E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (EHASS)
ISSN – Online 2720-7722 | Print 2821-8949
Volume 7 Issue 10 2026 pp 3206 - 3219
Available online at: https://noyam.org/journals/ehass/
DOI: https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.202671020

Check for updates

Exploring the support necessary for better academic performance of First-Time Entering Students at a selected university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa

Sinazo Majola[1] & Ntando Elliot Mpahla[1]

[1] Walter Sisulu University, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the support necessary for better academic performance of first-time entering students at a selected university in the Eastern Cape. First-time entering students are students who have just enrolled at university for the first time after passing grade 12. This is a transition period from high school to university, where students need the necessary guidance and support to fit into the new educational environment. The theory that underpinned this study is Student Integration Theory. This study employed a qualitative research approach and adopted a case study research design. Ten participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that were carried out in the form of a conversation between the researcher and participants. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Findings of the study revealed that workshop orientation and academic skills development workshops are crucial for first-time entering students. The study concludes that universities should normalize the availability of help and guidance for students who are in transition in the new educational environment. State the recommendations and the contribution of the study to scholarship.

Keywords: Support, First-time Entering Students, Academic Performance, Transition, Workshop Orientation, Academic Skills Development.

INTRODUCTION

Effective support systems have been shown to dramatically increase student retention rates, particularly for first-year students, in addition to improving academic results. As students transition to higher education, it is essential to understand how these factors overlap. One of the most important turning points in a student's academic career is the transfer from high school to university. Students who have just entered university after completing Grade 12 are known as first-time entering students, and they face different challenges as they adjust to the demands of higher education.[1] Supporting first-time students as they transition from secondary school to the academic demands of university life poses substantial challenges for higher education institutions worldwide. Adams and Luiz stated that these

[1] Theresa Conefrey, "Supporting First-Generation Students' Adjustment to College with High-Impact Practices," *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 23, no. 1 (2021): 139–60.

CORRESPONDENCE – Sinazo Majola **Email:** smajola@wsu.ac.za
PUBLICATION HISTORY - Received: 20th March, 2026 | Accepted: 8th September, 2026 | Published: 20th November, 2026.
TO CITE THIS ARTICLE – Majola, Sinazo, and Ntando Elliot Mpahla. "Exploring the support necessary for better academic performance of First-Time Entering Students at a selected university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa." *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 7, no.10 (2026): 3206 - 3219. https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.202671020
COPYRIGHT AND LICENSING - © 2026 The Author(s). Published and Maintained by Noyam Journals.
This is an open access article under the CCBY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

difficulties are made worse in South Africa by historical injustices, socio-economic gaps, and a constantly changing educational environment.[2] Adams and Luiz further argued that first-time students at Eastern Cape universities frequently face a range of challenges that affect their academic success, from a lack of social and emotional support networks to insufficient academic preparation.[3] According to Rotar, many institutions still find it difficult to adequately meet the special needs of these students, despite the increased awareness of the value of student support.[4] The study by Nunn argued that students' academic paths are mostly shaped during their first year and that early difficulties can lead to high dropout rates and a diminished sense of camaraderie within the academic community.[5] Several factors, such as peer interactions, family support, individual coping strategies, and the accessibility and availability of support resources, affect first-year academic achievement. Little is known about how Eastern Cape university students deal with these difficulties and what kinds of support would be most helpful in enhancing their academic performance.[6] According to Alam and Mohanty, first-year students need full support systems to enhance their academic performance and overall success.[7] Many studies have been conducted on the support necessary for the better academic performance of first-time entering students worldwide, but no study has been conducted at the selected university.

The transition to university life can be difficult for first-time entering students, especially in the context of South Africa's diverse educational landscape. Adams and Luiz state that first-year students face significant academic challenges, including a lack of preparedness for the demands of higher education, insufficient academic support systems, and difficulties in adapting to new learning environments.[8] Researchers have noticed that various support structures are in place at the selected university, but more research needs to be conducted on specific types of support that are most beneficial to first-time entering students, particularly in terms of improving their academic performance. Many studies were conducted on support necessary to assist in the smooth transition of students to university, but it remains unclear which support mechanisms effectively address the unique needs of this student population. Given the critical role that early academic success plays in the retention and success of students, it is essential to identify and understand the forms of support that are most needed and how they can be better implemented to enhance academic outcomes for first-time entering students in the Eastern Cape.

Based on this background, this study seeks to understand the challenges that first-time entering students face in their transition to university. It also seeks to identify how these challenges affect academic performance, how the students' needs can be addressed, and to provide recommendations on improving institutional support systems to enhance academic outcomes.

The study's findings might inform university administrators, policymakers, and support staff on how to develop and implement more responsive, student-centered support systems that enhance academic success and reduce dropout rates. Additionally, this study may contribute to existing academic literature by providing context-specific knowledge that may not emerge through quantitative methods alone. The study aims to foster more equitable and effective educational practices within South African universities. This study will contribute to a better understanding of the complex realities first-time university students face.

---

[2] Ansellia Adams and John M Luiz, "Incomplete Institutional Change and the Persistence of Racial Inequality: The Contestation of Institutional Misalignment in South Africa," *Journal of Management Studies* 59, no. 4 (2022): 857–85.

[3] Adams and Luiz, "Incomplete Institutional Change and the Persistence of Racial Inequality: The Contestation of Institutional Misalignment in South Africa."

