or possibly their parents') own reports, meaning it cannot be independently verified. In the UK, there is currently no easily accessible administrative database capturing information about parental education. Instead, prospective students are asked to self-declare their first-in-family status when they apply to university through UCAS. Yet this comes with obvious issues. If first-generation status were to be used to make 'high-stakes' decisions such as for contextual offers, it would provide a clear incentive for young people to misreport. Moreover, some students may genuinely be unaware of their parents' education level. In the case of step-families and siblings, it is not always entirely clear whose education should be reported.

The term 'first-generation' applies disproportionately to those from Black and Minority Ethnic groups.²¹ Research by University College London found that, compared to those who are White, those from mixed race, Indian, Pakistani / Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean and Black African groups are significantly more likely to achieve a degree and be the first

in their family to graduate from university.²² New evidence indicates that educational attainment is closely related to socio-economic status, but once this is controlled for, all other major ethnic groups still perform better than White British pupils. Professor Steve Strand at the University of Oxford referenced the theory of the 'immigrant paradigm' to explain the disparity in educational attainment between White British pupils and those from Black and Minority Ethnic groups:

The 'immigrant paradigm' suggests that recent immigrants devote themselves more to education than the native population because they lack financial capital and see education as a way out of poverty.²³

According to the controversial 2021 report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, this theory has been shown as responsible for better progression rates for ethnic minorities into post-compulsory education in England. The report also attributed differences in attainment to the fact that migrants of Indian heritage were more likely to be of high socio-economic status in their countries of origin. For some, this included rich experiences of further education.

As the data suggest, the story for some ethnic groups has been one of remarkable social mobility, outperforming the national average and enabling them to attain success at the highest levels within a generation. However, although a higher percentage of ethnic minority young people attend university compared with White British young people, the latter have the best outcomes in terms of grade attainment at more selective universities. Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that while parental education is likely to be a useful indicator for

lower stakes targeted policy interventions, it is less preferable for higher stakes activities. Further policy measures – such as using first-in-family status to make contextual offers – risks further widening disparities in entry to university between White British and Black and ethnic minority groups.

The categorisation of first-generation, while potentially useful for admissions offices and university officers, does not always sit well with the students it intends to describe. These students often come from multiple social class, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and arrive at university with varied experiences of further education. As Elizabeth Lee astutely explained in her evaluation of low-income students at an elite women's college, the administrative act of demarcating one group of students as 'disadvantaged' as compared to their peers, can have the effect of segregating the student body, subtly labelling confusion as deficit on the part of the now-identified marginalised student.²⁴

For others, labelling oneself as first-generation can be a powerful act of self-identification. More open discussion about what it means to be a first-generation student began at UK universities with the creation of organisations like the University of Oxford's Students' Union's Class Act. Since the inauguration of organisations like these by students who launched and expanded them, coupled with the efforts of universities to support and publicly discuss first-generation experiences, the term has become a more regular fixture in discussions of diversity and inclusion in higher education.

Complicated to define and difficult to verify, the use of first-generation as a measure of disadvantage has significant limitations, as noted by Rachel Gable:

while first generation students may face significant challenges in the transition to college, these challenges do not impact first generation students alone. Institutional messages and policies can have an impact on an entire community while also disproportionately affecting those most vulnerable. It is not the case that continuing generation students arrive without deficits, confusion, or disenchantment of their own.²⁵

At the same time, it is important to remember why the term is valuable. To be sure, most first-generation students come from families with low incomes and minimal exposure to higher education. Even when FiF students and others face similar challenges, they can respond in different ways, with the former more likely to blame themselves and the latter more likely to blame their institution.²⁶ Moreover, by not having a definition of first-generation, it is difficult for an institution to identify such students, track their academic progress and pinpoint needs for early intervention.

At heart, the term first-generation flags the possibility that a student may lack the critical cultural capital necessary to succeed in navigating the novel territory of university life. This opens an opportunity for higher education institutions to provide additional support for these students so they may be as competitive and successful as their peers.

