

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## South African private universities: The unique challenges of private university first-generation students – The unique opportunity for private higher education institutions

### Universités privées sud-africaines : Défis uniques des étudiants de première génération des universités privées et opportunité unique pour les établissements d'enseignement supérieur privés

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#### ABSTRACT

This article delves into the formidable obstacles first-generation students (FGS) encounter within the South African private higher education sector which locates the study on which it is based in the literature around the overall experience of first-generation students. Extensive research has underscored the various challenges faced by FGS, posing hindrances to their academic success in higher education. FGS often grapple with a complex journey fraught with challenges around finances, social adjustment, and epistemological access, to name a few. This research adopts a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional research design. The study utilises a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire supplemented by open-ended questions to gather data from a sample of 1 208 students. The study reveals that close to one-third (30.5%) of the sample found the academic requirements challenging, just less than two-thirds (63.6%) found the coursework overwhelming, and more than half (57.7%) received support from faculty and academic advisors. In terms of financial challenges, less than a quarter (21%) indicated that they face financial challenges most of the time. The results of this study are reflective of similar research on the challenges experienced by South African FGS. The authors suggest that more research is needed to examine the unique challenges the FGS experience at private universities in South Africa. Moreover, the authors argue that an overall systemic and structural transformation is needed to enable institutional changes that would ease the challenges of all students.

#### KEYWORDS

*South African higher education, private higher education, first-generation students, challenges, opportunities*

#### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se penche sur les obstacles considérables que rencontrent les étudiants de première génération (EPG) dans le secteur de l'enseignement supérieur privé sud-africain. Il situe cette étude dans la littérature consacrée à l'expérience globale des étudiants de première génération. De nombreuses recherches ont mis en évidence les divers défis auxquels sont confrontés les étudiants

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de première génération et qui entravent leur réussite dans l'enseignement supérieur. Les EPG sont souvent confrontés à un parcours complexe parsemé de défis financiers, d'adaptation sociale et d'accès épistémologique, pour n'en citer que quelques-uns. Cette étude adopte une approche quantitative avec une conception de recherche transversale. L'étude s'appuie sur un questionnaire à échelle de Likert en 5 points complété par des questions ouvertes pour recueillir les données auprès d'un échantillon de 1208 étudiants. L'étude révèle que près d'un tiers (30,5 %) de l'échantillon a trouvé les exigences académiques difficiles, un peu moins des deux tiers (63,6 %) ont trouvé les activités de cours écrasantes, et plus de la moitié (57,7 %) ont reçu un soutien de la part des professeurs et des conseillers académiques. En ce qui concerne les défis financiers, moins d'un quart (21%) ont indiqué qu'ils étaient confrontés à des défis financiers la plupart du temps. Les résultats de cette étude reflètent des recherches similaires sur les difficultés rencontrées par les étudiants sud-africains de première génération. Les auteurs suggèrent que d'autres recherches sont nécessaires pour examiner les défis uniques auxquels les étudiants étrangers sont confrontés dans les universités privées d'Afrique du Sud. En outre, les auteurs soutiennent qu'une transformation systémique et structurelle globale est nécessaire pour permettre des changements institutionnels qui atténueraient les difficultés de tous les étudiants.

## MOTS-CLÉS

*Enseignement supérieur sud-africain, enseignement supérieur privé, étudiants de première génération, défis, opportunités*

## Introduction

In South Africa's diverse higher education landscape, a growing emphasis on accessibility and inclusivity has led to an increasing enrolment of students from various socio-economic backgrounds; among these, are first-generation students (FGS). A development which is much applauded, supported and needed to improve communities and South African socio-economic growth. First-generation students are often defined as the first in their families to pursue higher education (Pascarella, et al., 2004) and have emerged as a distinct and vital demographic to grow the living standards and socio-economic resources of South African communities. Lucier (2019) describes a first-generation student as one who is in the process of getting a university qualification and emerging from a family where neither parent has ever attained a tertiary-level qualification. As South African universities endeavour to accommodate a more diverse student body, it is crucial to understand and address the unique challenges these first-generation students encounter. According to Christie et al. (2008), such students face unfamiliar challenges when entering tertiary education and find little cultural or social capital to support their efforts. Yet others (Hands, 2020; O'Shea, 2016, p. 59; Richards, 2022) assert that FGS can draw "upon existing and established capital reserves in this transition to higher education" and draw on prior and existing resources and can readily adjust to the new challenges given impactful support.

