

Title:

First Generation Students: Navigating University and Developing a Career

LSE Changemakers

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Recommendations

Help Navigating What's On Offer

- Better help is needed to navigate the wealth of talks, meetings and opportunities offered by the LSE Careers, departments and others.
- I recommend the creation of an **LSE-wide** infographic which provides students with an overview. It should show which types of events and opportunities that students can expect from where. The infographic should be marketed across campus at the start of each academic year

Reduce Barriers to Individualised Help

- FG students have less experience discussing their careers outside their social circle and are less used to discussing these concerns with 'professionals'
- I recommend creating a video of what a Careers Discussion could look like to reduce anxiety and help students understand and make the most out of such opportunities.
- Additionally, encouraging follow-up meetings with the same consultant might help students who find it difficult to retell their stories to engage more.

Additionally: Consider and Examine the Adverse Pressures from Career Social Media

- Students with fewer sources of career advice might be more likely to rely on social media for career inspiration and information. This might lead to a skewed picture of what career options are available among these students compared to their peers who have wider networks to gather information from.
- Both the positive and negative impacts of career social media for students' career building should be considered when designing services.

Introduction

First-generation students are a group which tends to be difficult to define. Some argue that it no longer is an important consideration in academic evaluation, but studies on social mobility suggest that parental educational level has a pervasive effect on expected earnings and socio-economic status for the next generation.

Being the first in my family to attend university, campus life and the myriad of opportunities was uncharted territory for me and the learning curve was steep. Observing friends with similar family backgrounds to my own grapple with their careers and all the non-academic tenets of university life inspired this project. I have sought to investigate how first generation (FG) status impacts how this group makes use of the non-academic opportunities offered at the university and how they pursue career development. First generation spans all students whose parents have not completed higher education. This group is worthy of investigation not despite its size but rather because of it. Intersecting with many other identities, such as minority backgrounds and low income, greater awareness about the needs of FG students can help us create a more inclusive and welcoming university experience for many groups.

To narrow down my project, I have chosen to focus on the Economics and Government departments. As they are two large departments, they not only lend large enough sample sizes, but offer different profiles, for example, in terms of International to Home students, which should yield additional robustness to my findings.

Literature in Brief

While the academic experience of FG students has been covered extensively, less research has been dedicated to their career development at university and how they navigate non-academic aspects of the university experience. While many FG students attend university with the goal of getting a good job, they are often more passive in researching opportunities than second generation students. Parents of FG students often encourage studying hard but may not be familiar and understand the other aspects of student life that also contribute to the value of the degree, such as networking with students and potential employers and gaining important non-academic skills which help students reach their career related goals (Roksa et al., 2018). Limited social networks of professionals with 'desirable' careers also make it harder to understand one's career options (Tate et al., 2015). They also exhibit low familiarity with career services offered by universities and tend to hold leading society positions, study abroad or do internships at lower rates (Pasero 2018; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020). This often leads to an excessive reliance on online resources instead (Pasero, 2018). It is therefore critical to make sure that this group is able to make informed choices and understand what opportunities are on offer so that they have the same chances to benefit from non-academic aspects of campus life as their peers from academic family traditions.

Methodology

This research project has sought to describe the challenges that first generation university students meet in developing their career paths. To meet this research question, this research project has made use of several methodologies to try and gain a first understanding of first-generation LSE students and their career development during their time at university: Firstly, by conducting a survey among current undergraduates, and secondly by conducting interviews and finally, by analysing participation statistics from the LSE Career Services.

Survey

The survey covered three core areas. In the first part, respondents were asked about their previous experiences and their background. In the second part, interviewees were asked about their habits surrounding career development, for example, who they tend to discuss career advice with, and how much they value these sources. Finally, they were asked about their attitudes in a range of different questions designed to assess confidence. A total of 176 responses were recorded. To recruit more first-generation participants, I went out with targeted posters. Despite these efforts, I ended up only reaching out to 23 first-generation students. Although too few to generalize about all first-gen students, it gives a first picture into them as a group and give ideas for further research.

