

First-Generation Students and the Hidden Challenges of university

By Charisma Hehakaya

If you don't have a laptop, studying becomes difficult. If you don't realize that education costs more than just tuition fees, you may be caught off guard by unexpected expenses. If you don't fully master the language, writing a motivation letter isn't easy. In an environment where going to university is not a given, intrinsic motivation often awakens only once you finally sit in a lecture hall.

First-generation students have no one in their immediate surroundings who has attended university before. Some come from stable families whose parents encourage and support them wholeheartedly. Others grow up in less stable households, without financial backing or access to helpful social networks. Some live in areas where universities are literally far away—whether that means a remote village, rural area, city, or even another country.

These students bring with them a wealth of diversity—in ethnicity, skin color, gender, and social class. Yet they all share one experience: if you don't know what to expect when you start university, you are bound to encounter many surprises along the way.

At university, I soon discovered many unwritten rules. Studying isn't just about absorbing knowledge; it's also about understanding how to study program. Each program has its own culture, norms, and expectations: how to participate in lectures, how to ask questions, how to present yourself, and even how to afford the tools needed for success, like a laptop or housing near campus. For many of my classmates, these things were normal. For me, they were not.

I grew up bilingual—Dutch at school, Malay at home. Because of that, I struggled with Dutch, and my English was almost nonexistent. Finding the right words was hard, and understanding academic texts was even harder. I took extra classes in Dutch, English, presenting, and academic writing and reading. I learned that repetition helps and that learning takes time.

Universities organize open days, but that doesn't automatically make them open to everyone. Once you earn your high school diploma, you can apply for a selective program, such as medicine. Since the shift from a lottery-based system to selection-based admissions, student populations in such programs have become less diverse. This is striking because, especially in fields like medicine, it's crucial that future doctors reflect the society they will serve. Yet most medical students today come from families with higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Many of them receive early encouragement, private tutoring, or expensive coaching to help them succeed in selection procedures. For students who can't afford such support—or don't even know it exists—the threshold is much higher.

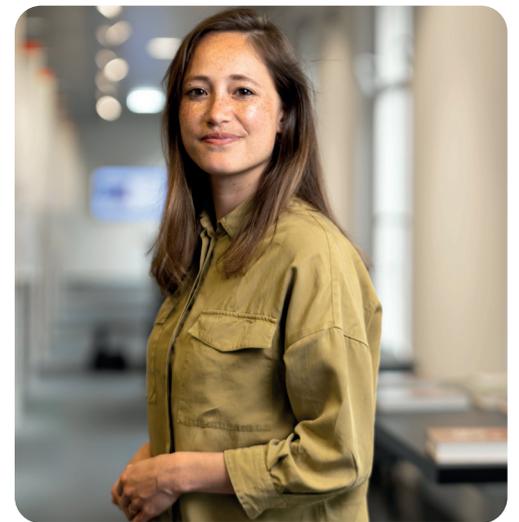
Educational institutions may decide for themselves how to select students, as long as they use at least two different methods. But if the criteria reward knowledge that only privileged students are likely to possess—such as familiarity with the healthcare system—they unintentionally exclude others. First-generation students are rarely in a position to prepare years in advance. Research has already shown that it's essential to consider the social and cultural background of applicants when assessing their potential.

What did being a first-generation student ultimately teach me? Not to compare myself with others. I learned to bridge the gap between people with and without academic backgrounds, and between theory and practice. I saw the same in other first-generation students: they become connectors. I discovered that language is a key to progress and that asking for help is a strength.

Equal opportunity is a social issue that universities can address. They can provide more targeted support to students from non-academic or low-income backgrounds—and make that support visible and easy to access. For many first-generation students, feeling at home at university is anything but obvious.

They often feel caught between two worlds: home and academia. Hearing that others share those feelings helped me feel less like an outsider. This is where role models matter most. And when role models are absent, it becomes even more important for teachers to make universities truly inclusive spaces. Support for “soft skills,” like finding housing or coping with setbacks, can be invaluable. Sharing experiences helps identify what students truly need. Financial support is also crucial.

When you're young and impressionable, hearing something from an authority figure can easily shape your self-image—especially in an unfamiliar environment. But that unfamiliar world is also a source of strength. First-generation students are pioneers who, through sheer determination, bridge divides and connect social groups. They excel at translating theory into practice. They are the bridge builders between worlds—people our society urgently needs in times of growing inequality and social tension.



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