

**POWERst – emPOWERing
first generation STudents**

**Policy
Recommendations
on Social Inclusion
in Higher Education**

POWERst



emPOWERing first generation STudents



University of Stuttgart
Germany



Empowering
young people



Amsterdam UMC
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2 Policy Recommendations on Social Inclusion in Higher Education

Preface

Talented young people from non-academic backgrounds face specific challenges on their academic path, as shown by their **underrepresentation** at universities and their **higher dropout rate across Europe**. They face more barriers to education than students from academic backgrounds, and struggle to overcome these obstacles without tailor-made support. However, **specific needs of first-generation students are rarely considered by educational institutions and policymakers**.

To address this issue, project “**POWERst – emPOWERing first-generation STudents**” aims at **fostering social inclusion by building a more inclusive Higher Education System in Europe while at the same time supporting university staff**. The purpose of the project is to help first-generation students to successfully complete a higher education study program and to consider pursuing a scientific career by supporting and empowering them and potential applicants as well as by providing teaching staff with the necessary tools to contribute to a more inclusive Higher Education System in terms of social background.

This policy brief gathers recommendations directly from first-generation higher education students and university staff at the partner universities of the POWERst Project (University of Stuttgart, Sciences Po Bordeaux and The Faculty of Medicine VU Amsterdam). With these recommendations we aim to provide novel ideas from and to (first-generation) students facing challenges before, during and after their studies. We present several guidelines and best practices for more inclusive approaches and a more effective diversity management at schools and universities. Further, our recommendations to policymakers at different levels aim at bridging the gap between policy and practice for a more diverse and inclusive higher education. Based on the experiences and learning acquired during the POWERst project, we present recommendations for the following target groups:

- (First-generation) Students
- Schools and universities
- Policymakers at EU, regional, national and local levels

These target groups are crucial as the policy brief will show

- what first-generation, underrepresented students can do to help themselves and to seek for support,
- what education institutions can do to support first-generation students for a more inclusive (higher) education, and
- what policymakers can do to raise awareness on underrepresentation of first-generation students in higher education and to support students and universities.

Based on a participatory approach, this policy brief builds on the voices of first-generation students from all partner universities to ensure their perspectives and voices are heard, while also including complementary expertise contributed by university staff. This process ensures that the policy brief contains by novel ideas to identify innovative solutions for the transition to inclusive and attractive universities for all students.

First-generation students are more likely to drop out given the intersectionality of drop-out factors.

Higher Drop-out rate

Imposter Syndrome

Many first-generation students suffer from the imposter syndrome, which stifles their ability to act and reach their potential.

Children from non-academic households often struggle to traverse educational barriers, leading to their underrepresentation in higher education institutions and the labor market.

Under-represented

Rarely Considered

The specific needs of first-generation students are rarely considered by tertiary education institutions.

Social Inequality in Higher Education

4,5 mio

EUROPEAN FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

In 2020, approx. 18 million tertiary education students were enrolled at European universities, 25% of them being first-generation students^{[2][3]}.

69 %

EUROPEAN NON-ACADEMIC HOUSEHOLDS

Currently, approx. 69,2% of Europeans aged 25-74 years have an educational attainment level below tertiary education^[1].

4 Recommendations to (First-Generation) Students

Recommendations to Students



ABOUT THIS SECTION

About this section

In this section, we present several recommendations to (first-generation) students from a bottom-up perspective. These recommendations are to serve to help students help themselves and receive support from others before, during, and after their studies.

Recommendations to (First-generation) Students

DO NOT COMPARE YOURSELF TO OTHERS!

Do not compare yourself to others!

Underrepresented students tend to think that they are alone with their struggles, and that they are responsible for their own situation. However, inequalities are often produced and reinforced by society, schooling systems, teachers, and curricula. The actors themselves are not always conscious of the causes and consequences of these social inequalities.

First-generation students should, therefore, be more aware of their status as first-generation students and the peculiarities that go along with their social origin. Understanding the reasons why they feel different than the majority in numerous situations can help manage their sense of belonging and overcome crises.

Ideally, they should realize that they typically have different starting conditions at university, than students whose parents studied themselves, as they oftentimes receive less financial and mental support by their families and cannot draw on academic experiences of their parents. First-generation students hence should not be too worried in case something does not work out as expected, such as that they get a lower grade or need an additional semester to finish their studies.

First-generation students should develop a comprehensive understanding of how inequalities affect individual life courses. It is especially important to **understand the intersectional nature of social inequalities**. They need to understand how various dimensions of diversity (religion, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, disability, and socioeconomic status) overlap, reinforce each other and affect academic success.

