RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Students' Transition into Higher Education: Incorporating High-Impact Practices to Foster Smooth Transition and Academic Success

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Abstract

The transition into Higher Education (HE) is a problematic situation for students and academic institutions worldwide. This scenario is even more apparent in the South African environment as a majority of the student body resides in low-income, rural environments and are first-generation university students. Such a context presents unique challenges such as separation from family, cultural differences and family obligations, together with academic and social integration pressures, thus placing students in an unfamiliar environment within HE. If successful integration into HE is not achieved at this initial stage of entry, students face the risk of academic failure. The purpose of the study was to explore the challenges faced by South African first-year students as they transition into HE and the impact of peer mentorship on the successful progression of university students. Findings reveal that engaging in high-impact practices inherent in first-year student experiences ultimately leads to the promotion of student success in areas such as increased academic performance, participation in activities with educational goals, student contentment and persistence in completion of their studies. This paper proposes an intervention that supports a smooth transition of students into higher education as it draws from the strategies of High-Impact Practices (HIPs) applicable to undergraduate courses.

Keywords: *high-impact practices; first-year student transition; higher education; peer mentoring*

Introduction

The relationship between High-Impact Practices (HIPs) and first-year experiences in achieving enhanced engagement, retention and academic performance amongst university students is examined in this desktop research paper. Mentorship, and more especially peer mentorship, is seen as an overarching component that leads to successful student experiences in higher education. Smith and Baik's (2019) study propose that HIPs focus on interaction and relationships that foster collaborative learning, which looks at encouraging peer interaction and learning in social contexts.

This study reviewed literature relevant to peer mentorship, high-impact practices in higher education and the models available for adoption. The South African higher education system has historically encountered several difficulties, leading to unequal opportunities for students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, according to Chiramba and Ndofirepi (2023). The pursuit of higher education is especially important in influencing both individual lives and the growth of the country, especially in South Africa (SA), a country still struggling with a historical legacy of inequality and socioeconomic imbalances (Swartz *et al*., 2019). Fostering inclusivity and diversity awareness in education is crucial for several reasons, according to Eden *et al.* (2024). The authors state

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that recognising and addressing the distinct needs and experiences of students from diverse cultural backgrounds fosters fair access to education. Secondly, adopting a nurturing and culturally sensitive learning environment improves social-emotional growth and academic performance. Students who embrace variety also develop empathy, understanding and respect for one another, which equips them to prosper in a world that is becoming more diverse and interconnected by the day. The report by Griesel and Parker (2009) stated that the post-apartheid transformation of the education system expanded the diversity of students. Diversity in terms of socioeconomic status, cultural background and place of origin, including both rural and urban, resulted in a range of students enrolling into South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Many of these first-generation students, who make up the majority of the student complement at Universities in SA, often face unique challenges related to academic preparedness and navigating university systems (Reed *et al*., 2018; Dlamini, 2017), which is the primary focus for this study. These challenges can impact students' academic success and overall well-being, thus requiring concerted effort from academic institutions.

Secondary sources are the main sources of data used in this review study. The writers used search methods in several databases, including baseline literature, to perform desktop research and obtain data from published secondary sources. Conference presentation reports, newspapers and public media pieces, published books and journal articles accessible through Google and Google Scholar were all examined using a qualitative research methodology, following a thematic analysis. In order to conduct a review for this study, a focus on both regional and international literature concentrating on first-year student experiences, high-impact practices and models of transitions and retention were reviewed across various academic databases like EBSCOhost, ERIC, ProQuest and Emerald Insight. Prior to the thematic analysis, the gathered data was refined based on its relevance and applicability to the subject of the study. As part of the exclusion criteria, unpublished or non-peer reviewed resources such as personal blogs, internal memorandums, as well as content that did not directly align with the themes of student transition, retention or high impact practices, were excluded.

Conceptualising the First-Year Experience: Challenges in Transitioning into Higher Education

The role of Higher Education has transformed over the years from knowledge acquisition to developing adaptive graduates. HE is required to meet the demands of the 21st century by developing students for employability (Lueg *et al.,* 2023; Mendick and Peters, 2023) with the necessary higher-order thinking skills, thereby providing students with a competitive advantage. Therefore, the adjustment from high school to HE has become a growing concern. This concern arises from the factors that influence transition and the challenges that are experienced by both students and academic institutions, as outlined below. Dias *et al.* (2019) believe that the transition from secondary education to higher education assumes significant importance during late adolescence and is often perceived as a highly positive life experience for students. However, scholars suggest that entering Higher Education marks the culmination of students' secondary education journey and the commencement of an entirely new and, in many respects, a more demanding journey (Thompson *et al.,* 2021; Kinsella *et al.,* 2022; Lin *et al.,* 2023).

