

Social and Academic Adjustment of First-Year University Students

Pilot Mudhovozi

University of Venda, Thohoyandou, South Africa
E-mail: <Pilot.Mudhovozi@univen.ac.za>

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ABSTRACT The study investigated the social and academic experiences of first year students at a university in Zimbabwe. A phenomenological research design was used to conduct the study. Respondents were seven purposefully sampled first year students (N = 7: males = 3, females = 4, mean age = 24.4 years; age ranging between 18 and 36 years). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each respondent. Content analysis of the responses showed that first year students experienced varied social and academic adjustment problems. The students over-relied on social networks and efficacious beliefs to cope with the challenges. The students need to be exposed to various coping resources to enable them to quickly and smoothly adjust into the new life at university.

INTRODUCTION

Demand for higher education is booming around the world. In countries like Zimbabwe, the number of university students increases every year, and still there are not enough places for all who want one (Mapako et al. 2012). Adjustment is a psychological concept that refers to the behavior that permits people to meet the demands of the environment (Rathus and Nevid 1986). A university is a new environment that triggers different reactions among first year students. Thus, life at university for the first year can be exciting and challenging (Habibah et al. 2010). On one hand, increased personal freedom can feel wonderful and frightening. The university presents the opportunity to become more individualistic. In addition, parental control ceases and the student is confronted with the new found freedom (O'Neill 2007). On the other hand, the student has to reconstruct his or her personal relations in a new environment and this often causes mental and physical distress (Tao et al. 2000). Bad adjustment with university life may force the student to leave the institution (Roland 2006).

The university terrain is drastically different from that of the school. Students get anxious as

they adjust to academic, social, personal and lifestyle challenges that the university presents (Abdullah et al. 2009). It is not surprising that today, it is widely recognised that high school graduation is not sufficient to prepare students for academic and social independence at university. This is a cause of concern as adjustment to the university environment is regarded as an important factor in predicting university outcomes (Petersen et al. 2009). The students deal with the transitional problems differently. Some deal with adjustment problems constructively while others feel overwhelmed and fail to cope with life at a university. It is against the above that the present study discusses the two major dimensions of adjustment which are social and academic.

Social Adjustment: Adjusting to university involves the complementary processes of desocialisation and socialization (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). Desocialisation entails the changing or discarding of selected values, beliefs and traits one brings to university in response to the university experience. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) explained socialisation as the process of being exposed to and taking on some of the new values, attitudes beliefs and perspectives to which one is exposed at university. Upon entry into a university, first year students are confronted with new personal and interpersonal challenges that include the need to establish new relationships, develop study skills and modify existing relationships with parents and their families (Parker et al. 2004; Tinto 1996). Pascarel-

Address for correspondence:

Dr. Pilot Mudhovozi
Department of Psychology
University of Venda, Private Bag X5050,
Thohoyandou, 0950, South Africa
E-mail: peemudhovozi@yahoo.com

la and Terenzini (1991) reported that first year students who are pre-occupied with friends from home struggle to adjust. They also observed that students who maintain compatible relationships with their families are more likely to do well at university. Similarly, Winter and Yaffe's (2000) study found that good relations with parents help both male and female students to adjust to the university. However, female students were more vulnerable to family problems than males. Therefore first year students need to renegotiate existing relationships with their parents and families to adjust well into university life. Students who received social support adjusted easily. A study by Enochs and Renk (2006) suggests that males adjust faster than females. In addition, the study revealed that females rely on social support more than their male counterparts to adjust to the university life. In addition, peer support and peer networks were critical in a person's adjustment into university life (Tao et al. 2000).

A study conducted with Malaysian students found that first year students encountered health, financial and academic challenges (Ahmad et al. 2002). The students experienced a delay in the disbursement of their money and that the money did not meet their financial needs at university. In South Africa, Cherian and Cherian (1998) reported that 33 to 85% of first-year students drawn from the University of the North experienced various adjustment problems. A recent study suggested that a significant number of South African tertiary students face financial problems as they live below the poverty line (Lloyd and Turale 2011). Thus, the transition to emotional and financial independence can be an overwhelming experience for new students (Smith and Renk 2007). It is believed that religion has a beneficial effect of increasing self control, allowing individuals to accept the situation and adjust the self by exerting greater control over their own behaviours (McCullough and Willoughby 2009). Religion promotes fellowship with others.

