

Adjustment Dynamics of First-Year Students to University Life at a Rural University in South Africa



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ABSTRACT

This research paper discussed the adjustment dynamics of first-year students to university life. Registering for the first time at the university seems to impose various challenges on newcomers. Most first-year students experience adjustment challenges in university life, which seem to lead to poor academic performance. Their performance stimulated the need to find the challenges and find ways to enhance adjustments and challenges to improve academic performance. The theory underlying this paper was Critical Emancipatory Research Theory. Participatory action research was employed in this study to collect data and a thematic approach was used to analyse data. A WhatsApp group was created to facilitate group conversations for data collection. The paper responds to two research questions: What adjustment challenges are experienced by first-year university students? In which ways can adjustment challenges be overcome? Participants in the study were ten first-year university students from two faculties. The study found that the factors contributing to difficulties in adjustment were a university workload, lack of residential accommodation, and lack of financial support. In light of the findings, the study recommends support strategies and programs that promote interaction with and among those who are newcomers at the university and the building of more residences for students. This paper contributes to the continued discussion about how newcomers can be supported to ensure they are settled in a conducive academic environment.

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INTRODUCTION

Registering for the first time at the university seems to impose an array of challenges on newcomers. Most first-year students experience adjustment challenges, leading to poor academic performance. Some researchers such as Meehan and Howells have noted that sometimes a big new environment becomes highly intimidating to first-year students.¹ On the other hand, Kwaah and Essilfie, report transitional demands and adjustments to the institutions of higher learning, for many young people starting university for the first time, it represents a significant shift in their lives that can be stressful and could indicate an incapacity to adjust.²

¹ Catherine Meehan and Kristy Howells, “‘What Really Matters to Freshers?’: Evaluation of First Year Student Experience of Transition into University,” *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 42, no. 7 (October 3, 2018): 893–907, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1323194>.

² Christopher Yaw Kwaah and Gabriel Essilfie, “Stress and Coping Strategies among Distance Education Students at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana,” *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education* 18, no. 3 (2017): 120–34.

Scholars such as Trautwein and Bosse, in their research also confirmed that the demanding nature of higher education can lead to stress, failure, low self-esteem, and depression in some individuals.³ In the study conducted by De Clercq Parmentier and Van Meenen in Belgium, on specific challenges of diverse university first-year students, they found variations in how students overcame transitional challenges and concluded their academic year with success based on dynamics of dealing with the new environment.⁴ These authors report that it is challenging for new entrants to university, which is overwhelming, and to other students leads to drop out. Another study by Razack, explored performs that influence how rural students approach university learning and they reported that investigated the practices that shape approaches to learning of students from rural areas in universities they reported that students from rural places have challenges in higher education curricula, which remain infused with colonialism, and challenges of digital technologies and social media both in rural communities and when entering higher education from a rural background.⁵

Annually, first-year students are enrolled in post-secondary education programs at universities across the globe following their high school graduation.⁶ Students from all backgrounds and locations are enrolled in these classes, enrolling at the university of their choosing, and various studies have been conducted on the adjustment challenges of first-year students in their first year of study at institutions of higher learning. Tanga and Maphosa, noted that first-year students have many academic obstacles, such as difficulties with writing, referencing, plagiarism, difficulty with English, and difficulty using computers.⁷ Their findings also showed that the low quality of education they acquired from the apartheid-influenced system, which some schools still employ, and the students' low socioeconomic origins present a variety of academic obstacles for the university under review. And concluded their study by suggesting the dedication on the part of shareholders of peer academic support programs. Aizawa, argues that the different lengths of time and kinds of challenges that each student encountered, whether they had to do with academic comprehension, cultural acculturation, or proficiency, and the varying effects these had on how long their adjustment process took and concluded that there is a need for ongoing support regarding language to help students navigate persistent transitional challenges.⁸

In another study, Blair argued that four facets of students' transitions to university life—social, academic, institutional connection, and personal emotional adjustment—are maintained as excessive and difficult.⁹ They concluded that academic achievement is higher in students who have successfully adapted to their new campus setting than in those who have not. Another study conducted in Turkey by Avci, confirms that first-year university students' initial experiences at university are predominantly in the form of difficulties in all the adjustment domains and emphasizes support services to be provided on personal-emotional adjustment of first-year students through psychological counselling and university counselling centers/units.¹⁰ Another study worth mentioning was conducted by Salami, which suggested that university authorities integrate activities designed to improve students' adjustment to college co-curricular activities that are meant for youth development.¹¹

While the above-quoted studies have contributed to factors contributing to first-years adjusting to university life experiences, none of the studies focused on the adjustment challenges of students from

³ Caroline Trautwein and Elke Bosse, "The First Year in Higher Education—Critical Requirements from the Student Perspective," *Higher Education* 73 (2017): 371–87.

