

Mind Over Marks: Emotional Well-Being and Academic Success Among First-Generation University Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of emotional well-being on the academic success of first-generation university students, with a particular focus on their lived experiences and coping strategies in higher education. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve purposively selected participants to capture the depth of their experiences. Findings reveal that first-generation students frequently encounter impostor syndrome, anxiety, self-doubt, financial strain, family expectations, social isolation, and a lack of belonging within academic settings. These challenges often hinder their emotional well-being, thereby affecting their academic success and overall university experience. However, the study also highlights resilience factors that contribute to student success, including social and institutional support, effective coping mechanisms, academic engagement, and mentorship opportunities. Such resources play a pivotal role in enhancing confidence, fostering a sense of belongingness, and improving academic outcomes. Furthermore, the research identifies institutional barriers that continue to limit access to adequate support for first-generation and financially disadvantaged students. By emphasising the interplay between emotional well-being and academic success, this study highlights the importance of comprehensive institutional interventions such as structured mentorship programmes, tailored counselling services, academic advising, and accessible research opportunities. The findings contribute to higher education policy and practice by offering insights into how universities can create inclusive environments that address the unique challenges of first-generation students while empowering them to thrive academically and emotionally.

Keywords: Emotional well-being, academic success, first-generation university students, higher education

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Introduction

Emotional well-being is a fundamental determinant of academic success in higher education, particularly for first-generation university students (FGUS), defined as those who are the first in their families to attend university (Stephens et al., 2014). These students often face difficulties adjusting to university life due to limited familiarity with academic expectations, financial constraints, and a lack of familial guidance or support networks (Pascarella et al., 2004). Such challenges are further compounded by socioeconomic limitations, cultural adaptation issues (Stephens et al., 2012), academic pressures, and social transitions. Consequently, FGUS are more vulnerable to stress, anxiety, and depression, with studies indicating that nearly 30–40% experience clinically significant symptoms (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). These emotional difficulties, in turn, adversely affect academic success, retention, and overall university experience (Keyes et al., 2012; Dyrbye et al., 2006). Moreover, many FGUS must balance employment with academic responsibilities, which exacerbates financial strain and limits study time (Terenzini et al., 1996). A further challenge lies in their limited awareness of institutional practices, such as accessing scholarships, engaging in research, or seeking academic guidance, thereby creating barriers less commonly encountered by continuing-generation students (Jehangir, 2010). Understanding these interconnected factors is essential for developing institutional support systems that foster both emotional well-being and academic success.

A prominent psychological challenge among FGUS is impostor syndrome, characterised by persistent self-doubt regarding one's academic abilities despite evidence of competence (Clance & Imes, 1978). This phenomenon is more prevalent among FGUS compared to their peers from college-educated families (Peteet et al., 2015). Additionally, FGUS often struggle

to relate to peers whose familial and socioeconomic backgrounds afford them greater academic exposure and resources (Stephens et al., 2012). Such experiences can diminish self-confidence, leading to disengagement, procrastination, and, in some cases, academic withdrawal (Jenkins et al., 2013).

The emotional and psychological challenges faced by FGUS have direct implications for their academic success. Research demonstrates a strong association between poor mental health and lower grade point averages, reduced class participation, and higher dropout rates (Lipson et al., 2019). Conditions such as anxiety and depression impair cognitive functioning, affecting concentration during examinations and performance under pressure (Eisenberg et al., 2009). Financial stress further intensifies these issues, as many FGUS prioritise employment over academic commitments, thereby reducing time available for study and engagement (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Despite these challenges, resilience and self-efficacy can play a crucial role in mitigating negative outcomes. Students who develop effective coping strategies such as goal-setting, seeking peer support, and maintaining structured study routines are better equipped to navigate academic and emotional difficulties (Bandura, 1997). In this regard, universities have a pivotal role in addressing the needs of FGUS. Institutional interventions, including first-generation mentorship programmes, culturally responsive counselling services, and peer support networks, have been shown to reduce feelings of isolation and improve student retention (Hicks, 2006; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). However, many institutions still lack adequate, targeted resources, and existing services may not sufficiently address the socioeconomic realities of FGUS. In some cases, students encounter dismissive or

oversimplified guidance that fails to acknowledge their structural challenges (Kiyama et al., 2015).