This paper suggests that the most useful definition of ‘first-generation’ is where a student is the first in their immediate family to attend a higher education institution. This means a person would not count as first-generation if the following relatives have gone to higher education or are currently attending higher education: parents, including adoptive

parents and step-parents who have been living with the student; siblings; and husband, wife or partner.

By narrowing the definition of first-generation for admissions and targeted outreach programmes, resources can be targeted to those who need it most.

2. Admissions

In 2021, The Sutton Trust reported that out of the 24 Russell Group universities, 15 use whether a young person is the first in their family to go to university as part of their widening participation criteria.²⁷ But how much first-generation status really matters for university admissions in the UK remains unclear.

An up-to-date picture of the widening participation characteristics used by Russell Group universities was captured in a 2021 HEPI blog by Professor Lee Elliot Major, Professor of Social Mobility at the University of Exeter, and Kieran Tompkins, a 2021 Business and Management graduate from the University of Exeter, which highlights the complexity.²⁸ Of 18 different factors, they showed no two universities use the same combination of information in their decision-making. For example, the University of Southampton actively targets students with 'No previous family experience of HE' as part of 11 indicators used to measure disadvantage, while Durham University uses just three indicators for contextualised admissions: Free School Meals; ACORN; and POLAR.

A research project at the University of Exeter found that heads of widening participation rated contextual admissions as one of the most effective tools in helping to enrol more students from poorer backgrounds. But previous HEPI research concluded that, while most students support contextual admissions, greater consistency in how data is used might enable greater certainty among applicants.²⁹ Lee Elliot Major urges that more work is needed to demystify institutions for applicants who may be put off from applying because they

are not aware of the contextualised admissions they may benefit from.

Alternative admissions

Three-quarters of participants in the Sutton Trust UK Summer School would be the first in their family to attend university, which reflects the fact that being a first-generation student in the UK helps to qualify someone for a number of outreach programmes that bridge the path to higher education.

The Brilliant Club mobilises the PhD community to support less advantaged students to access the most competitive universities and to succeed once they get there. Their Scholars Programme recruits, trains and places PhD tutors in schools to deliver programmes using university-style tutorials, which are supplemented by university trips. Independent evaluation shows prospective students are more likely to apply, receive an offer and progress to a highly-selective university than others from similar backgrounds.³⁰

Research funded by the Nuffield Foundation found that being first-in-family is an important barrier to university participation, over and above some other sources of disadvantage, and that it could be a crucial indicator in efforts to widen participation. A number of universities have programmes that help students from under-represented groups to get a place on an undergraduate degree:

- **The University of Leeds** runs an outreach programme called 'Access to Leeds', which offers applicants the chance to study a degree with lower requirements than the standard course offer. This can be up to two grades lower than the

published entry requirement for each course. To be eligible for the scheme participants must meet two of six criteria. This includes whether applicants are 'the first generation of your immediate family to go to university'.

- **Manchester Metropolitan University** supports young people in Greater Manchester who would like to go to university but whose parents did not have the opportunity. The First Generation Scholarship Programme offers applicants practical support and guidance to help them access and transition to university. If participants progress through the programme onto a full-time undergraduate degree at Manchester Met, they qualify for a First Generation bursary of £1,000 and the opportunity to attend a fully-funded workplace residential placement.
- **The University of Cambridge** has launched a Foundation Year offering talented students from backgrounds of educational and social disadvantage a new route to undergraduate study. The one-year course will prepare students for further learning and offer them the chance to progress straight to an undergraduate degree at Cambridge. Typical offers will require 120 UCAS Tariff Points, which is equivalent to BBB at A-level, compared with the standard Cambridge offer of at least A*AA. Mike Nicholson, Deputy Head of Education Services (Admissions and Participation) at the University of Cambridge, says a basket of measures will be used as part of the admissions criteria.