⁴ Mikaël De Clercq, Michaël Parmentier, and Florence Van Meenen, "Fair Enough?! Investigating the Specific Challenges of Diverse University First-Year Students," *Research Papers in Education* 39, no. 1 (2024): 113–33.

⁵ Fathima Razack, "An Analysis of the Academic Learning Challenges Faced by First Year Students in a Durban Private Higher Education Institution" (The IIE, 2020).

⁶ 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 (2020): 1–14.

⁷ Magdaline Tanga and Cosmas Maphosa, "Academic Hurdles Facing Undergraduate Students at One South African University.," *Research in Higher Education Journal* 35 (2018).

⁸ Ikuya Aizawa, "Tracking the First-Year Experience in English Medium Instruction: A Pre-Post Study of Transitional Challenges," *English for Specific Purposes* 73 (2024): 20–32.

⁹ Alasdair Blair, "Understanding First-Year Students' Transition to University: A Pilot Study with Implications for Student Engagement, Assessment, and Feedback," *Politics* 37, no. 2 (May 17, 2017): 215–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395716633904>.

¹⁰ Dilek Avci, "First Year and Adjustment in University Life: A Qualitative Study to Determine the Needs of First Year University Students," *Educational Research & Implementation* 1, no. 1 (2024): 51–68.

¹¹ Samuel O Salami, "Psychosocial Predictors of Adjustment among First Year College of Education Students.," *Online Submission* 8, no. 2 (2011): 239–48.

underprivileged students coming to a rural former mining area university in the Free State Province of South Africa. The study is, thus, unique in the sense that it seeks to enhance the democratic principles of equality and justice, which are liberating, enlightening, and emancipating the first year's students through the institutional supports and units that promote opportunities for freshmen the save space for learning as Critical emancipatory theory focuses on. This approach is referred to as emancipating first-year students to settle properly in all facets of their lives during the first year at their university. In light of this, the study aims to discuss the critical emancipatory research theory as the approach that would emancipate the first years from their challenges of encountering some stressors and academic hiccups when they are new at the university and suggest some ways in which critical emancipatory theory can enhance the experience challenges of the first year's students. The order of the paper is as follows: Following the theoretical framework discussion, the methods section will be covered, and the latter part will be the findings and discussion of the paper.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory employed for this study was the Critical Emancipatory Research (CER). This theory has a comprehensive approach to empowering and giving ways for first-year students to overcome their adjustment challenges. In 1923, German social theorists developed Critical Theory (CT) at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany, later they moved to the US, and the theory was popularized.¹² This theory encourages freedom, peace equality hope respect, closeness, and individuals treated with equal authority.¹³ The participants within this theory are treated with respect.¹⁴ Since participants collaborate to find answers to the issues that concern them, they are promoted to co-researchers, as they are taking initiative in solving their problems.¹⁵ This theory enables the liberation of first-year students from domination, powerlessness, and inequalities and is devoted to empowering the vulnerable through a series of interventions that would improve their adjustment at the university.¹⁶ This theory is relevant to couch this study as it appeals to the respect of every individual and strengthens the democratic ideals of fairness and equality, which are emancipating, empowering, enlightening, and liberating.¹⁷

Regarding the challenges faced by first-year's students of experiencing challenges in adjusting to the institution of higher learning, CER is used to refer to the strategy that would stimulate institutional management and all other stakeholders of education to play their part in supporting the freshers to overcome their university adjustment challenges.¹⁸ According to Dube and Hlalele, the CER theory ensures that individuals who have been oppressed can identify their state of oppression and free themselves from it. It also permits social change in marginalized areas and alters oppressive structures.¹⁹ Therefore, this study empowers first-year students to participate in their difficulties; they guarantee that their rights are upheld and that they receive the same respect that the theory is focused on.²⁰ Therefore,

¹² Beth Humphries, Donna M Mertens, and Carole Truman, "Arguments for an 'Emancipatory' Research Paradigm," in *Research and Inequality* (Routledge, 2020), 3–23.

¹³ Molefi Motsoeneng and Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Entrepreneurship Education for Further Education and Training College Lecturers," in *ICIE 2015 3rd International Conference on Innovation and Entrepreneurship: ICIE 2015*, vol. 120 (Academic Conferences Limited, 2015).

¹⁴ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Critical Emancipatory Research and Academic Identity," *Africa Education Review* 6, no. 2 (October 2009): 224–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146620903274555>.

¹⁵ Molaodi David Tshelane, "Participatory Action Research and the Construction of Academic Identity among Postgraduate Research Students," *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 9, no. 3 (December 30, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v9i3.188>.

¹⁶ Molefi Motsoeneng and Nosihle Veronica Sithole, "An Intervention Strategy to Enhance Technical Vocational Education and Training Entrepreneurship Education Lecturers' Knowledge of Content and Teaching," *EUREKA: Social and Humanities* 6 (2022): 48–57.

