



Lost in transition? A case study of the first-year experience of students from underrepresented groups or disadvantaged backgrounds at a Flemish university of applied sciences

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the transitional experiences and first-year challenges of underrepresented students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education (HE) at a Flemish university of applied sciences. Through qualitative methods and thematic analysis, this study identifies critical barriers and enablers during the transition to and first year of HE. The research reveals key challenges related to academic integration, social integration, mental well-being, student participation and specific needs. Based on these insights, three key recommendations are proposed: (1) providing clear, timely and student-centred information; (2) facilitating meaningful connection among students and staff; and (3) addressing students' specific challenges and institutional inequities. These strategies aim to enhance support for students from underrepresented groups or disadvantaged backgrounds and promote a more equitable learning experience.

Keywords: transition, retention, first year, academic integration, social integration, wellbeing, inclusion in higher education, underrepresented students, access, social inclusion, widening participation, higher education, disadvantaged backgrounds

Introduction

Higher education (HE) has experienced massification and diversification due to various factors, including top-down government policies, internationalization, and shifts toward lifelong learning (Guri-Rosenblit et al., 2007). This led to an influx of students from underrepresented groups—those whose participation in higher education remains comparatively low—and students from disadvantaged backgrounds – whose socio-economic, cultural, or educational circumstances systematically hinder their opportunities for success in higher education. The European Union (EU) has long emphasized inclusion and diversity in education as well, aiming that the student population of a HE institution should reflect the social context it serves (EHEA, 2007).

However, young people from underrepresented groups or disadvantaged backgrounds still face multiple challenges in accessing HE (UNESCO, 2020). Furthermore, increased participation from students from underrepresented groups or disadvantaged backgrounds does not automatically mean these students have the same success rate. In the EU, students with low socio-economic status, minority ethnic students,

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part-time students, and male students are more likely, on average, to leave HE without qualifications (Quinn, 2013).

This inequality has negative consequences on students, institutions and society. First, inequality negatively impacts students. Academic failure can have adverse psychological effects, such as a loss of motivation or self-confidence, feelings of loss, and disappointment (Skrbinjek et al., 2024; van Herpen, 2019) or may result in increased financial costs (van Herpen, 2019). Furthermore, students who leave HE without a degree are generally worse off financially (OECD, 2018). Secondly, HE institutions may experience a negative financial impact due to student dropouts or extended study times (De Boer et al., 2015; Hillman et al., 2014; Marginson, 2016). Third, political and cultural participation in society is at risk due to inequality, as HE aims to prepare students to become critical citizens who actively participate in public life and democracy (Consuegra & Cincinnato, 2020; Vlaamse Onderwijsraad, 2018). Additionally, social and economic inequality in HE can contribute to an unequal distribution of economic prosperity in society (Consuegra & Cincinnato, 2020).

A pivotal yet challenging period is the transition into HE (Gale & Parker, 2012; Harvey et al., 2006, Krause, 2006). This period is marked by complex challenges encompassing external obstacles centred on logistical, organisational and cultural aspects of this new environment, and internal obstacles centred on one's psychosocial capacity to navigate it healthily (Chipchase et al., 2017; Cole, 2017; Denny et al., 2015; Kahu & Nelson, 2017). Students are expected to choose the right degree programme, build new relationships, develop confidence in their academic capabilities and meet the demands of HE (Barefoot, 2008; Gale & Parker, 2012; Harvey et al., 2006; Tinto, 2012).

Moreover, students from underrepresented groups or disadvantaged backgrounds often encounter additional barriers that can further complicate the transition to HE. They may face financial constraints, cultural and language differences, experiences of discrimination and stereotyping, limited support or understanding from academic staff, a lack of mentorship, and the need to balance academic responsibilities with other life commitments (Belando-Montoro et al., 2022).

It is essential to improve the retention and success of students from underrepresented groups or disadvantaged backgrounds, for these students, HE institutions, and society as a whole.

