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Informational capital and the transition to university: First-in-family students' experiences in Austrian higher education

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Abstract

The agenda for widening participation in higher education has led to increasing numbers of students with a broader range of education and family backgrounds. However, transitioning to the university landscape remains a highly complex negotiation process, especially for first-in-family students, who cannot draw on previous experience from higher education in their families. Gaining access to informational capital—a combination of cultural and social capital—plays a crucial role in managing education transitions. We draw on rich empirical data obtained from 26 autobiographical narrative interviews with first-in-family university students in Austria to investigate how transitions to university are affected by informational capital. We also explore how access to informational capital was influenced by (1) institutional practices, such as initiatives to support students, especially first-year students; and (2) cultural fit—the extent to which a student's cultural capital corresponded with the dominant cultural capital in the field of their chosen discipline or higher education establishment. Our findings show that gaining access to informational capital was strongly affected by the institutional practices at universities within the different disciplines, thus highlighting the importance of higher education institutions in supporting their students during transition processes. We conclude with policy

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implications for how higher education institutions can assist first-in-family students to succeed at university.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The expansion of education in recent decades has led to a significant enlargement of the secondary and tertiary education sectors. The European agenda for broadening participation in higher education has likewise produced growing numbers of students from a wider range of education and family backgrounds (The Bologna Process & European Higher Education Area, 2015). An ever-increasing share of these students are also “first-in-family” students (i.e., the first members of their family to participate in higher education) and thus find themselves partaking in educational advancement processes (Heil et al., 2019). EUROSTUDENT data indicates that the percentage of students without higher education background is highest in Turkey (71%), Italy (69%) and Austria (61%) (see Figure 1; EUROSTUDENT VI Database, 2019).

A more meaningful indicator in this regard is the recruitment rate, which provides information on a young person's likelihood of going to university. In Austria, for example, research shows that young people from families with a higher education background are on average three times more likely to go to university than their counterparts from non-academic households (Unger et al., 2020). A number of studies show that transitioning to university remains a highly complex negotiation process, especially for first-in-family students, who might be less familiar with the university context than their peers with tertiary-educated parents (Cuconato & Walther, 2015; Kurantowicz & Nizinska, 2016; Maton, 2005; Thomas & Quinn, 2007). According to Lizzio (2011) higher education transition processes can be divided into four interrelated stages; namely, (a) transition towards, (b) transition in, (c) transition through and (d) transitions up, out and back. These stages do not exist in isolation nor in a linear configuration; instead, each stage is located in relation to the other stages. In this article we focus on processes of *transition in* that refer to students preparing for their studies whilst simultaneously navigating the expectations of the institution and socially integrating into the higher education environment.

It is frequently argued that the transition to university can be more challenging for first-in-family students than it is for young people from tertiary-educated households; due to the demands of the university system essentially designed for the educated middle class (Crozier & Reay, 2011; Lehmann, 2013; Nairz-Wirth et al., 2017;

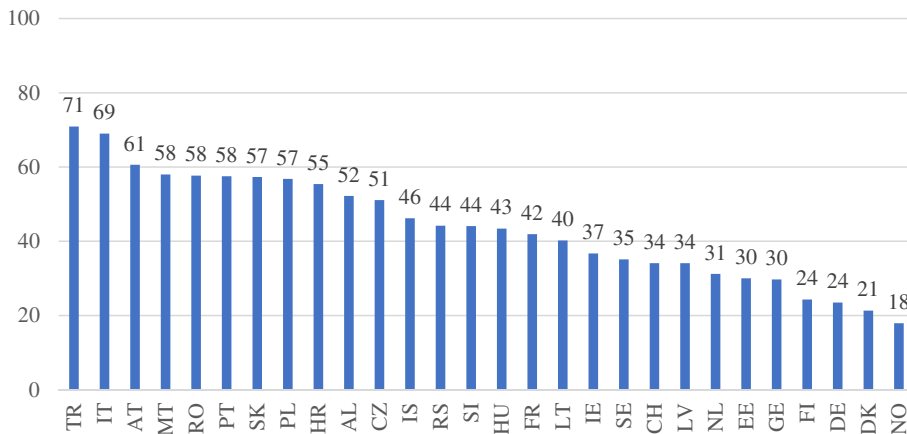


FIGURE 1 Share of university students (in %) from families with no HE background. *Source:* Figure has been constructed by the authors using data retrieved in 2019 from EUROSTUDENT VI Database [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

