

# First-generation entry into higher Education: Namibia's Future

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## Abstract

*With the changing political and socio-economical profile of previously disadvantaged Namibians, school leavers, as well as adults, increasingly decide to invest in Higher Education for an improved future. Students who come from homes where the responsible older generation was deprived of opportunities to enrol in education facilities are pioneering and positioning the world of academia for themselves. In their quest for education, they are at the same time paving the way for improved education for future generations. In a study conducted with First-Generation entrants at the University of Namibia it became clear that their general profile differs from that of First-Generation entrants in developed countries and their strengths and needs cannot be underscored by literature from developed countries. Further research into First-Generation entry into Higher Education in the African context will provide a clearer picture of the phenomenon and will allow educators to support the strengths that these entrants bring along to the tertiary institution of their choice.*

Since First-Generation entry as a phenomenon seems to be at present a common feature of Higher Education, internationally as well as in Namibia, authorities should keep in mind that a large number of the students who attend the University of Namibia are First-Generation students who have entered their tertiary institution of choice with the deserved expectation that their academic, as well as social needs, will be met. Although a number of studies describe First-Generation entry into Higher Education as it occurs in developed countries, it appears as though no studies have been conducted to describe this phenomenon in the Namibian context.

### **What is First-Generation entry into Higher Education?**

To demarcate First-Generation entry into Higher Education a number of definitions have been coined by researchers studying their profile. First-Generation students are primarily described as college or university students from a family where no parent or guardian has earned a university degree (Pike and Kuh, 2005). These students may consequently be first in their families to attend a tertiary institution (McConnell, 2000). A student may, however, not be first in his or her family to go to university if a sibling has already entered, but would still be regarded as first-generation.

In the Namibian context a large number of the students who enter Higher Education as the first in their families were often raised by someone other than the birth parent/s, often in cases where one or even both of the birth parents are still alive. These older generation are mostly grandparents or guardians, and they themselves were more often than not deprived of any education, such as primary or even basic literacy acquisition. Therefore, in order to encompass the complex dynamics of the extended family relationships of Namibian First-Generation students, the following was adopted to serve as a working definition to determine who could be regarded as a First-Generation entrant at the University of Namibia:

First-generation students are those for whom the responsible older generation (not necessarily birth parents) has not had any opportunity to study at university at any stage of their lives (Thomas and Quinn, 2007, p. 51).

In their study, Thomas and Quinn did not make a difference between First-Generation students and First-Generation entrants. My interest, however, is focused on those students who enter the often mysterious world of Higher Education, and who are not only novices as far as Higher Education is concerned but who are also pioneering a domain from which their families were previously-excluded. Thomas and Quinn (2007), however, warn that First-Generation entry should not be put within the matrix of class and ethnicity as it constitutes a point of overlap of many factors. It is, therefore, neither possible nor desirable to disentangle First-Generation entry from its various features.

This research project was driven by the following question: How does the profile of the First-Generation entrant at the University of Namibia compare with that of First-Generation entrants in developed countries?

This qualitative study was augmented by means of a case study design in order to explore the existing phenomenon of First-Generation entry at the University of Namibia. The results of the data collected and analysed by both the qualitative and the quantitative methods were, however, integrated during the interpretation phase of the study.

Although the population of this study comprised all the First-Generation entrants at the University of Namibia, purposive sampling was conducted to ensure a firm hold over the data collected in this project. It was decided to conduct a case study of an existing class group of English for General Communication (ULEG) students, attending a year course at the Language Centre of the University of Namibia. This is compulsory for those students who had achieved the requirements for admission to the university but whose marks for English were below a C-symbol. In order to define the paradigms of the project, it was decided that the only common denominator would be the First-Generation status of students in this ULEG class. Aspects such as gender, ethnic origin and cultural background were not employed as variables, but only as descriptors of the characteristics of the participants who represented First-Generation entry at the University of Namibia.

In this project the participants were observed. Questionnaires were administered and the participants were individually interviewed. Collected data, as well as current documentary sources, were employed to conduct a descriptive analysis of interviews, journal entries and descriptions of the continued development of the participants throughout the course of their first year of study at the University of Namibia.