Another critical gap lies in proactive academic advising. Many FGUS miss valuable opportunities, such as scholarships or research positions, due to limited awareness of application processes and institutional pathways (Jehangir, 2010). Structured outreach initiatives such as mandatory first-generation orientation programmes and faculty training on socioeconomic diversity can help bridge these gaps. While quantitative research provides insights into general patterns of FGUS mental health and academic outcomes, qualitative approaches offer a deeper understanding of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Personal narratives illuminate how emotional well-being shapes academic trajectories, highlighting both resilience-building processes and institutional shortcomings. Therefore, prioritising these voices in future research is essential for developing policies that effectively address both psychological and structural barriers faced by FGUS.

Theoretical Background of the Study

The interplay between emotional well-being and academic success has emerged as a major topic of interest for researchers in higher education. Emotional well-being encompasses individuals' psychological, emotional, and social functioning, including their ability to manage stress, maintain positive relationships, and effectively cope with challenges (World Health Organization, 2022). Academic success, on the other hand, extends beyond academic achievement and includes persistence, engagement, satisfaction, and successful progression through educational programmes (York et al., 2015). For first-generation university students, whose parents have not completed a university degree, the transition to higher education

often involves unique academic, social, and emotional challenges that influence both their emotional well-being and educational outcomes (Stebbleton & Soria, 2013).

The present study's aim is based on the premise that emotional well-being and academic success are related constructs. Positive emotional well-being contributes to greater motivation, self-regulation, resilience, and academic engagement, which are essential for success in higher education (Datu et al., 2018). Conversely, emotional distress, anxiety, and stress can hinder learning processes, reduce academic confidence, and negatively affect academic performance (Kumar & Bhukar, 2013). This is especially significant when it comes to FGUS, who often face significant social, family and financial support and adjustment pressures in university, as well as isolation in learning environments (Jenkins et al., 2013).

This study is based on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997), which highlights the role of self-efficacy in human behaviour and performance. According to Bandura, individuals' beliefs about their capabilities influence their motivation, perseverance, and performance. In higher education settings, students who have high academic self-efficacy tend to be more inclined to use effective learning strategies, overcome learning difficulties, and keep their emotions in check when challenges arise. FGUS often have limited access to familial guidance regarding university experiences, making self-efficacy an important factor in determining both their emotional well-being and academic success (Irlbeck et al., 2014).

The study is also guided by the theory proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) called Stress and Coping Theory. This theory is specified as a theory of how people rate stress and cope with it. The theory is that stress can be caused when people feel the environment is

demanding more from them than they have. Emotional demands, including school expectations, financial worries, social adjustment issues, and family responsibilities, are common stressors of first-generation college students (Covarrubias et al., 2019). Their ability to cope with these challenges through problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies significantly influences their emotional well-being and academic success. Stress can be reduced, and academic persistence supported, by effective coping strategies such as social support and institutional resources.

In addition, Tinto's Student Integration Theory (1993) provides further insight into the experiences of FGUS. Tinto argues that students' academic and social integration within the university environment plays a crucial role in their persistence and success. FGUS often face difficulties in developing a sense of belonging due to cultural, social, and academic barriers. According to research, a higher level of "institutional support" and "social connectedness" is associated with positive emotional well-being and academic success among students (Stebbleton & Soria, 2013).

The theoretical basis is further supported by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a methodological basis in carrying out this research. IPA focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences and the meanings they attach to significant life events (Smith et al., 2009). In this perspective, this study aims to uncover the first-generation university students' emotional reactions, difficulties, coping mechanisms, and successes to their first-generation university students.