Reay, 2018). A term for this is *cultural fit*, it denotes the extent to which student cultural capital matches the dominant cultural capital in a field of study or higher education institution. A student's cultural fit depends on the economic, social and cultural resources available in their family, the cultural capital they have acquired in secondary socialisation settings (e.g., at school or work) and the respective subject-specific culture in their chosen higher education establishment (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Since the capital resources of first-in-family students can be quite heterogeneous, studies also reveal a diverse picture with regard to their cultural fit in the transition to university (El-Mafaalani, 2012; Miethe, 2017; Orbe, 2004; O'Shea, 2016; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

Cultural fit—which can be perceived by students as *fitting in* at university—is of particular relevance for access to peer networks, where new students not only experience a sense of belonging but also gain valuable study-related information that might not be accessible via the official communication channels. Such networks can be used to acquire so-called informational capital, a crucial element for managing the transition to university. Informational capital refers to the link between a student's study-related information resources and their ability to use them to successfully navigate transitioning to university. It incorporates not only practical knowledge of study-related processes (e.g., course registration) but also the understanding and anticipation of study-related logistics (e.g., how best to organise oneself to ensure academic success and gain access to relevant networks).

From a Bourdieusian perspective, informational capital can be regarded as a combination of cultural and social capital (Munk, 2009; Santos & da Silva Costa, 2015). It builds on the language and thinking skills acquired prior to university, depends on the availability of competent sources to turn to in the event of a problem, and draws on the certainty that graduating from university is commensurate to one's primary habitus.

Intensive and diverse social networks, community participation, strong feelings of trust, and empowered access to information are the fundamental components of informational capital that [...] improves coping capacities, and minimises risk of misinformation and miscommunication. (Tasic & Amir, 2016, p. 4)

For the purposes of the study on which this article reports, we understand informational capital as a relevant source for successfully navigating the transition to university—information that is gained mainly via peer networks at university. The interface between peer networks and information makes informational capital significant. It familiarises students with the *unwritten rules* or *hidden curriculum* and thus enables them to understand both the “invisible” pedagogy (Bernstein, 1996) as well as the “rules of the game” (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Crozier et al., 2008). Students who possess such informational capital thus already begin their studies with an understanding of the rules of the game in the field of the university and specific disciplines—rules that generally are accepted by students and teachers and that are essential for success at university (Bourdieu, 1987; Nairz-Wirth & Feldmann, 2018).

However, previous studies have not adequately explored either the role of informational capital in the successful transition to university or how peer networks, experiences of cultural fit and institutional practices (such as initiatives to support students) influence access to this form of capital. Accordingly, we draw on rich empirical data obtained in a total of 26 interviews with first-in-family students in various disciplines to investigate their thoughts on access to informational capital and its role for navigating through university. Based on our analysis, we argue that higher education institutions should develop interventions that assist students in gaining access to informational capital.

The paper is organised as follows: The following section outlines the theoretical concepts we used to gain a deeper understanding of transition processes. We then review the empirical evidence on transition processes of first-in-family students and cultural fit in higher education and provide subsequently a brief overview of the situation at Austrian universities. Next, the research methodology is described and our findings on the role of informational capital for transition processes are discussed. We conclude with a critical reflection on how higher education institutions can assist diverse learners in transitioning to university and succeeding in higher education.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our analysis deploys Pierre Bourdieu's relational theory (Bourdieu, 1987) and its extension to the concepts of cultural fit and informational capital (Archer et al., 2006; Bremer & Lange-Vester, 2019; Crozier & Reay, 2011; Lehmann, 2013; Munk, 2009; Santos & da Silva Costa, 2015; Waddling et al., 2019; Wilson & Devereux, 2018). Bourdieu's relational approach considers the dynamic interplay of habitus, field and capital and takes into account the inequality of resources related to the socialisation process. The habitus develops from early childhood onwards and can be understood as an ensemble of patterns of perception, thought and action. While people are growing up, they incorporate both their family lifestyle and culture (primary habitus) as well as the specific cultures of education establishments (e.g., schools) they attend, into their habitus (secondary habitus).

