

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Induction-Phase Challenges Faced by South African Higher Education Students: A Case Study of Sol Plaatje University

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Abstract

This study investigated the challenges facing entry-level students at Sol Plaatje University. Research has underscored the inequalities and socio-cultural and economic disparities between students at universities. In the case of South Africa, these inequalities are particularly prevalent because of the legacy of apartheid. There is therefore a need for universities to monitor the transition of students in their academic journey from high school to university and to ensure that this transition is underpinned by social justice that ensures that no student feels excluded. It is in this context that this study sought to investigate the challenges of the induction phase of transition faced by Sol Plaatje University students, with first-year students as the target population. Through a social justice theoretical framework, the study adopted a qualitative design. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with a sample of twenty-five students. The findings reveal that in the induction phase of their higher education journey, the students experienced environmental, social, and academic challenges. The authors, therefore, recommend that universities be aware of the various challenges faced by first-year students in order to find appropriate solutions to eliminate these challenges, and ensure the students' ability to successfully transition through university.

Keywords: transition; induction phase; universities; challenges; social justice

Introduction

A report by Statistics South Africa (2020) indicates that South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world. This claim has been corroborated by other studies (Francis and Webster, 2019; Motala and Carel, 2019; Mzangwa, 2019), which have linked this inequality to the discriminatory policies that underpinned the apartheid era. Despite post-apartheid governments adopting liberal and progressive legislation, the high levels of inequality have continued to manifest unabated in every stratum of the South African society (Hino *et al.*, 2018; Chatterjee, 2019; Plagerson, 2023). This inequality is particularly prevalent in the education system (Knutsson, 2020). According to Vally (2019), while South African suburbs such as Sandton, in Johannesburg, boast world-class institutions with state-of-the-art facilities, schools in townships like Alexandra are characterised by violence, poor infrastructure, and a lack of resources. While this variation is visible when we compare the results of dysfunctional schools in poor areas and those in more affluent suburbs, a much darker and nuanced aspect of the discourse is in the way students experience the learning environment in the context of these different realities, and the dynamics that inform their different experiences. In this light, Vally (2019) surmises that the socio-economic status of learners is one of the most important factors that influence academic outcomes. It would therefore not be out of place to posit that in South Africa, factors such as parental wealth, place of birth and race are critical determining factors of a student's educational opportunities and experiences. A study conducted by Amnesty International (2020) shows

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that the situation described above is compounded by the multiple languages that are spoken in the country. All these factors relating to schooling play a role in the kind of student that enters a higher education institution after high school and could affect their performance and the likelihood that they would complete their studies in time.

The emergence of COVID-19 and its devastating effects around the globe exacerbated the challenges for students at higher education institutions. Institutions worldwide were forced to undergo unprecedented changes because of the pandemic (Mncube *et al.*, 2021; Tilak and Kumar, 2022). In South Africa, universities switched to online teaching and learning as a way of mitigating the effects of the pandemic and limiting its repercussions on the academic project (Gumede and Badriparsad, 2022; Motala and Menon, 2020). Whilst the South African education terrain always pointed in the direction of online or blended learning for the future, the sudden implementation necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic found the sector unprepared, hence, the switch has been termed “emergency remote teaching and learning” (Ojo and Lorenzini, 2021: 1). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of students in the face of challenges imposed by the pandemic, which could lead to an increase in dropout rates (Landa *et al.*, 2021; Okoye, 2021), as well as challenges posed by access to gadgets and connectivity, which are essential for online learning. This situation could cause a dilemma for Sol Plaatje University (SPU) which prides itself as a humanist and inclusive university which is sensitive to diversity, discrimination and marginalisation, and has enshrined issues of social justice as critical ideals of its vision statement and its 2020 – 2024 strategic plan.

