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Transitioning Experiences of First Year University Students from Rural High Schools: Assessing the Implications

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Abstract
This study, which examined first year university students' transitioning experiences from rural high schools to university, was conducted in two South African universities. Precisely, the students were asked to appraise their transition from rural high school to university with a view, not only to assist students to have a smooth and meaningful transition to university education, but also to assess their readiness to enter university and to adjust to university life. The study involved 80 students (male=40; mean age=17.6 years; SD= 0.3) sampled through stratified random sampling to ensure that the participants were from rural high schools only. A questionnaire with closed and open-ended items and follow-up interviews were the instruments used to source data. While a Cross-tab was used to present the data which were reported in percentages, Cramer's V was the statistic used to test if the students' experiences differed by gender. Many students reported feeling anxious, fearful and uncertain, not only about their readiness to enter university, but also about their ability to cope with new and bigger academic demands as well as about new complex social networks. The study also established that gender did not significantly influence the students' experiences (Cramer's V=0.04; Alpha level=0.05) One of the major recommendations is that, given that many first year university students experience difficulties in their transitioning from high schools to university, a lot of social support, from parents, peers, lecturers etc. is needed so that this transitioning does not handcuff and cripple the students' social and academic adjustment in the new institution.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, First year university students, Impending crisis, Rural high schools, Transitioning, Transitioning experiences

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Introduction

The current study examined first year university students' experiences regarding their transitioning from rural high schools to university. A study of this nature takes lofty significance given that literature (e.g., Mushoriwa, 2007) indicates that the views students have about their transitioning from one level of education to another may either facilitate or impede the adoption of appropriate social and academic strategies to cope with work at the higher level. In the case of the present study, the learner, transitioning from a high school to a university implies transitioning from a pupil to a student, from learning dependency to learning autonomy, from a puberscent to an adolescent. Such multiple transitions may have psychological impact on the learner. In fact, available literature (e.g., Fenzel, 2000; Sirsch, 2003; Mushoriwa, 2007; Urguhart & Pooley, 2011) indicates that transitioning, whether from primary school to secondary school or from high school to university, is usually fraught with psychological, social and academic challenges which may completely offset the learner if not properly handled.

Despite the importance of this transition, transitioning from rural high schools to university is relatively under-studied; there has been scanty research, especially in developing countries (Mushoriwa, 2007; Urguhart & Pooley 2011; Hamblet, 2016) where it is perhaps not necessarily less well known but perhaps less pronounced because it is seen as something that should naturally happen. This paucity of research ,and therefore of information regarding this transition, has resulted in many learners going to university ill-prepared; often resulting in frustrations, failures, drop-outs and withdrawals. A study in this area may therefore, assist students in their entry and subsequent adjustment to the new environment.

Statement of the Problem

Objectives of the Study.
The objectives of the study were to:
 (i) examine how first year university students from rural high schools feel about their transitioning to university.
 (ii) explore the experiences of first year university students during their transitioning to university.

Research questions
 (i) How do first year university students from rural high schools feel about their transitioning to a university?
 (ii) What are the experiences of first year university students during their transitioning from high school to university?

Hypothesis
Gender did not significantly influence the students' experiences.

Review of Literature
Transition implies moving from one level to another and this requires transitional changes in students (e.g., academic, social, personal) if they are to cope with university life. This is so, given that a university is a more complex and comprehensive environment than a school (Hamblet, 2016). For Hamblet, transitioning from high school to university is challenging for any student given that the student should adjust to increased academic demands and to an environment where there is less structure and support. It is perhaps for this reason that Cowan (1991p.7) sees transition as "periods of change, disequilibrium and internal conflict about gains and losses that can occur between periods of stability, balance and quiescence." Thus, transition (such as career change or change of a school) by its very nature, forces an individual to tread upon an unfamiliar path and this can cause a lot of disequilibrium, anxiety, failure and stress if not handled properly. However, and surprisingly, many people think that it is something that must just take place naturally and on its own. This may, in part, explain the paucity of research studies in many developing counties, in this all-important area.

