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RECEIVED 04 November 2025
REVISED 03 February 2026
ACCEPTED 09 February 2026
PUBLISHED 20 February 2026
CORRECTED 27 February 2026

CITATION

Gore O (2026) Leveraging the strengths that first-generation students have to succeed in South African higher education.
Front. Educ. 11:1739140.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2026.1739140

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Leveraging the strengths that first-generation students have to succeed in South African higher education

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Although broadening access has led to increased student enrolment in South African higher education since 1994, student success remains a challenge. While diversities became multiple, varied and complex with increased enrolments, the pervasive use of a deficit approach, which views such students as lacking, significantly influences low achievements. This study aimed to establish the strengths first-generation students have which help them to succeed within a context of systemic challenges. It is informed by the cultural capital theory and argues that first-generation students have the resources and strengths that universities should leverage in interventions aimed at improving student success. The paper describes the qualitative methodology used. This study employed five focus group discussions (FGDs) and 15 interviews to obtain data from final-year students at a university in South Africa. A stratified purposive sampling technique was used to select 73 students from the eight university faculties and eight modules selected based on performance. Data were coded and thematically analysed using NVivo 14, a qualitative software. Coded text were combined together to form subthemes and the subsequent themes. Key findings demonstrate that these first-generation students were self-driven and hardworking, disciplined and resourceful during their studies. While some of these strengths are not aligned to the cultural capital theory, they are significant to the geographical and historical context of South Africa where there is high inequality and poverty.

KEYWORDS

cultural capital theory, deficit approach, enabling factors, first-generation students, student success

Background of the study

The South African government broadened participation in its higher education since 1995 as a way of meeting the transformation imperatives of promoting economic growth and reducing inequality. Diversities became multiple, varied and complex with increased enrolments in higher education. The main challenge is the shift of student identity from the 'traditional university student' to predominantly the first-generation student, that is, first in their families to enter tertiary education. Enrolment into universities doubled from 500 000 in 1994 to 1 138 011 students in 2021 [[Council on Higher Education \(CHE\), 2023](#)]. Most of the students enrolled at the universities (71%) are first-generation students who struggle to complete their

studies, with African¹ students constituting the majority (76%) of the first-generation students (Mgqwashu, 2023, np). Cohort studies reveal that African students underperform compared to their White counterparts. African students had the lowest achievements with a graduation rate of 20.8% compared to the White 28.3% in 2021 [Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2024]. These statistics suggest that African students, who are mostly the first-generation students, experience some barriers that prevent them from succeeding. A complexity of factors such as failure to cope with university education, underpreparedness, inadequate finances, inability to use English as the language of instruction, lack of confidence, mental health problems, and lack of a sense of belonging to the university environment prevent first-generation students from completing their studies (Kelly-Laubscher et al., 2018). While most of the literature and interventions target the challenges the first-generation students face, the persistence of low and skewed outcomes suggest the need to employ alternative approaches to understand student needs and improve student success. This study explored the strengths that the first-generation students display to succeed at South African universities in a context of systemic challenges in the South African higher education sector.

A higher success rate of first-generation students in South African higher education is essential to meet the country's human capital needs for economic growth. Although access into higher education has doubled since 1994, representation of the African students from the country's population in public universities is still low (21.4%) contrasted to White (48%) students in 2021 [Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2024]. The overall proportion of people with a degree in South Africa is lower (14.9%) compared to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries that average 45%, Brazil (22.7%) and Mexico (25.3%), for the age groups 25–34 year in 2020, pointing to the need for the country to increase access [Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2024]. Even after enrolling at universities, systemic challenges have contributed to low attainments amongst the students especially first-generation students. External factors of the university that prevent some students from graduating include under-preparedness due to poor schooling, poor socio-economic background, and inadequate information about choice of degree and careers (Khuluvhe et al., 2021; Gore, 2021). After enrolment, first-generation students experience challenges such as the difficulty of adjusting to the unfamiliar university environment, dissatisfaction with the institution, loneliness, inadequate finances for living expenses and transport to and from the campuses, and uncondusive accommodation (Ruswa and Gore, 2022). Factors related to the teaching and learning domain including failure to understand content because of the language of instruction and the 'articulation gap,' that is the mismatch between the academic expectations by universities and the actual skills students bring from schooling associated with inequality in the schooling system (Scott, 2017, p. 37–39). Black first-generation students living far away from the campus experience an intersectionality of multiple vulnerabilities in their daily lives which limit their time spent on studies (Gore and Walker, 2020; Wilson-Strydom et al., 2016).

1 The South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) uses racial categories such as White and Black students who include Africans for the purposes of planning, monitoring and funding with the aim of addressing historical inequalities of the past apartheid as required by the country's constitution.