Contributing factors of student dropout vary from low self-confidence to poor first-year grades, feelings of being marginalised by the university environment and low academic motivation (Yomtov *et al.,* 2017). A focus on the holistic development of students is much needed, including student engagement, cohesiveness and psychological issues. The Centre for Collegiate Mental Health at Penn State University reported in a national survey that the highest concern of students was identified as anxiety with depression and stress, following the list of issues affecting students' success (CCMH, 2015). A review of 105 Further Education (FE) colleges in England spanning a three-year period revealed that 85% of colleges had reported an overwhelming increase in mental health difficulties (Campbell, 2022). Thus, the shift to HE can be seen as a multifaceted process as it acknowledges the factors unique to each student, as well as the environments in which they live and socially interact. This inevitably impacts psychological growth, as well as students' acquisition of academic skills, including time management and study techniques (Dias *et al.,* 2019). These factors influence the transition into HE and academic success. Campbell, Craig and Collier-Reed (2020) asserted that numerous studies have categorised the factors contributing to academic success, which can typically fall into three main groups: firstly, factors related to teaching and learning; secondly, environmental factors; and lastly, socio-psychological factors as depicted in Figure 1. These factors, as explained below, were described as behaviour that influences academic success, retention and transition in HE.
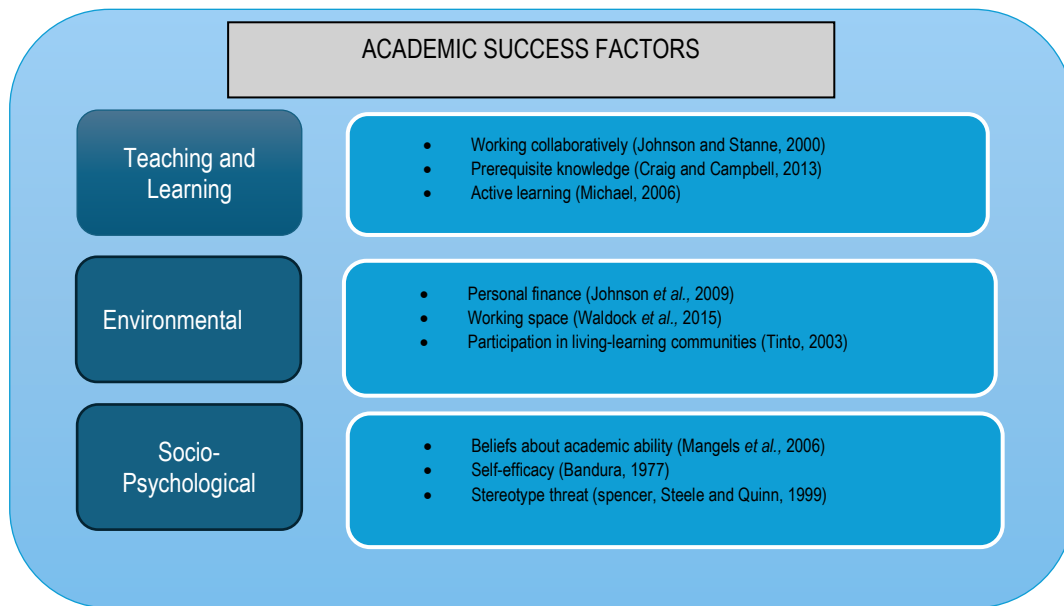
Figure 1: Classification of factors affecting academic success (Campbell, Craig and Collier-Reed 2020: 27)

According to Thomas *et al.* (2020) socio-psychological factors, also referred to as psychosocial factors, describe the effect of social and psychological elements that affect an individual's behaviour, mental health, physical health, social interactions and emotional stability. Literature has identified various psychosocial factors that influence the transition into HE, namely peer influence and support; family support; cultural background; access to resources; transition from high school; sense of belonging; levels of confidence; being in new, unfamiliar and less organised situations, as well as mental health and well-being (Govender, 2020; Meehan and Howells 2019; Thompson *et al.,* 2021). Studies by Thompson *et al.* (2021) reveal a notable increase in students consulting with mental health and well-being services. Pascoe *et al.* (2020) state that symptoms of anxiety and depression not only compromise general health and well-being, but also negatively impact academic performance. The authors further explain that exam scores were found to be lower for undergraduate university students who self-reported having more symptoms of anxiety and despair.