Urguhart and Pooley (2011) contend that for many students, the transition to the university has the potential to be stressful and it requires the student to make great and significant adjustment to his/her social, academic and personal life. The student has to experience a new environment, meet new classmates, form new social networks, and encounter new academic and social demands and expectations (Mushoriwa, 2007) as well as lecturers instead of teachers. Hamblet (2016) talks of a "jump to college" to indicate the big gap between high school education/life and university education/ life. Perhaps, this is why Weiss and Bearman (2007) argue that transitioning from high school to university is often a turning point for many students. For many, it heralds the beginning of a new life.

Tinto (1993) outlined three stages transitioning students move through; separation, transition and incorporation. In separation, Tinto notes that students move away from their familiar home and school environments, and some students may find this experience quite traumatic, depressing and disorientating. Regarding transition, in most cases students are torn between the old and the new environment. They realise that they no longer quite belong to the old environment but at the same time, they do not quite yet belong to the new environment given that very often, many of them will not have yet found their places in the new environment. Their experiences are not yet congruent with the social and academic life and expectations of the university. Incorporation then is when the new students have fully adapted to the new environment and are full members of the social and academic life of the new place.

Navigating successfully through the first two stages and finally adapting to the new environment will socialise new students into university life and its accompanying responsibilities, obligations and expectations. While there is a growing body of research (e. g. Fenzel, 2000; Sirsch, 2003; Urguhart & Pooley, 2011) focusing on the transition of secondary school pupils to tertiary institutions in developed countries, to the present writer's knowledge, little or no research has focused on the transition of rural secondary schools into university in developing countries. This is despite the fact that more often than not, students from rural areas enter university with insufficient and inadequate social and academic preparation. Many of them eventually find the social and academic pressures of their first year quite daunting.

This is perhaps, why Tinto (1993) contends that academic and social integration are the major challenges for first year students.

In South Africa, Maxwell and Mudhovozi (2014) conducted a research study focused on how rural high school learners choose their degrees in South African universities. They did not concern themselves with the experiences these learners go through during these early days, yet these experiences can alter a student's choice of a degree programme. To that extent, a study focusing on the experiences of first year university students who transitioned from rural high schools is necessary, given that, for most of these students, going to university is perhaps their first separation from home. While still in high school, many of them were dependent on family members for support and direction. This sudden exposure to an unfamiliar environment can cause a lot of disorientation in many aspects of the student's life and learning efforts. Studies (for example, see Lazarus, 1999; Mushoriwa, 2007; Urguhart & Pooley, 2011) have established that children from families or cultures where they have learned to see themselves as independent, self-contained and autonomous, tend to thrive in new institutions while those who tend to depend on group membership tend to be de-contextualised in new situations.

Evans (2017) has also noted that learners from poor communities such as remote rural areas not only take time to settle in new institutions, but also continue to have an extra burden of having to juggle work and study in order to make ends meet, given that in most cases, poverty is mostly pronounced in rural areas. Extrapolating from the above, the present study focused on students from rural high schools because many previous studies have not taken the trouble to differentiate between students from urban areas and those from rural areas, yet these students clearly have different experiences as a function of their backgrounds. Gibbs (1995), long noted that rural school students often have problems in doing well academically, at least initially, even though they may not be intellectually different from their peers from urban schools.

Many universities, with their urban or urban-like environments, tend to offer advantages to students from urban high schools to the detriment of those from rural schools. This is perhaps why Govender (2013) claims that many students come to university with massive academic deficits due to the dysfunctional high schools in rural areas. For Pargetter (1995), transition problems can be devastating to many students and can result in enormous economic and social waste. Many students often dropout because of transition problems that include failures and exclusions because of maladjustment etc.

Literature for instance, Evans, 2017) generally shows that there are two areas of transition success/failure. First, there is *school adjustment.* Successful transition involves students showing positive adjustment academically. Indicators include good attainment/achievement, regular attendance of lectures, academic persistence and readiness/preparedness, adjustment to the learning environment etc. Second, is *emotional and social adjustment at school.*

The student must show good behaviour towards peers and lecturers, should show positive attitudes and a liking for school, should not feel lonely etc. In all, it is within this backdrop that the present study investigated the experiences of first year university students in two universities in South Africa, with a view to determining how first year students can be assisted to meaningfully transition from high schools.