Universities in South Africa have designed and implemented interventions such as foundational and bridging programmes, student support programmes such as academic mentorship, peer mentoring, academic literacy and reading programmes. However, these interventions have not had the desired result: first-generation students continue to underperform. Low success among first-generation students not only wastes the country's resources, but also counteracts the country's efforts to reduce inequality and advance social justice, especially on the opportunities students would have lost and intellectual potential from these individuals (Scott, 2018; van Zyl et al., 2020). It is critical for historically marginalised and first-generation students to obtain a degree so they can access employment and increase their chances of social mobility. University graduates have higher chances of obtaining employment compared to those without a degree. In 2025 unemployment was lowest among the university graduates (23.9%) against those with only secondary school qualifications (47.6%) and those with only primary school qualifications (51.6%) (Statistics South Africa, 2025). This emphasises the importance of improving the success rate of first-generation students in South African universities.

The contribution of the study is the contextualisation of Yosso's cultural capital theory (Yosso, 2005) in the geographical context of South Africa, which has a history of disadvantage and high inequality. The study demonstrated that first-generation students in South African universities have a wealth of resources that enabled them to persist in their studies, challenging the deficit view. These strengths are "Belonging to social groups," "Aspirations," "Adaptability," "Perseverance," "Motivation and hardworking," "Self-discipline," and "Resourcefulness." While "Belonging to social groups," "Aspirations," "Adaptability," and "Perseverance," align with Yosso's (2005) social, aspirational, navigational, and resistance capital, what emerged as new from the current study, which is also its contribution, is "Motivation and hardworking" "Self-discipline" and "Resourcefulness."

Literature review

Worldwide, first-generation students are marginalised as lacking the cultural, academic and prerequisite skills to manage university education and, therefore, as requiring remedial support. The dominant view is that first-generation students who are ethnic minorities in the USA generally spend only a short time at university and never graduate because they lack aspirations (Carlton, 2025; Kamalumpundi et al., 2024; Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013). Yet inadequate finances, discrimination based on race and ethnicity, and underpreparedness, lack of mentorship, negative role models, fear of debt to fund their university education are problems more prevalent to first-generation students than the traditional ones who experience financial and academic-related stress (Carlton, 2025; Kamalumpundi et al., 2024). Similar perceptions inform Australian literature where first-generation students, mainly indigenous Aboriginal students, referred to students from low socio-economic status (SES), are pathologised. It seems that although there has been an increase enrolment in Australia, first-generation indigenous Aboriginal students are still viewed through deficit theory lenses. They are regarded as a "problem" and are associated with low entry points, poor performance and failure (O'Shea et al., 2016, p. 348). While these students have similar aspirations to those from high SES, low SES are seen as not belonging at university and pathologised as lacking aspirations compared to the

traditional students (Gore et al., 2017; Patfield et al., 2021). The mainstream literature in Latin America shows that first-generation students are at high risk of not completing their studies because of not having the cultural, social and economic capital needed for them to succeed in universities (Jarpa-Arriagada and Rodríguez-Garcés, 2017; López-Cárdenas et al., 2018; Fernandes, 2019; Webb, 2019). In Chile, for example, higher education is influenced by the neo-liberal policies where the government has reduced funding and opened the market, resulting in the increase of private and commercialised universities. As they anticipate social mobility, most first-generation students in Chile complete their schooling under-prepared for university education and enroll in private universities (Flanagan Borquez, 2017). These students have limited choices about the university and degree programmes to enroll because they rely on the family capital that gives them inadequate guidance, often too late when students complete their secondary schooling (Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2022). Additionally, lack of finances, being alienated by the university environment, long distance to campus, stress because of not belonging to the university, and balancing academic responsibilities and paid jobs are some of the barriers to students completing their studies (Flanagan Borquez, 2017; Flanagan Borquez and Soriano-Soriano, 2024). Similarly, South African literature tends to view low SES students through a deficit lens. They are seen as having internal and external shortcomings ranging from cognitive, motivational, cultural, linguistic to familial deficits (Pym and Kapp, 2013; Smit, 2012).

In their attempts to address the low achievement rate, universities could have inadvertently taken the deficit approach and thus contributed to the ineffectiveness of interventions. Embedded within the deficit approach is the view that underperforming students are intrinsically deficient. Bourdieu's Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986) postulates that low-income students, who are mostly the first-generation students, lack the economic, cultural and social capital essential for them to succeed in universities. The theory sees lacking the appropriate economic, cultural and social capital and the underperformance of the low socio-economic and first-generation students as reproducing inequality in universities and contributing little to social mobility of the students. It is clear from the theory that the students' low socio-economic background is regarded as a deficiency that prevents them from succeeding as the students do not benefit from their families and backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1986). This ignores the various resources and strengths that these students bring to the university. Moreover, universities that use the deficiency approach blame first-generation students for poor performance, seeing them as having problems that need to be "fixed" (Smit, 2012, p. 370). It seems that universities fail to recognise that the reason for first-generation students' underperformance may lie, at least in part, with their underpreparedness to accommodate diverse students (Gore and Walker, 2020).

