Factors Influencing the Higher Education of First-Generation Learners from Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups

SUNITA SINGH*, RITESH KUMAR**, AND ANANTA ANA TIGGA***

Abstract

Equality of educational opportunities in higher education has been a constant challenge for all. Nevertheless, the situation is rendered even more difficult for First-Generation Learners (FGLs), particularly those belonging to Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). Data was collected from FGLs of five different central universities regarding various aspects that might affect their academic journey in higher education. The gathered data was analysed using factor analysis, and data triangulation was done through Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The study analysed factors such as higher education goals and aspirations, urban adaptation, institutional support and environment, policy awareness and goals, financial constraints, administrative cooperation, language barriers, and overall satisfaction. It was found that the most prominent ones are financial constraints and administrative support. The study found that the higher education journey of FGLs is significantly influenced by familial financial support, along with government initiatives aimed at aiding their education. FGLs are still lacking an inclusive institutional environment, which plays a crucial role in helping them adapt, overcome mingling challenges, navigate various programmes and activities, and integrate into campus life. The study also found that technology plays an instrumental role among the FGLs in overcoming language barriers and compensating for a weak educational foundation. The study offered suggestive measures at the entry-level to provide them with specialised courses to improve their academic writing skills and overcome language barriers, followed by the mentorship programme with a supportive institutional environment and

 * *Associate Professor*, Department of Education, University of Delhi, Delhi
 ** *Research Assistant*, Department of Education, University of Delhi, Delhi
*** *PhD Scholar*, Department of Education, University of Delhi, Delhi

exposure towards setting their higher aspiration and valuing their culture and ethos during urban adaptation.

Keywords: Higher Education, Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), First-Generation Learners (FGLs), Influencing Factor

INTRODUCTION

Education is a critical force that leads to the broadening of one's mind and enhances critical thinking, problem-solving ability, and decision-making. It is a key driver of empowerment and a gateway of modernisation. However, Blanden *et al.* (2023) observe that the education system does not benefit all groups equally, leading to uneven development. Bias and discrimination based on gender, social and economic status, and special needs, often act as barriers to receiving the full benefit of the education system. Learners from Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), including Scheduled Tribes (STs), Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), face unique challenges in accessing quality education. They typically come from communities that have historically denied educational opportunities (Iyer, 2001) and often lack the necessary motivation and support to pursue academic studies due to factors such as inadequate study facilities at home (Dunn, 2015).

Modernisation and globalisation have led to the advancement of society, where disadvantaged groups are trying to break the vicious cycle of their lifelong dependency and poverty. The learners from these SEDGs are able to go for higher education institutions due to the increased access to education. Among these learners, most are First-Generation Learners (FGLs), the first in their family lineage to pursue higher education. They face considerable hurdles in their academic journey due to poverty, geographical disadvantages, and a lack of family tradition in formal education (Borooah *et al.*, 2015; Sedwal and Kamat, 2002). They often lack the familial knowledge and role models to guide them through higher education (Rubio *et al.*, 2017). They tend to have higher attrition rates and are more likely to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, which correlates with academic difficulties and lower educational aspirations (Bui, 2002). The All India Survey on Higher Education report (Government of India, 2022)indicates that despite an overall increase in GER for all groups in higher education, the GER for SC and ST groups remains below the national average. In 2021-22, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for the SC population was 25.9 per cent, and for the ST population, it was 21.2 per cent, indicating that a significant portion of these populations are not enrolled in higher education, and most of them are FGLs. The above points indicate that the condition of FGLs, especially

from SEDGs in higher education, is quite questionable. All these points have led to the need for this study. The present study is a comprehensive effort to analyse the factors that influence the access and success of FGLs in higher education.