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Theoretical Framework

The present study was framed within Lazarus' Cognitive-transactional stress theory (Lazarus, 1999). In brief, the theory views a new environment as a challenge and threat to the individual transitioning to it; hence, it results in anxiety, fear and stress on the part of the individual. Depending on the individual, there can be cognitive failure or success. Those who successfully adjust to the new environment are likely to experience cognitive success while those who do not successfully adjust to the new environment are likely to experience cognitive failure.

The tenets of the cognitive –transactional stress theory underpin the present study. Simply put, students who transition to university (new environment) and fail to successfully adjust are most likely to fail in their studies while those who successfully adjust are likely to succeed. In essence, the theory embraces both the cognitive and affective domains of the student by looking at how the students view their transition and their eventual adjustment to the new environment. Emotions such as excitement, fear, anxiety, joy, sadness are pertinent to the study of this transition. Failure to socially adjust can negatively affect cognitive adjustment and performance.

Methodology

Research Paradigm

The study used the positivist paradigm given that it employed the mixed methods approach. The positivist approach was appropriate for the study because it sees reality as a function of our experiences. This is in line with the present study which focused on the transition experiences of first year university students. Furthermore, the paradigm is relevant since it allowed for the use of the mixed methods approach to examine the experiences of the students. The mixed methods approach, taking advantage of the similarities and differences in quantitative and qualitative methods, is a very pragmatic approach (Yin, 2012).

Research Design

This study used the survey research design given its descriptive nature. For Van Dalen (2000), the survey research design is appropriate for research of this type since it allows for the collection and description of data which may be used to assess existing perceptions, beliefs, experiences and practices with a view to improving them where possible.

It was the intention of the present study to examine the experiences of first year university students transitioning from rural high schools to university. Furthermore, surveys have the advantage of allowing the use of relatively large samples as was the case in this study (n=80). In addition, the design had the advantage of allowing the triangulation of data collection instruments (questionnaires and follow-up interviews) and data analysis procedures (quantitative and qualitative) for better understanding of the phenomenon under study (Maree, 2010). For Trockim (2006), the best hope for achieving objectivity in research is by triangulating across multiple fallible methods- as was the case in the present study.

Population

The study involved two universities and the population were students from their Faculties of Education. A total of 510 first year students were in the two Faculties. Of these students, 402 were from rural high schools. These were thus, the actual population of the study.

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Sampling and Sample

Since the study was interested in students who were from rural high schools, the first task was to identify such students from the two Facullties through purposive sampling. After identifying the students (who, in fact, were the majority (n=402) in the two Faculties), stratified random sampling was applied, taking 20% of the total number of students from rural high schools and according to Van Dalen (2000), such a sample is representative. A total of 80 students (male=40) was pooled. It was necessary to have an equal number of male and female students given that the researcher was also interested in whether there was a significant relationship between the students' experiences and their gender.

Instruments

A modified form of the questionnaire developed by Sirsch (2003) and follow-up interviews were the instruments used to source data in this study. The questionnaire, which contained 5 items relating to social/emotional aspects and another 5 relating to academic aspects, required participants to choose an answer that went with their views, feelings and opinions from two given alternatives in each item; A or B. Participants were also required to give reasons for /explanations to their answers. This gave participants a chance to give their real views/opinions instead of merely choosing from answers provided by the researcher.

Ebdon (1999) sees questionnaires as suitable for eliciting feelings, perceptions, attitudes and experiences; hence, a questionnaire which aimed to tap the experiences of the students, was seen as suitable. The questionnaire also allowed for anonymity and privacy, which actually increased the rate of truthful responses. Follow-up interviews, which were employed after an initial analysis of the questionnaire responses, were conducted with 20 of the students who had responded to the questionnaire. The aim was to probe into subtle issues raised in the questionnaire and to have obscure points clarified. In fact, prompts and probes resulted in the students elaborating and providing more detail. One can penetrate beyond initial answers through follow-up interviews (Borgdan & Biklen, 2008) The follow-up interviews also allowed the researcher to see the motivations of respondents and their reasons for responding the way they did. All this added to the depth and comprehensiveness of the responses.