The term "first-generation student" is widely recognised in educational literature (Pascarella et al., 2004), particularly in the context of South Africa, where historical disparities have posed significant hurdles to equitable access to higher education (Mahlomaholo, 2019). Historically, disadvantaged groups have often had limited access to quality secondary education, perpetuating social inequalities. Efforts have been made to redress these imbalances, for instance, the 'Education White Paper 3' of 1997 (DoE,

1997) at the policy and national levels and various more recent examples at the local institutional level, for instance, the 'First-Generation Commission 2008' at Stellenbosch University (Heymann & Carolissen, 2011). First-generation students remain vulnerable to various academic, financial, and social challenges, including discursive issues and how this group is constructed and referenced (Soudien, 2010). There are emerging voices that increasingly focus on institutional and structural issues around how FGS are supported and how FGS continue to be constructed within deficit discourses (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016).

Wilbur and Roscigno (2016) opine that first-generation students are often at a disadvantage when compared to non-first-generation peers. Such disadvantages include inadequate information around and lack of exposure to university life. Bourdieu's cultural and social capital notion is frequently cited as an explanatory model to illuminate the challenges. Bourdieu's notions on cultural and social capital are premised on ideas of cultural under-preparedness of FGS around the type of knowledge and dispositions required to navigate the higher education environment. Phillips et al. (2020) highlight the psychological and academic stressors incurred by FGS and suggests that the "cultural mismatch contributes to worse experiences and academic outcomes among first-generation students and that these disparities persist even until graduation" (Phillips et al., 2020, p. 1112).

The experiences of first-generation students in South Africa, despite the country's progressive higher education policies, persist to include various challenges (van Zyl-Schalekamp & Mthombeni, 2015). While FGS can mobilise unique resources, it is recognised that their experiences may significantly impact their success rate in higher education (Hands, 2020; O'Shea, 2016; Richards, 2022; van Zyl-Schalekamp & Mthombeni, 2015).

This research aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by examining the significant challenges that first-generation students encounter within the South African higher education system, focusing on their experiences at a private higher education institution. Our focus is on one of South Africa's leading private higher education institutions with a diverse student body of 30 000. The findings of this research inform strategies and interventions to enhance the educational experiences of first-generation students, thereby fostering a more accessible, inclusive and equitable higher education landscape in South Africa. In addition, the authors compare and seek to generalize the challenges experienced by FGS to highlight the systemic and structural necessary efforts to shape a tertiary learning environment that is supportive of all students. This is a unique opportunity for private higher education institutions in South Africa.

## Literature

Ives et al. (2020) contend that the educational experiences of first-generation students are influenced by a multitude of factors, including financial constraints, epistemological access, a sense of belonging, and family conflicts, to name a few. Additionally, students encounter a myriad of challenges during their transition from high school to higher education, which encompasses differences in learning practices and class dynamics,

discursive usage by lecturers that may create language barriers, and the prevailing institutional culture (Naong et al., 2009). According to Naong et al. (2009), first-year students in South African universities face challenges such as feelings of isolation, difficulties in adapting to independent life, time management, and the management of social and cultural diversity, as well as social and family expectations.