What the factors discussed above imply is that student success at university depends on the ability of the student to manage the transitional challenges that occur between the entry and exit levels of the university. The initial phase of university life is of great importance because it builds a foundation for future success. This phase is made up of students who are first-time entrants into a university, with most of them coming directly from high schools. At SPU, the new students need to undergo induction programmes, which include a wide variety of short information sessions ranging from IT-related sessions to sports offerings at the university. Students who come to the university, especially in South Africa, come from diverse backgrounds which are shaped by social, economic, racial and cultural differences, and these differences influence the ability of each student to adapt to the university environment and succeed in the academic project (Mishra, 2020). In response to this idea of managing transitional challenges, many universities in South Africa have embraced the concept of social justice in order to address systemic inequalities by widening access to higher education institutions and ensuring that there are mechanisms in place to guarantee the successful integration and completion of students (Swartz *et al.*, 2019). Literature however provides little evidence of whether these mechanisms have been successful in addressing the challenges experienced by students. It is in this regard that this study sought to examine the nature and extent of induction-phase challenges faced by first-year university students in South Africa, using SPU as a case study. The argument is that this phase must be well managed by the university to create an enabling and supportive environment that ensures the successful transition of students through the university.

Transition and Academic Success in Higher Education

Academic student success plays an important role in the functioning of higher education institutions. According to York *et al.* (2015), academic success is the result of activities that focus on academic achievement, satisfaction, acquisition of skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of learning objectives, and career success. The bulk of published literature measures academic success narrowly as academic achievement, and academic achievement in itself is mainly based on the grade systems used in universities (Alyahyan and Düştegör, 2020). Alyahyan and Düştegör (2020) further explain that universities need to provide students with the necessary support at the right moment and plan training to improve the success rate of their students. This support is even more necessary for first-year students because attrition rates are higher in the first year than in later years (Baik *et al.*, 2019). For this reason, the transition into higher education institutions is of importance for students and institutional role-players.

Research has underscored the importance of managing student transition through university life. In this regard, Javed (2017) asserts that research is needed on the concept of transition, and to explore how this phenomenon takes place and impacts students, and the challenges transition poses for students when they enter university. Most students leave the warm and comforting environments of their homes only to be exposed to the harsh realities of transition into higher education institutions. The transition can be made more difficult by a range of differences between students, such as ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background (Leese, 2010: 243). The concept of transition refers to an individual's shifts or movement from the known to the unknown, from the familiar to the

unfamiliar, from an old to a new environment, and the challenges encountered in making this move (Javed, 2016: 14). The transition into university requires students to adapt to a new environment and new ways of doing things (Javed, 2016), and some students find this more difficult than others. This period is regarded as a perplexing time due to the need to unlearn old ways and learn new ones. Students must adapt from the old to the new, and the process of adapting to the transition is a distinct experience that is different for different students (Southall *et al.*, 2016). As students transition to the new environment, they bring with them diverse learning experiences and new sets of beliefs and expectations. Most students struggle with the transition into university, and this is even more challenging to students from less privileged and more marginal backgrounds as they enter an unwelcoming and even hostile environment (Greer, 2014). It is for this reason that higher education institutions need to manage the way students transition through their academic journey effectively and examine experiences that contribute to student success or failure, from pre-university entry conditions to experiences in the university system and those at the point of exit. Figure 1 below illustrates an ideal student journey.



Figure 1: Ideal student journey – smooth transition (BluenotesGlobal 2022)

Figure 1 depicts the ideal student journey that lecturers, management, and students imagine when they think about student success in higher education. The journey depicts the expectations of what students bring and what the institution can offer in terms of support for success to be realised. This approach of viewing the student's academic journey is known as the one-size-fits-all approach, which is not comprehensive, as it does not take into consideration the fact that university and student expectations are not always mutually compatible.

The figure below depicts the actual academic journey of university students:



Figure 2: The student journey in reality (AdmitHub 2020)

In contrast to Figure 1, Figure 2 illustrates the realities that institutions are aware of and that students experience when they enrol. Students have unique needs, dreams, and abilities at various times which means that no journey is straightforward, and each student has their own trajectory.

