



Summary April 11 2022

University Forum

Equality of Opportunity

Equality of Opportunity at the University?

On the 11th of April 2022, during the first fully physical meeting since the corona crisis, the University Forum discussed equality of opportunity at the UvA. The focus is on first-generation students: students who are the first in their family to go to university. To introduce the attendees to the theme, three guest speakers attended the session:

Dr. Merlijn Karssen

Two years ago, Merlijn and colleagues at the Kohnstamm Institute conducted research into unintended unequal accessibility and selection at the UvA. Among other things, the composition of the intake compared to VWO and other universities was examined, but also the differences in study success of students from different socio-economic backgrounds. The most important results of that research were already discussed many times at the UvA when the research was published two years ago, but were presented again at the University Forum as relevant background information for the discussions. What is striking, amongst other things, is that certain groups, such as students whose parents have a relatively low income, are less successful in their study career than other students. The full report can be read [here](#).

Milio van de Kamp

Being a first-generation student himself and a sociology teacher, Milio understands all too well the obstacles you face when you are the first in your family to go to university. If you are not aware of what it means to be a first-generation student, you will quickly start to think that all your difficulties in college are all your own fault. You start to doubt yourself, suffer from fear of failure, stress and perhaps decide to stop your studies after all.

Milio calls on the UvA to support these students and to pay more attention to the obstacles faced by students for whom the university is a strange new world. If we welcome these students better, we will also notice that growing up in a non-academic background is not a weakness, but a strength.

Fiona Veraa

In line with Milio, Fiona emphasizes how important it is that everyone, but especially these students themselves, is aware of what it means to be a first-generation student. She states that most universities and schools of applied science recognize the problems, but do not get any further than uniform, non-binding programs. This is because people are afraid of coming across as stigmatizing if they ask who is or is not a first-generation student. A first-generation student herself, and fully believing in the importance of being aware of that fact, she advocates at the University Forum that we leave that fear behind and start specifically looking for these students. If we do that in the right way, it is not stigmatizing, but empowering.

Subquestions

After the introduction by the three guest speakers, the members and other attendees started working in groups on the four sub-questions below. You can read the results of these group discussions in this report.

How do we ensure that first-generation students can continue their study career with the same success as other students? How do we prevent first-generation students from dropping out in the first year of the programme?

1

Would mandatory sensitivity training for teachers, study advisers, etc. be justified? If so, what kind of sensitivity are we talking about exactly?

2

When tackling the socio-economic accessibility of the university, should we focus on uniform programs or should we work more targeted towards specific groups? If the latter is preferred, are we also in favor of first-generation student registration?

3

What role does student life play in the socio-economic accessibility of the university? Should the university aim for more accessibility, for example through study and student associations?

4

How do we ensure that first-generation students can continue their study career with the same success as other students?

How do we prevent first-generation students from dropping out in the first year of the programme?

In order to prevent first-generation students from experiencing study delay or even dropping out, it is first important to identify which obstacles they face that do not or less affect the other students. The start of a first academic study is new and exciting for everyone, but it makes a lot of difference whether or not you can turn to your family for help. If there is no one in your family who has studied at university, then you have to figure everything out yourself. How do you study for an exam? How do you write an essay? Or at least, that's the feeling many first-generation students get. After all, most teachers and fellow students will be willing to explain things without judgment, but because so many things are already self-evident to them, the initiative for this exchange of information will lie with the first generation student. And he or she doesn't always feel the space for that. First-generation students start to doubt themselves because they don't know things that seem self-evident to everyone around them. Some even get the feeling that university is apparently not for them and switch to HBO. Those who stay will take a long time to acclimate, but that time is curtailed by the BSA.

What can we do about it? Many more students are first-generation students than we think, so for those students it might help to speak to more other first-generation students and discover that what they encounter is not their fault but is felt that way by many more students. If it is necessary to register who is a first-generation student, then we should do that. If we do this in the right way, it really doesn't have to come across as stigmatizing. On the contrary: the label 'first-generation student' can help them to explain their experiences. It is important to pay attention to this as soon as possible, preferably before the first academic year starts.

There are already several course-specific and university-wide programs (such as Get Ready) aimed at preparing first-generation students. Above all, let's expand it, promote it more fanatically and offer it in a targeted manner (as soon as we can see through better registration who exactly is first-generation student). It can be even earlier, by already paying attention to the theme during school visits. Let them know that everyone is welcome and that we can offer the right support to everyone for whom the university is a new world.