At the same time, education institutions and policymakers should also work towards understanding and explaining the interconnected nature of different identities which may be subject to overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage, so that first-generation students can realise that they are not alone.

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE AND LEARN FROM OTHERS!

Share your experience and learn from others!

Finding or building a network of first-generation students before, during and after higher education is one of the most effective ways to find like-minded peers, learn from one another, and integrate into the system. Sharing experiences and supporting each other can help first-generation students find their way into higher education, successfully finish their studies and build a future for themselves after graduation.

First-generation students can greatly benefit from **mentors of the same social background**. They themselves may also **become mentors and support others** which may help them realise what they have already overcome and what else they can accomplish in their future. **First-generation alumni as well as experienced first-generation students** can support current first-generation students by **acting as role-models**, e.g., by giving interviews, telling their **success stories**, or by being open for current students to reach out to them and ask questions.

Recommendations to (First-generation) Students

First-generation alumni can further support students by providing access to and actively including them into their networks as well as by providing opportunities for students to develop their potential by encouraging them to take action in designing their career paths (e.g., through internship/traineeship offers at their current positions, mentoring offers, etc.). **Alumni or more experienced students may become a buddy for or may form tandem pairs with students who are just getting started** at the university and support them throughout their journey, allowing new students to ask questions, while the mentors can share their experiences and advice.

Some universities or high schools have already established these kinds of exchange opportunities and support measures for (prospective) first-generation students. If so, first-generation students should take advantage of these opportunities and be as active as possible. If such support measures have not yet been established, students themselves can initiate and organise these kinds of programmes. They can be organised in a formal setting at the university level, e.g., in the form of office hours or official mentoring or buddy programmes, or they can be realized in a more informal way such as regular café or pub meetings.

Non-first-generation students may also take part in these programmes and support first-generation students by making themselves and others aware of their privileges and by providing allyship (e.g., by using their networks, status, etc. to raise awareness for the topic and to support and encourage first-generation students).

CULTIVATE YOUR OWN EXCELLENCE!

Cultivate your own excellence!

Being a first-generation student does not exclusively involve disadvantages, but also advantages. The experiences that first-generation students gain during their studies as well as the challenges they master and hurdles they overcome provide them with skills, knowledge, and personal development not easily accessible to non-first-generation students, which – if marketed correctly – can become powerful tools for their studies and entry into the labour market.

First-generation students make unique experiences and gain special skills such as work experience through side jobs, resilience as they often must work harder than others, self-reliance and independence in seeking and finding information. These are valuable resources – although they are not always recognised as such by the educational system.

YOU ARE NOT AN IMPOSTER!

You are not an imposter!

Imposter syndrome is “a psychological condition that is characterized by persistent doubt concerning one’s abilities or accomplishments accompanied by the fear of being exposed as a fraud despite evidence of one’s ongoing success”^[4]. **Many first-generation students suffer from the imposter syndrome**, which stifles their ability to act and reach their potential. By making oneself and others aware that these negative thoughts do not reflect the truth, by acknowledging one’s own achievements and by encouraging others to do so too, students can support themselves and others to overcome the imposter syndrome.

Recommendations to (First-generation) Students

Furthermore, **first-generation students should never be afraid to ask questions and to pursue opportunities.** The fear of standing out as different often hinders first-generation students (e.g., during lectures, conversations with university staff, non-first-generation peers, industry contacts etc.) to ask questions about unfamiliar matters or procedures. Similarly, the **fear of failure** (e.g., in competitions for university programmes, scholarships, jobs, etc.) keeps first-generation students from taking opportunities. These experiences are not exclusive to first-generation students. Non-first-generation students may also be afraid to ask questions, feel lost at university, and experience imposter syndrome. Yet, given their privileged background, these students may support first-generation students by providing allyship and by creating an atmosphere that allows for questions or making mistakes. Hence, **all students should actively ask questions, take opportunities, and encourage one another to do so.**

INFORM YOURSELF!

Inform Yourself!

Prospective university students should **visit information events and open days of the universities.** These events allow prospective students to get an overview of the offered study programmes, to learn more about their peculiarities and to ask questions, eventually allowing them to get a better idea of the academic opportunities ahead.

If possible, prospective students should visit a regular day at the university. For instance, the VU Amsterdam as well as the University of Stuttgart offer try out classes and pre-university master classes. By attending such programmes prospective students can familiarise themselves with the university, the campus, their peers as well as various aspects of university life, as for instance following lectures.