[4] Olga Rotar, "Online Student Support: A Framework for Embedding Support Interventions into the Online Learning Cycle," *Research and Practice in Technology Enhanced Learning* 17, no. 1 (2022): 2.

[5] Lisa M Nunn, *College Belonging: How First-Year and First-Generation Students Navigate Campus Life* (Rutgers University Press, 2021).

[6] Adams and Luiz, "Incomplete Institutional Change and the Persistence of Racial Inequality: The Contestation of Institutional Misalignment in South Africa."

[7] Ashraf Alam and Atasi Mohanty, "Predicting Students' Performance Employing Educational Data Mining Techniques, Machine Learning, and Learning Analytics,"in *International Conference on Communication, Networks and Computing* (Springer,2022),166–77.

[8] Adams and Luiz, "Incomplete Institutional Change and the Persistence of Racial Inequality: The Contestation of Institutional Misalignment in South Africa."

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges that first-time entering students face in their transition to university

Transitioning from high school to university is a significant milestone in students' academic and personal development. According to Kumar et al., this period is often marked by a host of challenges that can influence students' academic performance, psychological well-being, and overall adjustment.[9] Choi and Chang added that understanding these challenges is crucial for developing effective support mechanisms to facilitate smoother transitions for first-time entering students.[10] Kong and Yang argued that one of the difficulties faced by first-year students is adjusting to the academic rigors of university life.[11] Mthembu indicates that students often struggle with increased workload, higher academic expectations, and independent learning.[12] The shift from structured high school environments to university study can lead to feelings of overwhelm and inadequacy.[13]

Kahu, Ashley, and Picton said that first-time students frequently encounter stress, anxiety, and feelings of homesickness.[14] Sowmiya added that the loss of familiar support systems and the need to establish new social networks can contribute to loneliness and depression.[15] These emotional challenges can negatively impact students' motivation and academic engagement, underscoring the importance of mental health support during this period.

Financial constraints pose additional barriers for many first-year students. Managing tuition fees, accommodation costs, and daily expenses can cause significant stress and distraction from academic pursuits.[16] Logistical issues, such as navigating campus facilities and understanding administrative processes, can also hinder a smooth transition.[17] Research emphasizes the importance of support systems in easing students' transition. Orientation programs, academic advising, peer mentoring, and counseling services have been shown to enhance students' adjustment and retention.[18] The transition to university is a multifaceted process involving academic, psychological, social, and logistical challenges.

How these challenges affect academic performance, and how the students' needs can be addressed

Reviewed studies demonstrate that the transition from high school to university presents several interconnected challenges that can significantly affect the academic performance of first-time entering students. Academically, the increased workload, higher expectations, and demand for independent learning often leave students struggling to cope with university standards.[19] As a result, many students experience poor time management, reduced class participation, lower academic confidence, poor

---

[9] Devanshu Kumar et al., "Exploring the Transformative Role of Artificial Intelligence and Metaverse in Education: A Comprehensive Review," *Metaverse Basic and Applied Research* 2 (2023): 21.

[10] Wan Chong Choi and Chi In Chang, "A Survey of Techniques, Design, Applications, Challenges, and Student Perspective of Chatbot-Based Learning Tutoring System Supporting Students to Learn in Education," 2025.

[11] Siu-Cheung Kong and Yin Yang, "A Human-Centered Learning and Teaching Framework Using Generative Artificial Intelligence for Self-Regulated Learning Development through Domain Knowledge Learning in K–12 Settings," *IEEE Transactions on Learning Technologies* 17 (2024): 1562–73.

[12] T Mthembu, "The Role of Academic Support in First-Year Students' Success: A South African Perspective," *Journal of Higher Education Policy* 33, no. 2 (2021): 98–115.

[13] Ella R Kahu, Nicole Ashley, and Catherine Picton, "Exploring the Complexity of First-Year Student Belonging in Higher Education: Familiarity, Interpersonal, and Academic Belonging," *Student Success* 13, no. 2 (2022): 10–20.

[14] Kahu, Ashley, and Picton, "Exploring the Complexity of First-Year Student Belonging in Higher Education: Familiarity, Interpersonal, and Academic Belonging."

[15] K C Sowmiya, "Addressing Student Well-Being in Universities," *Factors Impacting Student Well-Being and Coping Tactics* 337 (2024).

[16] T Dube and B Nembaware, "Challenges Facing Higher Education Institutions in the Eastern Cape," *African Journal of Higher Education Studies* 18, no. 1 (2022): 45–60.

[17] Denise Jackson and Michael Tomlinson, "The Relative Importance of Work Experience, Extra-Curricular and University-Based Activities on Student Employability," *Higher Education Research & Development* 41, no. 4 (2022): 1119–35.

[18] Tara C Dennehy and Nilanjana Dasgupta, "Female Peer Mentors Early in College Increase Women's Positive Academic Experiences and Retention in Engineering," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, no. 23 (2017): 5964–69.

[19] Kong and Yang, "A Human-Centered Learning and Teaching Framework Using Generative Artificial Intelligence for Self-Regulated Learning Development through Domain Knowledge Learning in K–12 Settings"; Mthembu, "The Role of Academic Support in First-Year Students' Success: A South African Perspective."

assessment performance, and an increased risk of failing modules or dropping out.[20] Without adequate academic support, these challenges may limit students' ability to achieve their full academic potential.