Some of the remedial actions used are counterproductive. For example, students described as underprepared are separated from the mainstream classes and placed in bridging or extended degree programmes which stigmatise them (Calitz, 2018). The result is that the first-generation students are often alienated or disengaged and thus underachieve (McKay and Devlin, 2016). It is also important to recognise that first-generation students are offered a "one size fits all" programme in the bridging and extended degree programmes, as opposed to programmes that take account of their diversity, their access to resources and the systemic challenges they encounter (Mathebula, 2019). Additionally, the deficit approach encourages a negative view of first-generation students, stereotyping them as being

lazy and lacking motivation and appropriate culture and socialisation skills. This is counterproductive because it pessimistically implies that first-generation students cannot overcome disadvantage (O'Shea et al., 2016). Equally relevant is that because of the lower expectations of lecturers, inadequate effort is put into assisting first-generation students, which contributes to the perpetuation of inequality and disadvantage.

South African universities need to recognise that first-generation students come to universities with some resources and strengths that can be leveraged to raise their success. The Australian literature reveals that female Aboriginal students succeed because of their persistence within the broader goals they want to achieve, their ability to solve daily problems such as balancing parenting responsibilities and academic life, their confidence in seeking assistance, and their ability to create support network with other women of the same group (Uink et al., 2021). The Australian literature also shows that students from low SES were able to learn independently, were agentic as they proactively sought assistance from their lecturers and were able to manage their time (Macaulay et al., 2023; McKay and Devlin, 2016). Despite the cumulative disadvantages, a complex set of factors enables first-generation students to persist in universities in Latin America. Studies by Flanagan Borquez (2017) and Flanagan Borquez and Soriano-Soriano (2024) report that first-generation students in Chile benefit from familial capital as their families encouraged and supported them emotionally to persist in their studies, helped secure bursaries and technological devices, and created study spaces in the small living spaces they had. Through a practice of "Amalia," families of these students made sacrifices by going beyond their means to pay for accommodation and living expenses, even in a different town, which might result in debt (Flanagan Borquez and Soriano-Soriano, 2024, 07). First-generation students activated their social capital by feeling at home in the university's spaces, managing their emotions in the stressful university environment, creating bonds with friends, and seeking help through mentorship, tutorial and study groups (Linne, 2018; Flanagan Borquez and Soriano-Soriano, 2024). These students developed cultural capital by learning the language, expectations, strategies for success, being confident and persistent in their studies (Flanagan Borquez and Soriano-Soriano, 2024). Another study by Linne (2018) reveals that first-generation students developed coping mechanisms such as being part of groups, help-seeking behavior through seeking tutorial services, and participating in an organisation at the university. Despite them working long hours to finance their studies, first-generation students doubled their efforts to catch up and understand the content, and developed new habits to improve their performance, which highlights the adaptive and resilience capitals (Webb, 2019).

Similarly, some studies in South Africa have revealed that hardships associated with their poor socio-economic backgrounds, have allowed first-generation students to develop coping mechanisms, which they can use to their advantage when navigating the university system (Mkhize, 2024; Naudé and Breshears, 2024; Ndofirepi et al., 2023). Their previous experience of overcoming challenges such as lack of finances, being responsible of household and failure during their schooling have made these students resilient and able to persevere (Mkhize, 2024; Motsabi et al., 2020). The need to support their families, social mobility through ending intergenerational poverty, and the pressure from their families and communities to attain a degree were factors that motivated and build resilience among the first-generation students (Alcock and Belluigi, 2018; Naudé and Breshears, 2024; Ndofirepi et al., 2023). In addition to managing

multiple responsibilities and even take leadership roles these students demonstrate agency through being motivated, hardworking, and being able to make strategic decisions in their academic lives (Alcock and Belluigi, 2018; Kapp et al., 2014). This suggests that first-generation students have some valuable strengths and resources that universities should fully recognise rather than view these students through deficit lenses despite the intersecting challenges they face.

With a low academic outcomes, South African universities are concerned with finding ways of how to support the first-generation students to persist. While persistence refers to students' ability to complete their degree programmes; motivation, having self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and a positive perception of the value of the curriculum are essential for their success (Tinto, 2017). Tinto (2017) observes that although self-efficacy is essential for students to complete their studies, first-generation students lack the belief and confidence that they will succeed. To develop self-efficacy and confidence, universities should encourage the students to participate in the university's peer support programmes, confidence-building programmes such as leadership programmes, and social events that give students the opportunity to develop social networks. As most first-generation students are alienated by the institutional cultures especially in the historically white universities in South Africa, creating friendly environments and activities that foster shared academic and social experiences and pedagogical practices that engage students is key for the persistence of the students (Tinto, 2017).