Further, first-year students should **not be strangers to the online student portals and services offered by the central information offices of the universities.** These services are particularly useful during the orientation phase at the university, as they facilitate orientation and usually provide answers to frequently asked questions from first-year students – including first-generation students.

First-generation-students may also **consult a study advisor, programme coordinator or career officer** in case they have questions or doubts about their studies. When a student is doubting or questioning whether the chosen programme is what they really want, they can contact the study advisors or programme coordinators.

8 Recommendations to Schools and Universities



Recommendations to Schools & Universities

ABOUT THIS SECTION

About this section

This section provides recommendations for education institutions on what kind of tailor-made services they can offer to first-generation students to overcome institutional, financial, and psychological barriers. How can institutions create a more inclusive and diverse environment for first-generation students?

Recommendations to Schools and Universities

DEVELOP PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES!

Develop partnerships between schools and universities!

By developing partnerships between schools and universities, institutions can **ease the transition from secondary to higher education**. Such partnerships, for instance, may involve mentoring of high school students by university students and/or organising events at which university students visit high schools and give insights into their daily life at university.

The close cooperation between schools and universities may also function as a kind of detection system in secondary education. First-generation students and other less privileged students oftentimes tend to underestimate themselves. Building a **collaborative network between high schools and universities** offers the opportunity to **detect young promising prospective students, to help them to prepare for their choices of studies and to foster their academic success**.

Pre-university information is a must for first-generation students. For example, the **Pre-University College of VU Amsterdam** collaborates with high schools and offers various programmes for students of different school years to give them the opportunity to discover their talents and to prepare them for their studies. Some of these programmes are specifically targeted to first-generation students such as “Be Prepared” and “Better Prepared”.

Be Prepared is a programme that helps first-generation students choose a study programme that fits their interests and characteristics, provides them with the skills to study successfully and familiarizes them with university life. The **Better Prepared programme** helps first-generation students to start their studies well prepared. During a five-day training, the participants attend workshops and lectures on researching and studying at university as well as on general academic skills. Throughout the week, the participants are guided by student coaches and get to meet their fellow students. These programmes are important examples of how universities can form partnerships with high schools and provide support to first-generation students. Our recommendation for all education institutions is to create and maintain these kinds of programmes.

In addition to the partnerships between high schools and universities, the latter may also **collaborate with (non-profit) organisations that focus on the topic and seek their external expertise**. **ArbeiterKind.de**, for instance, is a non-profit organisation supporting (prospective) first-generation students in Germany. They encourage students who are the first in their families to attend university and support them on their way to graduation. To do so, ArbeiterKind.de offers a wide range of support measures such as sending their volunteers to high schools acting as role models and answering questions, regular open café meetings, different mentoring programmes (including career entry mentoring), as well as a variety of online workshops specifically targeted at the needs of first-generation students. The University of Stuttgart has been collaborating with ArbeiterKind.de and has provided the organisation with an office and the necessary infrastructure for this work.

Recommendations to Schools and Universities

ESTABLISH NETWORKS WITH AND FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS!

Establish networks with and for first-generation students!

Education institutions should **develop a structured mentoring system in addition to students' own initiatives**. Even though first-generation and other underprivileged students may need specific assistance, they might not always ask for it. With properly established mentoring systems students can be supported according to their needs and in case a student experiences difficulties, it is possible to intervene at an early stage and therefore ensure that their situation does not deteriorate.

Universities should **establish a first-generation student association**, similar to faculty representatives, in order to make networking and exchanging experiences, skills and information easier for students. In these associations, students from all backgrounds, but also academic as well as administrative staff may become members. The members should meet up regularly for round table discussions, share their best practices with their peers and seek for support whenever they need.

Another more informal way is to **establish buddy programmes** through which university students guide novel students (or prospective students). When freshmen have more experienced (first-generation) students by their side during their first years, they typically feel more welcome at the university given that they have a concrete contact person to approach whenever they have questions.

STRUCTURED ONBOARDING FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS!

Structured onboarding for first-generation students!

A good start is essential for students' prospects and future accomplishments within academia. To ensure a successful start, universities should **offer introductory weeks before the official start of the programmes**. These introduction days should **include social, administrative, and academic aspects**. A social introduction day may aim at having students get to know each other, the programme coordinators, and the teaching staff. Programme coordinators should also inform the students and give instructions on how to manage the administrative matters at the university such as registering for the classes and exams and paying student fees. Furthermore, they should share information on useful contacts whom the students may turn to with questions or problems. During these introduction days, teaching staff should organise introductory courses where students learn how to collaborate with others, learn how to study effectively and in a self-directed way, and that it is okay to ask questions and make mistakes.