To address the challenges faced by first-year students, universities implemented targeted support systems that address students' academic, emotional, social, and logistical needs. Orientation programs familiarise students with campus resources, academic expectations, and administrative processes, reducing logistical stress.[21] Academic advising and tutoring services help students develop effective study strategies and manage their workload expectations, enhancing their academic confidence and performance.

Mental health support is vital; counseling services, peer mentoring, and stress management workshops provide emotional support, fostering resilience and emotional well-being.[22] Creating an inclusive environment that promotes social integration through clubs, support groups, and peer networks alleviates feelings of loneliness and homesickness.[23] Financial aid programs and budgeting workshops alleviated financial stress, allowing students to focus more on their studies.

In sum, addressing these diverse needs through comprehensive support structures significantly improved students' academic outcomes and facilitated a successful transition to university life. Tailored interventions that recognize the multifaceted nature of these challenges are essential for fostering academic success and personal development among first-year students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory that underpins this study is Tinto's Student Integration Theory, first developed by Tinto and later refined in 1993 in his book *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*.[24] Tinto argued that students' academic success, persistence, and retention depend largely on how well students become integrated into both the academic and social systems of a higher education institution.[25] O'Shea et al. added that students enter university with different family backgrounds, personal attributes, educational experiences, skills, goals, and expectations.[26] These characteristics influence their commitment to completing their studies. However, students are more likely to succeed academically when universities provide adequate academic and social support that helps them integrate into the institutional environment. Tinto's Student Integration Theory provides a strong theoretical foundation for this study because it explains how academic and social support influence the academic performance of first-time entering students.[27] Reddy, Naidoo, and Ross said that the theory emphasises that successful integration into university life promotes student engagement, persistence, and academic success.[28] Although some scholars argue that the theory pays insufficient attention to external socio-economic and cultural factors, it remains one of the most influential and widely applied frameworks for understanding student success in higher education. The theory's emphasis on institutional support aligns closely with this study's aim of exploring the support necessary to improve the academic performance of first-time entering students in a university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. This theory is highly relevant to this study because it provides a comprehensive explanation of the types of institutional support required to improve the academic performance of first-time entering students.

---

[20] Kahu, Ashley, and Picton, "Exploring the Complexity of First-Year Student Belonging in Higher Education: Familiarity, Interpersonal, and Academic Belonging."

[21] Dennehy and Dasgupta, "Female Peer Mentors Early in College Increase Women's Positive Academic Experiences and Retention in Engineering."

[22] Kahu, Ashley, and Picton, "Exploring the Complexity of First-Year Student Belonging in Higher Education: Familiarity, Interpersonal, and Academic Belonging."

[23] Sowmiya, "Addressing Student Well-Being in Universities."

[24] Vincent Tinto, "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research," *Review of Educational Research* 45, no. 1 (1975): 89–125.

[25] Tinto, "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research."

[26] Sarah O'Shea et al., *First-in-Family Students, University Experience and Family Life: Motivations, Transitions and Participation* (Springer, 2017).

[27] Tinto, "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research."

[28] R. Reddy, C. Naidoo, and N.S. Ross, "Students' Transition into Higher Education: Incorporating High-Impact Practices to Foster Smooth Transition and Academic Success," *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies* 7, no. 7 (2025): 1–15.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing a case study design to explore the academic support needs of first-time entering students. Using a qualitative research technique clarifies the role of the researcher, the procedures involved in the research process, and the methodology to be used for data processing. The qualitative approach was relevant to the study since it enabled a thorough examination of the participants' viewpoints, experiences, and views.

Research design

The researchers used a case study research design as a suitable design for this study. In this study, the researcher employed a case study research design because, in qualitative research, case studies are frequently driven by the goal of obtaining a comprehensive, in-depth understanding of a particular instance, event, individual, or group in its actual setting.

Population

In this study, the population of interest was first-year students at a selected university in the Eastern Cape. The researcher chose first-year students because they are the primary source of information, as the researcher wants to understand the support necessary to improve the academic performance of first-year students at a selected university.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The non-probability sampling strategy was employed in the study since it entails choosing a group of individuals who possess a specific characteristic that the researcher wishes to examine. Participants were selected based on their specific characteristics, criteria and availability that align with the research objectives. Participants were 10 first-year students at a selected university in the Eastern Cape.

Data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews that were recorded and transcribed for analysis were used by the researcher to gather data. Two types of semi-structured interviews were carried out: one-on-one and group interviews. The researchers chose semi-structured interviews as a relevant tool to collect data in this study.

Data Analysis

In this paper, the researchers employed thematic analysis to analyse data because they wished to comprehend and explain the rich experiences, viewpoints, and significance found in the data. In addition, thematic analysis was useful for locating recurrent themes and subthemes within the data.

Ethical Considerations

Researchers adhered to ethical guidelines for conducting qualitative research. All participants were informed about the study's purpose, their right to confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and signed consent forms. Participant identities and responses will remain confidential. The data will be stored securely, and only the researchers and research team will have access to it. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The results of this study revealed that many students view the transition to university as a turning point in their lives, and first-time entering students (FTES) frequently encounter challenges that may have an impact on their academic performance. Supporting first-year students at a selected university in the Eastern Cape for better academic performance requires a multi-pronged approach encompassing academic support, social integration and mentorship, financial support, and psychological support. Here are some key strategies that were suggested by students.

