Exploring First-Generation Students’ Experiences of Inhibitors and Motivators from a Pakistani Higher Education Perspective

Nadia Gilani, Syed Abdul Waheed

Assistant Professor, Department of Teacher Education, University of Okara, Pakistan
Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Studies, University of Okara, Pakistan

ARTICLE DETAILS

ABSTRACT

The First-generation students are characterized by different academic experiences as compared to non-first-generation students from a higher education perspective. The present study aims to explore Pakistani first-generation students’ experiences who were studying at a public sector university. The researchers examined their academic lived experiences employing the phenomenological approach of qualitative research. Thirteen participants studying in various academic departments were approached through snowball sampling and they were interviewed with a semi-structured guide to explore what were their experiences of inhibitors and motivators while studying at a university as first-generation students. Thematic analysis revealed that these students had diverse and distinguished experiences which were structured under three major themes named family support, unawareness regarding studies, and challenges in academic matters. The study has implications for the parents, community, and higher education institutions for providing opportunities for their development and growth in society.

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1. Introduction

First-generation students enter a university with unique qualities and a different perspective. Most likely, they acknowledge the significance of the higher education system and try to achieve their study goals. Nevertheless, they come across many financial hurdles in their academic and daily life. They also face numerous hindrances from their parents as well because the parents bear the burden of their personal and academic expenditures (Jenkins et al., 2013; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Smith, 2020). These students enter the university with a lack of or no preparation as compared to the non-generation students. They are likely to have less information about the university and no experience of studying in such an environment, even their parents or relatives have no information about the university system. They do not have knowledge and skills of time management, fee structure, and budgeting of studies. They are not supported by their family for attending college (Thyer, 2000; Toutkoushian et al., 2019).
Such students face many issues and challenges. They cannot easily get access to the internet for searching different universities for their entrance and looking for better circumstances. Sometimes, the families of first-generation students disappoint them to attend a university and they tend to isolate themselves from their family and relatives due to their discouragement from them. Due to such conditions, they feel doubtful regarding their critical or motivational abilities and they think that they are not a part of the college where they are studying (Antonelli et al., 2020; Striplin, 1999). Their family members do not support them and they feel less confident and other skills are also dead. Research shows that first-generation students cannot participate in the educational and co-curricular activities that can strengthen their abilities in university. Moreover, teacher-student relationships or peer-relationship are also affected and sometimes they cannot develop a good relationship with faculty members (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Noel et al., 2021).

They also bear other various obstacles when they enter a university (Jehangir, 2010) such as social, cultural, economic, and educational barriers and other changes (London, 1989). These obstacles and unexpected situations develop discouragement, a sense of disappointment, and isolation among first-generation students (Antonelli et al., 2020; Lippincott & German, 2007). Hellman and Harbeck (1997) observed that first-generation students have less knowledge of their educational ability than non-generation students. Jenkins, Miyazaki & Janosik (2009) discovered that majority of first-generation students come to college with insufficient preparation. They need to improve their work in some subjects but they do not get appropriate support from the environment. They have lower readiness for college work and lower confidence in their abilities. Also, they feel hesitant to take the help of a teacher.

It is very difficult for first-generation students and their families to understand the necessary steps required for higher education (Chang et al., 2020; Smith, 2020; Vargas, 2004). Research shows that students have less knowledge about how to take admission to an institute of higher education if their parents could not attend a university. Therefore, they face different problems in taking admission (Tym et al., 2004). A huge number of first-generation students are scared of the system of higher education, they cannot understand the ‘psyche’ of their peers, and they do not get the idea of when it is suitable for them to interact and respond in a certain situation and when they should not (Noel et al., 2021; Pardron, 1992).

First-generation students face obstacles to understanding teachers’ expectations and they do not know about the use of academic language and the skills they should have. These factors may also affect preparing assignments and projects (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Jenkins, Miyazaki, & Janosik, 2009). These students and their families need to provide sufficient and useful information about university studies and experiences, particularly when they start their studies at a university or institute of higher education. They must be given information regarding university funds, fee structure, and other scholarship opportunities. Research has shown that first-generation students have less knowledge about the academic conditions and circumstances of a university (Antonelli et al., 2020; Engle, 2007; Adelman, 2007; Vargas, 2004). Many researchers have revealed that these students attend a university to help their families (Checkoway, 2018; Smith, 2020). Some of them submit applications to a university without having help from others. Sometimes, they do not pay a university fee because their parents are not in a position to afford it (Linda, 2015). They face multiple obstacles during their studies.