The habitus acquired in the milieu of origin can stand in contrast to the culture in an education establishment, a fact that can put those learners who are less familiar with the education system and its frequently implicit demands at a particular disadvantage (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Research shows, for instance, that some students are more likely to face challenges when transitioning to university, when their habitus of origin does not fit well to the dominant habitus in their university or discipline. This finding is based on the argument that milieu-specific socialisation processes equip students with different capital resources which, in turn, bear relevance for their perceived sense of belonging or recognition of the rules of the game at university.

That is, some young people are more appropriately equipped, through their class based habitus, to be aligned or already 'adjusted to the immanent demands of the game' [...] (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012).

The concept of cultural fit is also frequently used in conjunction with transition processes to university and the cultures encountered in different disciplines (Albright et al., 2018; Thomas, 2002; West et al., 2016). Student perceptions of *fitting in* at university can differ depending on habitus acquired in their milieu of origin. A poor fit (or incongruence) can trigger conflicts—in the form, for instance, of perceived tensions. On a psychosocial level, the subjective perception of "not fitting in" can manifest itself in a sense of unease, ambivalence and uncertainty (Friebertshäuser, 1992).

Whether or not students actually feel that they fit into the prevailing student or academic culture depends both on the level of congruence (i.e., homology) between their own habitus and the dominant habitus of the field as well as on the extent to which both—students and the field—demonstrate a capacity to adapt. A field in this context can be a higher education institution, a discipline or even a specific subject (Nairz-Wirth & Feldmann, 2018). These fields can adapt, for instance, by expanding the ethnic and social diversity of teaching staff, introducing measures to professionalise teaching methods, establishing mentoring programmes or intensifying information campaigns. Onboarding events for students, in turn, create networking opportunities and serve to motivate students to actively integrate themselves into the field of the university. Cultural fit is thus by no means a fixed, static relationship (Bremer & Lange-Vester, 2019); it is a dynamic process in which habitus, field and capital all influence each other reciprocally (Nairz-Wirth & Feldmann, 2019).

There is a particularly close link between the capacity to network and the cultural fit. It mediates the access to social peer networks and thus plays an important role in the transition to university. These networks can be viewed as social capital (e.g., supporting relationships) that is connected to the student habitus. A student's cultural fit therefore influences participation in such networks and access to informational capital. The concept of informational capital is related to the role of information itself and a person's ability to draw meaning from it (Gigler, 2011). It refers to the link between a student's study-related information resources and their ability to use them to successfully navigate the transition to university. Informational capital can be seen as a precondition for successfully navigating the transition to university (Munk, 2009), not least because it is needed to understand the rules of the game. The process of acquiring informational capital is affected by and mediated through social (peer)

networks in which students deploy corresponding educational strategies. Peer networks can be regarded as one of the best means of “gathering” informational capital on the academic world (Santos & da Silva Costa, 2015).

3 | REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

3.1 | Transitions to university and cultural fit

Numerous studies have already investigated the study-related experiences of first-in-family students, particularly with regard to their transition to and integration into the field of higher education (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Crozier et al., 2008; O'Shea, 2016, 2019; Pascarella et al., 2004; Reay et al., 2009). It is argued that gaining informational capital via family members might be more difficult for first-in-family students because they cannot draw on previous higher education experiences in their families (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012; Orbe, 2004). First-in-family students might also describe the transition to higher education as a period in which they had to find their feet in another culture (Zwerling & London, 1992). The extent to which students might perceive a feeling of not *fitting in* at university depends, among other things, on the economic, social and cultural resources available to them through their family and friends and the respective culture in their university or discipline (Nairz-Wirth et al., 2017; Thomas & Quinn, 2007).