Academic Adjustment: Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) argued that for most students, the transition to university classroom requires an adjustment of academic habits and expectations. First year students find that at university, competition is more acute, classes are larger, there is a lot of work, lecturers use different teaching

styles, the volume and frequency of written work are higher and standards are higher. It is imperative that the new students respond to the demands by studying harder, change their study habits and rearrange their priorities (Ngwenya 2004; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). As expected, Beder's (1997) study found that first year students had difficulty adjusting to the different styles of teaching compared to school. This is consistent with Adler et al.'s (2008) assertion that adjustment to university is critical for academic success. The researchers argue that poor college adjustment correlates with poor academic performance, low graduation rates and poor success later in life. It is therefore intriguing that most high school graduates have academic and social difficulties that delay their adaptation to the new university environment.

Other research scholars confirm that the experience of attending university is complex and pregnant with challenges that impinge on their academic success. Watton (2001) reports that the transition and adjustment time between high school and university is influenced by high school performance, living arrangements, origin and orientation activities. Students who stay off-campus with their families and those from urban areas find the adjustment easier to make. In addition, participation in university orientation activities is associated with better semester averages. Furthermore, research suggests that male students adapt to the new university environment better than their female counterparts (Enochs and Roland 2006). Another study by Doyle and Walker (2002) suggests that university students encounter a myriad of challenges. The academic staff who took part in the study reported that first year students were influenced by inadequate high school preparation, a sense of feeling disconnected and an increase in personal responsibility.

Burgess et al. (2009) reported that failure to meet the wider challenges faced by students during the transition from secondary to tertiary education impacts on learning outcomes. In South Africa, limitation in English was found to be significant among the historically disadvantaged black students and impacted negatively on their learning (Ngwenya 2004). Similarly, an earlier study by Ahmad et al. (2002) indicated that the use of English as the official mode of

communication among Malaysian students was a challenge as well.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, a study with disadvantaged South African students found that adjustment did not function as a pure mediator on academic performance as the dependable variable (Petersen et al. 2009). Instead, they reported that psychological variables better explained the students' adjustment to the university than academic performance.

From the foregoing, it is clear that first year at university is a critical stage at which students either form their beliefs and patterns of behavior in terms of higher education or decide to drop from university (Beder 1997). Adjustment in the first year of study at university has increasingly become recognised as vital to the overall success of students (Friedlander et al. 2007). First year students, therefore, require adaptive behaviours in areas such as time management, effective study skills, the capacity to complete courses and the ability to see transition as a normative shift and not a crisis (Birnie-Lefcovitch 2000). The students need to learn to balance many choices they have with their academic responsibilities. Also, they need to learn to negotiate dating in an era of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV, changes in daily routines, homesickness and the lack of externally imposed structure on their lives (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991).

Considerable literature is available on adjustment of first-year students in developed countries, yet comparatively little scholarly attention was given to Africa (Cherian and Cherian 1998). Also, adjustment difficulties among students need serious attention as they can lead to students' failure to complete their studies (Abdullah et al. 2009). Given that there is little known about adjustment problems among university students in Zimbabwe, the present study was conducted to assess whether the first year students actually differ from international first year students.

Goals of the Study: The study sought to investigate the social and academic adjustment experiences of first year students in a university in Zimbabwe. Specifically, the study sought to: 1). identify and explain the social adjustment problems encountered by first year students; 2). establish the academic challenges encountered by first year students; and 3). suggest strategies for reducing the adjustment challenges.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A phenomenological design was used in the study. Phenomenology is a particularly effective tool for revealing the qualitative aspects of adjustment (Byrne 2011). It was originally developed as a means of describing the essential features, or themes, that characterise human experience. Phenomenological research methodology, including its usual mode of data analysis, is understood and widely accepted (von Eckartsberg 1998). Phenomenology seeks to gain understanding of the essential "truths" of the lived experience (Byrne 2011). The researcher used phenomenology to gather the adjustment experiences of first year students.

Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used to select the respondents. To elicit in-depth information, knowledge of the topic under study was used to choose respondents who were willing to share their experiences at university (McMillan and Schumacher 1993). Seven respondents (male = 3; female = 4) were selected for the study. The respondents were all first year students with a mean age of 24.4 years. Their ages ranged from 18 to 36 years. They were drawn from the Faculties of Commerce, Education and Social Sciences. The aim was to select a sample that reflected the population of first year students.

Measuring Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather data. A semi-structured interview was chosen in order to allow the researcher a degree of freedom to explain his thoughts and to highlight areas of particular interest and expertise that he felt he had, as well as to enable certain responses to be questioned in greater depth, and in particular to bring out and resolve apparent contradictions (Horton et al. 2011). The guide had questions that were used to gather in-depth information that was specific to the study. The questions elicited demographic details of the participants as well as information on social and academic adjustment problems experienced by the first year students.

