

firstGen

Research indicates that the structure, regulations, and selection processes in the Swiss education system perpetuate social inequalities. Social origin, defined by socioeconomic status and parental education level, significantly influences educational pathways in Switzerland. Only 22.9% of the population aged 20-35 have at least one parent with higher education, but this figure rises to 47.2% among tertiary students. Despite this, 53% of students at Swiss higher education institutions (HEI) are First-Generation Students, whose parents did not graduate with a bachelor's degree. These students are diverse and motivated but face numerous challenges and structural barriers.

Knowledge development

The P7 2021-2024 project helped the partner universities to recognize First-Generation Students as a new category of diversity and to identify key issues and barriers in tertiary education based on social background that affect transitions to higher education, studies, professional integration and academic careers.

Awareness raising

In 2023, a successful one-day conference on First-Generation Students, social origin, and educational equity in Switzerland was held. It aimed to introduce the topic of social selectivity in tertiary education. Around 80 participants, including federal and cantonal actors, HEI staff, and students, attended. The event emphasized awareness-raising and advocacy to encourage policy implementation for First-Generation Students.

Recommendations

Partner universities developed solutions and a catalog of recommendations for higher education stakeholders to address inequalities based on social background. They focused on the barriers and challenges that First-Generation Students face in their transitions to higher education, studies, professional integration, and academic careers.

Social origin: a new diversity category

The impact of the social background on educational opportunities and success has not been adequately addressed in university support programs or policies. To address this issue, the Universities Bern, Fribourg, Lucerne, St. Gallen, and Zurich launched the P7 2021-2024 project, "Selectivity due to social origin in Swiss higher education." This project introduced the concept of First-Generation Students and focused on barriers to university access and academic careers. The goals were to highlight social selectivity, develop recommendations to reduce it, and develop measures at both the university and the various levels of education policy.

Information-Platform

The partner universities developed an information platform for First-Generation Students, more precisely for future students, current students and First-Generation Graduates. The platform is intended to be an innovative initiative for First-Generation Students, that aims to value them while addressing the specific challenges they may face during their educational and professional careers.

Exchange sessions

The Steering Committee (SC) organized meetings with higher education stakeholders to address barriers faced by First-Generation students due to their social origin. The meetings included

- Exchange with the team conducting the study on the social and economic conditions of students from the Federal Statistical Office. Topic: Data on First-Generation Students
- Inter-institutional exchange with the admission services of the partner institutions and Swiss universities. Topic: Alternative access to higher education
- Bilateral exchanges with federal and cantonal education authorities, as well as with services and stakeholders in each institution.

Implement First-Gen policies

The P7 2021-2024 project highlighted the lack of measures and policies that directly address First-Generation Students in Swiss higher education. The partner universities aimed to develop holistic approaches to support these students, graduates and academics, to address inequalities based on social background and to institutionalize efforts to implement First-Gen policies. Diversity offices are adopting action plans, and four out of five partner institutions are continuing their efforts beyond 2024 by implementing concrete measures to support First-Generation Students.