

# Sense of belonging to university and formation of peer groups in first-generation students at Durham University.

This research seeks to examine the role of parental education in students' sense of belonging in a Higher Education context. It will do this through surveying Durham first-year undergraduates' feelings of belonging to the university and examining how they have established peer groups by the end of their first year. These peer groups will be explored to discover how demographically homogenous they are. The study will then assess students' opinions of how far the university encourages a sense of belonging, and whether the university should prioritise this aspect of student experience. I will compare the students who are the first in their family to go to university with students who have a higher level of parental education. Should my research discover a link between lower levels of parental education and difficulty achieving a sense of belonging, this will reveal that this demographic may need extra support to excel at Durham.

Attracting first-generation students has been a key aim in recent years for higher education institutions in order to widen participation. However, defining a 'first-generation student' is a complex issue: a number of students who fit this definition may not conceptualise themselves in this way or identify with this label. A number of studies, including Henderson *et al.*, have utilised longitudinal data through large-scale national datasets to explore this demographic and have discovered that first-generation students are less likely to attend elite universities and more likely to drop out (Henderson *et al.*, 2020). Current studies of first-generation students focus on their grades and employment prospects. However, it has been proven that involvement in university life, such as belonging to a supportive peer group and feeling comfortable approaching tutors, is key to improving student success (Thomas and Quinn, 2007). Thus, student experience and sense of belonging is a key facet to understanding success at university and through this, wider issues of social mobility and education.

There has been a development in recent years to examine levels of belonging to university communities in working-class students. Reay *et al.* utilise Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to explore the issue of working-class student identity. In a comparative study spanning four universities, a key finding of Reay *et al.*'s study was that working-class students do not 'fit in' and often 'stand out' in comparison to their middle-class peers (Reay *et al.*, 2009). Cultural capital includes leisure pursuits such as classical music and literature. Discussion of these, Bourdieu argues, is often used to include a person within a particular class and exclude those who do not understand the reference. Children of middle-class parents may have had more access to leisure pursuits which have higher cultural capital growing up, and this may result in them being more comfortable discussing these things and feeling more included. This is a significant theoretical factor underpinning research into how students from underrepresented backgrounds may feel a sense of exclusion in higher education and could be particularly useful to apply to the experience of first-generation students.

The experience of first-generation students at Durham is particularly relevant this academic year due to recent studies and reports which have revealed an undercurrent of classicism within the University. Durham is a collegiate university, and this may provide a greater sense of belonging. On the other hand, however, traditional elements of the collegiate system such as formal dining may have a dual function of including those who understand how these events work and excluding those who do not.

The topic of first-generation student experience at Durham will be examined through an online social survey, due to the ongoing impacts of Covid-19. Quantitative methods will be used to assess the self-reported views of students, measured by a Likert scale. This will increase the sample size that can be acquired in a six-week research project. A larger sample size will increase the chances of achieving a more representative sample. To summarise, four themes will be explored through this survey: sense of belonging to college, sense of belonging to university, the demographic makeup of peer groups, and views of inclusivity at Durham generally. Demographic questions will stratify the differences in responses based on parental educational level. In order to account for another key variable which may have impacted on students' sense of belonging, a question will ask the extent students believe the Covid-19 pandemic

impacted their sense of belonging. This could open up an exploration of how the pandemic may have impacted groups such as first-generation students differently.

## References

Henderson, M. *et al* (2020) 'Moving on up: "first in family" university graduates in England', *Oxford Review of Education* 46, pp. 734-751.

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Thomas, E. and Quinn, J. (2007) *First Generation Entry Into Higher Education: An International Study*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.