The challenges facing university students were compounded by the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to abrupt changes when education switched from face-to-face to online lessons. In this regard, the interaction between educators and students, which used to be mostly physical, was replaced with communication carried out through tools and media such as computers, the internet and a range of other technologies (Nuraeni *et al.*, 2020). Higher education landscapes changed drastically, because learning had to continue despite the abnormal situation caused by the pandemic. The “normal” situation of having a teacher in front of the class is no more; COVID-19 ushered a new complex e-learning system in which students are taught remotely and sometimes hear voices but see no faces. This has been frustrating for many students who find it difficult to freely engage with lessons. This mode of teaching and learning is not without problems. In the online-induced dispensation, online teaching is perceived as posing a massive challenge (Mishra *et al.*, 2020). Stakeholders are not necessarily equipped to adjust to the sudden change, and may not be technologically competent to embrace the new situation. This situation is even more challenging for first-year university students in South Africa, most of whom come from high schools where they were not exposed to online learning (Mukuna and Aloka, 2020). It is for this reason that the challenges students experience during the induction phase of university life need to be investigated and managed so as to minimise their impact on the academic success of students.

Social Justice and Academic Success

Universities have a social responsibility to ensure that there is social justice for all students. It is in this regard that this study adopted social justice theory as a theoretical framework. Social justice has been conceptualised differently by different authors (Craig, 2002; Foreman and Arthur-Kelly, 2008; Shriberg and Clinton, 2016). This study adopted Hage *et al.*'s (2011) conceptualisation of the theory which defines social justice as the fair and equitable distribution of power, resources, and obligations to all people in society, regardless of race or ethnicity, age, gender, ability status, sexual orientation and religious or spiritual background (Hage *et al.*, 2011: 2796). They further explain that the principles of social justice include aspects such as inclusion, cooperation, fair treatment, equal access, and equal opportunity (Hage *et al.*, 2011: 2795). This implies that all people should be treated in an equitable manner regarding access to whatever social benefits are available in life. In the context of this study, social justice is defined as equitable access to services, accommodation, and education in a university setting that enhances learning. In this study, the target population originated from diverse backgrounds characterised by different social, racial, cultural, and economic realities, which all have an influence on their ability to succeed academically. Universities must therefore ensure that students who arrive at the university are provided with an environment in which everyone is treated equally and contextual challenges are minimised.

Providing students with access to opportunities would enable them to enjoy the privileges and features offered by institutions, irrespective of the students' diverse backgrounds and socio-economic status. This is relevant to the South African context because research has shown that there is a direct link between the economic, racial and socio-cultural background of students and their academic performances. The adoption of social justice principles by universities would therefore reduce inequalities and ensure that all students have the same rights and privileges to access university facilities and participate in university life regardless of their social, cultural, or ethnic backgrounds or their ability or disability (Foreman and Arthur-Kelly, 2008: 31). Social justice would also mean the adoption of equitable policies and practices that challenge aspects of student exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, oppression, cultural imperialism, and violence experienced at different levels. These challenges are situated at macro, meso and micro levels, and involve student engagement. For instance, macro-level challenges refer to engagement with the social and academic dynamics of the institution, meso-level challenges refer to student engagement with the social and academic dynamics at departmental level, while micro-level challenges speak to student engagement with the social and academic dynamics at classroom level (Harris and Patton, 2019).

In addition to Hage *et al.*'s (2011) conceptualisation, Bartley's (2021) five principles of social justice - access, equity, participation, diversity, and human rights - were adopted for this study. Access refers to the ability of every member of a community to access available services, equity refers to equal opportunities for every member of a community or organisation, participation refers to the right of every member of an organisation to have a voice, diversity refers to non-discriminatory treatment of every member of an organisation, and human rights refers to respect for the freedoms and dignity of every member of a community or an organisation (Bartley, 2021). The principles were adopted as a lens with which to understand the challenges that SPU students face when they arrive at the university for the first time.

Methodology

Research design refers to a blueprint of how researchers intend to perform their research (Babbie, 2016). In other words, a research design provides a structure for data collection and analysis and explains the procedures to be followed in the whole research process. The research design that was employed in this study is phenomenology. Phenomenology is described as the study of various phenomena. A phenomenon may be an event, a situation, experience or concept. Phenomenology is a way of describing something that exists as an integral part of the world in which we live (Astalin, 2013). The purpose of phenomenology is to describe the “essence” of a phenomenon from the perspective of the individual experiencing the phenomenon, so as to ascribe meaning to it (Teherani *et al.*, 2015). The phenomenon investigated by this research is students’ challenges during the induction phase of their university journey. A qualitative approach was adopted for the study. This approach explores questions relating to ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’, rather than ‘how many’ (Tuffour, 2017). The qualitative approach provides an insider perspective, which results in research being emic and idiographic. This approach was relevant for this study because it aimed to identify the challenges faced by entry-level university students.