In this context it needs to be clarified that some students with university-educated parents also report having problems fitting in when they start university and therefore such problems are not unique to first-in-family students (Miethe, 2017). Nevertheless, research indicates that first-in-family students are more often confronted with a multitude of interconnected disadvantages than students from higher education-backgrounds. Thus first-in-family students might also face additional study-related difficulties (e.g., problems with admissions formalities, financial issues and even in their relationships to their parents) on a far more frequent basis.

Recently, however, researchers have also begun to look more closely at those processes that are involved in successfully managing transition (El-Mafaalani, 2012; Gofen, 2009; Kurantowicz & Nizinska, 2016; Miethe, 2017; O'Shea, 2016; Spiegler, 2015; Stuart, 2006). This is gradually triggering a shift in perspective from a deficit-based approach towards a focus on individual and social habitus-field change (Miethe, 2017; O'Shea, 2016; Spiegler, 2015). Closer attention is thus being paid to success stories and positive study-related experiences of first-in-family students. In this context, the Bourdieusian theory is used e.g., for describing changes in the field of the university or a specific discipline. Accordingly, researchers are now more often also looking for evidence of changes in the institutional habitus of universities that might have potential to mitigate the problem of cultural fit. Further, changes in the labour market and growing challenges around the globe are causing more parents without university degrees to encourage their children to go to university than was the case in the past. Thus, participation in higher education is increasingly in many families seen as something that is a normal thing to do (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012; K apflinger et al., 2019).

To summarise, while some of the literature tends to focus on the challenges first-in-family students face by examining unequal experiences and structural conditions (Crozier et al., 2008; Nairz-Wirth et al., 2017; Reay et al., 2005), other literature explores the success of first-in-family students by looking for opportunities for individual agency as well as structural change (El-Mafaalani, 2012; Miethe, 2017; O'Shea, 2016; Spiegler, 2015). A shared feature of the majority of research on transition processes is that it connects to the theoretical concepts of Bourdieu. The study on which this article reports focused on the economic, social and cultural capital which students have at their disposal, either directly or indirectly. Informational capital—although crucial for managing the transition to university—has yet not received sufficient attention. This article attends to this gap by offering a qualitative analysis of the experiences of first-in-family students in Austria regarding their transition to university. We focus on how study participants drew on informational capital to manage their transition. We also examine how access to informational capital related to institutional practices and cultural fit.

4 | EDUCATION PATHWAYS AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN AUSTRIA

This section provides an overview of the Austrian education system with a particular focus on transition pathways to higher education. In line with other OECD member countries, the number of students, institutions and programmes on offer in Austria has also increased in recent years (Nairz-Wirth & Feldmann, 2019). The country currently has around 377,000 students, who can choose between some 1,800 different study programmes. 75.9% of students study at one of the 22 state universities in Austria, while a further 15.6% are enrolled in its 21 universities of applied science. The remaining 8.5% attend one of the fourteen university colleges of teacher education or sixteen private universities (Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, 2020; Statistics Austria, 2019).

In contrast to other European countries, upward mobility in education remains low in Austria; a situation that is attributed, among other factors, to early selection. After completing four years of primary school, schoolchildren can pursue different education tracks from the age of ten. Lower secondary schools (ISCED level 2), which pupils attend at the age of ten to fourteen years, are divided into an academic track (*Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schulen, Unterstufe*) and other secondary schools (*Mittelschule*). Austria is one of only two OECD member countries that introduce tracking already at the age of ten years (the OECD average is at fourteen years). Both the OECD and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) point out that this early separation into different tracks can increase inequalities in learning achievements and in the choices families make regarding further education (Tupan-Wenno et al., 2016). This means that in Austria the transition to university is already characterised by a strong selection according to social origins.