Universities should further **organise role model seminars** in which alumni present their experiences from their time at university and show which options students have after graduation. This allows first-generation students to compensate for missing role model experience in their families, while also highlighting that it is natural to struggle during one's first semester as others experienced the same struggles as well yet managed to succeed.

Recommendations to Schools and Universities

PROVIDE TRAININGS FOR TEACHING AND ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF!

Provide trainings for teaching and administrative staff!

Education institutions should officially acknowledge the presence of first-generation students and academics. During the POWERst project, many professors and lecturers indicated that they themselves were first-generation students. By being open about their own social background as well as by displaying awareness of this diversity dimension in academia, members of the university can provide allyship to first-generation students and academics and support their sense of belonging.

Education institutions should **create safe spaces for students to ask questions**, and teaching staff should always encourage students to do so. During the POWERst Summer Schools, many first-generation students stated that they had negative experiences with regard to the biased environment at universities, e.g., teaching staff answering to questions with expressions such as “you should know that by now”, “this is common knowledge”, “this is trivial”, or starting their lectures with “as we all know”. This kind of attitude makes first-generation students feel insecure and uncomfortable to ask further questions and effectively prevents participation in university seminars to the full extent.

Moreover, teaching and administrative staff at universities need to be aware of the challenges that first-generation students face. Universities should **offer regular training sessions for teaching staff to raise awareness** on the topic, provide them with insights into what it means to be a first-generation student, and provide tips on how to make their teaching more inclusive. This can also be applied to other diversity aspects. Education institutions can make it mandatory for teaching and administrative staff to participate in these “**diversity trainings**” regularly to contribute to a more inclusive higher education.

Universities may also organise courses for teaching staff which allow insight into the creation of inclusive learning environment for all students, while raising awareness for differences between students that typically are not visible at a first glance amongst teaching staff. The VU Amsterdam, for instance, provides their staff with various types of classes and training programmes. One of these programmes introduces the **Mixed Classroom Educational Model** which is an educational approach that builds upon differences to enrich the learning experience for all students. To support educators implementing the VU Mixed Classroom Educational Model, the university organises interactive Mixed Classroom in Practice workshops on acquiring and developing competencies to capitalize on differences in their classrooms.

Universities can moreover encourage their staff to offer office hours specifically for first-generation students, in which the students can ask questions or ask for support. Especially staff members who themselves were first-generation students should be encouraged to openly communicate their background to give current first-generation students a feeling of not being alone and of being understood.

Recommendations to Schools and Universities

PROVIDE EXTENSIVE CAREER COUNSELLING FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS!

Provide extensive career counselling for first-generation students!

First-generation students and other underprivileged students may not have the network and the social codes necessary for successfully entering the job market. Thus, specific training and mentoring may be useful, notably by **mobilising alumni of the same backgrounds**. While some students may get the necessary support from their families (i.e., support for choosing their profession, for finding internships to integrate into the labour market or for applying for jobs, etc.) first-generation students often do not have these opportunities and are forced to manage these steps on their own. Therefore, universities should provide extensive career counselling for (first-generation) students, as well as a variety of trainings (e.g., **workshops on how to network, how to write a CV, or workshops to develop soft skills** that go beyond academic education). An **extensive career counselling** is not only a valuable resource for career entry **after graduation, but also during studies** to gain early professional experience through internships or side-jobs, for example.

University staff should **make first-generation students aware of student research assistant positions** as they are typically more compatible with the academic life compared to other students' jobs and provide first-generation students with the opportunity to familiarise themselves with academic fields of work. Further, teaching staff (and universities) may provide support through the continuation and further development of digital asynchronous modules, developed during the pandemic, as these modules **allow students to be more flexible in their programmes**.

Some degree programmes require unpaid, **full-time internships** in order to graduate, which may not be affordable for every student. Yet, the internships are oftentimes obligatory to acquire the final qualifications of experience-driven programmes and are typically considered an exceptionally positive aspect by students of these programmes, given their large training periods. Providing **more flexibility in working hours** during these internships as well as more time to finish the internship may be helpful for first-generation students, as it allows them to maintain a side job alongside the internship. In addition, support from the university in applying for grants for internships abroad or in finding internships outside academia (which are often paid) is also important. Especially first-generation students are oftentimes dependent on paid side jobs to finance their studies. Therefore, universities should change their degree requirements in this regard to become more inclusive.