¹⁷ Fatma Aslan Tutak, Elizabeth Bondy, and Thomasenia L. Adams, "Critical Pedagogy for Critical Mathematics Education," *International Journal of Mathematical Education in Science and Technology* 42, no. 1 (January 15, 2011): 65–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020739X.2010.510221>.

¹⁸ Charles Gbollie and Harriett Pearl Keamu, "Student Academic Performance: The Role of Motivation, Strategies, and Perceived Factors Hindering Liberian Junior and Senior High School Students Learning," *Education Research International* 2017, no. 1 (2017): 1789084.

¹⁹ Bekithemba Dube and Dipane Hlalele, "Engaging Critical Emancipatory Research as an Alternative to Mitigate School Violence in South Africa," *Educational Research for Social Change* 7, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2018/v7i2a5>.

²⁰ Anne Becker, Annamagriet De Wet, and Willie Van Vollenhoven, "Human Rights Literacy: Moving towards Rights-Based Education and Transformative Action through Understandings of Dignity, Equality and Freedom," *South African Journal of Education* 35, no. 2 (2015): 1–12.

CER has been chosen for this study because it facilitates the abolishment of social injustice.²¹ champions emancipation, and focuses on freedom and the transformation of society. Hence, this framework has been chosen for the study because it helps to critique the current status quo of the first year on adjustment challenges at the university. Participatory action research is the methodology that will be discussed below.

METHODOLOGY

The paradigm underpinning this study is transformative, it applied a qualitative study design and Participatory Action Research (PAR). Through research and action, the transformative paradigm seeks to improve social justice and equity, emphasizing the significance of comprehending and overcoming power dynamics and social inequities.²² A qualitative research method is especially well-suited to this paradigm given its focus. Qualitative approaches are widely recognized for their capacity to fully grasp the subtleties and complexity of social phenomena as well as for offering comprehensive and in-depth understandings of individuals' experiences, viewpoints, and behaviours.²³ Therefore, PAR as a research approach fits properly with the paradigm and the research method as it allows interaction of all participants. The PAR research strategy encourages collaboration and active engagement between researchers and the community under study.²⁴

In the PAR the researched are actively involved in the research process starting from the identification of the questions, data analysis, and deliberating solutions to the research findings.²⁵ The approach is appropriate for this study as it allows more in-depth insight into the adjustment experiences of first-year university students. PAR also gives co-researchers a chance to express their concerns on the topic under study and contribute towards the solution, as well as ensuring that viewpoints are not ignored.²⁶ The eight participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Participants consisted of 5 students from the faculty of humanities and 5 from management sciences. The participants were chosen from an institution of higher learning at one campus of that institution in South Africa. The chosen participants were relevant to the study at the time of research they were first-year students at the university and the questions asked were related to their current situation of being first years at the university. The researcher visited the first groups in their classes in management science labour law class and humanities the EMS 11 ES class. The research explained the aim of the study and asked volunteers to take part and students showed a lot of interest and took part. The researcher together with the co-researchers had a focus group discussion using WhatsApp. After the formation of the WhatsApp focus group, the researcher posted two research questions in the group and allowed every participant to respond to them. The two research questions are as follows: What adjustment challenges are experienced by first-year accounting university students? In which ways can adjustment challenges be overcome? WhatsApp focus group discussion was a data collection instrument for this study. Data was gathered over three weeks through the WhatsApp focus group discussion. All the processes regarding the ethical principles were followed. Participants signed consent forms and were reminded by the researcher that they took part voluntarily and they could leave at any moment without suffering consequences. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, such as S1-S10. The data underwent thematic analysis. To evaluate the data, the following format, which was suggested by Laws, Harper, and Rachael was utilised as it was outlined and utilised by Dube and Segalo to analyse data in this study:²⁷

²¹ Ndaba Xolisile and Dube Bekithemba, "Critical Emancipatory Research Approach to Enhance Performance Among Progressed Learners in Life Sciences," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 12, no. 4 (July 8, 2021): 53, <https://doi.org/10.36941/mjss-2021-0027>.

²² Corey W Johnson and Diana C Parry, *Fostering Social Justice through Qualitative Inquiry* (Routledge Angeles, 2015).

²³ Bunmi Isaiah Omodan, "Causes and Institutional Responses of Social Unrest in South African Universities," *SAGE Open* 13, no. 4 (2023): 21582440231218776.

²⁴ Danielle Maude Littman et al., "Navigating, Subverting, and Replacing Conventional Academic Structures and Expectations to Co-Create with Participatory Action Research (PAR) Teams: Where to for PAR Scholarship?," *Journal of Community Practice* 31, no. 3–4 (2023): 466–87.

²⁵ T. May and B. Perry, *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process* (McGraw-Hill Education (UK), 2022).

