

“Breaking Barriers: A Comprehensive Study on the Pathways and Challenges Faced by First-Generation Students in Higher Education.”

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of first-generation students at Warwick University, focusing on academic preparedness, financial barriers, social integration, and mentorship support. Existing literature highlights challenges faced by first-generation students, including deficiencies in academic preparation, financial constraints, and social isolation. Using a mixed-methods approach, this research combines survey data (N=30) with in-depth interviews (N=4) to provide a comprehensive understanding of these issues. The findings reveal that both Warwick Scholars and non-scholars experience similar levels of under preparedness, despite pre-university interventions. Financial pressures significantly influence educational choices and contribute to family-driven stress. Social integration varies, with some students feeling isolated, while others find community through extracurricular activities. Mentorship support is inconsistent, with some students benefiting from personal tutors and peer networks, while others struggle to access adequate guidance. The study underscores the necessity for more inclusive and targeted support systems to address the multifaceted challenges faced by first-generation students. While the research provides valuable insights, limitations include a small sample size, suggesting the need for broader studies. Key recommendations include increasing counselling and skill-building workshops, expanding financial aid, enhancing mentorship, guidance, and career support to better support first-generation students.

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Introduction

Personal motivation is at the heart of this study. As a first-generation student—defined as someone whose parents did not attend or complete a university degree—my journey has deeply informed my interest in exploring the challenges and opportunities faced by those who venture into higher education without the prior familial experience of university life. Like many first-generation students, I have encountered barriers in accessing information about available opportunities and support mechanisms during my educational journey. These experiences have compelled me to undertake this research, “Breaking Barriers: A Comprehensive Study on the Pathways and Challenges Faced by First-Generation Students in Higher Education,” this study delves into the examination of first-generation students’ experiences from the perspectives of both Warwick scholars and non-scholars at University of Warwick. My aim is not only to shed light on the experiences of first-generation students but also to provide actionable insights that can enhance their access to resources and support networks.

First-generation students, defined as those whose parents did not attend or complete a university degree, represent a significant and growing segment of the higher education population (Pascarella et al., 2004). These challenges can include financial constraints, lack of familiarity with university culture, and limited access to information about higher education opportunities (Thomas, 2006). Research has shown that these students may benefit from additional support services, such as academic advising, financial aid guidance, and career planning assistance (Wainwright and Watts, 2018).

The research is essential in revealing the gaps in support and resources that first-generation students might encounter. This understanding highlights the importance of targeted research, enabling the university to identify the challenges faced by these students and to develop support systems specifically designed to address those needs. With this knowledge, educational institutions like the University of Warwick can implement effective strategies to bridge these gaps.

The University of Warwick's commitment to expanding access to higher education through its Widening Participation initiative is commendable. The initiative's focus on increasing the diversity of students and ensuring equal access to education is vital for the academic community. However, there is a need for further research to identify the specific challenges faced by first-generation students and develop targeted support systems to address these needs. By doing so, the University of Warwick can continue to bridge the gaps in support and resources for first-generation students, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to succeed in their academic pursuits.

The study will firstly conduct literature review relating around types of experiences first-generation students may face, followed by an examination of experiences of first-generation students in existing research through interviews and surveys, gathering both qualitative and quantitative data. Drawing from the collected data, this study describes and discusses experiences of first-generation students, before providing recommendations to support students. Through this research, my aim is to shed light

on the challenges faced by first-generation students and highlight the opportunities available at the University of Warwick.

Literature Review

The literature on first-generation students consistently highlights several key challenges that these students face, including academic preparedness, transition to university life, financial barriers, family dynamics, social and cultural integration. By examining key themes and findings, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by first-generation students and the implications for institutional support and interventions.

Academic Preparedness and Transition Challenges

Numerous studies have highlighted the academic preparedness challenges faced by first-generation students. Pascarella et al. (2004) found that these students often enter university with inadequate academic preparation, leading to lower confidence in their abilities and reluctance to seek help from faculty. Similarly, Katreovich and Aruguete (2017) identified deficiencies in academic preparation and difficulties navigating the university environment as significant obstacles for first-generation students.

The transition to university life can be particularly daunting for first-generation students. Research by Forsyth and Furlong (2003, cited in Thomas, 2006) revealed that these students often feel underprepared for the independent nature of university study, leading to anxiety and difficulties in academic and social integration.

Stebleton and Soria (2013) also noted that first-generation students may lack familiarity with university resources and academic culture, hindering their access to higher education.

Financial Barriers and Family Dynamics

Financial constraints and concerns about debt pose significant barriers for first-generation students in accessing higher education (Thomas, 2006). Bui (2002) found that first-generation students are more likely to be financially independent from their parents and need to work full-time to cover educational expenses, further compounding their academic challenges.

Family dynamics also play a crucial role in shaping the experiences of first-generation students. Jehangir (2010, cited in Stebleton & Soria, 2013) highlighted that many first-generation students balance family obligations alongside their academic pursuits, potentially impacting their ability to fully engage in university life. Additionally, research by Wainwright and Watts (2018) suggests that older siblings in first-generation families may serve as educational role models, influencing younger siblings' aspirations and choices regarding higher education.

Social and Cultural background

First-generation students often face challenges related to their social and cultural background within the university environment. Adamecz-Völgyi et al. (2020) found that these students frequently experience a cultural mismatch, where their social and cultural experiences differ from those of their continuing-generation peers, leading to lower academic performance. Forsyth and Furlong (2003, cited in Thomas, 2006) also noted that students who struggle to integrate socially—often due to differences in

cultural background—are at risk of becoming socially isolated, which can impact their academic motivation and commitment.

Lack of social capital and cultural capital further exacerbate the integration challenges faced by first-generation students. Wainwright and Watts (2018) highlighted that these students possess less social capital than their peers from college-educated families, impacting their academic engagement and retention. They often lack access to the privileged information and support networks that their non-first-generation peers possess, hindering their ability to navigate the complexities of higher education successfully.

Persistence and Retention Challenges

The academic, financial, and social challenges faced by first-generation students contribute to lower persistence and retention rates compared to their non-first-generation peers. Stebleton and Soria (2013) found that low-income first-generation students are nearly four times more likely to leave higher education after the first year. Eagle and Tinto (2008, cited in Stebleton & Soria, 2013) also noted lower graduation rates among first-generation students, particularly those attending large research universities.

Institutional Support and Interventions

To address the unique needs of first-generation students, researchers have emphasised the importance of institutional support and targeted interventions. Katrevich and Aruguete (2017) highlighted the effectiveness of support programs and initiatives providing academic preparation and social support in increasing enrolment and graduation rates among first-generation students.

Building on the findings of Bui (2002), it is evident that financial support is not only a necessity but a critical component of interventional support and interventions. Despite the availability of scholarships and other forms of financial aid, several barriers can impede these students' access to these resources. These barriers include lack of information or perception of application barriers, which can deter them from seeking the assistance they need. So, addressing these barriers can help them overcome economic difficulties.

Wainwright and Watts (2018) suggested that educators and administrators can implement strategies such as increasing access to mentorship and support services, fostering a sense of belonging through community-building initiatives, and providing academic resources tailored to the needs of first-generation students. These interventions can enhance the academic engagement and retention of this student population.

The literature on first-generation students highlights the multifaceted challenges they face, including academic preparedness, financial barriers, social and cultural integration, and family dynamics. These challenges not only affect their academic performance but also their persistence and retention within higher education. First-generation students often lack the social and cultural capital that their continuing-generation peers possess, which can lead to difficulties in navigating university life. However, research also emphasises the importance of targeted institutional support, such as academic preparation, mentorship, and financial assistance, in addressing

these challenges and improving outcomes for first-generation students. By understanding these barriers and implementing tailored interventions, institutions can better support this growing student population, helping to foster a more inclusive and equitable higher education experience.