5 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To analyse the experiences of first-in-family students, we opted for a qualitative approach that provides an in-depth insight into student perspectives and experiences of navigating the transition to university. Our work uses constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and follows Bourdieusian research traditions in which theory-building and empirical research are continuously linked. The sampling followed the principles of theoretical sampling, with a particular emphasis placed on ensuring that our sample included disciplines that afforded maximum variation both in the share of first-in-family students as well as in institutional culture and prestige. The following disciplines were chosen: (a) education science, where first-in-family students are overrepresented; (b) business administration, where the share of first-in-family students is equal to that encountered in the overall student population and (c) medicine, where first-in-family students are underrepresented (Lessky & Unger, 2019; Unger et al., 2020). Additionally, we interviewed students from other fields of study such as political science.

In total, we conducted 26 interviews with first-in-family students at different universities in Vienna and other parts of Austria over a four-year period from 2014 to 2018. The interviews ranged in length from 60 to 240 min, were narrative in style (Schütze, 1977) and always began with the interviewee's own account of their life history. Table 1 provides detailed information on seven cases, which we selected to illustrate the wide spectrum of first-in-family students within the sample according to age, field of study, term-time employment, etc. Study findings are discussed using specific statements from students in the concluding analysis. We use pseudonyms throughout the paper to guarantee student anonymity.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The data were analysed using the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software programme. Interview passages were categorised using open coding. During the interpretation process, we initially focused on the significance indicated by the interviewees (personal interpretation) and then ordered the emerging categories using Bourdieu's conceptual tools (see theoretical framework for the study).

The following section describes the results. The findings demonstrate how the category *informational capital* intersects with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital and field. First, a general overview of how students draw

TABLE 1 Demographic details of research participants (selection)

Name	Age	Gender	Programme	Study progress	Term-time employment	Delayed entry to HE	Rural origin	Immigrant background	Occupation mother	Occupation father
Lukas	25	Man	Education Science	6th semester	No	No	Yes	Yes	Secretary	Postman, journalist
Kathi	28	Woman	Education Science	3rd semester	Kindergarten assistant	Yes	Yes	Yes	Office clerk	Electrician
Michael	23	Man	Business Administration	6th semester	Waiter	Yes	Yes	No	Housewife	Bar owner
Viola	20	Woman	Business Administration	2nd semester	Retail salesperson	No	No	No	Secretary	Warehouse manager
Anna	29	Woman	Medicine	17th semester	Surgery assistant	Yes	No	No	Surgery assistant	Surgical assistant
Peter	25	Man	Medicine	7th semester	University tutor	Yes	No	Yes	Nurse	Tourist guide
Magdalena	21	Woman	Political Science	6th semester	Media support services	No	No	No	Kindergarten	Engineer

Source: Table has been constructed by authors referring to empirical data collected from 2014 to 2018.

on informational capital to manage the transition to university is provided. Then, we present a detailed analysis of how access to such capital is related to institutional practices and cultural fit.

6 | RESULTS

When transitioning to university, most students initially go through an orientation phase. The results presented here focus on this initial transition phase as seen from the perspective of the interviewed first-in-family students. The findings show how students gained access to informational capital via peer networks and how this process was affected by institutional practices within the different disciplines and student perceptions of *fitting in* at university.

6.1 | Informational capital, orientation and organising studies in higher education

Students often deal with many challenging organisational and social tasks at the beginning of their studies. As mentioned in the introduction, organising studies in higher education is a challenging task that requires understanding and anticipating the system and the way things are done at university. Lukas, a first-in-family student, had completed his secondary education in Italy and moved to Vienna to study education science. He had thus not gone through the Austrian school system and had no social peer networks at the university at the start of his course. Lukas found it difficult to gain access to informational capital. He didn't recognise important logistical aspects regarding the organisation of his timetable until his third semester. In other words, he was not aware of the rules of the game in this field when he started university.

