

# 297 Mental Health Problems in First Generation Students at UK Universities: A Comparison with Continuing Generation Students

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## Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

## Abstract

There is little UK-specific research on first generation university students (FGS; those whose parents did not achieve a university degree) and none which has focussed on mental health. The aim of this study was to compare the prevalence and types of mental health problems experienced by FGS and continuing generation students (CGS; those whose parents did achieve a university degree) at UK universities. Participants were students aged 18 years or older from any UK university and were recruited to the study via advertisements on social media. A sample of [target N = 200] UK university students comprising both FGS [target n = 100] and CGS [target n = 100] completed an online survey containing measures of mental health problems. In this presentation I will report the results of the data analysis and discuss the implications of the findings for FGS mental health, widening participation and future research in this field.

## Full paper

First generation students (FGS; those whose parents did not achieve a university degree) now constitute almost half of the UK university student population (Henderson et al., 2020; Office for Students [OfS], 2022). Existing UK research has established that “being first in family is an important barrier to university participation and graduation, over and above other sources of disadvantage” (Adamecz-Völgyi et al., 2020, p. 1). Moreover, the UK University Mental Health Charter (Hughes & Spanner, 2019) recognises that FGS may face greater challenges to their mental health than continuing generation students (CGS; those whose parents did achieve a university degree). Hence the UK OfS recommends that universities consider the intersection of mental health problems and FGS status so they can improve understanding and support (OfS, 2019). Despite this, there is no published empirical research on the mental health of FGS at UK universities, as confirmed by a scoping review of the international literature (Smith & McLellan, 2022).

The aim of this study was to investigate mental health in FGS at UK universities, specifically to compare the prevalence and types of mental health problems experienced by FGS and CGS. The study was designed to collect empirical data to address the following research questions: (1) Are FGS at UK universities more likely than CGS to experience mental health problems? (2) What mental health problems do FGS at UK universities experience and are they different to those experienced by CGS? It was hypothesised that FGS would experience more mental health problems than CGS and that the types of mental health problems experienced would differ between FGS and CGS.

The study design was cross-sectional and data collection was carried out via an online survey. Participants were students aged 18 years or older from any UK university and were recruited to the study via advertisements on social media. A sample of [target N = 200] UK university students comprising both FGS [target n = 100] and CGS [target n = 100] completed a questionnaire containing demographic questions (age, gender identity, level of study, parental education) and the Counseling Centre Assessment of Psychological Symptoms scale (CCAPS-62; Locke et al., 2011; McAleavey et al., 2012) for mental health problems. Total scores for the CCAPS-62 and individual scores for each of the eight subscales (depression, generalised anxiety, social anxiety, academic distress, eating concerns, family distress, frustration/anger, substance use) were analysed and compared for FGS and CGS.

In this presentation I will report on the findings of the study (work in progress – data collection currently ongoing) and discuss the implications for FGS, widening participation and future research in this field. This study makes a significant contribution to knowledge about FGS in UK universities and facilitates future research about mental health interventions which aim to ensure that widening participation encompasses FGS getting on, not just getting in.

## References

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