Procedure

The researcher held face-to-face individual interviews with the respondents. Interviews were conducted at various places which the respondents found comfortable and convenient. The respondents were invited to speak of their adjustment experiences in an open-ended manner and they had to decide on the level of disclosure. The nature of the interviews remained open-ended and flexible. The interview sessions were recorded verbatim and transcribed. Field notes were taken and interview conversations were recorded. Credibility of the data was enhanced by the richness of description that emerged from the data. Feedback of the results was given upon request.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was used to analyse data. The researcher read through the response transcripts and recorded recurring and interesting phrases and words. The data was segmented into categories which were consolidated into themes that were subsequently compared (Strauss and Myburgh 2002).

Ethical Considerations

Prior to commencement of the study, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the university. In addition, informed consent was obtained from the respondents. Respondents gave their assent after the purpose of the study was clearly explained to them. To preserve the anonymity of the respondents, their actual names were neither used nor recorded. Participation in the study was voluntary and the respondents were not subjected to harm physically or psychologically.

RESULTS

The study gives a snapshot of the adjustment challenges that first year university students encounter. Findings of the study are presented and discussed in terms of the identified themes and sub-themes. The qualitative descriptions are presented below.

Social Experiences

The study showed that first year students face a myriad of social problems at university.

Culture, separation from family, disengaging high school friends, finance, dress and food were the main themes that emerged from the study.

Culture

Cultural, religious and language variations militated against adjustment into the new university life. Two respondents indicated that differences in culture, language and religion were barriers to communication with other students. As expected, the respondents who struggled to adjust were females. The finding is illustrated by the following statements:

I meet many prospective friends on the campus. However, they come from different cultures and religions while others come from other countries. So, it is a very big challenge because I need to learn their languages in order to become friends with them. (Respondent 6, female).

The challenge that I experienced is that of a new language. Most the students use the local language. I find it difficult to communicate with most people because they use the local language that I am not good at. (Respondent 6, female).

The local language that they use is difficult to understand. (Respondent 3, female).

Anxiety of Separating from Family

Separation anxiety seemed to affect female more than male students. Most of the female respondents indicated that they missed their families and felt lonely. They were pre-occupied with thoughts of how their families were coping without them. The findings are illustrated in the following vignettes:

They are worried because it is my first time to live far away from home. (Respondent 3, female).

They are worried about me because they do not know whether I am coping or not. They pray that I must not change my behavior. I am sure that they miss me. (Respondent 4, female).

I am always wondering how they are coping without me, because I am not coping at all. I just wish I was there sharing my everyday experiences with them. (Respondent 5, female).

It was very difficult to leave my family and children and stay so far away from home. I feel so lonely. (Respondent 6, female).

My family might be wondering how I am adapting to the new place. (Respondent 2, male).

I am sure that my family is happy that I am at university. It is only that it will take a long time before I see them again. (Respondent 7, male).

Disengaging High School Friends

The youngest female respondent (18 years of age) was pre-occupied with high school friends who were disengaging from her. She had no friend at university. The following statements demonstrate the finding:

My social life is destroyed because I do not socialise with new students at university. It seems that my high school friends rejected me because they treat me differently. They avoid me. (Respondent 4, female).

Finance

Financial difficulty was a challenge as indicated by one male student. The student said:

I do not have enough money to buy all the things that I need. (Respondent 7, male)

Dress

A male respondent felt that his clothes were of inferior quality to those of other students. The respondent said:

Most of the people that I have met seemed to be dressed to kill.... I feel ashamed to socialise with them. They have lavish properties and wear expensive clothes. (Respondent 2, male).

Food

A female student reported that she did not like the food that was served at the new university. This is supported by the following:

I do not like the food that they sell. It is a nightmare to get the meal that I like (Respondent 4, female).

Noise

One female student was annoyed by the noise of radios played by other students in the hostel. She had the following to say:

Other students do not obey the rules. They make noise with their radios. (Respondent 3, female).

Academic Experiences

The study revealed that fear of failure was the main academic issue of concern among the sample first year students. They were anxious about passing all their semester courses. Some female respondents cited lack of courage to ask questions in class, teaching methods that were different from those used at high school and the use of several venues by a class as issues of concern. One male respondent indicated he was expected to buy his own reference books unlike at high school where they were provided. However, another male respondent reported that all his lecturers were good and made him feel free. He enjoyed his academic work.

Low Self-esteem

One female student had low self-esteem and could not ask the lecturer to clarify some academic issues because of lack of confidence. Since English was the official language of communication at the university, the student might have lacked proficiency in the language. The respondent said:

I am afraid to ask my lecturer when I do not understand while he is busy teaching. (Respondent 6, female).

