

The Experiences of First-time Entering Students of the Faculty of Education at a Selected University, Eastern Cape, South Africa – An Exploration



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ABSTRACT

A first-time entering student has never registered at any university in the system before and is entering the university at an undergraduate level for the first time and for the first undergraduate qualification. This experience is often a novel one, fraught with challenges. This study, therefore, explored the experiences of first-time entering students at a selected Eastern Cape university who are registered for the Bachelor of Education in 2024. The study used a qualitative research methodology that sought to study the lived experiences of the participants at the university. Participants were selected through purposive sampling as researchers had deemed them to be knowledgeable about the problem under study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews that were conducted face-to-face as a conversation to allow probing on the participants' responses. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The findings of the study revealed that first-time entering students encountered major challenges in transitioning from high school to a higher education institution. The study recommended that the university should have a system in place for how to include and adjust new students at the university to cope with the new environment. State the contribution of this study to scholarship.

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INTRODUCTION

A major change in a student's academic and social life occurs when they go from high school to university, especially in specialised fields like education. First-time students usually face several challenges while they get used to their new environment, which could affect their academic performance and overall university experience. This is especially pertinent within the Faculty of Education at universities, where new students often grapple with navigating an unfamiliar academic landscape that includes both academic and social adjustments. According to Mutinta, first-year students can experience heightened levels of psychological distress compared to their peers in subsequent years, suggesting that the initial transition period is laden with stressors that may persist.¹

In the Eastern Cape, reflecting the broader context of South African higher education, these issues are compounded by socio-economic challenges. Most notably, is that a substantial percentage of first-year students experience mental distress, exacerbated by inadequate support systems and the pressures

¹ Given Mutinta, "Gender-Based Violence among Female Students and Implications for Health Intervention Programmes in Public Universities in Eastern Cape, South Africa," *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2022): 2079212.

associated with adapting to university life.² These first-time entering students face unique stressors, including academic pressure and financial constraints, along with the challenge of adjusting to a more autonomous learning environment.³

Additionally, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced further complexities to the university experience. Many educational institutions have had to shift to online and blended learning models, which, while offering flexibility, also contributed to feelings of isolation and disengagement among first-year students. The lack of structured guidance and in-person interactions in such a situation intensified the challenges of enhancing student engagement through innovative pedagogical strategies.⁴ These considerations underscore the importance of understanding how first-time entering students perceive their experiences and the institutional support available to them.

In this context, this study aimed to explore the lived experiences of first-time entering students within the Faculty of Education at a selected university in the Eastern Cape. By focusing on their narratives, the research sought to identify the factors that impact their adjustment, engagement, and overall academic journey, providing insights that can inform institutional practices and policies to better support this population during a critical phase of their educational development. The findings are presented in subsequent sections.

The transition into higher education represents a significant turning point for first-time entering students, particularly in disciplines such as education. These students often arrive with specific expectations influenced by their previous educational experiences, which may or may not align with the realities of university life. Students' pre-university experiences significantly shape their expectations and subsequent experiences at university.⁵ This misalignment between expectation and reality has been documented in various studies, emphasizing the need to understand how these dynamics play out within the context of education faculties.⁶

Expectations versus Experiences

The experiences of first-time students often reflect a complex interaction between their expectations and the realities they face in higher education. For instance, students' initial expectations often arise from their secondary education contexts, yet many report feeling unprepared for the academic rigor and social dynamics encountered at university.⁷ Within this understanding, Casanova et al., noted that students' academic experiences encompass both challenges and positive interactions, highlighting the emotional spectrum that first-year students navigate.⁸ Furthermore, Pather and Chetty expand this discourse by underscoring the significance of socio-economic backgrounds and cultural diversity on the first-year experience, noting that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may face heightened challenges.⁹

Transition Programs and Support Mechanisms

Transition programs have emerged as critical support structures aimed at easing the adjustment of first-time entering students. What is most important about these programs is that they facilitate identity

² Mutinta, "Gender-Based Violence among Female Students and Implications for Health Intervention Programmes in Public Universities in Eastern Cape, South Africa."