This research reports on the results of the Erasmus+ project 'Supporting Under-Represented First Years' funded by the EU. The project sought to improve participation and success rates of students from underrepresented groups or disadvantaged backgrounds by making the transition into HE and support systems more inclusive. This project explored the needs of students from underrepresented groups or disadvantaged backgrounds and how to create a more inclusive HE experience for all students. Guided by the principle of "nothing about us, without us", students were invited to share their insights through interviews and focus groups.

This article presents the research findings from Artevelde University of Applied Sciences in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The aim of this study was to gain in-depth insight into the specific challenges, needs, and support experiences of students from underrepresented groups or disadvantaged backgrounds during their transition into HE and throughout their first year in order to create a more inclusive educational environment.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted. The value of qualitative research lies in its ability to provide answers to theoretical questions and deepen our understanding of specific phenomena or contexts (Mortelmans, 2009). This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of students' lived realities.

Data collection

Participant recruitment focused on students from underrepresented groups or from disadvantaged backgrounds and occurred through various methods. Posters and flyers were distributed, a call for participation was posted on the university of applied science's internal communication system, and repeated announcements were made in the student newsletter, on screens across campuses, and on the social media pages of the Office of Student Services. Students in existing support networks and services were also approached personally via email and phone. For this we followed internal processes in line with GDPR. The communication focused on inclusivity and referenced different identities.

Once a student expressed interest, they received information and an invitation by email and were followed up via telephone. To be included, students had to be registered in our institution in academic year 2023-2024 (n=15473) and had to volunteer to participate. Any student who identified as relevant or interested in this topic could participate.

To ensure maximum inclusivity, students were given the option to participate through a self-administered online questionnaire, in a semi-structured focus group or in an interview, either offline or online.

In the questionnaire, focus groups and interview, the interviewer followed the student journey. Students were asked to reflect on various moments in their academic journey, from pre-entry to end of the first year, through a statement with a 6-point Likert scale ('strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree') and a series of in-depth questions. First, the period before the start of their studies was discussed, including the enrolment process. Second, students reflected on the transition to their first year. The third part of the discussions focused on their experiences throughout the entire first year. Fourth, the topic of inclusion was addressed. Finally, students were invited to look at the future of the existing support services.

Sample Size and Participant Characteristics

The sample size is fifty students (n=50) belonging to one or more different underrepresented groups or originating from one or more disadvantaged backgrounds, as shown in Table 1. These participants participated in eight focus groups of up to 2 hours (n=8) and twenty-two individual interviews of up to an hour (n=22). The focus groups and interviews were conducted live as well as online. In these, the interviewer (first author) shared her position as a young, white, neurodivergent, queer researcher dealing with chronic pain as participants indicated they felt more comfortable when a staff member was also willing to share something about themselves, and that it was important to be able to recognize themselves in others.

A significant number of these students live at the intersection of multiple identities (n=30). Thus, it is important to view these results through an intersectional lens. Intersectionality examines how categories such as racial and ethnic background, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, disability, and age intertwine and mutually shape each other and provides a framework for understanding and explaining the complexity of the world, individuals, and their experiences (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 2017).

Table 1 Number of Participants per Group or Background

Underrepresented group/disadvantaged background	Number of participants
Neurodivergent students	21
Students belonging to an ethnic-cultural minority	13
Students experiencing mental health issues	12
Students with a physical disability	11
Mature students	10
Multilingual students	9
Students with caregiving responsibilities	8
Students whose studies are funded by the Flemish employment and vocational training service (VDAB)	7
Students who are balancing work and study	4
LGBTQIA+ students	4
Male students in a predominately female study programme	4
First-generation (i.e. pioneer) students	1
Care leaver students	1

Although the project focuses on students from under-represented groups, three students reacted to the targeted call, but did not identify themselves as such. They were allowed to partake due to their affinity with the subject at hand and shared similar experiences. Furthermore, their inclusion can help reach the broader aim of improving support for all students and fostering a more inclusive educational environment.

