Sociocultural experiences of first year students: A case study of a selected university in South Africa

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Abstract: The transition into higher education institutions is a perilous life stage for every first-year university student around the world. The aim of the study is to explore the sociocultural and lived experiences of first year students in one of the universities in South Africa. This study adopted qualitative approach which involved the use of focus group discussion and questionnaire for data triangulation. The diffusion of innovation theory of learning was used to frame the study. Convenient and purposive sampling were employed to select the sample population of 93 students who are coming from different provinces of South Africa, and registered for the first time at selected university to pursue their Bachelor Degrees in the faculty of Education. Findings revealed positive and negative experiences, and the study suggests the construction of knowledge through active engagement and involvement of these students as to help them to embrace both learning opportunities and challenges while studying at the university.

Keywords: First year students, High school, Higher education, Negative experiences, Positive experiences, Sociocultural experiences, Transitioning.

1. Introduction and Background

The transition from high school to higher education marks a significant milestone in the lives of many first-year students. For many students, this transition can be an exciting and a scary proposition at the same time (Uleanya & Rugbeer, 2020). Recent studies affirm that this journey is often filled with excitement and anxiety, whilst, exposing a student into a new living and learning experiences, challenges as well as opportunities (Crawford, Allen, Sanders, Baumeister, Parker, Saunders & Tice, 2024). Body of literature also alluded that many first-year students particularly those coming directly from high schools, find the transition into universities life as a difficult and often experience lack of connection with the university learning contexts (Ambler, Solomonides & Smallridge, 2021). On the other hand, it was mentioned in Priest, Saucier and Eiselein (2016) that first year of higher education brings a unique set of circumstances and acclimate demands to students. However, research affirmed that a successful adjustment on these circumstances, feelings and demands assist first year students to quickly develop a sense of belonging, well-being and strong connection with their new learning environment (Ayanwale & Ndlovu, 2024; Priest et al., 2016). Thus, the aim of this study is to identify the opportunities and constraints that first year students are experiencing with their transitions from high school to university. The study goes further and explores diverse sociocultural experiences and highlights their academic, social and personal achievements of their journey.

2. Literature Review

In essence, with social academic and adaptation challenges present a stark transition to the students from high schools to the academic rigor of higher education contexts. Mulaudzi (2023); Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020) argued that the strength of commitment to quality education by any university is the ability to build a strong and effective social and academic community to its students. Some studies

however, state that lecturers and administrators are the key agencies on improving the sociocultural experiences of the first-year students at university contexts (Cho, Wang, Bonem & Levesque-Bristol, 2022). Literature also revealed that self-directed learning is considered as a crucial strategy to enhance first year student's learning experiences (Morris, 2023). Meanwhile, studies on psychological well-being of university students have reported that first year students are experiencing stress, anxiety and feeling of alienation due to higher expectations for independent studies and critical thinking at university contexts (Liy, Ping & Gao, 2019; Mutinta2022).

With an increasingly diverse and multicultural learning context at universities Crawford et al. (2024); Tsang, Aubrey and Yuan (2024) affirmed that it is more important than ever for university administrators to incorporate culturally responsive instructions to the first-year students so as to help them with social integration and building of their social networks. Recent study alludes that first-year students' social economic status plays a significant role on shaping their learning experiences because "it can affect their ability to participate effectively in their university studies" (Crawford et al., 2024, p. 395). Similarly, research studies like that by (Ambler et al., 2021; Menzli et al., 2024) have mentioned that first year students particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds, those from remote and outlying areas appear to suffer more with adaptation to the university learning environment due to the limited access to the learning resources as well as people dynamics. Consequently, technology advancement at university often fosters some challenges to first year students since they are requiring direction, and guidance of how to access the technological devices for their learning process (Ayanwale & Ndlovu, 2024; Kanyopa, 2023).