Validity and reliability of the questionnaire

Although the questionnaire was adopted from Sirsch (2003), with minor modifications and despite the fact that several studies (e. g. Mushoriwa, 2007) have provided evidence of its good psychometric properties, still the questionnaire was given to 6 raters who were considered experts in the area to check its suitability(validity). The same 6 raters were also asked to score the questionnaire (out of 10) as a measure of people's feelings, perceptions, attitudes and experiences. The ratings were then correlated and an inter-rater reliability coefficient of 0.63 was obtained. This indicates that to a large extent, all the raters agreed that the questionnaire was reliable.

After the tests of validity and reliability, the questionnaire was test-run with a group of 10 students to see if it worked as intended. After minor adaptations and modifications, the instrument was adopted for use with the main sample (n=80).

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Results and Discussion
Results
Table 1 presents the responses to the questionnaire items. Participants chose options that went with their feelings and also described their transitional experiences and the meanings they attached to them.

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Table 1: Responses to the questionnaire items (n=80).
Stem: When I think of my early experiences at this university, I ……..

<div align="center">Social Aspects</div>

Statement	Responses in %	
	A	B
1. A) feel happy because it was exciting to be in a university.	42 (52.5%)	38
(47.5%) B) feel sad because I felt lost.		
Give reason(s) for your answer…………………..		
2. A) regret having come to university.	14(17.5%)	
66(82.5%) B) feel proud for having made it up to university.		
Give reason(s) for your answer………...		
3. A) felt happy to meet new friends.	28(35%)	
52(65%) B) felt stressed because it was difficult to form friendships.		
Give reason(s) for your answer………………		
4. A) realise that it was easy to establish new social networks.	33(41.25%)	
47(58.75) B) realise that it was not easy to establish new social networks.		
Give reason(s) for your answer………		
5. A) realise that I got a lot of support from many people	29(36.25%)	
51(63.75%) B) realise that I did not get the support I needed.		
Give reason(s) for your answer……...		

<div align="center">Academic Aspects</div>

Statement	Responses in %	
6. A) wonder how I managed to cope with university work.	68(85%)	
12(15%) B) become happy that I was confident that I would pass.		
Give reason(s) for your answer………		
7. A) remember feeling stressed because I feared the unfamiliar lecturers.	57(71.25%)	
23(28.75%) B) feel happy because it was an adventure in line with my academic goals.		
Give reason(s) for your answer……...		
8. A) feel I was prepared for university academic work.	38(47.5%)	
42(52.5%) B) feel I was not prepared for university academic work.		
Give reason(s) for your answer……...		
9. A) realise that they were academically stimulating.	23(28.75%)	
57(71.25) B) realise that they were academically threatening.		
Give reason(s) for your answer………..		
10. A) feel that overall, the transitional challenges I went through prepared me for the academic challenges at university level.	39(48.75%)	
41(51.25) B) feel that they were responsible for the fear of failure that I currently have.		
Give reason(s) for your answer………		

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Discussion

In item 1, while 52.5% of the participants indicated that they were happy to be in a university, 47.5% indicated that they were sad because they felt lost. Thus, while the majority (52.5%) of the students were happy to be in a university, others (47.5%) felt lost and separated from their homes. Interview data revealed on the one hand that the majority found the university socially stimulating, fulfilling, exciting and an opportunity to fulfil their educational aspirations. On the other hand, other students expressed frustration, fear and sadness and longed for their "better" organised high schools. This is perhaps why Mudhovozi (2011 p. 293) says, "Adjustment to university life can have different outcomes for different students." One interviewee (Interviewee 3) commented:

> This place is full of confusion. Nobody is helping us to find our way. Many a time we miss lectures because we don't know where the venues are. This is very frustrating. Most of the time I feel very stressed, especially given that I don't know how much adjustment I have to make in order to succeed (Interviewee 3).

The above sentiments uphold observations by Brown and Holloway (2008) who also saw that stress levels were very high among students in new institutions due to a number of reasons such as the unfamiliar socio-cultural environment as well as the unfamiliar academic environment. Hodgson, Lam and Chow (2010) also argue that many first year students do not seem to be aware of the academic adjustment they need to make in terms of basic study skills such as taking notes, reading extensively and intellectual skills such as analysing and synthesising information from different sources and perspectives. Independent reading, as opposed to learning guided by teachers, is critical yet it poses challenges to many new university entrants (Smith & Hopkins, 2005). It is important to note that, while some of these challenges may be transient, others have long lasting effect on the university career of the student.