Data Analysis

No data was obtained through the self-administered online questionnaire: not one student opted to participate through this format. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed manually. Respondent names were replaced by pseudonyms and information that could lead to the identification of participants, such as other names and/or specific locations, were omitted from the transcripts.

Upon obtaining written informed consent, the transcriptions of the interviews and focus groups were analysed via NVivo by the first author, using a thematic analysis (Lumivero, n.d.). A semantic approach was used to reduce the subjectivity of the researcher's judgment, and because the interest of this study is more based on people's stated experiences, rather than their assumptions. In our approach to qualitative research taken in this research, sampling aimed for 'saturation'—the point at which additional interviews no longer yield new information—over large sample sizes (Cambré & Waeye, 2001). Interviews and focus groups were processed at the earliest opportunity after completion and in the order of data collection. Saturation was reached after conducting eight focus groups (n=8) and twenty-two individual interviews (n=22).

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To find the themes, the following steps were taken:

1. The data were transcribed manually, and, during this process, initial notes or remarks were written down by the researcher;
2. Initial codes were generated using NVivo software. During this step, overarching codes were assigned deductively based on the research questions. These included for example “transition to HE”, “supporting factors during first year”, “needs”, “challenges”;
3. Descriptive codes were assigned by the researcher inductively from the data to segments that were relevant to the research topic;
4. The researchers sought connections between codes and codes were sorted into potential themes;
5. Themes were reviewed by reading through the data segments within one theme to verify whether they formed a coherent pattern, and the dataset was considered as a whole to make sure the themes accurately represented the data;
6. The themes that were supported by the most data segments were selected to be included in the results.

Some themes could be linked to one of the reflection statements. For these, an average level of agreement was calculated based on the numerical value of the Likert scale (From ‘Strongly agree’ = 6 to ‘Strongly disagree’ = 1). After calculating the average numerical value, the result was converted back to a non-numerical value.

Results

The results are presented chronologically starting from the period before entering HE up to the end of the first year. The main challenges, needs, and supportive factors mentioned by students will be discussed, illustrated with quotes (own translation to English). The sections on transition to and first year in higher education additionally focus on the themes academic integration, social integration, mental well-being and challenges related to their specific situation and needs.

Pre-entry

The participants expressed agreement with the statement: “It was easy for me to decide to enrol in HE,” with an average of 4.9/6 on the Likert scale. The first choice participants faced was whether to continue their education after secondary education. For many students, enrolling in HE was seen as a logical next step. They made this choice to obtain a HE degree, fulfil their dreams, and enhance their job prospects.

I was in a coma. When I woke up, I asked myself what impact I had already had on humanity. I was not happy with the answer and wanted to change that. - Tom

However, the decision to pursue HE was not evident for everyone. Several participants expressed concerns about the difficulty of the studies. This was particularly relevant for those with a migration background who mentioned being worried about the language barrier. Furthermore, some faced challenges due to a lack of support from their social environment. A few participants reported that family members, friends, or staff

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did not support their decision. In some cases this lack of support was linked to preconceptions about the abilities of disabled or neurodivergent people.

I was advised to enrol for just half a semester because of my learning disability. The woman who enrolled me didn't really believe in me. That was unfortunate. - Louise

The second choice participants faced was choosing an educational institution. Participants primarily chose the university of applied sciences for its diverse range of study programs. Some students based their decision on the availability of support options, such as student services and reasonable accommodations for students with specific needs. Other contributing factors for choosing the university of applied sciences included the personal approach of the institution and the location of its campuses.

During that period, I attended two information days. I felt a warm atmosphere and felt welcomed. There were teachers who recognized me the second time I came. I had the impression I would receive good guidance. - Caroline

Next, choosing a study program proved to be a significant hurdle. Many indicated that they had sought information during an information day, where they had the opportunity to meet with and ask questions to staff. Additionally, some participants visited a Study and Information Day, where they felt supported in the decision-making process. Besides the staff participants could meet during these events, they mentioned receiving guidance from friends, acquaintances, and staff from their previous educational institution.

