

How does it feel to be a First-Generation Student?

Imagine you just finished your master's degree! You are the first one in your family or neighbourhood or your close community to do that! Amazing! You now are thinking of applying for a PhD! But you are stuck. You are not sure how to approach this! Let us take another scenario- You got a PhD offer! Congratulations! But now what? What happens now? How are you supposed to actually do this? You do not know anyone with a doctorate personally. You feel unsure about this.

I can come up with other scenarios! You are to present at an international conference. You are anxious! You do not know how to network in a room filled with confident academics. Or, you have to write a research grant. It is absolutely necessary for your research but you do not have much idea of what it takes for the grant application to be successful. Or, you just finished your PhD and now looking for an academic job. You feel stuck again and now you even have doubts.

All these situations are pretty common in academia. Almost everyone has faced them at some point in time. However, someone who is a first-generation student or academic has faced these scenarios quite a few times and has struggled more than their peers. An academic journey in itself is demanding; however, if you do not know someone who is in academia, then there are more chances that you have struggled more than someone who has people in their family or networks who are in academia.

If you are a first-generation academic, then your journey is both rewarding and stressful. On one hand, it is a source of great pride- you get opportunities to pursue your passion, contribute to knowledge and bring impact to society. It is wonderful in the sense that you managed to break the educational disadvantage you faced and now have further opportunities ahead and have also created opportunities to help your loved ones. On the other hand, your journey has been/is stressful. Apart from the usual workload, and stress, you lack the social and cultural capital to achieve your goals and sometimes you have doubts regarding your abilities.

Though there are statistics on socio-economic gaps in access to higher education, studies on first-in-family students are rare; studies on first-in-family academics are even rarer. However, first-generation students make up a substantial portion of most of the universities in the UK. I, myself, am a first-generation PhD student and based on the discussions with other first-generation academics and students in the UK, here I have outlined some of the experiences and challenges that first-generation academics face.

Social and Cultural Capital

Social and Cultural Capital are the resources and networks that can help you access opportunities and achieve your goals. If you are a First-generation student, then you are less likely to go to highly selective universities. Also, you are more likely to choose a degree course that is directly linked to the labor market. So, it is not only the grades and interviews that determine which university or course you opt for, there are other factors too. The same goes for PhD journey too and beyond. Generally speaking, if you have connections with professors, alumni or peers, then you have better opportunities for research collaboration, career prospectus, funding and others. Social and Cultural capital also let you get to know the norms and the unspoken rules of academia, which lets you have the advantage of what to do and what not to do in any scenario, be it presenting a paper at a conference or effectively communicating ideas with prospective supervisors or funders. If you are a first-generation academic, then you may lack this kind of capital. You may lack any role model or mentor who can navigate you through the ups and downs of academia. You may not know how to build a network or contact influential people in your discipline.

Financial Insecurity

Financing a PhD can be difficult for anyone but it is especially challenging for first-generation students. Tuition fees, living expenses, fieldwork, and research travel are expensive. Further, there can be additional unseen costs. With the high rise in the cost of living and a dearth of job opportunities, getting a higher degree in arts and humanities does not seem like an option for the working and lower middle-classes. Academia is now international, tenure jobs are fewer and therefore highly competitive and working hours are way long with very less amount of time provided for pursuing own research, as compared to previous decades. Compared to industry, working in academia has lost its charm and has become less rewarding.

Adding insult to injury, the fees of studying for a PhD are unusually high. Imagine paying 5000 pounds annually (25,000 pounds annually for international students) along with the increased cost of living, or 3 years minimum. After the end of the three years, only mythical creatures have been able to submit their thesis. The others struggle to juggle between working part-time, other responsibilities and writing final chapters. If you are coming from a working-class background and have faced hardships, then it is even more challenging.

Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome is a psychological phenomenon where you doubt your capabilities or skills and think of yourself as a fraud or an imposter. You may think you do not belong here or have been placed here because of luck or external factors. You may feel that you are simply not smart enough or work hard enough to become an academic. Then, you try to work hard and give yourself unnecessary stress in order to meet higher standards. Academia can be brutal. You might be isolated and alienated from others because they do not come from the same background as yours. You might also have self-doubt due to the lack of appreciation and recognition. In the worst circumstances, you might feel discriminated against or biased by people who doubt your capability. These can give you stress and can take a toll on your mental well-being along with the regular demands and expectations of a PhD course.

It does get better though..

Being a first-generation academic is not easy but is not impossible either. You have gone through various challenges and overcame them to be where you are. And you have the potential to overcome bigger challenges and achieve more. See these challenges as part of the process. Seek professional help. Practice self-care. Universities have mentorship, guidance and other resources to help you ensure these things through workshops, seminars and working groups. Also, find your community and try to meet new people which can be good for your well-being. Very importantly, celebrate your wins, both small and big. You are doing great! You are not alone and there is always help available. You are a role model and an inspiration for others who would be walking in your footsteps. You should be proud of yourself, and your identity and embrace the opportunities that academia has to offer.

Feel free to reach me at excy@liverpool.ac.uk if you would like to share your experience or need any help.