I thought you had to complete STEOP [introduction and orientation] first—which you do—before you can do other modules and sit exams. So yes, I got it all a bit wrong and really only started doing everything in my third semester—exams, I mean—one after the other, because it's up to you when you do them. (Interview, Lukas, education science student, 2017, Austria)

Lukas attributed the lack of orientation he experienced at the start of his university career to ignorance on his own part instead of also placing some of the responsibility on the university. It was only as he progressed with his course—and a friend also enrolled at the university—that he came to realise that he could also have taken other exams during the orientation phase.

So, I was the only one, I was totally [...], I mean I didn't know a soul. And then a friend from [town in Italy] arrived and started there too. But she's already further than me because she understood the system. When I started, I didn't understand the system at all or how things worked. (Interview, Lukas, education science student, 2017, Austria)

As far as Lukas was concerned, he lost time because he only had the official information provided by the university to go on when he started. He had no access to informational capital through peer networks and thus only came to understand some of the features of the practical organisation of studies, *the system*, at a later stage.

According to the first-in-family students we interviewed, *understanding the system* was crucial for progress at university. This also became clear in the interview with Michael, a business administration student who moved to Vienna from a rural part of Austria to go to university. Michael attended a vocational secondary school for tourism and worked as a waiter in a hotel for a year after leaving school, thus delaying his entry to university. Like Lukas,

he had a fragmented university network, which is why it took him some time to acquire informational capital. He learned to understand the system primarily with the help of peers.

And, well, then I found out by chance, because a friend visited me, and we logged in and he said I had to register because I couldn't do the courses otherwise [laughs]. So I registered for the courses while he was there. But I later found out that attendance wasn't actually obligatory. You didn't need to register. (Interview, Michael, business administration student, 2016, Austria)

The passage above shows that when students start university, they often depend on the help of peers to understand the hidden, unknown or misunderstood rules and to plan their studies. Our analysis of the interviews shows that new students require different types of knowledge to help them understand the system and find their way when they start university. This informational capital is made accessible through a specific combination of social and cultural capital. Social networking is thus especially important for new students who are just starting university and need to organise their studies. The corresponding information (i.e., informational capital) that is shared via student networks is highly relevant for students and primarily accessible via such networks.

6.2 | Informational capital and disciplinary practices

Alongside the organisational aspects that students manage during their transition to university, social aspects can be highly decisive in determining whether they find university to be a positive experience. Social peer relationships can be a stabilising factor and give new students a sense of belonging, particularly when they are starting out at university. Peer relationships can also develop into lasting student networks that provide stability and a *secure source* of information about studying and the university—i.e., informational capital. Consequently, peer relationships at university are crucial in determining the extent to which students feel that they are welcome and *belong* in their respective institution and the extent to which they gain access to informational capital. The establishment of peer networks depends largely on the general parameters in the university field, i.e., the institutional practices supporting this process. This aspect was reconstructed in our analyses and the results are presented individually for the disciplines *medicine*, *business administration* and *education science*.

In medicine, the tightly organised course structure (prescribed semester timetables and planning, organisation into small groups) creates particularly strong institutional support for peer networking. In the case of Anna, a first-in-family medical student, the institutionally prescribed structures, e.g., working in the same small group of around ten students for a complete academic year, had a positive effect on her development of a peer network and thus also on her study progress. Her parents both work in medical professions (her mother is a surgery assistant in a medical practice, and her father is a surgical assistant in a hospital), and she is thus familiar with the field of medicine (she reported, for instance, having been allowed to accompany her father into operating theatres as a child). Nevertheless, neither of her parents went to university and she cannot draw on any higher education experiences in her family. Being a member of a small group provided her with much support since it gave her access to social capital right from the start.

[...] so when you are already in this small group and talk to the people in it, you naturally ask or do things together in the group or so. (Interview, Anna, medical student, 2017, Austria).

The interviews with business administration students, in contrast, revealed that peer networking among students depended more heavily on the efforts of the students themselves. The following quote from Michael illustrates problems faced by first-in-family students in business administration.