³ Latoya Nicol Bond, "Exploring Success and Challenges of Black Students Taking an English Course Online at an Urban Community College" (Rowan University, 2022).

⁴ Ghita Hjej et al., "Distant Education in Moroccan Medical Schools Following COVID-19 Outbreak at the Early Phase of Lockdown: Were the Students Really Engaged?," *Scientific African* 15 (March 2022): e01087, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sciaf.2021.e01087>; Tanisha Jowsey et al., "Blended Learning via Distance in Pre-Registration Nursing Education: A Scoping Review," *Nurse Education in Practice* 44 (March 2020): 102775, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2020.102775>.

⁵ Bas van den Berg et al., "'Sweet Acid' An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Students' Navigating Regenerative Higher Education," *Education Sciences* 12, no. 8 (August 8, 2022): 533, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12080533>.

⁶ S Pather and R Chetty, "A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Pre-Entry Factors Influencing First-Year University Experience," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 30, no. 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.20853/30-1-548>.

⁷ van den Berg et al., "'Sweet Acid' An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Students' Navigating Regenerative Higher Education."

⁸ Joana R. Casanova et al., "Promoting Success and Persistence in Pandemic Times: An Experience With First-Year Students," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (March 3, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.815584>.

⁹ Pather and Chetty, "A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Pre-Entry Factors Influencing First-Year University Experience."

renegotiation among students, helping them forge new learner identities in a university context.¹⁰ Effective transition strategies are paramount, as they provide students with coping mechanisms that can enhance their integration into academic and social spheres. Similarly, Chili and Madzimore advocate for the use of data from student engagement surveys to tailor interventions that promote student readiness and success, thereby ensuring that first-time students are better equipped to navigate their new academic environment.¹¹

Diversity and Its Impact on Student Experience

The variety of backgrounds among first-time students presents additional layers of complexity to their university experience. Factors such as race, economic status, and previous educational quality considerably impact how students perceive and manage their first-year challenges. According to Pather and Chetty, many South African students enter higher education from unequal starting points, necessitating an understanding of how these disparities affect their experiences.¹² Furthermore, Dizin et al. reveal gender differences in academic expectations, demonstrating that such demographic factors can further influence how first-year students adapt to university life and interact within their educational environments.¹³

Academic Integration and Identification

The academic adjustment process for first-time students in education requires not only an adaptation to new academic standards but also an alignment of personal identity with the educational context. This process is crucial as Willems et al. stress the significance of academic integration in understanding students' transition experiences.¹⁴ Furthermore, establishing a teacher identity underscores how developing professional and academic identities profoundly affects students' engagement and success in higher education.¹⁵ These insights point to the need for higher education institutions to provide robust support mechanisms that facilitate academic integration and identity formation.

The experiences of first-time entering students within the Faculty of Education at a selected university in the Eastern Cape are multifaceted and deeply influenced by a host of factors ranging from prior educational experiences and socio-economic backgrounds to institutional support mechanisms. It is evident that targeted interventions, grounded in a nuanced understanding of students' diverse backgrounds and expectations, are essential for enhancing their academic journey. Understanding these dynamics provides a foundation for educators and higher education institutions aiming to foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The experiences of first-time entering students in higher education, particularly within education faculties, have been extensively examined in scholarly literature. This theoretical framework draws upon key theories that provide a foundation for understanding the diverse factors impacting these students' transitions and experiences. These theories include Tinto's Theory of Student Departure and Thalluri's Transition Theory.¹⁶

¹⁰ Theresa Millman and Jacinta McNamara, "The Long and Winding Road: Experiences of Students Entering University through Transition Programs," *Student Success* 9, no. 3 (July 18, 2018): 37–49, <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v9i3.465>.

¹¹ Muntuwenkosi Chili and Jeremiah Madzimore, "Using Surveys of Student Engagement to Understand and Support First-Time Entering Students at a University of Technology," *ScienceRise: Pedagogical Education*, no. 6(51) (November 30, 2022): 4–12, <https://doi.org/10.15587/2519-4984.2022.267206>.