Admissions in the USA

The picture of admissions in the USA is just as unclear. The term

first-generation was not widely deployed in higher education research or used as a classification in universities until the early 2000s, just as the actual rate of first-generation students reached a relative nadir.³¹

The Center for First-Generation Student Success reported that for the academic year 2015/16, 56 per cent of undergraduates nationally were first-generation college students (neither parent had a bachelor's degree) and that 59 per cent of these students were also the first sibling in their family to go to college.³²

Case Study: Harvard

At Harvard, the active recruitment of first-generation students can be traced to former university president Lawrence Summers's launch of the Harvard Financial Aid Initiative in 2004. The Financial Aid Initiative was designed to support students from low and middle-income families who might not otherwise consider Harvard because it was financially out of reach. While first-generation students come from a variety of financial backgrounds, the Financial Aid Initiative has increased the number of students from low-income backgrounds and simultaneously added to the number of first-generation students at Harvard.

More open dialogue about the experiences of first-generation students began at Harvard with the creation of a first-generation alumni special interest group in 2012 and a first-generation student organisation in 2013. Harvard Primus, Harvard's first-generation student union, lists its three main objectives as:

1. *To facilitate the transition to college for first generation students through initiatives such as providing mentorship networks and sharing academic and social resources among members;*
2. *To build a community among first generation Harvard students; and*
3. *To provide the first generation student community a platform to express its voice and to advocate for themselves.*

At Harvard, first-generation status is 'one of 50 factors' taken into consideration.³³ William R. Fitzsimmons, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid has said, 'This is not a mechanical process.'³⁴

Some public policy experts in the US believe the definition of first-generation should be narrowed for admissions and financial aid. Harvard Law Professor Tomiko Brown-Nagin argues that only those in need should receive special admissions considerations.³⁵ She wants parental education to be taken into account alongside family income, limiting the definition to students where neither parent attended college and those who are eligible for Pell grants. To avoid crowding out the neediest students, she argues disadvantage must be identified more precisely and 'attacked at its roots'.

A report released in 2016 by the Institute for Higher Education Policy similarly advocated narrowing the definition so that students whose parents had an associate degree (which is less demanding than a bachelor's degree) could no longer count themselves as first-generation.³⁶ Dr Jack, an Assistant Professor

of Education at Harvard, concedes that for some people, targeting first-generation students is affirmative action – the active effort to improve educational opportunities for groups that have been subjected to discrimination – that will not ‘ruffle any feathers’. But serving on an American Sociological Association task force to tackle the issue, he said supporting first-generation students is no substitute for admissions that consider race.

The picture of US admissions at elite universities provides clear lessons for the UK. Inflated A-Level grades in 2020 and 2021 for the COVID-19 pandemic generation of students have produced unprecedented numbers of pupils meeting the grades required for selective degree places. Moreover, rising student numbers mean the admissions landscape is set to be a far tougher environment for student applicants of the future.³⁷ This is particularly true for highly selective institutions, where the race for places is set to intensify. The deployment of the term first-generation in relation to contextual admissions could even exacerbate educational inequalities: as regulators urge for a more ambitious use of contextual admissions, it is crucial that narratives about intergenerational educational mobility do not overtake calls to improve provisions for the country’s most disadvantaged pupils.

A series of reports have shown the number of years a child has been eligible for Free School Meals to be the best available marker for childhood poverty, thus identifying disadvantage.³⁸ Moves by the admissions service UCAS to provide universities with this data have the potential to be transformative for undergraduate admissions. Delivering verified data to universities about the individual socio-economic background

of applicants could improve the targeting of contextual admissions and widening access schemes, assuming universities make use of it and also that tight student number caps are not reintroduced.