Many people around me already knew what they wanted to study, but I only figured it out during the summer holidays. There were so many options that it was overwhelming for me. Because of this, I pushed it aside since there was no time pressure yet. It was a pity because at that moment, you wish you already knew. I just couldn't figure it out. On top of that you receive hundreds of brochures, but I didn't look at them. It was all just way too much. - Marie

Enrolment

For most participants, the enrolment process in HE went smoothly. However, the participants who did encounter obstacles primarily reported the high number of administrative tasks and not knowing the subsequent steps in the enrolment process.

Transition to HE

The participants somewhat agreed with the statement: 'The transition to higher education was easy for me', with an average of 4.3/6 on the Likert scale and agreed with the statement: 'The actual start of higher education was easy for me,' with an average of 4.6/6 on the Likert scale. Follow-up questions showed that participants experienced challenges and supporting factors during their transition to HE regarding (1) academic integration, (2) social integration, and (3) mental well-being. Additionally, students reported (4) challenges related to their specific situation and needs.

Most challenges that emerged were related to (1) academic integration. Participants particularly struggled with planning, class schedules and adjusting to a new routine. Another recurring challenge was the lack of information regarding the first few days as well as the amount of new information. Many participants mentioned that the large amount of information presented in a short period was overwhelming, and that they had trouble remembering much of it. Furthermore, students encountered problems with both online

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and offline navigation. They had difficulty becoming familiar with the institution's online platforms and found it challenging to locate the right classroom on campus.

In the first few weeks, all the deadlines for every course were communicated. It was a package from here to Tokyo. Maybe it would be better not to say all of this at once, so it's spread out a bit more. I had to try to organize that chaos. I was really stressed about it... - Cynthia

Supporting factors mentioned included receiving adequate information during the first days or weeks, being familiar with the campus thanks to a previous tour or visit, and prior HE experience.

Secondly, participants also reported challenges related to (2) social integration. Several participants mentioned that they found it difficult to connect with others or were worried about meeting new people. Participants who said the transition went smoothly often cited reasons such as finding it easy to connect with peers and staff and having plenty of opportunities to get to know each other better.

I found it easy to get into the flow because I already had friends in the program. This made me more motivated to attend classes. It was great because I can sometimes feel nervous about doing things alone. I prefer to be surrounded by others. - Davide

Thirdly, several participants indicated that they faced (3) mental health challenges during their first days and weeks at the university of applied sciences. Stress was mentioned most frequently.

A lot of attention was given to the first two days. On the first day, we each got a sticker with our name and class, and then they came to collect us as a group. It was a bit scary at first. – Marie

Finally, the conversations revealed that certain groups of participants faced (4) obstacles related to their unique circumstances and needs. The first group consisted of participants who started later in the academic year. They reported that missing out on the information provided during the first week, as well as catching up on missed classes, presented significant challenges. A second group included older students who had returned to education after a considerable time. Some of them had been out of an educational setting for years, making the transition to HE more difficult. The digitalization of the educational system further contributed to these challenges. A third group included participants with a migration background. These students primarily identified language as a major obstacle. The key supporting factor was good guidance by student support staff and lecturers.

[...] everything was new: the people, the language... I took a Dutch course for two or three years, but this was completely different. Most people were new students from high school, so I felt a bit old. I also didn't fully understand everything about what we were going to do during the first week/day. I didn't quite understand the teachers. This was difficult. - Yassine

First Year

Participants described facing various challenges, needs, and supportive factors during their first year, particularly in relation to (1) academic integration, (2) social integration and (3) mental well-being. In addition, some students reported (4) specific challenges linked to their specific situations. This included students who started HE during the COVID-19 pandemic, LGBTQIA+ students, and students with a migration background. These students also offered suggestions for improving the material world to make HE more inclusive and accessible.

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On (1) academic challenges, participants mentioned that expectations regarding exams, retakes and internships are often unclear. Second, they struggled to balance their studies with other responsibilities.. Third, the coursework is frequently experienced as too difficult, with many students also pointing to a high workload.