Methodology and Methods

Research Approach and Participants

This study utilised a concurrent mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data to examine the experiences of first-generation students in higher education. A total of 34 participants took part in this study, including 14 Warwick Scholars and 20 non-scholars, primarily undergraduates. Of these participants, 25 were female and 9 were male, reflecting a gender imbalance. Consequently, the analysis did not focus on gender-specific outcomes to maintain the relevance and integrity of the comparative analysis.

It is important to note that students in the Warwick Scholars programme must meet specific eligibility criteria, including socio-economic background considerations. As a result, these students are classified as coming from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which aligns with the objectives of this study. This dual-component methodology allows for a nuanced understanding of the challenges and support needs specific to this cohort, incorporating the unique perspectives of both Warwick Scholars and non-Scholars.

Qualitative Component

Qualitative data were collected through one-to-one, face-to-face structured interviews with first-generation students from the University of Warwick. The participants represented a diverse range of gender identities, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and included students involved in initiatives like the Warwick Scholars programme, which aims to widen access to higher education for students from socio-economically disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. The interview questions were designed to explore participants' experiences regarding academic transitions, family dynamics, financial considerations, and future aspirations. The Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was then employed to identify themes within participants' responses.

I approached the thematic analysis by thoroughly reading the narratives of the four students, noting key points, initial ideas, and recurring themes that emerged from their experiences. This step was crucial to gain a deep understanding of the data and to identify patterns that would inform the subsequent coding process. Next, I assigned codes to segments of the data that appeared meaningful or significant. These codes were specific, descriptive labels that captured key thoughts or concepts within the narratives. For example, quotes about financial struggles were coded under "Financial Impact," while discussions about academic challenges were coded as "Academic Preparedness and Confidence." Finally, I compiled my findings into a comprehensive table for each student.

Appendix A: Provides a timeline for the data collection process, highlighting the key activities from the ethics application to the completion of data gathering in June 2024.

Appendix B: Provides a summary of the interviewees, including their gender, Warwick Scholar status, level of education, and the date of the interview.

Quantitative Component

Quantitative data was gathered through an online survey distributed to eligible participants using Qualtrics. The survey consisted of multiple-choice questions to gather demographic information and Likert-scale items that allowed participants to express their level of agreement with statements about their university experiences. An open-ended question at the end of the survey offered additional qualitative insights. Survey responses were kept anonymous, and data was automatically analysed by Qualtrics to generate descriptive statistics.

Appendix C: Presents a summary of key findings from the online survey, including demographic information, first-generation status, and participation in the Warwick Scholars programme.

Data Collection and Storage

The research project ensured the protection of participants' privacy and confidentiality through several measures. First, both interview and survey data were anonymised, removing any information that could identify the participant.

Interview recordings were stored on the University of Warwick's OneDrive, which was double password protected. After the interviews had been transcribed and anonymised, the recordings were deleted.

Before participating in the study, all participants were fully informed about the nature of the research and provide their informed consent. They were assured of their anonymity and that the information they provide would be treated with strict confidentiality. This means that no one outside the research team would have access to their personal information or responses.

Access to the collected data was restricted to only the members of the research team, ensuring that the data was used only for the purposes of the study and was not shared unnecessarily.

Finally, the ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Warwick. This approval guaranteed that the research was conducted responsibly and met the standards required for research involving human participants.

Research Questions

The following table outlines the research questions and sub-questions that structure this study. These questions are designed to explore the academic, financial, and social experiences of first-generation students at the University of Warwick, as well as the role of institutional support and mentorship programmes in enhancing their academic success and well-being.

Table 1: Research Questions

Research Questions	Sub-questions	Data Source
How do first-generation students at the University of Warwick navigate academic, financial, and social challenges in their university experience?	1.1 How do first-generation Warwick Scholars perceive their academic preparedness compared to non-scholars?	Survey (Likert scale): I felt academically prepared for university. Interview: Can you describe the academic skills and knowledge you acquired before starting university? How did this preparation affect your confidence in your academic abilities?
	1.2 What are the specific challenges faced by first-generation students in transitioning to university-level studies?	Survey (Likert scale): I have faced significant challenges as a first-generation student. Interview: What, if any, challenges have you faced that you feel are related to being a first-generation student? Which are the biggest challenges?
	1.3 To what extent do financial considerations influence education choices among first-generation students?	Survey (Likert scale): Financial considerations have significantly impacted my educational choices. Interview: How have financial considerations impacted your educational choices?
	1.4 How do family financial dynamics affect academic experiences of first-generation students at Warwick?	Survey (Likert scale): My family has provided substantial support for my higher education journey. Interview: In what ways has your family supported or influenced your journey in higher education?
	1.5 How do first-generation students perceive their sense of belonging at Warwick University?	Survey (Likert scale): I feel a strong sense of belonging within the university community. Interview: Can you share your experiences with social integration at university? Have you felt a sense of belonging within the academic community?
	1.6 What roles does cultural background play in shaping university experiences of first-generation students?	Survey: My cultural background has significantly influenced my university experience. Interviews: In what ways has your cultural background shaped your experiences at university?
What roles do institutional support and mentorship programmes play in the academic success and well-being of first-generation students?	2.1 How effective are mentorship programmes in supporting academic success among first-generation students?	Survey: I have had access to effective mentorship or peer support networks. Interview: Have you had access to mentorship or peer support networks? How have these influenced your academic journey?
	2.2 What are the perceptions of Warwick Scholars and non-scholars regarding access to support services?	Survey: The academic support services at the university have met my needs. Interview: What types of academic support services have you utilised, and how effective have they been for you? How well do you think the university supports first-generation students?

Findings

Table 2: Summary of Findings from Interviews with First-Generation Students

2.1

Students	Academic Preparedness and Confidence
1	The individual's preparation for university was insufficient and affected their confidence in their academic abilities. The school they attended did not provide the necessary skills or knowledge required for university-level work, which made them feel unprepared and anxious about starting university. This lack of preparation also led to feelings of self-doubt and imposter syndrome, as they felt out of place among their peers who seemed better prepared. However, their determination to succeed and the emotional support from their family helped them navigate these challenges and build their confidence over time.
2	The individual's preparation for university was adequate but not entirely sufficient, which affected their confidence in their academic abilities. They attended a state comprehensive school where they focused on their A-levels in Mathematics, Biology, and Chemistry. Despite having dedicated teachers who pushed them to aim high, they still felt underprepared for the independent learning and extensive reading required at university. The teaching style and level of academic rigor at university were significantly different from what they were used to, which initially led to a dip in their confidence. However, over time, they adjusted by seeking support from tutors, joining study groups, and improving their study techniques, which gradually improved their confidence as they adapted to the new academic environment.
3	The individual's preparation for university was somewhat adequate, which positively affected their confidence in their academic abilities. Before starting university, they had acquired some academic skills such as referencing and essay writing from their history A-levels. These skills provided them with a solid foundation and boosted their confidence when handling university-level assignments that required similar skills. However, they still felt underprepared for the independent learning and extensive reading required at university. The teaching style and level of academic rigor at university were significantly different from what they were used to, which initially led to a dip in their confidence. Despite this, they gradually adjusted to the new academic environment and continued to develop their skills and knowledge throughout their time at university.
4	The individual's preparation for university primarily consisted of developing skills in time management and effective revision strategies through their A-level studies. These skills helped them manage the pressure of deadlines and exam preparation at university. However, they found that the method of revision at university differed from A-levels, as there were fewer past papers to practice with and lecturers often created their own questions. This difference initially posed a challenge, but the skills they acquired during their A-levels allowed them to adapt and continue to perform well academically.