These theoretical approaches imply that emotional well-being is more than just a psychological feeling and reflects personal beliefs, coping mechanisms, and social environments. FGUS' emotional well-being and academic success are impacted by a multifaceted interaction between self-efficacy, stress management, social engagement, and personal meaning-making. Therefore, understanding these experiences through a qualitative lens can provide valuable insights into the factors that promote resilience, well-being, and academic success among this population.

Purpose of the Study

In higher education institutions, academic success is also affected by emotional well-being. FGUS often face unique challenges, including academic pressures, limited familial guidance, financial constraints, and difficulties in adapting to university environments, which may affect both their emotional well-being and academic success. Although previous research has identified factors such as stress, self-efficacy, social support, and coping strategies as important determinants of student success, most studies have employed quantitative approaches that focus on measuring relationships among variables. Therefore, little is known about the individual lived experience and interpretation of the link between emotional well-being and academic success for first-generation university students.

This study aims to address this gap by using the IPA approach in order to explore and describe in detail the lived experiences of the first-generation university students. By providing deeper insights into their emotional challenges, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of academic success, the study seeks to contribute to the existing knowledge on students' emotional well-being. The findings are expected to assist in creating and designing targeted support systems,

such as mentorship programmes, counselling services, peer support systems, and resilience-building initiatives within higher education institutions.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the emotional challenges faced by first-generation university students in higher education.
2. To study the influence of emotional well-being on the academic success of first-generation university students in higher education.
3. To investigate the institutional barriers and support systems that shape the emotional well-being and academic success of first-generation university students in higher education.
4. To explore the coping strategies employed by first-generation university students to navigate challenges and maintain emotional well-being and academic success in higher education.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of FGUS regarding emotional well-being and academic success in higher education. Phenomenology is particularly suited to understanding the subjective experiences, interpretations, and meanings individuals attach to a phenomenon (Tötemeyer et al., 2025; Vagle, 2018; Van Manen, 1990). This design enabled an in-depth exploration of students' emotions, coping strategies, and academic experiences within the university context. Consistent with the phenomenological tradition, Pollio et al. (1997, pp. 29–30) noted that

phenomenological interviews aim to elicit first-person accounts of lived experiences and are guided by participants, aligning with the study's objective of understanding experiences from the participants' own perspectives.

The research used a qualitative phenomenological approach because the study aimed to gain a subjective perspective and see what essence of the participants' experiences was, and not to measure variables. The study aimed to identify commonalities in the aspects of emotional well-being and performance in terms of academic success from the rich description gained from the participants.

The study used IPA for data analysis. The IPA method is a qualitative analysis technique that emphasises the exploration of how student process their individual and social lives. Through the use of IPA, the researcher obtained more in-depth information regarding the participants' narratives to engage with the meaning ascribed to their perceptions of emotional well-being and academic success in the study.

Participants

This study focused on FGUS who are pursuing various academic programmes at the Teacher Education Department, Central University of South Bihar. Following IPA, Smith and Fieldsend (2021) recommend purposeful sampling to select participants with shared characteristics (Patton, 2002). So, the present study used purposive sampling in the selection of appropriate research participants.

The sample size was determined according to the principle of data saturation (art of ending an interview when there are no new themes or information), to ensure the collection of comprehensive data. A total of 23 students were initially selected who are enrolled in the B.A. B.Ed. (III, V, & VII semester), B.Sc. B.Ed. (III, V, & VII semester), and M.Ed. (III semester) programmes. However, a smaller group of twelve participants (7 males and 5 females) were selected, as some practical limitations, like the availability and goodwill of the participants, were present when the final sample was reached. The result of the present study with the smaller sample may transfer to FGUS, but not to the broad generalisability to the whole population of students.