The above literature has revealed that first-generation students are regarded as lacking the required attributes and capitals that universities require because of the low socio-economic backgrounds. Only a limited amount of literature has focused on the strengths that the first-generation students bring into the universities from their backgrounds, which contributes to their success.

Problem statement

Labelling and 'othering' students masks the competence that disadvantaged, first-generation students have. Universities do not take full account of their competence when designing interventions to help address the challenges these students face. They also tend to have a single way of approaching learning and teaching that places traditional students at the centre and non-traditional students at the periphery (O'Shea et al., 2016). One way of creating a conducive environment for the first-generation students in South African higher education would be through decolonising² teaching methods, pedagogy and university spaces (Mbembe, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Recognising alternative knowledges, which resonate with the lives of the first-generation students, as opposed to the dominant Eurocentric knowledge, could facilitate a move away from deficit thinking in South African higher education.

University lecturers, researchers and university management do not pay adequate attention to the needs of marginalised students as they tend to view their situation as normal and expected (Smit, 2012). The knowledge gap that this study addresses is that while there is

considerable amount of literature on the challenges students face, there has been limited focus on what enables the first-generation students to succeed. It is possible that universities have ignored valuable attributes that the first-generation students have such as perseverance, motivation, and the ability to navigate the unfamiliar university spaces (Kapp et al., 2014; Mathebula, 2019). This study therefore responded to the following research: *What strengths and resources can first-generation students draw on to increase their chances of success in the context of systemic challenges they face at South African universities?*

When the strengths and resources of these students already have are fully recognised, universities can leverage them to design more effective student support programmes.

Theoretical framework: cultural capital theory

The study drew on Yosso's (2005) cultural capital theory to explore the valuable strengths and resources that first-generation students have already developed during their school studies before entering university. Universities can use the valuable strengths and resources to improve the success rate of these students within a context of systematic challenges. Although Yosso's (2005) cultural capital theory was developed to improve the success rate of the marginalised students in the context of the USA post-school education, the high levels of inequality in South African higher education and society makes it appropriate for this study. The theory helped us to view first-generation students through a positive lens, making it possible to consider the knowledge and skills they already have rather than the negative lens of a deficit approach. This theory also allowed us to recognise students' agency through exploring the decisions made and the actions taken that enhanced their wellbeing and academic success at university. The argument presented in this study is that first-generation students have a wealth of resources gained from their diverse backgrounds, that can be leveraged for success at university. Yosso (2005) lists six forms of capital:

- *Linguistic capital* refers to the skills obtained through the ability to communicate in multiple languages.
- *Aspirations capital* is the ability of students to establish goals for their future that they want to pursue in the face of the challenges experienced.
- *Familial capital* constitutes knowledge gained from their immediate and extended family, thus a sense of kinship and community.
- *Social capital* is the social network that marginalised students develop and use for social support.
- *Navigational capital* capacities are the skills that the students can use to navigate the university spaces with which they are unfamiliar.
- *Resistant capital* means the resistance students have to injustices and the resilience they have to face challenging situations (Yosso, 2005).

Combining these capitals makes it possible to gain a multidimensional view of the cultural wealth and strengths that first-generation students have. By recognising and expanding their cultural wealth and strengths when articulating the challenges students face, universities

² Decolonization is a movement in South Africa aimed to transform universities that privilege Eurocentric views so that students needs are catered for through promoting indigenous knowledge systems.

can design and implement effective interventions for the success of the first-generation students.

Methodology

The study employed qualitative methodology. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews were used to gather data from final-year students at a university in South Africa. Final-year students were selected because they were close to completing their studies and could be regarded as successful and able to reflect on their experiences since their enrolment at the university. Nevertheless, the limitation of having selected that group excluded some students who dropped out between the first and final years of the studies. This is considering the high dropout rate of 33% among contact students in a cohort set to complete their study within the three years [Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2024]. A total of five FGDs with between 6 and 10 participants each and additional 15 in-depth interviews with different participants were conducted. Seventy-three students took part in FGDs and interviews, which were conducted online. Different students took part in the FGDs and interviews based on the availability of the students with those students who indicated that they were unavailable to participate during scheduled times of the FGDs being asked to participate in the interviews on the times convenient to them. Simultaneously, the use of the FGDs and in-depth interviews enabled both collective and individual perspectives to be captured, encouraging those who could have been uncomfortable to speak about their experiences in a group setting to speak freely (Guest et al., 2012). Whereas the FGDs were between 70 and 90 minutes long, the in-depth interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes. All the FGDs and interviews were conducted in English, a language that all the students were comfortable with. Topics covered in the FGDs and in-depth interviews included challenges students faced, aspects of their lives contributing to their persistence, and how the university could support them to complete their studies.