Theme 1: Academic Support

The term academic support describes the tools, resources, and advice given to students to enhance their knowledge, abilities, and academic achievement.[29] In reference to academic support, Kumar et al. argued that Academic support improves student performance by providing tailored guidance, resources, and skills growth that help students better understand course material, manage their time effectively, and build confidence in their abilities, ultimately leading to improved learning outcomes and academic success.[30] When participants were asked about the academic support that they need for better academic performance, they revealed that they need proactive intervention, personalized learning resources, mentoring and academic skills workshops.

Sub-theme 1.1: Personalized academic support

Numerous participants underlined the importance of personalized academic support. This includes more time with tutors and personalised learning resources. Participants expressed a desire for more time with tutors, as they found it easier to understand course material when explained in a one-on-one setting.

For instance, L2CSM5 mentioned that.

> *"I wish that the higher education institution could give me more time with a tutor because I find it easy to ask questions and understand the topic when it is explained by a tutor."*

Sub-theme 1.2: Access to resources and technology

The need for access to resources and technology was another recurring issue raised by participants. Several participants mentioned that they needed additional computer lab access or instruction on how to use internet resources efficiently. Participants suggested that More access to computer labs and proper training in searching for journal articles and textbooks online would improve their academic performance. For example, participant L2CSF2 said that*:*

> *"The higher education institution must give me more time to access computer labs, and I must be trained on how to search for journals and textbooks online".*

Sub-theme 1.3: Training in Academic Research Skills

Many students expressed a desire to be trained in accessing scholarly articles and textbooks online. Participant L2CSF4 added that:

> *"I need to be trained on how to access information online*

Participant L2CSM4 also emphasised that:

> *"I did not know how to access scholarly articles or electronic textbooks. I think receiving training on how to use the university library databases and other online academic resources will assist me."*

With a similar view, participant L2CSF2 said that:

> *"Most of us rely on Google because we are not familiar with academic databases. Training on how to search for scholarly articles and download prescribed textbooks would make studying much easier."*

Subtheme 1.4: Academic feedback

Participants emphasized that receiving regular feedback from lecturers helps them identify areas of improvement, allowing them to address shortcomings before they become obstacles to academic success. L2CSF3 said that

> *"Lecturers must give me feedback every time I do a task so that we can be able to see if I need to improve my performance".* Many participants have the same ideas; participant L2CSF4 added that:
>
> *"I also need constant feedback from my lecturers".*

[29] Omari Shabani and Kefiloe A Maboe, "The Effectiveness and Efficiency of Student Support Services in Open Distance Learning Institutions in Africa: A Desktop Review," *African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning* 5, no. 2 (2021): 25–44.

[30] Kumar et al., "Exploring the Transformative Role of Artificial Intelligence and Metaverse in Education: A Comprehensive Review."

Sub-theme 1.5: Peer mentoring

Participants suggested that learning from more seasoned peers may be helpful, especially when it comes to efficiently managing workload. For instance, participant L2CSM3 emphasised that:

> "*Having someone who has already been through the same experience makes a big difference. Senior students share practical study strategies and time management skills that help me as a new student to cope with the academic workload."*

While participant L2CSF1 added that :

> "*Peer mentoring is important because I often struggle to organise my studies. An experienced student guided me on planning my work, prioritising tasks, and avoiding falling behind with my coursework."*

Theme 2: Psychosocial Support and Social Integration

Sub–theme 2.1: Social Support

Participants underlined how important it is for universities to provide a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere that supports students in forming relationships, feeling accepted, and overcoming emotional and mental health issues.

Sub-theme 2.2: Social events

The necessity of programs and activities that foster a feeling of community and belonging was a recurrent subject among participants. Several participants suggested that social events, such as department-specific "braais" (barbecues), could help first-year students interact with continuing students, facilitating meaningful connections. Participant L2CSM1 mentioned that:

> *"I think the university should organise social events like departmental braais because they give us an opportunity to meet senior students. This helped me feel welcomed, make friends, and realise that I am part of the university community."*

Similarly, participant L2CSF3 had the same opinion:

> "*Social activities are just as important as academic support. Events such as braais, welcome gatherings, or student networking sessions allow me to interact with continuing students, ask questions freely, and build relationships that make settling into university much easier."*

Sub-theme 2.3: Orientation sessions

To assist first-year students in acclimating to the academic and social environment, participants recommended that educational institutions provide thorough orientation programs. Participant L2CSM3 said that.

> *"I think the university should offer comprehensive orientation sessions for first-time entering students to help us understand both the academic and social environment. Orientation should introduce us to university services, academic expectations, campus facilities, and student support programmes so that we can settle in more quickly and feel confident from the beginning."*

Sub-theme 2.4: Peer support networks

Participants emphasised the value of having a student counsellor and a peer mentor to help them deal with the difficulties they encounter. Peer mentoring provides students with a valuable support system by allowing them to learn from peers who have already experienced the transition to university. Participant L2CSM3 stated that

> *"Having both a student counsellor and a peer mentor would make a big difference for me. A peer mentor understands the challenges of transitioning to university because they have already been through the same experience. They can provide guidance, encouragement, and practical advice, while a student counsellor can offer additional support when I am struggling academically or personally."*