The purpose of this research is to explore how first-generation students participate in educational activities and academic decision-making to improve their academic and social life. The study examines how first-generation university students can find out ways to solve their problems and interact with
faculty which can help them cope with academic and personal challenges. It aims to understand how first-generation university students solve their academic obstacles during their studies at the university. An attempt has been made in this study to examine first-generation students’ experiences of studying in higher education institutions focusing on the study inhibitors and motivators and how they are motivated and challenged by them.

2. Research Questions
- What are first-generation students’ study experiences at the university?
- What challenges do Pakistani first-generation students face during their studies?
- How do family members of first-generation students respond to their academic needs and activities?
- How do other significant persons of first-generation students help them in their study matters?

3. Methodology
The study examined the experience of first-generation university students from a Pakistani perspective. It focused on the first-generation students’ feelings as being the first member of the family who is studying at a university or has completed his or her studies. According to Gareene (2018), “First-generation college students are defined as students whose parents had never attended postsecondary education or earned postsecondary degrees” (p. 174). The purpose of this qualitative research is to acquire an intensive and deeper understanding of the phenomenon rather than to achieve general information discovered (Gentles et al., 2015). The qualitative research used in this study is phenomenology.

Phenomenological research is an in-depth and intensive inquiry into human lived experience. Phenomenological research is concerned with human lived experience in everyday life. At its core, it concerns that the researchers need to require in-depth understating to help the people obtain new knowledge (Bliss, 2016). The reason to employ the phenomenological approach is to explore how the participants describe their experiences as first-generation university students.

The participants were male and female students studying in different academic programs in different semesters of a university. The participants belonged to the rural and urban areas surrounding the university. The researchers approached 13 first-generation students for interviewing them. The researchers used snowball sampling because the rare number of participants was not easily and adequately approachable. Snowball sampling depends upon seeking a reference and is more useful for unachievable samples. It was continuously used until data had been saturated (Naderifar, 2017). In demographic questions, the basic information of the participants was gathered and analyzed. In this phenomenological research, the basic research question was, “how it was like and what challenges did Pakistani first-generation students face during studies in a university”? Also, how they were supported by their family members, peers, and university support system.

To get answers to these questions, the researcher used semi-structured interviews because the researcher want to access in-depth and vast information from interviewees. A semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method in which researchers prepare a pre-planned list of open-ended questions. It provides an opportunity for the interviewer to explore specific themes and get access to more detailed information about the themes. It also allowed researchers to explore their points of view. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis of the interview text which allowed the researchers to find some important themes emerging from the transcripts.
4. Results

As a result of the analysis of the interview transcripts, the following themes emerged which have been described from the participants’ perspectives.

4.1 Family Support

Family support has a vital role in children’s academic life. It plays a major role in one’s academic success. It becomes more significant in the case of first-generation students. The students with greater family support feel a lot more encouraged to pursue their studies as they get every possible support from their family members.

Some of the participants of the study who are residing in urban areas described that their families supported them in their studies, especially in terms of financial support. The students added that their families also provide them with support in their academic matters as they wanted them to have advanced academic qualifications because, in their family, no one can reach this point before them. In most cases, fathers are the most encouraging persons in their families. They are ready to help them out in any way when they feel difficulty in understanding any subject matter by themselves and if possible, arrange extra coaching classes by paying a lot of money. It is only because they are the first ones in their family to continue higher education.

One such participant who did not want to continue her studies as no one in her family continued her studies further; shared her father’s encouraging statement that “In this modern age human beings are useless without higher studies, so you should not stop here”. Moreover, she added very interestingly advice that her father gave her regarding her studies:

“Try not to achieve high grades, simultaneously try not to achieve poor grades. But try to get an average score. Otherwise, you can face problems during job interviews as they would have high expectations in case of high grades and they might not consider you in case of poor grades”.

On contrary, some of the participants added that not all the members of their family were supportive of their education rather only one of them helped them in pursuing their higher education and because of that family member, they are here today and are trying to complete their higher studies. As one of the participants elaborated that no one was in favor of girl’s education in my family. My grandfather used to say that she must stay home after completion of 5th grade (primary education). But my father wanted me to continue my studies and supported me in every possible way as I also have a strong desire to get higher education and now, I am the first person in my family who is studying at university.