Baik *et al.* (2019) affirms the high rate of mental health issues among college students is a serious problem for both academic institutions and the larger communities they serve. Psychological distress can significantly affect students' physical, cognitive, emotional, and social functioning in many domains. Prolonged psychological discomfort tends to affect students' ability to learn and participate in various academic activities, which tends to compromise students' ability to pay attention, make decisions, remember details, be motivated, process information and regulate their impulses. Furthermore, Cage *et al.* (2021) as well as Thompson *et al.* (2021) maintain that managing these factors can be mentally taxing, and they may have a significant impact on students' mental health. Besides mental health issues, a lack of interest in courses; insufficient academic preparation; inadequate financial help; heightened competition; difficulty integrating into academic systems; and being in new, unfamiliar and less organised situations are some of the other factors cited (Kam-Fong *et al.,* 2019; Govender, 2020). According to Shefer *et al.* (2018), first-year university students are particularly vulnerable to failure due to an unstable economy, pervasive government corruption, and a lack of a solid agenda for political and socioeconomic development.

Drawing on the work of Campbell *et al.* (2020), personal finance, working space and participation in living-learning communities are considered as environmental factors, even though some scholars may address it as psychosocial issues. Furthermore, physical separation from family is an important environmental factor that can lead to feelings of homesickness, loneliness and emotional uncertainty, which can disrupt students' everyday routine (Cameron and Rideout, 2022). First-generation students as well as those from rural or culturally homogeneous backgrounds may experience cultural shock or cultural mismatch because of exposure to a diverse university environment (Chang *et al.,* 2020). This entails interacting with students from various socioeconomic, racial and cultural backgrounds, in addition to being exposed to new social norms and academic standards. Students may feel pressure to embrace or navigate between their cultural heritage and new societal norms as they face challenges of negotiating their cultural identity and values within a predominantly urban and multicultural university setting.

Therefore, Choset (2021); Fan *et al.* (2021) and Cameron and Rideout (2022) highlight the importance of fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion since it promotes student retention and success rates. Ideally, understanding the challenges that first-year students face whilst transitioning into university life and developing a sense of belonging is crucial for effectively engaging and ensuring student success in HE, according to by Meehan and Howells (2019). Hence, a supportive atmosphere influenced by social variables, such as inclusive campus rules, support networks for marginalised groups and diversity programmes on campus is needed.

Caviglia-Harris (2022) claims that living-learning communities and other initiatives such as tutoring programs and academic centers can assist students in acquiring competencies and fostering a sense of belonging within a community. In addition, Choset (2021) confirms this by also advocating that living-learning communities play a crucial role in the college student journey. This mitigates the dropout rates and transitions into HE at the undergraduate level. Anderson and Blankenberger (2023) are of the opinion that HE Institutions have recognised the importance of this issue and have therefore established initiatives designed to facilitate student interaction with faculty, staff and peers. Meehan and Howells (2019) further add that these key stakeholders play a pivotal role promoting institutional integration and engagement through elements such as the efficacy of student interactions with academic and support personnel; the effectiveness of feedback mechanisms; the calibre of guidance regarding course-related issue; and adherence to university policies and procedures. Thus, Kinsella *et al.* (2022) highlight the importance of students being engaged within the university community, which allows for the adjustment and transition to their new surroundings and fulfil the psychosocial requirements of their course. This is congruent with Tinto's model, which is considered one of the most influential models for understanding dropout rates (Tinto, 1975), which will be subsequently discussed.

