

Surviving First Year of University as a Student: Is it a Jungle?

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ABSTRACT The aim of this paper is to investigate challenges and prospects amongst first year students at the University of Limpopo, South Africa. The transition from high school to embark on university studies is one of the critical stages in a student life. This is the time when students have to learn new academic and social survival skills amongst others, without the guidance of their guardians. Most of these students, during the first months of university, struggle to balance between academic and new social demands brought by the new university environment. The study was conducted among 105 first year Public Administration students through a close-ended questionnaire. The paper therefore, compares experiences and strategies that are used for survival in the first year of university. The challenges identified during the data analysis are presented together with recommendations that can assist with survival strategies and therefore curb high dropout rates among first year students.

INTRODUCTION

Students from high schools around South Africa become excited about the prospects of being enrolled in institutions of higher learning. Policymakers should thrive to comprehend the benefits of embarking on tertiary education and the consequences incurred by students in their verge to survive first year of studying (Castleman and Page 2014). However, those students know a little about the challenges they are expected to go through in order to climb the highest ladder in academia. This paper reports on the findings conducted among 105 Public Administration students at the University of Limpopo. Although the paper acknowledges bias in the data collected due to the representativity of the sample, it could serve as a pointer towards the broader picture. The paper begins by providing a brief background, research methods and the presentation of findings. This paper therefore concludes by providing recommendations about how new university students can adjust and cope within the new environment from home.

Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To investigate challenges confronting first year university students using the Public Administration class as a case study and;
2. To establish root causes of such challenges in order to propose recommendations.

Background of the Study

The first year of a student's university experience is crucial for a successful transition and to attain a bachelors' degree (Musoba et al. 2013). This is the period where new entrants in university are confronted with challenges of having to adjust survival skills outside the guidance of their parents and guardians. Even though the decision to attend university is one encouraged by parents and universities, students are left on distress where they are expected to cope on their own. However, the university experience is an important opportunity for both personal growth and development (Richardson et al. 2012). Furthermore, according to Shim and Ryan (2012), a university environment provides a platform where students have an opportunity to expand their social circles and networks. These new circles and network are sometimes found to be an enormous challenge whereby new students' team up with bad associations. This becomes a period where some students experience bad academic outcomes as well as broken social cohorts thus resulting in poor academic performance (Richardson et al. 2012).

Despite the challenges of social cohesion, poor academic results in most instances is as a result of factors such as the use of new technological advanced equipment (Nkondo et al. 2014), writing skills (Muslim 2014), orientation programmes, lack of study materials, and stress (Richardson et al. 2012) amongst others. This study was conducted among first year students at the

University of Limpopo, South Africa to determine some of the challenges and prospects confronting them during this transition year in a university environment. Many of the challenges which are prevalent at the university currently, dates as far as the apartheid era. However, the university as compared to other South African universities fails to provide effective support structures to smoothen the transition to higher education. The University of the North (as it was known before 2005), was established under the apartheid regime's policy of separate ethnically-based institutions of higher learning policy (University of Limpopo 2015). The real challenge was that the university served at under-resourced and the standard of education and the quality of instruction was placed under demand. By judging the number of prominent society and government leaders that the university produced during apartheid, and during the democratic dispensation one could be tempted to argue that the system has deteriorated.

METHODS

This paper reports and discusses on an investigation which examined some of the challenges confronting first year students in their transition and survival battle in a university environment. An anonymous questionnaire was distributed among the Public Administration students for the academic year 2014 during the second semester. Students were informed that their identity would remain anonymous and that their participation was voluntary. The questionnaire comprised closed-ended questions for the demographic data and furthermore, their perceptions and opinions of the challenges faced were probed. Some of the questions raised in the questionnaire included amongst others; their first choice degrees, the enrolment and registration processes of the university, access to on-campus accommodation, access and the use of tech-

nological equipment such as computers, the usefulness of the orientation programmes offered by the university. The data collected through the questionnaire was filtered and categorised according to the challenges and analysed according to such categories. The study is only limited to the first year Public Administration students at the University of Limpopo.