Most of the participants added that appreciation is another important element in bringing success to one’s life. If one does not receive appreciation from family members, he/she is less likely to achieve success. At the same time, where the first-generation children get support and appreciation from their family members, in addition to this, first-generation students also have to face criticism from family members as well who try to demotivate or discourage them as a result of jealousy and personal/domestic grudges.

On supporting the eldest child, one of the participants shared interesting remarks “my parents supported me the most being their eldest child so that I would be able to help my younger siblings”. He further added that “being a first child makes you close to your parents. You can discuss everything freely and can also advise your younger siblings”. Another participant described that in her family she
was the first girl who studies at the university which makes her feel proud. She further added that “I feel very happy when my parents used to tell others the same thing with pride”.

4.2 Unawareness regarding Studies

Parents who did not get higher education, particularly in universities, most likely remain unaware of the rules and regulations of the university, particularly at the time of admission, and the worth of various degree programs. Every university/higher education institute has its criteria and process for admission and various degree programs have different values and worth for different people.

Most of the participants described that their parents tried to motivate them and wanted them to get higher education, but they were unable to guide them properly because they were unaware of university rules and regulations. The participants added that awareness regarding admission to university or higher education institutes is much needed along with financial and moral support from their parents or other family members because being the first-generation child, they have no other family member to guide them. On the other hand, children who get their parents’ guidance or guidance from other family members become more aware and enter the higher education institute with confidence. They can better decide what to opt for and what to leave.

One of the participants remarked that “my family did not help me because they never knew about the university admission process and the knowledge about various degree programs. I did everything by myself”. She further added that due to lack of awareness, I made a wrong decision about my degree program; now nothing can be done as I have taken admitted to that particular program. But now she remarked that “I can help, support and guide my younger sibling or cousins in choosing a better degree program. I would not let my younger brother/sister’s future suffer due to the wrong choice of degree program”.

Some of the participants described that they not only suffered at the time of admission and selection of degree programs but also faced difficulties regarding university examination criteria which are different from secondary boards. In the beginning, they did not understand the university’s examination passing criteria, or its GPA/CGPA due to the semester system which is quite different from the annual system. It was very problematic. At the time of the announcement of the result of the first semester, many of us got to know about various criteria for passing the exam but “at that time, it was too late”. Then, it was thought that achieving a good CGPA is a difficult task but over time, by knowing the rules of examination, things become better.

4.3 Challenges in academic matters

Not every first-generation student goes through a similar phase during their studies. Some of them get a lot of help and support as the first member of the family in higher education and their parents or other family members become more conscious about their academic matters whereas some of them face a lot of hurdles because of the family’s lack of support and unawareness. So, they have to face a lot of challenges during their academic period.

Mobility is one of the biggest issues for girls as well as boys. Certain educational institutions do not provide proper transport facilities, especially for boys. Many students come from rural or suburban areas. They require hours to reach the university which causes a lot of time and money wastage and male students would not be able to help their parents with various chores which are the source of their family income. Male students also described that many local transporters do not stop their vans or
buses when they see awaiting students. As they are the eldest, they have to help their parents in earning and as a result, they are forced to leave the university by their family members. In the case of female students, there is the facility of transport but university buses travel only on specific routes/ways. So, the female students who come from far-flung areas would not be able to reach university and they have no elder brother to drop them on his bike or car and resultantley suffered a lot. Most of their time is wasted which affects their academic matters.

One of the participants who resided in rural areas shared his experience “Transport is the major problem for me. It is very difficult for me to go to university in the village. Most often I have to wait for an hour or so to catch the bus. As a result, I get back home late at night”. Another participant described that “due to financial problems I could not pay the full fare of the vehicles. Moreover, the transporters do not permit the student’s concession. I have to wait for a long to search for a seat on public transport. As a result, most of the time, I reach university late and miss my lectures”.

**Lack of financial support** is another major issue faced by the majority of first-generation students because they do not have elder brothers or sisters who earn along with their parents, consequently suffering financially. Many low-income parents have a different point of view. They thought that it is only for rich people to get higher education. Furthermore, parents would not understand the importance of academic life without having university experiences.

