




Academic and Social Adjustment Struggles of First-Year B.Ed. Humanities Students: Insights from a South African University

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ABSTRACT

First-year B.Ed. Humanities students often experience significant challenges transitioning from high school to university, particularly in adapting to academic expectations and navigating social environments. This study aimed to explore the academic and social adjustment struggles faced by first-year B.Ed. Humanities students at a South African university using Tinto's Theory of Student Integration and Bandura's Social Learning Theory as guiding frameworks. A qualitative research design and interpretive paradigm were applied using qualitative questionnaires completed by a purposive sample of first-year students. Data was analysed through thematic analysis. Key themes emerged, including difficulties with independent learning, managing time and multiple modules, language and communication barriers, social isolation, and challenges with group work dynamics. The study highlights the interconnected nature of academic and social challenges in student adjustment, reinforcing the importance of institutional support in fostering student integration and self-efficacy. This study contributes to scholarship by providing context-specific insights into the lived experiences of South African B.Ed. Humanities students, expanding the application of established theoretical frameworks in understanding student adjustment within underexplored educational settings, and informing targeted interventions to enhance student retention and success.

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INTRODUCTION

The transition from high school to university is a significant milestone that presents both opportunities and challenges for first-year students. Specifically, those pursuing a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) in Humanities at a South African university often encounter difficulties in both academic and social adjustments. Research indicates that the first year of university is crucial for determining student success, retention, and well-being.¹ Academic challenges, such as adapting to independent learning, managing increased workloads, and comprehending complex subject matter, can impede students' ability to perform

¹ N. Phelley Lavhelani, Clever Ndebele, and Fhatuwani Ravhuhali, "Examining the Efficacy of Student Academic Support Systems for 'at Risk' First Entering Students at a Historically Disadvantaged South African University," *Interchange* 51, no. 2 (2020): 137–56.

effectively.² Socially, students may experience feelings of isolation, adjustments to cultural diversity, and difficulties in forming meaningful peer relationships.³

These adjustment struggles can impact academic performance and contribute to increased dropout rates. This challenge indicates the need to understand and address these challenges. While several studies have examined student adjustment issues in higher education, much of the existing literature focuses on general university students rather than the specific experiences of students in particular disciplines. Research on first-year students in education programs, especially within the South African context, is still limited. Additionally, previous studies often emphasise either academic or social challenges in isolation, rather than exploring their interconnected nature. There are also inconsistencies in the findings regarding the effectiveness of institutional support, with some studies expressing concerns about its impact. Conversely, other research suggests that personal resilience and peer networks play a vital role in students' adjustment.

The well-being and academic success of students are vital considerations in the South African context, where historical inequalities, diverse student backgrounds, and socio-cultural challenges complicate these transitions. This study aims to explore first-year students' perspectives on their struggles with academic and social adjustment in higher education. This study examines the academic and social adjustment struggles faced by first-year students at a South African university. The study draws insights from relevant research related to this study. Understanding these adjustment challenges is crucial for developing effective support mechanisms that can enhance student success and well-being. To conduct this study, the following research question was explored: "What are the academic and social adjustment challenges faced by first-year B.Ed. Humanities students at a South African university?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

The transition to university is a pivotal phase for first-year Humanities students. This requires substantial academic and social adjustments that impact their well-being and success. In South Africa, this transition is influenced by historical inequalities and diverse socio-cultural contexts. This literature review explores the key academic and social adjustment challenges faced by these students at a South African university. The study draws on current research to inform targeted support strategies. The review is structured around the following themes:

- Academic Transition and Preparedness
- Social Integration and Belonging
- Influence of Socio-Economic Background and Institutional Support

A literature review of the relevant and related studies is made below.

Academic Transition and Preparedness

The transition to university poses significant academic challenges for first-year students, especially those enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) Humanities program. These challenges largely stem from the shift from the structured environment of secondary education to the self-directed nature of higher education. Moosa and Langsford note that students often grapple with increased workloads, unfamiliar teaching methods, and the need for independent thinking.⁴ Similarly, Motsabi et al. highlight that Humanities students encounter greater difficulties in engaging with theoretical concepts and academic writing.⁵ The stress and anxiety associated with this transition reveal a lack of preparedness for the academic demands of higher education.

A crucial aspect of academic adjustment is the move from externally guided learning to self-regulated learning. Wessels et al. argue that many students enter university without the necessary

² Matsolo Mokhampanyane, "Adjustment Dynamics of First-Year Students to University Life at a Rural University in South Africa," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, July 12, 2024, 1238–49, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ejass.20245714>.

³ Diane Lorenzetti et al., "Exploring International Graduate Students' Experiences, Challenges, and Peer Relationships," *Journal of International Students* 14, no. 2 (May 11, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i2.5186>.

⁴ Moeniera Moosa and Dale Langsford, "'I Haven't Had the Fun That Is Portrayed': First-Year Student Expectations and Experiences of Starting at University," *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)*, no. 83 (2021): 127–45.

⁵ S. Motsabi, B.M. Diale, and A. van Zyl, "The Role of Social Support in the Persistence of First-Year First-Generation African Students in a Higher Education Institution in South Africa," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 34, no. 4 (September 2020), <https://doi.org/10.20853/34-4-3486>.

metacognitive and evaluative skills for success, such as time management, critical reading, and academic argumentation.⁶ Avci suggests that incorporating metacognitive strategies into first-year curricula can help students develop reflective inquiry and independent learning.⁷ Without targeted support, students risk underperforming academically and experiencing diminished confidence.

