



Intervention strategies to support first-year university students' transition from dependence to autonomy at universities in Limpopo Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The transition from high school to university represents a critical developmental and academic shift for first-year students, moving from a structured, dependent environment to autonomous learning and self-management. While students often enter university with enthusiasm, many encounter unexpected academic workloads, social challenges, and financial responsibilities that can compromise their well-being and performance. The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of the first-year students who transitioned from dependency to autonomy and the social work intervention strategies at universities in South Africa. A qualitative, exploratory design was employed, using semi-structured interviews to collect data from 15 first-year students from two universities in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Data was analysed thematically to support academic needs and social, emotional, psychological, and financial aspects. The study identified four key interrelated themes: (1) academic overload and time-management struggles, (2) emotional and social adjustment challenges, (3) personal responsibility and financial independence pressures, and (4) the importance of psychosocial and social work support. Findings indicate that early, visible, and continuous social work support, combined with peer mentoring and life-skills interventions, can significantly enhance students' autonomy, resilience, and academic integration. The study contributes practical insights for higher education institutions and social work practitioners seeking to scaffold first-year students' successful transition into independent learning environments.

Keywords: Autonomy, first-year students, higher education, transition, social work support.

INTRODUCTION

The first year of university represents a profound transition, where students shift from the structured guidance of high school to the autonomy demanded by tertiary education. In high school, learners are frequently reminded of assignments, guided through study schedules, and supported in balancing academic and personal responsibilities.¹ In contrast, university life requires students to self-regulate, manage multiple concurrent assignments, navigate complex social networks, and assume financial and

¹ Litshani Lizer Tshiredo, "The Impact of the Curriculum Change in the Teaching and Learning of Science: A Case Study in under-Resourced Schools in Vhembe District" (2013).

personal independence.² First-year students often begin their academic journey with excitement and optimism, only to encounter feelings of overwhelm, homesickness, and stress within the first few months. The shift from external support to personal accountability can affect not only academic performance but also emotional well-being and social integration.³ Many students struggle to balance deadlines, presentations, class participation, and independent learning, while simultaneously navigating residence life, budgeting, and peer relationships.

From a social work perspective, this transition is particularly significant because it underscores the need for holistic interventions that address both academic and psychosocial challenges. Social workers within higher education are uniquely positioned to facilitate resilience, life-skills development, and support networks that help students navigate this critical period.⁴ This study explores the experiences of first-year students at universities in Limpopo Province as they move from high school dependence to university autonomy. Specifically, it investigates: (1) the academic, social, and emotional challenges faced during the transition; (2) the impact of these challenges on students' well-being and academic engagement; and (3) strategies that can be implemented from a social work perspective to support autonomy and resilience. By centring student voices, this research contributes to both scholarly understanding and practical interventions to improve first-year student success in South African universities.

While research on first-year students' experiences highlights their academic preparedness, adjustment, coping, and retention barriers, there is a lack of focus on social work intervention strategies that comprehensively address these challenges. Previous studies have neglected the proactive and preventive, strengths-based, and empowerment-based approaches of social work in supporting first-year students and enhancing their adjustment, especially those from rural communities. There is little empirical work that explores how social workers intervene at different levels, including individuals, faculty, peers, and institutions, to support students to adjust, strengthen their resilience, and autonomy during the transition period. This study centres social work as a crucial support tool for students struggling with financial, academic, social, adjustment, and emotional problems in rural higher education settings to address the gap.

The transition from high school to university is a significant period of adjustment, encompassing major changes in psychological, academic, and social aspects. Many South African students enter higher education unprepared for the demands of independent learning, time management, and financial responsibility. Despite entering tertiary institutions with enthusiasm, many first-year students experience academic overload, emotional distress, and difficulty navigating self-directed study.⁵ Universities in Limpopo, like many rural-based institutions, continue to witness high levels of academic stress, adjustment challenges, and underutilisation of support services among first-year students. These struggles often lead to decreased academic performance, withdrawal, or mental health difficulties that remain unaddressed due to limited awareness or stigma associated with seeking help.⁶

The problem, therefore, lies in the gap between institutional expectations of student autonomy and the lived realities of students who arrive underprepared for independent academic and personal life. This study seeks to explore these transitional challenges and identify practical, social work-based interventions to support students' adjustment to autonomy.

This study is grounded in the belief that higher education should not only focus on academic instruction but also nurture students' holistic well-being. The transition from high school to university

² Annah Vimbai Bengesai et al., "Student Perceptions on Their Transition Experiences at a South African University Offering a First-Year Experience Programme.," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 10, no. 2 (December 23, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v10i2.4084>.

³ Liesel Engelbrecht et al., "Coping Processes of South African First-Year University Students: An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 8, no. 2 (December 2020), <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v8i2.4443>; Karina Mostert and Charlize Du Toit, "Well-Being of First-Year Students: The Role of Study Characteristics, Strengths and Deficits," *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology* 50, no. 0 (January 23, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4102/SAJIP.v50i0.2117>.