#### **Demographic profile of First-Generation entrants at the University of Namibia**

The class group employed in this project consisted of 42 students of which 31 were First-Generation students but only 24 were First-Generation entrants. From data collected by means of two questionnaires and personal interviews I was able to establish a number of distinguishing features that characterised the profile of First-Generation entrants at the University of Namibia as it presented itself through the group of 24 First-Generation students who agreed to participate in this project. In the rest of this article the words *First-Generation student* and *First-Generation entrant* will be used interchangeably to indicate the First-Generation participants in this project.

The group of students thus identified consisted of fifteen female and nine male students. Eleven of them were younger than 20 years, while eight were between 20 and 25 years of age. There were also five mature-age students, three males and two females, who had interrupted their professional careers to attend university on a full-time basis. Two of the male, mature-age students were from Botswana and were on staff development programmes sponsored by the Botswana government.

Of the 24 First-Generation entrants participating in this project, eighteen (13 females and 5 males) indicated that they were the first in their immediate families to attend any tertiary educational institution while 3 females and 3 males had distant family members who had tertiary qualifications. The fact that family members had not attended tertiary institutions had the cumulative effect that, apart from being uninformed and naïve about tertiary

education, and thus not able to advise the First-Generation student on matters concerning Higher Education, family members without tertiary qualifications would more often than not by default belong to the working classes (Penrose, 2002; Thomas and Quinn, 2007) with lower income (McConnell, 2000; Penrose, 2002; Pike and Kuh, 2005), and were thus financially challenged; they would consequently be restricted in the financial support they could provide to the family member who was a First-Generation entrant into Higher Education.

Contrary to findings by authors (McConnell, 2000; Thomas and Quinn, 2007), from studies conducted with First-Generation students in the United States, it did not, however, appear as if the Namibian First-Generation students had to reassure their families that they had invested wisely since the families seemed pleased that their children had entered Higher Education, and they also encouraged them to a large extent. It, furthermore, appeared that, unlike First-Generation students in developed countries, the Namibian First-Generation students did not have more personal income than Continuing-Generation students (students of whom a member of the responsible, older generation had attended an institution of Higher Education), and they seemed to be concerned about their actual lack of money and concerns of debt, as well as their comparative lack of money in relation to friends not in Higher Education (Thomas and Quinn, 2007) or even more affluent students on campus.

#### **Financial barriers to successful entry and persistence in Higher Education**

Since the availability of funds is a universal determiner of participation in Higher Education, the participants were probed about their financial situation at the commencement of their tertiary studies, as well as their prospects for the continuation of their studies. Of the participants, 20.8% reported that they did not experience money constraints either on entry into or in their ability to continue their studies; the rest of the participants, however, stated that one of their biggest concerns as students was money constraints. At least three of the students had registered previously but remained at home for one or even two years in order for their families to save money for the registration fees of their child since, according to one participant, "in the years before it was not right financial."<sup>1</sup>

To compound the situation in which many of the students had severe difficulties in securing money for study purposes, many of these participating First-Generation entrants also came from poorly financially-resourced homes; they were thus further limited in providing for their subsistence while at university. Only very few could rely on sustained financial support to provide for their daily living expenses while they were attending university.

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<sup>1</sup>All comments by participants are reported verbatim

As far as their ability to persist financially in Higher Education was concerned, 20.8% of the participants reported that they did not experience real financial difficulties. Four of them were mature-age students of whom two were sent to the University of Namibia by the Botswana government. Another participant had worked for one year as a supplementary teacher in a rural school after completing Grade 12, and had saved her salary to pay for her studies. She also acquired a government loan. Two further participants had also acquired government loans since they had somebody who was prepared to supply collateral to secure the loan. A number of the other participants reported that they were not able to secure a government loan since there was nobody to provide any security for the loan.

A large number of the students, however, stated that it was hard for them to cope financially and some of the common difficulties that they experienced were that:

- sometimes they did not have taxi fare and could thus not attend classes;
- they depended on friends for text books and made copies – this was not a satisfactory situation as friends sometimes forgot to bring the books, and they also knew that it was illegal to copy from text books;
- they struggled when they had to ask their relatives for money to pay for urgently required books and study guides since these relatives were sometimes reluctant to give money or told them to wait until the end of the month (summarised student responses).

Even though students in general suffered difficulties because of the very little disposable money they had, they, as well as their parents, seemed to value education highly.