Language further complicates the academic adjustment process, particularly for students from rural or township schools where English is not the primary language of instruction. Motsabi et al., and Corson emphasise the linguistic barriers that hinder comprehension and the ability to articulate complex academic content.⁸ As a result, students often struggle to understand course material and construct coherent academic arguments, which can lead to feelings of exclusion. Programs that focus on academic literacy and provide scaffolding for language acquisition, such as those proposed by Chetty and Kepkey and Bantjes et al., are essential for ensuring equitable access to academic success.⁹

Social Integration and Belonging

Social adjustment plays a crucial role in the well-being and academic persistence of first-year students. Zanden et al. and Reardon et al. assert that students from marginalised communities often encounter unique challenges when adapting to new social environments.¹⁰ These challenges include navigating racial, cultural, and socioeconomic dynamics, which can lead to feelings of alienation. Lan et al. found that social anxiety significantly hinders students' ability to form meaningful peer relationships, thereby diminishing their integration into the university community.¹¹

Students who enter university without established social networks or who experience heightened social anxiety face greater difficulties in adapting. McConney and Fourie-Malherbe notes that socially anxious students are more likely to withdraw from social interactions, negatively impacting both their academic and emotional adjustment.¹² In contrast, McConney and Fourie-Malherbe suggest that peer mentorship and social engagement programs can alleviate these challenges by providing safe spaces for interaction and support.¹³ Conversely, students with lower social anxiety tend to have smoother transitions and better academic outcomes.

The significance of a sense of belonging in fostering academic success cannot be overstated. Avci emphasises the detrimental effects of cultural mismatches between students' backgrounds and university environments, which can impede the development of belonging and motivation.¹⁴ To address this, institutions must cultivate inclusive, emotionally intelligent environments that embrace cultural diversity and promote peer interaction. McConney and Fourie-Malherbe advocate for university initiatives, such as culturally sensitive counselling and inclusive orientation programs, to bridge social divides and enhance integration.¹⁵

⁶ Quenton Wessels et al., "The Use of Reflective Practice to Promote Pharmacy Students' Metacognition in a Foundation Anatomy Course," *Anatomy Journal of Africa* 8, no. 1 (February 27, 2019): 1474–81, <https://doi.org/10.4314/aja.v8i1.183970>.

⁷ Dilek Avci, "First Year and Adjustment in University Life: A Qualitative Study to Determine the Needs of First Year University Students," *Educational Research & Implementation* 1, no. 1 (April 1, 2024): 51–68, <https://doi.org/10.14527/edure.2024.04>.

⁸ Motsabi, Diale, and van Zyl, "The Role of Social Support in the Persistence of First-Year First-Generation African Students in a Higher Education Institution in SOUTH Africa"; David Corson, "The Learning and Use of Academic English Words," *Language Learning* 47, no. 4 (December 28, 1997): 671–718, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0023-8333.00025>.

⁹ Lamese Chetty and Brigitta Kepkey, "Access to and Effectiveness of Support Services for Students in Extended Curriculum Programmes at a South African University," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 11, no. 2 (December 13, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v11i2.4896>; Jason Bantjes et al., "COVID-19 and Common Mental Disorders among University Students in South Africa," *South African Journal of Science* 119, no. 1/2 (January 31, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2023/13594>.

¹⁰ Petrie J. A. C. van der Zanden et al., "Patterns of Success: First-Year Student Success in Multiple Domains," *Studies in Higher Education* 44, no. 11 (November 2, 2019): 2081–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1493097>; Sean F. Reardon, Demetra Kalogrides, and Kenneth Shores, "The Geography of Racial/Ethnic Test Score Gaps," *American Journal of Sociology* 124, no. 4 (January 2019): 1164–1221, <https://doi.org/10.1086/700678>.

¹¹ Bunrosy Lan et al., "Academic Adjustment of Freshmen in Cambodian Higher Education Institutions: A Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of General Education and Humanities* 3, no. 2 (April 28, 2024): 169–96, <https://doi.org/10.58421/gehu.v3i2.203>.

¹² Angelique McConney and Magda Fourie-Malherbe, "Facilitating First-Year Student Adjustment: Towards a Model for Intentional Peer Mentoring," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 10, no. 2 (December 23, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v10i2.3781>.

¹³ McConney and Fourie-Malherbe, "Facilitating First-Year Student Adjustment: Towards a Model for Intentional Peer Mentoring."

¹⁴ Avci, "First Year and Adjustment in University Life: A Qualitative Study to Determine the Needs of First Year University Students."

¹⁵ McConney and Fourie-Malherbe, "Facilitating First-Year Student Adjustment: Towards a Model for Intentional Peer Mentoring."

Influence of Socio-Economic Background and Institutional Support

Socio-economic status significantly influences the academic and social adjustment of B.Ed. Humanities students. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds often encounter financial hardship, insufficient academic preparation, and limited access to learning resources.¹⁶ These challenges can lead to heightened stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy, complicating their transition to university. According to Maila and Ross, many of these students feel unprepared for the demands of higher education, resulting in diminished performance and lower retention rates.¹⁷

Students from rural and peri-urban areas face distinct challenges when adapting to urban university environments. Agumba et al. and Walker and Mathebula emphasise the disorientation that stems from cultural and academic differences.¹⁸ These students often lack urban social networks and may experience stigma related to their socio-economic status. Vincent and Hlatshwayo argue that these disadvantages impede both social engagement and academic performance.¹⁹ Therefore, establishing support structures that specifically address these issues is crucial for fostering equitable student success.