And the uni, I mean [university name] in particular, also makes it hard for you to find your feet and feel like you belong. Because you have lots of small courses and move around a lot because they are so short. You're constantly with new people so you never really build close relationships, not even to lecturers. You're here a bit, there a bit—everywhere a bit, really—but nowhere in particular. (Interview, Michael, business administration student, 2016, Austria)

This quote is a good example of social fragmentation, i.e., the student takes part in various courses and study-related activities, tries to get to know his peers but finds it difficult to form lasting relationships or establish stable groups because of the way his course is structured. Business administration students also told us about how student rankings were used to rank performance, basically putting students in competition with one another and discouraging them from providing each other with mutual support. While many of the first-in-family business administration students interviewed attended the networking event organised by the university at the start of their first semester, they found it to have been of little help since it was essentially just a one-off, “mass” event.

While education science students also reported less institutional support for establishing supportive peer networks, they found it easier to connect with one another because there was a strong sense of inclusivity among the students. Dedicated Facebook and WhatsApp groups played an important role in helping students find their feet in the university system and establish relationships to their peers. These online forums work primarily on a peer-to-peer basis, often across different years. The students describe them as places where they can participate in lively exchange and both offer or receive support, e.g., in the form of sharing materials and information. In the following quote, an education science student, Katharina, talks of the positive experience of getting to know some of her peers.

I was lucky when I started university. I got to know some other girls right away. And when you've got someone to talk things over with or, well, at least know that someone will be there when you go to a lecture, it makes a difference: you feel a bit more secure with someone at your side. (Interview, Katharina, education science student, 2018, Austria)

For Katharina, university did not seem to be a place where there are structures in place to help students to get to know each other—students connect either as a matter of “luck” or as the result of their own personal efforts.

The findings presented in this article highlight how important it is for students that universities offer opportunities for students to build relationships with their peers—e.g., working in small groups during seminars or organised networking events—over a longer period of time, or at regular intervals. This allows them to develop more stable and lasting networks and helps them gaining access to informational capital via such networks.

6.3 | Informational capital and *fitting in*

In this section, we examine how the perception of *fitting in* relates to gaining access to informational capital. Interviews with Viola and Magdalena demonstrated that a habitus-field dynamic can emerge in which institutional support measures (in the form of networking events and tutoring programmes) do not suffice for providing access to informational capital, because students feel they do not fit in at university. Viola went to a vocational secondary school for commerce and Magdalena went to a general academic secondary school. While Viola's parents both work in an international company, Magdalena's mother is a kindergarten teacher and her father is an unemployed purchasing clerk.

Viola started university with a number of friends from school. She took the relevant subjects at school needed to study business administration and worked in corporate management on a part-time basis while at university. Viola attended the networking events organised by the university at the start of her first semester. These events emphasised how important peer networks are for gaining access to relevant information and completing a degree. But Viola had difficulties in building such networks when she started university. Attending these events just intensified her feeling of *not fitting in*.

Well, you don't just go to the library and speak to the person sitting next to you. I don't know. Things were different at school somehow. We knew each other—everyone knew everyone [laughs]. It can be pretty lonely here at times. [...] So yes, I tried to get to know new people. I mean, there are some nice people at university. But, I don't know, with my personality, I don't think I really fit in. (Interview, Viola, 2017, business administration student, Austria).

Viola actively tried to build contacts to other students on her course. She described her peers at the university as “nice” but felt that her relationship to them was superficial. In her opinion, the characteristics she would attribute to herself, such as openness, honesty and directness, did not fit with the institution and its student culture. The mass events organised by the university and lecturers who demonstrated that they did not want to build relationships with students made it clear to her that she didn't *fit in*

During STEOP [introduction and orientation], you don't really have any contact to the lecturers, which is understandable because you're in a room with a thousand people. I hope that will change. Because that's something that I don't find good, being in a room with a thousand people, I mean. I think the lecturers are good—they explain everything and so on, but I need real contact to a lecturer. (Interview, Viola, 2017, business administration student, Austria).

Magdalena also had difficulties in gaining access to informational capital via student groups and to build relationships to lecturers. Her faculty, the Department of Political Science, had a small room that was used for group meetings. In the following quote, she laments the lack of initiative on the part of teaching staff to encourage team building.