2.2

Students	Challenges faced
1	The individual faced several challenges as a first-generation student, including academic, financial, social, and emotional difficulties. Academically, adapting to a rigorous academic environment was tough without prior experience or guidance, and writing essays required more time and effort than it seemed to take others. Financially, supporting themselves financially was challenging, and they were unable to secure a grant despite eligibility, adding to the financial burden. Additionally, commuting home every weekend to help their parents with work took up significant time, impacting their study schedule and social life. Socially, finding a sense of belonging was difficult, and while they attended events and joined societies, they often felt out of place. However, forming a close bond with a flatmate provided some social support.
2	The individual faced several challenges as a first-generation student, including navigating the university system without prior guidance, financial pressures, and feeling out of place among peers with more familiarity with university culture and resources. The biggest challenge was managing the financial strain of university life, as balancing part-time work with academic commitments often left them exhausted and impacted their study time. Another major challenge was understanding and accessing available resources and support services, as they had to figure out everything on their own without a family background in higher education.
3	The individual faced several challenges as a first-generation student, including dealing with complex student finance forms, staying motivated to attend university despite not living on campus, and navigating the bureaucratic aspects of higher education without prior family experience. The biggest challenge was navigating the bureaucratic aspects of higher education, as it required them to figure out everything on their own without any prior guidance or experience.
4	The individual faced several challenges as a first-generation student, including a lack of support from their family within the university system, limited knowledge and advice compared to their peers, and less networking opportunities. They also mentioned that future career prospects might be more challenging for first-generation students due to a lack of parental understanding and networking. One of the biggest challenges they faced was the amount of content they had to remember and understand, and a personal challenge was asking for help, which they have struggled with throughout their academic career.

2.3

Students	Success and Achievements
1	The individual had several positive experiences at university, including Warwick Scholars programme, including being part of the Warwick Scholars programme, which provided financial support and enhanced their skills in problem-solving, communication, and organisational awareness. They also found success in undertaking their current research project, which aligned with their interests and provided valuable academic experience. Additionally, having a nice accommodation and friendly flatmates was a positive aspect of their university life.
2	The individual's significant successes at university include being awarded a scholarship, which boosted their confidence and relieved financial pressure, and participating in a summer internship programme, which provided practical experience and helped them build a professional network. These opportunities affirmed their academic and career aspirations and showed them that hard work and perseverance pay off.
3	The individual's significant successes at university include making friends, achieving good grades in their modules, becoming more independent, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance. These accomplishments have helped them feel more confident in their abilities and more integrated into university life.
4	The individual's positive experience at university includes being able to come out of their shell and meet new people, which can be challenging for them as an introvert. By being more outgoing, they have been able to meet people from all walks of life.

2.4

Students	Financial Impact
1	<p>Financial considerations have significantly impacted the individual's educational choices, as they accepted expensive university accommodation which consumed most of their maintenance loan, limiting their financial flexibility. They opted for accounting and finance courses with the aim of securing a stable job post-graduation. Despite the high cost, they used their scholarship to study abroad, prioritising personal growth. Commuting home every weekend constrained their time on campus, reducing opportunities to engage in social activities.</p> <p>Financial stress is a constant presence for the individual at university, often distracting them from their studies. The time spent commuting home every weekend limits their ability to participate in weekend campus events and social activities. Cooking their meals is a budgeting strategy they employ to manage expenses.</p>
2	<p>Financial considerations have played a crucial role in the individual's educational choices, as they chose to attend a university that offers financial aid and scholarships. To manage costs, they opted to live in university accommodation with lower rent. Additionally, they often had to choose between part-time work and extracurricular activities, sometimes missing out on valuable experiences to ensure they could support themselves financially.</p> <p>Financial stress has always been present during their university experience, making it challenging to balance work and studies and sometimes affecting their academic performance. Limited funds also meant they had to be very careful with their budget, often missing out on social events and activities. However, financial aid and scholarships have been a lifeline, allowing them to focus more on their studies and less on financial worries.</p>
3	<p>Financial considerations have not significantly impacted the individual's educational choices yet because their chosen course is paid by the university. Since they do not live on campus, they do not have to worry about accommodation costs, which has reduced financial stress. This has allowed them to focus more on their studies without the added pressure of financial burdens.</p>
4	<p>The individual has made financial considerations a priority in their educational choices by using a budget tracker to ensure they have enough money for food each week. They also decided to stay local for university, living close to home, which allows them to stock up on food from home. However, they regret joining a sports society due to the expenses associated with it. Overall, financial considerations have impacted their experiences at university by making them more mindful of their spending and limiting their participation in certain activities.</p>

2.5

Students	Family and Social Dynamics
1	<p>The individual's family has been emotionally supportive, always encouraging them to pursue higher education. However, they are unable to provide financial support, making scholarships and student loans essential for the individual's education.</p> <p>As the eldest child, the individual has significant family responsibilities, including helping their parents with their work and caring for younger siblings. This often conflicts with their academic responsibilities, particularly during exam periods when they need to focus on their studies.</p>
2	<p>The individual's family has been incredibly supportive emotionally, always encouraging them to pursue their education and achieve their goals. Although they couldn't provide financial support or academic advice, their belief in the individual's potential has been a constant source of motivation. They celebrate the individual's successes and provide a strong support system, reminding them of the importance of education and perseverance.</p> <p>As the eldest child, the individual has responsibilities at home, including helping with household chores and supporting their younger siblings with their schoolwork. These obligations sometimes make it challenging to focus entirely on their studies, especially during exam periods. However, the individual has learned to manage their time effectively and prioritise their responsibilities to balance both family duties and academic commitments.</p>
3	<p>The individual's family has been very supportive throughout their higher education journey, ensuring they are not too stressed and encouraging them to take breaks when needed. They also offer advice on various matters concerning university, such as maintaining a good work-life balance and planning their career. Their emotional support has been invaluable in helping the individual navigate the challenges of university life.</p> <p>The individual has no family obligations that may limit or hinder their academic career. This has allowed them to focus entirely on their studies and personal development without the added responsibilities that some students might face.</p>
4	<p>The individual's parents have had a significant influence on their pursuit of higher education, as they have low-wage jobs and moved to a new country to provide their child with a better education. They want their child to obtain a good stable job, so they encouraged them to attend university.</p> <p>Family obligations impact the individual's academic life, as they come from an immigrant family and their parents often need their help, adding stress and extra tasks to their university work. Having to assist with the family's business sometimes means they cannot commit to social activities with friends in the late afternoon or evening.</p>

2.6

Students	Social and Cultural Integration
1	<p>Social integration has been challenging for the individual, as place among students from more privilege Their ethnic and cultural background sometimes makes it difficult to fit in, leaving them feeling stuck in the middle.</p> <p>Initially, the individual didn't feel a sense of belonging within the academic community. However, support from professors, their personal tutor, and peers has gradually helped them feel more included, especially through group projects and discussions. While they still struggle with feelings of not fully belonging, they have found a supportive network on campus.</p>
2	<p>Social integration was challenging at first for the individual, particularly because they felt different from many of their peers who had more affluent backgrounds and familiarity with university life. Joining societies and clubs related to their interests helped them build a network of friends and feel more connected to the university community. Participating in group projects and study sessions also helped them integrate socially and academically.</p> <p>Initially, the individual struggled to feel a sense of belonging within the academic community. However, over time, they built relationships with lecturers and peers through group projects and class discussions. Joining academic societies and attending departmental events also helped them feel more connected. Now, they feel more confident in their place within the academic community and appreciate the diverse perspectives their peers bring.</p> <p>The individual's cultural background has significantly shaped their experiences at university. Coming from a working-class background has given them a unique perspective on many issues and made them more empathetic towards others facing similar challenges. Their cultural background has instilled a strong work ethic and resilience, which have been crucial in navigating the demands of university life. Additionally, being part of a minority group has made them more aware of the importance of diversity and inclusion, and they actively contribute to these conversations on campus.</p>
3	<p>Social integration has been somewhat limited for the individual because they do not live on campus. However, they have made friends and joined some societies, which has helped them feel part of the university community. They feel a sense of belonging within the academic community, especially through these social connections and participation in university activities.</p> <p>The individual's cultural background has made them seek out people from similar backgrounds more actively. They have joined South Asian Societies and befriended people from their own culture to immerse themselves more in their cultural background. This has helped them feel more connected and supported at university, providing a sense of community and belonging.</p>
4	<p>As an introvert, the individual was initially terrified about going to university without knowing anyone. However, they decided to put themselves out there and joined societies, which helped them find good friends and feel a sense of belonging within the academic community. They believe that even if someone doesn't find their people in the first few weeks, they will eventually find them later.</p> <p>The individual's cultural background has expanded significantly since coming to university from a small, non-diverse town. They have met many people with different cultures due to the university's diversity, which has been interesting and unique. However, they still sometimes feel like they cannot fully merge into certain scenarios due to cultural differences.</p>