The present study is guided by Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory. Bourdieu argues that "cultural capital" is a significant factor in class reproduction. He suggests that the privileged class, which holds economic and cultural capital, maintains its dominance through educational practices. Bourdieu identifies three types of capital critical to understanding social inequalities: economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Among these, cultural capital is most important in the educational system. It can be converted into economic capital through education (Swartz, 1997). Bourdieu (1986) describes cultural capital in three forms: embodied (personal attributes such as linguistic competencies and cultural affinities), objectified (material possessions like books and artwork), and institutionalised (educational qualifications). According to Bourdieu (1986), educational inequalities persist due to the working-class habitus, which lacks the desired cultural capital. For upper-class children, cultural capital transmission begins in the family and continues in school (Bourdieu, 1986). Teachers recognise and encourage cultural capital subtly, perceiving students with more cultural capital as more intelligent or gifted (DiMaggio, 1982). Conversely, students from disadvantaged backgrounds lack cultural capital at home, putting them at a disadvantage in the educational system. Bourdieu argues that cultural capital can only be converted into economic capital through the educational system, highlighting its role in social inequality transmission. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, guides this study as a key factor in social inequality transmission.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The literature on FGL highlights significant challenges and disparities compared to the Non-First Generation Learner (NFGL). FGLs from SEDGs face distinctive challenges like a lack of familial academic experience, economic constraints, and social barriers, which collectively hinder their academic progress and overall educational experience. The limited accessibility of quality educational institutions and equality concerns fail to adequately address the required needs and demands of the students, which further leaves a critical gap in understanding and supporting this vulnerable demographic.

Studies consistently underscore the impact of family background, socio-economic status, and educational support systems on FGLs' academic experiences. In the Indian context, studies by Antil (2021) and Iyer (2001) reveal that FGLs often face more educational challenges

due to factors like inadequate home environments, socio-economic hardships, and limited familial support. Gender disparities further complicate their experiences, with girls often encountering additional social and emotional barriers (Iyer, 2001). Research also examines the educational outcomes and challenges across different contexts. For example, Dubule's (1997) study on higher education highlights significant differences in study habits between FGL and subsequent-generation learners, noting higher hurdles faced by girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Kashmir, Bhat and Netragaonkar (2014) found notable disparities in scientific temper and academic achievement between FGL and NFGL, suggesting implications for educational policy and support strategies.

At the International level, studies such as Bryan and Simmons (2009) and Garcia (2010) underscore the importance of familial and community support in mitigating academic challenges for FGL. These studies highlight the role of family involvement, cultural capital, and institutional support in enhancing retention and academic success among FGL (Garcia, 2010; Dumais and Ward, 2010). Systematic reviews like Ives and Castillo-Montoya (2020) critically analyse the conceptualisations of FGL as learners, advocating for more inclusive and supportive educational approaches that acknowledge and leverage their diverse backgrounds and experiences.

The research gap in these studies is multifaceted, reflecting a significant disparity in the volume and scope of research conducted on FGLs internationally compared to the Indian context. There is a notable paucity of studies covering the concerns, and challenges of the FGLs from SEDGs, such as STs, SCs, and OBCs in the Indian context, particularly in the higher education sector. This research aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive examination of the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that impact their educational journeys at entry, process, and output levels. This study focuses on the educational challenges faced by FGLs, particularly from socio-economically disadvantaged communities, and explores effective approaches to improve their educational outcomes, ensuring their upliftment and integration into mainstream society.

RESEARCH QUESTION
What are the influential factors that affect the Higher education of first-generation learners of SEDGs?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY
To identify and examine the factors influencing First-Generation Learners of SEDGs in Higher Education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
To achieve the objectives of this research mixed-methods research design was used. Using convenient

sampling, the data were collected from the HEIs, namely the University of Delhi, Central University of South Bihar, Central University of Jharkhand, Banaras Hindu University, and Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was employed to choose the sample, i.e., enrolled FGLs from disadvantaged groups, to ensure the inclusion of individuals who could provide relevant and insightful data pertinent to the study's objectives. Detailed demographic information of the total 248 participants has been given in Table 1. To triangulate the findings, 10 faculty members had been chosen from the above central universities, 25 FGLs were interviewed after their consent, and 5 students were chosen to conduct focus group discussions to know their reflections on FGLs' experiences, challenges, and future aspirations in Higher Education.