Subtheme 2.5: mental health support

Numerous participants recommended that workshops, campaigns, and convenient access to counselling services be used to raise awareness of mental health issues at universities. For example, participants stressed the importance of having a student counsellor on hand to offer assistance when things get tough. Participant L2CSF5

> *"The university should do more to promote mental health by offering workshops, awareness campaigns, and easy access to counselling services. There should always be a student counsellor available because I experience stress and anxiety, and having someone to talk to can make a big difference when things become overwhelming."*

Sub-theme 2.6: wellness programs

Participants underlined the importance of wellness programs that attend to students' general well-being in addition to mental health knowledge. Workshops on stress management, discussions on mental health, and other activities aimed at enhancing emotional resilience may be included in these programs. Participant L2CSF5 said that:

> "*I believe the university should offer regular wellness programmes that focus on students' overall well-being, not just academics. Workshops on stress management, mental health discussions, and activities that build emotional resilience would help us cope better with university life and stay motivated throughout our studies."*

Theme 3: Financial Support

Financial support refers to the different forms of financial aid that the organisation offers students to help them pay for their education.[31] Salmi and D'Addio state that the goal of financial support is to lower financial obstacles, increase access to higher education, and free students from financial stress so they may concentrate on their studies.[32]

Sub-theme 3.1: Financial Literacy and Academic Performance

Participants stressed the value of developing sound budgeting skills, pointing out that even with low means, knowing how to divide money properly can reduce financial stress. Participant L2CM2 emphasised that:

> *"I think the university should provide financial literacy workshops because I struggle to manage my money. Learning how to budget properly, even when you have limited financial resources, can reduce stress and help you focus more on your studies instead of constantly worrying about finances."*

Sub-theme 3.2: On-Campus Employment Opportunities

Participants mentioned that receiving financial aid from organisations like NSFAS or bursaries helps them to concentrate on their studies without having to worry about how they will pay for their education. Students who work on campus not only earn a consistent income but also get job experience and time management skills that will help them in their future careers. Participant L2CM4 mentioned that:

> *"Receiving financial support through NSFAS allows me to concentrate on my studies without constantly worrying about paying tuition or meeting my daily needs. I also believe the university should create more on-campus employment opportunities because they provide us with extra income, valuable work experience, and time management skills that prepare us for our future careers while supporting our academic success."*

[31] Susan Dynarski, Lindsay Page, and Judith Scott-Clayton, "College Costs, Financial Aid, and Student Decisions," in *Handbook of the Economics of Education*, vol. 7 (Elsevier, 2023), 227–85.

[32] Jamil Salmi and Anna D'Addio, "Policies for Achieving Inclusion in Higher Education," *Policy Reviews in Higher Education* 5, no. 1 (2021): 47–72.

Sub-theme3.3: Bursaries and Scholarships for Disadvantaged Students

Participants in their remarks underlined the need to provide bursaries that are especially intended for students from underprivileged backgrounds. Participant L2CF1

> *"I believe the university and other stakeholders should provide more bursaries and scholarships specifically for us from disadvantaged backgrounds. I am a capable student who struggles financially, and this affects my ability to focus on my studies. Financial support will give me the opportunity to succeed academically without the constant burden of worrying about how I will pay for my education and living expenses."*

DISCUSSION

Academic Support - Personalized academic support

The study reveals that first-time entering students need personalised academic support. This aligns with the findings of Kong and Yang, who argued that personalised guidance improves understanding and boosts student confidence.[33] According to Choi and Chang, the desire for individualised support suggests that students benefit from attention that is directly relevant to their individual learning needs, allowing them to grasp difficult concepts more effectively.[34]

Access to resources and technology

The study highlighted the need for first-time entering students to be given more access to resources like the library and computer labs. These findings are similar to the study findings of Branan, Bennett, and Braithwaite, which highlighted that students' access to labs can have a significant positive impact on students' performance at all levels. They further stated that access to labs is particularly important for students who lack personal computers.[35]

Training in Academic Research Skills

Training on accessing scholarly articles and textbooks online was emphasised in this study. This aligns with the study by Lee, Lee, and Jeong, which emphasizes the importance of equipping first-time entering students with essential skills for accessing scholarly articles and textbooks online, thereby building a strong foundation for their academic success and fostering independent learning in the digital environment.[36]

Academic Feedback

The study findings revealed a need for consistent academic feedback to update first-time entering students on their progress. Saeed and Mohamedali argued that time plays a critical role in student learning, providing students with a clear understanding of their progress and areas that need further attention.[37] Thus, ensuring that students receive constructive, ongoing feedback should be a priority for academic institutions.

Peer mentoring

The significance of peer mentoring was also emphasised by the study. This suggestion aligns with the concept of peer-assisted learning, which has been shown to improve academic performance by providing students with practical, relatable insights from those who have already navigated similar academic

---

[33] Kong and Yang, "A Human-Centered Learning and Teaching Framework Using Generative Artificial Intelligence for Self-Regulated Learning Development through Domain Knowledge Learning in K–12 Settings."

[34] Choi and Chang, "A Survey of Techniques, Design, Applications, Challenges, and Student Perspective of Chatbot-Based Learning Tutoring System Supporting Students to Learn in Education."

[35] Daniel M Branan, Paul Bennett, and Nicholas Braithwaite, "Remote Access Laboratory Equipment for Undergraduate Science Education," in *Teaching Science Online* (Routledge, 2023), 143–55.