3. Factors affecting student success

Widening participation incorporates the idea of not just access to higher education but also facilitating student success. First-generation students are less likely to be on a persistent path towards a degree and are less likely to remain enrolled and to acquire that degree.³⁹ Still, for those that do attain degrees, their early career earnings are thought to be only marginally lower than those of continuing generation graduates.⁴⁰ This suggests that although institutions define success in different ways – often highlighting increasing diversity in admissions – increasing diversity in degree completion is arguably a more important policy goal. This is because degrees can unlock future jobs, leading to good graduate outcomes.

In the words of Michelle Donelan, the Minister for Universities:

For a long time, social mobility has been almost entirely focussed on getting in.

After all, getting someone in and through the door is a nice, easy thing to measure.

They're statistics that look good on a report, they sound good in speeches and they fill column inches with clear, positive headlines.

But anyone that has worked hands-on to improve social mobility will know that real social mobility is almost never as clear and easy.

Getting in is in reality just the first rung on the ladder.⁴¹

First-in-family students have higher non-continuation rates than those with parents who have been through the higher education system. While more than two out of three of all university students complete their degrees, this share is four percentage points lower among those without graduate parents.⁴² These findings underline the importance of equipping first-generation students with the tools to navigate the university system past the point of admission.

Parental influence

Freedom of Information requests to the UK's 30 top-tariff universities found the majority of them sought to engage parents in their widening participation outreach, although five did not.⁴³ However, nearly half of the activities that engage parents do so as part of a student outreach programme without providing anything specific or distinct for parents.

Cultures of learning within families are key drivers for young people's ambitions and aspirations. In particular, an individual's 'economy of experience' is linked to their parental level and field of study, which is of significance for reaching a higher level of education.

Generally speaking, first-generation students are more likely to have grown up in an environment where there was not high value placed on higher education. Middle-class parents are more 'interventionist' and more involved in the strategic mapping of their children's educational careers while working-class parents are often comparatively 'hands-off'.⁴⁴ Second-generation students therefore engage with the prospect of university with more 'certainty' than their first-generation counterparts.⁴⁵

Case Study: Parent Power, King's College London

King's College London runs a parental engagement programme with Citizens UK. This uses community organising methods to mobilise and train local under-represented parents, enabling them to become university access experts in their communities, while also giving them the tools to start campaigns for educational equality.

Parent Power's approach identifies the specific support required by pupils with potential from families with no history of higher education participation. Following a series of successful campaigns, parents who joined Parent Power have secured fully funded bespoke open days at universities across the UK and negotiated bursary places on private summer schools usually reserved for those who can pay an expensive fee.

Anne-Marie Canning, CEO of the Brilliant Club and the original founder of Parent Power, notes how engaging with families can have powerful effects:

As a first-generation student I remember vividly the moment someone from the University of York took the time to explain student finance to my own Mum. It was transformative to feel I had an ally on the journey to university and made everything less lonely.⁴⁶

Anne-Marie Canning stresses that meaningful parental engagement is not a 'fluffy and optional extra' but a 'fundamental part of the widening participation puzzle'.⁴⁷

Transition

First-generation students overcome traditional barriers to higher education in their admission to highly selective universities yet are more likely than their peers to have a challenging transition because they lack the required social capital. As Sophie Pender, a first-generation student at the University of Bristol and founder of the 93% Club said, 'When I got to university I realised that the hard part wasn't getting in, it was fitting in.'⁴⁸

In one recent study, researchers followed two cohorts of first-generation students at US Ivy League universities along with their continuing generation peers. The study found that 44 per cent of first-generation students described themselves as 'less academically prepared' than their peers during their second-year interviews.⁴⁹ This was more than twice the rate of their continuing generation peers in the sample. When interviewed again as fourth-year students, the preparation gap widened to nearly three times the rate. With more time and experience in college, first-generation participants as a group were more likely to trace a declining self-assessment of preparation. When asked why they changed their assessment, most offered some version of 'I just didn't know what I didn't know'.⁵⁰

The evidence suggests universities should introduce more robust transition interventions at the point of entry for first-generation students to reduce anxiety and distress in the first few weeks.