Interviews

For the interviews, I probed deeper into the findings from the survey. As well as asking them about their experiences, I asked respondents what they thought about some of the differences I found between first generation students and others. The interviews lasted 30-45 minutes. Also here did I struggled to recruit participants. Out of 15 first-generation students who expressed interest in the survey, only 3 agreed to the interview and no further interviewees were sought due to time constraints.

LSE Data

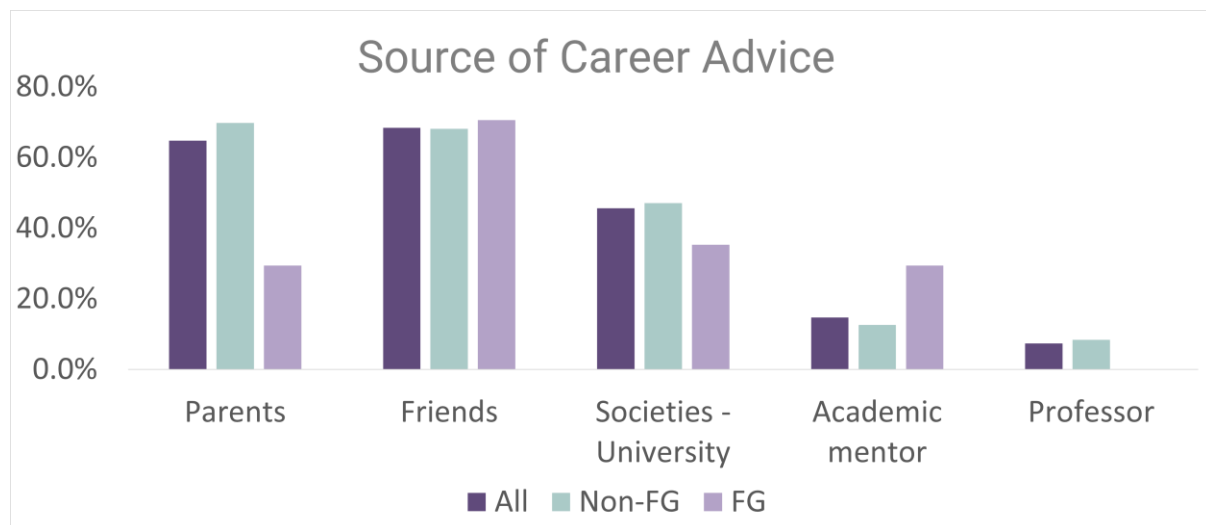
Finally, I retrieved data from LSE Careers on participation in their events. Unfortunately, the data does not distinguish between different types of events but merely gives a count of overall participation. Spanning several cohorts, I analysed the participation by first-generation students relative to their peers. The students' parental data is often incomplete and unreliable as it is self-disclosed. Around 12259 out of 17,000 student-year contained responses to the question of parental educational status. Removing 'Don't know' and 'Prefer not to say' responses, my LSE sample spanned 8203 student-years whereof half were first generation students. This means that this group reports to a much higher extent than other students, as research shows that the level of first-generation students at undergraduate level is substantially higher. Additionally, first generation students might attach more weight to their background than do students whose family has an academic tradition and therefore be more likely to fill out this information. This may bias results towards zero.

Results

Network & Advice

For the statement “I know one or more professionals who have a career I aspire to” the response pattern was similar among the two groups with around 20% in both groups choosing either Disagree or Strongly Disagree while 70% agreed with the statement.

Figure 1: Previous sources of career advice by parental educational status



When asked to rank what sources they had previously received career advice from, nearly 70% of students whose parents had gone to university reported receiving advice from them, compared to less than 30% of first-generation students. One interviewee explains that rather than seeking advice, discussing career with parents serves the purpose of emotional support: “I mean, I speak to them about [my career], but I give them my decisions, and I present my thought process”. Two interviewees explained that their parents tried to give advice, but that it is not helpful as they do not understand the formalities surrounding the academic and job application procedures.