Body of literature revealed that with their transitioning to higher education, first year students are expected to become firm and autonomous throughout their undergraduate studies (Kanyopa & Hlalele, 2021; Mulaudzi, 2023). This study affirms that the university learning contexts exposes first year students into new world of assignments, projects, lecture halls and libraries which are bigger than classes in high schools. Thus, these students need support from lecturers, administrators and other role players to assist them with transition process from high schools to university learning environment. This was also supported by Ikävalko, Pernaa and Aksela (2023); Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020) that transition from high schools to university education has an impact on first year student's lives in intellectual and social contexts. Hence academia has to employ proactive strategies to ensure that first year student's learning experience is improved in a holistic manner.

3. Theoretical Framework

The Diffusion of Innovations (hereafter, DOI) learning theory was employed to frame this study. The theory was developed by E.M Rogers, an American communication theorist in 1962. The DOI is the theory that informs the process of learning through communication and innovation within a certain channel over time in a particular social context (Menzli, Smirani, Boulahia & Hadjouni, 2022). The theory also believes that innovation degree and adoption in learning process are influenced by factors such as compatibility, complexity of the task, observability and the relative advantage of idea or program introduced in a particular learning context (Ayanwale & Ndlovu, 2024). More important, the theory explains the learning as a social process that occur among the students in the relation to the spread of new ideas and practices over time. In this study, the theory was used to accelerate the transition process and adoption of learning environment changes to the first-year students at a selected university. Whereby, learning innovations and adoption were communicated for extending and improving learning experiences of these students within this particular educational context.

4. Methodology

This article adopted a qualitative case study approach to research on higher education experiences of first year students at a selected university in South Africa. An interpretive research paradigm was used as a lens to provide a comprehensive description of the diverse learning experiences of the first-year students. In this study, researchers employed the questionnaire and focus group discussion to collect data. The convenience and purposive sampling methods were used to select the research context and the sample population of 93 first year students from the Faculty of Education. The questionnaires

using a 6-point Likert-Scale were administered to all 93 first year students, Batterton and Hale (2017) states that a 6-point Likert-Scale is crucial survey questionnaire method to measure people's experiences, values, attitudes, perceptions and behavioral changes. Further, participants were grouped into nine groups in which each group was consisted ten participants for focus group discussion sessions, while the remaining three (3) students were acting as facilitators of the focus group discussions. Focus group discussion is a data generation method that allows researchers to explore participant's thoughts, feelings, experience and behavior (Flick, 2022; Kanyopa, 2018). Data generated was thematically analysed. Thematic data analysis is a process of identify and report the repeated patterns (Byrne, 2022; Peel, 2020). Thus, this study analysed the transcripts several times to develop its two main themes that emerged from the data collected.

5. Presentation and Discussion of Findings

This section stipulates learning experiences of the first-year students at a selected university. Participant's comments assorted that their learning experiences are influenced by skills, knowledge, and their daily social interactions during their learning process. This was supported by Mutinta (2022); Thiry (2019) who mentioned that learning experiences are gained through the course itself, the program as well as active participation during the learning process. Moreover, "the learning experiences can either be positive or negative" (Kanyopa, 2018, p.43).

5.1. Negative Experiences

Essentially, participant's responses presented in the Table 1, indicated that there are four common negative learning and lived experiences for first year students at higher education contexts, namely; Psychosocial challenges, Cognitive challenges, financial stress, Navigating university resources. Nevertheless, 11 students (11,84%) out of 93 who returned their questionnaires scripts mentioned that they have never experience any negativity in their studies process. Additionally, another 8 students (8,6 %) did not provide any response.

Table 1.
Negative experiences of first year students at a selected University.