The participants of this study were first-year students at SPU. The research made use of random sampling to select twenty-five first-year students to participate in the study. The researchers acknowledge that this sampling technique can contribute to a degree of self-selection bias, and that the sample cannot be regarded as being representative of the research population. To mitigate self-selection bias, the researchers ensured that participants were selected from all the four schools of the university. Although the findings of the research project cannot be generalised as the reality of all SPU students, the participants’ subjective accounts can shed light on the role of the induction phase in the successful transitioning of students through the university. To achieve the envisaged aim of the project, two data collection methods were used. Understanding the complexities of student experiences and their perspectives calls for a variety of expressive data collection methods to produce rich data. Relying on a single qualitative method, such as interviews, might not produce a complete picture of the participants’ experiences. The researchers realised that first-year students might find the academic space intimidating and might not be able to fully express themselves verbally (especially in English). For these reasons, a survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The survey questionnaire was used to acquire biographic information from participants. The survey provided information on the participants’ ages, genders, home languages, provinces of origin, and economic backgrounds. This data was used as a baseline to understand who the participants were and where they came from, which is particularly important knowledge, especially for the induction phase of university life. Information on the participants gathered from the survey was as follows:

Table 1: Participants’ information

School	Economics and Management Sciences	Education	Humanities	Natural and Applied Sciences	
Count	4	10	8	3	
Gender	Male	Female			
Count	7	18			
Home language	Afrikaans	isiXhosa	Sesotho	Setswana	
Count	9	3	2	11	
High school attended	Resourced	Under-resourced			
Count	9	16			
Race	African	Coloured ⁷	White		
Count	16	7	2		
Province of origin	Eastern Cape	Free State	Gauteng	Northern Cape	North west
Count	2	1	2	9	11

⁷‘Coloured’ is the term used in South Africa to refer to citizens of multiracial ethnic origins.

Semi-structured interviews were used to enable the participants to share any challenges of the induction phase that they had experienced. The questions covered issues such as preparation for university, adaptation to the city and the university, accommodation and orientation, the academic project and student support. The interviews were face-to-face and were conducted on the university campus. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Any identifiable information was removed, and pseudonyms have been used to refer to participants in this article. The data collected using the two instruments was interpreted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to inductive thematic analysis. In inductive thematic analysis, the themes are generated from the data as opposed to deductive thematic analysis in which the researcher approaches the data with themes that have been developed from either the research questions, literature review or theoretical framework (Proudfoot, 2023). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach outlines the six steps needed for a thematic analysis which include, familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, search for themes, review of themes, definition of themes and writing (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 87). In this regard, the authors of the study familiarised themselves with the data, manually generated codes for the data, then generated, reviewed and define themes from the data before interpreting the findings. The generated themes were reviewed to identify common and distinct categories in the datasets, which enabled the authors to come up with a consolidated set of themes to guide the interpretation of the data. The themes that emerged were environmental challenges, social challenges and academic challenges.

The study was conducted in a way that respected the ethical principles of integrity, voluntary participation and informed consent, confidentiality, and data protection, and ensuring that the participants are not exposed to any harm (Carling, 2019; Bhandari *et al.*, 2021). Research integrity refers to conducting research in a way that leads to others having confidence and trust in the methods and results of the research (Carling, 2019). To ensure the integrity of this study, ethical clearance was obtained from SPU before the project commenced. Voluntary participation means that participants take part in a study freely and not due to coercion, and that they reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time (Marshall *et al.*, 2014). Informed consent requires that the participants be provided with detailed information about the study to enable them to make informed decisions about their participation. In this regard, participation in this study was entirely voluntary and no participant was pressured or coerced in any way to take part in the study. Furthermore, the informed consent of all the participants was obtained through the signing of an informed consent form. Data protection implies that research should be conducted in a way that minimises the risk of unauthorised access to the personal data of participants (Carling, 2019). For the protection of the confidentiality of the participants of this study, all information that was collected was processed anonymously to ensure that participants could not be identified by inference from the published findings. The data collected was password protected and stored on a secured device to minimise the risk of unauthorised access to the personal data of participants. Furthermore, to ensure that participants were not exposed to any harm, all SPU COVID-19 protocols were strictly adhered to.