Table 1
Demographic Details of the Participants (Sample)

Sex	Male	120
	Female	127
	Others	001
Educational Level	UG	141
	PG	107
	Others	000
Social Class	ST	087
	SC	063
	OBC	098
Medium of Instruction up to Matriculation	English	117
	Hindi	102
	Others	29

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

To identify the factors that influence the higher education of the FGLs, a self-constructed questionnaire comprising thirty-one items on a five-point Likert scale and semi-structured interviews has been used for the data collection. The questionnaire contained items related to educational aspirations, educational goals, influence of family and community, financial support, cultural and social integration, support provided by educational institutions, education-related opportunities, inclusivity, policies, and resources. Data was collected from January 2024 to April 2024. The questionnaire was distributed in both online and offline modes, and a total of 248 participants responded to it. Through using descriptive statistics like computation of standard deviation and NPC values researcher has assessed the nature of the data for the use of parametric statistics like factor analysis. To identify the relationships between various variables in the questionnaire,

factorial analysis was done with the help of SPSS software.

Data Analysis

Before applying factorial analysis, researchers have calculated the value of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The KMO value of 0.721 indicates that the sample is adequate for the factor analysis. The high Chi-Square value (2754) strongly rejects the null hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix. This indicates that there are correlations in the data suitable for factor analysis. The degree of freedom for this test is 465, corresponding to the number of variables being analysed. The p-value is 0.000, which is less than 0.05. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is highly significant (p < 0.001), suggesting that there are underlying patterns in the data that factor analysis can uncover. Further, the factors were analysed through the principal component technique and the rotated component matrix. Further, the original statements included in the questionnaire were grouped into 'new variables' or dimensions such as goals and aspiration, urban adaptation, institutional support, institutional environment, policy awareness and goals financial constraints, administrative cooperation, family expectation and language barriers, overall satisfaction, family income support to simplify and understand the data set. Qualitative narrative analysis was also done concerning these dimensions for better understanding.

Result

Concerning Factors Influencing FGL's Higher Education, when factor analysis was applied to 31 statements included in the questionnaire, it resulted in the extraction of 10 factors. In Table 2, the statements included in each factor appear with their loadings. The ten factors include only 26 of the original 31 statements. Certain statements were excluded from the factor specification because of their low loading on any factor. The factors created by the classification of the 31 original statements into categories are presented with their eigenvalues in Table 2. Table 2 highlights the statements included in each factor along with their loadings. This effectively summarises the dataset, representing 66.235 per cent of the original variability. The researcher found various cross-loading issues in the component matrix table. By examining the rotated component matrix, the researcher better identified distinct components, ensuring that each item contributes significantly to only one component, thereby improving the clarity and reliability of the factor structure. Only those variables were considered for further analysis which had a loading threshold above 0.5. In Table 2, the factors and the included statements, along with their loading, have been highlighted.

Table 2
Factors Loading Table

S. No.	Factors	Eigen Value	% of Variance	Variables/Statements	Loadings
1.	Goals and Aspirations	5.808	18.736	● My higher education journey has positively impacted my career aspirations.	0.780
				● My aspirations for contributing to my community have grown through higher education.	0.801
				● The support and opportunities I received in higher education institutions have been aligned with my long-term goals.	0.784
2.	Urban Adaptation	3.267	10.537	● The lack of role models in my rural community impacted my initial aspirations for higher education.	0.529
				● I feel that I am not competent with urban students.	0.719
				● I feel difficulty in mixing with other students due to divergence.	0.747
				● I feel that I am alienated from the urban culture.	0.632
				● I feel that I do not get support from other students in my educational activities.	0.679
3.	Institutional Support	2.248	7.253	● I get adequate support from the SC/ST/OBC cell in the institution.	0.684
				● I am aware of any affirmative actions taken by the above-mentioned cells.	0.771
				● I get opportunities to present tribal arts/games in the institute.	0.668
				● I get adequate opportunities to carry out sports activities.	0.600