⁴ Kathleen Collins and Adrian Van Breda, "Academic Support For First-Year Social Work Students In South Africa," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 46, no. 1 (June 17, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.15270/46-1-179>.

⁵ Petrus Lombard, "Factors That Influence Transition from High School to Higher Education: A Case of the JuniorTukkie Programme.," *African Journal of Career Development* 2, no. 1 (February 26, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajcd.v2i1.5>.

⁶ Lombard, "Factors That Influence Transition from High School to Higher Education: A Case of the JuniorTukkie Programme."

is often framed as an academic progression, yet it also involves a psychosocial transformation that requires emotional maturity, social adaptation, and self-regulation.⁷ From a social work perspective, understanding this transition is crucial because students' adjustment difficulties often stem from unmet psychosocial needs, such as stress management, social belonging, and financial competence, which fall within the domain of social work intervention.

At the universities in Limpopo Province, many first-year students are first-generation university attendees from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds. Their experiences provide critical insight into how systemic inequalities intersect with personal adaptation. By exploring these experiences, the study seeks to empower universities to design targeted support mechanisms that combine academic guidance with social work intervention. The study's findings will contribute not only to student success literature but also to policy development on psychosocial support in South African higher education.

Although several South African studies have examined student success and retention, few have approached the issue from a social work lens that emphasises psychosocial support and holistic development. Pretorius and Blaauw focus on academic preparedness and institutional barriers, yet often overlook the social work role in fostering autonomy, resilience, and emotional well-being.⁸ This study fills that gap by examining how social workers, as trained professionals in empowerment, advocacy, and emotional support, can meaningfully intervene in students' transition from dependence to autonomy. Furthermore, there is limited research on the lived experiences of students from rural-based institutions. By situating the research in this context, the study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of transition challenges within the South African higher education landscape, particularly for students from under-resourced backgrounds.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transitioning from dependence to autonomy

The transition from high school to university marks a critical developmental phase in a young person's life, often involving a shift from dependence to autonomy. High school learners are accustomed to structured environments where teachers, parents, and guardians closely monitor their academic progress and personal development.⁹ However, upon entering university, students are suddenly expected to self-regulate, manage time effectively, and take full responsibility for their learning and wellbeing.¹⁰ This shift often creates anxiety, confusion, and a sense of loss, as students must quickly adapt to new academic and social systems. Lees and Van Zyl note that the first-year transition involves not only academic adjustment but also a redefinition of self-identity and belonging within a new institutional culture.¹¹ The first months of university life are therefore crucial in shaping students' long-term engagement, motivation, and retention.

In South Africa, this transition is further complicated by systemic inequalities in basic education, which leave many first-year students underprepared for the level of independence required at university.¹² Learners from under-resourced schools often struggle with academic writing, critical thinking, and digital literacy, which can amplify feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt during the adjustment process.

⁷ Collins and Van Breda, "Academic Support For First-Year Social Work Students In South Africa."

⁸ T. Pretorius and D Blaauw, "Psychological Capital, Coping, and Academic Success among South African University Students," *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 31, no. 6 (2021): 521–29.

⁹ Seda Sevinç and Cem Ali Gizir, "Factors Negatively Affecting University Adjustment from the Views of First-Year University Students: The Case of Mersin University.," *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice* 14, no.4(2014):1301–8.

¹⁰ Bengesai et al., "Student Perceptions on Their Transition Experiences at a South African University Offering a First-Year Experience Programme."

¹¹ Deborah Lees and Andre Van Zyl, "Students Experience Stories as Lenses for Sense-Making of the Transition to Higher Education," *Perspectives in Education* 42, no. 2 (July 12, 2024): 31–45, <https://doi.org/10.38140/pie.v42i2.7696>.

¹² 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>.

Psychosocial challenges in the first-year experience

Beyond academics, the emotional and social adjustment of first-year students is vital to their overall success. Research by Sevinç and Gizir found that first-year students often experience emotional distress, loneliness, and difficulty balancing personal and academic demands.¹³ Their study emphasised that students who lack adequate coping mechanisms or social support structures are at higher risk of disengagement and mental health challenges. Similarly, Bengesai et al. observed that many first-year students enter university with high levels of excitement, but this enthusiasm tends to decline after the first few months as academic workloads increase and support systems diminish.¹⁴ This pattern mirrors what has been observed at the universities in Limpopo Province, where students initially display enthusiasm but later report emotional fatigue and difficulty maintaining motivation. The role of social support in buffering these challenges cannot be overstated. Motsabi et al. highlight that social support, whether from peers, mentors, or family, significantly enhances students' persistence and resilience.¹⁵ Those who feel connected and supported are more likely to cope effectively with academic stress and develop a sense of belonging in the university environment.

