

# First-Generation Students in the post-pandemic university: Centring students' experiences in moving towards a more inclusive higher education

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## Abstract

This special issue, titled 'First-Generation Students in the post-pandemic university: Centring students' experiences in moving towards a more inclusive higher education', brings together eight research articles that shed light on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student equity. By taking a holistic view on First-Generation Students' journeys into and through higher education, and by valuing their experiences in different institutional and national contexts (Austria, Australia, Czechia, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom), this special issue offers new methodological and theoretical insights into equity and inclusion in higher education. It contributes to critically reflect on the meanings and configuration of higher education in a post-pandemic scenario by discussing how social justice-oriented policies can improve higher education for all. In this editorial, we outline the scope of this special issue and introduce each of the eight articles.

## Keywords

First-Generation students, post-pandemic university, higher education, inequality, student experience

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has initiated ongoing profound changes regarding social, spatial, and temporal arrangements of higher education on a global scale (Ajjawi et al., 2022; Dodd et al., 2021). Literature has examined that under-represented student groups, for example, those who are the first in their family attending university (First-Generation Students), have been especially put at risk of seeing their positions deteriorating further compared to the general student population (Lörz et al., 2021; O’Shea et al., 2021). However, research has also shown how the new arrangements, routines and technologies that have been used to provide teaching during the pandemic (e.g. remote teaching and learning), might benefit under certain conditions First-Generation Students and students with working and family responsibilities (Stone, 2021; Stone et al., 2021). As the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic passes, the challenge now is to use this momentum to critically reflect upon what universities could do across Europe to drive forward equitable access and success in higher education (Atherthon, 2022). In order to do so, we need student voices to be heard and included when formulating policy implications on how the European higher education sector can move towards a more inclusive educational system.

## This special issue

This special issue ‘thinks with’ the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic on the academic and social experiences of disadvantaged student groups, especially First-Generation Students and explores the challenges they are facing in a changing university environment (Drane et al., 2021; Farnell et al., 2021). It also sheds light on the opportunities the current changes have to offer for these students. Indeed, while many universities are trying to go ‘back to normality’ (e.g. attracting students to live on campus again), students are increasingly raising their voices in terms of which changes, introduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, should be kept in a post-pandemic university (e.g. the rising number of available online or blended courses, since it offered some students to more easily juggle university with work or family commitments; Doolan et al., 2021).

This special issue deliberately focuses on First-Generation Students from a diversity of backgrounds, considering the heterogeneity within this student group (Brooks and O’Shea, 2021) and taking into account the variety of challenges and opportunities those students have experienced in different national and institutional settings. In many European countries, First-Generation Students are the majority within the student population (Hauschildt et al., 2024). However, compared to the distribution of the educational attainment within their parents’ generation, they are still at disadvantage as students whose parents obtain a higher education degree show a higher probability of going to university than their First-Generation counterparts (Zucha et al., 2024). This circumstance makes this group unique for equity policies, since they are often the majority at universities in Europe, but still face multiple forms of oppression when transitioning through university, especially when being first-generation intersects with other forms of disadvantage based on previous educational trajectories, gender, ethno-racial divisions, financial resources, etc. (O’Shea et al., 2021; Patfield et al., 2022; Wilkins, 2014). Therefore, taking experiences and perspectives from these students into account provides a necessary basis for reflecting more broadly upon how we could use this momentum of change to move towards a more inclusive European higher education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022). The special issue includes *eight research articles* illuminating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on student equity and shedding light on the experiences of First-Generation Students moving into and through higher education.

In the first paper, Sarah O’Shea argues that while students from more diverse backgrounds are nowadays encouraged to access university to fulfil widening participation or social inclusion

objectives, certain types of university learner identities continue to be normalized and valorized across higher education systems. There are often unspoken expectations attached to the 'ideal' student (e.g. studying full-time, prioritizing studies). In this study, however, O'Shea offers an alternative to this idyll of the 'turbo' student based on data of First-Generation Students in Australia highlighting the disjointed pathways that many students took and the ways in which the material realities of life significantly impacted on their educational decision making and lived experiences.