4.	Institutional Environment	1.803	5.815	• There is no group based on region/caste in the hostel.	0.700
				• I feel that our culture is not being understood by other people.	−0.558
				• There are no selection biases in any kind of co-curricular or extracurricular activities.	0.601
5.	Policy Awareness and Goals	1.540	4.967	• I am aware of different National and State-level policies that benefit the SC/ST/OBC students.	0.505
				• I have clear long-term educational goals that I am committed to achieving.	0.810
				• I am determined to persist in the face of obstacles to achieve my future aspirations.	0.671
6.	Financial Constraints	1.460	4.710	• I can afford the cost of a hostel.	−0.726
				• Economic constraints have posed challenges to achieving my educational and career aspirations.	0.721
7.	Administrative Cooperation	1.185	3.821	• The administration cooperates with me in availing scholarships.	0.861
				• The staff treat me well when I go to them for financial assistance issues.	0.796
8.	Language and Aspiration	1.116	3.599	• My family's expectations played a significant role in shaping my aspirations at the entry level.	0.573
				• Language acts as a barrier in studies when it comes to English.	−0.548
9.	Overall Satisfaction	1.096	3.534	• I am satisfied with my overall educational experience at the institution.	0.783
10.	Financial Support	1.012	3.263	• The income of my family supports the cost of my higher education.	0.843

Factor 1, termed Goals and Aspirations, exhibiting the high loadings, indicates that higher education significantly shapes students' career aspirations, enhances their desire to contribute to their communities, and aligns with their long-term goals. When participants were asked how their institutional culture supports their long-term goals? One of the participants from the University of Delhi shared: "To attain long-term goals my university provides services like free UGC NET Coaching, CUET Entrance exam preparation coaching, and Hostel accommodation to students with low socio-economic status, orphan, single girl child, and disabled students which facilitate them to continue their higher education smoothly". Another participant shared: "Through engagement with many debating societies majority of the first-generation learners of Eastern UP, Bihar, and Rajasthan etc. got exposure to learn communication, literary and critical thinking Skills". The participants' narratives also affirm that the higher education journey and their institutional support positively impact their goals and future career aspirations. Aligning the same result, Pascarella *et al.* (2004) also found that higher education plays a crucial role in shaping the career aspirations of the FGLs.

Factor 2, termed Urban Adaptation, portrays high loading that highlights significant challenges on the aspirations of higher education such as lack of role models in the community they belong, feeling of incompetency, when compared to urban students, difficulty in mixing with students, feeling of alienation from the urban culture, and lack of peer support in the educational activities. Some FGLs of Guru Ghasi Das Central University were connected through telephonic interviews. A female participant of an undergraduate course (B.Sc.) shared, "When I came from my village Agarpani, Bodla district, and joined classes in university, my classmates of urban location majorly raised voices on my dress sense and hairstyle and considered my presence in their group as *chomu* or another certain name like *behan ji*, *desi* girl, *saadhaaran ladki*, *gaon ke type ki*, etc. My peer group students always doubted my skills, like use of technology, marketing, and negotiation skills, whenever I was on field trips or excursions". Another participant also shared his voice concerning the kind of difficulties he faced when he arrived at the University of Delhi from his home town located in Eastern UP. He said, "At Delhi University, I feel alienated because Delhi is a metropolitan city. This is the first time I am using the Metro train, rush roads, late-night party culture, smoking, and other open modern cultures among my elite background friends. Frankly, I say that I am not able to mix with this culture". Participants' narratives relate to the study done by Bhatt and Bahadur (2018), which also supports

the above factors which hinder their educational success of FGLs.

Factor 3, Institutional Support includes statements on support from SC/ST/OBC cells, awareness of affirmative actions taken by these cells, opportunities to present tribal arts/games in the educational institution, and opportunities to engage in sports activities. The high loadings suggest there is a robust institutional support system that is providing them with the necessary resources and opportunities to succeed in higher education. The study of Jehangir (2010) supports the importance of institutional support for FGLs. One of the participants from Central University of Jharkhand shared, "Once or twice a year we get a chance to represent our culture through song or dance performance in various stages organised by different departments of the university which further creates excitement among us". In contrast, another participant from the Central University of South Bihar shared, "There are not many options for sport here. I have played handball at the state level in school, but there is very little scope for it at this university. Also, there is not much information available about inter-university events. I take part in the annual sports day to keep myself happy and engaged". The narratives of participants here are mixed in nature. The universities are providing a lot of opportunities to the FGLs; however, they still lack in providing all the requirements to the students.