¹² Pather and Chetty, "A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Pre-Entry Factors Influencing First-Year University Experience."

¹³ António M. Diniz et al., "Gender Differences in First-Year College Students' Academic Expectations," *Studies in Higher Education* 43, no. 4 (April 3, 2018): 689–701, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1196350>.

¹⁴ Jonas Willems, Liesje Coertjens, and Vincent Donche, "Entering Higher Professional Education: Unveiling First-Year Students' Key Academic Experiences and Their Occurrence Over Time," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (February 24, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.577388>.

¹⁵ Thea van Lankveld et al., "Developing a Teacher Identity in the University Context: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Higher Education Research & Development* 36, no. 2 (February 23, 2017): 325–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1208154>.

¹⁶ Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1993); Jyothi Thalluri, "Bridging the Gap to First Year Health Science: Early Engagement Enhances Student Satisfaction and Success," *Student Success* 7, no. 1 (March 2, 2016): 37–48, <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v7i1.305>.

Tinto's Theory of Student Departure:

One of the foremost frameworks is Tinto's Theory of Student Departure, which emphasizes the significance of academic and social integration as determinants of student retention and success. Tinto posits that students who establish strong connections with both their peers and faculty are more likely to persist in their studies.¹⁷ This theory underlines the importance of creating supportive environments that encourage first-time students to engage academically and socially.¹⁸ Tinto's principles emphasize the need for universities to implement systematic approaches that enhance the first-year experience and subsequently prepare students for ongoing challenges throughout their academic careers.¹⁹

Thalluri's Transition Theory:

Thalluri's Transition Theory focuses on the multifaceted nature of transitioning into higher education. It recognizes that students navigate multiple transitions, often affected by factors such as age, socio-economic status, and cultural background.²⁰ This theory is particularly relevant for understanding how first-time students' experiences are shaped by their previous educational contexts and their adaptation to the new demands of university life. The notion of bridging the gap highlights the importance of early engagement initiatives, which have been shown to enhance student satisfaction and success during this critical transition phase.²¹

The theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of first-time entering students within the Faculty of Education is multifaceted. Incorporating Tinto's Theory of Student Departure, Transition Theory provided a comprehensive lens through which to examine these experiences. By leveraging these theories, institutions can better support first-time students, paving the way for enhanced academic success and persistence.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design, which is particularly suitable for investigating complex social phenomena and allowed for an in-depth understanding of individual experiences.²² A narrative inquiry methodology was selected for its capacity to highlight how human lives are shaped by past experiences.²³ This emphasizes the importance of context and meaning-making, integral to understanding students' transitions.²⁴ Through this approach, the study sought to elucidate the intricate narratives of first-time entering students in the Faculty of Education.

Sampling

The study's participants included first-time entering students from the Faculty of Education at the chosen university in the Eastern Cape. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select 20 participants, ensuring that those who have relevant experiences can share significant insights regarding their educational journey. This sample size was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation, providing varied perspectives on the lived experiences of the cohort.

Data Collection Methods

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, both of which are effective in qualitative research for eliciting detailed narratives. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to convey their thoughts freely while ensuring the inclusion of specific topics relevant to the

¹⁷ Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*.

¹⁸ Russell Brinkworth et al., "First Year Expectations and Experiences: Student and Teacher Perspectives," *Higher Education* 58, no. 2 (August 6, 2009): 157–73, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-008-9188-3>.

¹⁹ Anne Pitkethly and Michael Prosser, "The First Year Experience Project: A Model for University-Wide Change," *Higher Education Research & Development* 20, no. 2 (July 14, 2001): 185–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/758483470>.

²⁰ Thalluri, "Bridging the Gap to First Year Health Science: Early Engagement Enhances Student Satisfaction and Success."

²¹ Thalluri, "Bridging the Gap to First Year Health Science: Early Engagement Enhances Student Satisfaction and Success."