Institutional support is vital in alleviating the impact of socio-economic disadvantage. Programs like targeted orientation, peer mentoring, and academic bridging courses have proven effective in facilitating adjustment.²⁰ Mokhampanyane and Bantjes et al. recommend structured first-year experience programs that combine academic and social support mechanisms.²¹ Additionally, inclusive teaching practices and culturally responsive pedagogy are essential. As Ifenthaler and Yau assert, institutions that continuously evaluate and improve support services can significantly enhance student engagement, resilience, and retention.²²

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To examine the academic and social adjustment challenges faced by first-year B.Ed. Humanities students, this study utilised Tinto's Theory of Student Integration and Bandura's Social Learning Theory.²³ These frameworks offer valuable insights into student adaptation to university life, particularly within South Africa's diverse socio-cultural landscape. Tinto posits that student retention relies on both academic and social integration.²⁴ Academic integration involves engagement with coursework and a sense of belonging, while social integration encompasses building relationships with peers and faculty, as well as participation in university activities.²⁵

¹⁶ Carlos Felipe Rodríguez-Hernández, Eduardo Cascallar, and Eva Kyndt, "Socio-Economic Status and Academic Performance in Higher Education: A Systematic Review," *Educational Research Review* 29 (2020): 100305; Yaw Owusu-Agyeman and Enna M. Moroeroe, "Relationality and Student Engagement in Higher Education: Towards Enhanced Students' Learning Experiences," *International Journal of Emotional Education* 15, no. 2 (November 2023): 37–53, <https://doi.org/10.56300/ZANL1419>.

¹⁷ Precious Maila and Eleanor Ross, "Perceptions of Disadvantaged Rural Matriculants Regarding Factors Facilitating and Constraining Their Transition to Tertiary Education," *South African Journal of Education* 38, no. 1 (2018).

¹⁸ Hellen Agumba, Zach Simpson, and Amasa Ndofirepi, "Towards Understanding the Influence of Rurality on Students' Access to and Participation in Higher Education," *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning (CriSTaL)* 11, no. 1 (2023): 22–42; Melanie Walker and Mikateko Mathebula, "Low-Income Rural Youth Migrating to Urban Universities in South Africa: Opportunities and Inequalities," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 50, no. 8 (2020): 1193–1209.

¹⁹ L. Vincent and M. Hlatshwayo, "Ties That Bind: The Ambiguous Role Played by Social Capital in Black Working Class First-Generation South African Students' Negotiation of University Life," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 32, no. 3 (July 2018), <https://doi.org/10.20853/32-3-2538>.

²⁰ Joanne Deborah Worsley, Paula Harrison, and Rhiannon Corcoran, "Bridging the Gap: Exploring the Unique Transition From Home, School or College Into University," *Frontiers in Public Health* 9 (March 17, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.634285>; Jenna Mittelmeier et al., "Understanding the Early Adjustment Experiences of Undergraduate Distance Education Students in South Africa," *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* 20, no. 3 (January 18, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v20i4.4101>.

²¹ Mokhampanyane, "Adjustment Dynamics of First-Year Students to University Life at a Rural University in South Africa"; Bantjes et al., "COVID-19 and Common Mental Disorders among University Students in South Africa."

²² Ifenthaler, Dirk, and Jane Yin-Kim Yau "Higher Education Stakeholders' Views on Learning Analytics Policy Recommendations for Supporting Study Success". *International Journal of Learning Analytics and Artificial Intelligence for Education (iJAI)* 1, no.1 (July, 2019) 28-42. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijai.v1i1.10978>.

²³ Albert Bandura and Richard H Walters, *Social Learning Theory*, vol. 1 (Prentice hall Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1977).

²⁴ Vincent Tinto, "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research," *Review of Educational Research* 45, no. 1 (March 1, 1975): 89–125, <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089>.

²⁵ Subethra Pather and Nirmala Dorasamy, "The Mismatch between First-Year Students' Expectations and Experience alongside University Access and Success: A South African University Case Study," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 6, no. 1 (2018): 49–64.

Students in South African universities frequently encounter obstacles such as overwhelming workloads, the need for self-directed learning, and insufficient academic resources.²⁶ Those from disadvantaged backgrounds may also lack the cultural capital necessary for effectively navigating higher education.²⁷ Socially, students often face feelings of isolation, homesickness, and challenges in adjusting to diverse settings.²⁸ Tinto's theory advocates for the establishment of structured support systems, such as mentoring and student engagement initiatives, to enhance integration and improve retention (see Figure 1). Tinto's theory suggests that structured support systems like mentorship programs and student engagement initiatives can enhance integration and improve retention rates.

