International Journal of Education Sciences (IJES)
Received on 06. 10. 2014/18. 11. 2014
REF. NO. IJES-544
(Always refer our Reference No. for all correspondence)
Surviving First Year of University as a Student: is it a Jungle?
Ntwanano Mathebula
Department of Public Administration, Office 2042, Old K Block, University of Limpopo
E-mail: Ntwanano.mathebula@ul.ac.za

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

Ntwanano Mathebula

Department of Public Administration, Office 2042, Old K Block, University of Limpopo
E-mail: Ntwanano.mathebula@ul.ac.za

KEYWORDS Surviving, First year, University, Student, University of Limpopo

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

INTRODUCTION

Students from high schools around South Africa become excited about the prospects of being enrolled in institutions of higher learning. However, those students know a little about the challenges they are expected to go through in order to climb the highest ladder in academia. This paper reports on the findings conducted among 105 Public Administration students at the University of Limpopo. Although the study acknowledges bias in the data collected due to the representativity of the sample, the study could serve as a pointer towards the broader picture. The study begins by providing a brief background, study methods and the

presentation of findings. This paper therefore concludes by providing recommendations about how new university students can adjust and cope within the new environment from home.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The first year of a student's university experience is crucial for a successful transition and to attain a bachelors' degree (Musoba Collazo & Placide 2013). This is the period where new entrants in university are confronted with challenges of having to adjust survival skills outside the guidance of their parents and guardians. Even though the decision to attend university is one encouraged by parents and universities, students are left on distress where they are expected to cope on their own. However, the university experience is an important opportunity for both personal growth and development (Richardson King Garrett & Wrench 2012). Furthermore according to Shim & Ryan (2012), a university environment provides a platform where students have an opportunity to expand their social circles and networks. These new circles and network are sometimes found to be an enormous challenge whereby new students' team up with bad associations. This becomes a period where students experience bad academic outcomes as well as broken social cohorts thus resulting in poor academic performance (Glogowska Young & Lockyer, 2007; Richardson King Garrett & Wrench 2012).

Despite the challenges of social cohesion, poor academic results in most instances is provided by factors such as the use of new technological advanced equipment (McLennan & Gibbs 2008), writing skills (Monanno & Jones 2007), orientation programmes, lack of study materials, and stress (Richardson King Garrett & Wrench 2012) amongst others. This study was conducted among first year students at the University of Limpopo, South Africa to determine some of the challenges and prospects confronting them during this transition year in a university environment. Many of the challenges which are prevalent at the university currently, dates as far as the apartheid era. The University of the North (as it was known before 2005), was established under the apartheid regime's policy of separate ethnically-based institutions of higher learning policy (www.ul.ac.za). The real challenge was that the university served at under-resourced and the standard of education and the quality of instruction was placed under demand.

METHODS

This paper reports and discusses on aninvestigation which examined some of the challenges confronting first year students in their transition and survival battle in a university

environment. An anonymous questionnaire was distributed among the Public Administration students for the academic year 2014 during the second semester. Students were informed that their identity would remain anonymous and that their participation was voluntary. The questionnaire comprised closed-ended questions for the demographic data and furthermore, their perceptions and opinions of the challenges faced were probed. Some of the questions raised in the questionnaire included amongst others; their first choice degrees, the enrolment and registration processes of the university, access to on-campus accommodation, access and the use of technological equipment such as computers, the usefulness of the orientation programmes offered by the university. The data collected through the questionnaire was filtered and categorised according to the challenges and analysed according to such categories.

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

Gender		**Age Groups**			**Degree**				
Male	Female	16-21	21-30	30+	BAdmin[i]	BDevs[ii]	HR[iii]	Econ[iv]	Other
26%	**74%**	**90%**	**9%**	**1%**	**39%**	31%	**12%**	**18%**	**0%**

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

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

CHALLENGES

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

The choice of degree programmes

In this section the respondents were asked whether the current degree being pursued was their first choice. Surprisingly, a 67% majority of the respondents did not intend to study their current while only 33% had the intentions to study the current degrees. Hence this is a challenge that could be attributed to high failure rates where students do not enrol for their programmes of choice. In most instances, high school students do not attend career exhibitions where they are advised on detail on the degrees they should choose. However, in this study, 82% of the respondents attended exhibitions and open weeks, while 18% did not attend during their tenure in high schools.

Enrolment and registration processes

Due to increased intakes of first year students by universities, there has been an increased burden in the enrolment and registration processes. According to AltbachReisberg&Rumbley (2009) there is a need to expand the enrolment support in order to decrease strains on the academic system facing dilemmas of expanded enrolment. In this section, students were asked to rate the enrolment and registration processes of the University of Limpopo.