Campbell *et al.'s* (2020) research identifies the importance of working collaboratively, prerequisite knowledge and active learning as part of teaching and learning that promotes student behaviour and adjustment into HE. Sterling (2018) adds that the increase in academic rigor, which includes difficult assignments, lengthy reading lists and demanding coursework, may be too much for first-year students to handle; while Mulaudzi (2023) indicates that the shift in teaching styles, such as lectures and seminars, can also be overwhelming. Other difficulties include leading individual tasks, managing time and taking the initiative to ponder and reflect. It appears that these issues permeate most classes regardless of how motivated, passionate or enthusiastic teachers and students are (Govender, 2020). These issues can be mitigated by teaching and learning strategies that assist students in understanding the learning material, its purpose and how it ties into the larger scheme of things, which could be facilitated through guided group projects and more tailored course guidance (Meehan and Howells, 2019). Additionally, Sriram and Anburaj (2024) suggest that navigating the academic environment of a university where English or another dominant language is utilised as the medium of teaching can be intimidating for students who are not native speakers and poses a language barrier. These students frequently find it difficult to participate in class discussions, keep up with lectures and fit in with the university environment. Furthermore, Mulaudzi (2023) and Nunn (2021) add that it can be difficult to make new friends and feel included in a wider, more diverse university society, especially for students who are more reserved or lack social skills.

According to Walker and Mathebula (2020), students' success and well-being are greatly influenced by their capacity to successfully navigate and adjust to new and sometimes overwhelming institutional settings. Although it does not entirely affect their results, Walker and Mathebula (2020) contend that coming from a rural home and having a low income have a substantial impact on students' university experience. Mokhampanyane (2024) and Lombard (2020) further attest that most first-year students struggle with adjustment, which affects their academic performance. Increased access to higher education, greater engagement by underprivileged students and the requirement for intervention measures are all necessary to support these students, according to Jones *et al*. (2008). If higher education wants to successfully raise student throughput and success rates, these strategies are essential. Furthermore, according to Harackiewicz and Priniski (2018), customised interventions address certain educational issues, such as assisting first-year students in adjusting to university life or reducing achievement gaps for students from underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities. Literature suggests the use of HIP to promote such relationships (Arikan *et al.,* 2022). In addition, McDaniel and Van Jura (2022) state that these interventions help facilitate the narrowing of achievement disparities between historically marginalised populations and their advantaged peers.

Understanding the challenges highlighted in this section underscores the need for deliberate institutional responses. The following section explores high-impact practices and strategic interventions that support student engagement and transition into higher education.

High-Impact Practices and Institutional Strategies for Enhancing First-Year Success

According to Kuh (2008), HIPs are instructional strategies that have been demonstrated to dramatically improve student engagement, learning outcomes and general success in Higher Education. These instructional strategies aim to encourage deep learning, engage students in their learning process, and strengthen ties between students, academics and the larger community (Ramasamy *et al.,* 2024). Amongst the various characteristics of HIP, collaboration is key to addressing issues of social integration into institutions of higher learning. Collaborative learning experiences, including teamwork amongst students to discuss ideas, solve problems and learn from each other, is emphasised by HIP strategies. Undergraduate research, service-learning, internships and field experiences, capstone courses and projects and study abroad programs are amongst the examples of achieving success through HIPs. HIPs contribute to students' personal and professional development, including increased self-confidence, leadership abilities and a sense of civic responsibility. Research conducted by Tinto (2012) shows a positive correlation between participation in HIPs and increased academic achievement, retention and engagement amongst students, resulting in the increased likelihood of students completing their course of study; graduating on schedule; and exhibiting improved communication, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Furthermore, HIPs have shown potential in closing achievement gaps amongst diverse student populations, including, racial and ethnic minorities, first-generation students and students from low-income backgrounds (Lee *et al*., 2024), Engle and Tinto (2008) are of the opinion that educational institutions may have the potential to facilitate the academic success of every student through ensuring equal access to transformative learning opportunities. Research consistently proves that HIP play a pivotal role in enhancing student success, engagement, and retention in higher education. Lee *et al*. (2024) add that institutions that have taken the opportunity to prioritise the integration of HIPs into their educational frameworks have the ability of cultivating a supportive learning environment that prepares students not merely for academic achievement, but also for lifelong learning and professional success.

Smith and Baik (2019) postulate that the demands of Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) force HE institutions to focus on sound evidence-based teaching, validating the move towards the development of a holistic student from the inception of first year. Various authors have advocated the need for smart thinking in educating the future leaders of the nation, which is further supported by Smith and Baik (2019) who draw from the teachings of Ambrose *et al*. (2010) in their presentation of the seven principles of learning for 'smart teaching'. These principles focus on the academic development of the student with an important focus on the interaction between the intellectual, social and emotional atmosphere of the course and students' present developmental stage. The successful achievement of this interaction has the potential of presenting an environment within HE that the fosters safe, cohesive integration of students into the HE sector, with success determinants for progression. Fink (2016: 3) further presents his own list of High Impact Teaching practices (HITP) that contribute to student success as "helping students become meta-learners, learning-centered course design, using small groups in a powerful way, service learning/community engagement with reflection and being a leader with your students. The incorporation of the various aspects of HIP and identification of relevant High Impact Teaching Practices (HITPs) coupled with psychological issues relevant to the "student experience", is necessary for creating an environment of learning in which a student feels comfortable.