Institutional support related to the above factor is a very crucial factor as it helps the FGLs in making a unique identity and surviving in the institutions.

Factor 4, Institutional Environment, includes three statements. The positive loading of 0.700 in the statement related to the absence of regional/caste-based groups in the hostel indicates that the environment is mostly inclusive, but some FGLs do not agree with it. A negative loading on the second statement indicates that the culture of the FGLs is being understood in the institution, but still, most do not agree with it. Also, the loading of 0.601 in the statement related to fair selection in the co-curricular and extra-curricular activities indicates that the institutional environment in this regard is mostly fair, but still many participants feel that the selection process is not completely unbiased. All of these factors indicate that most of the FGLs face a lot of hardship in these institutions too. When participants were probed regarding this factor, one of the participants stated, "You will never see any kind of groups based on caste, but region-wise groups are present in the institution. If you belong to their group, then you are certainly going to cherish your culture, but if you don't, then you will feel alone. I am from a tribal belt of Chhattisgarh, and I am not able to represent my culture well because they think of me as a kind of backward person

who has no manners and culture. And when you belong to a culture whose representation is negligible, then you will be neglected in all the events of the institution".

Factor 5 is Policy Awareness and Goals, which include statements on awareness of policies at the national and state level that benefit the SEDGs, the commitment to achieve long-term educational goals, and the commitment to face any obstacles in achieving their future aspirations. The loadings on these items indicate that though FGLs are committed to achieving their long-term educational aspirations, demonstrating strong internal motivation and resilience, they are not well-informed about the SC/ST/OBC policies and provisions that could benefit them. One of the students from Central University of Jharkhand stated, "I am from a very rural area and I am not very aware of my rights, government initiatives, and policies. Sometimes, I regret that the lack of comprehensive information about these things indirectly affects my growth. I wish to know, but I don't know from where I will be able to gather all the information".To which another participant added that, "It is very important to have resources to fulfill our dreams. We have shown desire and passion to reach here in this institution, but have lacked direction and resources. Also, we do not know what our rights and this has become our weakness. But my family and I are standing strong to face any kind of obstacle in the path of my higher education".

Factor 6 is Financial Constraints, which includes statements on the affordability of hostel costs and the impact of economic constraints on the educational and career aspirations of the FGLs. The negative loading in the first statement and the positive loading in the second statement reflect significant financial burdens that impact students' ability to focus on and succeed in their educational pursuits, highlighting the critical need for financial support. Engle and Tinto (2008) also highlight the point that the FGLs face significant financial constraints. When questions were asked to FGLs regarding this factor, they said, "I belong to a lower caste and my family's income is quite low due to which I have found it very difficult to fulfil basic needs for my studies. Hostel fees are low, but mess fees are quite high. There is no concession on mess fees. Sometimes, I feel a lot of tension regarding money. The family members also keep saying that they are spending most of their income to meet the expenses of my studies, you must earn money, as we are running out of money. And one thing is that you can't prepare yourself according to the main events because I don't have that much money, that I can buy all the food for myself".The above narrative of the participant related to the sixth theme, highlights many things about an FGL in higher education. The scarcity of money leads the FGLs to work on a part-time basis, which affect their academic achievements as compared to their

NFGL counterparts. Caste, ethnicity, and money play a complex game even if a FGL has done a lot to overcome the initial challenges of entering in higher education institution.