Figure 1: enrolment and registration processes

Striking the balance between social and academic life

Balancing social and academic life could prove difficult for first year students, particularly if they are from societal backgrounds where they were unable to explicitly learn social tendencies (Elias 2006). In this study, students were asked whether they were able to balance between social and academic life. It is shocking to learn that 93% of the respondents are able to strike the balance while only 7% are unable to find such a balance between social and academic life. What is more surprising is that, while majority of the respondents are able to strike a balance, their academic performance remains low.

The affordability of food parcels and groceries

Generally, the University of Limpopo largely registers students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. Most of the university students depend on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which is a loan payable upon completion and finding inroads in the workplace. The fund only finance part of their tuition and accommodation and leaves students stranded for food and other essentials. In this study, students were asked

whether they are able to afford groceries and other essential that last for a month. As it has been articulated, it was not shocking to learn that 63% of the respondents have challenges in buying groceries while only 37% of the respondents can afford groceries. This challenge has led to many female students resorting to dating older men or even worse their lecturers so that they are able to buy food.

Access to study rooms and libraries

According to Gross & Dobozy (2009) access to an equipped library during the first year of higher education is vital for academic success, and an essential component of good information literacy practices. In this study, it was discovered that although the University of Limpopo boasts a library, majority of its students do not have access due to staying off-campus or mainly because the library is inadequately equipped with information sources. In this section, students were asked of places where they study and evaluate the quality of material in the university library.

Figure 2: accessing study rooms and libraries

Figure 3: the state of the university library

Based on figure 2 and 3 and the information provided above, it can be concluded that majority of the students do not utilise the university library for study purposes. This could be attributed to the fact that only 36% of the respondents were satisfied by the state of the library and the quality of material. Upon observation, it was learnt that the university library does not have an updated database and the material is outdated and irrelevant.

Perceived academic stress levels and meeting deadlines

Academic stress refers to the pressure to perform well in school particularly in assessments including examinations which leads to a sense of distress, which is generally manifested in a variety of psychological and behavioural problems (Rao 2002; Busari 2012). According to Nandamuri (2006), stress is a necessary and unavoidable attendant of daily living necessary because without it people would be listless and apathetic creatures, as it relates to external events whether pleasurable or anxiety. This view is supported by Yumba (2008) where he states that, academic stress are caused by both internal and external environment that upsets balance, thus affecting physical and psychological well-being and requiring action to restore

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

Perceived confidence and knowledge of using computers

Computers have become global, and are used more effectively by the younger population (McLennan & Gibbs 2008). However, considering the backgrounds of the majority of students at the university and the poverty stricken schools they come from, using computers and other technological advances proves to be a challenge. In this study, a staggering 98% of the respondents started using computers for the first time in their first year as university students, while only mere 2% of the respondents had the access to computers before they ventured into university environment.

However, it is encouraging to learn that the use of computers among first year students is improving. Students were asked as to whether they are coping with the use of computers and other technological equipment.

Figure 4: the standard of using computers and other tools

Access to housing and accommodation on campus facilities

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

Other challenges

Despite some of the challenges discussed above, students expressed major concerns with regard to the frequent changing of lecturers and their teaching techniques. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that Limpopo Province is comprised of different tribes thus the issue of diversity becomes a major challenge for students. Other common challenges among

students include the lack of study material, adapting to the new environment from home, annoying roommates, peer pressure and the large amount in university debts.

ROOT CAUSES OF SOME OF THE CHALLENGES

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

Academic and writing workshops

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

Orientation for first year students

Coherent first-year experience programs, which include precollege and ongoing orientation programmes, first-year seminars, and other new student advising and study group experiences, appear to be linked to a variety of positive outcomes for first-year students (KuhKinzie Buckley & Hayek 2006). Orientation programmes are meant to acquaint first year students to the new learning environment and teaching them survival skills. In this study, students were asked to rate the orientation programme as offered to first entering students by the University of Limpopo.

Figure 5: usefulness of the orientation programme

Based on figure 5 and the information provided above, it can be concluded that although majority of the respondents considers the orientation programme to be effective, there are other students who still perceive the programme to be useless and ineffective. This may be attributed to the fact that students in this study are still finding it very difficult to survive in the new academic environment.

Peers and friendships

Social adjustments play a critical role in student persistence at college (GrayVitak Easton & Ellison 2013). Research found that positive aspects of success in university are learning interest, making friends and meeting new people (Jalomo 1995). Many first year university students fail to make any meaningful friendships, thus report feelings of loneliness and miss friends from home (Smith & Wertlieb 2005). In this study 66% of the respondents have made more than three friends during their first year of university, while 21% of the respondentshave made more than one but less than three friends, 8% of the respondents only have one friend, 5% of the respondents have not made any friendships. Furthermore, the respondents were asked to rate friendships that they have made since coming to university as portrayed by figure 6 below.