The role of social work in higher education

Social work plays a transformative role in supporting students during this vulnerable transition period. Collins and Van Breda argue that social work intervention within universities should not only focus on crisis counselling but also on empowerment, prevention, and systemic support.¹⁶ Through life skills training, emotional support, and advocacy, social workers help students navigate the pressures of independence and academic expectations. Social workers are also uniquely positioned to identify structural barriers affecting students' well-being, such as financial hardship, housing instability, or limited access to resources, and to advocate for institutional reforms that promote equity and inclusion. As Soundy emphasises, social workers can foster resilience by helping students develop healthy coping strategies, time management skills, and self-awareness, all of which are crucial for sustaining autonomy and academic success.¹⁷ The integration of social work practice into higher education thus offers a holistic approach, addressing not only students' academic challenges but also their emotional and social development. This aligns with the profession's core values of empowerment, human dignity, and social justice.

Well-being, resilience, and institutional support

Recent research has shifted from focusing solely on academic performance to considering broader measures of student well-being. Mostert and Du Toit highlight that well-being is influenced by both personal characteristics and institutional environments. Their findings indicate that when universities intentionally promote psychological safety, connectedness, and supportive learning conditions, students are more likely to thrive and persist in their studies.¹⁸ At the same time, the importance of resilience, the capacity to adapt positively despite challenges, has become a key theme in transition studies. Soundy found that students who develop active coping mechanisms, such as help-seeking, social engagement, and self-care, are better equipped to manage the pressures of autonomy.¹⁹ For social work practitioners in higher education, this underscores the importance of proactive intervention. Support should begin before crises arise, focusing on early identification of adjustment challenges, group support programmes, and mentoring systems that foster self-efficacy and emotional resilience.

¹³ Sevinç and Gizir, "Factors Negatively Affecting University Adjustment from the Views of First-Year University Students: The Case of Mersin University."

¹⁴ Bengesai et al., "Student Perceptions on Their Transition Experiences at a South African University Offering a First-Year Experience Programme."

¹⁵ 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."

¹⁶ Collins and Van Breda, "Academic Support For First-Year Social Work Students In South Africa."

¹⁷ Patricia Nthabiseng Soundy, "Transition from High School to University: Challenges Faced by First Year B. Ed. Students at a University of Technology," 2016.

¹⁸ Mostert and Du Toit, "Well-Being of First-Year Students: The Role of Study Characteristics, Strengths and Deficits."

¹⁹ Soundy, "Transition from High School to University: Challenges Faced by First Year B. Ed. Students at a University of Technology."

The reviewed literature highlights that transitioning from high school dependence to university autonomy is a multifaceted process that involves academic, emotional, and social adaptation. Students' success during this transition depends largely on the availability of supportive structures that nurture both competence and well-being.²⁰ Social work's holistic and empowerment-based approach offers practical solutions to the challenges faced by first-year students. By integrating psychosocial support, skills development, and systemic advocacy, social workers can play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between dependence and autonomy, ensuring that students are not only retained but truly thrive in their academic and personal journeys.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study employed Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which posits that environmental factors significantly influence human behavior at different levels. This theory posits that students in their first year of study face many factors that influence their transition, coping, and adjustment.²¹ This theory was essential for examining and determining how first-year students at universities in Limpopo cope with the transition from dependency to autonomy.²² It was a crucial theory to adopt because it examines the environmental factors that may contribute to first-year students' vulnerability, the barriers to adjustment, and the ways they cope with university life. This theory was used to understand transitions and coping at different levels, including the mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The mesosystem encompasses the interactions between first-year students' academic and personal lives and how these interactions influence their coping, adjustment, and transition.²³ The exosystem was essential because it focused on the community's influence on students' transitions. This involves the influence of the student community and the environmental factors within it that determine the transition of first-year students. The macrosystem refers to societal attitudes and existing policies that enhance adjustment, transition, and higher education. The chronosystem focuses on changes over time, and this is important because students can adjust and cope with challenges with support from different stakeholders.²⁴

The study adopted the ecological systems theory to understand how first-year students cope, adjust, and transition from a more restricted environment to an independent situation with limited parental or adult supervision. The study found that environmental factors significantly impacted the behavior of first-year students at universities in Limpopo Province.²⁵ Transition refers to first-year students who enter a university environment, adjust easily, and have coping mechanisms despite having been exposed to a more restrictive environment during secondary school. In social work, coping, adjustment, and transition are essential elements that may affect students' mental health and performance at universities.²⁶ The theory considers significant environmental factors that influence first-year students' behavior. It focuses on the person in the environment and on the factors within it that determine individuals' behavior. A university environment can be both influential and threatening to the well-being of first-year students due to factors such as bullying, relationship problems, and adjustment issues.²⁷

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to gain a deeper understanding of intervention strategies for transitioning students into university. This approach was found to be suitable because it sought to explore and gain more insight into the phenomenon under investigation. The approach aligns

²⁰ Bengesai et al., "Student Perceptions on Their Transition Experiences at a South African University Offering a First-Year Experience Programme."; 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."