#### **Value of education for First-Generation entrants**

The value that Namibian First-Generation entrants put on Higher Education differed markedly from the views of First-Generation students in developed countries. It appears that in developed countries the notion among First-Generation students is in general that Higher Education will mainly provide a secure entry into the market place (McConnell, 2000; Thomas and Quinn, 2007). When exploring the reasons why the participants in this project decided to enrol at the University of Namibia for tertiary studies the following was found:

- one of the participants stated that her parents “forced her to come”;
- and another student stated that it was his own choice to come to the University of Namibia;
- 62.5% of the participants, however, stated that the main reason why they decided to pursue tertiary education was to improve their knowledge;

- only 29.2% said that they decided to study further "to get a well-paid job."

When the value that the participants put on Higher Education was further pursued in the personal interviews, a large number of the students said that it made them feel very proud to be a university student. One student stated with much pride that he was the first person in the family to pursue Higher Education, while the others in his family just "fell pregnant or ended up on the streets."

The First-Generation entrant into Higher Education might, however, through a lack of intimate knowledge of the workings of academic institutions and a general naivety of the level of cognitive engagement required, have too grandiose a career design before entering Higher Education. This proved in studies done in developed countries (McConnell, 2000; Pike and Kuh, 2005; Thomas and Quinn, 2007) to have a largely negative effect on the value of Higher Education that many disillusioned First-Generation entrants put on Higher Education. Most of the participants in this project were also not able to follow their career paths of choice, and were advised to change their courses; however, they adjusted well to their new career options. They seemed to value Higher Education even more, after they had become practically involved and understood the possible career paths that their study courses offered.

#### **Living conditions of First-Generation entrants**

Students living at home may have different expectations of Higher Education. According to Thomas and Quinn (2007, p. 78), "they tend to see university as an extension of secondary education and have little concern about aspects outside attending university lectures" since it "may be because their social networks exist outside the university." None of the participants in this project were attending university from home and they had to find accommodation in Windhoek while attending the university.

From the 21 responses received concerning students' living conditions the following information was gained:

- 4.8% were accommodated in one of the residences on campus;
- 9.5% resided with close family members, such as either a sibling or a close cousin;
- 23.8% had made alternative living arrangements. One of the three male mature-age students was staying with friends, while the other two, male students from Botswana were sharing accommodation. The two, female mature-age students both had their own homes which they shared with their children. One was a divorced lady while the other lady was in practice also a single mother, since her

husband was a teacher at a school approximately 1300 km from Windhoek and only returned home during holidays;

- 62% were residing with members of their extended families.

Although some students reported that their living conditions were fair, most indicated that they were not residing under ideal circumstances. The mature-age students had all achieved a large degree of independence and seemed to cope well with their circumstances. The one student who was staying on campus only complained about the cramped space in his room and difficulties in providing his own meals, since there was a communal kitchen with only stoves but no refrigerators available; the hostel students only received breakfast and had to provide the other meals themselves. Those students who were staying with a sibling or a cousin close to their own age seemed to be experiencing their accommodation more positively than students residing with a much older sibling.

One of the female students reported her living conditions as follows, "cause it's like, you know, we are living in this shebeen [a venue of informal liquor trading] and sometimes there's noise; you can't really lead a quiet life and there in Katutura there is a lot of noise, you can't even cope." She solved this difficulty by staying as long as possible in the University of Namibia library every day.

Another student described his accommodation as follows, "I am staying at Okuriangava on the outskirts outside Windhoek; that side, on the way to Okahandja [approximately 15 km from the campus]. And first I was staying with my relatives but not very close relatives. So I just shifted from there. There was some couple of problems. Now I am staying with a friend. I'm paying monthly." When asked how he felt about his current accommodation, he continued, "Not very good 'cause sometimes when I come to school and I go back home, I get the accommodation. Sometimes he told me 'You must go find yourself a place to sleep because now I am having a friend that's coming.' Just like that. So I have to beg the person again. So later-on they accept me just to sleep. Every day when I come back to school where can I sleep? I don't really have a nice place to sleep. I don't have a fixed accommodation."

One of the female students described the relative with whom she was staying as follows, "I'm staying with my aunty ... she's a kind of person that really don't understand ... school. She really doesn't understand. Sometimes she used to complain, 'you're just wasting the money' and all that stuff." Another male student reported that "Well, I am staying in Katutura where no-one wants to stay. ... I'm just staying with my mother's brother. ... I am struggling for food ... to pay electricity and water." He indicated that he would like to stay on campus "but the problem is the fees. I cannot afford to pay it."