This sample was deemed adequate as saturation was reached, a point when data repeats itself, demonstrates richness and ceases to generate new insights (Morse, 2015). To obtain diverse views, the first-generation students that were invited to participate in the study were drawn from those studying eight modules that were purposively selected from the eight faculties, based on students' performance (four underperformance, two average performance, and two high performance). This stratified purposive sampling resulted in a balance of participants across the different academic backgrounds yielding a wide range of learning experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018) while monitoring the recruiting process ensured a fair representation of participants across the various performance levels (see Table 1).

After the audio files were transcribed verbatim, data were coded and thematically analysed with the aid of NVivo 14, a qualitative software package. Descriptive coding was initially implemented to identify the categories of text with similar meaning, which were then merged to form subthemes, and subsequently themes. The process involved identifying patterns of text with similar meaning, assigning codes to text, and clustering of the related codes to form subthemes. The subthemes were then merged to form themes from which meaning was derived to before building a story. Although Yosso's (2005) cultural capital theory guided the analysis, this did not entirely influence the process as new themes were allowed to emerge. The themes

TABLE 1 Students' characteristics.

Characteristic	Category (years)	Total (n = 73)	Percentage
Gender	Male	33	45.2
	Female	40	54.8
Race	African	61	83.6
	Colored	2	2.6
	Indian/Asian	1	1.3
	White	9	12.3
Age	20–22	43	58.9
	23–25	27	36.9
	26 and above	3	4.1
Faculty	Education	12	16.4
	Engineering	10	13.7
	Agricultural Natural Sciences	10	13.7
	Humanities	12	16.4
	Management and Economic Sciences	11	15.1
	Law	9	12.3
	Theology	9	12.3
Module performance category	High performing	18	24.7
	Average performing	19	26.0
	Low performing	36	49.3
Funding	National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)*	53	72.6
	Private bursaries and loans	7	9.6
	Self-funded or own savings	3	4.1
	Parents/family	10	13.6

*The National Student Financial Aid Scheme is a government funding that gives bursaries to students from low income families to cover their university tuition and living expenses.

that emerged from the data were belongingness to social groups, aspiration, adaptability, perseverance, motivation and diligence, self-discipline and resourcefulness. Ethical procedures were observed throughout the study. We obtained ethics approval from the university and ensured that participation was voluntary by using a consent form that made it quite clear that they could refuse to participate. Additionally, confidentiality was achieved through not sharing the data with people outside of the research team and using pseudonyms to anonymise the data.

Findings

The findings reveal that first-generation students belonged to and benefitted from their membership of social groups, were driven by the goals they wanted to achieve, and had the navigational capacity and perseverance to succeed in their studies despite the difficulties they encountered. It is equally significant that first-generation students were self-motivated and hardworking because of the need to attain their goals and improve their socio-economic condition and that they were self-disciplined and resourceful.

Belonging to social groups (social capital)

Belonging to social groups that offered support emerged as critical to the lives of the students during their studies. Interacting with their peers and sharing their challenges not only presented a platform for motivating another, but also improved their mental wellbeing.

I think having a positive relationship with our peers was helpful when we were depressed because we talked with someone who is of our age group, we are more open to them than when we talk to lecturers. [...] I think also the environment being able to share space with peers who have done this thing before, who have completed the academic year before, being able to have an interaction with them, having to be guided by them, and giving you basically motivation and tips on how to tackle certain issues. (FGD 3, Dingalo, Male, Faculty of Theology)

Related to that was belonging to religious groups, which contributed to students' spiritual wellbeing. Thabang, who had initially dropped out of the B.Com Accounting degree programme before enrolling for a B.Com in Business Management, explained:

Yes, there was a time, especially the time I dropped out as a student. [...] I was spiritually distant from God, I wasn't even attending church. Spiritually I was so low. But now through talking to family and other peoples I gained that faith and trust in God. This has given me peace a lot, God is in charge and will not let me down. (In depth-Interview Thabang; Male, Black, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences)

Thabang's belief in religion enhanced his wellbeing and increased his confidence during his studies. Moreover, belonging to social groups meant they had academic support as students helped each other with assignments, and shared important information about the lecturers and the university. This was especially crucial for the distance education students:

Because sometimes you do not understand things, if you have your peers or classmates or people who know about what you are doing or the course that you are doing, it is important to keep such connections because it helps you grow. If you know something you have to share that information with others, you should not be selfish or shy because after all that degree will also be shy to be finished on time. (FGD 1, Ipeleng, Female, Black, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences)

Clearly, social networks were regarded as a safety net when students struggled with certain topics in their modules. Some

students were able to befriend others who were familiar with the academic support modules they were studying, including those who had already completed and passed the modules. They greatly valued the opportunity to share ideas with each other about their academic work. Although belonging to social groups emerged from students across all faculties, it was not reported by students from the Faculty of Engineering who struggled to create social networks because of busy schedules. Simultaneously, religion was mostly cited by students from the low performing modules experiencing a lot of stress from intersectional challenges suggesting their belonging to religious groups for emotional and spiritual support.

