

**ENTERING UNIVERSITY AS THE FIRST:
UNDERSTANDING FIRST-GENERATION
STUDENTS' CHALLENGES AND THEIR
COPING STRATEGIES AT UNIVERSITI
MALAYSIA SABAH**



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UMMS
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**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND
HUMANITIES**

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2022

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation has been composed entirely by myself and that is not submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. The material in this thesis is my own except for quotations, summaries and references which have been duly acknowledged.



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ABSTRACT

For many first-generation students, higher education act as an important turning point that can help to advance their inherited socioeconomic status. Without university-educated parents, first-generation students often time lack the social capital and cultural capital that are crucial for their integration at university. Therefore, this study explores the challenges faced by first-generation students and the coping strategies they have relied on to overcome them. Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually with 15 third-year, first-generation students from the Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), a public university in Malaysia. Guided by social capital theory and cultural capital theory, research data were analyzed and coded for themes by using thematic analysis. The research findings demonstrate that first-generation students were academically, socially and financially challenged by the university due to their initial limited understanding of preparation for university. Their past academic experience, family's socioeconomic background, and parents' education levels have inevitably placed them in a disadvantaged position at university. However, these students possess positive outlooks that have overshadowed various challenges in their university degree journey. In opposition to the view that first-generation students are less competent to persist at university owing to their socioeconomic backgrounds, the support from their family and peers has significantly motivated them to continue pursuing their dreams. Therefore, it is hoped that the meaningful insights provided in this study can be taken as a valuable reference for universities and schools to better understand this group of students.

Keywords: First-generation students, social capital, cultural capital, challenges, coping strategies, higher education

ABSTRAK

Bagi ramai pelajar generasi pertama, pendidikan tinggi berfungsi sebagai titik perubahan penting yang boleh memajukan status sosioekonomi yang mereka warisi. Tanpa ibu bapa yang telah bergraduasi daripada universiti, pelajar generasi pertama sering mengalami masalah kekurangan modal sosial dan modal budaya yang amat penting untuk integrasi mereka di universiti. Oleh itu, kajian ini meneroka cabaran yang dihadapi oleh pelajar generasi pertama dan strategi coping yang mereka gunakan untuk mengatasinya. Temu bual separa berstruktur telah dijalankan secara maya dengan 15 orang pelajar tahun tiga, generasi pertama dari Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), sebuah universiti awam di Malaysia. Berpandukan teori modal sosial dan teori modal budaya, data penyelidikan telah dianalisis dan dikodkan untuk tema dengan menggunakan analisis tematik. Penemuan penyelidikan menunjukkan bahawa pelajar generasi pertama telah mengalami cabaran dari segi akademik, sosial dan kewangan di universiti kerana pemahaman awal mereka yang terhad tentang persediaan ke universiti. Pengalaman akademik lepas pelajar, latar belakang sosioekonomi keluarga, dan tahap pendidikan ibu bapa sudah pasti meletakkan mereka pada kedudukan yang kurang bernasib baik di universiti. Walau bagaimanapun, golongan pelajar ini mempunyai pandangan positif yang telah membantu mereka menghadapi pelbagai cabaran dalam perjalanan ijazah universiti mereka. Bertentangan dengan pandangan bahawa pelajar generasi pertama kurang berupaya untuk meneruskan pengajian di universiti kerana latar belakang sosioekonomi mereka, sokongan daripada keluarga dan rakan sebaya telah banyak mendorong mereka untuk terus mengejar impian mereka. Oleh itu, diharapkan pandangan bermakna yang diberikan dalam kajian ini dapat diambil sebagai rujukan yang berharga kepada universiti dan sekolah untuk lebih memahami golongan pelajar ini.

Kata kunci: Pelajar generasi pertama, modal sosial, modal budaya, cabaran, strategi coping, pendidikan tinggi

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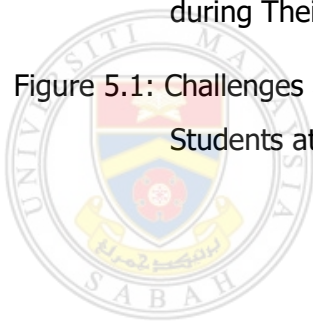
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

UMS	-	Universiti Malaysia Sabah
COVID-19	-	Coronavirus Disease 2019
FSSK	-	Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
FPP	-	Faculty of Psychology and Education
FSSA	-	Faculty of Science and Natural Resources
FPEP	-	Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy
FKI	-	Faculty of Computing and Informatics
FSMP	-	Faculty of Food Science and Nutrition
PTPTN	-	National Higher Education Fund Corporation
M40	-	Middle 40%
B40	-	Bottom 40%