Duarte *et al.* (2014) highlighted that HEIs have tackled the issue of dropout in a variety of ways, implementing preventive measures that range from mentorship or tutorial programs to all-encompassing programs that account for institutional, social and cognitive aspects. The objective of these programs is to close the gap that keeps students from advancing their competencies whilst also offering additional assistance to at-risk groups in the form of financial help, study skills programmes or time management training. Turner *et al.* (2017) further acknowledge that first-year learners who are integrated with other students both within and outside the University develop a sense of camaraderie and foster intellectual, social and personal connectedness. Douglas *et al.* (2018) and McCall *et al.* (2020) underscore the importance of orientation as it encourages students to engage with the first-year experience from the moment of enrolment by acquainting them with the university setting, pushing them to socialise with faculty and staff, and providing them with crucial information about schedules, study areas and learning resources. Colleges and universities are stepping up their efforts to reach and engage first-year students by

increasing the length of orientation and offering new orientation modes like virtual orientations. Soria *et al.* (2013) stated that orientation programs continue to grow with student participation across HEIs, which may differ amongst the various institutions either being one-day programmes or extending over a week.

According to O'Connell *et al.* (2019), the information that these orientation programs aims to impart, through education and peer support, will result in improved academic achievement, emotional and social maturity, and a more favourable perception of the university. Al-Sheeb *et al.* (2018) encourages students to adjust to college life and to help those who are not functioning well by incorporating the 'first-year experience' project, which encompass several programs and events, including success workshops, first-year lectures and student orientations. Carragher and McGaughey (2016) stipulate that programs for peer mentoring seem to be crucial in improving students' overall experiences and easing their transition to higher education. With the establishment of transition programs like summer bridge programs and first-year seminars, HEIs assist students in making connections with peers and professors, feeling at home in HE and performing efficiently (van Herpen *et al.,* 2019). Hommes *et al.* (2012) discovered that social networks, friendships, peer-to-peer information sharing and other interactions on course-related matters had a beneficial impact on first-year student performance. In addition to the beneficial effects of peer-to-peer connection on academic achievement, building a social network gives students a sense of community that facilitates their transition into the role of higher education students. According to Zimmerman (2008), self-regulation is the ability of learners to actively govern their own learning outcomes and take charge of their own learning processes through a combination of metacognitive, behavioural and motivational strategies. Furthermore, Lizzio and Wilson (2013) articulate that students engage in a connected series of activities as part of the self-regulation process, which begins with a realistic assessment of their situation and progresses to goal-setting that is both reasonable and suitable.

Institutions are employing various strategies to ensure that first-year students, especially students that are first-generation and historically disadvantaged, are seamlessly integrated into HE. Means and Pyne (2017) recommend that first-generation, low-income students can benefit from cultural support initiatives such as need-based scholarship programs, which offer social, financial and emotional assistance to help them feel like they belong in their academic communities. In addition, Ball and Hennessy (2020), as cited in Le *et al.* (2024), indicate that peer mentoring creates opportunities for senior students to offer tailored advice that assist students to establish productive study habits, set objectives, manage their time and access institutional resources, which promotes academic progression. Social support can be categorised as instrumental support, emotional support and informational support (Meng *et al*., 2017). The authors explain that instrumental support involves tangible aspects of physically helping an individual, like providing notes to a student who may have missed lectures due to legitimate reasons. Emotional support involves the ability of the institution to provide encouragement, re-assurance or acceptance to a student who is in distress, whilst informational support involves the ability of mentors to provide guidance and advice to a student that is dealing with stress. Furthermore, Seery *et al.* (2021) stated that ongoing mentoring relations could provide a solid foundation in developing meaningful and enduring connections, not only during the academic period but also later in their life engagements.