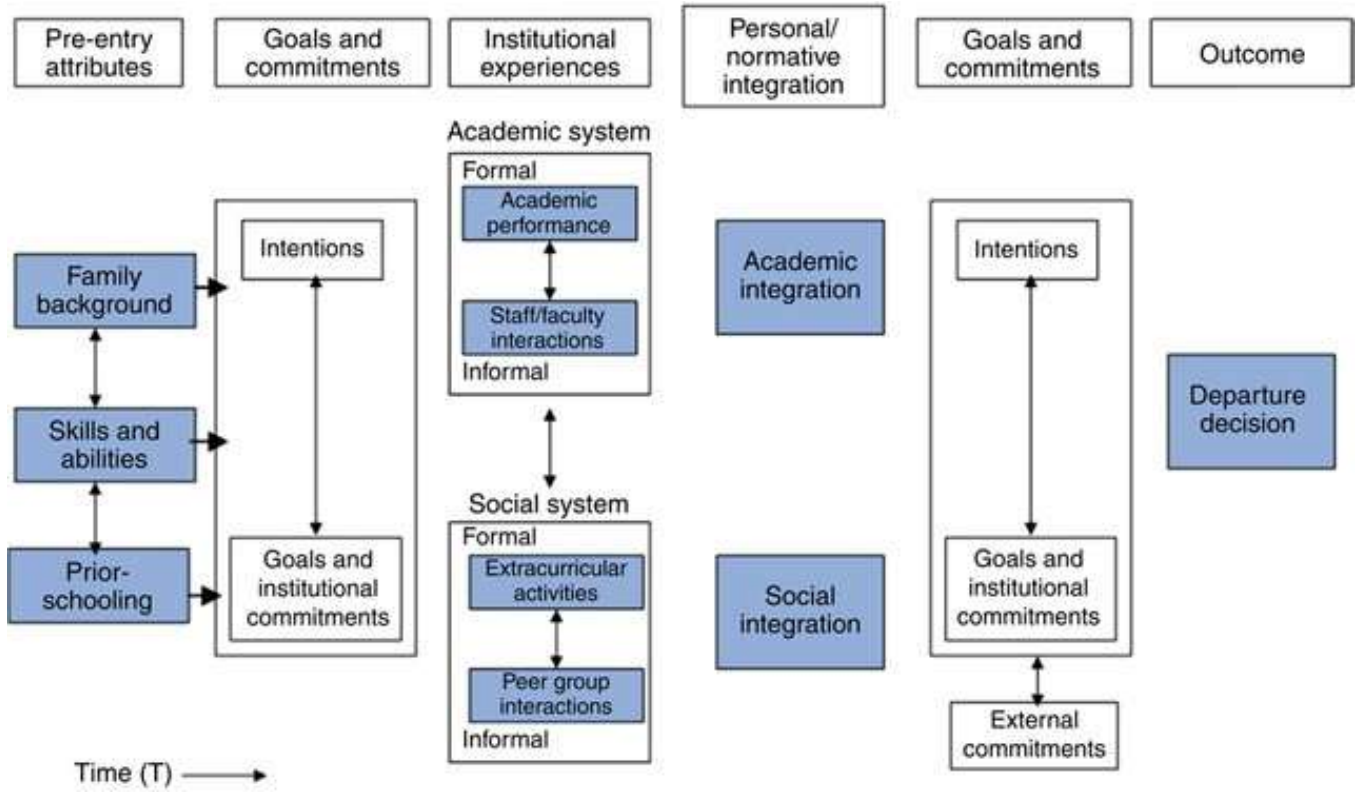


Figure 1: Tinto's Theory of Student Integration.²⁹

This figure, which is adapted from Tinto, shows the student integration model, which explains the factors that influence students' decisions to persist in or leave higher education.³⁰ The model emphasises that students enter university with pre-entry attributes. These include family background, prior schooling, and personal skills. These attributes influence their intentions, goals, motivations and commitments. These attributes interact with students' institutional experiences, which are divided into the academic system, such as academic performance and faculty interactions, and the social system, like extracurricular activities and peer interactions. Students' positive experiences in these areas foster academic and social integration, reinforcing both personal and institutional commitments. Conversely, if integration fails, students may reconsider their intentions and become more likely to withdraw, as indicated by the departure decision.

²⁶ Kathryn Nel, Saraswathi Govender, and Reyagalaletsu Tom, "The Social and Academic Adjustment Experiences of First-Year Students at a Historically Disadvantaged Peri-Urban University in South Africa," *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 26, no. 4 (2016): 384–89.

²⁷ Bulelwa Makena, "The Influence of a Historically Disadvantaged Background on Reading Culture: A Case of Some Primary School Language Teaching Educators in Eastern Cape Province.," *International Journal of Research in Business & Social Science* 11, no. 6 (2022).

²⁸ Ika Febrian Kristiana et al., "Social Support and Acculturative Stress of International Students," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 11 (May 27, 2022): 6568, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19116568>.

²⁹ Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226922461.001.0001>.

³⁰ Tinto, *Leaving College*.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a qualitative research approach within an interpretive paradigm to investigate the academic and social adjustment challenges faced by first-year B.Ed. Humanities students at a South African university. Qualitative methods were selected for their capacity to provide in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences.³¹ This interpretivist approach recognises that reality is socially constructed, and that meaningful understanding arises from participants' perspectives.³² The study's flexible design facilitated deep engagement with the students' narratives, capturing the contextual nuances of their adjustment experiences. The target population comprised all first-year B.Ed. Humanities students enrolled at the university during the 2024 academic year. Twelve students were selected through purposive sampling based on their willingness to share experiences relevant to the research objectives. This sample size aligns with qualitative inquiry, which prioritises depth of understanding over breadth.

The data was collected using a semi-structured questionnaire featuring open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed reflections on academic and social adjustment challenges. This instrument allowed for flexibility and follow-up probing, enabling the identification of emerging themes. The questionnaire was administered online to enhance convenience and accessibility. Before participating, students were provided with detailed information about the study, and informed consent was obtained to maintain ethical standards of voluntary participation and confidentiality.

The responses were analysed using thematic analysis, a rigorous method for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns within qualitative datasets. The researcher conducted multiple readings of the data to gain a comprehensive understanding before coding and categorising themes. These themes were refined through iterative review and interpreted in relation to existing literature and the theoretical framework. To ensure trustworthiness, strategies such as reflexivity, triangulation, and member checking were employed, enhancing the credibility and relevance of the findings.

The ethical considerations of this study included ensuring that participants were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, and potential risks of the research before participation, thereby securing informed consent in accordance with ethical standards. Voluntary participation was emphasised, with students made explicitly aware that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by securely handling data and protecting participants' identities when reporting findings.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings are contextualised using Tinto's Theory of Student Integration, which emphasises the importance of academic and social integration for student retention, and Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Thematic analysis is used to examine these themes through theoretical lenses. This analysis provides insights into how universities can better support first-year students in adapting to the complexities of university life. The discussion is structured around six main themes: Transition to Independent Learning and Academic Adjustment, Social Integration and Peer Collaboration, Expectations vs. Reality in University Life, Balancing Personal and Academic Life, The Role of Technology and Online Learning Resources, and Coping Strategies and Institutional Support. Each theme is explored in detail, linking student experiences to theoretical perspectives and offering actionable recommendations for improving student success and well-being.