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Higher education is one of the most effective pathways for students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds to achieve upward social mobility. To be specific, education offers individuals the opportunities to climb up the social ladder regardless of their family's origins (Bowen *et al.*, 2005). In Malaysia, higher education- especially Malaysian public universities- serves as a crucial avenue for many underprivileged students to improve their educational achievement and social standing (Abdul Halim & Norzaini, 2010). In other words, the expanding access for students to higher education in Malaysia may be seen as an effort in fostering local national advancement as well as combating social exclusion and poverty. For many students from working-class families, attending university and acquiring a degree is a practical way to boost their overall employment prospects and quality of life (Archer & Hutchings, 2000). Unfortunately, students from disadvantaged socioeconomic origins are often the first member of their families to attend university. This notion of being the first to traverse the higher education system is often accompanied by obstacles that increase their likelihood of facing adversity and deprivation in higher education settings (Nor Hafizah Selamat *et al.*, 2013).

Regardless of one's own ambition or aspirations, navigating a new path with inadequate knowledge or resources might make the journey more difficult. The majority of first-generation students confront various obstacles that put them at a disadvantage in their pursuit of completing a university or college degree. While their families may be encouraging and supportive, they are often unfamiliar with the higher education landscape in a primary sense (Pascarella *et al.*, 2004). Past studies have shown that, while first-generation students have become a more prevalent group in nations that are undertaking massification of higher education (Alcock & Belluigi,

2018), this group of students continue to be an underrepresented social category in Malaysia and many other countries. According to a study conducted in Malaysia (Nor Hafizah Selamat *et al.*, 2013), the majority of Malaysian first-generation students come from rural regions and low socioeconomic level households. Additionally, these students are more likely than other student groups to have an unpleasant university experience due to their relatively limited knowledge about university, overall sense of agency in pursuing higher education, and support from others (Pascarella *et al.*, 2004). The reason for this is that a student without university-educated parents grows up with less university-related social and cultural capital, thus decreasing their likelihood of having a more smooth educational experience (Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides, 2011).

Examining the personal experiences of these students and identifying the key factors that made the journey feasible or difficult, might be beneficial in assisting other future first-generation students through the arduous process. Hence, this research intends to contribute to the literature by acquiring a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by first-generation students and their coping strategies at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), a public university in Malaysia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 third-year, first-generation students to collect personal accounts describing their challenges and what strategies they used to overcome them throughout their undergraduate studies. Simply put, this study wishes to offer more insight into the ongoing discussion concerning first-generation students from a Malaysian first-generation university student perspective.

1.2 Problem Statement

As a result of the massification of higher education, institutions face new obstacles in satisfying the expectations of their students, who are their most essential stakeholders. Institutions of higher education must effectively accommodate an expanding number of students who came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, academic routes, university expectations and knowledge, since these differences may affect how they navigate their university experience. According to the National Higher Educational Strategic Plan (as cited in Kutty, 2014), Malaysia's education system aims to enhance and change higher education to make it more innovative and competitive.

To put it another way, institutions of higher education must improve the quality of the student learning experience. While the number of published studies on the experiences of first-generation students in Malaysia is fairly limited, it is acknowledged that understanding undergraduate experiences in higher education is essential for institutions to enhance the student learning experience.

With that being said, it has been shown that higher education offers advantages for all students; however, for first-generation students from low socioeconomic households, this opportunity holds a far greater significance. Higher education may provide these students with the opportunity to break their inherited socioeconomic circumstances and achieve a different result for themselves and their families in life (Gray, 2013). Simply by undergoing the university experience, it allows these students to develop social networks that they lacked prior to attending university. Consequently, completing higher education may be a pivotal turn in the lives of many underprivileged students. Problematically, completing a university degree is far more difficult than it seems. This is particularly true for students who are the first in their families to pursue higher education, since they may not have access to the same amount of knowledge at home as the continuing-generation students in conforming to the norms and practices of higher education settings (Alcock & Belluigi, 2018).

Therefore, it is increasingly apparent that higher education institutions in Malaysia need to monitor and manage their first-generation students in a systematic way. This is particularly true given that the parents of first-generation students have little social capital and limited knowledge on how to acquire tertiary education. Even when they desire to assist their children, these parents often lack the ability to effectively lead their children (Beasley, 2019). Thus, these students are forced to locate other sources of knowledge and support outside of the family, resulting in their reliance on other social networks such as friends, educators, and university-related supports. Consequently, the significance of understanding the obstacles faced by first-generation students and the coping strategies they used to overcome these obstacles becomes even more prominent. In other words, focusing on first-generation students may give a better understanding of the journey of disadvantaged students toward the actualization of chances in higher education, which may contribute to enhanced social mobility, social equality, and the promotion of

meritocratic principles (Pascarella *et al.*, 2004). Accordingly, this research offers descriptive data that may aid in orienting the education system toward a more effective approach to meeting the requirements of these students.