Kateřina Machovcov, Taťana Škanderov, Tereza Vengřinov and Barbora Zumrov focus in the second article on First-Generation Students' transition to higher education in the Czech Republic. Based on qualitative interviews, the authors present various journeys into higher education and how they interact with students' identity trajectories. Interestingly, the experiences of the pandemic played an unpredictable role, weakening learning engagement for some but providing time to focus on studies for others.

Based on a longitudinal qualitative research project with 40 First-Generation Students in Italy, in the third paper Marco Romito explores how transition to university should be understood as a process with simultaneous cognitive, social, emotional and bodily dimensions. Combining Bourdieu with the intersectionality perspective, the paper shows how divisions and hierarchies along class and racial lines define the boundaries of legitimate membership in the university and the facilitating or hindering conditions under which learning and socializing can take place. In particular, the paper explores how the disruption caused by COVID-19 to universities' sedimented routines, assumptions, ways of socializing and teaching had differing impacts on First-Generation Students.

Using longitudinal quantitative register data, Mandl and Haag analyse in the fourth paper of this issue how existing inequalities in access to higher education for First-Generation Students have developed in course of the pandemic in Austria. They show that despite the disruptive effects of the pandemic, the enduring downward trend in both the total number and the proportion of First-Generation Students has not been reversed.

The fifth paper, written by Alejandro Montes, is based on research involving 20 First-Generation Students interviewed before and after the pandemic in a Catalan university. The author shows how the hurdles and difficulties these students encountered in the pre-pandemic scenario have been further amplified with the new academic routines. In particular, the paper explores how non-presential teaching might contribute to foster social isolation and loss of links and codes that are crucial to students' academic experiences.

Lessky investigates in the sixth paper of this issue how familial dynamics shape First-Generation Students' educational pathways and inform how they engage with the higher education setting. Based on interviews with 27 learners studying at four public universities in Austria, the analysis revealed three different drivers for attending university. Findings show that these drivers inform not only the why but also the how First-Generation Students organize their social contacts during their university education. It is argued that these subjective dimensions need to be taken into account if we aim to improve targeted support and to enhance the quality of learning experiences for all higher education students.

The seventh paper in this issue, written by Resch and Bleicher, explores the social belonging of First-Generation Students in a large university in Austria applying a qualitative approach. The findings illustrate that First-Generation Students navigate higher education under significant economic constraints and experience intermittent access to social support measures. The study shows that negative sentiments during studying block students' active involvement in class, and thus their sense of belonging.

Finally, the eighth paper of Vikki Boliver, Kate Hampshire, Andrea Lambell, Abigail Lewis and Catherine Marley illuminates inequalities in students' sense of economic, cultural and social belonging at a highly selective UK university. Reporting on data collected via an online survey and follow-up focus groups, findings show that students from disadvantaged backgrounds scored significantly lower on all three elements of belonging compared to their more advantaged counterparts. Excerpts from the open questions illustrate the interrelated nature of the barriers to economic, cultural and social belonging faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This study points to the need for highly selective universities to do more to facilitate belonging for less advantaged students.

### Contribution

By taking a holistic view on First-Generation Students' journeys into and through higher education, and by valuing their experiences in different institutional and national contexts (Austria, Australia, Czechia, Italy, the UK and Spain), this special issue offers new methodological and theoretical insights into equity and inclusion in higher education. It also contributes to critically reflect on the meanings and configuration of higher education in a post-pandemic scenario by discussing how social justice-oriented policies can improve higher education for all.

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**Franziska Lessky** is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Education at Oxford and an Assistant Professor at the University of Innsbruck. Her research delves into various topics related to university students’ access to, progression through, and completion of higher education. Additionally, she investigates students’ political views and behaviors, graduate outcomes and career pathways, as well as working conditions in academia. All of her work is grounded in an equity perspective, critically examining social inequalities in higher education and beyond.

**Marco Romito** is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Milan-Bicocca. His research focuses on social-classed and racialized inequalities in educational transitions, specifically looking at guidance practices, institutional habitus, and the trajectories of first-generation students using qualitative and longitudinal methods. He has published on these topics in journals such as the *European Educational Research Journal* and the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, and has led studies on the transition to and retention in higher education in Italy. His broader interests include the governance of education and the role of ICT in schooling.