Duarte *et al*. (2014) refer to Tinto's model, which focuses on interactions between students and institutions. According to the model, student dropout is caused by dynamic and reciprocal interactions between the personal characteristics of the student, the characteristics of HEI and the surrounding external community elements such as friends, family, as well as business and economic contexts. According to Tinto (2003), a person's family history, personal values and prior secondary school experience can have an impact on their decision to enrol in and continue with HE. The academic and social integration of students, which is associated with their contacts with teachers and peers as well as their grade achievement and intellectual growth, contribute to the enhancement of the institutional experience. Tinto further adds that a student's commitment to the HEI and to graduating will be determined by how well-integrated they are intellectually and socially within the institution. This thereby influences the student's choice of whether to persist or drop out. Consequently, this understanding has led to the reform of pedagogical practices in HEIs by integrating and engaging students in the learning process (Tinto, 2003). Therefore, Meehan and Howells (2019) propose that the primary objective of HE is to teach students rather than merely ensuring their retention, with the understanding that learning serves as a crucial factor in fostering retention.

Edenfield and McBrayer (2021) present the hierarchy model of student interactions with institutional agents as indicated in Figure 2. The model reflects how these interactions over time lead to the transformation from

meaningless to meaningful interactions when the institutional agent acts as a resource, a support system and an advocate on a hierarchical continuum.

The model explains each category and the progression from the lowest order of meaningless student contacts to transactional contact with instructional agents, then to the highest order of meaningful student interactions, which includes having an advocate on campus. By maintaining regular contact, getting accurate information, having meaningful and in-depth conversations, developing trust and strengthening their bond with an institutional agent, students can transition from meaningless to meaningful encounters. Making even more frequent contact, keeping the agent in their lives consistently, strengthening their bond even more and increasing their level of trust are all ways that students might progress.
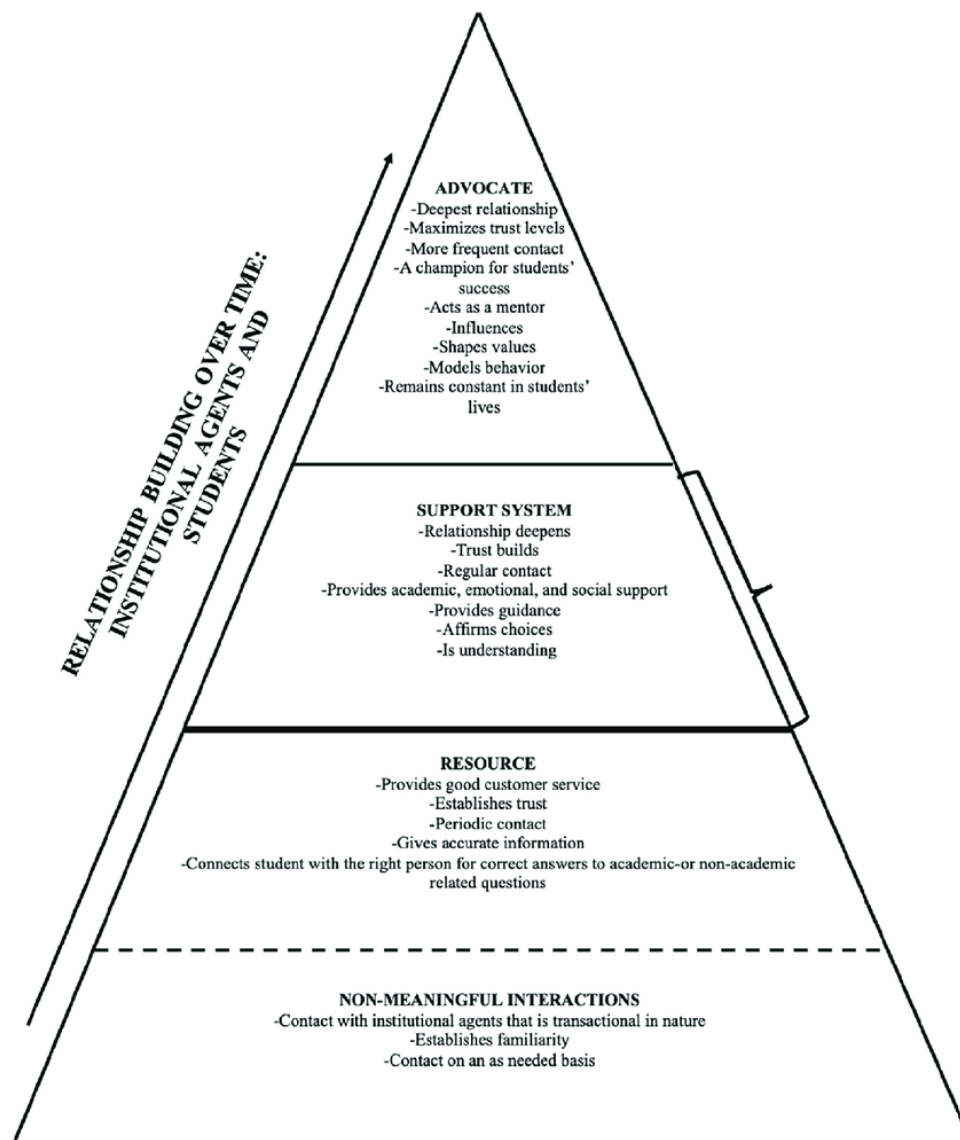
Figure 2: Hierarchy model of Student Interactions (Edenfield and McBrayer, 2021)