Theme 1: Transition to Independent Learning and Academic Adjustment

First-year B.Ed. Humanities students reported significant challenges in transitioning from the structured environment of high school to the self-directed learning that is required at university. Most students struggled with managing increased workloads, understanding complex theoretical concepts, and developing academic writing skills. One student remarked, *"In high school, there was no critical thinking required."* This shows the need for a cognitive leap that is necessary for university success. Another noted, *"Lecturers provide direction on topics. Then the rest is up to you."* This emphasised the importance of

³¹ John W Creswell and J David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sage publications, 2017).

³² Bunmi Omodan, "A Model for Selecting Theoretical Framework through Epistemology of Research Paradigms," *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies* 4, no. 1 (2022): 275–85, <https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v4i1.1022>.

self-regulation. These experiences align with the findings of Moosa and Langsford and Motsabi et al., who identified academic underpreparedness as a barrier to first-year adjustment.³³ Tinto's model connects weak academic integration to student attrition, while Bandura's Social Learning Theory suggests that a lack of observed academic behaviour models diminishes students' self-efficacy.

Most participants expressed a noticeable gap between high school expectations and the realities of university life. They found it challenging to adapt to the less structured university environment, which demands greater autonomy and critical thinking. One student shared, "*University life is very exciting, but the work is much more demanding than I expected.*" This sentiment echoes the findings of Reardon et al., who noted that clearly communicated learning expectations facilitate student adjustment.³⁴ Tinto's theory posits that when institutional experiences do not meet expectations, students may disengage. Bandura's model emphasises that students learn through feedback and reinforcement; the absence of support and clear norms leaves them without the necessary guidance during this critical transition.

To ease this transition, universities should incorporate metacognitive instruction into their curricula. Participants indicated that structured support systems, such as academic literacy programs and time management workshops, would be beneficial. Avci recommends training students in reflective inquiry and time management to build academic resilience.³⁵ Chetty and Kepkey, along with Bantjes et al., advocate for targeted academic literacy programs, particularly for those facing linguistic barriers.³⁶ These strategies align with Bandura's focus on modelling and self-efficacy, as well as Tinto's assertion that academic engagement is crucial for persistence. Without such interventions, students risk academic failure, disengagement, and eventual dropout.

Theme 2: Social Integration and Peer Collaboration

Students reported varied experiences with social integration. Some quickly formed friendships, while others felt excluded due to language or cultural barriers. One student remarked, "*Being new in varsity made me quickly adapt.*" This reflects a positive social experience. Conversely, a Pedi-speaking student highlighted language issues, stating that "*some students are hesitant to speak English, resulting in inefficient communication.*" These observations align with the findings of Zanden et al. and Lan et al., who noted that linguistic exclusion can lead to isolation.³⁷ Tinto emphasises that a sense of belonging among peers enhances persistence, and Bandura's theory underscores the importance of social interaction in learning. McConney and Fourie-Malherbe found that poor group cohesion negatively impacts engagement and performance.³⁸

Group assignments also posed challenges. Some students appreciated them for encouraging cooperation, while others found them "*draining*" due to unequal contributions and unresolved conflicts. These experiences echo the findings of McConney and Fourie-Malherbe that poorly structured group work can impede collaboration.³⁹ Tinto's model posits that social integration strengthens institutional commitment, while Bandura highlights that peer interaction facilitates learning through modelling and feedback. Without intentional interventions, students risk isolation and subpar academic outcomes.

To enhance social integration, universities should establish structured peer mentoring and inclusive orientation programs. Participants expressed a desire for initiatives that promote cultural responsiveness and foster trust among diverse student groups. Avci argues that institutions must create culturally responsive environments to cultivate trust and inclusion.⁴⁰ McConney and Fourie-Malherbe advocate for culturally sensitive counselling services and safe spaces for interaction.⁴¹ These

³³ Moosa and Langsford, "'I Haven't Had the Fun That Is Portrayed': First-Year Student Expectations and Experiences of Starting at University"; Motsabi, Diale, and van Zyl, "The Role of Social Support in the Persistence of First-Year First-Generation African Students in a Higher Education Institution in South Africa."

³⁴ Reardon, Kalogrides, and Shores, "The Geography of Racial/Ethnic Test Score Gaps."

³⁵ Avci, "First Year and Adjustment in University Life: A Qualitative Study to Determine the Needs of First Year University Students."

³⁶ Chetty and Kepkey, "Access to and Effectiveness of Support Services for Students in Extended Curriculum Programmes at a South African University"; Bantjes et al., "COVID-19 and Common Mental Disorders among University Students in South Africa."

³⁷ van der Zanden et al., "Patterns of Success: First-Year Student Success in Multiple Domains"; Lan et al., "Academic Adjustment of Freshmen in Cambodian Higher Education Institutions: A Systematic Literature Review."

³⁸ McConney and Fourie-Malherbe, "Facilitating First-Year Student Adjustment: Towards a Model for Intentional Peer Mentoring."

³⁹ McConney and Fourie-Malherbe, "Facilitating First-Year Student Adjustment: Towards a Model for Intentional Peer Mentoring."

⁴⁰ Avci, "First Year and Adjustment in University Life: A Qualitative Study to Determine the Needs of First Year University Students."

⁴¹ McConney and Fourie-Malherbe, "Facilitating First-Year Student Adjustment: Towards a Model for Intentional Peer Mentoring."

recommendations align with Tinto's focus on supportive institutional experiences and Bandura's framework of reciprocal determinism in social learning. Addressing these needs can enhance both academic engagement and emotional well-being, ultimately improving student retention and success.