[36] Stephanie Lee, Ju-Ho Lee, and Youngsik Jeong, "The Effects of Digital Textbooks on Students' Academic Performance, Academic Interest, and Learning Skills," *Journal of Marketing Research* 60, no. 4 (2023): 792–811.

[37] Nagham Saeed and Fehmida Mohamedali, "A Study to Evaluate Students' Performance, Engagement, and Progression in Higher Education Based on Feedforward Teaching Approach," *Education Sciences* 12, no. 1 (2022): 56.

challenges.[38] Chandrasekera et.al. agree with Mthembu by stating that peer mentoring can offer a less intimidating and more accessible avenue for students to learn, providing both emotional support and academic guidance.[39]

Psychosocial Support, Social Integration

Social support

The findings of the study highlight how crucial social support is for improving students' well-being and academic achievement. In this setting, social support was viewed as essential for both personal growth and academic achievement, especially for first-year students adjusting to university life. According to Sowmiya, psychosocial support, social integration, and mentorship improve student performance by encouraging emotional well-being, building a sense of community, and offering individualised assistance, which helps students navigate academic challenges and succeed.[40]

Social events

The study demonstrated the need for social events to assist first-time entering students. These findings aligned with the study by Kahu et al., who stated that social gatherings can be a useful tactic to help students, particularly those who are new to the school, feel less alone and more a part of the community.[41]

Orientation sessions

The significance of orientation sessions as a fundamental support system for new students was again emphasised by the participants. This finding aligns with the study findings of Kahu et al., who argued that students must be introduced to academic expectations, campus resources, and support services through orientation programs.[42] Institutions can facilitate a more seamless transition, lessen anxiety, and boost students' confidence in navigating college life by offering some preliminary advice.[43]

Sub-theme: Peer support networks

Peer support networks emerged as a critical form of social support. These findings are supported by a study by Shabani and Maboe, which said that peer mentoring provides students with a valuable support system by allowing them to learn from peers who have already experienced the transition to university.[44] Dennehy and Dasgupta posit that peer mentors can help incoming students adjust to academic life by offering guidance, emotional support, and counsel.[45] Peer support networks have been related to better mental health, a stronger sense of belonging, and increased academic achievement, according to research.

Mental health support

The results also made clear how urgently mental health support is needed. This finding aligns with the study findings of Sowmiya, which stated that students often face emotional and mental health challenges during their academic journey, and these issues can significantly impact their academic performance.[46] The importance of mental health support is reinforced by existing literature, which indicates that mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress are common among university students and can

[38] Mthembu, "The Role of Academic Support in First-Year Students' Success: A South African Perspective."
[39] Tilanka Chandrasekera et al., "PeTe (Peer Teaching) Mentors: How near Peer Mentoring (NPM) Affects Academic Success and Retention in Design Education," *Innovative Higher Education* 49, no. 5 (2024): 975–91.
[40] Sowmiya, "Addressing Student Well-Being in Universities."
[41] Kahu, Ashley, and Picton, "Exploring the Complexity of First-Year Student Belonging in Higher Education: Familiarity, Interpersonal, and Academic Belonging."
[42] Kahu, Ashley, and Picton, "Exploring the Complexity of First-Year Student Belonging in Higher Education: Familiarity, Interpersonal, and Academic Belonging."
[43] Sowmiya, "Addressing Student Well-Being in Universities."
[44] Shabani and Maboe, "The Effectiveness and Efficiency of Student Support Services in Open Distance Learning Institutions in Africa: A Desktop Review."
[45] Dennehy and Dasgupta, "Female Peer Mentors Early in College Increase Women's Positive Academic Experiences and Retention in Engineering."
[46] Sowmiya, "Addressing Student Well-Being in Universities."

affect academic outcomes.[47] According to Hanson et.al., giving students access to stress management classes, mental health initiatives, and counseling services can help them manage their mental health and achieve academic success.[48] In other words, institutions should ensure that mental health resources are not only available but also well-publicized and easily accessible to students.

Wellness programs

Workshops on stress management, discussions on mental health, and other activities aimed at enhancing emotional resilience may be included in these programs. Bladek said that it is imperative that health initiatives be included in the classroom to help students manage the demands of both their personal and academic lives.[49] Giving first-year students, in particular, a comprehensive support system that encompasses both academic and emotional support is crucial because the adjustment to university life can be challenging.

Financial Support

Financial Literacy and Academic Performance

The results indicate that students' capacity to successfully manage their resources, which in turn improves their academic performance, is greatly influenced by their level of financial literacy. To improve their comprehension of financial planning, debt management, and budgeting, survey participants indicated a desire for financial literacy workshops. These observations are consistent with research that indicates financially literate students are better able to handle their money, which can lower stress levels and increase their ability to concentrate on their studies.[50] Students also asked for chances to participate in institutional programs that would help them become better financial decision-makers. Dynarski et. al. said that it would be advantageous to offer educational workshops on financial subjects like budgeting, credit management, and saving to give students the skills they need to make prudent financial choices and successfully handle their money throughout their academic journeys.[51]

On-Campus Employment Opportunities

Opportunities for employment on campus were also emphasised as a crucial means of student assistance. Jackson and Tomlinson suggest that universities can reduce financial stress and provide students with useful work experience by providing jobs that allow them to work while they study.[52]