Negative experience	Frequency	Percent
Psychosocial challenges	21	22.58
Cognitive challenges	13	13.97
Financial stress	30	32.26
Navigating university resources	10	10.75
No negative experience	11	11.84
No response	8	8.6
TOTAL	93	100.00

Body of knowledge showed that transitioning from high school to higher education is considered a crucial incident in late adolescence and is associate with psychosocial challenges (Mulaudzi, 2023; Uleanya & Rugbeer, 2020). As university first year students, individualization and independence are the new roles that guide the students towards the decision making (Ambler et al., 2021). Although this transition provides students with many opportunities, this research shows that the transitioning from high schools to higher education institutions can be exciting and threating at the same time. This implies that, first year university student may develop the feeling of isolation and alienation while adjusting to their new learning environment. The following sections discuss the negative experiences experienced by the first-year students at a selected university.

5.2. Psychosocial Challenges

Psychosocial challenges are defined as subjective negative experiences that related to deficient social relation (Kanyopa & Mokhele-Makgalwa, 2024). Similarly, Sharp and Theiler (2018) mentioned that psychosocial challenges are related to various negative learning experiences, such as ineffective social

skills, poor academic performance, hopelessness, anxiety and depression. Psychosocial challenges are associate with common negative experiences like isolation, feeling of alienation, loneliness, solitude, sociocultural adjustment, and social anxiety. Participants responses through the questionnaire stipulated those psychosocial challenges are common negative experiences faced by the first-year students at a selected university. A total of 21 students (22,58%) highlighted the issue of psychosocial by associating it with homesickness and loneliness that they are facing in their new learning environment.

Studies also show that psychosocial challenges are associated with high risk for mental problem, heart diseases, depression as well as cognitive dysfunctions (Mutinta, 2022). Thus, it can be understood that it is important for first year students learning process to be demonstrated at a higher level of social connection to help them to learn effectively, survive and thrive (Ikävalko et al., 2023; Li, Zhao, Chen, Peng & Lu, 2022). Research on public health revealed that psychosocial challenges manifest depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal thoughts to most students in learning contexts (Chew & Cerbin, 2021). Additionally, through the focus group discussion sessions, participants voiced their concerns on the psychosocial challenges as first growing negative experience in their learning process. Findings from the focus group discussion sessions revealed that negative learning experiences affect students' overall well-being, wellness and foster inability to function effectively. This was also supported by Li eta al. (2022) who mentioned that psychosocial challenges lead to poor academic performance and school dropout.

Moreover, lack of consistent peer contact was mentioned to cause negative self-evaluation, fear, depression and anxiety to most of first year students (Brainee, 2024). Focus group discussion sessions revealed that psychosocial challenges promote impaired concentration to many students and also their decline in academic motivation and performance. Essentially, studies on higher education institutions found that psychosocial challenges are negatively correlated with student's well-being and sense of belonging at university environment (Mulaudzi, 2023; Sharp & Theiler, 2018; 2020).

5.3. Cognitive Challenges

Cognitive challenges are the group of difficulties that impacts a person's perceptions, thoughts and behaviors (Mutinta, 2022; 2024). Cognitive challenges can be displayed through diverse aspects such as pressure of academic, high level of stress and anxiety as well as social adjustment (Ariffin, Noor & Alias, 2020). Participant's questionnaire responses indicated that cognitive challenges are most crucial challenges faced by most the first-year students at a selected university. Consequently, a total of 13 participants (13,97%) indicated their cognitive challenges by associate it with their inability to cope with day-to-day problems and stress. According to Crawford et al. (2024); Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020) state that cognitive challenges refer to a wide range of disorder that negatively impact one's ability to think and functioning.

On the other hand, Li et al. (2022); Priest et al. (2016) state that cognitive challenges can vary depending on the circumstances and trigger factors. Studies also alluded that cognitive challenges sometimes appear as physical problems (Ambler et al., 2021), this implies that cognitive challenges can be displayed through a persons' behavior, functions as well as unexplained aches and pains. Through focus group discussion sessions participants explained cognitive challenge by relating it with diverse challenges they are facing in their study process. This including difficulties and constraints in their working memories and their problem-solving skills. It was also evidenced in Chew and Cerbin (2021) that cognitive challenges negatively affect student's memory, attention and their problem-solving ability.