1.3 Research Questions

To explore the first-generation students' experience in the context of Malaysia's public university, the following questions were developed to understand the challenges faced by first-generation students at UMS and their coping strategies for overcoming the hardships:

1. What are the difficulties experienced by first-generation students during their studies at UMS?
2. What are the factors that assist first-generation students to cope with difficulties during their studies at UMS?

1.4 Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following research objectives:

1. To identify the challenges experienced by first-generation students throughout their academic journey at UMS.
2. To ascertain the coping strategies relied on by first-generation students in overcoming their challenges at UMS.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is important because there is a paucity of studies and limited knowledge of first-generation students' experiences in the setting of Malaysian higher education (Kutty, 2014; Nor Hafizah Selamat *et al.*, 2013; Abdul Hamid & Norzaini, 2010). In other words, the research on students from impoverished backgrounds has received little attention. In Malaysian sociological and higher education literature, the term 'first-generation' is still uncommon. Regardless, it is undeniably true that these students possess a wealth of first-hand information that can help make the path of future first-generation students easier.

To specify, it would be helpful to obtain information on the factors that helped their persistence in completing their degree programs. Students whose parents have a university education should not have an edge over those whose parents do not. In addition, people without tertiary education parents should have fair access to fundamental social capital to compensate for their lack of direct experience. To put it another way, individuals have no influence over their parents or the environment in which they grow up. One's socioeconomic status, ethnicity and parents' educational levels should not determine their chances of achieving success in higher education. Indeed, higher education is a safe way to achieve success, but students who are the first in their families to pursue it continues to fall behind (Pascarella *et al.*, 2004).

This research examines the lived experience of first-generation students in order to understand how they perceive the expectations mismatch and negotiate the academic process as university students. A better understanding of these factors would not only provide higher education institutions with the knowledge and evidence to support their policies aimed at students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, but it would also be enormously advantageous for the development of the aspirations and life chances of young adults from various backgrounds (Engel *et al.*, 2006; Pascarella *et al.*, 2004). Taking a closer look from the students' perspectives at the challenges they face, and how they overcome them will provide further insights into how educators and higher education institutions in Malaysian public universities are responding to issues involving student expectations for educational experiences.

Students come from a range of cultural and familial backgrounds, as well as life experiences. These disparities will inevitably impact their learning and engagement process at university. Empirical research conducted abroad demonstrates the impact of student background in moulding the university experience (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Bergerson, 2007; Ermisch & Francesconi, 2001). Consequently, this research will be a considerable effort to listen to these students' experiences and acquire greater insight into the issues that confront first-generation students and how they overcome these obstacles within the higher education landscape. Gaining such knowledge may help higher education institutions and the system as a whole, in addressing the needs of first-generation students and

other disadvantaged students more effectively. Overall, it is hoped that this student can add more empirical evidence to the wealth of social sciences literature in the context of underrepresented student groups.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to identify the challenges faced by first-generation students and the strategies that are relied on by them in coping with those hardships at UMS. In this research, 15 third-year, first-generation undergraduate students from different faculties were recruited for semi-structured interviews. Therefore, this study is limited to 15 third-year, first-generation students from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSSK), Faculty of Psychology and Education (FPP), Faculty of Science and Natural Resources (FSSA), Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy (FPEP), Faculty of Computing and Informatics (FKI), and Faculty of Food Science and Nutrition (FSMP) in the Kota Kinabalu main campus. The study was conducted for three months, starting from May 2022 until July 2022 when most of the classes were still conducted virtually, as the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) restrictions were just slowly lifted in Malaysia. It is important to note that social capital theory and cultural capital theory are being utilized as the theoretical approaches in this study since both theories have been shown to be appropriate for comprehending this student group by numerous academics.

1.7 Structure of the Study

This thesis is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study, the problem statement, research questions, research objectives, significance of the study and the structure of the study. Next, Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature related to first-generation students, specifically their challenges and coping strategies. The chapter also outlines the two theoretical perspectives that are vital in understanding and exploring the research. Chapter 3 describes the methodology used within the study which are the research design, sampling strategy, data collection method, research instrument, and data analysis method. Furthermore, Chapter 4 reveals the results of data analysis on the research's interviews with the

first-generation students at UMS. The chapter then lays out the challenges experienced by the participants as well as the coping strategies they utilized to overcome them. Finally, this thesis ends with Chapter 5 where the researcher concludes everything about the research by providing a discussion of the research findings, the study's implications and offers recommendations for potential future studies.