I sometimes get really frustrated with the small assignments we have to complete. I think, “What on earth are we doing this for?” We already have so much to study. I’m also juggling this with my family, and then I still have to find time for pointless tasks. – Pieter

In response to these challenges, participants expressed a need for more, clear, and accurate information, e.g. about the academic calendar and class schedule. Additionally, many participants indicated the benefit of recorded lectures and online alternatives. Those who felt they had made the right study choice highlighted several valuable aspects of their program, such as learning in small groups, a flexible or part-time curriculum, and the availability of recorded lectures.

On (2) social integration, the participants agreed with the statement: ‘I felt well-surrounded throughout my first year,’ with an average of 4.8/6 on the Likert scale. However, several participants reported feeling a lack of connection with their peers during this period. They cited reasons such as age and mindset differences, as well as language barriers and skin colour.

Because of the language, I was afraid to talk to people. I didn’t dare approach them because they spoke very differently. I was worried they would find my language or accent strange. I was too scared to speak. It was hard to get to know people that way. – Amir

Participants expressed a strong need for peer support, opportunities to learn from each other, and more informal online and offline gatherings. Connecting with peers from similar groups appears crucial for students from underrepresented groups or disadvantaged backgrounds.

Because of my queer identity, I felt like a bit of an outsider, as the university seemed fairly conservative. When I started, I didn’t really feel there was a safe space where I could go to chat or make friends. – Pati

Participants who felt well supported emphasized the importance of feeling connected to fellow students. They often mentioned valuing the personal approach and accessibility of staff.

Related to (3) mental well-being, participants somewhat agreed with the statement: ‘I felt good throughout my first year,’ with an average of 3.6/6 on the Likert scale. Stress was frequently mentioned as a mental health concern. Participants often linked this stress to a fear of failure, noting that they especially struggled with their mental well-being during exam periods.

The exams were the biggest source of stress in my life. I had no idea what to expect, how to study for them, how thoroughly we needed to know everything, or how strict the grading would be. The exam period and the study sessions before were very stressful, but so was the period afterward while waiting for my results. I felt like a complete zombie. – Marie

A specific need, particularly strong among students with disabilities, was for more opportunities to provide input and offer feedback on courses. They would like to be more included in organizing their own support.

If I need help, someone at the reception assists me, but I’ve never spoken with these people directly. They think they know how best to support me based on what they’ve heard from my diversity coach, whom I have spoken with. There are too many intermediaries, leading to

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miscommunication. This causes the people who are supposed to help me to panic, which in turn makes me stressed. – Annelies

Some of the participants' first year took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which considerably shaped the experiences of first-year students in Belgium. They primarily reported difficulties with online classes and the lack of social contact.

After my first-semester results, I was really proud and motivated to start the second, but then everything shifted to online teaching. I ended up failing my entire second semester because I just couldn't keep up. – Izzy

Several participants reported (4) negative experiences related to aspects of their identity that set them apart from the average student. These experiences ranged from teachers handling topics insensitively, to participants feeling excluded or laughed at, and hearing or reading racist, homophobic, and transphobic comments.

When I answered a question or made a comment in class and got it wrong, I could see other students laughing, and it hurt me. Why? I'm trying my best. If it were the other way around—if they came to my country and were learning a new language, they'd make mistakes too. I had confidence in myself, but seeing this hurt me and affected how I felt. – Carlos

In response to these challenges, participants primarily expressed a need for greater awareness around diversity, inclusion and equity, a designated contact point and procedure for reporting issues, and a more diverse curriculum and workforce.

Most of our lecturers are white, heterosexual women around the same age. I don't necessarily mind that, but I would like to see more diversity in that area. There are many Muslim students or neurodivergent students, but they don't see themselves represented in the lecturers. Teaching staff could help break the taboo by sharing more of their own backgrounds with students.

Representation is important. More could also be done to promote diversity and inclusion. – Maya

Participants shared various ideas for campus redesigns to better meet their needs. The primary focus was on improving accessibility for students with limited mobility.