2.7

Students	Mentorship and Academic Support
1	<p>The individual has had access to mentorship and peer support networks, which have significantly influenced their academic journey. They have a personal tutor who listens to their concerns and provides valuable advice and support. Additionally, they have participated in peer mentoring programmes such as the CoACH mentoring programme and the Buddy Scheme programme, where they were paired with an MBA mentor and a third-year student in their course, respectively. These experiences have been insightful and helpful, offering guidance and resources relevant to their academic journey.</p> <p>The support from their personal tutor has been crucial in staying motivated and seeking necessary resources. The peer support networks have been beneficial in terms of interacting with peers at different stages and gaining useful resources and feedback, helping them navigate university life more effectively.</p> <p>In terms of academic support services, the individual has utilised the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Math resilience workshop: support in overcoming maths anxiety. - Essay writing support: Provided valuable feedback on essay structure and content, which was particularly effective during their foundation year. <p>These academic support services have been effective for the individual.</p>
2	<p>The individual has been assigned a personal tutor for academic guidance and support. However, they feel that the mentorship could have been better if there was a peer to go to for assistance.</p> <p>In terms of academic support services, the individual has not had access to any. They believe that having access to such services could have been beneficial for their academic journey.</p>
3	<p>The individual has been assigned a personal tutor who checks up on them throughout the year. Having a personal tutor has been beneficial academically, as their tutor offers guidance about current and upcoming years at university, such as what to expect in terms of workloads and how to spend their time effectively. This mentorship has provided valuable support and direction, helping them navigate university more successfully.</p> <p>In terms of academic support services, the individual has not attended any academic support sessions as they do not feel the need to. However, they are aware that these services are available and knowing that has been reassuring.</p>
4	<p>The individual has had access to mentorship through a personal tutor who is available to help and can be contacted via email. This has been comforting for them, knowing that they always have someone to support them throughout their university career. Additionally, lecturers are very willing to help if contacted via email.</p> <p>In terms of academic support services, there are many different programmes in place for struggling students. However, the individual has personally not needed to use these services.</p>

2.8

Students	University Support and Resources
1	<p>The individual believes that while the university offers a range of support services, specific initiatives targeting first-generation students could be improved. They suggest that more targeted outreach and financial aid would be beneficial for this group.</p> <p>To better support first-generation students, the individual recommends expanding mentorship programmes to include more peer and alumni mentors who can share their experiences and advice. They also suggest implementing workshops on financial literacy, time management, and mental health tailored for first-generation students. Increasing funding for scholarships and grants specifically for first-generation students would also alleviate financial stress.</p>
2	<p>The individual believes that the university offers support services that indirectly benefit first-generation students, such as the Warwick Scholars programme. However, they feel that the awareness and accessibility of these resources could be improved. They suggest that more targeted outreach and communication about available resources would ensure that first-generation students can fully benefit from the support offered.</p> <p>To better support first-generation students, the individual recommends implementing more targeted outreach programmes to ensure that first-generation students are aware of available resources. They also suggest creating a dedicated support centre for first-generation students, which would provide a centralised location for resources and community building.</p>
3	<p>The individual believes that the university does a good job in supporting first-generation students. They mention that the university offers Widening Participation initiatives to provide extra support and guidance to first-generation students who are more likely to need assistance. Additionally, programs like Realising Opportunities help A-level students who are first-generation and want to attend Russell Group universities, providing them with necessary support and resources.</p> <p>In terms of policy recommendations, the individual does not have any specific suggestions as they feel that the current support provided by the university has been sufficient for their needs.</p>
4	<p>The individual feels that the university has not adequately addressed the struggles faced by first-generation students compared to their non-first-generation peers. They mention that there is a lack of support and awareness regarding these issues.</p> <p>To better support first-generation students, the individual recommends implementing a dedicated first-generation student tutor or a specific person whom first-generation students can approach for help with any questions they may have. They also suggest creating programs to enhance understanding of university studies, available courses, and how these can contribute to future career advancements. Additionally, they propose increasing financial support for first-generation students to help alleviate some of their burdens.</p>

2.9

Students	Future Aspiration and Reflection
1	<p>The individual aspires to work in the banking sector, potentially linking sustainability with finance. Their status as a first-generation student influences their aspirations by making them more determined to succeed despite the lack of a professional network or family experience in higher education. Additionally, they hope to assist in social policy to help create better support systems for students like them and advocate for educational equity.</p> <p>Looking back, the individual wishes they had known more about financial aid options and support services before starting university. They believe that early awareness of schemes and pathways for social mobility would have been beneficial. A comprehensive guide for first-generation students would have been incredibly helpful. They also mention that resources or workshops on time management and dealing with imposter syndrome would have been useful in navigating the challenges they faced.</p>
2	<p>The individual aspires to work in the field of engineering, specifically focusing on renewable energy solutions. Their status as a first-generation student has made them particularly aware of the importance of education and the opportunities it can provide. Their experience has instilled a strong sense of responsibility to give back to their community and support future first-generation students in achieving their goals.</p> <p>Looking back, the individual wishes they had access to a peer mentor from the very beginning, as it would have made the transition to university life smoother and less overwhelming. They also believe that more information about career planning and networking opportunities would have been beneficial in helping them prepare for life after graduation.</p>
3	<p>The individual aspires to have a stable job that utilises the degree they are working towards. Their status as a first-generation student has motivated them to work hard and make the most of the opportunities available to them, knowing that their achievements can pave the way for future generations in their family.</p> <p>Looking back, the individual wishes they had more guidance on handling finances and managing a good work-life balance with university. They believe that having access to these resources and advice early on would have made their transition to university smoother and less stressful.</p>
4	<p>The individual's future aspiration is to work in the cosmetics industry. As a first-generation student, they intend to look for a well-paying job that is located near their family. They believe that their status as a first-generation student may influence this aspiration because they feel they lack the necessary networking to secure a good internship for experience in this field. Therefore, they plan to start from the bottom to build their network.</p> <p>Looking back, the individual wishes they had known about all the internship opportunities that the university offers so they could apply for them to gain more experience and enhance their CV. They also regret not knowing about the Sutton Trust program, which could have provided additional opportunities for learning and networking. .</p>

Key Findings Based on Themes Identified:

Academic Preparation and Confidence

Students reflected on their A-level preparation's impact on their confidence in handling university assignments and independent learning. Challenges included adapting to the pace and depth of university studies. Notably, Student 1 and 3, who are Warwick Scholars, felt less prepared than Student 2 and Student 4, who are non-scholars. However, academic challenges were a common thread among all participants.

Challenges Faced

Participants shared a range of challenges, including financial strain, navigating university bureaucracy, and managing academic workload while balancing part-time work or family responsibilities. Each student had unique experiences, such as difficulties in accessing support or dealing with motivational challenges. Student 1 and 2, the former a scholar, faced financial constraints, possibly explaining why Student 2, and non-scholar, works part-time.