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14 Recommendations to Policymakers

Recommendations for Policymakers



ABOUT THIS SECTION

About this section

According to the European Commission's Communication on a Renewed EU Agenda For Higher Education COM(2017)247, "Higher education must play its part in facing up to Europe's social and democratic challenges. This means ensuring that higher education is inclusive, open to talent from all backgrounds^[5]." Project POWERst is committed to this statement and aims at creating the right conditions for first-generation students to thrive in an inclusive learning environment in higher education.

RAISE AWARENESS FOR A MORE INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION!

Raise awareness for a more inclusive higher education!

Many young people are excluded from the higher education systems because of their socio-economic situation, educational background, insufficient systems of support and guidance and other obstacles^[6]. These structural barriers to higher education exist and remain. Policymakers should work towards developing a comprehensive understanding of how inequalities affect the individual life course and raise awareness on how they lead to under-representation of marginalised groups in higher education. This can best be implemented by means of training modules that draw on the current state of social science research in this regard.

The higher education system as a whole should **create continuous strategies to strengthen the social dimension and foster equity and inclusion in higher education**. To do so, a **broad-based dialogue** is needed between public authorities, higher education institutions, student and staff representatives and other key stakeholders, including social partners, non-governmental organisations and people from vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups^[6]. This broad-based dialogue can ensure that the strategies developed are responsive to the needs of the wider community.

First, it is important to **define underrepresented groups in higher education**, and identify which students may require additional support to overcome the barriers to their access and continuity in higher education. **There should be defined target student groups** in order to create a systemic approach and support systems to remove these barriers. Policymakers should facilitate a common understanding of underrepresented groups for inclusion in their action plans. Additionally, the definition of underrepresented groups should also be based on local context in order to adjust and create tailor-made strategies to students' needs^[7].

OFFER MORE SUPPORT TO EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS!

Offer more support to education institutions!

Policymakers should engage in a **continuous policy dialogue with higher education institutions and high schools** to develop the necessary strategies for a more inclusive higher education. The education institutions should be provided with **sufficient and sustainable funding** to build adequate capacity to embrace diversity and contribute to equity and inclusion in higher education^[6].

These fundings can especially be used to improve the recruitment strategies in terms of addressing inequities in recruitment, admissions, and support during the studies. Further, policymakers should "provide policies that enable higher education institutions to ensure effective counselling and guidance for potential and enrolled students in order to widen their access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies. These services should be coherent across the entire education system, with special regard to transitions between different educational levels, educational institutions and into the labour market^[6]."

Recommendations to Policymakers

In addition to the financial support, “higher education institutions should be supported and rewarded for meeting agreed targets in widening access, increasing participation in and completion of higher education studies, in particular in relation to vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups^[6].”

As first-generation students often lack the background knowledge and connections to access higher education and need more assistance, additional funding is needed for the creation and development of support programmes exclusively for first-generation students. Policymakers can address these barriers and inequities by providing **additional funding to organisations/projects/programmes that provide training and support to first-generation students**. Similarly, governments and EU bodies themselves can expand their internship/traineeship programmes or create programs exclusively for first-generation students.

OFFER MORE SUPPORT TO STUDENTS!

Offer more support to students!

Structured funding should be provided for students in the form of **grants and scholarships** to support them in studying, working and/or volunteering abroad^[6]. Accordingly, **information regarding the eligibility requirements and application procedures** should be in an **easy-to-understand format and easily accessible**. Where possible, **top-up procedures** should be applied to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In many cases, young people decide against studying due to a lack of financial means. For this reason, **accessibility to funding programmes should be eased**. While most government programmes provide financial support, they often involve extensive application procedures or impose restrictions on additional funding opportunities (e.g., restrictions on income earned through part-time jobs, restrictions on funding based on the income of parents, etc.). By loosening said restrictions and by simplifying application procedures policymakers can actively contribute to a more inclusive education system. Further, most of the funding programmes are provided in the form of loans which require students to repay a certain percentage of the grant after the completion of their studies, thus posing an additional burden on the young people.

Scholarships exclusively for first-generation students should be introduced. Existing scholarship programmes mostly include first-generation students implicitly, yet they most often compete against non-first-generation students, which, given their privileged background, typically hold the comparative advantage. The provision of scholarships exclusively for first-generation students effectively lowers competition amongst students and thus increases the chances for first-generation students to receive funding.

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