On Item 2, most students (82.5%) indicated that they were proud to have made it up to university. This excitement is understood given that many students from rural high schools, especially in developing and post-colonial countries like South Africa, have problems in accessing university education because of numerous problems such as poor backgrounds, weak support systems, lack of information and hidden discriminatory practices that may still be rife in some of the former elite universities. Furthermore, in some instances, a number of students from rural high schools fail to make it to university because of inadequate and insufficient preparation by their schools. One interviewee (Interviewee 5) commented:

> We have reason to celebrate making it up to the university. Many of our friends failed. Places have become very competitive and universities have become even more selective. Our rural schools do not, in most cases, have adequate resources, facilities and good teachers to adequately prepare us for university education (Interviewee 5).

The feelings expressed above may represent subtle and less overt sentiments of many rural high school graduates. Many of those interviewed felt that they had good reason to be happy to be in a university because many rural high schools in South Africa are characterised by high levels of low achievement; resulting in many not going to the university. Birnie (1999)

even thinks that the high school curriculum itself is not meant to prepare students for higher education. It is merely a means of selecting for higher education and hence, a number of students go to university unprepared. In the present author's view, this suggests that many students who make it to university are not adequately prepared for university education and hence, they face numerous challenges, at least at entry point or during initial stages. Students should therefore, re-frame, not only a new learning culture, but also a new social culture as they begin university education. This would enhance and facilitate their successful transition to university and maximise their on-going development at the institution.

The sentiments expressed above, that rural high schools do not sufficiently prepare students for university education, partly explain why the current study was motivated to focus on first year university students from rural high schools. The researcher assumed that students from rural high schools may be facing unique adjustment problems in their new institution given that many of them come from disadvantaged environments/backgrounds.

Sixty-five percent of the participants indicated that they felt stressed because it was difficult to form friendships (Item 3). This observation upholds observations of previously reported samples (e.g., Brown & Holloway, 2008; Maxwell & Mudhovozi, 2014). For Tinto (1993), academic and social integration are the major challenges facing first year university students. One female student (Student 2) commented:

> I feel isolated and lonely most of the time. My initial enthusiasm of being here is waning now. I have two friends who are also from rural schools. Those from urban schools tend to avoid us. There tends to be subtle urban-rural tensions which affect how we relate to each other. Those from urban schools see us as inferior.

The above sentiments echo the findings of earlier studies in this area (e.g., Liampttong, 2011) which also reported experiences of loneliness and isolation among university students during initial stay at the university. The sentiments also suggests that class integration of students from rural high schools and those from urban high schools is still problematic in some universities. Many students are aware of the differences between these two types of schools and this may be a source of tension among students; especially in the early days. Many think that rural schools' size and resources tend to impair the schools' capacity to adequately prepare students for the demands of university's social and academic life.

Item 4 also shows 58.75% of the respondents indicating that it was not easy to establish relationships. Failure to establish meaningful relationships may negatively affect the students given that relationships are critical for one's functioning; both socially and academically (Aukrust,Pope-Edwards, Kumru, Knoche & Kim 2003). Some female students indicated that there were times when some returning male students pretended to befriend them yet the intention was to sexually take advantage of their being new in the place. Studies (e.g., Palaniappan, 2007) have demonstrated the need for new students to quickly establish genuine and long-lasting relationships with peers, if they are to successfully adjust to the new place (University).

Good relationships with peers may lead to less stress and fewer adjustment problems (Ongori & Agolla, 2008). Many interviewees, especially females, expressed worry over the absence of their loving families to give them support in what some described as trying times. For Mudhovozi (2011), social support is a powerful coping strategy for students who are under-going or experiencing stressful new situations or life challenges.