²¹ Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Harvard university press, 1979).

²² Barbra Teater, *An Introduction to Applying Social Work Theories and Methods 3e* (McGraw-Hill Education (UK), 2019).

²³ Karla Krogsrud Miley, Michael O'melia, and Brenda DuBois, "Generalist Social Work Practice: An Empowering Approach," (*No Title*), 2001.

²⁴ 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."

²⁵ Mostert and Du Toit, "Well-Being of First-Year Students: The Role of Study Characteristics, Strengths and Deficits."

²⁶ Lees and Van Zyl, "Students Experience Stories as Lenses for Sense-Making of the Transition to Higher Education."

²⁷ Teater, *An Introduction to Applying Social Work Theories and Methods 3e*.

with the study's title and its aims and objectives. The approach enabled the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the interventions used to help students transition into university life. An exploratory research design was employed in the study to examine areas that have not been explored regarding the transition of university students.²⁸ This design is primarily used when there is little information about the phenomenon. The design was relevant for exploring the gap identified in the transition from high school to university. The design helped the researcher gain more information about the participants' feelings and attitudes in their natural settings.

The study population comprised first-year students enrolled at universities in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The researchers developed a set of inclusion criteria because not all members of the population had an equal chance of being selected for the study. The criteria were that the students must be first-year students at universities in Limpopo Province. The students should have adjustment problems with independence or transition. Sampling is an essential process in empirical research. It is a process used by researchers to select participants to answer the research questions and objectives. In research, there are two sampling methods: probability and non-probability sampling.²⁹ This study used a non-probability sampling method, which aligns with the research approach, design, title, aims, and objectives. In this sampling method, not all participants stand an equal chance of being selected into the study. It is a non-random method in which participants are selected based on eligibility and qualification according to the set criteria.³⁰ It does not use statistical or numerical methods of analysis, nor does it focus on the narratives. The snowball sampling technique was used in this study and proved relevant for identifying first-year students. The researchers relied on participants to refer others in first-year classes because they did not know potential participants. The first participants referred the researchers to other participants who were willing to contribute meaningfully to the study. This technique was essential because the researchers could not have known the participants. It was appropriate to recruit participants who could answer the research questions based on their knowledge and experience.

The study used semi-structured interviews with 15 participants recruited for the study. The researchers developed an interview schedule with a set of questions to be asked of participants. The interview schedule guided the line of questioning and determined if the researchers needed to probe for further understanding and clarification.³¹ The interview questions were open-ended to enable the participants to gain deeper insight into the phenomenon under investigation. The researchers were responsible for data collection and analysis. The data collection process lasted a month, with English used to communicate due to the diverse nature of the participants. The duration of the interviews varied among participants, averaging 45 minutes. The process of data collection was stopped because of the principle of data saturation. This is when participants started repeating information submitted by other participants and bringing no new information. This happened at participant number 15, and the process of data collection was terminated. The researchers transcribed the data and familiarized themselves with it for analysis. The researchers repeatedly listened to the audio and read the transcript to familiarize themselves with the data. This enabled the researchers to code the data that was found to be repeated many times. The emergence of themes was essential when significant information was repeated, enabling the theme review process. The developed themes were reviewed, and the writing-up process ensued.

Ethical considerations were crucial to the study to ensure that participants were not harmed by their engagement. Informed consent was vital to ensure that participants understood the study, its benefits, and the risks of participating. Participants were provided with information before they could consent.³² The participants were then requested to sign an informed consent form granting their participation in the study and permission to be audio-recorded during the interviews. Confidentiality was a significant principle observed in the study. The researchers kept participants' confidential information private, with no access by third parties. The laptop's data was encrypted with a password,

²⁸ Pranee Liamputtong and Douglas Ezzy, *Qualitative Research Methods*, vol. 2 (Oxford university press Melbourne, 2005).

²⁹ Martin Terre Blanche et al., *Research in Practice: Applied Methods for the Social Sciences* (Juta and Company Ltd, 2006).

³⁰ John W Creswell, *Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sage, 2014).

³¹ E. Babbie and J. Mouton, *The Practice of Social Research South African Edition* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa, 2010).