Aspirations (aspirational capital)

First-generation students were driven by the need to pursue their career aspirations through attaining a degree. While students viewed attaining a degree as essential for accessing employment and receiving a high income, they also wanted to graduate to improve their socio-economic status and that of their families.

Aspect that helps us to succeed as students is the bigger picture. The reason why we started with everything, I believe that there's a reason why each of us started with the course and we have a vision that we see for ourselves. So, if I give up now; what was the reason for starting? The factor that keeps me going is where I see myself in the future despite things that are happening around me. It's just that one goal that I want to reach. (FGD 5, Kedidimetse, female, Black, Faculty of Humanities)

The determination to achieve their goals was key to the students' success. Although some were discouraged by their peers for having enrolled for degree programmes that were perceived as having limited employment opportunities, a Bachelor of Theology, for instance, students were determined to graduate and were optimistic about securing employment after graduating. Simultaneously, students aspired to contribute to their communities after having graduated. Advising people on ways of developing their communities and sharing information about career paths with young people in schools in their communities were some of the social goals they mentioned:

You can help the community by giving different ideas on ways to develop the community around you and also go to basic education schools and give students some kind of guidance on how to choose the good careers and [degree] programs, towards their studies and also give some motivation speech as well. (In-depth Interview, Participant 15, Bonolo, Female, Black, Faculty of Humanities)

Graduating was perceived as a way of gaining the respect of their communities. Students had a wide range of plans for the future that extended beyond the extrinsic value of the degree programme or employment after graduating. As such, students looked forward to contributing socially to the communities, which is the intrinsic value of their degree. While students from across all the module performance levels demonstrated the aspirational capital about their careers in the future, those from the poorly resourced schools and families showed to have social aspirations related to changing their communities.

Adaptability (navigational capital)

The first-generation students reported having the capacity to adapt to the university's environment. One aspect they quickly adjusted to was the use of technology. Although they had little exposure to technology during their schooling, students quickly gained a mastery of the university's Learning Management System, eFundi.

And then you make sure that you also go through your eFundi [Learning Management System]. And as now we're going to write exams, you make sure you will study upfront, you don't wait for lecturer to tell you when to start. You have to make sure that you study. [...] You need to make sure that you plan your work. Because if you jump one day without accessing it (eFundi), you will lose a lot of information. (In-depth Interview, Modise, Male, Black, Faculty of Education)

Besides that, students took the initiative to study ahead and paid attention to information posted by the lecturers on eFundi. At the same time, the students learnt to adjust to studying independently despite the poor schooling that conditioned them to be reliant on teachers. Their navigational skills obtained from solving problems from an early age helped them to navigate the complex university environment such as the bureaucratic registration processes, and to apply for funding from the state bursary scheme that supports low-income student, National Student Financial Aid Scheme. Adaptability was more pronounced among the black low-income students considering their little exposure to the university's institutional culture and expectations.

Perseverance (resistance capital)

The data shows that first-generation students persevered throughout their studies as some of them had failed and had to repeat some modules since they enrolled at the university. Because of poor performance, others had dropped out of the degree programmes they were initially enrolled for. Rebatho, who lost a bursary due to poor performance, observed:

And then I had to drop out because I didn't have funding. [...] So right now I'm here back. Things are going well so far for me. So hopefully I'll be competing my degree this year. (In-depth Interview, Rebatho, Male, Black, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences)

So, I am personally very undefeated, I try, by all means to set priorities and know why I'm here. I'm like, okay, these are the challenges, if anything, the challenges are not setting me off, they're pushing me to do better to be greater. So, I think the challenges have motivated me to be the kind of student that I am today, or to achieve great things in this university. (In depth Interview, Thabani, Male, Black, Faculty of Natural and Agriculture Sciences)

Central to the quotes is the notion of the students' perseverance, unwillingness to give up, and their positive attitude to work towards completing their studies. Low performance students reported perseverance so that they can complete their studies. Being able to bounce back after having failed was central to the student's ability to continue their studies. Equally relevant to that was their prior experience of having failed during schooling, which strengthened their ability not

to lose heart and keep going when they failed some modules at the university. Through their perseverance, the students were able to overcome the obstacles that would have prevented them from succeeding.