Apart from the fact that many of the students grew up in extended family groups in isolated, rural communities and were deposited at sometimes seemingly unwilling relatives, they also had to travel far daily to attend classes at the University of Namibia. The university complex in Windhoek is situated in the extreme south of the city while the suburbs where most of the students were accommodated are in the extreme north of the city. 83.3% of the students reported that they had to travel in excess of 5 km to the university every day. Only 12.5% stated that they stayed between 3 and 5 km from the university complex, while only one student was residing on campus.

Apart from the cost implications that living far away from campus had, it also compelled First-Generation entrants who came from protected and contained social environments to learn to negotiate the complex network of public and private transport to enable them to arrive in time on campus and reach home again safely in the evenings. Although many of the students originally reported in the questionnaire that they made use of taxis, they qualified those statements in the interviews which were conducted later in the year. Many of them had by then made arrangements with taxi drivers to pick them up and drop them off every day for a monthly fee that they had negotiated beforehand. One mature-age lady paid her taxi fees once a year in the form of a cow.

Many of them opted, as they became more streetwise, to travel by municipality bus in the mornings which was 50% of the taxi fare. Should they need to stay at the University of Namibia too late to take the last bus, they would then make use of the more expensive taxis. It appeared that the transport network provided by the taxis and municipal buses worked well. Only two students said that they had to walk far to reach the taxi rank and one stated that it was dangerous for her to walk from the taxi rank back home in the evenings.

Practical impediments to easy access to Higher Education, such as insecure accommodation and transport problems, did, however, not appear to influence the participants' desire to continue and complete their studies at the University of Namibia. It further appeared, contrary to what has been reported of First-Generation students in developed countries (Penrose, 2002; Pike and Kuh, 2003; Thomas and Quinn, 2007), that the First-Generation entrants at the University of Namibia experienced a sincere sense of belonging to the academic culture of the university.

When compared to studies done by scholars such as McConnell (2000), Penrose (2002), Pike and Kuh (2005) and Thomas and Quinn (2007), it is clear from the data that the Namibian First-Generation students had a very different experience as far as participation in their academic environment was concerned, and that those features of academic life that might lead to feelings of isolation and exclusion were different from what was reported about First-Generation students in developed countries.

### **Participating in academic associations and societies on campus**

One of the ways to investigate the degree to which First-Generation students adapted to the academic culture of the university was to enquire about their participation in those clubs and associations established by the university on campus. Four of the twenty-four participants stated that they had joined clubs or associations. One was the ladies' soccer club and one student played volleyball for the university, as well as for the Namibian volleyball team. Two students had joined culture clubs, such as *Otjiuana* for Otjiherero speaking students and *Nekwa iyatsima* for Oshiwambo speaking students.

Many of the other students said that they did not join such societies because of financial reasons, insufficient knowledge about them or that they were scared to compromise the time they had available for academic work; however, quite a large number of students showed interest and had made attempts to join but were frustrated with the fact that they had not received any feedback on enquiry about certain associations and clubs. Most of them expressed a desire to participate in the social and cultural activities offered by the university in their second year.

Studies done in developed countries (McConnell, 2002; Penrose, 2002; Thomas and Quinn, 2007) indicated that the minority groups of students at Community Colleges joined academic societies at their institutions; mainly because they felt that those societies only catered for the majority groups of the student population. Consequently their feelings of isolation and disappointment with the tertiary experience were compounded. This is clearly not the case at the University of Namibia – apart from the mentioned academic societies and sports disciplines offered to the University of Namibia students, the university hosts an annual cultural festival to promote intercultural awareness and social and academic integration. That the participants in this project did not join societies can thus mainly be described to the fact that much of the university experience was new and that they were initially still on the periphery looking in, before immersing themselves totally in the academic culture of the University of Namibia in their subsequent years of study. Not belonging to academic and social societies in their first year did not influence their attitudes towards the social environment negatively.

### **Relationships with colleagues and lecturers in an academic environment**

One of the features that seems characteristic of First-Generation entry into Higher Education, as mentioned in the literature in developed countries, is the discontent and isolation that First-Generation students experience in the academic environment of their institution of Higher Education (McConnell, 2000; Penrose, 2002; Pike and Kuh, 2005; Thomas and Quinn, 2007). This seems to be one of the major reasons why First-Generation students fail to persist in Higher Education and drop out before completing their courses of

study (McConnell, 2000; Pike and Kuh, 2005). My observations of the University of Namibia students over a number of years have, however, never created the impression that they felt excluded from the academic discourse community they had joined.