This study explores various factors that shape the experiences of first-generation students, ultimately impacting their academic journey. The various factors are grouped here into socio-economic and financial challenges, academic preparedness and academic support. Familial poverty can adversely affect the kind of financial support a student can mobilise, thus impacting their ability to focus on academic success. This is reflected in various studies, citing financial and socio-economic challenges leading to student stress (Liamputtong, 2011; Noang, et al., 2009). A study on first-generation students revealed that financial challenges are particularly acute for them, often forcing them to take on extra jobs to make ends meet, worrying about their families' financial coping and compromising on essential requirements, like food, Wi-Fi access and accommodation due to financial challenges. This is against the backdrop of a high drop-out rate in South Africa's higher education institutions (Motala, 2017), where barely half of the admitted students complete their degree programmes. Yoganathan (2017) opines that over 40% of students either drop out or never graduate from higher education due to numerous issues related to financial challenges. First-generation students, in particular, may face barriers related to living in off-campus or far-from-campus accommodation, which impacts transportation costs, class attendance, and the ability to build social and supportive relationships on campus (Pascarella et al., 2004).

A second issue discussed here as creating challenges for FGS involves academic preparedness and accessing support (Hands, 2020). First-generation university students often have had a less privileged high school experience, exacerbating their challenges adapting to university teaching and learning culture. Academic challenges, including new pedagogies, difficulties in note-taking, and fast-paced and impersonal teaching methods, are common among first-year students (Modipane, 2011). Morrow (2007, 2009) adds issues around epistemological access as critical in the success of first-generation students, students from disadvantaged contexts and first-year students in general, which is also supported by Lewin and Mayoyo (2014).

The transition from high school to higher education brings forth a host of new responsibilities for first-year students, including increased independence and decision-making without parental guidance. First-generation students often straddle two worlds: expectations of success within their families, and the unfamiliarity of the academic world. This duality can lead to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and depression, affecting their sense of belonging in both realms.

### **South African private universities**

Private universities were originally designed to meet vocational training needs and then grew into a for-profit system (Kruss, 2004; Mabizela, 2002, 2007). However, the private higher education sector has reinvented itself to become "important role players in the

South Africa higher education landscape” (Bezuidenhout et al., 2013, p. 275). The private higher education institutions receive no financial support from the public national fiscus in South Africa. They are thus reliant on their own strategy and quality provision to deliver on their promised student success. Bezuidenhout et al. (2013) highlight that little research has been undertaken to examine the main drivers of success in this sector and conducted a study to explore the motivation for the choices of students who enrol in private higher education institutions. Their results (Bezuidenhout, et al., 2013) suggest that safety and security conditions, academic reputation, and reasonable fees were among the key factors motivating students to choose private over public universities in South Africa.

There has been an enormous need to expand the higher education sector in SA. Private higher education institutions have responded to this need by providing relevant courses and degrees and doing so in ways that support student success. Currently (CHE, 2022; DHET, 2019), there are 131 private universities and 26 public universities in South Africa (CHE, 2022). In 2019, the higher education sector comprised 1 074 912 students in the public sector and 208 978 in the private sector, which is about 16.3% of students in private higher education institutions and 83.7% enrolled in public institutions (CHE, 2022; DHET, p. 9). There are many similarities in these sectors (staffing numbers, student demographics, etc.) and also pass rates. The key difference is that students receive no government grant or funding if they enrol in private higher education institutions.

This study focuses on the challenges of first-generation students in private higher education in South Africa, where institutions do not receive government subsidies and their students do not receive government grants (like NSFAS, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme). Consequently, private higher education institutions that enrol students from low socio-economic backgrounds face unique challenges and must be deliberate in supporting their first-generation students. High drop-out rates (Motala, 2017) and extended graduation timelines due to student challenges place financial constraints on students and potentially delay student graduation and success (Uleanya et al., 2011; Uleanya & Gamede, 2018; Uleanya et al., 2019).

This article suggests that much more research needs to be done to understand the challenges faced by students at private institutions. However, the authors also point out that this is a unique opportunity for private institutions that are perhaps more agile to respond to the entire student experience with a more attuned and supportive learning context to support all students. These ideas are premised on the suggestion that the learning context needs to adjust to the diverse and uniquely challenged and resourced students entering higher education (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016).