³² J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Sage, 2018).

and some information was kept in a lockable cupboard. The study ensured that participants' personal identifying information would not compromise them.³³ No personal identifying information was collected from the participants to avoid compromising or harming them. The researchers did not collect any personal identifying information, as it would not be used in the study. The study used pseudonyms in place of personal identifying information to protect participants from harm and victimization. It was essential to ensure the research questions were sensitive to avoid harming participants.³⁴ Although managing harm is not easy, the researchers developed questions that were sensitive and would not harm participants. Given the study's sensitivity, participants who were triggered received a debriefing to support their emotional stability. The debriefing sessions were provided free of charge to ensure participants did not incur costs for this activity as a result of their participation in the study. The researchers contracted with the psychologists and social workers who provided the service to the participants at no cost.³⁵

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The study made significant revelations. Four major themes emerged from the data, reflecting the layered challenges and coping mechanisms students experienced during their first year at university. These findings are crucial for identifying the factors that disrupt functioning, coping, and adjustment, and that hinder an effective transition from dependence to independence without parental support. The study findings have revealed several factors that are barriers to students' success and coping, requiring first-year students to seek peer and professional support to address adversity.

Theme 1: Academic Overload and Time Management Struggles

The study found that a poor transitional program makes students struggle with academic overload and time management. It reveals that students are struggling due to adjustment issues and difficulties coping with new environments and settings. It revealed that mentorship for every first-year student is essential to help them navigate through the system. One of the most recurring and emotionally charged themes was the academic workload and the shift from externally structured guidance in high school to self-directed learning in university. Participants consistently described their initial enthusiasm giving way to feelings of overwhelm as they encountered multiple concurrent assignments, presentations, and tests often due within the same week. Unlike in high school, where teachers remind learners daily of due dates, university students are expected to manage their time independently.

"In high school, teachers used to remind us every day, 'Don't forget your project, you have a test in a week, study in 3 days, study, and so forth.' Here, they give you a course guide with 10 due dates, and sometimes you only get reminded 3 days beforehand. If you didn't plan ahead of time, you are finished." P2

"It is difficult for me to adjust to the new environment because everyone minds their own business. The lecturers are not like in high school, where teachers would beg you to do your school work. It is a problem to cope independently without support." P5

"Time management is one of the things that can make you pass or fail in university. Your schedule and plan should be supported by good time management so that you can meet the demands of the assignments, tests, presentations, and examinations." P11

This sentiment highlights a steep learning curve in self-discipline and time management. The absence of ongoing reminders or step-by-step monitoring left students struggling to prioritise tasks, often leading to sleepless nights, missed deadlines, or burnout. Many expressed frustration that lecturers assume students already possess advanced organisational skills.³⁶ Students struggle with adjustment, leading to emotional exhaustion and a decline in performance. Transition is often a problem for first-

³³ D R Moreno, "The Nuremberg Code and Informed Consent for Research," *JAMA* 319, no. 1 (2017): 86.

³⁴ Babbie and Mouton, *The Practice of Social Research South African Edition*.

³⁵ Creswell, *Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*.

³⁶ Tumelo Sekgobela, "Coping Strategies of Social Workers Working with Nyaope Substance Users in South Africa," *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, March 3, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.25159/2708-9355/19635>.

year students worldwide, making it difficult for them to progress in their first year of study.³⁷ The study's findings align with the literature on academic overload and time management struggles. Previous studies show that first-year students struggle with time management, meeting deadlines, and adjusting to a new environment that requires independence.³⁸

Theme 2: Emotional and Social Adjustment Challenges

The study found that first-year students are emotionally vulnerable due to exposure to a foreign environment. Adjustment to new settings makes it difficult for first-year students to be effective and operate effectively at an early stage at universities. The study revealed that first-year students face many difficulties, such as relationship problems, adjusting to independence, and transitioning from high school to university life. The study highlights that students struggle in the first semester of their first year due to unfamiliarity with the territory and a new learning environment. Beyond academics, students reported that the emotional toll of independence is often underestimated. Most participants described the first few weeks as exhilarating: a new sense of freedom, meeting people from different provinces, and the excitement of living alone. However, by mid-semester, their tone shifted: homesickness, loneliness, and a sense of isolation replaced the initial thrill.

“University is not just about books; it’s about managing your emotions, being consistent, and true to yourself because if you can’t do that, dating is free, parties are endless, and when you’re not focused, you can easily get consumed.” P4

“The first three months are problematic for the first-year students as we are still adjusting to the new environment and way of doing things. Sometimes you are expected to learn through teams or have online learning, which we are not used to because we are only used to having a teacher in front of us.” P8

“I struggled with adjustment and getting new friends because I am used to village life and did not want to be close to people who would have a bad influence on my life. I needed to see my family, and now I am alone, doing everything on my own.” P12