Successes and Achievements

Successes varied from academic achievements to personal growth, like overcoming introversion or finding belonging through social activities. Achievements included scholarships, internships, and positive accommodation experiences.

Financial Impact

Financial considerations significantly influenced educational choices and experiences. Students chose courses like accounting and finance, engineering and life science, traditionally stable well-paying fields. Managing budgets, choosing affordable options, and selecting universities with financial support were recurrent themes

Family and Social Dynamics

Family support played a crucial role, primarily emotional, in motivating respondents. However, all students highlighted a lack of social capital networks from their families. Some faced significant family obligations affecting their academic pursuits, while others navigated social integration challenges, experienced equally by both scholars and non-scholars of the first-generation.

Social and Cultural Integration

Students discussed their experiences with social integration on campus, joining societies, and navigating cultural differences. Cultural background influenced social interactions and sense of belonging positively and negatively. Students 1 and 2 found integration challenging, whereas Students 3 and 4 were able to find more easily.

Mentorship and Academic Support

Access to mentorship and supportive academic resources varied. Personal tutors and supportive lecturers were appreciated, but gaps in specific support for first-generation students were evident. Non-scholars did not always utilise available support, while scholars did and benefited from it.

University Support and Resources

While participants recognised existing support services, they called for more targeted initiatives for first-generation students. Awareness of the available programmes varied, with suggestions for improvement in support systems. All students acknowledged the indirect support through existing initiatives but emphasised the need for more direct support.

Future Aspirations and Resource Needs

Students shared aspirations related to their career paths and how their first-generation status influenced these goals. Concerns about networking, access to internships, and guidance in career planning were prevalent.

Figure 1: Clustered Bar regarding Experiences of First-Generation Warwick Scholars

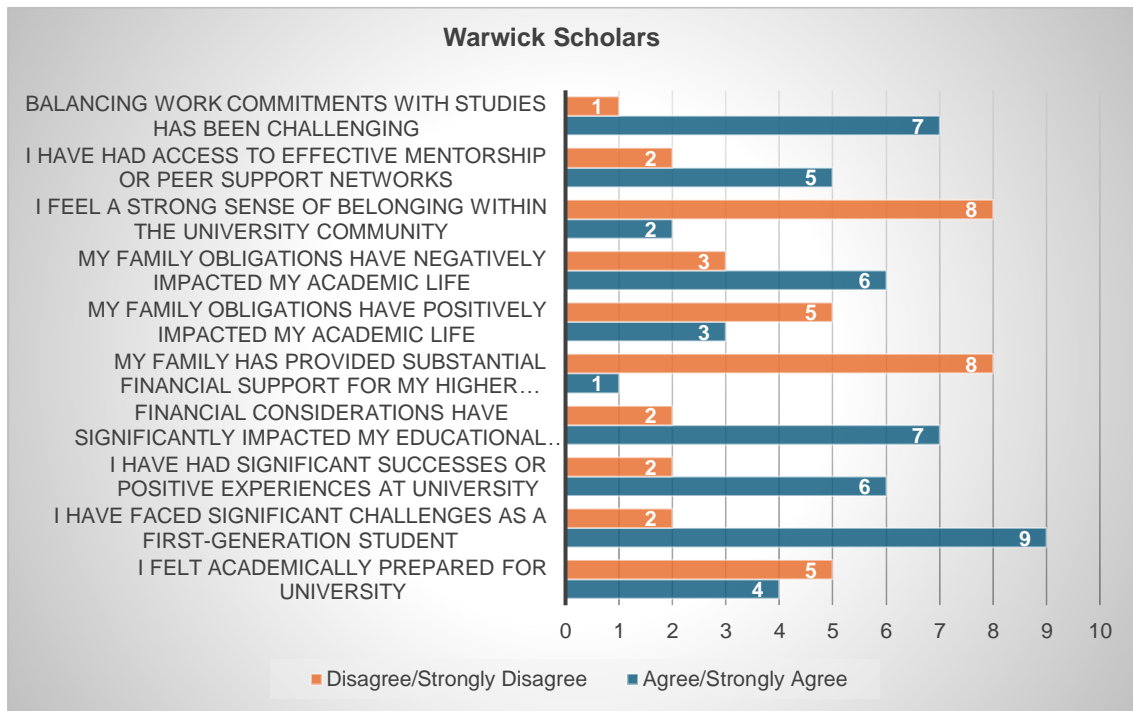


Figure 2: Clustered Bar regarding Experiences of First-Generation Non-Scholars

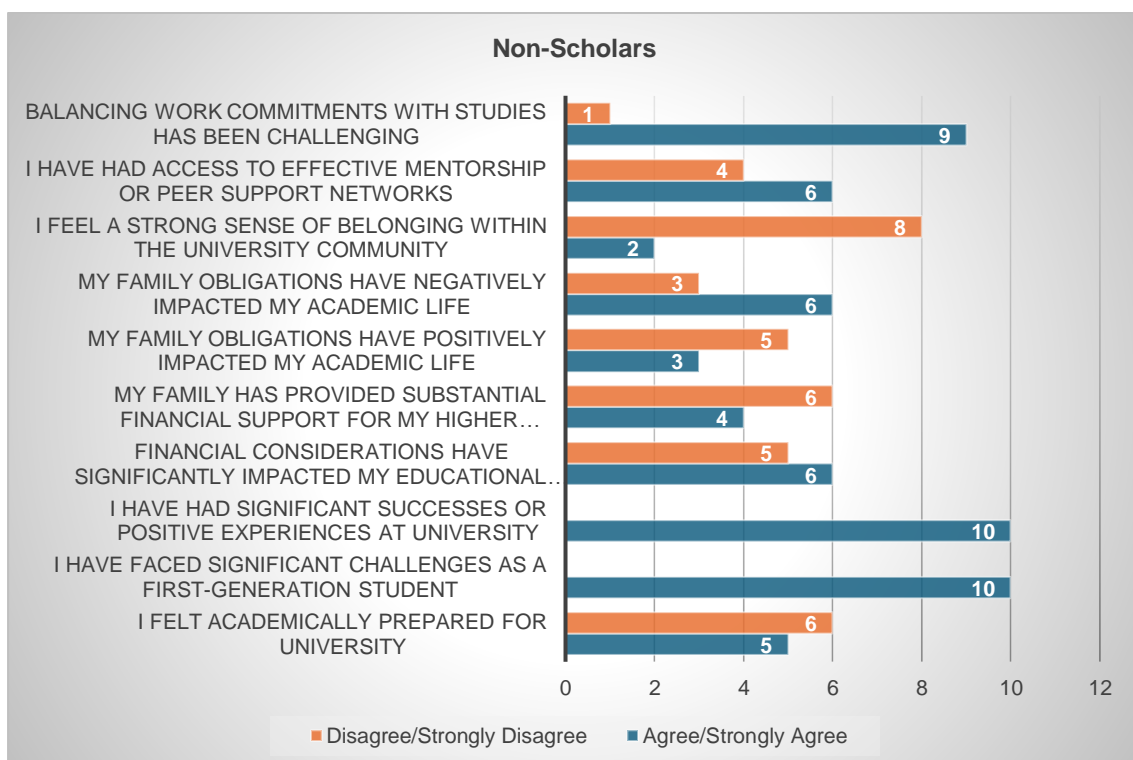


Table 3: Comparative Survey Results: Warwick Scholars vs. Non-Scholars

The table below highlights the key comparison points between Warwick Scholars and non-scholars, focusing on first-generation university students. For better visualisation and understanding, only the most relevant comparison data. points have been included.