## **Methodology**

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the challenges first-generation students face at Rosebank College, a private higher education institution in Johannesburg, South Africa.

## **Research design**

The quantitative approach facilitated the collection of structured numerical data, which can be subjected to statistical analysis to derive meaningful insights. We opted for a cross-sectional research design to capture a snapshot of the experiences and challenges of first-generation students, gathering data at a single point in time.

## **Research site**

Rosebank College is a private university status higher education institution with nine campuses spread across South Africa, with six faculties and 28 000 students enrolled in undergraduate contact teaching and learning degrees.

## **Participants**

The target population comprised the 28 000 students registered at this private higher education institution. From the submitted 1 300 respondents, 1 208 remained valid responses, altogether making  $N = 1208$ , which is 4.31% of the overall population.

## **Survey instrument**

The online survey took less than 10 minutes to complete and had 3 sections. Section A asked the participants about biographical information and demographics, section B focused on their perceptions of academic load and their experienced challenges around managing their demands, and section C focused on the kind of support they access and receive. We employed questions with Likert scale-type responses and also included two open-ended questions that enabled responses in text form. The Likert scale responses ranged from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”, offering a spectrum of five responses.

The questionnaire encompassed items related to academic challenges, financial obstacles, social support, and personal experiences. Additionally, two open-ended questions were integrated into the questionnaire, enabling participants to provide qualitative insights and share their personal experiences. These questions were structured to encourage participants to elaborate on their challenges and experiences, facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of their perspectives.

## **Data collection**

A cover letter explaining the purpose of the survey, ethical clearance and the option to take part or opt-out, together with the survey link, was sent via email to all students registered at Rosebank College during March and April 2023. The participants could click on the survey link and, by doing so, consented to take part in the survey. Participants could withdraw or discontinue at any point with impunity. The survey was kept open until we collected data from a sample of 1 300 students (5%), providing a representative cross-section of the student population.

## **Analysis**

The gathered data were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 27. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies,

were computed to summarise and interpret the data. Furthermore, inferential statistical analyses were employed to investigate relationships and associations between variables.

Prior to full-scale data collection, a pilot test was executed to assess the clarity and effectiveness of the questionnaire. Feedback from the pilot testing phase was then used to refine the survey instruments.

Ethical clearance was received from the Ethics Committee at Rosebank College. The survey instrument and consent letters were distributed to all campuses using an online platform, ensuring respondent anonymity and informing students of the study’s purpose, their rights as participants, and the voluntary nature of their participation.

## Results

Results are presented in graphs and tables, offering a comprehensive visual representation of the findings. For reasons of scope and length of this article, only the data of the FGS are reported, and the qualitative responses are omitted. These will be the focus of another paper.

### Demographic profile

The demographic profile of the participants included their age, academic programme, and the year of study for which they were registered. The sample size is 1 208 students, as shown in Table 1. Findings, as reflected in Table 1, reveal that a majority of students were relatively young, with 80% of students between the ages of 18 and 25 years of age. Of the 80%, 75% of them were first-generation students. The Faculty of Education predominates, with 50% (599 respondents) of the students majoring in Education and of the 50%, 49% are first-generation students. The second faculty is Commerce, reflecting 30% of the sample (363 respondents); 35% (127 respondents) of whom were first-generation students. The ICT faculty has the lowest number of first-generation students, with 6% (22) respondents. It was found that 30% of students are first-generation students. Further research is needed to establish characteristics which explain the discrepancy in the number of first-generation students in South African higher education in both private and public tertiary institutions.