Table 1 shows a summary of demographic details of respondents in terms of gender, age groups and the degree programme. Majority of respondents are females between ages of sixteen and twenty-five.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The paper presents the results as per the 105 questionnaires distributed among the first year students in the Public Administration class. The paper therefore acknowledges bias in the results of the study since 105 students in the entire first year student's enrolment may be viewed as an insufficient sample. However, the findings of the study can be utilised as an indicator of the general challenges and prospects that exists within the class of the chosen sample and the overall university population.

Challenges

The aim of this section is to present some of the challenges confronting first year students at the University of Limpopo. The challenges range from; choosing study programmes, the enrolment and registration processes, balancing social and academic life, affordability of food, accessing study material and libraries, academic stress, accommodation, confidence in the use of computers and other identified challenges.

The Choice of Degree Programmes

In this section the respondents were asked whether the current degree being pursued was their first choice. The findings show that a 67

Table 1: Summary of survey participants' demographic details (%)

Gender		Age groups			Degree				
Male	Female	16-21	21-30	30+	BAdmin ¹	BDevs ²	HR ³	Econ ⁴	Other
26%	74%	90%	9%	1%	39%	31%	12%	18%	0%

¹ Bachelor of Administration

² Bachelor of Development Planning and Management

³ Bachelor of Human Resource Management

⁴ Bachelor of Commerce in Economics

percent majority of the respondents did not intend to study their current while only 33 percent had the intentions to study the current degrees. Hence this is a challenge that could be attributed to high failure rates where students do not enrol for their programmes of choice. Furthermore, the quality of teaching is still not to standards due to lack of higher qualifications of lecturers. The sample of respondents is mainly those rejected by other departments due to different required entry levels. In most instances, high school students do not attend career exhibitions where they are advised on detail on the degrees they should choose. However, in this study, 82 percent of the respondents attended exhibitions and open weeks, while 18 percent did not attend during their tenure in high schools.

Enrolment and Registration Processes

Due to increased intakes of first year students by universities, there has been an increased burden in the enrolment and registration processes. Accordingly, there is a need to expand the enrolment support in order to decrease strains on the academic system facing dilemmas of expanded enrolment (Mouton et al. 2013). In this section, students were asked to rate the enrolment and registration processes of the University of Limpopo.

The summary in Table 2 shows the student's perception and encounters of the enrolment and registration procedures at the University of Limpopo. The general perception is that the processes are frustrating.

Table 2: Enrolment and university registration procedures

<i>Frustrating</i>	<i>Acceptable</i>	<i>Exceptional</i>
66%	24%	10%

Striking the Balance Between Social and Academic Life

Balancing social and academic life could prove difficult for first year students, particularly if they are from societal backgrounds where they were unable to explicitly learn social tendencies (Elias 2006; Asiedu-Appiah et al. 2014). This paper probed whether students were asked if they were able to balance between social and academic life. It is shocking to learn that 93 per-

cent of the respondents are able to strike the balance while only 7 percent are unable to find such a balance between social and academic life. While the majority of the respondents are able to strike a balance, their academic performance remains low.

The Affordability of Food Parcels and Groceries

Generally, the University of Limpopo largely registers students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. Most of the university students depend on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which is a loan payable upon completion and finding inroads in the workplace. The fund only finance part of their tuition and accommodation and leaves students stranded for food and other essentials. However, there are students from good backgrounds who also utilise NSFAS which affect the capability of the fund to sufficiently accommodate the needy. In this study, students were asked whether they are able to afford groceries and other essential that last for a month. As it has been articulated, it was not shocking to learn that 63 percent of the respondents have challenges in buying groceries while only 37 percent of the respondents can afford groceries. This challenge has led to many female students resorting to dating older men or even worse their lecturers so that they are able to buy food.

