

College education and social mobility among first-generation graduates in their early careers [from districts of Tamil Nadu, Chennai and Tirunelveli]

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Abstract: College education is seen as a major tool for social transformation, especially for first-generation learners, enabling them to access equal opportunities on par with other non-first-generation learners in society. The research examined whether college education effectively led to meaningful employment and improved social position for individuals across different social backgrounds. The research focused on first-generation graduates in their early stages of career within the age group of 20 -30 years. The districts of Chennai and Tirunelveli of Tamil Nadu were selected to equally represent the southern and northern regions of the state. A qualitative research design was adopted, and data were collected from 30 first-generation graduates through semi-structured interviews. The data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis along with univariate frequency tables. The findings indicated that although higher education enabled access to the formal workforce, it did not consistently ensure alignment between educational qualifications and employment outcomes. A majority of respondents reported that their degree functioned primarily as an eligibility requirement rather than a direct pathway to suitable employment. Factors such as limited academic guidance, financial constraints, language barriers, and gender-based challenges significantly influenced employment opportunities and career progression. The study concluded that college education contributed to partial social mobility. However, its impact remained constrained by structural and institutional inequalities that limited the transition from education to employment.

Key Words: First-generation graduates, social mobility, College education, Employment outcomes, Socio-economic factors.

1. INTRODUCTION:

College education has been widely regarded as a key pathway for achieving social mobility, particularly for first-generation learners who lack a family background in higher education. For such individuals, education represents an opportunity to secure better employment, improve financial conditions, and attain a higher social position in society. However, changing job market conditions, including skill-based hiring and increasing job insecurity, have made the transition from education to employment more complex. As a result, the assumption that higher education automatically leads to upward mobility through employment generation requires critical examination. This study examines whether college education translates into meaningful, degree-equivalent and desired employment among first-generation graduates. Focusing on individuals with up to three years of work experience truly expresses whether first-generation graduates have entered into their aspired job and experienced upward mobility. The study also explores how factors such as social background, access to guidance, and economic conditions shape employment outcomes. By analysing the transition from education to employment, the study aims to understand the extent to which educational attainment contributes to improved social position in contemporary contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

The existing literature on the relationship between education and social mobility suggests that higher education has a significant impact on employment generation and the potential for upward mobility. Nevertheless, the literature has also shown that structural inequalities based on class, gender, caste, and geographical location are also significant factors

that affect educational outcomes and the potential for converting education into employment (Sinha, 2018)¹. Although the chances of higher education have improved for everyone, inequalities in the quality and guidance provided are still major issues for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. First-generation learners are more likely to face difficulties such as a lack of academic guidance, and the lack of knowledge of the system and a lack of awareness about the various academic disciplines. Theoretical literature also explains this phenomenon by showing that education has the potential to promote inequality based on differences in the availability of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1977)², (Bowles and Gintis, 1976)³. Another important factor that has been highlighted by labour market research is the increasing trend of the non-convergence of education and employment outcomes. Labour market research has shown that the chances of underemployment are increasing (Bahl & Sharma, 2023)⁴.

Apart from the above literature findings, an important research gap has been observed in the existing literature regarding the relationship between education and employment outcomes and the potential for converting this into social mobility in the early stages of the labour force. The existing literature has mostly focused on the study of educational outcomes and labour market outcomes separately. Existing studies also show that mobility remains limited despite educational expansion due to structural inequalities (Asher et al., 2022)⁵. Moreover, the existing literature has also failed to observe the experiences of first-generation graduates as they face difficulties in the early stages of labour force involvement. This study aims to bridge the existing research gap by showing the relationship between college education and demographic, social, and economic factors and employment outcomes leading to social mobility for first-generation graduates.

3. OBJECTIVES

- To understand how caste, class, and gender influence the lived experiences of first-generation learners.
- To investigate whether college education is a primary pathway to employment among first-generation graduates.
- To identify the key schemes and provisions offered by the Tamil Nadu government to support first-generation learners.

4. RESEARCH METHOD

Sources of data

Primary data was collected from respondents through semi-structured phone interviews.

Secondary data was obtained from government websites, research journals and articles. These sources helped identify and analyse schemes for first-generation learners in Tamil Nadu, enabling holistic recommendations.