Findings and Discussion

The data of this study was analysed to understand the challenges first-year students face regarding their right to access higher education and the facilities of the university, their right to equal participation in university activities, and the respect for their freedoms and dignity by other members of the university community. The findings that emerged from the data were categorised into three types of challenges, which are environmental, academic and social challenges.

Environmental challenges

One of the major challenges confronting first-year students was moving away from home to a new city – an environment they were not familiar with. Many of them struggled to adapt and this generated anxiety, nervousness, uncertainty, fear, discomfort, and a feeling of alienation. One participant indicated that, *"I feel nervous and alienated because of the new environment"*. Another one said:

For me, I did not feel welcome at all, because I did not know where and what to do. I was accepted late at the university and was also new in Kimberley with no relatives.

These responses are a clear indication of the challenges posed by a new environment, which many first-year university students in South Africa face. Moreover, many South African universities are situated in urban areas, and many students are from rural areas. These students struggle to adapt to the dynamics of urban life when they register for university studies. This confirms Javed's (2016) view that one of the main challenges facing first-year

university students is the need to adapt to a new environment. It is therefore important for universities to implement measures that not only focus on the smooth adaptation to the campus environment, but also take into consideration the wider environment in which the university is situated.

Most of the participants reported that they felt pressure and anxiety because of the uncertainty of the academic work that they were going to be involved in. One participant indicated that they were “*overwhelmed and scared*”. Another said, “*I felt the pressure when I started here because of the uncertainty and the unknown*”. A third participant indicated that they were “*facing a lot of work and had to learn to be self-disciplined*”. Another student said that they felt lost on campus and did not even know where lecture venues were. These responses by the participants confirm the anxiety that first-year students experience regarding the unknown nature of academic expectations at universities, and confirm the claim that transitioning into the university environment is usually a perplexing experience for first-year students (Southall *et al.*, 2016). The orientation programmes organised by universities in South Africa, including SPU, are usually intended to allay some of these anxieties of the students, and most participants in this study indicated that the academic orientation programme was, indeed, extremely helpful in mitigating their fears and uncertainties. Some, however, indicated that they had missed the orientation because they had been accepted or had registered late after the orientation had already taken place. This means that some students are being left behind in relation to the social justice principles of equal access and participation. Social justice requires every member of the community to have equal access to available resources and services and an equal opportunity to participate in the activities of that community (Bartley, 2021). Universities must therefore ensure that they present more than one session for the orientation of new arrivals to the university in order to accommodate those who register late for one reason or another.

Another environmental challenge that participants of this study faced was that of accommodation, especially for students living off campus. The location of residences can play a role in the development of a student’s academic journey. Most of the respondents who lived off campus indicated that they experienced safety issues and struggled to access the library at night because they were worried about their safety when they had to return to their residences. Others said that their residences were at some distance from the main campus, which caused a variety of challenges for them because they were new to the city and were not used to their surroundings and the bigger city itself. This was evident when a participant mentioned that:

Some residences are far, and poor weather can affect attendance; it is not safe for some students when going back to residence when coming from campus.

Some participants also claimed that the university was not doing enough to help all students to get accommodation on campus. Many of them suggested that the university needed to prioritise first-year students when allocating on-campus accommodation because most of them were new to the city and did not know their way around. On this issue, one respondent said, “*We should have been given accommodation on campus before returning students because we are new to the city while returning students already know the city well*”. Furthermore, the respondents reported that some off-campus residences belonging to the university were situated in areas which were not conducive for studying as they were close to entertainment establishments that disturbed and distracted the students from studying. In this regard, one participant said, “*the noise disturbance from the pub is very distracting*”. They also reported that some of the off-campus residences experienced recurrent problems relating to Wi-Fi connectivity, which adversely affected their ability to study and log in for online lectures.