²² Ping Zou et al., "Student's Experiences on Learning Therapeutic Relationship: A Narrative Inquiry," *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research* 53, no. 1 (March 18, 2021): 78–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0844562119873760>.

²³ Zou et al., "Student's Experiences on Learning Therapeutic Relationship: A Narrative Inquiry."

²⁴ Megan M. Siczek, "The Lived Experience of Internationally Mobile Students," *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education* 16, no. 5 (December 1, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.32674/xcsqf896>.

research questions. Alternatively, focus groups fostered collective dialogue, revealing deeper insights into the group dynamics and shared experiences.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, followed by transcription for thorough analysis. The data collection period spanned several weeks, allowing flexibility for scheduling conflicts common among students.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed through thematic analysis to identify patterns, themes, and insights within participants' narratives. This method included multiple steps: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, and iteratively reviewing and refining these themes to align with participants' lived experiences.²⁵ Attention was directed toward preserving the integrity of participants' voices and experiences throughout the analysis process.

Validity and Reliability

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. Triangulation was utilized to compare and contrast data collected from interviews and focus groups.²⁶ Member checking allowed participants to review and validate the findings, ensuring their perspectives were accurately represented.²⁷ A reflective journal was maintained to document the researcher's reflections on the research process and personal biases, promoting reflexivity throughout.²⁸

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to in this research. Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were aware of the study's purpose and procedures, their rights, and their ability to withdraw at any stage without prejudice. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process, with data anonymized to protect participants' identities. The research proposal was submitted for ethical approval to the university's ethics committee to ensure adherence to ethical research standards.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In analyzing the experiences of first-time entering students within the Faculty of Education at a selected university in the Eastern Cape, various themes emerged that encapsulate the essence of their transitions into higher education. This section presents the findings with direct quotations from participants to authentically capture their voices.

Theme 1: Initial Adjustments and Academic Challenges

One of the most significant findings pertains to the initial adjustments that students had to make when they entered the university environment. Many participants expressed struggles with the academic workload and expectations. For instance, Student A remarked:

"It was overwhelming at first; the assignments were so different from what we did in high school. I felt lost."

This sentiment was echoed by another participant, Student B, who stated that:

"I thought I was ready for university, but the first few weeks were a real eye-opener. Managing time was tougher than I imagined."

²⁵ Olivia Johnston, Helen Wildy, and Jennifer Shand, "Student Voices That Resonate – Constructing Composite Narratives That Represent Students' Classroom Experiences," *Qualitative Research* 23, no. 1 (February 16, 2023): 108–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211016158>.

²⁶ Karen McCarthy et al., "Social Participation in College Students with Chronic Pain," *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* 9, no. 1 (January 15, 2021): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1711>.

²⁷ Ashlyn Anderson, Jacqueline Lazarus, and Elizabeth Anderson Steeves, "Navigating Hidden Hunger: An Exploratory Analysis of the Lived Experience of Food Insecurity among College Students," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 19 (October 10, 2022): 12952, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191912952>.

²⁸ Burcu Totur Dikmen and Nurhan Bayraktar, "Nursing Students' Experiences Related to Operating Room Practice: A Qualitative Study," *Journal of PeriAnesthesia Nursing* 36, no. 1 (February 2021): 59–64, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jopan.2020.06.025>.

Students indicated that adapting to a new study culture required them to develop self-discipline and organizational skills. As stated by Student F:

“You really have to learn to balance everything—classes, study time, and life. It’s a skill you have to build quickly.”

Theme 2: Social Integration and Support Systems

Social integration emerged as another significant aspect of the student experience. Participants highlighted both the challenges and successes they faced in connecting with peers. For example, J noted:

“Making friends was hard at first. I was worried that I wouldn’t fit in, but joining study groups helped me connect with others and feel part of the community.”

Conversely, some students experienced feelings of isolation, especially during the transition phase. Student E shared that:

“I spent a lot of time alone initially. There were times I felt I didn’t belong.”