Factor 7 is Administrative Cooperation. The loadings on these items suggest strong administrative support, indicating that students receive substantial help from administrative staff in accessing scholarships and financial assistance, which is vital for managing the financial aspects of their education. One of the participants from Banaras Hindu University stated, "The financial assistance from the government sources is very crucial for my higher education and here in this institution, the administration helped me out in availing the scholarships. They treat me well, and when they got to know that I am the first one in my family to pursue higher education, they were happy to help me out. One time I was unable to withdraw an amount from the institution that was specially designed for students like me due to some paper issue, they moved forward to help me beyond their limits". The narratives of participants affirm that the good behaviour from the administration helps the FGLs in boosting their morale. This finding aligns with the findings of Ishitani (2006) that administrative support helps FGLs and boosts them to succeed in their academics.

Factor 8 is Language and Aspiration, which includes statements on shaping of aspirations of students based on family expectations and the barriers caused by the English language. The positive loading on the first statement indicates that family expectations significantly shape students' aspirations, while the negative loading on the second statement highlights that most of the FGLs do not face any significant challenges posed by language, particularly with English, in their academic journey. The narratives of the participants provide a deeper insight into this factor. In the words of one of the participants, "I am here in this institution because of my family. They have shown me a path to prosper in my life through education. I am very much motivated by my father's dream. He could not study due to financial burdens but he wishes that I could become something big in life and for this my father can do anything for me". When asked about the language barrier during their studies the same participant replied, "I am not from a family where English is spoken at home but still my schooling has shaped my English a lot. And here in this institution, whenever I face difficulty with the language, there are many digital tools which help me, whether it is converting English to Hindi, simplifying hard English to easy and understandable English, making assignments in English, and many more. The new and advanced AI tools also help me in my studies for language comprehension and understanding".The interesting point

in this factor is that technology plays a crucial role in the studies of FGLs. In the present world, when everything is being driven by cutting-edge technologies, FGLs are also taking advantage of that for their growth, advancement, and survival.

Factor 9 is Overall Satisfaction, which includes statements on overall satisfaction within higher education institutions. The moderate loading, 0.783, indicates that FGLs are generally satisfied with their educational institutions. Most of the participants agreed that the higher educational institutions in which they are currently enrolled provide them with opportunities to shape their future despite various challenges. In the words of participants, one participant shared that, "Challenges are not new to us. We have faced these a lot, but still, we are here, and this is the only place where we can dream big and make those dreams true. I am satisfied with this institution as it has given me the hope to achieve big in my life. Also, this place has given me a lot of good friends, teachers, guides, and a new way of life. And yes, there are shortcomings, but I don't think they are that big in comparison to what it has provided me with". Another participant shared, "I am a first-generation learner and I am learning a lot here. Most of the professors are very friendly, although some are not, but still, I am learning a lot. This institution has provided me with a lot of resources to use and succeed in my life. Despite being from a small village and lower caste, my friends have accepted me as I have always been a part of their lives. They are making me learn and understand a lot. I am quite satisfied with my institution as it has given wings to my dreams".

Factor 10, Financial Support includes statements on income support from the family. The high loading of 0.843 on this item highlights the crucial role of family income in supporting the cost of higher education. This financial support enables students to afford education and related expenses, significantly impacting their overall educational journey. This factor is prominently highlighted in studies by Engle and Tinto (2008), Ishitani (2006), Pascarella *et al.* (2004), Jehangir (2010), and Thayer (2000), which emphasise how family income support affects the educational paths of FGLs. The responses from the participants in this study align with this assertion. One participant shared, "I can't imagine my higher education without the financial support of my family. My family is a farming family, and the income isn't stable, but they prioritise my studies over other expenses. My parents work very hard to meet the cost of my studies, and they regularly send money for my rent, food, and college fees". Another female participant remarked, "Higher education is costly, especially for someone like me who had to move to a city for better

opportunities. In our village, many girls don't go to college because their families can't afford it. I'm lucky that my parents are willing to spend money on my education, even though they sometimes have to borrow to manage expenses. My elder brother started working part-time just to support me. That extra income made it possible for me to continue my studies". The narratives of the participants highlight that the struggle of the FGLs is mostly related to the financial income of the family. The family work very hard to overcome this. The tenth factor is supported by the sixth factor, and both support each other.