While it is understandable that South African universities do not have the capacity to accommodate all students on campus, efforts must be made to ensure that conditions at off-campus residences are as conducive to studying as at campus residences. Doing so would ensure that the social justice principle of providing a conducive learning environment for all students (Foreman, 2008) is achieved. This is particularly important to ensure that students are able to focus on their academic work instead of being exposed to the hustle and bustle of urban life and having to worry about their safety.

Social challenges

In addition to the environmental challenges discussed above, the findings of this study revealed that first-year students at SPU also experienced social challenges. The main social challenge reported was that of racial stereotyping and marginalisation of some students by others. One coloured student indicated that Black students

felt entitled because they were the majority and did not think that students from other racial groups mattered. This led to some coloured and white students feeling socially excluded. In the respondent's words:

Black students treat coloured students differently and do not want to listen to our point of view. The white students also don't feel like they belong because they are seriously marginalised.

Stereotyping can create another challenge in the form of isolation and alienation when students do not feel integrated in the university community. In this regard, one of the respondents indicated that, "At residence, I sometimes feel isolated because of this race thing. I will just stay in my room. One of my other friends experiences the same thing".

Another problem of stereotyping is that it can lead to academic exclusion by undermining participation in class activities. This was evident when one of the participants voiced the following:

Because I think the Black students are treating coloureds differently, I don't want to ask questions in class because they might think that I am stupid by asking this question.

These social challenges are not confined to students. Some participants indicated that staff members demonstrated outright racial discrimination against non-Black students in a sports team. This was evident when a participant stated that,

I was in one of the sport teams and the coach did not give the same amount of support as for the black student. This was like in front of me. He would ask the others how he could help them but would not assist me as well when I indicated it. Then I moved to the men's team and some of the coloured students told me that the coach was also treating them like that.

It is worth mentioning that these reports of racial stereotyping, marginalisation and discrimination do not seem to be widespread in the student community at SPU. They are however serious enough to warrant the attention and intervention of university authorities. The principles of social justice require the absence of discrimination and respect for the rights, freedoms, and dignity of every member of an institution (Bartley, 2021). The injustices of the wider society are usually replicated in educational institutions (Greer, 2014). This implies that having policies that prevent marginalisation and discrimination are not enough to eliminate these ills because some of these practices are so subtle that they may not be picked up by policy mechanisms. It is therefore important for universities to also have other preventive measures in place such as diversity and social cohesion campaigns or orientation for students and staff. This would help to prevent situations in which macro-level policies of inclusivity are undermined by individual attitudes at the micro level.

Academic challenges

One of the main challenges faced by participants was that they were not prepared for university life after high school. Although high schools do in general prepare learners for university by equipping them in subjects that are necessary for certain university programmes, other university-level challenges are not accommodated by the high school curriculum. Among the academic challenges faced by participants was the use of technology at university level, which they had not been prepared for at high school level. This was evident in responses such as, "The high school did not prepare me for online learning", and "I was also struggling with computers and online classes at university". The majority of the respondents also indicated in the survey that they had not been exposed to the use of computers in high school. This was an indication that they had not been exposed to online teaching and learning in the classroom. The reason for this lack of exposure was that many of the high schools that the students attended lacked access to the necessary technology resources, or they did not use the resources optimally in lessons. This was evident when one participant said, "We had no computers at schools, so there was little exposure". Not having exposure to the use of technologies, in this case computers, means that the students did not acquire the skills needed to work with these technologies at university level. It could thus be said that this shortcoming made the process of transition into a higher education institution more difficult for these students, and the level of difficulty was related to the range of differences in students' backgrounds (Leese, 2010). These students were reporting to university with a backlog in the necessary skills and this situation could marginalise them even further and negatively influence their academic participation at classroom level (Harris and Patton, 2019). It could therefore be argued that these students experienced a sense of exclusion with regard to access and could even have the sense that equal opportunities within the broader social justice environment were lacking (Bartley, 2021). These students

could already be feeling marginalised when they enter the classroom, which might influence their academic performance.