**Table 1: Demographic profile of participants**

Sample (N = 1208)			
Characteristics	Group	Number of sample (N) (percentage % of sample)	FGSs of the overall sample (N = 370 = 30%)
Age	Under 18	5 (0%)	1 (0%)
	18 – 24	972 (80%)	277 (75%)
	25 – 34	177 (15%)	69 (19%)
	35 – 44	46 (4%)	21 (6%)
	45 or older	8 (1%)	2 (1%)

Sample (N = 1208)			
Faculty/Programme	Commerce	363 (30%)	127 (35%)
	Education	599 (50%)	181 (49%)
	Humanities	138 (11%)	40 (10%)
	ICT	108 (09%)	22 (6%)
Year of study	First Year	542 (45%)	170 (46%)
	Second Year	304 (25%)	96 (26%)
	Third Year	234 (19%)	64 (17%)
	Fourth Year	100 (100%)	28 (8%)
	Other	28 (2%)	12 (3%)

### Academic pressure and support for first-generation students

In response to students experiencing academic pressures, Figure 1 depicts the findings that 30.5% of students found academic requirements challenging, while 33.1% of students could neither agree nor disagree; however, 36.4% of students found the academic requirements not challenging. Asked about feeling overwhelmed, it appears that 63.3% of the respondents indicated that they indeed felt overwhelmed, and 16.4% disagreed with feeling overwhelmed (see Figure 1). In terms of receiving academic support, 57.7% indicated that they received academic support from academic support staff at Rosebank College, and only 17.1% indicated that they hadn't receive academic support (see Figure 1).

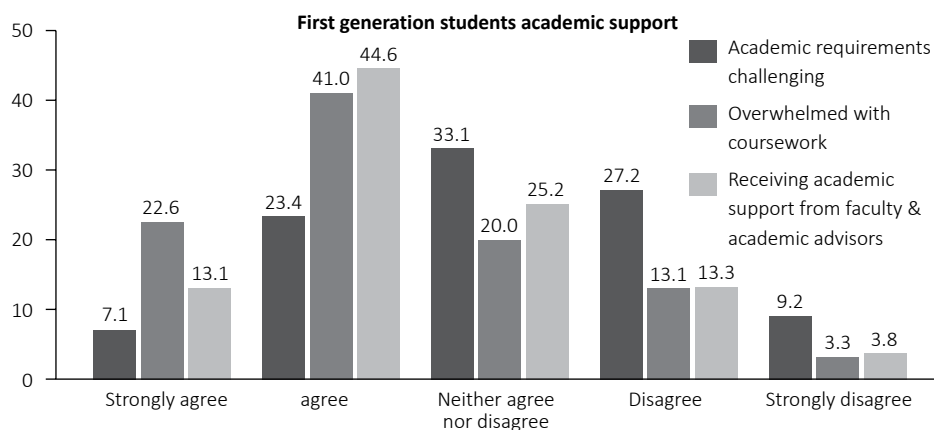
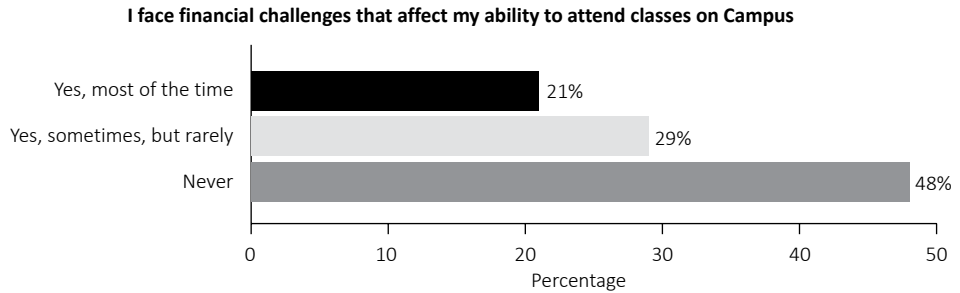


Figure 1: Information about academic load, challenges and support

### Financial challenges

Respondents were asked if they faced financial challenges that affected their ability to attend classes on campus. Figure 2 below indicates that 21% of FGS report financial challenges that impact their ability to attend class. However, 29% indicated that they sometimes or rarely experience financial challenges, and 48% of FGS reported that they “never” had to face financial challenges that affect their ability to attend classes.





