

# Face-Off: South African Universities and First-Generation Students

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the significant challenges first-generation students encounter in South Africa's higher education system. With a focus on the unique experiences of this specific student population, the paper aims to shed light on the obstacles they face during their transition into university life and explore the implications for their academic success. Financial constraints, lack of inter-generational familial support, academic preparedness, cultural adjustment, and mental health are teased out to provide a composite understanding of the barriers faced by these students. However, these are only aspects of a terrain that is becoming increasingly prevalent in South Africa and perhaps globally. The student does not arrive at a university as an empty vessel eagerly awaiting to be filled with neutral discipline knowledge. These students often arrive at an Oxbridge system — often with the same architecture, curriculum and teaching methods that replicate the Northern university — that is foreign and alienating. The curricula that confront them are not necessarily neutral and often reflect colonial hegemony. The paper then wishes to examine the intersectionality of the university and first-generation students as a complex and possibly confrontational space that requires a different approach and support on the university's part to facilitate student success. It may be a harbinger of fundamentally reshaping the university as a space built around the student rather than its unquestioned epistemological assumptions.

**Keywords:** constraints, future, South Africa, student success, university