Many expressed that their mental health declined once the reality of total responsibility set in: cooking, budgeting, cleaning, dating, lifestyle, and balancing workloads without parental reminders. This is consistent with the literature that students suffer mental health problems because of exposure to new settings and environments.³⁹ The students also experience sleep deprivation, and “constant rushing” became normalised, especially when assignments coincided with whether you could write the final examination. Moreover, the competitive academic environment created new stressors. Several students who had been top learners in high school felt demoralised upon realising that “everyone here was also top of their class.”⁴⁰ The transition also coincided with the digitalisation of learning, including Turnitin, AI tools like ChatGPT, and online submission platforms. For many, this was overwhelming, as they felt “technologically underprepared.” These findings echo Engelbrecht et al., who note that the modern higher education landscape requires both digital competence and emotional resilience, capacities that must be nurtured rather than assumed.⁴¹

Theme 3: Personal Responsibility and Financial Independence

The study revealed that students require different forms of support, including financial literacy and personal responsibility. It found that some intervention strategies to support first-year students include financial literacy and independence, as well as budgeting. The study established that first-year students need to receive support to avoid psychosocial problems, mismanagement of the limited budget allocated to them, and mental health problems. This has been found to be an effective intervention for helping

³⁷ Bengesai et al., “Student Perceptions on Their Transition Experiences at a South African University Offering a First-Year Experience Programme.”

³⁸ Engelbrecht et al., “Coping Processes of South African First-Year University Students: An Exploratory Study.”

³⁹ Lees and Van Zyl, “Students Experience Stories as Lenses for Sense-Making of the Transition to Higher Education.”

⁴⁰ 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.”

⁴¹ Engelbrecht et al., “Coping Processes of South African First-Year University Students: An Exploratory Study.”

first-year students adjust to a new learning environment and cope with adversity. A powerful and often overlooked challenge that emerged from discussions was the sudden demand for personal responsibility, particularly regarding financial independence. Students repeatedly noted that while high school focused on academic discipline, it did not prepare them for the practical realities of independent living.⁴² For many first-year students, this was the first time managing monthly allowances, buying groceries, planning meals, or budgeting for transport, printing, and data.

“When I first got my allowance, I spent half of it in the first week on my favourite snacks and clothes, because I thought I had everything. But by the following weeks, I was asking family members for assistance, and they didn’t have any either, since they had budgeted for me to get a bursary. That’s when I realised: I’m really on my own now.” P3

“Universities should develop strategies to educate first-year students about financial management and personal responsibility. This should be done during the orientation of first-year students, and it should not be an intense training but just basic to prepare students.” P10

“In my view, we should have a compulsory module in the first year that prepares students for financial literacy, personal management, planning, and time management. It is essential for first-year students to understand challenges ahead of them to avoid disruptions to their education.” P14

This newfound independence created both growth and vulnerability. Several students described the excitement of “finally being free,” only to feel guilt or shame when poor budgeting led to financial strain. For some, mismanagement of funds led to food insecurity or absenteeism when they could not afford transport or assessment printing costs. Such experiences echo research by Maseko and Le Roux, who found that financial mismanagement among first-year students significantly contributes to stress, poor academic performance, and increased dropout risk.⁴³ Similarly, Ngidi and Sibanda argue that financial literacy is not merely an economic skill but a psychosocial resilience factor; students who manage money effectively tend to demonstrate higher self-efficacy and emotional stability.⁴⁴ This recognition of responsibility is central to the transition toward autonomy, but can also be destabilising without structured support. Bayaga et. al emphasise that first-year success depends not only on cognitive readiness but also on the development of life-management competencies, the ability to self-regulate across academic, social, and financial domains.⁴⁵

Theme 4: The Importance of Psychosocial and Social Work Support

The study found that psychosocial support services are essential and effective in assisting students with the transition from dependency to autonomy. It revealed that this is one of the significant strategies institutions of higher learning can use to help students integrate well into the university community. It was established that students who receive psychosocial support services are better placed to cope with adversity, challenges, and poor judgment in the first year of study. Despite these challenges, students who accessed counselling, mentoring, or peer-support programmes reported greater resilience and confidence. They described such services as “a place to breathe” and “where you realise, you’re not alone.” Participants believed that early intervention by social workers through workshops, orientation programmes, and peer mentoring could help first-years adapt more effectively. The students indicated that social work services are essential to help deal with adjustment problems, relationship issues, gender-based violence, and bullying. Social workers were found to be instrumental in helping students cope in higher education.

⁴² Venicia McGhie, “Entering University Studies: Identifying Enabling Factors for a Successful Transition from School to University,” *Higher Education* 73, no. 3 (March 9, 2017): 407–22, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0100-2>.

⁴³ M Maseko and P Le Roux, “Budgeting, Spending Habits, and Financial Stress among South African University Students,” *African Journal of Economic and Management Studies* 14, no. 2 (2023): 189–204.

⁴⁴ D Ngidi and L Sibanda, “Financial Literacy and Academic Resilience among First-Year University Students,” *South African Journal of Education* 42, no. 3 (2022): 1–12.

⁴⁵ A Bayaga, E Bosire, and R Morake, “Student Engagement and Academic Success: Insights from South African Universities,” *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 10, no. 1 (2022): 23–39.