The most important factor in determining academic achievement is that students should use work and study techniques that help them reach their objectives. As shown in Figure 3, Lizzio and Wilson (2013) explain that a student should initially understand the expectations of the task (contextual awareness), followed by prioritising their actions and adherence to a personal standard (goal setting). Based on this understanding, the student should then plan their time and choose study strategies appropriate for the specific type of assessment (strategy selection); manage their competing priorities and constraints as they work on the task; and produce a high-quality and timely product (e.g., essay, exam, presentation, etc.) on time (effective action). The authors are of the opinion that critical self-reflection and experience-based learning are essential components of effective self-regulation, and students would be placed in a better position to respond and successfully complete future assessments.

Figure 3: The Academic Self-Regulation Model (Lizzio and Wilson, 2013)

Lizzio and Wilson (2013) presented the current intervention in support of first-year students who were having trouble with early university evaluation in developing their ability to regulate their academic performance. This was to be gained through:

- a deeper comprehension of the factors influencing their early assessment success (improving metacognitive awareness);
- feeling more upbeat and optimistic, with the belief that they can "take charge and do better";
- putting changes into practice and getting the help one needs (environmental support and positive action planning); and
- feeling more competent and assured to handle their upcoming assessment assignment on their own (initiating future self-regulation).

Lizzio and Wilson (2013) further indicate that the main goal of the intervention process was to methodically assist students in learning to self-regulate their academic behaviour regarding assessment tasks, including the capacity to solve problems quickly to get back on track after an early setback.

The RCI method was designed as a group intervention that aims to provide assistance to students as they identify the thoughts, feelings and coping strategies that relate to their psychological, behavioural and interpersonal issues regarding the stress factors that students experience on an ongoing basis (Roig *et al*., 2020). A key component of this process is peer support and connection (First *et al.,* 2018). This model incorporates the concepts of a strengths-based approach, group problem-solving and peer support and connection, designed with the aim of alleviating the negative effects of stress. The inherent strength of this model lies in the concept of group and peer support and problem-solving, which could counteract the negative effects of feelings of isolation and not belonging. These issues, especially for first- year students, contain dire effects that could not only impact a student's first-year experience at the institution but also carry throughout the years of the student's life at higher education institutions. Various studies revealed the positive aspects of adopting such a process because it allowed for members to share and validate their experiences as they share their own thoughts and observe their own coping strategies and learn from the experiences of each other, as well as help others like them through the process of adapting as well (Chandler *et al*., 2020; Herbert and Manjula, 2022 and Herrero *et al*., 2019).

Proposed Framework for Effectively Engaging Students into a Department at HEIs

In the discussion section, the significance, meaning and applicability of the findings are explored. The information discovered through the review is assessed and its connection to this paper is outlined, contributing to the overall conclusion of this study. The findings of this study provide university instructors with a valuable understanding of the dynamics of first-year experiences in SA HEIs, as well as enlighten them on their involvement in providing greater support, thereby improving students' outcomes and experiences in higher education.

The purpose of this study was to examine the literature on first-year student experiences and propose an intervention to support the smooth transition of first-year students into HE. Considering the dire need for HEIs to

not merely provide an education to students but to move towards improving student outcomes and experiences as they transition and move into the various levels of higher education experiences, these implications include the need to grow and improve relationships between institutional agents and first-year students and re-think the phenomena of teaching and learning at HEIs. The model presented offers an opportunity for HEIs to adopt a more engaged and distinctive educational experience that focuses on improving student success as they cultivate sustaining relationships between institutional agents and students. This perspective is based on the notion of adopting innovative approaches, disrupting traditional teaching and learning experiences, and thereby ensuring that students achieve their educational objectives whilst institutions meet their retention and succession targets.