Theme 3: Expectations vs. Reality in University Life

The transition to university revealed a significant gap between students' expectations and their actual experiences. Participants anticipated structured learning environments similar to those in high school, but instead faced the need for self-directed learning. One student remarked, *"The academic workload turned out to be more intense than I had anticipated. Though we do have fun."* Such discrepancies between expectations and reality can lead to confusion, stress, and academic disengagement. These findings align with Moosa and Langsford, who noted that many students expect a structured learning environment akin to high school, only to discover they must manage their own learning.⁴² Tinto's theory suggests that when institutional experiences do not meet expectations, students may become disengaged. Additionally, Bandura's model emphasizes that students learn through feedback and reinforcement; without adequate support and clear norms, they lack essential guidance during this critical transition.

Participants also identified orientation programs as insufficient in preparing them for university life. One suggested that "mandatory orientation programs" would better equip students. These concerns resonate with Pather and Dorasamy, who argue that pre-entry expectations influence students' commitment and persistence.⁴³ Tinto's theory further supports the notion that unmet expectations can lead to disengagement, while Bandura's model reveals the importance of feedback and reinforcement. Without sufficient support and clear norms, students struggle to navigate this pivotal phase.

To address these challenges, institutions must implement comprehensive early engagement initiatives. Participants recommended structured first-year experience programs that combine academic and social support. Mokhampanyane advocates for such programs to facilitate a smoother transition.⁴⁴ Ifenthaler and Yau stress the importance of continuously evaluating and improving induction processes.⁴⁵ These efforts align with Tinto's integration framework, which focuses on the importance of early institutional experiences in student retention. They also reflect Bandura's perspective that adaptation and learning are influenced by modelling, feedback, and self-efficacy, all of which are best nurtured in structured, supportive environments.

Theme 4: Balancing Personal and Academic Life

Balancing academic responsibilities with personal commitments has become a challenge for first-year students. Participants reported difficulties in maintaining personal relationships, managing study schedules, and coping with stress. One participant noted, *"It's hard to balance academic and personal life. You have to prioritise tasks and manage your time effectively."* This highlights the struggle between competing demands. These experiences align with findings from Rodríguez-Hernández et al., which indicate that students from low-income backgrounds often juggle academic and familial responsibilities.⁴⁶ Additionally, Walker and Mathebula found that students in transitional settings need support to adapt to academic expectations and personal changes.⁴⁷ Tinto's theory suggests that unresolved personal pressures can hinder academic and social integration, increasing the risk of withdrawal.

Participants identified inconsistent routines, overlapping assessments, and family expectations as significant stressors. While some reported using time-management strategies, others felt overwhelmed. This reflects Rodríguez-Hernández et al.'s findings regarding the challenges faced by low-income

⁴² Moosa and Langsford, "I Haven't Had the Fun That Is Portrayed": First-Year Student Expectations and Experiences of Starting at University."

⁴³ Pather and Dorasamy, "The Mismatch between First-Year Students' Expectations and Experience alongside University Access and Success: A South African University Case Study."

⁴⁴ Mokhampanyane, "Adjustment Dynamics of First-Year Students to University Life at a Rural University in South Africa."

⁴⁵ Dirk, and Yin-Kim Yau "Higher Education Stakeholders' Views on Learning Analytics Policy Recommendations for Supporting Study Success."

⁴⁶ Rodríguez-Hernández, Cascallar, and Kyndt, "Socio-Economic Status and Academic Performance in Higher Education: A Systematic Review."

⁴⁷ Walker and Mathebula, "Low-Income Rural Youth Migrating to Urban Universities in South Africa: Opportunities and Inequalities."

students.⁴⁸ Walker and Mathebula further emphasize the need for support in navigating academic and personal transitions.⁴⁹ Tinto's theory and Bandura's Social Learning Theory highlight the importance of self-regulation in achieving academic success, suggesting that students must monitor and adjust their behaviours to balance academic goals with personal life.

To address these challenges, institutions should offer workshops focused on time management, stress reduction, and personal organization. Participants expressed a desire for holistic support models that consider both academic and personal aspects of student life, a recommendation supported by Mittelmeier et al.⁵⁰ Bantjes et al. propose integrating wellness initiatives into academic programs, aligning with Bandura's focus on self-efficacy and Tinto's model, which acknowledges that students' ability to manage personal challenges directly affects their engagement and retention.⁵¹ Holistic support can foster resilience, enabling students to maintain balance and achieve success.

Theme 5: Socio-Economic Constraints and Institutional Support

First-year B.Ed. Humanities students frequently identified socio-economic constraints as significant barriers to their adjustment. Many students reported a lack of data, transportation, and essential learning materials. One student stated, "*Sometimes I have no data to attend online tutorials,*" while another mentioned, "*My parents couldn't afford to buy the textbook, so I borrowed from friends.*" These experiences reflect the findings by Bantjes et al., which indicate that economic hardship undermines academic persistence.⁵² Similarly, Mittelmeier et al., found that financial strain leads to emotional distress and disengagement from academics.⁵³ According to Tinto's model, when students lack institutional support during challenging times, their academic and social integration suffers, ultimately reducing their likelihood of retention.

Participants reported that institutional support structures were inconsistent and difficult to access. They expressed frustration over long queues at financial aid offices and unclear processes for obtaining food allowances or accommodation. One participant noted, "*We queue all day for financial aid and miss classes.*" This corresponds with findings by Motsabi et al., who argue that inefficient institutional services exacerbate student stress.⁵⁴ Moosa and Langsford (2021) also found that students without administrative guidance are more likely to disengage.⁵⁵ These issues contradict Tinto's model of supportive institutional experiences and hinder the modeling, feedback, and reinforcement mechanisms central to Bandura's learning theory.