“Psychosocial support services are important to help us cope and transition well into university life. This is a different space that requires early adjustment to avoid failure and poor planning.”

P4

“Social workers perform a supportive role and offer counselling for relationship problems with parents or at school. They assist with students' life balance to ensure that we manage time effectively. This assists us in reducing pressure and focusing on the important things that need to be prioritized.”

P6

“Although there are numerous struggles, students like myself who receive counselling were able to get peer support, and time management programs were able to help us cope with higher education challenges. The support of social workers is helpful in coping and transition.”

P10

These findings align with Collins and Van Breda, who emphasise that social work in universities can promote empowerment through prevention-based, holistic support.⁴⁶ They provide educational programs aimed at raising students' awareness of their services that enhance coping and adjustment. They provide counselling and debriefing services to students who need psychosocial support. Similarly, Pather and Dorasamy recommend resilience-building programmes that equip students with coping strategies for both academic and emotional stressors.⁴⁷ Social workers provide services to address barriers that hinder students' success and to help first-year students cope with difficulties. They make the environment conducive to the transition from independence to autonomy in higher education. Providing psychosocial support services is important for helping first-year students cope with a new environment and the transition to independence. Social workers prevent bullying cases, GBV, substance abuse, and many other social problems, which are a threat to students' coping at universities.⁴⁸

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that academic overload and time-management difficulties constitute one of the most significant barriers to successful transition among first-year students. Participants described moving from a highly structured secondary school environment to a university system that requires independent planning and self-regulation. This finding supports Bengesai et al., who found that many students enter higher education without adequate preparation for self-directed learning.⁴⁹ The findings suggest that autonomy should not be regarded as an assumed attribute of university entrants but rather as a developmental competency that requires institutional nurturing. From an ecological systems perspective, students are expected to simultaneously adapt to multiple demands within their academic and personal environments. The inability to successfully coordinate these demands often results in stress, exhaustion, and poor academic adjustment. Therefore, the challenge is not merely workload volume but the process of learning how to manage competing responsibilities independently.

The study further demonstrates that the transition to university is a psychosocial process as much as it is an academic one. While participants initially expressed excitement about independence and personal freedom, many later reported loneliness, homesickness, social isolation, and difficulty adapting to a new environment. These findings support Sevinç and Gizir, who argue that emotional adjustment plays a central role in student persistence and university integration.⁵⁰ The findings are particularly significant within the Limpopo context, where many students originate from rural communities and experience substantial geographical and cultural displacement upon entering university. The transition therefore involves negotiating new identities, social relationships, and expectations. Failure to address these emotional challenges may undermine academic success despite adequate intellectual capability.

⁴⁶ Collins and Van Breda, “Academic Support For First-Year Social Work Students In South Africa.”

⁴⁷ Pather Subethra and Dorasamy Nirmala, “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 (July 2018), <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3065>.

⁴⁸ Sekgobela, “Coping Strategies of Social Workers Working with Nyaope Substance Users in South Africa.”

⁴⁹ Bengesai et al., “Student Perceptions on Their Transition Experiences at a South African University Offering a First-Year Experience Programme.”

⁵⁰ Sevinç and Gizir, “Factors Negatively Affecting University Adjustment from the Views of First-Year University Students: The Case of Mersin University.”

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that the transition from high school to university represents far more than an academic adjustment. It is a complex developmental shift that requires both institutional and psychosocial support. To address the academic, emotional, and financial challenges faced by first-year students, a coordinated and intentional strategy is essential.⁵¹ Universities must strengthen their first-year orientation programmes to move beyond introductory campus tours and basic academic briefings. Orientation should be a semester-long process that gradually introduces students to essential life skills such as time management, budgeting, digital literacy, and academic integrity. By providing sustained guidance rather than a one-week induction, institutions can help students internalise autonomy and responsibility in manageable stages.⁵²

The most significant finding of the study is the value students attached to psychosocial and social work support during their transition to university life. Participants consistently identified counselling, mentoring, peer support, and psychosocial interventions as factors that enhanced coping, resilience, and adjustment. These findings extend the work of Collins and Van Breda, who argue that social work services within higher education should focus not only on remedial intervention but also on prevention, empowerment, and student development.⁵³ The present study demonstrates that social work interventions facilitate the development of autonomy by providing students with practical coping strategies, emotional support, and problem-solving skills. This finding positions social work as a critical component of first-year student success programmes, particularly within institutions serving vulnerable and historically disadvantaged populations.