Bursaries and Scholarships for Disadvantaged Students

The study revealed that scholarships and bursaries would be extremely beneficial to students from underprivileged families. According to Dube and Nembaware, students frequently encounter major obstacles to pursuing higher education, such as the incapacity to pay for tuition and other related expenses.[53] They further suggested that Institutions can help close the financial gap and increase access to higher education by providing bursaries that are specific to the requirements of these students.[54]

---

[47] T. Sivertsen, "Financial Constraints and Their Impact on Academic Performance in South African Universities," *South African Journal of Education and Development* 11, no. 2 (2020): 45–58.
[48] UYOK Hanson, C A Okonkwo, and C U Orakwe, "Fostering Mental Health Awareness and Academic Success through Educational Psychology and Telehealth Programs," *Iconic Research and Engineering Journals* 8, no. 6 (2024): 523–30.
[49] Marta Bladek, "Student Well-Being Matters: Academic Library Support for the Whole Student," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 47, no. 3 (2021): 102349.
[50] Dube and Nembaware, "Challenges Facing Higher Education Institutions in the Eastern Cape."
[51] Dynarski, Page, and Scott-Clayton, "College Costs, Financial Aid, and Student Decisions."
[52] Jackson and Tomlinson, "The Relative Importance of Work Experience, Extra-Curricular and University-Based Activities on Student Employability."
[53] Dube and Nembaware, "Challenges Facing Higher Education Institutions in the Eastern Cape."
[54] Dube and Nembaware, "Challenges Facing Higher Education Institutions in the Eastern Cape."

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper makes the following recommendations:

- Implement personalized academic support programs, including tutoring and mentorship, tailored to meet individual student needs.
- Increase access to campus resources such as libraries and computer labs, especially for first-time-entering students lacking personal devices.
- Provide regular training workshops on academic research skills, including accessing scholarly articles and textbooks online.
- Establish structured and ongoing feedback mechanisms from lecturers to monitor and support student progress.
- Develop peer mentoring schemes to foster academic guidance and emotional support among students.
- Organize social events and orientation programs to facilitate social integration and ease students' transition into university life.
- Offer accessible mental health services, including counseling, stress management workshops, and wellness programs.
- Promote mental health awareness and resilience-building activities as part of the student support system.
- Introduce financial literacy workshops covering budgeting, debt management, and saving strategies.
- Expand on-campus employment opportunities and facilitate access to scholarships and bursaries for disadvantaged students.
- Provide emergency financial aid options to alleviate immediate financial stressors impacting student performance.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that comprehensive support for first-time entering students is crucial for their academic success and overall well-being. Personalized academic guidance, access to resources and technology, and training in research skills are fundamental to fostering independence and confidence in students' academic pursuits. Additionally, consistent academic feedback and peer mentoring enhance students' understanding and engagement, while psychosocial support through social events, orientation, and peer networks helps facilitate social integration and emotional resilience. The urgent need for mental health services and wellness programs underscores the importance of addressing emotional challenges that can impede academic performance. Financial literacy, on-campus employment opportunities, and targeted bursaries or scholarships are also vital in alleviating financial burdens and enabling students to focus on their studies. Overall, adopting a holistic approach that combines academic, social, emotional, and financial support systems can significantly improve the transition and success of first-time students in higher education institutions.

Recommendation for future studies

Future research can focus on and address non-cognitive factors that affect academic success for first-time entering students. This relates to the importance of academic mindsets, perseverance, learning strategies, and social skills as components influencing student success. This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach; future studies may adopt a mixed-methods approach.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adams, Ansellia, and John M. Luiz. "Incomplete Institutional Change and the Persistence of Racial Inequality: The Contestation of Institutional Misalignment in South Africa." *Journal of Management Studies* 59, no. 4 (2022): 857–85.

Alam, Ashraf, and Atasi Mohanty. "Predicting Students' Performance Employing Educational Data Mining Techniques, Machine Learning, and Learning Analytics." In *International Conference on*