Nevertheless, this limitation did not negatively influence the quality of data collected by the chosen participants, who gave rich and meaningful data that fitted into the phenomenological approach of the study and gave the researcher the opportunity to explore in detail the life experiences of the participants as FGUS.

Data Collection and Procedure

The data were collected using semi-structured interviews as a primary data collection method (Best et al., 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018), which provided the opportunity to explore the topic in detail, based on the free-form conversation with a focus on the experience of the FGUS. The interviews were well planned, with a great opportunity to follow various aspects of academic success in combination with the freedom of a participant to express his/her point of view. Before the data collection process, interview times were agreed upon, allowing the researchers and respondents to have some time that would be convenient to them, with special consideration to the process of rapport building and the development of a

comfortable, trusting environment. All the interviews were audio-taped with the consent of the participants, and on average, the interviews lasted approximately 20-35 minutes. To ensure methodological rigour, the researcher maintained reflexive practices by documenting post-interview reflections and analytical memos during transcription, while also engaging in regular debriefing sessions with the co-author, an experienced researcher (Vagle, 2018).

Ethical Consideration

The study adhered strict ethical protocols at all stages of the research process (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). Participants were informed of their rights, including voluntary participation, guaranteed confidentiality, and the freedom to withdraw at any time without any penalty. To safeguard privacy, all data were anonymized through the use of code names during analysis and publication. Digital records were stored securely in encrypted, password-protected systems accessible exclusively to the researchers. Furthermore, identifiable information was systematically segregated from analytical materials to ensure participant anonymity in all research outputs.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

While qualitative data offers limitless analytical possibilities (Saldaña, 2021), this study focused its examination through a specific research perspective. We employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic analysis framework, systematically coding and identifying patterns across the dataset. The analytical process incorporated reflexive memoirs after each interview (Vagle, 2018; Willig, 2007), with transcriptions beginning after the initial interview and continuing alongside data collection. The result was classified into the following themes.

Interpretation of Objective 1

Theme 1: Emotional Challenges

Theme 1.1. Impostor Syndrome and Self-Doubt

Several participants reported experiencing a pervasive sense of not belonging within academic institutions, often attributing their presence to external factors rather than merit. Participant 3 expressed these feelings, saying, *"I always feel like I'm behind, like I'm being cheated."* In the same way, Participant 11 stated, *I do not think I belong here. Everyone else seems to know what they are doing, but I'm just pretending. I keep waiting for someone to call me out as a fraud."*

Another theme that kept repeating was the comparison to other individuals who had more privileged backgrounds, which made individuals more insecure. Participant 7 stated, *"I am the first person in my family to graduate from high school. I never thought that I was an intelligent person to have gotten into this university."* Further, participant 1 said the same thing: *"Even though he gets the scholarship, he still feels like he's being misled or that he doesn't deserve it."*

Also, the differences in familiarity with institutions were a factor that led to self-perceived inadequacy. Participant 5 said that even in his second year, he was not aware of class times because of a lack of familiarity with teachers and friends. *"I feel stupid for not asking them earlier."* Further, participant 5 extended his experiences, like *"I kept thinking that I made a mistake in admission. I felt that I did not belong here when I found it difficult in the classes."* These experiences allow certain persons to internalize their struggle into intellectual deficits.

Theme 1.2. Economic Stress and Family Pressure

Financial instability was a significant stress factor among them, as most participants (7 out of 12) maintained part-time jobs in addition to their studies. This economic demand not only drives their educational activity but also intensifies feelings and family-related obligations.