We will also have to explain more clearly about career prospects at the university. In contrast to most MBO and HBO courses, many university courses do not focus on a specific profession. It is also not the case that you become a scientist per se. How does that work? Once first-generation students have reached the UvA, leniency in applying the BSA would give them more time to familiarize themselves with academic customs. We must not lose sight of them. Self-reliance in finding the right help is not self-evident. More tailor-made support and a more targeted offering could go a long way.

Not all of this has to come from teachers and study advisors. A mentoring program that pairs older students with freshmen could add value to all students, and first-generation students in particular when we pair them with older first-generation students.

All these possible programs are not just about studying itself. Students who move out of their homes for the first time without extensive support from their parents have to figure out things like work, insurance, room rent, textbooks, etc. themselves. That can be overwhelming and stressful. Older students or the university may also be able to offer help.

Would mandatory sensitivity training for teachers, study advisers, etc. be justified? If so, what kind of sensitivity are we talking about exactly?

Opinions were divided on whether sensitivity training should be mandatory. An alternative to making separate training courses mandatory is to incorporate the content of those training courses into existing mandatory and optional training programs for teachers and study advisers. We are mainly talking about the BKO, but also induction processes for new colleagues. If there are signs that a specific employee clearly falls short in terms of sensitivity, it should be possible to make training mandatory, but there was no agreement about obligation for everyone.

The follow-up question is what the content of such training would be. What certainly deserves attention is awareness of your position as a role model. What does that do to students and how do you deal with it wisely? In addition, it is important that teachers are aware of the risk of stereotypes. Without that awareness, you as a teacher can quickly, often unintentionally, hurt or exclude students.

Finally, in line with the first sub-question, it would be of great help if more teachers realize that much of what they take for granted can be completely unknown to – especially – first-generation students. Paying attention to that could mean a lot for these students.

More generally, it is important that teachers develop sensitivity to the different background-specific characteristics of students and colleagues, so that we can use that awareness to make our education more inclusive instead of only the ‘normal student’ recognizing themselves in the university culture. It is important to mention that the problem is not so much in the university culture itself, but mainly in the self-evidence with which we deal with that culture, which makes it very difficult for first-generation students to make that culture their own.

**When tackling the socio-economic accessibility of the university, should we focus on uniform programs or should we work more targeted towards specific groups?
If the latter is preferred, are we also in favor of first-generation student registration?**

A target group-oriented approach would undoubtedly be more effective, but it is not immediately clear how this should take shape. Even if you manage to overcome stigmatization with a positive approach, registration remains complicated. Registering is not the only way to work more target-oriented. By using seniors, alumni and a more extensive tutoring system, we can lower the barriers for first-generation students. By also making it clearer for whom exactly which programs are intended, we can reach more first-generation students. At the moment, there are still major differences between study programs in what they offer for these students.

Ultimately, the UvA is much further away for new students than their own study program, so there should be clear and accessible points of contact, especially within the study program itself. Especially the tutor should be one. One way to create a clear point of contact, a safety net and a relatively easy environment for first-generation students is to work with a kind of 'core class', especially in the first year; a working group whose composition remains the same for the various courses of the first year. This way we make it easier to acclimatize.

Finally, we will therefore have to improve existing uniform programs with first-generation students in mind and also add new target group-specific programs where they are currently missing.

What role does student life play in the socio-economic accessibility of the university?

Should the university aim for more accessibility, for example through study and student associations?

It is important to look at student life, because it is a serious factor in creating a 'home feeling'. The feeling of being welcome and of belonging somewhere is an important precondition for a pleasant student life and can also translate into greater study success. On the other hand, the lack of such an environment can greatly enhance the feeling that many first-generation students already had to deal with – not quite belonging in the university world.

Student life is largely concentrated in the many associations. If you are not familiar with this and you miss the boat at the start of the academic year, this will remain a foreign world for you. The UvA should expand the range, awareness and targeting of programs for first-generation students. The Get Ready program is a good start, but it is not reaching everyone yet. Let us especially learn from successful programme-specific programs (such as Baanbrekers at ISW, brought to the attention by guest speaker Milio van de Kamp) and translate these into as many other programs as possible. These programs should pay full attention to how student life works, which associations there are, whether or not that is something for you and how to register.

It would help if the existing associations themselves also wanted to draw attention to these programs and would pay attention to socio-economic accessibility themselves. The UvA can encourage this by supplying the correct information and by entering into discussions with the associations about this, but without coercion. Another idea is to set up a new student association especially for first-generation students. Smaller scale is also possible, for example in the form of a monthly meeting.

Such measures are especially of added value because they bring first-generation students into contact with fellow sufferers in order to strengthen the feeling of home and to show them that what they encounter is not their own fault.



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