Lack of Reference Books

One respondents said:

I am expected to have my own text books. I do not know how I will get them. You know at secondary school we were not buying books but here it is a different place. Books are very expensive. I do not have money to buy the books. (Respondent 1, male).

No Permanent Venue

One respondents said:

The challenge is that you have to move from one venue to another to attend lectures. This is different from the high school set up where learners use the same classroom for the whole year. (Respondent 5, female).

Fear of Failure

Some students were achievement motivated. They were anxious about failing in their first

semester at university. Perhaps their parents and/or sponsors demanded good results. Failure would therefore lead to loss of sponsorship. The following statements illustrate the finding:

I am concerned about my modules. I do not want to fail them. (Respondent 2, male).

I do not want to fail my first semester as I am still adapting to the new environment. I do not want to let my family down. (Respondent 4, female).

I do not want to fail. I need to get high marks in order to get distinctions. (Respondent 3, female).

Different Teaching Methods

The effect of different teaching style at university was found to be an academic stressor. This is demonstrated in the following statements:

The lecturers are doing their level best.... but, the way they teach is different from the way we were taught at secondary school. (Respondent 4, female).

All my lecturers are good. They make us feel free in class and I am doing fine academically. (Respondent 1, male)

Strategies for Coping with Stress

Social networks and efficacious beliefs were the coping strategies that emerged from the study.

Social Networks

The importance of a peer support network was revealed by the study. The following statements support the findings:

So far, I met many people likely to be friends. We shared our problems. (Respondent 1, male).

I think that finding friends that will mentor and encourage me will help. I need somebody who can boost my confidence. (Respondent 2, male).

I do not have a friend at the moment. I need to learn other main languages first.... May be if I get a friend, I will cope with the challenges. (Respondent 3, female).

I do not have friends on campus so I feel lonely because naturally I like to socialise with friends. (Respondent 4, female).

Efficacious Beliefs

Some respondents believed that they were going to cope with the challenges that they faced at university. This was going to be achieved through hard work and determination. They respondents said:

I am sure I will cope with the challenges. I will strive towards excellence. (Respondent 1, male).

I know I will adapt to the new lifestyle no matter what! (Respondent 5, female)

DISCUSSION

It emerged from the study that first year students face several social problems at university. The problems emanated from culture, separation from family, disengaging high school friends, finance, dress and food were the main themes that emerged from the study. The social problems are discussed next.

Cultural, religious and language variations militated against adjustment into the new university life. Female respondents indicated that differences in culture, language and religion were barriers to communication with other students. As expected, most of the respondents who struggled to adjust were females. This confirms Enochs and Renk's (2006) assertion that females have a lower adjustment than males because they rely on social support more than their male counterparts to adjust to the university life. Most students used the predominant vernacular language at the host institution.

Separation anxiety seemed to affect female more than male students. Most of the female respondents indicated that they missed their families and felt lonely. They were pre-occupied with thoughts of how their families were coping without them. This is in line with Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) finding that first year students who are pre-occupied with friends from home struggle to adjust. Had they been communicating with their family members they were going easily adjust into the university life (Winter and Yaffe 2000). They also observed that students who maintain compatible relationships with their families are more likely to do well at university. One male respondent reported that he thought that his family was probably wondering how he was adapting to the university life. The other male respondent thought his family was happy

that he was at university. He was concerned that it was going to take long to see his family members.

The youngest female respondent (18 years of age) was pre-occupied with high school friends who were disengaging from her. She had no friend at university. The finding is consistent with Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) finding that first year students who are pre-occupied with friends from home struggle to adjust. In addition, financial difficulty was a challenge as indicated by one male student. The finding supports previous researches which reported that university students experience financial difficulties (Ahmad et al. 2002; Cherian and Cherian 1998; Lloyd and Turale 2011; Smith and Renk 2007). Perhaps the student came from an economically disadvantaged family (Lloyd and Turale 2011).

One male respondent felt that his clothes were of inferior quality to those of other students. The student's perceived economic misfortune was not surprising as Cherian and Cherian (1998), Lloyd and Turale (2011) and Smith and Renk (2007) indicated that some families lived below the poverty line. A female student reported that she did not like the food that was served at the new university. This finding is not surprising as Zimbabwe had not recovered from the effects of its worst economic crisis which did not spur universities. Students experienced serious food shortages (Manyukwe 2008). Another female student was annoyed by the noise of radios played by other students in the hostel. This suggests a lack of proper supervision of halls of residence by the university staff.