FINDING AND CONCLUSION

The study highlights multiple dimensions shaping the educational journey of FGLs in higher education. FGLs consider that higher education plays a transformative role in shaping their career and aligns with their long-term goals. It enhances their desire to contribute to their communities. Institutional culture and support services, such as coaching for competitive exams, hostel accommodations, and exposure to extracurricular activities, were instrumental in enabling students to pursue their aspirations. However, transitioning to urban educational environments presented significant challenges. Many students from rural and underprivileged backgrounds reported difficulties integrating with urban peers, facing cultural alienation, and

being subjected to derogatory remarks about their appearance and background. Such experiences impact their sense of belonging and self-confidence. Institutional support systems were highlighted as critical enablers, providing resources for academic and personal growth. Cultural programmes, sports opportunities, and affirmative action policies offered marginalised students avenues for expression and development. The narratives also revealed disparities in policy awareness among FGLs. While many demonstrated resilience and motivation to achieve their goals, limited knowledge of affirmative action policies and available support posed barriers to fully utilising institutional opportunities. Financial constraints were another recurring challenge, with participants emphasising the strain of managing tuition and living expenses despite family sacrifices. Administrative support, particularly in accessing scholarships and addressing financial concerns, played a crucial role in alleviating some of these burdens and boosting student morale. Participants expressed satisfaction with their institutions overall, acknowledging the opportunities provided despite challenges. Many credited their families for shaping their aspirations and noted the use of technological tools and digital resources in overcoming language barriers. These interconnected dimensions highlight the complex interplay of aspirations,

institutional support, adaptation, and resilience in the educational journeys of FGLs.

From the analysis of the findings of this research, some of the suggestions, particularly those from SEDGs, have been discussed further, which can be considered to create an inclusive, supportive, and enriching educational environment for all FGLs. The most important part of the suggestion is the recognition of FGLs at the entry level in higher education institutions. It is crucial to provide them the targeted interventions designed especially for them. The introduction of bridge courses tailored to meet the diverse educational backgrounds of students will help them in a smooth transition into the higher education environment. Offering specialised courses to improve academic writing skills will help FGLs overcome language barriers and excel in their studies. The mentorship programme for the FGLs could be beneficial as they need guidance about their studies at every step. For this programme, senior and understanding professors could be assigned who could guide FGLs in the right direction so that they could get through higher education without any trouble and with a lot of knowledge. As the FGLs from SEDGs often lack adequate financial support, creating a fund to assist students in purchasing laptops and other necessary learning items would be a highly encouraging move in the direction of higher education for

these learners. Also, implementing regular counselling sessions to support these students emotionally and academically.

The present study provides a deeper insight into providing targeted interventions to the FGLs, especially from the SEDGs, for their smooth transition into higher education institutions. This study is also important for educational institutions to meet the unique requirements of the FGLs. Educational institutions must create an inclusive and democratic environment where diversity is well cherished and each individual can bloom in their journey to transformation to the higher self.

Limitations and Future Implications of the Study

The present study has collected data on FGLs exclusively from the five key universities due to the limitations in time and resources. A broader inclusion of central and state universities could yield a more comprehensive conclusion. This study primarily emphasises factor analysis that represents the responses of the majority of participants, whereas the responses of the minority have been neglected. A qualitative study with a limited number of participants could provide a more nuanced comprehension of the issue. The findings of this study may provide essentials for developing targeted interventions and support mechanisms to create a more inclusive atmosphere, leading to the overall

well-being of FGLs from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education.

REFERENCES

ANTIL, P. 2021. Educational Problems of First-Generation Learners and Non-First-Generation Learners in Relation to Achievement Motivation and Home Environment [Doctoral dissertation, Panjab University]. Shodhganga. http://hdl.handle.net/10603/366105

BHAT, S.A. AND Y.D. NETRAGAONKAR. 2014. Scientific Temper and Academic Achievement of First and Non-First Generation Learners in Kashmir. *Scholarly Research Journal for Humanity Science and English Language*. 1(5), 660–669.