Statement	Response	Warwick Scholars (N=12)	Non-Scholars (N=12)
I Felt Academically Prepared for University	Agree/Strongly Agree	36%	42%
	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	45%	50%
I Have Faced Significant Challenges as a First-Generation Student	Agree/Strongly Agree	82%	83%
	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	18%	0%
I Have Had Significant Successes or Positive Experiences at University	Agree/Strongly Agree	55%	83%
	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	18%	0%
Financial Considerations Have Significantly Impacted My Educational Choices	Agree/Strongly Agree	64%	50%
	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	18%	42%
My Family Has Provided Substantial Financial Support for My Higher Education Journey	Agree/Strongly Agree	9%	33%
	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	73%	50%
My Family Obligations Have Positively Impacted my Academic Life	Agree/Strongly Agree	27%	33%
	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	45%	25%
My Family Obligations Have Negatively Impacted my Academic Life	Agree/Strongly Agree	55%	33%
	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	27%	50%
I Feel a Strong Sense of Belonging Within the University Community	Agree/Strongly Agree	18%	50%
	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	73%	33%
I Have Had Access to Effective Mentorship or Peer Support Networks	Agree/Strongly Agree	45%	50%
	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	18%	33%
Balancing Work Commitments with Studies Has Been Challenging	Agree/Strongly Agree	64%	75%
	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	9%	8%

Key Findings Based on Themes Identified:

Academic Preparation and Confidence

The perception of academic preparedness among Warwick Scholars and non-scholars is quite similar, with 36% of scholars feeling prepared and 42% of non-scholars feeling the same. Despite the additional academic support that Warwick Scholars typically receive, their perceived level of preparedness is not significantly higher than that of non-scholars. This suggests that the transition to university may be equally challenging for both groups, regardless of pre-university interventions.

Challenges Faced

When it comes to facing significant challenges as a first-generation student, the responses from Warwick Scholars and non-scholars are almost identical, with 82% and 83% respectively agreeing or strongly agreeing that they have faced such challenges. This highlights that being part of a structured programme like Warwick Scholars does not necessarily alleviate the broader, systemic challenges faced by first-generation students, such as navigating the academic environment, financial pressures, and balancing family obligations. There is a need for more holistic and comprehensive support strategies that address the multifaceted nature of these challenges.

Financial Impact

In terms of financial considerations impacting educational choices, 64% of Warwick Scholars indicated that financial considerations significantly impacted their choices, compared to 50% of non-scholars. This suggests that despite having access to some financial support, Warwick Scholars may feel more financial pressure, possibly due to the stakes involved in maintaining their scholarships or because the support does not fully cover their needs.

Social and Cultural Integration

Regarding the sense of belonging within the university community, only 18% of Warwick Scholars felt a strong sense of belonging, compared to 50% of non-scholars. This is surprising given that Warwick Scholars typically have access to more targeted support programmes designed to help them integrate into university life. However, the results suggest that these programmes may not be fully effective in fostering a sense of belonging, possibly isolating these students from the broader university community or failing to address specific needs effectively.

Mentorship and Academic Support

Finally, when it comes to access to effective mentorship or peer support networks, 45% of Warwick Scholars reported having access to effective mentorship, compared to 50% of non-scholars. This challenges the assumption that Warwick Scholars, who often have access to dedicated mentorship programmes, would report higher satisfaction with these resources. The comparable results suggest that non-scholars may be accessing or forming their own mentorship networks effectively, or that the formal mentorship programmes available to Warwick Scholars are not meeting their expectations.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Support Services Access and Perceived Barriers (N=12)

	Have you ever sought support services at the university?	The academic support services have met my needs	Are there any barriers or concerns you have about accessing them?	Is there anything the university can do to help address those concerns or make accessing support services easier for you? If so, please state.
Warwick Scholars	Yes (50%)	Agree/Strongly Agree (60%) Disagree/Strongly Agree (20%)		
Non-Scholars	Yes (17%)	Agree/Strongly Agree (50%) Disagree/Strongly Agree (0%)		
Warwick Scholars	No (50%)		Yes (33%) No (67%)	"Make support services more available and easier to access." "Advertise types of support service"
Non-Scholars	No (83%)		Yes (50%) No (0%)	"Increase the visibility of support services through personal tutors. Online communications are often missed" "Make support services more aware and open, advertise them more."

Key Findings:

The utilisation and perceptions of support services among Warwick Scholars and non-scholars reveal several key differences and similarities. Firstly, a significant disparity exists between the two groups in terms of utilising support services, with only 17% of non-scholars seeking support services compared to 50% of Warwick Scholars. This discrepancy suggests potential barriers in awareness, visibility, or perceived accessibility of these services among non-scholars, who could benefit greatly from accessing university support services.

When it comes to satisfaction with academic support services, both groups report similar levels, with Warwick Scholars having a slightly higher satisfaction rate.

However, the fact that only about half of the students from each group feel their needs are being met indicates room for improvement in these services. The slightly lower satisfaction among non-scholars might be linked to their lower engagement with these services, suggesting that those who do engage may find them more beneficial.

Despite the structured support Warwick Scholars receive, a third still experience barriers in accessing additional support services. For non-scholars, the concern is more pronounced, with half reporting barriers. This higher percentage aligns with their lower utilisation of services, indicating that barriers like lack of awareness, visibility, or possibly stigma are more acute among non-scholars.

Both groups emphasise the need for greater visibility and accessibility of support services, which suggests that current communication methods might not be effective. Non-scholars' specific call for more involvement of personal tutors in communicating these resources highlights the need for more personalised and direct approaches in promoting these services, possibly reflecting a disconnect between non-scholars and the broader university communication channels.

In conclusion, while both Warwick Scholars and non-scholars face challenges as first-generation students, there are notable differences in their utilisation and perceptions of support services. These findings underscore the need for increased visibility and accessibility of support services, as well as more personalised and direct approaches in promoting these services to ensure that all first-generation students can fully benefit from the resources available to them.

Figure 3: Warwick Scholars' Key Suggestions in Keywords



Warwick Scholar's Suggestions

Warwick Scholars expressed a desire for additional counselling and skill-building workshops, advocating for services that support and guide first-generation students to provide mentorship. There was a clear call for enhanced career support, with recommendations for outreach programmes that illuminate pathways into careers and increased assistance in accessing work experience and graduate jobs. Scholars also

suggested more recognition for first-generation students, greater awareness of social mobility programmes, and increased financial support to alleviate stress associated with education costs and other commitments.

Figure 4: Non-Scholars' Key Suggestions in Keywords



Non-Scholars' Suggestions

Non-scholars emphasised the need for increased visibility and awareness of existing support services, particularly through personal tutors. They called for a wider array of opportunities for first-generation students in academics, placements, and extracurricular activities. Suggestions included establishing a dedicated support group, providing more mentorship and guidance on university opportunities within the first year, and creating clearer pathways for university and future work. Non-scholars recommended mentorship schemes for post-university job searches and platforms like a LinkedIn page specific to first-generation students to share job opportunities. They also advocated for making support services more approachable to avoid feelings of embarrassment and for clearer information on financial help and career support with the label of “Widening Participation.”

Key Suggestions

The word clouds and participant input underscore the diverse yet specific needs of first-generation students at the University of Warwick. Both scholars and non-scholars identified the need for improved career support, financial aid, and mentorship programmes tailored to their unique circumstances. The suggestions reflect an overarching desire for greater visibility, accessibility, and personalisation of support services. Integrating these insights will be crucial for the university in developing more effective and inclusive support systems for first-generation students, ultimately enriching their educational experience and outcomes.

