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Learning from First-Generation Academics: Social Inequality and Cultural Capital at Maastricht University

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Spaces available for this project: 3

Project description

This project has received funding from the Maastricht University Diversity and Inclusivity (D&I) grant scheme, and will therefore exist within a wider research context.

First-generation students are those who come from a background where they are the first in their family to enter university education. These students often encounter specific barriers during their studies, and in their later academic life. Research has shown that they often feel more insecure, and struggle with a cultural gap between their family backgrounds and university life. By exploring these barriers at UM, we aim to open a discussion, create more understanding and self-reflection, and by doing so let both first and later generation academics make explicit use of the untapped potential and talents of first-generation academics.



The diversity issues that the D&I policy currently emphasizes are gender, age, and nationality. However, we believe that diversity in terms of social class is often overlooked and (literally) invisible. Moreover, there is often a degree of intersectionality at play when it comes to academic cultural and social capital combined with gender and nationality.

First-generation students and staff can bring new perspectives to learning and research at UM. For instance, it could make tutorial discussions more fruitful if students would feel comfortable sharing the experiences they have had in social environments different from a typical academic cultural background. Instead, first-generation students and researchers often struggle to 'fit in'

and conform to what they perceive as the academic norm, which can impact their performance and leaves their full potential untapped.

A diversity policy aimed at bridging this cultural gap would enable the academic community to make use of its diversity and break barriers and taboos. If the university aims to engage with topics that matter to society, and engage with it more broadly, then the perspectives of those who do not come from an academic background will prove essential in putting these issues on the academic agenda.

This project aims to understand what the experiences of first-generation students are at Maastricht University, to contextualize this in other related studies, and to formulate findings that are relevant for university policy on diversity. The project is designed to include research participants in the design and progression of the study itself, and as such also aims to contribute to sharing experiences between different groups of first-generation students and academics.

Prerequisites

There are no specific course prerequisites, although it may be helpful to have some affinity with interviewing and possibly focus groups and/or survey research. In terms of content, we will be working with concepts like Bourdieu's cultural capital.

We are looking particularly for students who themselves would identify as first-generation, but other students who can contribute are welcome to apply as well. Please indicate how you think you will contribute in your motivation letter.

Tasks and expectations

What will you be doing in this project, and what are the supervisor's expectations?

Students will be involved in individual interviews, analysis, and possibly survey design. Students will also be invited to brainstorm about policies that the university could implement to support first-generation students and academics.

Research phases

Withing the UCM MaRBLe framework, we distinguish 5 general research phases in any project. Students are expected to contribute to at least 2 of these 5 phases. Below are the main ones that apply to this project:

2 - Developing Methodology, 3 - Gathering Data, 4 - Analysing Data

Assessment

At UCM, you will have to present your research plan in the form of a poster (ungraded), and in a presentation at the end (20% of the final grade). The supervisor (in this case Dr. Jeroen Moes & Dr. Inge Melchior) determines the remaining 80% of the grade based on an assessment that fits the students' responsibilities in the project. Here are the details for the remaining 80%:

The outcome of the project will be a research report. Beyond this, the way assessment will be done can be agreed upon at the start of the project. By default, a final paper counting for 80% of your grade, and 20% for a presentation at UCM is assumed.

Context

MaRBLe students are expected to genuinely contribute to on-going research or the research agenda of the supervisor or her/his department. Below is a description of the context for this project, and the background of the supervisor:

Dr. Inge Melchior has a lot of experience with applied research that involves participants. Her earlier work includes working as an anthropologist at various hospital departments to examine the experience of care among specific groups of patients. For this, she has employed the Experience-Based Co-Design (EBCD) approach, which actively seeks to include participants in both research design and analysis.

Dr. Jeroen Moes has worked as an anthropologist and sociologist on issues of identity and social class across different places in Europe. He also coordinates several other student-centered research projects that take an action research approach that is inclusive towards participants in the studies.

Both Jeroen and Inge consider themselves First-Generation Academics.

The project is funded by the university's Diversity and Inclusivity grants and as such is situated at both UCM (Jeroen) and FASoS (Inge). It also benefits from an advisory board which includes René Gabriëls (FASoS), Marieke Hopman (LAW), and several students from a variety of faculties and departments.



Note that for help with your research you can also [get in touch with the Methods Lab](#).