[The lecturers] also want to network, but their desire is pretty weak. And, of course, you had to overcome your inhibitions to go there, and mine were always very strong. So, of course, I could have gone there but there were always groups of three or four people sitting there together, who were clearly best buddies. (Interview, Magdalena, political science student, 2018)

Magdalena also feels that she was ignored as a person and that the relationship component was missing.

[...] A little bit of personal contact, you don't need to be friends. That's hard in lectures with 300 people. I don't want to be just another anonymous student, someone who the lecturers don't care whether they sit there or not. (Interview, Magdalena, political science student, 2018)

The feeling of *not fitting in* at university negatively affects gaining access to informational capital and vice versa. For Viola, this ultimately led her to change programme. Magdalena had increasingly avoided university without making a final decision to leave university. Both students tended to react to the feeling of *not fitting in* by fleeing from the field (Friebertshäuser, 1992). The habitus tensions they experienced in higher education manifested in their experiences of the study programme, which did not sufficiently support the building of informational capital, but instead fostered their feelings of *not fitting in*. The experiences of Viola and Magdalena illustrate how access to informational capital is interwoven with feelings of belonging and fitting in at university.

7 | CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In this article, we shed light on a specific form of capital; namely, *informational capital*—a form of capital that is relevant for successfully navigating the transition to university. By examining informational capital, we have been able to show that first-in-family student transition to higher education is influenced by access to practical information about studying at university. It is the interface between social capital (e.g., peer networks) and information

that makes informational capital so significant because it emphasises the value students attach to such information for navigating through university. Our analysis highlights that informational capital plays a crucial role in managing the transition to university, since it familiarises students with “the rules of the game” (Bourdieu, 1987; Nairz-Wirth & Feldmann, 2018). The first-in-family students we interviewed perceived these rules, and thus also their disciplinary fields at university, to be complex and to lack transparency. They recognised that important aspects of information required for studies in higher education, and many practical details, cannot be obtained via the official university channels.

Gaining access to such informational capital is mainly provided via peer networks. To be able to participate in peer networks, experiences of *fitting in* are also relevant. Those interviewed students who were able to gain access to informational capital via these networks faced fewer obstacles in transitioning to higher education. In disciplines where students experienced a high sense of belonging, they felt less isolated during the transition process and were able to more easily access informational capital. This evidence highlights that policies are needed for supporting students in gaining access to informational capital. Our empirical findings show that gaining access to this form of capital can be supported by institutional practices (e.g., information events for first-semester students). However, we propose that these interventions need to be provided over a longer period of time and/or at regular intervals (i.e., working in small groups during seminars). Interventions repeated on a long-term basis allow students to build relationships with their peers and to develop more stable and lasting networks. Students who experienced so called networking mass events, or events that took place only once, struggled more with gaining access to informational capital. Their feeling of not fitting in at university seemed to have increased after participating in such events. Therefore, we believe that there is a need in higher education institutions to reflect on existing measures and how current practices meet the needs of students.

Despite institutional practices, the history of one's own habitus also influences the extent to which students anticipate informational capital and can use it to successfully manage their transition to university. Informational capital, as a combination of cultural and social capital, is acquired even before the transition to university not only in the family and in peer groups, but also in school. In this regard, we propose that approaches such as study and career counselling should be intensified in schools. Also, closer partnerships between schools and universities should be established to ease transition processes (Matheson et al., 2018). Potential policy interventions should include various support services, peer tutoring, mentoring, professional advising as well as outreach-programmes. For example, peer mentoring programmes—especially in the first year of university—could reduce incongruencies between habitus, capital and field more effectively (Yomtov et al., 2017). Such interventions would assist students in gaining access to informational capital via supporting them in establishing networks at university. In this context, we introduce field-specific information (e.g., informational capital) as an additional form of capital and call for a broader inclusion of this concept in education research and higher education policymaking for further supporting and improving student success.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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