Discussion

Table 5: Key Perspectives on First-Generation Students' Experiences from Interviews, Survey Data, and Literature

Key Finding	Interview Data	Survey Data	Literature
<i>Academic Preparedness and Transition Challenges</i>	First-generation students report challenges in adapting to university-level studies, highlighting gaps in academic preparedness	Warwick Scholars and non-scholars alike perceive themselves as underprepared academically, especially in areas like academic writing.	Pascarella et al. (2004), Katreich & Aruguete (2017) emphasise deficiencies in academic preparation as significant obstacles for first-generation.
<i>Financial Barriers and Family Dynamics</i>	Financial considerations significantly influence educational choices and experiences, with varying degrees of family support noted.	Both groups cite financial strain as major concern, impacting decisions on course selection and work commitments.	Thomas (2006) and Bui (2002) highlight the financial constraints faced by first-generation students, emphasising the role of family dynamics.
<i>Social and Cultural Integration</i>	First-generation students experience mixed levels of social integration and sense of belonging, influenced by cultural background and living arrangements.	Warwick Scholars report lower sense of belonging compared to non-scholars, influenced by cultural mismatch and social isolation.	Forsyth & Furlong (2003) and Adamecz-Völgyi et al. (2020) discuss cultural mismatch and social isolation as common issues for first-generation students, though experiences can vary.
<i>Institutional Support and Mentorship</i>	Both groups express a need for enhanced mentorship and peer support systems, highlighting gaps in existing institutional support.	Non-scholars perceive better access to effective mentorship compared to Warwick Scholars, indicating disparities in support provision.	Stebbleton & Soria (2013), Katreich & Aruguete (2017) and Wainwright & Watts (2018) emphasise the importance of institutional support and targeted interventions for first-generation students, influencing access to mentorship and support services.

In discussing the triangulation of data from interviews, surveys, and literature reviews regarding first-generation students, we observe consistent themes across different types of data collection methods. These findings collectively highlight the challenges and needs of this student demographic, providing a richer understanding than any single method could offer.

Academic Preparation and Confidence

1.1 Perceptions of Academic Preparedness

The perception of academic preparedness among first-generation students, particularly Warwick Scholars, is a significant concern. Despite the structured support that Warwick Scholars receive, both scholars and non-scholars report similar levels of feeling underprepared for university-level studies. This is consistent with the findings of Pascarella et al. (2004) and Katreovich & Aruguete (2017), who highlight the gaps in academic backgrounds commonly faced by first-generation students.

For example, Student 1 noted, *“My A-level experiences were challenging due to inadequate preparation from the school.”* This illustrates the lack of readiness that is not uncommon among this demographic. Warwick Scholars, despite their participation in pre-university interventions, often feel less prepared than their non-scholar peers. This perception reflects their generally lower socio-economic backgrounds and limited prior access to educational resources. Survey data supports this, showing that only 36% of Warwick Scholars and 42% of non-scholars felt adequately prepared. Student 1’s description of a “rocky transition” further underscores that these academic challenges persist despite additional support.

However, the experience of academic preparedness among first-generation students is not uniform. For instance, Student 3 mentioned, *“I felt my school did a good job in preparing us for independent learning,”* suggesting that the level of academic preparation can vary significantly among first-generation students. This variability highlights that while some students struggle, others enter university with a stronger foundation.

1.2 Specific Transition Challenges

First-generation students face several specific challenges in transitioning to university-level studies, including financial constraints, family responsibilities, and social integration difficulties. These challenges are well-documented in the literature, with Forsyth & Furlong (2003) discussing the socio-economic pressures that complicate academic transitions.

Financial constraints are particularly impactful, influencing decisions about course selection, accommodation, and work commitments. Student 2’s decision to *“live in university accommodation with lower rent”* underscores the necessity of financial considerations in every aspect of university life. This aligns with the survey data, where a significant percentage of first-generation students indicated that financial pressures heavily influenced their educational choices.

Despite these challenges, some students manage to adapt well to the academic environment. As Student 2 shared, *“The initial weeks were tough, but I quickly got the hang of things with the help of workshops and peer study groups.”* This statement reflects how institutional support, and self-learning opportunities can help mitigate initial academic challenges, emphasising the importance of accessible academic resources.

Financial Barriers and Family Dynamics

1.3 Influence of Financial Considerations on Educational Choices

Financial barriers are a central theme in the educational experiences of first-generation students, directly affecting their choices and opportunities. Thomas (2006) and Bui (2002) discuss how financial constraints and family dynamics influence these students' decisions, often limiting their options. Student 2's statement, "*Financial consideration has played a crucial role in my educational choices,*" highlights how financial realities dictate not just academic choices but also living arrangements and lifestyle decisions. This influence is further reflected in the survey data, where 64% of Warwick Scholars and 50% of non-scholars reported that financial considerations significantly influenced their educational decisions. These findings suggest that even with financial support, such as scholarships, the pressure remains considerable.

However, some students manage these constraints successfully. For example, Student 5 remarked, "*I worked part-time, but it didn't interfere with my studies because I managed my time well,*" indicating that effective time management can allow students to balance work and study without significant academic compromise.

1.4 Impact of Family Financial Dynamics on Academic Experiences

Family financial dynamics deeply influence the academic experiences of first-generation students. Thomas (2006) emphasises how these students often bear the dual burdens of financial insecurity and high family expectations. Student 4's narrative, "*My parents had a big influence on me to pursue higher education as they have low-wage jobs, and they moved to this country to give me a better education. They want me to get a good stable job, so they have influenced me to go to university,*" reflects the aspirations and expectations that drive many first-generation students. These expectations often come with significant pressure to succeed academically as a means of improving the family's socio-economic standing. The survey data supports this, with 55% of Warwick Scholars agreeing that family obligations negatively impacted their academic life, compared to 33% of non-scholars.

Conversely, other students experience family dynamics that offer support without undue pressure. For instance, Student 3 said, "*My family was very supportive, but they didn't put too much pressure on me; they just wanted me to do my best.*" This suggests that while family dynamics are generally influential, they can also provide a balanced support system that alleviates stress rather than exacerbates it.

Social and Cultural Integration

1.5 Perceptions of Belonging at Warwick University

Social integration presents significant challenges for first-generation students, with many reporting feelings of isolation and disconnection. Forsyth & Furlong (2003) and Adamecz-Völgyi et al. (2020) discuss how cultural mismatch and social isolation are common issues for these students, though individual experiences can vary.

Student 1's experience, "*Navigating social circles felt daunting... I often felt out of place,*" reflects the difficulties many first-generation students face in finding a sense of belonging at university. The survey data supports this, revealing that only 18% of Warwick Scholars felt a strong sense of belonging, compared to 50% of non-scholars.

This suggests that while Warwick Scholars may receive more structured support, these programmes might not be fully effective in fostering a sense of community, potentially even isolating these students from the broader university environment.

However, the experience of social integration is not universally negative. For example, Student 3 mentioned, “I found it easy to make friends through my course and extracurricular activities,” contrasting with Student 1’s feelings of social isolation. This highlights that while social integration can be challenging for some, others find it relatively easy, particularly when they actively engage in university life.

1.6 Role of Cultural Background in University Experiences

Cultural background significantly shapes the university experiences of first-generation students, influencing their comfort levels and social interactions. Forsyth & Furlong (2003) and Adamecz-Völgyi et al. (2020) emphasise how cultural mismatches can exacerbate feelings of isolation and otherness. However, active participation in extracurricular activities can enhance social integration, as illustrated by Student 4’s comment, “Joining societies fostered a sense of community.” This highlights the potential for involvement in university life to counteract feelings of isolation.

Nonetheless, the challenges associated with cultural differences remain, as these factors can complicate the integration process. Student 3 shared a positive experience, “Coming from a multicultural background, I found it easy to relate to people from different cultures,” suggesting that for some students, cultural diversity can be an asset, broadening their social connections and enriching their university experience.

Institutional Support and Mentorship

1.7 Effectiveness of Mentorship Programmes

Mentorship programmes are crucial for supporting the academic success of first-generation students, but their effectiveness varies. Stebleton & Soria (2013) and Wainwright & Watts (2018) emphasise the importance of targeted institutional support and mentorship for first-generation students. Student 1’s comment, “*My personal tutor’s guidance has been invaluable,*” underscores the importance of personalised support. However, survey data reveals discrepancies in the perceived quality of support between Warwick Scholars and non-scholars. While 45% of scholars reported satisfaction with mentorship, 50% of non-scholars felt similarly, indicating that current mentorship programmes may not fully meet the needs of all first-generation students.