Research design

The study adopted a qualitative approach within a descriptive research design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews to elicit detailed narratives. Inductive Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes from respondents' experiences.

Area of study

The study was conducted in Chennai and Tirunelveli districts of Tamil Nadu. Chennai represented an urban setting with greater opportunities and institutional exposure. Tirunelveli reflected a less urbanised context shaped by cultural and social influences.

Sampling method

A non-random sampling method using snowball sampling was employed. The sample included 30 first-generation graduates aged between 20 and 30 years with up to three years of work experience. Respondents were from Chennai and Tirunelveli and represented diverse gender and social backgrounds.

Tools of data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured phone call interviews with open-ended questions. This approach helped capture in-depth narratives and lived experiences. Additional informal conversations were used to enrich the data further.

5. ANALYSIS:

The data is interpreted and analysed based on inductive thematic analysis with the help of univariate frequency tables and pie diagrams based on the data collected.

Table 1.1
Parental education background of the respondents

Parents' Education	Frequency	Percentage
Uneducated	13	43.33%
Middle School	11	36.66%
High School	6	20%

Figure 1.1

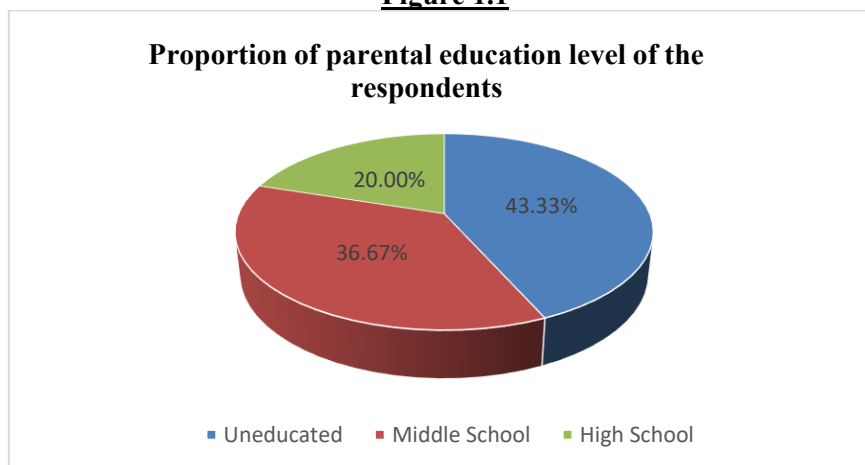
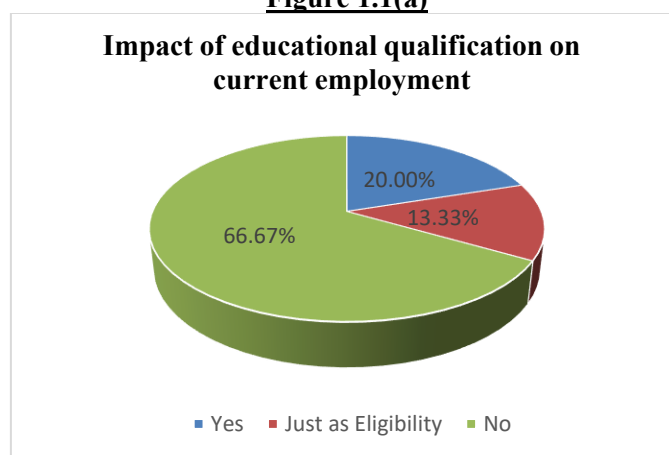


Table 1.1(a)
Role of academic qualification in current employment

Degree-Enabled Current Job	Frequency	Percentage
Yes, directly helped acquire the job	6	20%
Just as Eligibility	4	13.33%
No, did not facilitate employment	20	66.66%

Figure 1.1(a)



Theme 1: Education as Aspiration and Conditional Mobility

Education is experienced as a significant achievement rather than a routine life transition. For most respondents, pursuing higher education represents a break from their family's educational history and carries strong expectations of improving their social and economic position. It is closely associated with hope, responsibility, and the idea of collective family advancement. However, this expectation is not fully realised in practice. Education does not consistently lead to employment aligned with one's field of study. Instead, it functions more as a basic qualification required to enter the job market. While it enables access to employment, it does not guarantee upward mobility or career progression. As a result, mobility remains partial and conditional. Respondents experience some level of change in status, particularly through employment, but this change is often limited, gradual, and uncertain. This reflects a gap between the perceived value of education and its actual outcomes in the labour market.