Most of the participants, however, experienced their entry into Higher Education as stressful "due to the new environment." They reported that they felt "uncomfortable", "confused" and like "strangers" and "outcasts," "lost" in a "new world" as for many of them it was "the first time away from family." It was described as "horrible" because of the inability to "attend the course of my choice" or because they "did not know how to use the library," "how to speak English" or "how to use technology." It was also difficult to organise themselves in order "to catch the bus or taxi" to campus. Participants also mentioned feelings of "loneliness" because of "no friends" and they "could not cope with many new faces." Especially the older students expressed feelings of "inferiority" as "some time I felt like humiliated because some students were look more economic fit, especially those of my age" or "because I saw some students cuming with cars at the university while I struggled to get money for taxi"; however, this particular student felt that "as days passed, I started realizing that its normal because we come from different backgrounds."

Feeling forlorn and strange is not a prerogative of First-Generation entrants, and all students, I presume at all universities, will experience initial feelings of isolation. These feelings of forlornness and isolation that the participants in this project experienced might, however, have been compounded by the sense of bewilderment many of them experienced in the new physical and social environment outside the academic environment they also had to cope with. The difference between their initial feelings of forlornness and the subsequent feelings of belonging they experienced later in their first year of academic studies contrasted starkly with attitudes recorded by researchers of First-Generation students in developed countries.

When judged on a superficial level it could be assumed that these First-Generation entrants had become well-adjusted and that this should be reflected in their subsequent academic performance; however, attitude, confidence and motivation are interrelated and together form a foundation that will influence a student's pursuance of academic success.

#### **Parents/families' attitudes**

When questioned about the emotional support First-Generation entrants received from their parents or immediate families, the majority responded that they experienced a fair amount of emotional support. They stated that their parents felt "proud" and felt "pleasure" in having a child who studied at university and, therefore, "keep on suffering" themselves. The parents wanted them to "study hard that we can get something from you" and "you must come that we enjoy your fruit".

Five of the students who indicated that the emotional support they received from their families were either average or not good; all were raised either by a guardian, grandparents, an aunt, a sister or a single mother. Another student had attended a post-secondary college to improve her Grade 12 results, working towards achieving the required number of points to enter the university. In discussions with her it was clear that she felt distant from her family and had developed her own life already in the time before she entered the university. The mature-age students reported much support and encouragement from their families, especially their children, who saw them as role models.

### **Reflections**

These First-Generation students at the University of Namibia do have the potential to be successful in their tertiary studies. They seemed to have realistic expectations of themselves and seemed further to have set achievable goals for themselves. They also appeared to be confident, and the majority of them were content with the courses they were enrolled in, albeit not necessarily their first choices. They seemed to have integrated well into the social environment and also did not feel isolated from the academic discourse community of the University of Namibia.

It would, therefore, not only be irresponsible, but also dangerous, to assume that First-Generation entry can be seen as constituting a lack which needs to be remedied. It is necessary to keep in mind that First-Generation entrants, on joining the institution, "become insiders and are not any longer outsiders of the educational and social community" (Thomas and Quinn, 2007, p. 124). They also bring their families into the fold and, "given time, First-Generation entry could help to foster new sets of values within their respective families" (Thomas and Quinn, 2007, p. 125). This is, however, not a process that can be left to mature on its own, since the demands made by Higher Education are immediate and unforgiving (Smit, 2009). Therefore, a combined effort to support First-Generation students is required by all stakeholders, and responsible thought and planning should go into designing and adopting approaches conducive to the requirements of the customers buying into the services offered by specific tertiary institutions.

The challenge for educators is, therefore, not how to build First-Generation students' confidence but how to "restore or reclaim it, or better yet, how not to undermine it in the first place" (Penrose, 2002, p. 457). It is important to keep in mind the impact of how students perceive themselves on the integration process. If they see themselves as being "different" from the rest of the academic community or as having special needs, this can affect the process of "fitting in." Socialisation is an important aspect of integrating into Higher Education and the academic community, and has a positive impact on academic motivation, willingness to seek help and personal achievements.

Thomas and Quinn (2007) categorically state that the current divide exhibited in educational research and practice, between widening participation activities and community-based informed learning, is a false and unhelpful one. Therefore, making First-Generation entry the locus of investigation is one way in which theoretical and practical bridges can be built.

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