Cultural mismatch

The stress behind the transition to higher education is in large part the result of a change in status. Some students are used to

being the top achiever in their environment – the big-fish-little-pond effect. Yet on entering a new environment dominated by students from higher socio-economic backgrounds, some perceive their status as a star pupil to be in jeopardy. Moreover, there is a tension for first-generation students between what is taught at university and things they have previously learned. As students diverge from their parents in order to find their own interests, they may feel a sense of betrayal to the working-class. This tension occurs due to a cultural mismatch in capital.

A sense of belonging, seemingly a given by way of entering university, is now in question both at home and university. There are two possible solutions to this: either students change or universities change to accommodate a range of lived experiences.

Career vision

According to a study by the University of Southampton, for first-generation students, the most prominent motivator for going to university is to 'get a better job'.⁵¹ On the contrary, research from Canada found continuing generation students more likely to cite 'to become an independent thinker' or 'to explore my potential and interests' as their motivations.⁵²

The future career vision of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds is based around themes of equal opportunity, being appreciated at work and job security, while students from higher socio-economic backgrounds look towards a future with a high starting salary, high levels of personal responsibility and status and prestige. Although the former list might sometimes be considered better life goals than the latter list, the ability of students to develop individual

narratives of their own future career is worryingly absent in many first-generation students.⁵³

First-generation students overwhelmingly report not knowing enough about the careers services offered at university.⁵⁴ First-generation students are less confident in their readiness for higher education and more likely to lay the blame for any problems on themselves rather than their institutions and they are therefore more likely to avoid asking questions or seeking help.

This research suggests that first-generation students need help developing the core skills needed to enable the formation of a realistic career plan. By definition, the Careers and Employability Service is part of a higher education service-industry related model.⁵⁵ Therefore, higher education institutions have a responsibility to find different ways to reach those students that need careers services but are not being communicated with effectively. However, points of transition are associated with increased stress and anxiety, meaning early intervention comes with the risk of overwhelming first-year students.

Nottingham Trent University develops skills that lead to success as part of their 'Welcome week' activities. The ethos is that there is no lack of provision. Rather, students fail to engage with student services because they do not always realise they can.⁵⁶ By learning resilience and recognising their own agency, students can create meaning and purpose in their lives at university and beyond.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

Many first-generation students have succeeded in making it to high-status academic higher education institutions, reflecting strong levels of resilience and natural talent. They are motivated by high labour market ambitions and giving back to their families and communities. Yet first-generation students are more likely than their peers to drop out of their chosen courses and have challenging transitions to higher education because they lack the social capital of their continuing generation peers. They are also, on average, more likely to have been eligible for Free School Meals. This suggests that the categorisation of first-in-family is likely to be a useful indicator for lower stakes widening participation activities, such as eligibility for types of outreach programmes.

Despite this, first-in-family is not a good definition for higher-stakes activities, such as contextualised admissions. Although the term is often deployed as a proxy for disadvantaged, not all first-in-family students are low-income and not all low-income students are first-in-family. Moreover, the term applies disproportionately to those from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, who already outperform White young people, on average, in terms of accessing higher education. It is reasonable to assume that the use of the term first-generation in relation to contextual offers threatens to intensify existing education inequalities. Focusing on first-in-family students in isolation is overall unlikely to make things significantly better. Universities need to take a broader approach to admissions, using a basket of measures to determine who receives such advantages as a contextual offer. This is the key lesson from the USA, where definitions of

first-in-family are being narrowed in order to make room for more effective and targeted affirmative action.

The first-in-family problem is, at root, a fair access one. In the UK, first-generation students are entering higher education in vast numbers, currently constituting around two-thirds of all university graduates. In other words, the bigger problem is not getting more first-in-family students into higher education, but rather getting more first-in-family students into highly selective institutions. Further to this, highly selective universities need to ensure they retain first-generation students as well as just recruit them. Research suggests that for those first-generation students that remain enrolled in university and achieve a degree, their early career earnings are only slightly less than those of continuing generation graduates. This underscores the importance of focusing on degree completion as a critical measure of widening participation.