Participants called for more accessible financial aid information, academic mentoring, and on-campus resource centres. One student suggested, "*Give us weekly workshops on funding, bursaries, and free online materials.*" Mokhampanyane proposes that targeted financial literacy programs enhance students' ability to manage resources.⁵⁶ Chetty and Kepkey emphasize the importance of accessible student support hubs that streamline access to academic tools.⁵⁷ These interventions align with Tinto's emphasis on comprehensive institutional support and Bandura's perspective that structured guidance builds learners' self-efficacy. Without reliable access to resources and support, disadvantaged students remain excluded from full academic and social participation.

⁴⁸ Rodríguez-Hernández, Cascallar, and Kyndt, "Socio-Economic Status and Academic Performance in Higher Education: A Systematic Review."

⁴⁹ Walker and Mathebula, "Low-Income Rural Youth Migrating to Urban Universities in South Africa: Opportunities and Inequalities."

⁵⁰ Mittelmeier et al., "Understanding the Early Adjustment Experiences of Undergraduate Distance Education Students in South Africa."

⁵¹ Bantjes et al., "COVID-19 and Common Mental Disorders among University Students in South Africa."

⁵² Bantjes et al., "COVID-19 and Common Mental Disorders among University Students in South Africa."

⁵³ Mittelmeier et al., "Understanding the Early Adjustment Experiences of Undergraduate Distance Education Students in South Africa."

⁵⁴ Motsabi, Diale, and van Zyl, "The Role of Social Support in the Persistence of First-Year First-Generation African Students in a Higher Education Institution in South Africa."

⁵⁵ Moosa and Langsford, "'I Haven't Had the Fun That Is Portrayed': First-Year Student Expectations and Experiences of Starting at University."

⁵⁶ Mokhampanyane, "Adjustment Dynamics of First-Year Students to University Life at a Rural University in South Africa."

⁵⁷ Chetty and Kepkey, "Access to and Effectiveness of Support Services for Students in Extended Curriculum Programmes at a South African University."

Theme 6: Emotional Well-being and Psychological Adjustment

Students reported experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional fatigue during their transition to university. Many expressed feelings of loneliness, pressure to perform, and fear of failure. One student remarked, *“You feel like crying every day because you don’t know if you’re doing well.”* These psychological responses align with findings by Bantjes et al., which indicate that emotional distress is prevalent among first-year South African university students.⁵⁸ Walker and Mathebula (2020) further connect emotional well-being to successful adjustment. Tinto’s framework acknowledges that emotional disengagement negatively impacts academic persistence, while Bandura emphasises the influence of emotional states on motivation and self-regulated learning.

Participants noted that psychological support services were often unavailable or insufficient. Several students mentioned they were unsure how to access counselling or feared being stigmatised. One student stated, *“I don’t even know where the wellness centre is.”* This disconnect echoes the findings of Reardon et al., who reported low student engagement with support services due to inadequate communication and stigma.⁵⁹ Pather and Dorasamy found that awareness campaigns and staff referrals can improve access to these services.⁶⁰ Institutions that overlook students’ emotional health fail to meet the integrated support requirements outlined in Tinto’s theory and miss the opportunity to enhance self-efficacy through guided coping strategies, as proposed by Bandura.

Students recommended more visible and proactive mental health support. Suggestions included peer counselling, anonymous chat platforms, and regular wellness sessions. One participant proposed, *“Start the term with a mental health workshop and keep checking in.”* Ifenthaler and Yau advocate for early wellness interventions that reduce long-term stress and build resilience.⁶¹ McConney and Fourie-Malherbe support the incorporation of mental health literacy into curricula to normalise help-seeking behaviours.⁶² These recommendations align with Tinto’s emphasis on holistic integration and Bandura’s belief that learners must manage emotional influences to achieve academic success. Without a proactive mental health infrastructure, first-year students remain vulnerable to burnout and disengagement. Below is Figure 3, which shows the intervention that can be used to address the challenges of first-year BED students in Humanities.

⁵⁸ Bantjes et al., “COVID-19 and Common Mental Disorders among University Students in South Africa.”

⁵⁹ Reardon, Kalogrides, and Shores, “The Geography of Racial/Ethnic Test Score Gaps.”

⁶⁰ Pather and Dorasamy, “The Mismatch between First-Year Students’ Expectations and Experience alongside University Access and Success: A South African University Case Study.”

⁶¹ Dirk, and Yin-Kim Yau “Higher Education Stakeholders’ Views on Learning Analytics Policy Recommendations for Supporting Study Success.”

⁶² McConney and Fourie-Malherbe, “Facilitating First-Year Student Adjustment: Towards a Model for Intentional Peer Mentoring.”