Academic Experiences

The study revealed that fear of failure was the main academic issue of concern among the sample of first year students. They were anxious about passing all their semester courses. Some female respondents cited lack of courage to ask questions in class, teaching methods that were different from those used at high school and the use of several venues by a class as issues of concern. One male respondent indicated that he was expected to buy his own reference books unlike at high school where they were provided. However, another male respondent reported that all his lecturers were good

and made him feel free. He enjoyed his academic work. The gender difference supports the argument that male students adapt to the new university environment better than their female counterparts (Enochs and Roland 2006).

One female student had low self-esteem and could not ask the lecturer to clarify some academic issues because of lack of confidence. Since English was the official language of communication at the university, the student might have lacked proficiency in the language. Previous studies had found English to be significant among the historically disadvantaged black students and that it impacted negatively on their learning (Ahmad et al. 2002; Ngwenya 2004). Difficulty in expressing herself in English could have made her fail to participate in class. Another plausible reason is that, she had social phobia hence could not speak in the presence of many students. In addition, it is a sign of inadequate high school preparation (Doyle and Walker 2002).

It also emerged from the study that lack of reference books and limited teaching space affected the students' performance. The finding is consistent with Nyaruwata's (2012) assertion that the higher education institutions in Zimbabwe experienced a myriad of challenges that include limited teaching space and reference material. Some students were achievement motivated. They were anxious about failing in their first semester at university. Perhaps their parents and/or sponsors demanded good results. Failure would therefore lead to loss of sponsorship.

The effect of different teaching style at university was found to be an academic stressor. The finding is in line with Beder (1997), Ngwenya (2004), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) who indicated that first year students had difficulty adjusting to the different styles of teaching compared to school. Contrary to the above, one male respondent reported that all lecturers were good and made him feel free in class and perform well. Thus, it contradicts Beder's (1997), Ngwenya's (2004), Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) finding. However, it confirms Enoch's and Roland's (2006) finding that male students adapt to the new university environment better than their female counterparts.

Strategies for Coping with Stress

Social networks and efficacious beliefs were the coping strategies that emerged from the

study. The importance of a peer support network was revealed by the study. This is consistent with Tao et al.'s (2000) observation that peer support and peer networks were critical in a person's adjustment into university life. Most of the respondents indicated that they needed to have friends although language was a barrier. They needed friends to share their burdens for support and socialisation. One of them said that she felt lonely because she had no friend.

Some respondents believed that they were going to cope with the challenges that they faced at university. This was going to be achieved through hard work and determination. This confirms Ngwenya's (2004) and Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) suggestion that it is imperative that the new students respond to the demands by studying harder, change their study habits and rearrange their priorities. However, the respondents did not mention the need to acquire adaptive behaviours in areas such as time management, effective study skills, the capacity to complete courses and the ability to see transition as a normative shift and not a crisis (Birniefcovich 2000). Such skills help students to learn to balance many choices they have with their academic responsibilities.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDY

The size of the sample is small to make any generalisation beyond the sample itself. However, to broaden the applicability of the findings, this study can serve as a pilot for future studies with bigger samples. However, the goal of a phenomenological study is in-depth exploration of a phenomenon and uniqueness of perceptions rather than generalisability of the findings. Future study should focus on the study skills and academic performance of first year students.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that first year of study at university is a stressful time. The respondents reported that they experienced both social and academic adjustment problems. Overall, females reported higher social and academic adjustment challenges than males although only males indicated that they had financial problems.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

It is hoped that this study will contribute to an increased awareness of adjustment problems faced by first year students. Thus, the study offers insights which can help university management, academic staff and student support services intervene in the process of helping students to quickly adjust to the university's academic and social demands. It is imperative for universities to integrate first year students successfully into the institution to enable them realize their full academic potential. The students should be helped to re-arrange their priorities in life in order to adjust to the new environment. Universities should strengthen and/or revive new student orientation programmes, first year orientation seminars that are co-instructed by students and faculty, remedial or developmental courses especially in English and writing and study skills. Student development professionals should pay attention to students with poor adjustment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study points to the importance of understanding adjustment problems among first year cohorts in relation to specific challenges that they face and appropriate interventions that could be used to improve student outcomes. First year students need to be equipped with adaptive behaviours in areas such as time management, effective study skills, the capacity to complete courses and the ability to see transition as a normative shift and not a crisis for them to realise their academic potentials. Universities should review and strengthen the programmes targeted at helping students adjust smoothly and quickly. Psychologists in the Student Support Services should help students to discover the order of their wishes as self-awareness is the key to success.

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