The students who reported that they were happy to meet new friends (35%) indicated experiencing fewer social problems after establishing successful relationships with others; especially with those from rural schools also. These new friends became a support group and a buffer against stress. Item 5, 63.75% of the respondents indicated that they did not get the support they needed as new university entrants. Asked where they expected to get the support from, one of them (Student 9) commented:

> I need the support of everyone who matters…. from my family members, lecturers, peers etc. We expected the university to run an orientation programme to assist us; they did but it wasn't the kind I personally was looking forward to (Student 9).

The issue of support is critical for new students' survival at the university. While some students are able to work their way through on their own, others will need assistance and support. Support from family members and friends can help to reduce fear, stress and adjustment problems often faced by many students during their first days in a new environment. The above response also shows the need for universities to run meaningful orientation programmes for students. In fact, research studies (for example, Tinto,1993) have long established that new students who had good orientation programmes did not only adjust well, but were also retained at a higher rate than those who did not have orientation programmes. Thus, it is important to ensure that first year students who have been recruited are retained by thoroughly preparing them for their studies.

In Item 6, which focused on academic aspects, 85%(68) wondered how they were going to cope with university work. For many new students, time management is a real issue during these early days. One student (Student 14) said:

> Many of us are failing to balance the many things and courses that we are expected to study. Personally, I don't seem to have the capacity to do all this and I am beginning to develop fears that I might fail. I don't seem to get much from the lecturers who are just too fast for me (Student 14).

Interview data also revealed that many students experience a number of challenges in their first days at the university. They are expected to adopt a new learning culture characterised by independent study. For Hodgson, Lam and Chow (2010), many first year students do not seem to be aware of the academic adjustment that they need to make if they are to succeed in their studies. As already seen, many lack basic study skills such as taking notes, reading extensively and synthesising information from different sources and perspectives. Such students have been reported in literature (for example, Musso, Vargas, Torres, del Canto, Melendez, Balloqur & Cornejo 2008) as facing extreme pressure of fear of failure. As seen in Item 8, 52.5% (42) of the participants indicated that they were not quite ready for university work. Many reported having problems with computer and library skills, heavy workload, over-loaded timetables which sometimes led to clashes of subjects etc. On Item 7, most students (71.25%-57) expressed a lot of concern over lecturers' high speeds when lecturing.

While most of the students (85%) felt threatened by university academic work, expressing worry over their intellectual ability to succeed at university level, a few (15%) were happy to enter a university. One of them (Student 16) commented:

> I like the challenging work. It shows that I am going higher in my education. I am fully prepared to tackle university. It's exciting to test the limit of your intellectual functioning (Student 16).

Such optimistic students often succeed because their confidence may lead them to high engagement with their university work; resulting in enriched learning experiences necessary for success at this level. Thus, it would appear that, to achieve total academic adjustment, students need, not only take an active role in their own development, but also be optimistic about their chances of succeeding in their studies. Perhaps, this is why Polaki and Nenty (2001) argue that a student's personal convictions about his/her own capabilities are chief determinants of his/her motivation and level of academic achievement. For Mandless and Perry (2000), the greater the quantity and quality of optimism and involvement in university academic life, the more likely the student will succeed. Munro and Pooley (2009) argue that successful university academic adjustment requires high levels of resilience, which is "the capacity to respond and endure or develop and master in spite of life stressors and adversity" (Mandless & Peery, 2 000 p.990).

On Item 9, only 28.75% (23) of the students said that their early experiences at the university were stimulating while 71.75 % (57) felt that their initial experiences at the university were threatening. Interview data revealed that many students felt threatened by a number of factors such as the urban-like or urban university environment for which rural students have very little to draw upon when entering university. It was also observed that factors such as the high academic demands of university work threatened many students. In a surprise comment, one female student (Student 17) said:

> There is some torture and dilemma which most of us are facing in our academic transition to university. We have serious problems of adjustment and choice of subjects. Our transition to university is made more difficult because, Life Orientation, a subject that is supposed to help us make informed subject choices is not taken seriously by schools. Universities too, do not take the subject seriously. The high points we often score in this subject at Grade 12 level are often just ignored by many universities. This leaves most of us with inadequate subjects for certain courses. To think that you can fail to get a place because of this is killing in itself.