Both non-FG and FG students reported friends constitute a source of career advice. But digging beneath the surface, it quickly becomes apparent that the importance placed on this advice differs substantially between these groups. When asked to rank the helpfulness of the advice received, first generation students ranked this advice as much more helpful than non FG-students. The interviews lent further weight to this finding, indicating that first generation students often listen into what others are doing to understand the codes of how to break into a sector or what learn what firms might present job opportunities.

The internet often came up as an important source of information for both learning about elite institutions, extra-curriculars and job opportunities. One interviewee openly spoke about the internet as a key vehicle that resulted in leaving their hometown and coming to London:

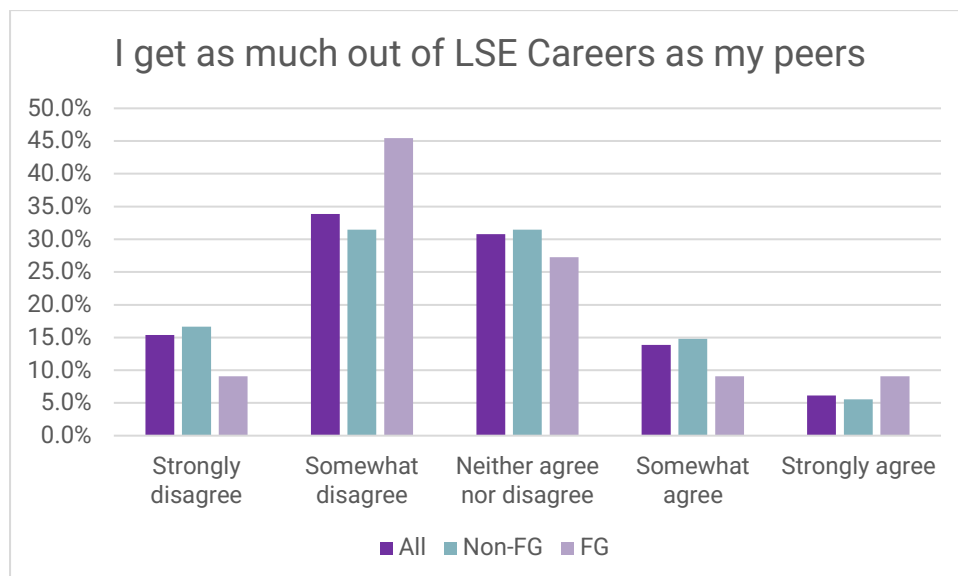
And I think the internet is like, the only reason if I had to pinpoint one reason why I'm here, it would be the internet and social media. I've always been on the internet on computers, ever since I was like three and I had Facebook since I was eight. [...] Like I've been out there ever since it all started and that's how I also remember the first event that got me into all these activities and things.

For another interviewee, LinkedIn and other social media was more directly used as a source of career information. They explained that friends' profiles were a critical source of information to learn about career trajectories generally as well as specific opportunities. Lacking other sources of advice, the internet becomes incredibly important.

Navigating Career Offering at University

In the survey, first generation students and other students tended to share perceptions of how much they get out of LSE Careers.

Figure 2: Agreement with Statement Perception of Use LSE Careers



However, in the interview, challenges surfaced. Interviewees indicated they found it difficult to navigate the offer of activities from the school. Several felt that there was insufficient information offered to first year students to help them understand the opportunities offered by the university and how they were structured. This led to overwhelm for one student:

Yeah, I mean, you didn't know because it first year did not give a lot of information. It was very divided because there's many different departments. Maybe you get something from the school, from LSE events, from LSE careers or like even my department or whatever, giving a different information. They have different portals that you can look at. [...] I didn't know what to do with it.