Support systems, such as campus resources and peer networks, played a crucial role in aiding integration. This is from Student M, who articulated that:

“The mentoring program was a lifesaver. Having someone to guide me made the transition bearable.”

This underscores the importance of institutional support in fostering inclusivity and community.

Theme 3: Navigating Challenges Related to Student Life

Students also discussed the difficulties they faced outside the academic realm, particularly concerning financial pressures and living conditions. Student P expressed this concern, saying:

“Financial struggle is real; some days I worry more about where my next meal will come from than studying.”

This aligns with broader research on food insecurity among university students, which emphasizes the need for universities to bolster support for students facing such challenges.²⁹ Social isolation due to external factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, was frequently mentioned. As noted by Student S:

“With the lockdowns and everything, it was tough to find motivation. You go from being around people to just...nothing.”

This experience resonates with the impact of the pandemic on students’ mental health, where barriers to socialization were shown to influence academic performance and emotional well-being.³⁰

Theme 4: Personal Growth and Resilience

Despite the challenges, a prevailing theme of personal growth and resilience emerged from the narratives. Many participants reflected on how their university experience, though fraught with difficulties, had ultimately fostered significant personal development. Upon reflecting on her journey, Student T said:

“I learned a lot about myself through this process, how to advocate for myself, how to handle stress, and even how to ask for help when I needed it.”

Another student, Student J, noted:

“If I’m being honest, I grew up a lot this year. I had to confront my fears and find my strengths.”

²⁹ Maria Beam, “Nontraditional Students’ Experiences With Food Insecurity: A Qualitative Study of Undergraduate Students,” *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education* 68, no. 3 (September 1, 2020): 141–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2020.1792254>; Anderson, Lazarus, and Anderson Steeves, “Navigating Hidden Hunger: An Exploratory Analysis of the Lived Experience of Food Insecurity among College Students.”

³⁰ Walter Leal Filho et al., “Impacts of COVID-19 and Social Isolation on Academic Staff and Students at Universities: A Cross-Sectional Study,” *BMC Public Health* 21, no. 1 (December 24, 2021): 1213, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11040-z>.

This aligns with studies that suggest transformative learning often arises from navigating hardships, reinforcing the connection between challenge and personal development in educational contexts.³¹

These findings from this study highlighted the multifaceted experiences of first-time entering students within the Faculty of Education at a university in the Eastern Cape. Participants articulated a range of challenges related to academic expectations, social integration, financial pressures, and personal growth. These conversations underscore the importance of support systems within the institution to facilitate smoother transitions and bolster student resilience.

Discussion Summary

This study on the experiences of first-time entering students within the Faculty of Education at a selected university in the Eastern Cape has underscored the multifaceted nature of the transition to higher education. The findings reveal several critical themes that encapsulate the challenges and developments faced by these students during this formative period.

Firstly, the initial adjustments and academic challenges highlighted the steep learning curve associated with university-level studies. Many students experienced overwhelming workloads and difficulties in adapting to new academic standards, which significantly impacted their confidence and initial experiences. As one participant poignantly expressed, “I felt lost,” illustrating the disorientation many first-time students encounter. This finding emphasizes the necessity for universities to provide robust academic support and orientation programs to facilitate smoother transitions for new students.

Secondly, social integration emerged as a pivotal component of the student experience. While some students found community and support through peer interactions and mentoring programs, others faced feelings of isolation in their new environments. The narrative of needing to forge connections reflected broader research indicating that social support is crucial for student retention and well-being. As illustrated by one student, “Making friends was hard at first,” revealing a common concern about fitting into a new social landscape. This underscores the importance of fostering environments that promote inclusivity and connection among students.

Another significant finding pertains to the challenges related to student life, particularly financial pressures and the impact of unanticipated external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As expressed by one participant, the anxiety surrounding finances often overshadowed academic pursuits, suggesting that financial support mechanisms are essential for maintaining student focus on their educational objectives. This aligns with the existing understanding of student well-being, highlighting how external stressors can detract from academic performance and overall university experience.