Even at [one of the campuses], which the website claims is 100% wheelchair accessible, adjustments are needed. The door to the inclusive restroom does close automatically behind me, but it's incredibly heavy to open. I have to push it with all my weight. If I'm in my wheelchair on a bad day, I just can't open that door. I have to ask someone to help. [This campus] might be wheelchair accessible, but it's not wheelchair friendly, and that's a big difference. – Eva

Another significant structural adjustment participants suggested was more and better spaces designated for rest and prayer. While such spaces exist on some campuses, they currently do not fully meet students' needs. Participants pointed out that there are not enough such spaces and that the existing ones are often too small or poorly maintained.

There is a prayer room, but it's just a little closet that isn't vacuumed, and no one knew where it was. This makes me feel like it's only there for the university of applied science's image. – Aïsha

Participants also highlighted the need for gender-neutral restrooms. Not all students are aware of their location, and others feel that the current location is too visible, making it uncomfortable to use.

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I'm glad there are gender-neutral restrooms, but I wouldn't have placed them with the other restrooms. I expected them to be in a more discreet location. Right now, they're heavily vandalized with stickers from [a Flemish far-right political party]. Apart from the vandalism, their visibility can be a barrier. Going in is like 'coming out' in front of everyone. I haven't seen anyone use a gender-neutral restroom, and I know from my non-binary friends that they don't feel comfortable taking that step. – Elke

While diversity and inclusion require ongoing attention, several participants showed appreciation for existing initiatives. Participants felt empowered to be themselves at the university of applied sciences and valued that their peers were also free to be their authentic selves on campus.

I am a very diverse student. I am older, I work, I have studied before, I am not heterosexual, and I have a disability. I never felt at any moment that any of these things would be a problem. Twenty years ago, it was very different. – Kathy

Several factors outside of the influence of the university of applied sciences helped participants overcome challenges or experience fewer difficulties during their first year. Some participants mentioned the support they received from family, friends, and professional counsellors. Additionally, participants highlighted personal qualities that enabled them to succeed, such as easily taking initiative, which helped them seek assistance and handle challenges more effectively. Older students and those with greater self-confidence emphasized that these traits also aided them throughout their first year.

Without my family—my husband, my kids, my parents, and everyone who showed understanding when I said, “Not now”—I wouldn't have made it. – Arusha

Discussion

This study highlights the central role of academic integration, social connectedness, and mental well-being in shaping the first-year experience and academic success of students in HE. First, participants reported frequent challenges in managing expectations, planning, navigating institutional systems, and processing large volumes of information. Second, many students expressed concern about connecting with peers and building friendships. Third, mental well-being emerged as a critical concern, with stress being a recurring theme. These findings are consistent with prior research across broader student populations (Tinto, 2012; van Herpen, 2019; Van Rooij et al., 2017) but may carry heightened implications for students from underrepresented backgrounds or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Students with diverse needs and identities face additional and intersecting challenges. These students often contend not only with the generic demands of HE, but also with systemic barriers such as insensitive pedagogical practices, inaccessible facilities, implicit bias, and a lack of representation in the curriculum and staff body. These findings are consistent with barriers to inclusion in HE found in previous research (Belando-Montoro et al., 2022).

Taken together, these findings call for a systemic approach to inclusion that goes beyond only individualized or group-targeted support and addresses institutional structures, cultures, and routines.

Students' academic and psychosocial experiences during their transition into HE underline the importance of two key areas of action: (1) providing clear, timely and student-centred information; (2) facilitating meaningful connection among students and staff.

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First, HE institutions must improve how they communicate with students, particularly at transition points. Many participants described receiving either too little information or being overwhelmed by large amounts of information delivered all at once. Both contributed to confusion, insecurity, and stress. To address this, institutions should provide clear, timely, and student-centered information, carefully phased throughout the first year. Repeating essential information at key moments can support cognitive load management and help students retain what matters most.