On the other hand, some students may find informal peer networks just as effective as formal mentorship programmes. Student 4 remarked, “*I didn’t use the mentorship programme much because I found enough support among my peers,*” suggesting that while formal mentorship can be beneficial, peer support also plays a significant role in the academic success of first-generation students.

1.8 Perceptions of Access to Support Services

There is a noticeable difference in perceptions of access to support services between Warwick Scholars and non-scholars. Survey data indicates that 50% of scholars actively utilise these services, compared to just 17% of non-scholars. Stebleton & Soria (2013) and Katreovich & Aruguete (2017) discuss how institutional support, when

effectively communicated and accessible, can significantly impact first-generation students' academic success.

However, perceptions of accessibility vary. While some scholars feel that these services could be more accessible, others like Student 3 had a positive experience: *“The university’s support services were easy to access, and I never felt that I was missing out on any help.”* This suggests that while some students may perceive barriers to accessing support services, others find them adequate and accessible. Non-scholars, in particular, advocate for more involvement of personal tutors in promoting available resources, as they may feel more comfortable accessing support through direct, personalised communication.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of the challenges and experiences faced by first-generation students in higher education, focusing specifically on Warwick Scholars and non-scholars at the University of Warwick. Through a blend of quantitative survey data and qualitative interviews, key findings related to academic preparation, financial constraints, social integration, institutional support, and career development needs were uncovered.

A strength of this study is its ability to offer detailed insights into the specific challenges faced by first-generation students at the University of Warwick. These insights can inform targeted support mechanisms tailored to the specific needs of its student population, ultimately promoting equity and success in higher education.

Despite its strengths, the study has limitations in terms of generalisability, as it focuses specifically on first-generation students at the University of Warwick. Additionally, qualitative findings may be influenced by researcher interpretation. It is also important to note that this study was conducted under the ethical guidelines set forth by the Widening Participation Ethics Committee of the University of Warwick, ensuring responsible and ethical research involving human participants.

The insights gathered from this research highlight the multitude of challenges faced by first-generation students at the University of Warwick. While these students exhibit remarkable resilience and perseverance, it is crucial that institutions like Warwick rise to meet their unique needs and support their journey towards success.

Participants offered the following recommendations to address the challenges identified in our study, with the goal of fostering an inclusive environment that empowers first-generation students to flourish both academically and personally:

Recommendations for Supporting First-Generation Students:

1. Increase Counselling and Workshops

Offer additional counselling services and skill-building workshops tailored to first-generation students. These workshops should focus on critical areas such as time management, financial literacy, study skills, and transitioning to university life. By providing these resources, the university can empower first-generation students with the tools they need to succeed academically and personally.

2. Enhance Financial Aid

Expand financial support mechanisms, such as scholarships, grants, and bursaries, to ease the financial burdens faced by first-generation students. Increasing visibility and awareness of existing financial aid services is essential to ensure that students are fully informed about the resources available to them. Clear and accessible information about financial support can help alleviate financial stress and enable students to focus on their studies.

3. Provide Mentorship, Guidance and Career Support

Establish a comprehensive mentorship programme that connects first-generation students with peer mentors and alumni who have navigated similar challenges. This mentorship should offer guidance on university life, career opportunities, and personal growth. Additionally, enhance career support by organising panels, workshops, and networking events with professionals. These events can provide valuable insights into career paths, access to work experience, and graduate job opportunities. Creating a dedicated LinkedIn page or community platform for first-generation students will foster a sense of belonging, allowing them to share job opportunities, build professional networks, and connect with successful alumni who can serve as role models.

4. Improve Visibility of Support Services

Increase the visibility of available support services, especially through personal tutors and within academic departments. Clear labelling and promotion of support services related to widening participation will ensure that students fully understand what resources are available and how to access them. This will reduce confusion and encourage more students to benefit from these opportunities, helping them navigate university life more effectively.

5. Expand Extracurricular and Academic Opportunities

Promote a wider range of opportunities, including academic placements, extracurricular activities, and social events, to enrich the university experience for first-generation students. These opportunities help level the playing field, providing students with the chance to build valuable skills, connections, and a well-rounded portfolio that will enhance their future employment prospects. By actively promoting these opportunities, the university can ensure that first-generation students are exposed to a broad spectrum of experiences that contribute to both their academic and personal growth.

The overarching theme driving this research—understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by first-generation university students—pushes us into a broader discussion about the nature of educational equity and access. This prompts considerations of not just descriptive analyses but also theoretical frameworks and models that explain the causal relationships or key variables in play. As such, this study advocates for comprehensive support systems that encompass academic preparation, financial aid, social and cultural integration, institutional mentorship, and career planning to facilitate the success of first-generation students in higher education.

To further enrich the discussion, it is crucial to acknowledge the diversity within the first-generation student cohort. Students from different ethnic, socio-economic, and geographical backgrounds may have distinct experiences and needs. For instance, students from rural areas might face more significant transition challenges compared to their urban counterparts. Additionally, students from minority ethnic groups might encounter unique forms of discrimination or barriers to integration.

Furthermore, the discussion could be broadened to consider the role of technology in bridging the gap for first-generation students. Digital tools and online resources can provide valuable support, especially for those who may not have easy access to traditional forms of assistance. For example, online tutoring platforms, virtual career fairs, and professional networking sites can offer opportunities for academic and career development.

Lastly, it is essential to emphasise the potential for positive transformation. First-generation students often bring unique perspectives and resilience that can enrich the educational environment. Institutions can harness this potential by creating inclusive spaces that celebrate diverse backgrounds and experiences. By doing so, universities can not only support the individual success of first-generation students but also contribute to a more dynamic and innovative learning community.

Future research should continue to explore the intersectionality of identities and experiences within the first-generation student population, as well as the effectiveness of various support strategies and interventions. By understanding the nuanced challenges and implementing tailored support systems, institutions can create more inclusive and supportive environments for first-generation students, fostering their academic success and overall well-being.

In conclusion, this research has deepened our understanding of the complex challenges faced by first-generation students at the University of Warwick. From a personal standpoint, this journey has emphasised the importance of trusting the process, embracing individual differences, and acknowledging one's unique background. These insights highlight the resilience needed to navigate university life as a first-generation student.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Timeline for Data Collection

Time	What	Details
February	Ethics application form and associated documents.	Filled in details of ethics application form and completed records of participants information leaflets, consent forms, online survey, interview questions, invitation emails prompts. These were reviewed by the Widening Participation Ethics Committee; feedback was given for amendments.
March	Ethics application form and associated documents.	Details were amended and submitted for final review; ethics approval was granted.
May	Online survey and interviews	To gather quantitative data and incorporate aspects of qualitative insights, surveys were distributed online. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with Student 1,2,3 and 4 to obtain extensive qualitative data.
June	Online survey and interviews	The data collection process, which involved both surveys and interviews, was completed on 17 th June.

Appendix B: Table of Interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Warwick scholar? (YES/NO)	Level of education	Date of interview
Student 1	F	YES	UG	08/05/2024
Student 2	M	NO	UG	17/05/2024
Student 3	F	YES	UG	27/05/2024
Student 4	F	NO	UG	10/06/2024

Appendix C: Demographic Breakdown of Survey Participants from the University of Warwick

Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
WP student		
Yes	24	80%
No	6	20%
Warwick Scholars Programme		
Yes	12	50%
No	12	50%
First-Generation Status		
First-Generation	24	80%
Not First-Generation	6	20%
Level of Study		
Undergraduate	26	87%
Postgraduate	4	13%
Gender		
Male	8	27%
Female	22	73%