Findings also revealed that first year students are failing to meet the higher expectations of the university courses. Participants mentioned the issue of inability to manage their time, balancing their assignment and coursework which resulted to the overwhelmed feelings. Body of literature also affirmed that cognitive challenges to first year students are influenced by the pressure of academic performance and personal responsibilities. This implies that the transitioning from high school to university typically offers a range of negative experiences that impact study-life balance. Participant's discussions also revealed that cognitive challenges lead to difficult in adjustments towards the new teaching and learning methods and self-directed decision-making process.

5.4. Financial Stress

Globally, the cost of attending universities has increased stress to students who are pursuing higher education. According to Halabieh, Hawkins, Bernstein, Lewkowict, Unaldi Kamel, Fleming and Levitin (2022) reported that student's financial situation often is stressful, because managing living expenses like food and rent can be a challenge especially, for students with limited financial support. Responses from the questionnaire employed in this study revealed that a total of 30 students (32,26%) highlighted that they are experiencing potential financial stress at a selected university. Participants of the study also mentioned about the lack of funding and scholarships which resulted to their failure to afford the living and studying expenses. Furthermore, the study revealed that first year students are experiencing financial independence for the first time, which was mentioned by Morris (2023) as a stressful time for them. This implies that with financial independence at university, these students are now required to plan their budgets on how to spend their moneys carefully and wisely.

In all focus groups, participants indicated that there is a clear link between financial stress and poor mental functioning, because, worrying over finance has been connected with mental issues like sadness and depression. In like manner, studies have specified an association between financial and general poor mental functioning, and mentioned that the high cost of tuition fees, textbooks and other studying fees can be a significant mental burden to most university students (Li et al., 2022; Mutinta, 2022). In congruency, body of literature on higher education indicated that most of students perceived financial stress as one of their negative experiences while pursuing their studies at universities (Ariffin et al., 2020; Thiry, 2019).

Additionally, group discussions revealed that financial stress always affect student's academic performance and achievement negatively, especially when it comes to study and work at the same time. Findings revealed that financial difficulties force the first-year students to work part-time jobs to pay bills and afford their living expenses, which consequently reduces the number of hours that can be used for studying. Moreover, research shows that balancing academic responsibilities and part-time jobs can be exhausting and leave no time for self-care and social life to students (Cho et al., 2022; Priest et al., 2016). In all focus groups, participants mentioned part-time jobs as an impediment as they prevent them from performing well in their studies. Besides, research has shown that "students who are experiencing higher level of financial stress are more likely to discontinue with their studies compared to more financially secure colleagues" Cho et al. (2022, p.224).

Findings also affirmed that financial stress leads to the failure to pay for the learning materials such as textbooks, dictionaries which were mentioned to affect first year students academically. Participants also mentioned the issue of escaping some lessons only because the prescribed textbooks and other required materials for certain courses are too expensive. This was mentioned in Sharp and Theiler (2018); Tsang et al. (2024) that university students are confronted with difficult decisions of whether to buy expensive textbooks or to pay for their necessary basic needs like food, rent and medications.

5.5. Navigating University Resources

Another negative experience highlighted by the participants of the study, was the whole process of navigating university resources at a selected university. A total of 10 students (10,75%) mentioned that they faced and still are facing challenges to access university facilities such as laboratories, libraries, writing space, and lecture theaters. Ikävalko et al. (2023); Kanyopa and Hlalele (2021) alluded that without proper orientations, first year students will experience potential challenges to access resources like academic advising centers, tutoring centers, and counselling services. First year students may lack understanding of the important resources available in their learning environment due to improper orientations. Similarly, participants also declared that due to the amount of information presented on orientation day resulting to cognitive overloaded and leave them without knowing where and which resources are provided within their learning context. Menzli et al. (2024); Mulaudzi (2023) mentioned that many first-year students may not be aware of the existing resources and learning supports that are offered by the university.