Participant 7 explained this pressure, saying, *"My parents have sacrificed a lot. If I fail, I will disappoint them."* Likewise, participant 5 stated, *I had to work part-time 20 hours per week to buy books. My parents are unable to assist me, and so it makes me feel guilty when I spend money on anything."* The financial dependence aspect of control of emotions was also highlighted by participant 9, also saying that, *"My parents say they sacrificed everything on my behalf. It is inspiring and at the same time frightening. What will I do for them in case I fail?"*

To ensure income, employment is often necessary at the cost of education. Participant 3 said, *"I work 15 hours a week just to pay the room rent."* Another factor that would step on the toes of education was family expectations, which was seen to have clashed with education. Participant 2 indicated that *"The family considered him to be wasting his time studying rather than assisting the family business. It is depressing."*

Students who are experiencing both financial and academic stressors experience more stress than their peers who do not have such problems. For example, Participant 3 said that he could not concentrate on exams because he was also worried about paying rent, while his classmates did not have that kind of stress. This shows that financial problems can unfairly affect the academic performance and well-being of some students.

Theme 1.3. Loneliness and Isolation

The majority of the participants (9 out of 12) responded that the cultural and socioeconomic differences made it difficult to create peer relationships. These variations are likely to be reflected in social interaction, which further entails a sense of marginalisation in the academic domain.

The 5th participant has outlined his disapproval, stating, *“I do not go with students who talk of holidays or family legacies here.”* On the same note, participant 9 said, *“I don’t relate to students who talk about their parents’ college lives. I feel like an outsider during this group discussion.”*

Academic collaborations are an example of exclusionary social dynamics. Participant 11 explained, *“In labs, study groups are formed based on who already knows each other from school. I’m always the last one invited, if at all.”* This kind of unspoken separation made students from different backgrounds feel even more left out.

The self-silencing behaviour was also a result of cultural and geographic differences. Participant 9 remarked, *“I am from a rural area. When classmates talk about travelling abroad, I just stay quiet.”* Also, participant 12 explained that *“I’m the only girl from a different background in my lab group. Sometimes, I put on different ways to speak so that I can fit in.”*

Theme 1.4. Anxiety and Depression

The majority of the people who participated (7/12) reported being subject to intense academic stress, and acted out in terrible psychological distress and bodily indications of

burnout. The level of academic pressure often exceeds the capacity of the students to cope with it, especially the students living in poor educational backgrounds. This sentiment was echoed by participant 6, who said, *“Panic attacks before exams. The high school did not train me to do this amount of workload, and I felt like I was drowning.”*

Constant academic pressure led to depression in some students. Participant 4 stated, *“I had weeks when I could not get out of bed. I would always think to myself that there is no use doing it because I am bound to fail.”* Participant 10 was also in the same situation, saying that *“last semester she barely left her room. I was depressed up to the point I could not even open my laptop.”*

Interpretation of Objective 2

Theme 2: Influence of Emotional Well-Being on Academic Success

Theme 2.1. Direct Relationship between Stress and Grades

A notable proportion of participants (6/12) reported that emotional difficulties directly impaired their academic success. Participant 2 described acute test anxiety: *“I blanked during finals because I was so stressed about failing”*. This manifested in various ways, including cognitive impairment (Participant 7 stated that *“I failed at my first midterm because I was so anxious and I couldn’t think straight”*) and maladaptive study behaviours (Participant 4 reported: *“When I’m stressed, I procrastinate. Then I cram, and my grade suffers”*).

Theme 2.2. Resilience as a Buffer

Those students who managed to create effective strategies of emotional regulation (5/12) showed more successful results in studying. The 2nd Participant reported that *“As soon as he*

learned to manage her anxiety, her GPA (Grade Point Average) went up.” Social support proved to be protective as well, one participant claiming that he found a group to study in and was doing better. Participant 10 emphasized the aspect of self-efficacy: *“Self-efficacy made me perform better the more I believed in myself. Trust counts.”*

Theme 2.3. Dropout Risk and Persistence

Two participants have been at critical stages of wanting to drop their studies because of psychological pressure. Faculty intervention was critical, as one of the participants replied: *“I would have dropped out in my first semester. However, a professor happened to take note of me, and suggested that I stick around,”* and Participant 3 gave credit to his scholarship adviser, who helped him avoid dropping out.