Figure 6: the state of friendships at university

Entertainment activities and parties on campus

Entertainment and partying is a feature prevalent in institutions of higher learning. It is an aspect that is normally related to high drop-outs. In this study, students were asked whether they attended bashes on campus. Furthermore, students were probed with regard to the frequency in which they consume alcoholic beverages. 71% of the respondents indicated that they do not attend either parties or bashes, while 29% of the respondents indicated that they do attend parties and bashes on-campus. Furthermore, it was interesting to learn that 73% of the respondents do not take alcoholic beverages at all, while 24% of the respondents drink occasionally, 3% of the respondents drink regularly as indicated in figure 7 below.

Figure 7: the intake of alcoholic beverages.

Extra-curricular activities and involvement

Involvement is an investment of physical and psychological energy that occurs along a continuum and has both qualitative and quantitative features (Foreman &Retallick 2013). Students who are involved and participate in extracurricular generally benefit by having better grades, having higher standardised test scores, higher educational attainment, attending school more regularly and having higher self-esteem. It is clear from this assertion that extracurricular activities have a positive impact on academic performance. In this study, students were asked if they participate in any extracurricular activity in the university. It was shocking to learn that 74% of the respondents do not participate, while 17% of the

respondents participate in various sporting codes, and 9% of the respondents participate in student communities. It can thus be concluded that benefits associated with the involvement in extracurricular activities are likely not to be prevalent amongst first year students at the University of Limpopo.

CONCLUSION

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

REFERENCES

Althbach PG, Reisberg L & Rumbley LE. 2009. Trends in global higher education: tracking an academic revolution. *A Report Prepared for the UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education.*

Bonanno H & Jones J. 2007. The MASSUS Procedure: Measuring the Academic Skills of University Student A Diagnostic Assessment. Revised Edition.http://sydney.edu.au./stuserv/documents/learning_centre/MASSUS.pdf. Accessed on 20 August 2014.

Busari AO. 2012. Identifying differences in perceptions of academic stress and reaction of stressors based on gender among first year university students. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2 (14): 138-146.

Elias MJ. 2006. Academic and social-emotional learning. International Academy of Education.*Educational Practices Series-11*.

Foreman A,&Retallick MS. 2013. Using Involvement Theory to Examine the Relationship between Undergraduate Participation in Extracurricular Activities and Leadership Development.*Journal of Leadership Education*, 12 (2): 56-73.

Glogowska M, Young P &Lockyer L. 2007. Should I go or should I stay? *Active Learning in Higher Education,* 8 (1): 63-77.

Gray R, Vitak J, Easton EW & Ellison NB. 2013. Examining social adjustment to college in the age of social media: Factors influencing successful transitions and persistence. *Computers & Education*, 67: 193-207.

Gross G &Dobozy E. 2009. Adding value to first year student learning with embedded library pod/vodcasts.*Proceeding ascilite Auckland 2009.*

Irvin L. 2010. What is "academic" writing? http://wac.colostate.edu/books/writingspaces1/irvin--what-is-academic-writing.pdf. Accesed 06 October 2014.

Jalomo R. 1995. First-year student experiences in community colleges: Crossing borders, making connections and developing perceptions about learning. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No.ED 383 367).

Kuh GD, Kinzie J, Buckley JA & Hayek JC. 2006. What Matters to Student Success: A Review of the Literature Commissioned Report for the National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success: Spearheading a Dialog on Student Success. http://nces.ed.gov/npec/pdf/kuh_team_report.pdf. Accessed 06 October 2014.

McLennan T & Gibbs S. 2008. Has the computing competence of first year university students increased during the last decade? *Proceedings of Ascilite Melbourne, 2008.*

Musoba GD, Collazo C, &Placide S. 2013. The first year: just surviving or thriving at an HIS. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 12 (4): 356-368.

Rao AS. 2000. Academic stress and adolescent distress: the experiences of 12th standard students in Chennai, India. Unpublished dissertation submitted for degree Doctor of Philosophy. University of Arizona.

Shim S & Ryan A. 2012. What do students want socially when they arrive at the college? Implications of social achivements goals for social behaviors and adjustment during the first semester of college.*Motivation and Emotion*.

Smith JS & Wertlieb EC. 2005. Do First-Year College Students' Expectations Align with their First-Year Experiences? *NASPA Journal*, 42 (2): 153- 174.

Talebloo B & Baki RB. 2013. Challenges faced by international postgraduate students during their first year of studies. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science,* 3 (13): 138-145.

Wilson NL. 2009. Impact of extracurricular activities on students. Research paper submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree Master of Science. University of Wisconsin-Stout.

Yumba W. 2008. Academic stress: a case of the undergraduate students. www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:556335/FULLTEXT01.pdf. Accessed 15 September 2014.

---

[i] Bachelor of Administration
[ii] Bachelor of Development Planning and Management
[iii] Bachelor of Human Resource Management
[iv] Bachelor of Commerce in Economics