Motivation and hardworking

First-generation students were willing to learn, contributing to their success. The students were self-driven in their studies, and they took the initiative to find additional resources for their modules. They were determined to succeed, regardless of the odds against them.

I have learnt a few life lessons along the way, so I have skipped, 'I now need to grow up things are on my shoulders.' I think complaining is not going to help for one to be a successful student. You have to take it upon yourself and go ok I am going to a library, or I am taking out this book. I think to be successful you have to take a lot of it on to yourself and don't depend on somebody else. (FGD1, Senwelo, Female, Black, Faculty of Health Sciences)

There are a lot of things that happen that can take away your motivation. But if you're determined, whatever the situation you just keep going. (In-depth Interview, Rehana, Female, Indian, Faculty of Health Sciences)

Students took ownership of learning and were hardworking. Besides that, some students were motivated by role models from their communities and graduates who had successfully completed their studies within the context of similar challenges. Again, their poor socio-economic backgrounds and the need to improve themselves and their families was a crucial source of motivation for these first-generation students. The form of capital was more evident from high performing students who attributed their performance to their effort and commitment to their studies.

Self-discipline

Students were able to control their desires, emotions and thoughts, and commit themselves to achieving their life goals, reflecting their self-discipline. Central to self-discipline was their ability to make decisions that prioritised the important aspects of their educational and personal lives at the university. A critical element of self-discipline was their ability to manage their time well, balancing their academic work and social activities.

What we do is we have a balanced life, what we live is academic life and the social life. The academic life is from Monday to Friday so that means in cycle of 7 days I have free time to party on a Friday night. [...] Discipline now has to play a major role because if you are disciplined you can go anywhere, but if you are not disciplined you will not get the results that you need. (FGD 1: Participant 2, Refilwe, Female, Black, Faculty of Law)

Time management was pivotal to the success of the students, especially those that had to balance their work, academic, family and social lives. Those who were from child-headed households had begun to make important decisions and manage their lives from an earlier age which advantaged them in managing the conflicting demands of university education. Students regarded time management as a life skill they had gained prior to university, something they had practised during their university studies, and something that would be

significant in their future lives, both in their family and work environments. The self-discipline that students demonstrated enabled them to pay attention to their studies and at the same time engage in social, family and study activities. Self-discipline was less reported by the low performing students compared to high performing students who believed that their success was because of that.

Resourcefulness

Some students were able to meet the challenges of having limited learning materials and finances and inadequate data in their off-campus accommodation. For example, some students used the strategy of using study materials from previous years to assist them in their current projects:

And then I think also the ability to be resourceful. More often than not, when it comes to things for engineering, we spend the majority of your third year doing projects whether it's assignments to do a simulation or it's an assignment to go and do lab work. So, being able to be resourceful whether you have reference documents that you can rely on, that are more or less the same, like if you have last year's practical, and the practical that you are doing this year is the same. (In depth Interview, Tshepiso, Male, Black, Faculty of Engineering)

Having learnt how to maximise scarce resources in their life before university, the students were able to thrive despite having limited resources at the university. Being resourceful was evident from low-income backgrounds unlike the middleclass students who had adequate learning and living resources.

Discussion of findings

Findings demonstrate that first-generation students had a wealth of resources ranging from motivation and diligence, aspirations, perseverance, belonging to social groups, resourcefulness, self-discipline, and adaptability. These assets were instrumental in the success of students which contradicts the dominant belief based on the deficit view that first-generation students lack the requisite skills including motivation, aspiration and socialisation needed for them to succeed in universities (Yosso, 2005). Our findings reveal that these first-generation students had developed skills in their previous experiences, studies, and social lives. As a result, they were able to draw on socio-economic background and schooling experiences to meet the challenges and demands of university life, which contributed to their success. This is an alternative view to the dominant perspective that views first-generation students as entirely disadvantaged (Calitz, 2018; McKay and Devlin, 2016).

The findings also illustrate the first-generation students' capacity to use their agency, make decisions, take the initiative, and act on them to achieve what they value at the university. First-generation students had the adaptability skills "Navigational capital" and perseverance skills "Resistance capital" contrary to the view that they lacked the skills to navigate the university system and persist with their studies (Yosso, 2005). First-generation students are self-driven and responsible for their learning to attain their aspirations through using available resources maximally as a means of successfully negotiating the complex university systems. Students with high self-efficacy, which is the belief that they will succeed, tend to engage with their university tasks more and persist until

the task is completed despite the difficulties (Tinto, 2017). Zimmerman et al. (1992) explain that through having high self-efficacy, students become self-regulated and influence their learning and achievements and can apply appropriate strategies to acquire the knowledge and skills for achieving their goals. Because of their high self-efficacy, these first-generation students circumvented the daily challenges they confronted, bounced back after having failed and dropped out of the degree programmes they were studying, and were likely to graduate as they were in their final years. Most students were also likely to achieve their career aspirations of finding employment after graduation [Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2024] and improving their own lives as well as that of their families and communities.