Access to Study Rooms and Libraries

Access to an equipped library during the first year of higher education is vital for academic success, and an essential component of good information literacy practices. This paper discovered that although the University of Limpopo boasts a library, majority of its students do not have access due to staying off-campus or mainly because the library is inadequately equipped with information sources. In this section, students were asked of places where they study and evaluate the quality of material in the university library.

Depending on accessibility to the reading spaces, students need to find spaces in which they can study in a friendly environment. The summary in Table 3 shows different spaces within the University of Limpopo which they access for study purposes.

Table 3: Access to study rooms and library

<i>Library</i>	<i>Own rooms</i>	<i>Lecture halls</i>	<i>Other venues</i>
44%	38%	13%	5%

The summary in Table 4 derives from Table 3 and shows the state of the University of Limpopo library. The paper probed the state of the university library. Although majority of the respondents in this study indicated that they mostly study at the university library, the spaces are confined and characterised with obsolete and out-dated study material.

Table 4: The state of the university library

<i>Satisfactory</i>	<i>Need slight improvement</i>	<i>Need major improvement</i>	<i>Unsatisfactory</i>
36%	32%	28%	4%

Based on Tables 3 and 4 and the information provided above, it can be concluded that majority of the students do not utilise the university library for study purposes. This could be attributed to the fact that only 36 percent of the respondents were satisfied by the state of the library and the quality of material. Upon observation, it was learnt that the university library does not have an updated database and the material is outdated and irrelevant.

Perceived Academic Stress Levels and Meeting Deadlines

Academic stress refers to the pressure to perform well in school particularly in assessments including examinations which leads to a sense of distress, which is generally manifested in a variety of psychological and behavioural problems (Busari 2012; Affum-Osei and Asante 2014). According to Sonipat (2014), stress is a necessary and unavoidable attendant of daily living necessary because without it people would be listless and apathetic creatures, as it relates to external events whether pleasurable or anxiety. This view is supported by Yumba (2008) whereby he states that, academic stress are caused by both internal and external environment that upsets balance, thus affecting physical and psychological well-being and requiring action to restore balance. In this paper,

students were asked whether they were academically stressed and the ability to meet academic deadlines as one of the stressors. 59 percent of the respondents were academically stressed while 41 percent were free from academic stress. In terms of the stressor (that is, meeting deadlines), 85 percent of the respondents are able to meet deadlines while a mere 15 percent are unable to meet deadlines.

Perceived Confidence and Knowledge of Using Computers

Computers have become global, and are used more effectively by the younger population (Allan and Seaman 2013; OECD 2014). However, considering the backgrounds of the majority of students at the university and the poverty stricken schools they come from, using computers and other technological advances proves to be a challenge. In this study, a staggering 98 percent of the respondents started using computers for the first time in their first year as university students, while only mere 2 percent of the respondents had the access to computers before they ventured into university environment. However, it is encouraging to learn that the use of computers among first year students is improving. Students were asked as to whether they are coping with the use of computers and other technological equipment.

The summary in Table 5 shows the first year students' ability to use computer facilities and other technological related tools. Generally the knowledge of computer facilities has improved among first year students. This can be attributed to the introduction of computer studies among high school students in South Africa. Another contributory factor could be the increased use of technology in the modern technological, industrial and globalisation era.

Table 5: Computer usage

<i>Doing well</i>	<i>Trying</i>	<i>Need assistance</i>
59%	35%	6%

Access to Housing and Accommodation on Campus Facilities

Access to accommodation on-campus facilities is not a challenge pertinent to the University of Limpopo, but also prevalent to other South

African universities. According to Talebloo and Baki (2013) student accommodation off-campus facilities is unsafe, poor and expensive. The University of Limpopo does not have adequate student accommodation which in turn exposes the students to crime, squalid conditions, and inconvenience. In this section, students were asked to state their place of accommodation. A staggering 71 percent of the respondents stay in accommodations off-campus while a mere 29 percent of the respondents have accommodation access to on-campus facilities.