Theme 2.4. Long-Term Academic Confidence

The root of increased academic involvement of the participants is improved psychological health. Participant 7 mentioned that she engaged more in class as she overcame self-doubt, and Participant 8 said, *“When I stopped regarding myself as an impostor, I began to contribute in class. My grades also improved since I was not fearful of questioning things.”* When describing the overall effect, Participant 10 said: *“Since I am just about to enter the world of graduates, I realise that stability in emotions is as relevant as studying.”*

To understand coping strategies and support mechanisms that can be embraced among first-generation university students to overcome such challenges in higher education.

Interpretation of Objective 3

Theme 3: Institutional Barriers and Support Systems

Theme 3.1. Lack of Tailored Mental Health Resources

Many of the respondents were not satisfied with the services of the university counselling, citing them as not very relevant to the needs of first-generation and financially disadvantaged students. Participant 4 articulated this disconnect, stating, *“Therapy here feels like it’s made for the student with different problems.”* Another one said, *“I walked out of the sessions thinking that my issues did not conform to the kind of experience they were ready to deal with, which is evident in the case of financial stress and family duties.”* In continuation, another participant said, *“The counsellor was kind, but it felt like they didn’t have any background in working with first-gen or immigrant students. It made me feel more isolated, not less.”* One of the participants said that the existing support systems do not address emotional or academic needs and that they are usually engineered with a single-minded outlook.

Theme 3.2. Navigational Challenges in the Institution

Most participants (8/12) indicated that they have had great difficulties in accessing institutional resources, such as scholarships, academic advising, and opportunities in research. It was a systemic disadvantage that was most caused by a family's lack of academic capital and silenced institutional expectations. This was commented by Participant 1: *“Nobody informed me about research opportunities until my 2nd year. By the time I had come in, I was already lagging.”*

There were more obstacles because academic advisers could make assumptions that pre-existing knowledge existed. Participant 8 pointed out this concern: *The advisor assumes you*

are at a level where you know how to apply for the scholarship. I did not, and I missed deadlines, though.” This theme of poor guidance continues to indicate that the traditional advising model might not fit the needs of first-generation university students who are not familiar with the process at the institution.

Theme 3.3. Cultural Insensitivity in Academic

A small number of participants (4 out of 12) had the feeling that there were gaps in teaching, as teachers had expected students to know certain things. These assumptions posed barriers that prevented the students from fully engaging and involving themselves in their academic work.

Participant 8 articulated this mismatch as follows: *“Professors think that all the students have the same background knowledge.”* Sometimes, such issues lead to assumptions about family educational experiences. In this regard, Participant 4 said: *“Professors say, ‘Ask your parents what you should do,’ but my parents didn’t pursue higher education.” This is because they don’t know the reality.”* Other differences proved to be a major curse. Participant 11 said, *“Some lecturers assume that everyone has a laptop. It took me one year to save to purchase one.”*

Theme 3.4. Positive Institutional Support

A large minority of the participants (5/12) mentioned that their experiences were successful and fruitful from institutional programs tailored to the needs of first-generation students. This support system helped students reduce feelings of loneliness and offered them valuable resources to support them in their academic journey. Participant 10 also highlighted the

psychological effect of validation as she stated, *“My mentor was the first person who made me believe that I was worthy of being here.”* Similarly, Participant 3 talked about the usefulness of the program: The first-gen mentorship programme was a lifesaver. Along with this has come a person who understands my struggles.