BHATT, S. AND A. BAHADUR. 2018. Importance of Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy for College Students. *Indian Journal of Community Psychology*. 14(2).

BLANDEN, J., M. DOEPKE AND J. STUHLER. 2023. Educational Inequality. *Handbook of the Economics of Education*, 6, 405–497. https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.hesedu.2022.11.003

BOROOAH, V., N.S. SABHARWAL, AND D. DIWAKAR. 2015. *Caste, discrimination, and exclusion in modern India*. Sage, New Delhi.

BOURDIEU, P. 1986. The Forms of Capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*. 241–258. Westport, CT: Greenwood. https://www.socialcapitalgateway.org/content/paper/bourdieu-p-1986-forms-capital-richardson-j-handbook-theory-and-research-sociology. Accessed 21 January 2025.

BRYAN, E. AND L.A. SIMMONS. 2009. Family Involvement: Impacts on Post-Secondary Educational Success for First-Generation Appalachian College Students. *Journal of College Student Development*. 50(4), 391–406. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0081

BUI, K.V.T. 2002. First-Generation College Students at a Four-Year University: Background Characteristics, Reasons for Pursuing Higher Education, and First-Year Experiences. *College Student Journal*. 36(1), 3–12.

DIMAGGIO, P. 1982. Cultural Capital and School Success: The Impact of Status Culture Participation on the Grades of US High School Students. *American Sociological Review*. 47(2), 189–201. https://doi.org/10.2307/2094962

DUBULE, V.K. 1997. A Comparative Study of Study Habits and Youth Problems Amongst Advantaged and Disadvantaged First Generation and Non-first Generation Learners. Doctoral Dissertation, Sant Gadge Baba Amravati University. Shodhganga. http://hdl.handle.net/10603/12593

Dumais, S.A. and A. Ward. 2010. Cultural Capital and First-Generation College Success. *Poetics*, 38(3), 245–265. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2009.11.011

Dunn, D.S. 2015. *The Oxford handbook of undergraduate psychology education*. Oxford University Press.

Engle, J. and V. Tinto. 2008. Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-income, First-Generation Students. Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED504448.pdf

Garcia, O. and J.A. Kleifgen. 2010. *Educating emergent bilinguals: Policies, programs, and practices for English language learners*. Teachers College Press.

Government of India, Ministry of Education. 2022. *All India Survey on Higher Education 2021–22*. https://aishe.gov.in/aishe/viewDocument.action?documentId=353

Ishitani, T.T. 2006. Studying Attrition and Degree Completion Behavior among First-Generation College Students in The United States. *The Journal of Higher Education*. 77(5), 861–885. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2006.11778947

Ives, J. and M. Castillo-Montoya. 2020. First-Generation College Students as Academic Learners: A Systematic Review. *Review of Educational Research*. 90(2), 139–178. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319899707

Iyer, G.M. 2001. A Psycho-Social Study of First-Generation Learners. Doctoral Dissertation, Goa University. Shodhganga. http://hdl.handle.net/10603/32078

Jehangir, R. 2010. *Higher Education and First-Generation Students: Cultivating Community, Voice, and Place for the New Majority*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230114678

Pascarella, E.T., C.T. Pierson, G.C. Wolniak, and P.T. Terenzini. 2004. First-Generation College Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education*. 75(3), 249–284. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2004.11772256

Rubio, L., C. Mireles, Q. Jones, and M. Mayse. 2017. Identifying Issues Surrounding First-Generation Students. *American Journal of Undergraduate Research*. 14(1). http://dx.doi.org/10.33697/ajur.2017.002

Sedwal, M. and S. Kamat. 2002. Education and Social Equity in Elementary Education. In *India Education Report*. 72–86.

Swartz, D. 1997. *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. The University of Chicago Press. https://www.gacbe.ac.in/images/E%20books/Culture%20and%20Power%20-%20The%20Sociology%20of%20Pierre%20Bourdieu%20.pdf

Thayer, P.B. 2000. Retention of Students From First Generation and Low Income Background. *Opportunity Outlook*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED446633.pdf