Communication, Networks and Computing, 166–77. Springer, 2022.
Bladek, Marta. "Student Well-Being Matters: Academic Library Support for the Whole Student." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 47, no. 3 (2021): 102349.
Branan, Daniel M., Paul Bennett, and Nicholas Braithwaite. "Remote Access Laboratory Equipment for Undergraduate Science Education." In *Teaching Science Online*, 143–55. Routledge, 2023.
Chandrasekera, Tilanka, Zahrasadat Hosseini, Aditya Jayadas, and Lynn M. Boorady. "PeTe (Peer Teaching) Mentors: How near Peer Mentoring (NPM) Affects Academic Success and Retention in Design Education." *Innovative Higher Education* 49, no. 5 (2024): 975–91.
Choi, Wan Chong, and Chi In Chang. "A Survey of Techniques, Design, Applications, Challenges, and Student Perspective of Chatbot-Based Learning Tutoring System Supporting Students to Learn in Education," 2025.
Conefrey, Theresa. "Supporting First-Generation Students' Adjustment to College with High-Impact Practices." *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 23, no. 1 (2021): 139–60.
Dennehy, Tara C., and Nilanjana Dasgupta. "Female Peer Mentors Early in College Increase Women's Positive Academic Experiences and Retention in Engineering." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, no. 23 (2017): 5964–69.
Dube, T., and B. Nembaware. "Challenges Facing Higher Education Institutions in the Eastern Cape." *African Journal of Higher Education Studies* 18, no. 1 (2022): 45–60.
Dynarski, Susan, Lindsay Page, and Judith Scott-Clayton. "College Costs, Financial Aid, and Student Decisions." In *Handbook of the Economics of Education*, 7:227–85. Elsevier, 2023.
Hanson, UYOK, C A Okonkwo, and C U Orakwe. "Fostering Mental Health Awareness and Academic Success through Educational Psychology and Telehealth Programs." *Iconic Research and Engineering Journals* 8, no. 6 (2024): 523–30.
Jackson, Denise, and Michael Tomlinson. "The Relative Importance of Work Experience, Extra-Curricular and University-Based Activities on Student Employability." *Higher Education Research & Development* 41, no. 4 (2022): 1119–35.
Kahu, Ella R., Nicole Ashley, and Catherine Picton. "Exploring the Complexity of First-Year Student Belonging in Higher Education: Familiarity, Interpersonal, and Academic Belonging." *Student Success* 13, no. 2 (2022): 10–20.
Kong, Siu-Cheung, and Yin Yang. "A Human-Centered Learning and Teaching Framework Using Generative Artificial Intelligence for Self-Regulated Learning Development through Domain Knowledge Learning in K–12 Settings." *IEEE Transactions on Learning Technologies* 17 (2024): 1562–73.
Kumar, Devanshu, Alimul Haque, Khushboo Mishra, Farheen Islam, Binay Kumar Mishra, and Sultan Ahmad. "Exploring the Transformative Role of Artificial Intelligence and Metaverse in Education: A Comprehensive Review." *Metaverse Basic and Applied Research* 2 (2023): 21.
Lee, Stephanie, Ju-Ho Lee, and Youngsik Jeong. "The Effects of Digital Textbooks on Students' Academic Performance, Academic Interest, and Learning Skills." *Journal of Marketing Research* 60, no. 4 (2023): 792–811.
Mthembu, T. "The Role of Academic Support in First-Year Students' Success: A South African Perspective." *Journal of Higher Education Policy* 33, no. 2 (2021): 98–115.
Nunn, Lisa M. *College Belonging: How First-Year and First-Generation Students Navigate Campus Life*. Rutgers University Press, 2021.
O'Shea, Sarah, Josephine May, Cathy Stone, and Janine Delahunty. *First-in-Family Students, University Experience and Family Life: Motivations, Transitions and Participation*. Springer, 2017.
Reddy, R., C. Naidoo, and N.S. Ross. "Students' Transition into Higher Education: Incorporating High-Impact Practices to Foster Smooth Transition and Academic Success." *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies* 7, no. 7 (2025): 1–15.
Rotar, Olga. "Online Student Support: A Framework for Embedding Support Interventions into the Online Learning Cycle." *Research and Practice in Technology Enhanced Learning* 17, no. 1

(2022): 2.
Saeed, Nagham, and Fehmida Mohamedali. "A Study to Evaluate Students' Performance, Engagement, and Progression in Higher Education Based on Feedforward Teaching Approach." *Education Sciences* 12, no. 1 (2022): 56.
Salmi, Jamil, and Anna D'Addio. "Policies for Achieving Inclusion in Higher Education." *Policy Reviews in Higher Education* 5, no. 1 (2021): 47–72.
Shabani, Omari, and Kefiloe A Maboe. "The Effectiveness and Efficiency of Student Support Services in Open Distance Learning Institutions in Africa: A Desktop Review." *African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning* 5, no. 2 (2021): 25–44.
Sivertsen, T. "Financial Constraints and Their Impact on Academic Performance in South African Universities." *South African Journal of Education and Development* 11, no. 2 (2020): 45–58.
Sowmiya, K. C. "Addressing Student Well-Being in Universities." *Factors Impacting Student Well-Being and Coping Tactics* 337 (2024).
Tinto, Vincent. "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research." *Review of Educational Research* 45, no. 1 (1975): 89–125.

ABOUT AUTHORS

Ms Sinazo Majola holds a Bachelor of Education Honours degree, is currently pursuing a Master of Education and works as an Acting Postgraduate Coordinator in the Faculty of Education (FED) at Walter Sisulu University. An aspiring researcher with a strong passion for learning and growth in the field of research, Ms Majola is a novice researcher, highly motivated and eager to develop expertise and make meaningful contributions to the area of interest. To achieve these ambitions, active participation in numerous research seminars and research writing retreats, as well as attendance at various research conferences, has been undertaken. Published work includes 03 articles, 01 book chapter, and 2 papers in conference proceedings.

Dr. Ntando Elliot Mpahla is a PhD holder and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Adult & Education Foundations at the Faculty of Education at Walter Sisulu University, with 10 years of work experience at a tertiary institution. Supervision of Honours, Master's, and PhD students has been undertaken. Lecturing covers both undergraduate and postgraduate students who aspire to be educators in South Africa. With the undergraduate students, the task is to introduce research, because educators employed in schools will come across sections dealing with research in the syllabus. With the postgraduate students, supervision is the order of the day. Eighteen B Ed Honours students and two Master of Education students have already graduated in the Faculty of Education. Currently, four (04) Master's students and two (02) PhD students are under supervision. Generally, Dr Mpahla is a novice researcher who is very eager to become an experienced researcher, with 27 articles published. Research interests are in the disciplines of professional teacher development and education policy imperatives.