The importance of the peer-based initiative was also realized with Participant 10 saying that *“The group in her department became the guide to survival in sharing the resources.”* One of the other participants referred to their first-gen student group as a space where students could attain practical and emotional support, referring to their group as *“A safe space.”*

Interpretation of Objective 4

Theme 4: Coping Strategies

Theme 4.1. Individualism and Motivation

Intrinsic motivation was the most emphasized way of coping by most of the participants, who tended to frame their academic life as an option to alter intergenerational patterns. The 2nd participant elaborated this as follows, *I remind myself, why I am here to break the cycle.”* The same applies to Participant 1, who upheld self-efficacy beliefs: *“I tell myself: you made it here all by yourself. You are able to do it yourself. It keeps me going.”*

Some of the respondents used structured, incremental strategies to manage academic demands. Participant 8 described a compartmentalised approach: *“I just set a small goal, I passed one exam, then the next. When I get too ahead of myself and start thinking, I panic.”* It had other forms, with Participant 8 saying, *“I treat school like a job with a strict schedule and no excuses.”*

Theme 4.2. Peer and Mentor Support

About 42% (5 out of 12) of the respondents used to get some assistance by establishing bonds with their peers who are also first-generation students and faculty. Participant 9 commented that her study group has been beneficial because it keeps her balanced, that they all struggle together, and it helps her academically. Participant 4 said, *“The support of other first-gen students rescued me. We go together and see each other once a week to release stress and study.”*

Mentorship also exerted a very close influence. According to Participant 10, *“It was her mentor who had given her the first positive words: ‘You deserve to be here.’ That altered everything.”* One participant said, *“One of the professors saw that I was not doing well and eventually became my mentor.”* Students felt acknowledged, assisted, and more confident in their learning process because of such relationships.

Theme 4.3. Emotional Regulation Techniques

A portion of the participants (4/12) used playful emotional regulations, such as physical activity and reflections. Participant 6 used exercise as a way of clearing the mind: *“Running clears my head when stress becomes too much.”* This was stated by Participant 2: *“I find that when I am stressed out, I will take a long jog and come back less stressed.”* Others adopted a written reflection, as participant 7 explained: *“I write down my fears, and I make them feel smaller.”*

Discussion

The present study examined the emotional well-being of FGUS and their impact on academic success, while also identifying institutional barriers, support systems, and coping strategies. The findings highlight impostor syndrome, financial insecurity, and loneliness as central emotional stressors that negatively influence academic engagement and outcomes. These results are broadly consistent with existing literature, which identifies FGUS as particularly vulnerable to intersecting academic, financial, and psychosocial pressures. However, unlike some large-scale survey findings that generalize mental health concerns across diverse student populations, the current study provides context-specific insights into how these stressors are experienced and negotiated in everyday academic life.

Impostor syndrome emerged as a prominent theme in this study, reinforcing earlier work that links first-generation status with persistent self-doubt despite academic competence. Similarly, financial insecurity was found to significantly disrupt students' academic focus, aligning with findings by Mulaudzi (2023), who reported that financial strain contributes directly to anxiety and diminished academic performance. While prior studies (e.g., Aruguete & Katrevich, 2017) attribute lower academic performance among FGUS partly to inadequate academic preparation, the present findings extend this argument by demonstrating that emotional burdens, particularly financial stress and psychological insecurity, play an equally critical role. In this sense, the study shifts the focus from a deficit-oriented view of academic preparedness to a more nuanced understanding of emotional and structural constraints.

Loneliness and difficulties in social integration are also featured strongly in the findings. Consistent with Mulaudzi (2023) and Hassan (2024), participants reported challenges in

building social networks and developing a sense of belonging, often exacerbated by cultural dislocation and homesickness. While previous research has linked social isolation to poor academic outcomes, the current study further illustrates how these experiences interact with emotional distress to hinder both academic confidence and participation. This highlights the importance of viewing academic performance not merely as a function of cognitive ability but as deeply embedded within social and emotional contexts.

Concerning coping strategies, the study found that participants relied primarily on self-motivation and peer support, which aligns with prior research emphasizing the role of social support, optimism, and problem-solving in stress management (Hatunoglu, 2020; Salam et al., 2019). However, certain strategies, such as time management, journaling, and exercise, reported by participants, were not uniformly evidenced across all cases and should therefore be interpreted cautiously. Unlike some studies that position time management as a central determinant of academic success, the current findings suggest that it functions more as a supplementary coping mechanism rather than a primary explanatory factor. This distinction is important to avoid overgeneralization and ensures that interpretations remain grounded in the data.