Findings of the study also revealed that understanding of administrative processes, locations for departments such as financial aid department, housing, course registration can be confusing and frustrating to new students in university contexts. In addition, participants also state that registration and enrollment processes is always challenging to them. This was evidenced in Halabieh et al. (2022); Thiry (2019) that first year students might be confused with requisites and enrollment deadlines during the registration process. In all focus group discussions, participants mentioned that at a selected university most of applications to various services are involving paperwork that adhere specific timeline, which led to difficulties to get access to several resources.

Essentially, navigating of learning resources was mentioned by Kanyopa (2018); Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020); 2020) as a significant challenge for students since they find themselves in a new and complex learning environment compared to their former learning environment. Likewise, Cho et al. (2022, p. 225) also states that "knowing the location of various offices and resources on a large campus can be challenging for new students". Findings of the study also showed that participants are struggling to know the time, locations and processes to access certain services at their university, as they are still new and not familiar with working hours for various offices. On the other hand, Mulaudzi (2023); du Toit-Brits (2019) postulate that navigating university resources can be limited by cultural and linguistic diversity existing in a particular learning context. Specifically, students from different cultural and historical back grounds or different educational system, they may face barrier due to language that used as a media of instruction.

5.6. Positive Experiences

Despite the negative lived and learning experiences explained in previous sections, participants also revealed some positive experiences while pursuing their studies at a selected university. In essence, participant's responses showed that university contexts are attractive, engaging and more collaborative. More so, participants commented on some policies such as internationalization policy and say that it allows and expose them to diverse cultures through collaboration with international students from worldwide. Justly, participant's responses presented in the Table 2, indicated that there are two common positive learning and lived experiences for first year students at a selected university, namely; Diverse cultural awareness, and personal growth and development. However, 35 students (38%) out of 93, returned their questionnaires scripts blank with no response regarding their positive experiences.

Table 2.
Positive experiences of first year students at a selected University.

Positive experience	Frequency	Percent
Diverse cultural awareness	19	20
Personal growth and development	39	42
No positive experiences	35	38
Total	93	100

Research revealed thousands benefits gained by the high school students once transitioning to the higher education contexts. As first year students at the university, they are introduced into new academic, learning and intellectual opportunities that significantly impact their social, academic, personal dimensions and development as professionals.

5.7. Diverse Cultural Awareness

Diverse cultural awareness refers to the understanding and recognition of the differences among people from different cultural backgrounds (Brainee, 2024; Kanyopa, 2022). It involves the appreciating and respecting of diversity including cultures, values, religious beliefs and various traditional morals. Participants responses through the questionnaire specified the diverse cultural awareness as one of the positive experiences of first year students at a selected university. A total of 19 students (20%) highlighted the advantages of being exposed into diverse cultural activities. Through group discussion sessions, participants revealed that cultural awareness not only helps them to understand various

traditional and cultural practices, but also, enhances their understanding of several behaviors, values religious beliefs and customs. Studies by Ariffin et al. (2020); Kanyopa and Hlalele (2021) maintained that awareness about different traditions and culture practices enhances one's respect towards others cultural perspectives and experiences. Meanwhile, Ouedraogo (2021); Wang, Zhang and Zheng (2023) affirmed that diverse cultural awareness is the best means for showing respect and empathy towards others' uniqueness, differences and their backgrounds.

Findings of the study revealed that cultural awareness increases students' communication skills, as they becoming aware of what to say, to who and where. This was supported by Banks (2015) that cultural awareness helps students to take into consideration different cultures existing within their learning contexts and being aware of potential barriers which may happen when communicating with diverse people. Research on diversity affirmed that diverse cultural awareness helps people to interact effectively with other people of diverse cultural or historical backgrounds (Wang et al., 2023; 2022). All focus group sessions revealed that cultural awareness helps participants to overcome stereotypes and prejudices that lead to biases and discrimination. More importantly, participants also state that experiences in diverse cultural awareness, the college managed to create an inclusive learning environment that makes every student to feel secured, valued, and respected.