Furthermore, the visibility and accessibility of social work services within higher education need urgent reinforcement. Many students in this study reported being unaware of campus social workers or unsure how to access them. Social work professionals should therefore be integrated within faculties and residences, not confined to counselling offices. Regular awareness campaigns, classroom visits, and peer dialogues can help normalise help-seeking and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health and social support. Social workers can also play a proactive role in facilitating group sessions on emotional regulation, resilience, and self-efficacy, equipping students to handle the inevitable pressures of academic life.⁵⁴ In addition, the study highlights the need for structured peer-mentorship programmes in which trained senior students guide newcomers through academic, financial, and personal challenges. Peer mentors, when supported by social work professionals, can act as bridges between first-year students and institutional support structures, helping them feel seen and understood in their early months of adjustment.⁵⁵

At a policy level, universities should consider formalising a Transition Support Framework that positions student well-being as a shared institutional responsibility. This framework should include the establishment of early warning systems that allow lecturers, tutors, and residence staff to refer struggling students to social work services before their difficulties escalate. Moreover, integrating financial literacy training should become standard practice in first-year curricula. Many students in this study struggled to manage their allowances and adapt to independent living, often leading to financial distress and emotional burnout. Policies mandating periodic financial education workshops can mitigate such risks, helping students cultivate not only academic competence but also the practical skills of adulthood. Partnerships between universities, government departments, and non-profit organisations are equally crucial in expanding the reach of psychosocial services. Funding for campus-based social work units, mental health programmes, and peer support initiatives should be prioritised within the higher education budget. As social work values are rooted in empowerment and holistic development, practitioners are uniquely positioned to advocate for systemic changes that protect students from silent suffering and dropout. No student should be left to navigate the pressures of autonomy alone; every institution should ensure that help is visible, approachable, and tailored to diverse student needs.

⁵¹ Bayaga, Bosire, and Morake, "Student Engagement and Academic Success: Insights from South African Universities."

⁵² McGhie, "Entering University Studies: Identifying Enabling Factors for a Successful Transition from School to University."

⁵³ Collins and Van Breda, "Academic Support For First-Year Social Work 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 McGhie, "Entering University Studies: Identifying Enabling Factors for a Successful Transition from School to University."

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the findings of this study. Students' transition experiences were influenced by interconnected systems operating at multiple levels. At the microsystem level, relationships with peers, lecturers, and family members influenced adjustment and coping. At the mesosystem level, interactions between academic, social, and personal responsibilities shaped students' experiences of stress and adaptation. Exosystem influences included university support structures, financial aid systems, and student support services, while macrosystem influences reflected broader social inequalities affecting students from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds. The findings therefore confirm that successful transition cannot be attributed solely to individual motivation or academic ability but is strongly shaped by environmental and institutional factors. This supports the ecological understanding that student well-being is produced through interactions between individuals and their surrounding systems.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on first-year student transition by demonstrating that the movement from dependence to autonomy is a multidimensional process involving academic, emotional, social, and financial adjustment. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on academic preparedness, this study foregrounds the importance of social work interventions in promoting resilience and successful adaptation. Furthermore, the study offers context-specific insights from rural South African universities, a setting that remains underrepresented in higher education research. The findings provide empirical evidence supporting the integration of psychosocial support services into institutional strategies aimed at enhancing student retention, well-being, and success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study and the reviewed literature, the following recommendations are suggested to strengthen the transition of first-year university students from dependency to autonomy.

- Universities should develop an extended orientation program for first-year students. It should be a developmental program rather than a one-off induction event.
- The orientation should include components such as digital literacy, time management, self-directed learning, and academic planning. This approach will gradually internalize autonomy and build confidence in controlling academic demands.
- Rural universities should institutionalize the compulsory life-skills modules for first-year students that address personal responsibility, decision making, financial literacy, and stress management.
- Universities should improve the visibility and accessibility of campus social workers. Social workers should be integrated into faculties and residence environments.
- Social workers in higher education should adopt a proactive approach, preventive intervention strategies, and a strengths-based approach when working with first-year students.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the journey from high school dependence to university autonomy is both a personal and social transformation. The findings of this study affirm that while independence is celebrated as a sign of maturity, it also exposes students to emotional, academic, and financial vulnerability. The role of universities, particularly campus social workers, is to bridge this gap through prevention, empowerment, and compassionate intervention. Supporting students holistically not only improves retention and performance but also nurtures their sense of belonging and dignity as developing scholars. When universities invest in the human side of learning, they do not merely produce graduates; they cultivate resilient, responsible citizens capable of sustaining themselves and contributing meaningfully to society. The study recognizes the importance of university support systems for first-year students in enhancing transition and preventing mental health problems. It further appreciates the significant role of social workers in helping first-year students adjust to a new environment and address social problems that may disrupt their social functioning.

Limitations of the Study

As a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with a small group of first-year students, the findings are context-specific and cannot be generalized to all universities in South Africa. The sample represents students from two institutions, meaning regional and institutional variations are not captured. Time constraints and limited access to certain support departments within the university also restricted the breadth of institutional perspectives.

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