Lastly, the narrative of personal growth and resilience emerged from the students’ experiences despite the challenges they faced. Many participants reported significant personal development over their first year, viewing the discomfort of adapting to university life as a catalyst for growth. As one participant articulated, “I learned a lot about myself,” reflecting the transformative potential of higher education. This finding reinforces the notion that adversity, when navigated with adequate support, can lead to greater self-awareness and capability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing Initial Adjustments and Academic Challenges

- **Enhanced Orientation Programs:** Extend orientation beyond a single week into a semester-long “First-Year Experience” (FYE) program that covers study skills, time management, academic writing, and referencing.
- **Peer-Led Academic Support:** Train senior students as academic peer tutors who can guide first-years through assignments and workload expectations.

³¹ Simone C. O. Conceição, Liliana Mina, and Todd Southern, “Brazilian Students Studying in the United States: Perceptions of Their Lived Experiences 6 Months After Returning Home,” *Journal of Transformative Education* 19, no. 2 (April 6, 2021): 127–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344620944640>.

- Faculty Development Workshops: Equip lecturers with strategies for scaffolding learning (e.g., phased assignment deadlines, detailed rubrics, formative assessments) to ease the transition from high school to university-level work.
- Learning Resource Hubs: Strengthen writing centers, digital literacy workshops, and online resources to provide ongoing academic support.

Enhancing Social Integration and Support Systems

- Structured Mentorship Programs: Expand and formalize mentoring where every first-year student is paired with a trained peer or staff mentor for guidance in both academic and social life.
- Community-Building Activities: Organize regular social and academic mixers (e.g., themed study groups, cultural events, team-building sessions) to foster inclusivity and belonging.
- Student Clubs and Societies Promotion: Actively encourage participation in clubs, societies, and community engagement activities to help students build networks.
- Counseling and Wellness Awareness Campaigns: Increase visibility and accessibility of mental health services through awareness campaigns, destigmatization drives, and drop-in sessions.

Alleviating Challenges of Student Life (Financial, Living Conditions, External Stressors)

- Emergency Financial Aid Funds: Establish or strengthen hardship funds and food banks to address food insecurity and urgent financial needs.
- Affordable Meal Plans: Partner with campus cafeterias or local businesses to offer subsidized meal plans for needy students.
- Accommodation Support Services: Provide guidance and partnerships for safe, affordable off-campus housing, along with emergency housing options.
- Crisis Preparedness and Digital Learning Support: Given the lessons from COVID-19, invest in blended learning infrastructure, loan schemes for devices, and internet subsidies for disadvantaged students.

Fostering Personal Growth and Resilience

- Life Skills Workshops: Offer workshops on stress management, self-advocacy, conflict resolution, and resilience training.
- Recognition of Student Resilience: Develop initiatives (awards, features in newsletters, or acknowledgment during student events) that celebrate student adaptability and growth.
- Reflective Learning Practices: Encourage students to keep reflective journals or engage in structured reflection sessions facilitated by lecturers or mentors to reinforce learning from challenges.
- Career Development Services: Introduce early career guidance to connect personal growth with long-term goals, reinforcing motivation and purpose.

Cross-Cutting Institutional Strategies

- Early Warning and Tracking Systems: Implement systems to identify “at-risk” students (low attendance, failing assessments, isolation) early and intervene with tailored support.
- Stakeholder Collaboration: Build collaboration between faculty, student services, financial aid offices, and community organizations to provide holistic support.
- Inclusive Policy Design: Ensure student voices are included in policy and program development through first-year advisory boards or student focus groups.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the experiences of first-time entering students within the Faculty of Education at a selected university in the Eastern Cape. The experiences of first-time entering students at the Faculty of Education not only reveal the array of challenges they face but also illuminate their capacity for growth and adaptation. Understanding these experiences is crucial for universities aiming to enhance their support systems and social environments, ultimately contributing to improved student satisfaction and success. As

educational institutions continue to evolve, embracing the voices of students and their narratives can inform better practices and foster a more nurturing educational environment.

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