Table 1.2
Availability of academic guidance among respondents

Academic Guidance	Frequency	Percentage
Yes, it was available	10	33.33%
No, it wasn't available	20	66.66%

Figure 1.2

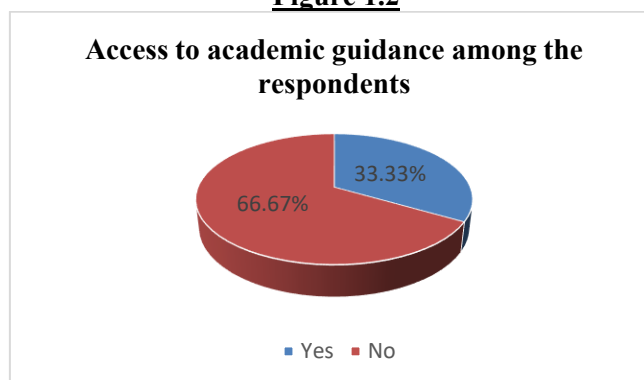
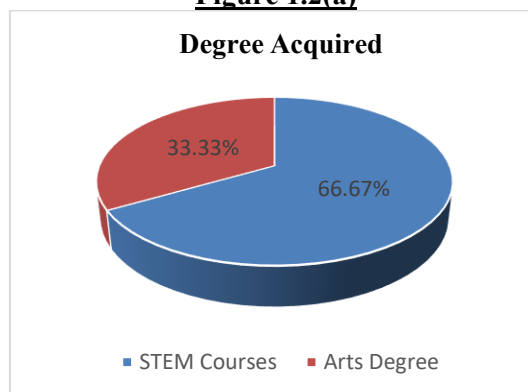


Table 1.2 (a)

Degree Acquired	Frequency	Percentage
STEM Courses	20	66.66%
Arts Degree	10	33.33%

Figure 1.2(a)



Theme 2: Lack of Institutional Guidance and Informational Inequality

A major issue emerging from the analysis is the absence of structured academic and career guidance. Respondents navigate their educational journeys with limited awareness of available options, career pathways, and job market demands. Educational decisions are often made without sufficient information, leading to choices that are not always aligned with future opportunities.

This lack of guidance creates a form of informational inequality. While access to higher education has increased, the ability to effectively navigate the system remains uneven. First-generation learners, in particular, lack exposure to institutional processes, professional networks, and strategic decision-making.

As a result, many respondents realise the limitations of their educational choices only after entering the job market. This delay affects their confidence, employability, and ability to compete with others who possess greater awareness and support. The absence of guidance thus becomes a key factor in shaping unequal outcomes within the education-to-employment transition.

Table 1.3
Distribution of parental occupational status into skilled and unskilled labour

Parents' Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Skilled Labour	19	63.33%
Unskilled Labour	11	36.66%

Figure 1.3

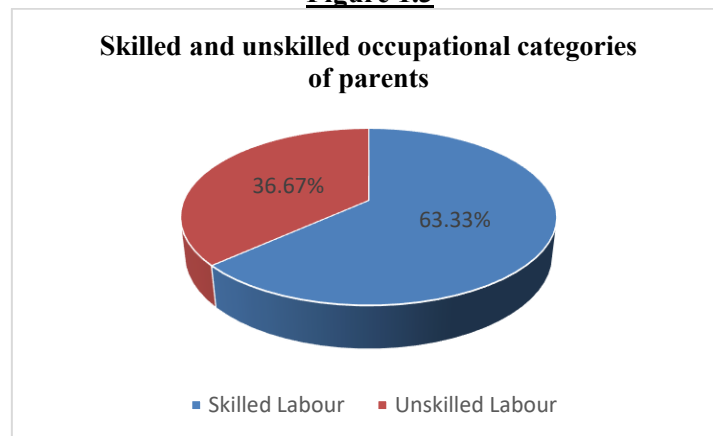
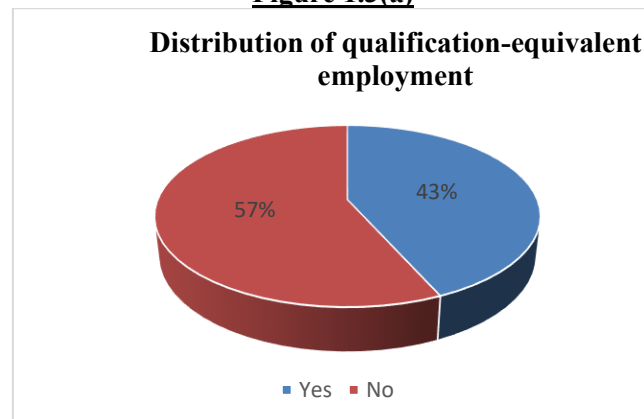