1.8 Summary

The chapter begins with an introduction to the study's background, followed by a description of the current position of first-generation students in Malaysia's higher education environment. The chapter then followed with a problem statement that emphasizes the intent and purpose of the research. This is followed by research questions, research objectives and the significance of the study. The chapter concludes with the structure of the thesis. In general, the purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges and coping strategies of first-generation students at a public university in Malaysia, namely UMS. It is hoped that this qualitative study will further the understanding of the challenges and what coping strategies they relied on to overcome these challenges.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This literature review seeks to identify and describe the complex realities that many first-generation students encountered throughout their adjustment to higher education. Although education is recognized as a vital aspect of one's life, its accessibility is restricted for many first-generation university students and poses a problem of equality. The emphasis of this literature review will be on the challenges and coping strategies of first-generation students, which are the study's two primary foci. Followed by discussions on social capital theory and cultural capital theory, which have been effective in analyzing the experiences of first-generation students' experience in higher education. Understanding the challenges surrounding first-generation students' access to social and cultural capital throughout the pursuit of their university degrees may help the educational system provide greater assistance for young adults who will be the first members of their families to start a new journey.

2.2 The First-Generation Student Experiences in Higher Education

Since the early 1980s, first-generation students have been investigated and characterized via various empirical studies (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Pascarella *et al.*, 2004; Terenzini *et al.*, 1996). First-generation students are individuals who are the first members of their families to attend higher education with the intent of receiving a degree. It is important to note that this concept is consistent despite some minor changes (Gofen, 2009; Inkelas *et al.*, 2007). To simply out, there is two distinct types of first-generation students that are generally discussed and accepted by academics. The first category of first-generation students includes individuals whose parents have never completed a tertiary degree. This implies that none of their parents has

ever completed studying at college or university (Inkelas *et al.*, 2007). The second type of first-generation students is those whose parents attended university but did not graduate (Engle *et al.*, 2006).

For the purpose of this study, a first-generation student is defined as a student who is the first generation of the family to ever pursue a degree at university. The parent of the student may or may not have attended university, but neither parent successfully earned a degree. First-generation students may also have siblings who previously attended or are attending university. These students, however, are the first cohort of their family members to pursue a university degree (Beattie, 2018). Therefore, the following sections discuss the challenges and coping strategies of first-generation students at university, who generally lack university-related information and preparations.

2.2.1 First-Generation Students' Challenges

First-generation students usually experience university differently than their non-first-generation peers (Beasley, 2019; Kutty, 2014; Nor Hafizah Selamat *et al.*, 2013; Barry *et al.*, 2009; Pascarella *et al.*, 2004; Archer *et al.*, 2003). This is often owing to the fact that first-generation students lack the support and supervision of their parents who also never navigated higher education. A study by Barry and his colleagues (2009) examined how first-generation students coped with the inherently stressful collegiate environment. Their study focused on the importance of students sharing their stressful experiences with others. The findings suggested that first-generation students may be reluctant in discussing their college-specific struggles because they lack individuals in their lives, particularly family members, who can immediately relate to these difficult experiences. The study's researchers also discovered that first-generation students were less inclined than their non-first-generation peers to share stories about their college experience with others, such as their friends, or even professionals.

In addition, a qualitative study by Beasley (2019) was conducted to better understand the struggles that first-generation students face during their first year of college. Using Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and social capital theory (1986) as theoretical frameworks, the study has identified first-generation students who face

various hardships during their first year of collegiate experience, including financial difficulties, emotional strains, and overall unpleasant acclimation process. Similarly, another study also found that first-generation students generally lack knowledge of the realities of financing higher education and how to navigate the financial aid process (Archer *et al.*, 2003). This has caused many of these students to face difficult times in adjusting to university life and negatively affected their academic performance.

The majority of studies, however, had been done in cultural settings that differ from that of Malaysian higher education. To put it another way, these findings may not be applicable in Malaysia to a certain extent because many studies on this population were conducted in Western countries with different cultures and higher education systems than Malaysia. As pointed out by various previous studies in Malaysia, there has been a shortage of studies on first-generation students at Malaysian universities (Kutty, 2014; Nor Hafizah Selamat *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, more studies on university experience among first-generation students in Malaysian higher education are required. With that, Nor Hafizah Selamat and her colleagues (2013) conducted a quantitative study to better understand this student population by comparing the first-generation and non-first-generation students in a Malaysian public university, as well as identifying characteristics that differentiate the two groups in terms of their ethnicity, gender, parental education, and parental income. There were 78.8% first-generation students among 3512 first-year students, compared to 21.2% non-first-generation students. The study also found that the majority of first-generation students hailed from low socioeconomic status rural families. Therefore, their study has indicated that first-generation students do exist as a prevalent group and also implies that they tend to face financial challenges in Malaysian higher education settings.

Besides examining the profile of first-generation and non-first-generation students, Kutty (2014) has conducted a longitudinal qualitative case study focused on how the transition to university is experienced by first-generation students in Malaysian higher education. By applying multiple theoretical frameworks including cultural capital theory and social capital theory, the study discovered that in the early weeks of university, first-generation students faced disjuncture between expectations held prior to starting university and the reality they confront. In the study's semi-