Other Challenges

Despite some of the challenges discussed above, students expressed major concerns with regard to the frequent changing of lecturers and their teaching techniques. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that Limpopo Province is comprised of different tribes thus the issue of diversity becomes a major challenge for students. Other common challenges among students include the lack of study material, adapting to the new environment from home, annoying roommates, peer pressure and the large amount in university debts.

Root Causes of Some of the Challenges

The challenges identified above might just be a 'drop in the ocean'. The paper sought to identify some of the contributing factors to these challenges. The ensuing section discusses some of the causes of the challenges confronting first year students.

Academic and Writing Workshops

A new university student may develop anxiety due to the expectations about the writing required in college (Irvin 2010; Rezaei and Jafari 2014). This is often the cause of high stress levels particularly among first year students. This in turn affects their overall academic performance. In this study, students were asked whether the University of Limpopo provides a platform for enhancing academic writing skills. The majority (63%) of the respondents indicated that they have not attended academic or writing skills, while only 37 percent of the respondents have attended the academic writing initiatives organised by the university.

Orientation for First Year Students

Orientation programmes are a set of various activities aimed at supporting new students in their transition of higher institutions of learning (Owusu et al. 2014). Coherent first-year experience programs, which include precollege and ongoing orientation programmes, first-year seminars, and other new student advising and study group experiences, appear to be linked to a variety of positive outcomes for first-year students (Owusu et al. 2014). Orientation programmes are meant to acquaint first year students to the new learning environment and teaching them survival skills. In this study, students were asked to rate the orientation programme as offered to first entering students by the University of Limpopo.

The summary in Table 6 shows how students perceive the importance and usefulness of orientation programmes as offered by the university for new students. These are the programmes aimed at teaching new students the dynamics and complexities of the university environment.

Table 6: Orientation programmes

<i>Helpful</i>	<i>Very helpful</i>	<i>Useless</i>
56%	26%	18%

Based on Table 6 and the information provided above, it can be concluded that although majority of the respondents considers the orientation programme to be effective, there are other students who still perceive the programme to be useless and ineffective. This may be attributed to the fact that students in this study are still finding it very difficult to survive in the new academic environment.

Peers and friendships

Social adjustments play a critical role in student persistence at college (Gray et al. 2013). Research found that positive aspects of success in university are learning interest, making friends and meeting new people (Victoria International 2015). Many first year university students fail to make any meaningful friendships, thus report feelings of loneliness and miss friends from home (Smith and Wertlieb 2005). In this study 66 percent of the respondents have made more than three friends during their first

year of university, while 21 percent of the respondents have made more than one but less than three friends, 8 percent of the respondents only have one friend, 5 percent of the respondents have not made any friendships. Furthermore, the respondents were asked to rate friendships that they have made since coming to university as portrayed by Table 7.

Table 7: Social circles and friendships

<i>Beneficial</i>	<i>Mutual</i>	<i>Useless</i>
59%	32%	9%

Entertainment Activities and Parties on Campus

Entertainment and partying is a feature prevalent in institutions of higher learning. It is an aspect that is normally related to high drop-outs. In this study, students were asked whether they attended bashes on campus. Furthermore, students were probed with regard to the frequency in which they consume alcoholic beverages. 71 percent of the respondents indicated that they do not attend either parties or bashes, while 29 percent of the respondents indicated that they do attend parties and bashes on-campus. Furthermore, it was interesting to learn that 73 percent of the respondents do not take alcoholic beverages at all, while 24 percent of the respondents drink occasionally, 3 percent of the respondents drink regularly as indicated in Table 8.

The summary of Table 8 derived from Table 7 shows the frequency of alcohol among first year university students.