The effort to recruit and retain high achieving first-generation students at universities speaks to their commitment to social mobility and desire to increase participation among under-represented groups. But effective widening participation is not just interested in student numbers. Just as important is ensuring successful completion of courses and accessing rewarding careers afterwards.

i. Access

Recent studies find clear differences in affluence and broader measures of socio-economic background between first-in-family and continuing generation students. However, the use of parental education in contextual admissions is constrained by the fact it is self-reported, and therefore hard

to independently verify. Moreover, many do not know their parents' education, and even if they do, it may not be entirely clear whose education should be reported. This is in addition to the issue that people from ethnic minority backgrounds, who already attend university in higher proportions compared with White young people, are more likely to become a first-generation student. Together, these factors suggest parental education, while likely to be a useful indicator of lower stakes widening participation activities, is less useful as a criterion for contextual offers. **We recommend that universities use a basket of measures in the practice of contextualised admissions.** Critically, this should include the number of years a child has been eligible for Free School Meals, which is considered the best available marker for identifying disadvantage.

Highly selective universities should demystify contextual admissions. Complexities in elite higher education are part of what makes the system so hard to navigate and so alienating for many students. Greater consistency and transparency would provide clarity to students and instil confidence in those who think they may not fit in or who are not aware of the policies they may benefit from.

Universities should deliver specific outreach engagement for the parents of groups that are under-represented in higher education. This should address misconceptions that fuel parents' concerns, with particular attention given to common misconceptions around student finance. By empowering parents to support and develop the knowledge and skills they need to overcome disadvantage, they can support their children's entry to higher education.

ii. Transition

All universities should provide a mentoring programme between first-year and continuing undergraduates to facilitate the building of strong networks for all students. Data provided at the point of admission is useful for identifying the fact that transitional support should be offered to incoming cohorts. During the University of St Andrews contextual admissions process, applicants who have participated in widening access activities across Scotland are flagged and subsequently invited to take part in a widening access mentoring scheme. Those that take part are allocated to a student mentor who matches one or more characteristics with the applicant. Mentors then support mentees throughout their transition, providing a friendly point of contact and answering basic questions about all aspects of student life, including accommodation, module choices and societies.

Points of transition are associated with increased risk of anxiety. The UK's boarding-school model of higher education, where most young full-time students move away from home while studying, serves to exacerbate this issue. This is particularly true for first-generation students, who record intense feelings of dislocation as they enter a new environment where they are the cultural outsider. Institutions should ease stress in the transition period through **accommodation allocation schemes that gives priority to students from groups most vulnerable to non-completion.**

iii. Progress

All students should be provided with a regular and familiar point of contact. Small group meetings, for example with a personal tutor, establish regular contact between student and staff, providing continuity in teaching and unofficial contact. These sessions should be timetabled to ensure regular meetings.

For those that choose to withdraw from higher education, **the system needs to be more flexible, facilitating easier routes to re-entry and providing base-level qualifications.** Sometimes students need to pause their learning. The *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding* (commonly known as the Augar report) recommended that 'at least one interim qualification to all students who are following a Level 6 course successfully.'⁵⁷ Such a change in the way universities award qualifications could help students who have to interrupt their studies and motivate students who are struggling to complete their current year successfully.

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First-in-family students make up a majority of young first-degree students yet face a number of challenges. So they are now the focus of many specific interventions in the UK and the USA.

This report looks at the pros and cons of using first-in-family as a key measure of disadvantage. It argues that, while it is an appropriate metric for low-level activity, it is not robust enough for higher stakes initiatives, such as contextualised admissions, where it needs to be supplemented with additional information.

The paper ends with some top-level policy recommendations aimed at helping first-in-family students while not limiting the ambitions of others.

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