Not being familiar and participating in the first year led to them feeling behind compared to their peers who might be more familiar with the offering of the university. For some, not feeling initiated into this world has led to a sense of having missed out on essential career steps. This

was also particularly pronounced for one interviewee who had to attend university online due to the pandemic:

'I didn't know there was stuff like spring week at the end of last summer. So I didn't learn all those until I came in my second year and I realised that I missed a lot on those stuff. Yeah, yeah. So part of, I guess, when you're trying to make applications and trying to find a job or internship, but it didn't really work out. I don't know maybe because of my lack of experience or knowledge in the industry. Because I missed out a year before.'

LSE Careers: Participation & Engagement

Asking students whether they felt LSE had relevant career opportunities it appears that first generation students tend to be slightly more positive in their attitude towards the selection of activities than their non-FG peers. Despite this fact, there is a consistent if not statistically significant trend in LSE Careers Data showing that first-generation students participate less with LSE Careers than do students whose parents have attended university (see Figure 4). This trend can be observed across both the government and economics department but is particularly strong within the latter. In government department, first generation students miss out on 1.5 events compared to their peers over the course of their bachelor and in the economics department it is 1.6.

Figure 3: Agreement with Statement about Perception of Usefulness by Group

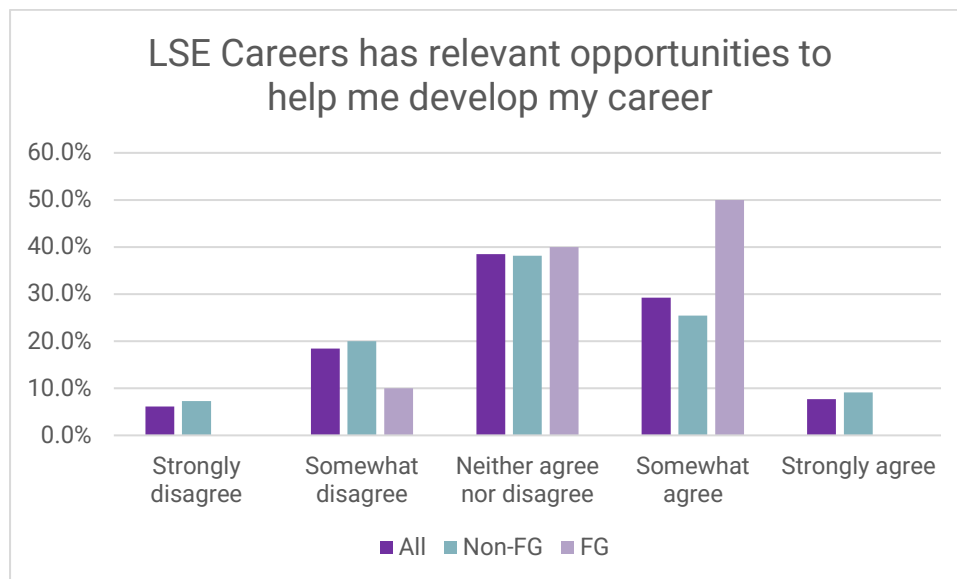


Figure 4: Rates of Participation by Group and Department

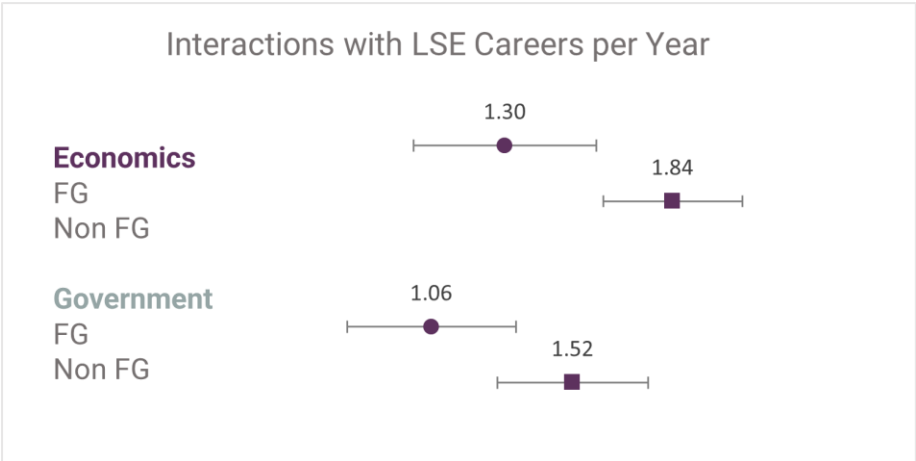


Figure 5: Participation Across Time among Government Student

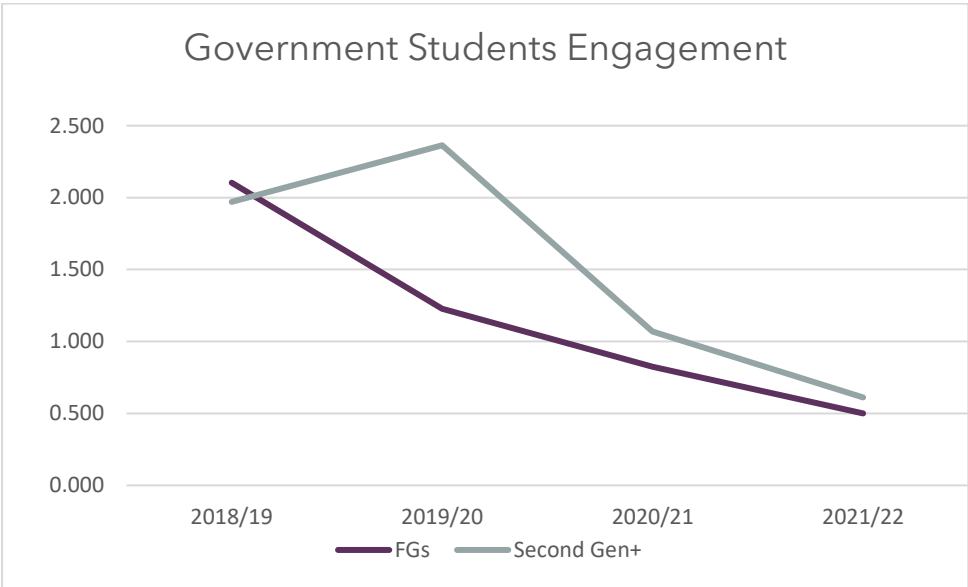
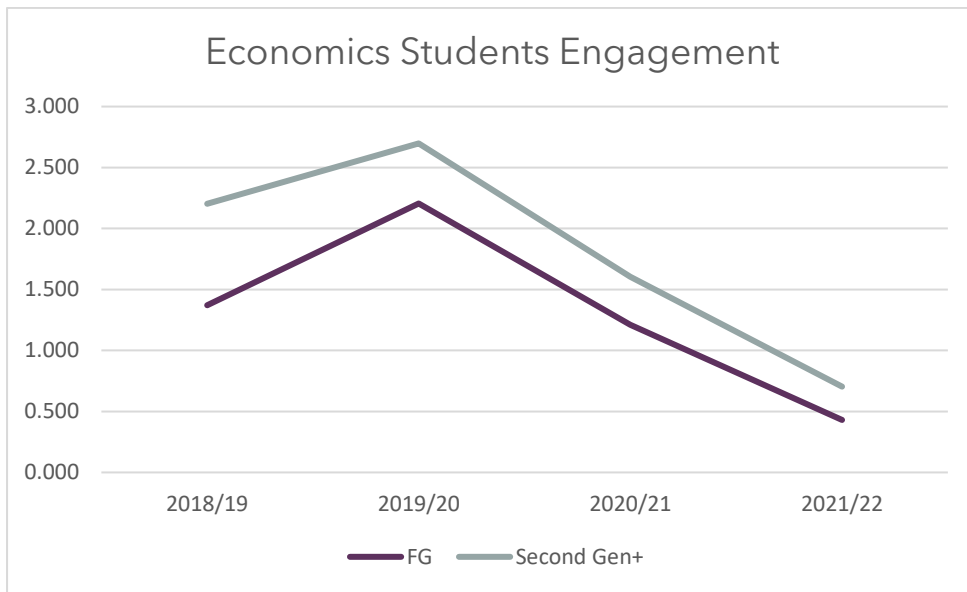