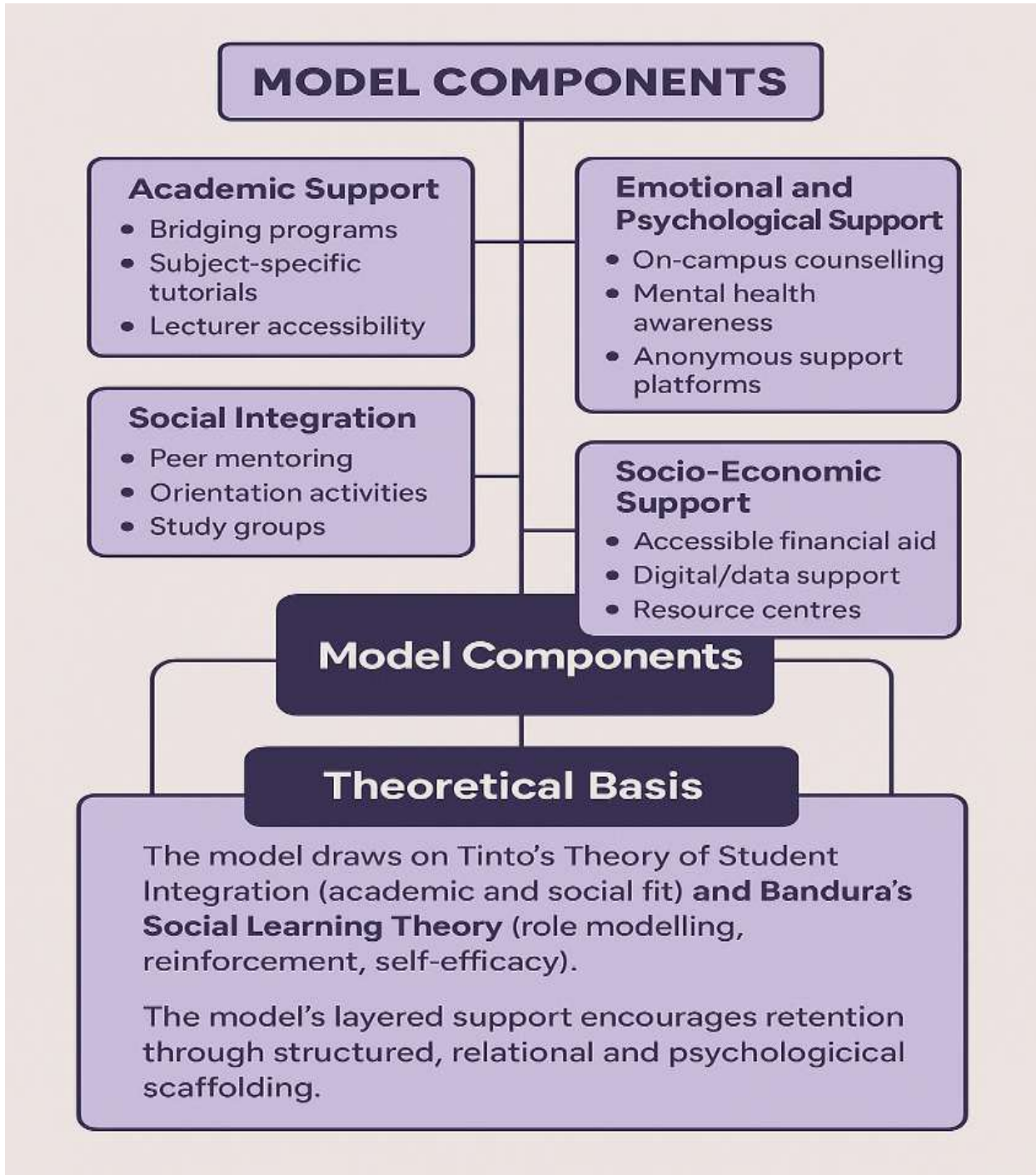


Figure 3: Comprehensive Support Model for First-Year Student Adjustment and Retention

Figure 3 illustrates a flowchart of a student support model that comprises five core elements. These include Academic Support, Social Integration, Emotional and Psychological Support, Socio-Economic Support, and Institutional Responsiveness. Each component includes targeted interventions such as bridging programs, peer mentoring, counselling services, financial aid, and staff training. Together, these components form the “Model Components” section, which is connected to the model's theoretical foundation based on Tinto's Theory of Student Integration. This model emphasises academic and social fit. And Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which focuses on role modelling, reinforcement, and self-efficacy. This model aims to enhance student retention by providing a structured and relational support system that addresses academic, emotional, social, and institutional needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address these issues, universities and lecturers should implement a comprehensive intervention model that incorporates academic literacy, peer mentoring, time management support, and language development into the first-year experience. Orientation programs should be extended and carefully designed to meet both academic expectations and social integration needs. Lecturers are encouraged to adopt inclusive pedagogies, model appropriate academic behaviour, and provide consistent feedback. Additionally, institutions should invest in support services that acknowledge the diverse socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds of students. By integrating these strategies into teaching and institutional practices, universities can create environments that empower students to build confidence, adapt to new challenges, and achieve success both academically and socially. Future research could benefit from a larger sample size and include a broader range of universities from different regions or countries to enhance diversity and generalizability. Employing a mixed-methods approach could also provide a more comprehensive understanding of academic and social adjustment challenges by combining qualitative insights with quantitative data for more extensive trend analysis. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could track students' adjustment experiences over time, offering deeper insights into how these challenges evolve throughout their academic careers.

CONCLUSION

This study has emphasised the diverse academic and social adjustment challenges faced by first-year B.Ed. Humanities students. This includes independent learning, language barriers, socio-economic constraints, and mismatched expectations. These challenges negatively impact both academic performance and emotional well-being. Utilizing Tinto's Theory of Student Integration and Bandura's Social Learning Theory, the study emphasizes the importance of integration and self-efficacy for student retention and success. Without targeted interventions, students may become disengaged and at risk of dropping out. The findings accentuate the necessity for structured academic support, inclusive social environments, and responsive teaching practices, all of which are essential for fostering successful student adjustment during the transition to university life.

Limitations of the Study

This study has a notable limitation due to its small sample size of twelve first-year B.Ed. Humanities students, which may not adequately capture the diverse experiences of the entire cohort. Additionally, the use of purposive sampling, which relies on participants' willingness to share their experiences, may introduce selection bias and limit the generalizability of the findings. The study's focus on a single South African university may further restrict the applicability of the results to other contexts with varying socio-cultural and academic environments.

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