This challenge would be direr for students with no access to computers at home as was voiced by a participant who indicated that, *“I do not have a computer at home”*. This is an indication that the students did not only come from schools that were under-resourced, but their home communities were also economically marginalised. They did not therefore have equal opportunities for success (Bartley, 2021). This situation can lead to poor academic performance because the students do not have the necessary skills to use technology optimally when they enrol at university. Not knowing how to use the different technologies, or taking longer to grasp the skills, could hamper their ability to complete certain tasks during lessons or while doing assessments. One of the students indicate that, *“One of the challenges was to manage my time when I was doing online assessment”*. Such students would feel more vulnerable to academic failure as the challenge with technology could have a negative effect on their intellectual abilities (Berlach and Chambers, 2011). These students lack the potential to adjust quickly in the learning environment (Mishra *et al.*, 2020) and this shortcoming increases the need for universities to take up the social responsibility role of ensuring that students are not left behind on the academic journey. SPU seeks to mitigate this challenge by the inclusion of a computer literacy induction as part of the orientation programme for first-year students. This solution does not sufficiently address the challenge because the induction is only for a few days and the skills acquired are not enough to engage in online learning efficiently. Furthermore, although every SPU student receives a laptop after registration, participants reported other related issues such as the problem of connectivity at some residences and administrative lapses. One participant voiced the issue as follows: *“I also experience connectivity and network problems at my residence”*. Another participant indicated that they were, *“not included in the email list and not being invited to TEAMS”*. It could therefore be said that these students were excluded from the academic project at the beginning of the year. Such exclusion could create anxiety for the students because they could not communicate with other students or lecturers when lectures started.

When students arrive at the university it can be an anxious period for them. This is their first experience at university and everything possible needs to be done to make it a joyful and pleasant first-hand experience. However, for some students, especially those who arrive late, it can be a daunting experience because of the additional challenges they face, which can influence their academic journey. One of the respondents indicated that the university sent them an acceptance for admission very late:

There was no communication from SPU for late acceptance, therefore I registered late and could not attend the orientation. That made me feel lost.

This meant that they could not take part in the academic orientation at all and therefore experienced enormous difficulties at the start of their university journey. It is therefore important for the university to improve their communication systems so that accepted students would experience a smooth transition into the university. The orientation programme is a particularly key component for first-time entry students because it provides them with all the finer details of university life and the necessary structures. This student was excluded from this opportunity and they indicated that it increased their anxiety.

Conclusion

Entering a university as a first-year student can be incredibly stressful unless a university has proper mechanisms in place to make students feel welcome. Although most universities have proper structures in place to facilitate the transition of first-year students from high school, students continue to face certain challenges. As discussed in this article, the participants in the study experienced environmental, social challenges and academic challenges. Universities, therefore, must be aware of the possible challenges that students could face, and they need to have mitigation plans in place to address these challenges. Some of the recommendations for institutions that would smooth the transition into university for students need to be comprehensive. For a start, institutions need to provide first-year students with access to psychology services in the form of pre-determined workshops with them during or as part of the orientation period. Since this can be in a group format, it would mitigate the feeling of alienation and nervousness, especially for students who are coming from rural areas. This should also include off-campus students because they also experience anxiety and nervousness as a result of security issues. Secondly, although it is difficult to mitigate issues related to social discrimination, students need to be made aware of policies in this regard and the necessary processes that can be followed. Connecting first-year students with peers in other year groups to assist them in the processes at the university will be a good start. Challenges regarding the use of

technology require continuous intervention that could start with a workshop. This should not be a once-off workshop because the students would continue to have different levels of challenges as they progress in their academic journey. Finally, the universities need to monitor the experiences of first-year students so as to evaluate the effectiveness of the measures in place and also identify new challenges. This would enable them to revise ineffective measures and put in place new ones to mitigate the challenges faced by first-year students, and enable students to have equal opportunities and participation in university structures and events.

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