Some of the students whose parents do not have enough resources described that they belong to a poor family. Their parents morally support them, but they cannot support them financially. Most likely, it is because they have a big family size. They give home tuition to manage their personal and university budgets which suffer their academics. One of the students whose younger brothers and sisters are studying remarked that “my mother says that now you should take a gap in your studies I want to teach your younger siblings. You must start a job in any private school to support your family financially”. Some of the participants who belong to a village describe that we have no internet facility at home. If a teacher assigns an assignment, then our friends download the article for us and we read the article and complete the assignment. Some said that we have internet packages on our mobile phones but there is a signal problem in our village.

Some of the girls who want to take admission to a well-ranked university said that their parents have not allowed them to live in a hostel. One of them reflected that “I apply for admission in more than one university. When I see the list of eligible students, my name was in the top ten but I cannot go because it is situated in another city and my parents never permit me to live in a hostel because there is no other person in the family who stayed in a hostel before me. So, I took admission to a nearby university”. One of the participants who belong to a rural area remarked that “my parents have not allowed me to study while living in a hostel. They said that the environment of the hostel is not good. We cannot take any risk”.

One of the participants whose parents are illiterate explained that their parents have a little bit of information about the importance of education so, they are unable to help me in my studies. She describes that my parents said to me to go and get my education whatever I want, so I always face a lack of guidance and depend upon hit and trial. I face a lack of basic information and lack of proper guidance about studies. Moreover, studies in co-education was a different thing for my family. My parents do not feel good when I contact male teachers or colleagues. So, I always avoid talking to male teachers or colleagues about the academic matter.
5. Discussion

The primary area of interest in this study is the experiences of first-generation university students. The research contributes to exploring the understanding of how first-generation university students interact with faculty and how they engage with their peers (Hutchison, 2015; Smith, 2020). First-generation university students are those who are the first in their families to enter the university. Although their background and identifications are different, they are financially deprived and culturally isolated and have lower resources as compared to those who have more resources and are financially stable (Antonelli et al., 2020; Ishitani, 2006; Toutkoushian et al., 2019).

The students enter colleges and universities with different abilities. Those students whose parents did not get four-year education from a university, their children get lower marks and face many obstacles in their studies other than those children whose parents have a bachelor's degree. First-generation students face many problematic obstacles at home, in academic culture, and community in their studies (Perna, 2015; Toutkoushian et al., 2019). They have to face a lot of problems at home and outside such as a lack of family support in terms of moral and financial aspects. Moreover, they do not get time at home for their studies and their parents prefer to indulge them in household responsibilities contrary to their academic work. It is because they cannot understand the psychology of their children at this stage. Therefore, the students get through anxiety and stress due to a lack of or no support from their families (Hsiao, 1992; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018).

The students mostly enter a college or university for different reasons than the next generation (Noel et al., 2021; Saenz et al., 2007). They begin their studies because they want to help their parents and parents feel proud and gain respect from the community or relatives (Bui, 2002; Smith, 2020). Educationally, first-generation students achieve their goals more imperfectly than non-generation students. The studies show that first-generation students achieve low marks in college than non-generation students (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Billson & Terry, 1982).

This study shows that first-generation students enter university with lower marks and less critical thinking. It is the responsibility of the university to guide what institutions expect from first-generation students and how they should be successful in their academic careers (Antonelli et al., 2020; Davis, 2010). Previous research reveals that first-generation students are mostly focused on getting a degree rather than other academic and social activities. They are usually interested to get a degree because they want to do jobs rather than they can discover hidden talent (Chang et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2012).

The study helps to foster a sense of preparation and support for first-generation university students. Engle and Tinto (2008) observed that it is very important to enhance the academic preparation of first-generation students for entering a university. This study has implications for first-generation students who should be motivated to study and help describe why they are enrolled in colleges or universities and how they should be supported in the institute. This will also help faculty and counsellor members to understand the barrier for first-generation students in a university.

6. Conclusion

First-generation university students had unique academic experiences as compared to the non-first-generation students found in the literature. It can be concluded that these students did not receive encouraging support from their family and their parents opposed their education. On the other hand, some of their relatives came forward for assistance and helped them in their studies. Most of the first-generation students were unaware of the opportunities in the university and they struggled to cope
with the challenges they had during their studies. Nevertheless, the peer support significantly contributed to their progress and development which provided them the confidence to survive. The study has implications for the parents, community, and higher education institutions for providing opportunities for their development and growth in society.

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