The proposed framework, as indicated in Figure 4, presents a holistic approach to assessing the experience of first-year students and identifying the needs of the relevant academic department, resulting in the systematic integration of the curriculum with student-relevant activities that not only consider teaching and learning, but factors such as cultural aspects, partnerships, both internal and external, peer mentoring and the continuous process of feedback and evaluation, ultimately resulting in improved practice.

Figure 4: Proposed framework for first-year students' integration into higher education

The *'needs assessment'* involves a need to conduct a thorough assessment of institutional/departmental goals, student demographics and existing resources to determine the readiness for integrating HIPs is important. There is also a need to identify specific areas where HIPs can address institutional priorities, such as improving retention rates or enhancing student learning outcomes. The *'curricular integration'* entails aligning peer mentoring programmes with course objectives to ensure the attainment of significant and meaningful contributions to first-year students' academic and social development. The *'student advising and mentoring'* entails assigning faculty mentors to support students through their first-year experiences and provide tailored guidance.

For *'training opportunities',* providing professional development opportunities for peer mentors will capacitate them for dealing with student engagement activities and effective implementation strategies through workshops, seminars and training sessions. The *'active learning strategies'* involves the implementation of pedagogical approaches that promote active learning, critical thinking and problem-solving skills activities. Encourage collaborative learning, peer-to-peer interactions and reflection to deepen students' engagement and learning outcomes. The *'assessment and feedback'* entails developing clear assessment criteria and rubrics would enable the effective evaluation of student performance. For its part, *'cultural shift'* step fosters a campus culture that values and celebrates student engagement. Recognising and showcasing student achievements resulting from peer mentoring activities through awards, recognitions and presentations will inspire others and promote a culture of shared learning. The *'evaluation and continuous improvement'* involves establishing mechanisms for collecting and analysing data on the impact of these interventions on student outcomes, retention rates and overall institutional effectiveness. Use evidence-based findings to make informed decisions and refine strategies for integrating peer mentoring programmes. Finally, '*partnerships and collaborations'* helps in supporting departments and external organisations, industry stakeholders and community partners to expand opportunities for students to engage in support programmes and mentoring.

By following this framework, institutions can create a supportive and enriching environment that empowers students to thrive academically, develop essential skills, and achieve their full potential through meaningful engagement in peer mentoring programmes.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the measures that higher educational institutions could adopt to foster the smooth transition of first-year students into HE, with the aim of increasing the retention and engagement of students during their years at the institution. This is necessary in the era of 4IR that demands a shift in the educational realm whilst encouraging the delivery of a transformed educational experience, evident with the inclusion of high-impact practices. In conclusion, addressing these specific challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes targeted support programmes, culturally sensitive interventions, and collaborative efforts between universities, communities and government entities. Institutions can improve the academic performance, retention rates and the general well-being of students entering higher education in South Africa by acknowledging and addressing these issues. Institutional commitment in providing adequate resources, faculty development opportunities and administrative support are key to the effective implementation of HIPs. The impact of HIPs can be enhanced with institutions' support in integrating HIPs into the curriculum; providing structured support systems for students; and fostering a campus culture that values active learning and student engagement. High-Impact Practices aim to improve students' educational experiences by encouraging holistic growth, deepening engagement and boosting active learning. With the goal of preparing students for success in their academic, professional and personal lives, they embody a framework for educational excellence. The adoption of the proposed model from this study offers an opportunity for HEIs to achieve these goals and continuously review their success factors. Future studies in the form of longitudinal action research can advance the practicality of the proposed framework, which documents the successes and difficulties encountered whilst putting into practice the proposed recommendations.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This study engages Higher Education Studies by examining pedagogical frameworks, such as High-Impact Practices (HIPs), and their direct influence on student retention, academic performance, and persistence. Simultaneously it draws from sociology to analyse the impact that socio-economic status, rurality, family obligations, and cultural capital has on the process of social and academic integration. The research explores the aspects of student transition, including identity formation, coping mechanisms for stress and separation, and the role of peer mentorship in fostering a sense of belonging and student contentment. By intertwining these disciplinary threads together, the paper provides a holistic understanding of the first-year experience, arguing that effective interventions should address not only institutional practices but also the complex social and psychological issues of students navigating an unfamiliar environment.

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