These sentiments indicate the extent of frustration many first year students experience at the start of their university year. There are worries about academic programmes chosen as a result of subjects chosen which fail to fulfil one's dream career; all blamed on the failure of Life Orientation to achieve its objectives for being included in the curriculum. Many students find these frustrations and pressures very depressing and over-whelming, resulting in some of them engaging in risky behaviours such as drug and alcohol abuse, prostitution etc.
On Item10, which was meant to give an overall assessment of how students felt about their initial experiences at the university, 51.25% (41) of the students felt that the transition challenges they encountered at the start of their first year were responsible for the fear of failure they currently experienced. These students advocated a smooth transition from high school to university to avoid causing disorientation in students. One student commented:

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> Many universities offer very limited, if any, meaningful programmes to assist new students to navigate the transition, yet it is a huge leap in one's life which is accompanied by social, financial and academic instability. Many students hit bumps and can either drop out or fail at the end.

Many students in this group bemoaned lack of adequate psychosocial support from various stakeholders such as parents, lecturers, peers etc. which resulted in trauma among many of the students. Studies (for example, Mandless & Perry, 2 000) have shown that on-campus social support influences the experiences of students entering university On the other hand, 48.75% (39) felt that these challenges prepared them for challenges at university level and should therefore be viewed positively. One student (Student 19) noted:

> These challenges test our academic and social readiness to enter university. While I agree that positive social support is critical; we must learn to venture into new areas of life on our own. It's all about self-sufficiency (Student 15)

What we see is that while slightly more than half (51.25%) of the students who participated in this study felt that their experiences at university during the early days were stressful, frustrating disorienting etc. just slightly less than half (48.75%) thought these experiences, though discomforting times, have positive aspects such as preparing them for the hard work and resilience typical of university life and studies.

The study hypothesised that gender did not significantly influence the students' experiences. In order to test this, a Cramer's V test was run. The following were the results.

Table 2: Crosstab of gender by attitudes/views regarding transitional experiences (n=80).

Gender	N	%Attitude
Males	40	48.78
Females	40	51.22

Cramer's V = 0.04.
Alpha level=0.05

Since Cramer's V=0.04, it means there is a very low positive relationship between gender and students' transitional experiences. This relationship fails to reach significance at 0.05 significance level. In practice then, one is justified to conclude that gender did not influence the students' transitional experiences. In the present writer's view, maybe both male and female students show similar resilience, an issue that calls for a research study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that literature (e.g., Tinto, 1993) generally sees first year experiences as equipping the first-year students with and socialising them into the necessary and essential skills to navigate meaningfully through the university. What might be needed therefore, as already argued, is to transform the students' experiences, positive or negative ones, into experiences congruent with university learning and expectations. For Govender (2013), universities should realise that students from high schools are already disadvantaged in many ways; hence, they should do more instead of just waiting to see whether they will survive or sink. This is critical because, many studies (e.g., Opoku-Asare & Siaw 2016) have

demonstrated that students' previous schooling, among other factors, influences their present academic achievement and performance.

It should also be noted that for many rural students, transitioning from high school to university removes them from a co-operatively sheltered life of the community to the freedom of the university. To the present writer, unless this new freedom is aligned to the student's reasons for pursuing university education, many students end up negating and neglecting their studies.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the present study, the study recommends the following:

First, the present study observed that many rural students, irrespective of gender, experience a lot of challenges (social, academic etc.) during their transition from high school to university. It is therefore necessary for universities to come up with comprehensive orientation programmes meant to help these students to make effective transition and adjustment to the new environment. These programmes could help the new students learn how to handle stress, how to manage their time and finances etc. Many students in this study pointed out the need for help and support from various people such as lecturers, parents, senior students (who, unfortunately, often add to their misery by abusing female students).Second, given that high schools are part of the students' transition to universities, they too have a role to play in the transition of their students to university instead of merely worrying about their passing and finding places in universities. High schools, with their Guidance and Counselling teachers or Life Orientation teachers, should play a critical role in preparing these students to successfully proceed to university education. High schools could help by ensuring that students are socially, academically and emotionally prepared to manage the rigour of university life. Time could be created for this after Matric / A Level examinations. In the present writer's view, at the moment, in many countries and schools, the transition from high school to university is one of the most difficult and therefore dreaded developmental challenges confronting high school students.

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