Table 8: Alcoholic indulgence and parties

<i>Not at all</i>	<i>Occasional</i>	<i>Regularly</i>	<i>Weekends</i>
73%	24%	3%	0%

Extra-curricular Activities and Involvement

Involvement is an investment of physical and psychological energy that occurs along a continuum and has both qualitative and quantitative features (Foreman and Retallick 2013). Students who are involved and participate in extra-curricular generally benefit by having better grades, having higher standardised test scores, higher educational attainment, attending school

more regularly and having higher self-esteem. It is clear from this assertion that extracurricular activities have a positive impact on academic performance. In this study, students were asked if they participate in any extracurricular activity in the university. It was shocking to learn that 74 percent of the respondents do not participate, while 17 percent of the respondents participate in various sporting codes, and 9 percent of the respondents participate in student communities. It can thus be concluded that benefits associated with the involvement in extracurricular activities are likely not to be prevalent amongst first year students at the University of Limpopo.

DISCUSSION

Numerous challenges confronting first entering university students vary from one university to the other. Such owes to structural backing in place supporting students in the transitions to institutions of higher learning from secondary schools. Academic preparation, personal adjustment, and increasing awareness of students and parents during the switch period necessitate orientation programmes (Owusu et al. 2014). The usefulness of and effectiveness of these programmes seek to also ensure the lowering of stress levels. The University of Limpopo as characterised by lack of student support structures, new university students are confronted with challenges of adjusting to the new environment. Such can lead to poor academic performance and higher dropout rates (Goux et al. 2014). Due to financial constraints, learning and teaching culture, and historical background amongst other challenges inhibit the University of Limpopo to become a world class university as compared to other South African universities such as Wits, University of Cape Town, University of Pretoria just to mention a few. Some of the challenges emanate by reluctance by government to prioritize the funding of previously disadvantaged black universities. The University of Limpopo is ranked twenty in the South African university ranking. Factors such as lack and low quality of tutoring, writing centres, class equipment, transport and sport facilities, and libraries result in the low ranking of the university. However, some of the challenges manifest in relation to loss of cultures, sexualities, and immoral decay among university students (Omonijo et al. 2014). It is some of these challenges that

continue to pose threats to the survival of first entering university students. However, it should be acknowledged that the findings as shown in this paper can only be limited to the university under study. The distraught confronting first entering students at the University of Limpopo can be a combination of behavioural challenges while some might be of the strategic management nature. In general challenges confronting first entering university students at the case study relates to both environmental and structural challenges in the teaching and learning environment.

CONCLUSION

This paper investigated the challenges confronting first year students at the University of Limpopo. Data was collected using questionnaires among first year Public Administration students during the second semester. It is interesting to learn that students are confronted with challenges ranging from the enrolment, registration processes, striking balances between social and academic life, affording food and groceries, access to study rooms and study materials, increased stress levels, knowledge of using computers and accessing on-campus accommodation. The results and analysis in the paper confirmed that students experience challenges during their first year. While the data may be premature and somehow bias due to the sample, it can be concluded that students at the University of Limpopo find it difficult to thrive in to the varsity system. The results presented in the paper further suggest that the current situation may remain the same for the near future. Perhaps the university needs to pay close attention and review its structures and system so that other students in the preceding year feel more comfortable for the purposes of thriving academically.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While researchers recognise differences between the University of Limpopo and other South African universities, ensuring the survival of first entering students remain pivotal. The study therefore recommends government investment particularly to previously disadvantaged black university with a view of establishing and maintains world class infrastructure (accommo-

dation, sports, infrastructure etc.) to enable smooth transitions and survival to universities. The study further recommends the prioritisation of exhibition and open-weeks to ensure that first entering students are knowledgeable of the degree programmes they are enrolling for. This study established that a majority of respondents did not intend enrolling for their current degree which has the potential of them not have a sense of belonging. Libraries are crucial as a source of information, particularly at institution of higher learning. In this regard the study recommends that a university utilise online teaching, learning and sharing systems such as e-books and e-study. This will ensure that study materials remain relevant and up to date.

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