**Figure 2: Financial challenges experienced by FGS in this sample**

## Discussion

The literature and research concur that first-generation students (FGS) face unique challenges that can be clustered into financial, academic, epistemological and social issues (Case et al., 2018; Hands, 2020; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016; Lewin & Mayoyo, 2014; Mabizela, 2002a, 2002b, 2005, 2007; Naong et al., 2009; O’Shea, 2016). The results of this study underscore these findings and align with the national and international findings around challenges FGSs face in higher education institutions. Consequently, specific academic, social and financial support and attuned pedagogy are required to assist FGS with academic challenges.

Moreover, the overall results of our study suggest that, indeed, FGS do experience difficulties around managing the academic load and also find the academic demands challenging. In addition, financial challenges are some of the significant problems the FGS faces. Liamputtong (2011) concurs that financial pressure is one of the stressful factors that impact the success of students in higher education.

To mitigate these challenges, private higher education institutions would benefit from emboldening their efforts to support the unique needs of the FGS. There is a need to develop financial aid, and scholarship programmes to engage the South African government and extend the NSFAS to students in private higher education, targeting first-generation students. This will alleviate the financial burdens and help cover expenses related to transportation, data access, and tuition fees. Private higher education must create initiatives involving the families of first-generation students in the higher education process. These initiatives can help manage family pressures and improve family support for FGS educational journeys. The proposed recommendations may enable South African private universities opportunities to provide support and opportunities for first-generation students, enabling them to overcome the obstacles they face and succeed in their academic journeys.

While the focus is on the FGS themselves and the support tailored to their experience, there are also strong arguments that suggest that the teaching, learning, academic and social-cultural context in higher education need to be re-examined to adjust to the profile and needs of the variety of students who indeed are in the South Africa higher education context, including FGS. Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016) suggest that singling out various groups does not serve the overall student and institutional

success agenda. Rather, they argue that there is a risk of focusing on a “narrow band of students, over a limited time period and that it separates the educational thinking and planning for the foundation students from the mainstream” (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016, n. p.). A unique focus on ‘special needs’ groups is to the “detriment of either group of students and lecturers” (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016, n. p).

This study reveals that the FGS indeed have significant challenges which needs to be considered when shaping supportive interventions. However, heeding Leibowitz and Bozalek’s (2016) recommendations, it would be useful to consider the overall institutional teaching, learning, and support offerings to impact student success significantly. It is argued in this article that private institutions have a unique opportunity to do so, given their agile and ambitious intentions.

## **Conclusion**

The study investigated various challenges impacting first-generation students in South African private higher education. The study found that FGS face challenges around academic load, academic context, and financial difficulties, to name a few. Our results indicate that almost a third (30.5%) of students in our sample found academic requirements challenging, nearly two thirds (63.3%) of this sample felt overwhelmed, and almost half (49%) said they do not experience financial pressures. Over half (57.7%) of this sample indicated that they received academic support. The authors recommend that more research be conducted to examine the profile of challenges FGS face at private institutions compared to the challenges faced by students at public institutions.

Overall, private higher education institutions are already offering substantial academic support, as evidenced in this study (over half of the students in this sample, 57.7%, indicated that they had accessed academic support). While private higher education institutions are aiming their efforts at the students and their unique needs, the students and institutions would also benefit from considering systemic and structural issues that would enhance the overall learning experience of all students. This, indeed, is an opportunity for the private higher education institutions, which often have agile and responsive systems, ready and primed for meaningful and relevant responses to the kinds of diverse students, including FGS, entering the higher education sector.

## **Ethics statement**

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained through the Rosebank College Ethics Clearance Committee.

## **Potential conflict of interest**

None.

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