The linguistic and familial capitals did not emerge explicitly from the student data. This shows a limitation of the cultural capital theory (Yosso, 2005) when applied to the context of South African higher education. The absence of linguistic capital among the first-generation students can be explained by the historical inequality in South African context. Most of the first-generation students attend the poorly resourced schools that do not charge fees. After being taught using indigenous languages, students struggle to use English, which is the main language of instruction at university resulting in them performing poorly (Kelly-Laubscher et al., 2018; Scott, 2017). Furthermore, first-generation students' family backgrounds and culture misaligned with the university's culture that was Eurocentric and resembled the middleclass, which explains the absence of the familial capital among the first-generation students (Yosso, 2005). Consequently, these students could not relate the knowledge they learnt from their families to the university's culture and expectations as their families and kin did not have university experience. The South African universities have been blamed for advancing the Western knowledge systems neglecting the indigenous knowledge systems (Mbembe, 2016). Decolonising universities could therefore help the first-generation students to easily adjust to the university environment and connect what they learn at university to their lives (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

"Motivation and hardwork," "Self-discipline" and "Resourcefulness" are the additional strengths that emerged from the findings, which are not outlined in Yosso's Theory (Yosso, 2005). Whereas the dominant literature views first-generation students as lacking discipline during their studies, for example lacking time management skills and failing to balance academic work and social life (Gore and Walker, 2020; Macaulay et al., 2023), what is different from previous studies is 'Self-discipline' that emerged as a strength in this study as first-generation students drew on the diligence developed from their past experiences of hardships including experiences of leading, taking care of their siblings and managing their lives in child-headed households. This is especially significant in the context of South Africa where the country has the highest inequality in the world³, with most black families experiencing poverty partly because of the apartheid legacy and mismanagement and corruption by the post-apartheid governments. Moreover, this study reveals 'Resourcefulness' strength that the low-income students had which is not well pronounced in previous studies. The experience of surviving with limited resources in poor households developed resilience in them and for them to be resourceful during their studies. While the context of limited resources prevents most students from accessing and completing their studies in South Africa, it can motivate, build resilience and contribute to students being resourceful. The above findings are significant

³ South Africa has a Gini co-efficient of 0.63 in 2025 with 0 representing a perfectly equal society and 1 An unequal society (Statistica, 2025).

for university management and policymakers to develop interventions that take into account these strengths so that first-generation students can succeed.

Conclusion and recommendations

The study has revealed that first-generation students had the following strengths and resources that enable them to succeed: motivation and diligence, aspirations, perseverance, belongingness to social groups, resourcefulness, self-discipline, and adaptability. If these strengths and resources that students have are fully recognised by universities and reinforced through support programmes, the success rate of the first-generation students is likely to improve. By fully recognising these strengths and resources, policy makers, practitioners and researchers in universities can help students to develop their agency.

The study recommends that universities identify ways of improving students' Sense of belonging to social groups, Aspirations, Adaptability, Perseverance, Motivation and diligence, Self-discipline and Resourcefulness. This can be achieved through creating platforms for students and encouraging them to build social networks and participate in groups events, intensifying outreach programmes on degree choices and careers before students enroll at the university, intensifying orientation programmes to help students adapt to the university environment, and implementing activities that enhance student motivation such as participating in public events and receiving recognition and constructive criticism. Universities need to foster self-discipline through peer mentorship programmes to strengthen students' resolute commitment to studies to attaining their goals, to encourage and help students to thrive in the context of available resources as a way of promoting resourcefulness, and to provide a platform for senior first-generation graduates to share their experiences with first-year students. These interventions should be implemented together with changes that aim to decolonize the curriculum, teaching methods and university environment so that first-generation students can relate, enabling them to complete their studies. Future research could focus on a mixed-method study to establish the link between these strengths to measurable outcomes such graduation, throughput and retention. The limitation of the study is that it was conducted at a single South African university implying that the strengths identified might not apply to other universities in the country and other countries globally. Nonetheless, readers can choose the strengths that apply to their contexts.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by North-West University Basic and Social Science Research Ethics Committee NWU-00977-22-A7-20. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

OG: Writing – review & editing, Software, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Data curation, Project administration, Formal analysis, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was received for this work and/or its publication. The study was sponsored by the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDG) South Africa through the Siyaphumelela Project.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Esmarie Strydom, Nomasomi Morule, and Rassie Louw at the North-West University's Centre for Teaching and Learning, for their guidance and support throughout this project.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Correction note

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the scientific content of the article.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

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