Figure 6: Participation Across Time among Economics Students



Analysing the data across years shows that participation has declined among both groups and across both departments since 2018/19, likely due to the covid-19 pandemic. There is however not enough observations to analyse whether the effect is caused by any particular year group. It is however notable that the decline among FG students within the government department is sharper than among non-FG peers. As participation is likely expected to recover, the rates should be closely monitored to ensure equal access to career development opportunities.

One-to-One Meetings

My data suggests that first generation students book fewer one-to-one meetings than do non-FG students. Less than 10% had attended several one-to-one meetings compared to over 20% of non-FG students in my survey, suggesting that FG students are less likely to book repeated personal meetings with career services.¹ In the interviews I probed into why this is. Two interviewees reported feeling like the meetings were both too short and perceived a lack of continuity: 'I thought it is too short of a session to get to know the culture and to communicate the problems. [...] I find it quite general..' In other words, they felt it was not worth it to explain their situation over again to a new careers consultant. Not being used to interacting with career professionals and 'networking' might explain these differences.

Table 1: Number of One-to-One Career Appointments Attended

	Non-FG	FG
One	28.6%	45.5%
Two or more	23.2%	9.1%
None	48.2%	45.5%

¹ It should be noted that these results are neither statistically significant nor balanced sample per year of study but have been used as an indicator given that LSE Career data does not specify appointment type

Discussion & Conclusion

This Changemakers project has provided a first look into the differences between first generation students and non-FG students at the LSE. One key finding concerns the general participation rates among the two groups. Across the two departments I examined, FG students participate a lot less. Across the course of a three-year bachelor, FG students might lose out on as much as 1.5 engagements on average. This low participation with LSE Careers is concerning, as the literature suggests that FG students are also less engaged in other types of career building activities, such as leadership positions in societies (Tate et al, 2015).

First generation students are capable. Many are good researchers and are in a habit of actively finding out about opportunities through various channels. For example, FG students tend to rely on friends a lot for career inspiration and advice. Particularly friends 'who know the codes'. While both students groups discuss career with friends, the critical difference is that for FG students, this source is more important and influential. Similarly, the internet also surfaced as a key vehicle of learning about opportunities and career trajectories. One reported that friends' LinkedIn profiles was a main source of career inspiration. While it is fantastic that social media can increase the visibility and accessibility of positions and opportunities, there is a risk that only one type of career path and experiences are highlighted. Straightforward career paths often shine on LinkedIn, but there can be many paths that lead to the dream job. Relying on friends and curated profiles might give an unrepresentative picture which lead to an unnecessarily narrow conception of what a great career should look like.

Another key finding concerns the engagement in one-to-one meetings. Both the survey results and the interviews suggest that first generation students struggle to engage with consultants. Perceiving the meetings as impersonal and too short and therefore not worth it. Literature suggests that not being used to speak about oneself and verbalise thoughts about career in such a transactional setting might be underlying mechanisms. Setting out expectations for meetings, being aware of these differences in culture and encouraging follow-up meetings might be ways to bridge these gaps and encourage more and better participation for this group, and other groups who find this type of interaction challenging.

This Changemakers project has provided a first look into first-generation students' career development opportunities. While some have argued that this group is too large to be paid attention to, this report has shown that the opposite is true: This group is worthy of investigation not despite its size but rather because of it. Intersecting with many other identities, such as minority backgrounds and low income, greater awareness about the needs of FG students can help us create a more inclusive and welcoming university experience for many groups at our campus.

References

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