Arce-Trigatti and Anderson (2020) alludes that diverse cultural awareness is crucial in todays' interconnected world, because it fosters mutual understanding, peace, cooperation and trust between people from different background (Kanyopa 2022). Specifically, findings of the study also stipulate that cultural awareness enhances student's understanding on global events including international holidays and global interactions. Thus, cultural awareness is essential for first year students at a selected university, since this experience allows them to not only participate effectively in multicultural programs, but also, it helps them to broaden their cultural limits.

5.8. Personal Growth and Development

The first year of university studies is viewed as a time for new schedules, new experiences as well as new daily routines that significantly impacts ones' growth and development (Halabieh et al., 2022; Menzli et al., 2024). In their first university year, students experience both liberation and independence as they become more responsible with their choices, decisions, budgets, self-care as well as their self-discipline towards their new found autonomy (Uleanya & Rugbeer, 2023). Essentially, participant's responses specified personal growth and development as their positive learning experience at a selected university. Findings indicated personal growth and development as a common experience, because a total of 39 students' (42%) responses mentioned it as positive change they encountered when transitioning to higher education.

In all group discussions, participants revealed that university life exposes them into a digital world that influences diverse perspectives and ideas. This implies that the transitioning from high school to university brings a significant academic challenges and intellectual opportunities to students. Research by Ariffin et al. (2022); Thiry (2019) affirmed that personal growth and development at university is influenced by challenges and opportunities found in the particular learning environment. Literature also stipulate that with high level of critical thinking, and problem solving that university courses come with, first year students turned to be more independent with fundamental academic beginning (Cho et al., 2022).

Personal growth and development was mentioned as crucial experience for first year students because, it introduces them into critical self-directed learning that significantly impacts their professional endeavor (du Toit-Brits, 2019). Group discussions also revealed that personal growth and development help students to be active in collaborative learning as well as in conducting their independent research studies. In like manner, participants alluded that personal growth and development to shape their identities and prepare them for both personal and professional life challenges. Ikävalko et al. (2023); Halabieh et al. (2022) mention that personal growth and development at university context not only enhances student's ability to handle multiple responsibilities, but also, to improve their organizational and management skills. Consequently, learning experiences of first year university students are multifaceted, thus, it is important for the universities to provide them with

mutual support that will alleviate their academic journey and be able to comprehend their academic and social challenges that have impact on their personal growth and well-being.

6. Trustworthiness and Ethical Consideration

The current study undertook several measures to ensure its' trustworthiness and research ethics. Researchers employed member checking on the data generation instruments to ensure the credibility, also triangulation of the methods employed strengthened the validity of the study. The data generated was validated by the senior professors in the particular university. Clear description of the context and data generation process enhance the dependability of the study, whilst, the transferability was ensured by denser information identifying the research context and participants of the study, to allow its applicability to other similar contexts. Principle of openness and transparency during data generation and interpretation of findings ensure the confirmability of the study. Still, the study also embraced the ethical principles throughout the research process by securing research permissions, guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity for both the context and participants of the study. All the participants received informed consent letter that ensures their voluntary participation, and protection against any harm or threats.

7. Recommendations for Future Research

The study discusses some of lived and learning experiences of first year students in a selected university in South Africa. However, further research is necessary to investigate the different strategies and coping mechanisms that would assist the first-year university students to adjust and cope easily with their transitioning to higher education contexts.

8. Conclusion

The study has addressed pressing experiences of the first-year students in a selected university in South Africa. While it is acknowledged that the first-year students' experiences are multifaceted, the study maintains that it is crucial for the universities to provide these students with social and institutional support to ease their transitioning from high school to university.

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Data Availability Statement:

The data that support the findings of the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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