Table 1.3(a)

Alignment between educational attainment and occupational role

Degree-equalised Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Yes, equal position as of my degree	13	43.33%
No, underemployed	17	56.66%

Figure 1.3(a)



Themes 3: Economic Constraints and the Normalisation of Compromise

Economic conditions play a central role in shaping both educational and employment trajectories. Respondents largely come from financially constrained backgrounds where resources are limited, and responsibilities are immediate. These conditions influence not only access to education but also the choices made within it. Financial constraints lead to restricted opportunities for skill development, higher studies, and career exploration. Many respondents are required to enter the workforce early, often prioritising income over personal aspirations. As a result, employment decisions are driven by necessity rather than preference. This leads to the normalisation of compromise, where individuals accept jobs that do not match their qualifications or interests. Stability and immediate income become more important than long-term growth or job satisfaction. Over time, this reinforces patterns of underemployment and limits the transformative potential of education.

Thus, economic background acts as a mediating factor that shapes how education is experienced and utilised, often restricting its ability to generate meaningful upward mobility.

Table 1.4
Sectoral distribution of employment of the respondents

Working Sector	Frequency	Percentage
Government Sector	15	50%
IT Sector	7	23.33%
Private Sector (Non-IT)	7	23.33%
Self-Employed / Entrepreneur	1	3.33%

Figure 1.4

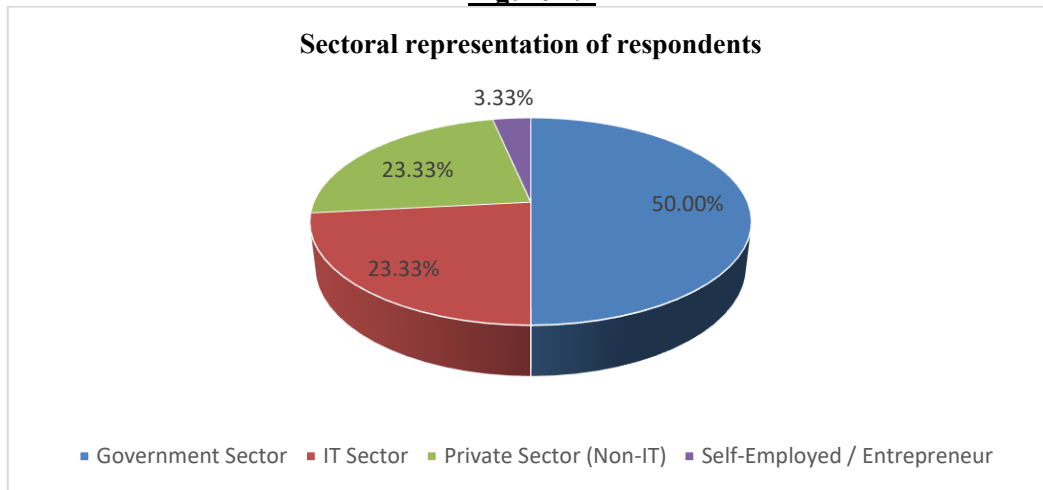
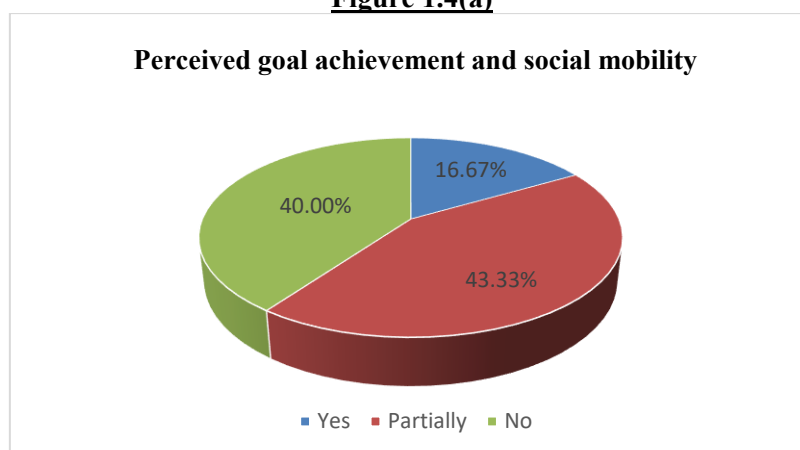