Second, connection and belonging emerged as powerful themes across the data. Facilitating meaningful connection—between students, and between students and staff—is essential. Institutions should invest in low-barrier, inclusive social and academic activities that help build relationships early on. Informal gatherings, peer support initiatives, and connection-focused classroom strategies can foster a sense of community and psychological safety. Such efforts are particularly impactful for students from underrepresented groups or disadvantaged backgrounds who may otherwise feel isolated or alienated in mainstream academic environments.

The third recommendation builds on students' experiences of exclusion and systemic inequity. Many participants reported identity-related challenges, including ableism, racism, language barriers, homophobia, or inadequate representation in teaching staff and course materials. For some, these experiences compounded existing academic stress and directly impacted well-being and persistence. In response, institutions must take responsibility for raising awareness and promoting equity and inclusion through a comprehensive set of actions. Inclusion requires actively involving students from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds in decision-making processes and transforming institutional cultures and structures that reproduce inequality (van den Brink, 2018). This can be supported by raising awareness among staff and students through training, curriculum reform, and ongoing reflection, as well as by establishing clear procedures and a dedicated contact point for reporting discrimination. Increasing diversity among teaching and support staff so they better reflect the student body is also essential. Practical changes to the physical environment—such as improving accessibility and providing gender-neutral facilities and spaces for prayer and rest—help create a more welcoming campus. Finally, institutions should offer targeted and tailored support for specific groups, including psychological services, academic accommodations, and linguistic assistance.

Limitations

The aim was not to generalize the findings of this study to a broader population: partly because it is a qualitative study and partly due to the first limitation, namely that participants were primarily selected from a group already enrolled in HE and receiving support. It also includes students who haven't dropped out. This may have resulted in an insufficient representation of the challenges and barriers faced by students who did not enroll, dropped out sooner or did not access any support initiatives. Some elements, for example the lack of connection with peers, might have surfaced more strongly if these were included.

The second limitation is that self-identification might have influenced the apparent composition of the sample. Since the categories to which participants belonged to were based on self-identification, it is possible, for example, that participants were less likely to identify as first-generation students if this category did not have a noticeable impact on their experiences during the period being studied.

Thirdly, the interviewer's (first author) position as a young, white, neurodivergent, queer researcher dealing with chronic pain had an impact on the experiences that were shared during the conversations. Participants

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indicated they felt more comfortable when a staff member was also willing to share something about themselves, and that it was important to be able to recognize themselves in others. The interviewer took this advice to heart and noticed students with whom they shared part of their identity felt more comfortable discussing the challenges related to it. This underlines the importance of a diverse research team.

Conclusion

This study offers an in-depth examination of the first-year experiences of students from underrepresented groups or disadvantaged backgrounds at a Flemish university of applied sciences. It reveals the layered and intersecting challenges these students face, from navigating complex academic systems and forming social connections to confronting issues of identity, representation, and exclusion. Despite these obstacles, many students also identified key sources of support—both within and beyond the institution—that enabled them to persevere.

The findings underscore the importance of a proactive, inclusive approach to the student experience, particularly during the critical first year. Institutions must provide clear, timely, and accessible information; actively foster a sense of connection and belonging; and take structural action to embed equity and inclusion into their policies, practices, and cultures. Importantly, students from underrepresented groups or disadvantaged backgrounds must not only be supported, but must be included as co-creators of the environments in which they study.

Statement of interest

All procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institution where the research was carried out. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. All data collection adhered to GDPR regulations and all rules and regulations set up by the university college.

Biographies

Jara Van Wiele participated as a researcher in the SURYF project at the Office of Education and Guidance. She is passionate about fostering inclusion and diversity, she specializes in qualitative research, policy development, and advocacy for underrepresented groups.

Stéphanie Verhaegen participated as an intern in the SURYF project at the Office of Education and Guidance while obtaining her Master's degree in Gender and Diversity from Ghent University (2025). Besides caring for her two children, she is currently writing a grant proposal for research on mothering and Medically Assisted Reproduction.

Pieterjan Bonne participated as a project coordinator in the SURFY project at the Office of Education and Guidance. As a policy officer, he focuses on the transition to and first year in higher education and was the SURFY project coordinator.

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