At the same time, the study acknowledges the coexistence of maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as avoidance, self-blame, and denial, which have also been documented in earlier research (Abdallah et al., 2021; Alkhawaldeh et al., 2023; Anggraini & Santhoso, 2017; Cortes et al., 2022). The presence of both adaptive and maladaptive strategies underscores the complexity of FGUS experiences and suggests that coping is not a linear or uniformly positive process. In fact, the findings indicate that without adequate institutional support,

students may oscillate between constructive and detrimental coping behaviours, thereby affecting their mental health and academic stability.

A critical contribution of this study lies in its examination of institutional support systems. Participants reported that existing mental health services were often insufficient or not tailored to their specific socioeconomic and cultural needs, corroborating earlier findings (Vescovelli et al., 2017). While previous literature advocates for comprehensive support structures, the current study highlights a gap between policy recommendations and lived experiences. This reinforces calls for universities to move beyond generic interventions and adopt culturally responsive, student-centred approaches (House et al., 2020). Programs such as mentorship initiatives, peer networks, and inclusive counselling services supported by prior studies (Cage et al., 2021; Duffy, 2023) are validated by the present findings, though their accessibility and effectiveness remain uneven.

Importantly, the study challenges the assumption that financial aid alone is sufficient to support FGUS. Instead, it argues for a more holistic framework that integrates emotional well-being, social belonging, and academic support. This aligns with broader socio-ecological perspectives, which emphasize the interaction between individual, institutional, and structural factors in shaping student outcomes. At the same time, the findings caution against deficit-based narratives by recognizing the resilience, agency, and resourcefulness demonstrated by FGUS, particularly through peer collaboration and self-driven coping efforts.

In conclusion, the discussion highlights the need for a more coherent and evidence-based interpretation of FGUS experiences by closely aligning findings with existing literature while

avoiding unsupported generalizations. By critically engaging with prior research and situating the findings within a broader theoretical and empirical context, the study strengthens its contribution to understanding the complex relationship between emotional well-being and academic success. Future research should continue to integrate qualitative insights with quantitative trends to develop more inclusive and context-sensitive educational policies that address both psychological and structural barriers faced by FGUS.

Conclusion

Comprehensively, this study supports the idea that mind and marks are closely interconnected among first-generation university students. Emotional issues like impostor syndrome, financial problems, and social isolation are the most significant factors that can interfere a lot with academic performance unless addressed. However, the findings indicate that these students are quite remarkable and capable of high success when provided with targeted support and opportunities to build coping strategies. This would indicate that universities can play a powerful role in promoting emotional well-being through mentorship, counselling, and peer groups. Institutions not only support the first-generation learners but also enhance campus diversity, retention, and overall academic success.

The qualitative design of our study provides valuable insights that are, however, not generalized as it is not the population of all FGUS. Recall bias and a single-campus environment are the reasons suggesting that the collected results may not be generalised. To extend these findings, future studies are thus supposed to adopt bigger and more heterogeneous samples and the mixed methods approach. It would be particularly helpful if longitudinal studies were done in order to follow the emotional paths of the FGU students

and identify the most opportune intervention times. Importantly, a researcher is encouraged to take an intersectional perspective, analysing the interactions between race, gender, socioeconomic status, and other identity markers and first-gen status in determining well-being and grades. Such gaps are field areas we will be addressing to advance our work to ensure that campuses move to comprehensive support systems that first-generation students require.

Finally, the commitment of institutions will be essential in making the first-generation university students succeed in terms of having mind over marks. According to our results and the existing literature, emotional health needs to be considered as the priority among universities because supporting FGU students healthily allows them to perform significantly better and causes higher education to become more productive and inclusive.

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