Table 1.4(a)
Achievement of personal goals and perceived social mobility

Goals Achieved and Improved Social Position	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	5	16.66%
Partially	13	43.33%
No	12	40%

Figure 1.4(a)



Theme 4: Structural Barriers in the Education-to-Employment Transition

The transition from education to employment emerges as a complex and challenging phase influenced by multiple structural factors. Respondents encounter barriers that extend beyond academic qualifications, including language limitations, gender norms, regional disparities, and a lack of institutional support. Language plays a significant role in shaping confidence and participation, particularly in formal and professional settings. Even when individuals possess knowledge, difficulties in communication affect their ability to perform in interviews and workplace environments. Gender also influences experiences in distinct ways. Women face restrictions related to safety, mobility, and social

expectations, which limit their employment choices. Men, on the other hand, experience pressure to secure employment quickly and fulfil family responsibilities, often leading to acceptance of less suitable jobs. Regional differences further shape opportunities, with individuals from less urbanised backgrounds having limited exposure to career options and institutional networks. This affects their ability to access diverse employment pathways. Employment patterns reflect a preference for stability and security, often prioritising government jobs over private sector opportunities. This indicates a broader tendency toward risk avoidance, shaped by economic vulnerability and social expectations. Despite entering the workforce, many respondents experience only partial improvement in their social position. Social bias, subtle forms of exclusion, and structural inequalities continue to influence their experiences, limiting confidence and long-term progression.

6. KEY FINDINGS :

- The respondents predominantly belong to first-generation, low-educated, working-class families, indicating a shift toward formal sector mobility.
- Education is primarily perceived as a means for economic security and family advancement rather than individual intellectual pursuit.
- A strong preference for government employment reflects the importance of stability, security, and social recognition.
- Educational choices are shaped by cost, accessibility, and familial influence rather than informed career aspirations.
- Financial constraints significantly influence educational trajectories, limiting access to higher studies and specialisation.
- A clear mismatch exists between educational qualifications and occupational outcomes, with degrees functioning largely as eligibility criteria.
- Language barriers, particularly among regional-medium students, constrain confidence and adaptability in academic and professional settings.
- Gendered social expectations restrict women's workforce participation, particularly in relation to safety, mobility, and marriage norms.
- Employment contributes to improved confidence, social recognition, and decision-making among respondents.
- Limited career awareness and institutional guidance affect educational and occupational decision-making, especially in rural contexts.
- Social mobility is partial and constrained, shaped by structural factors such as class, language, gender, and limited exposure.

7. CONCLUSION:

The study focuses on first-generation graduates in their early workforce and examines the transition from education to employment and its impact on social mobility. It finds that while higher education enables access to jobs, it does not ensure alignment with qualifications or upward mobility. The mismatch between education and job market demands, along with financial and structural constraints, limits opportunities for many graduates. As a result, education often functions only as an entry requirement rather than a pathway to meaningful advancement. Institutional support systems and government schemes remain important but are not fully effective in addressing these challenges. The study highlights the need for more holistic interventions beyond financial support to improve employment outcomes and mobility.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Institutions should establish continuous and structured career guidance systems to improve informed educational and occupational decision-making.
- Colleges should implement compulsory communication and language training to address barriers affecting confidence and employability.
- Strong institutional–industry linkages should be developed to reduce the gap between educational qualifications and employment outcomes.
- Targeted mentorship and support systems should be introduced for first-generation learners to compensate for the lack of familial educational capital.
- Government support schemes should be expanded and integrated with skill development, financial aid, and career tracking to enhance employability outcomes.

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