²⁶ Omodan, "Causes and Institutional Responses of Social Unrest in South African Universities."

²⁷ S. Laws, C. Harper, and M. Rachael, *Research for Development* (London: SAGE, n.d.); Bekithemba Dube and Jacob Segalo, "Post-COVID Teaching and Learning of Religious Education in the Context of School Violence in South Africa," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, October 26, 2022, 6–18, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2022SP3112>.

Step 1: Review the gathered information twice.

Step 2: List all of the subjects that were discovered in the data at first.

Step 3: Review the data to see if the themes found correspond with the research questions and participant answers.

Step 4: Link the topics to annotations, professional discussions, and citations.

Step 5: To learn about the themes, look through the categories. Consider the research questions when analysing the data.

Step 6: Create a tool to assist in identifying patterns in the data.

Step 7: Analyse the data and conclude. In this step, the data are categorized based on the research questions or the ideas behind them, with a focus on highlighting the findings.

The member-checking method was used by the author to guarantee the study's validity. The data was shared with the participants to confirm that everything captured what was contributed. The validity was also addressed through the alignment of the questions with the themes and subheadings that emerged from the analysis.²⁸ The section below discusses research findings and discussions.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Here are the research findings of the study as per responses to the first research question of the study, which is, what adjustment challenges are experienced by first-year university students? The section below is arranged based on themes that were found. Direct statements from participants are included to validate and reinforce the important findings.

Adjustment Challenges Experienced By First-Year University Students

Heavy University Workloads

Too much workload emerged as a first challenge as per participants' responses to the first research question. The participants have indicated that the university workload is more demanding, and from every class they attend they are given more work and more assessment in the meantime, therefore for them, this becomes a challenge. During the discussion, this is what the participants have indicated and why they find workload a challenge as they are fresh at the university. This is what, S5, had to say:

“For me university work is more rigorous because from every class there is an assignment.”

In support of what the first participants had said this is what S3 had to say:

“I so wish lecturers could discuss the assessment, while we are writing other subjects' tests others are continuing with classes as normal. For some of us is just too much.

“At high school, things were tough, but we used to have test week here it is easy to complete two chapters in one class. For all of us, complaints are too much about this too much work. S4

The participants from the discussion indicated that the greatest challenge for them is the heavy load of academic work at the university. They showed that university work is far more than high school work. They showed that they were overwhelmed by what they never anticipated. More chapters to be covered within a short space of time. Participants said they did not get any support from anyone. Students felt like they were not as empowered as they were supposed to be, and they complained of no collaboration as the CER would encourage all stakeholders to collaborate with the first years till, they are adjusting to the university.²⁹ Participants expressed that they found university work to be extremely demanding and that their inability to comprehend the subject matter and adjust to new lectures was hampered by the numerous classes they had to attend every day without breaks. They also mentioned how tired they were when they got to other classes and how they learned nothing in those latter ones.

²⁸ Sue L. Motulsky, “Is Member Checking the Gold Standard of Quality in Qualitative Research?,” *Qualitative Psychology* 8, no. 3 (October 2021): 389–406, <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000215>.

²⁹ Michell. Ivey, “Examining the Experiences of Adult Learners in a First-Year Seminar Course at a Tennessee Community College” (University of Arkansas, 2023).

Lack of Financial Support

The data gathered indicates that one important effect contributing to the adjustment challenges of the first year of the university within the South African context is traced back to socioeconomic factors as participants have pointed out that they are from families that cannot afford and lack funding is the contributing factor towards the challenges that they are encountering. Below are statements from participant S4:

“I got a rejection on academic funding I do not see how I am going to go on like this because even my parents are assisting me with their grant money.”

In support of what was raised by S4, this is what S7 had to say:

“The financial issue is a huge challenge because without being funded it is difficult to buy academic resources like textbooks and laptops. I am still waiting for NSFAS's response. It is frustrating to study hungry.”

This is what S9 had to say regarding the stress they endure when it comes to funding:

“My parents are not working. I depend on NSFAS, and the delay in payment stresses me a lot because I share the same funding with my family back home.”

Participants indicated that socioeconomic inequalities are the main contributing factor because they made clear that they depend on the funding from the grant and if they do not have that financial support, they would not be able to be like other students. They indicated that there is no freedom at the university if they are not supported financially. The principles of peace, equality, hope, respect, and closeness are advocated by CER.³⁰ However, PAR and CER empower the marginalized to voice out their challenges and give them a chance to suggest solutions to their challenges. Therefore, the authors suggest that funding for students should be distributed on time to bring equality, freedom, and peace to their university life.

Insufficient Accommodation on Campus

Participants are showing that without the proper accommodation on campus becomes stressful. Accommodation issues brought so many challenges to first-year students who did not get accommodated on campus. This is what S10 had to say regarding the consequence of not being accommodated on campus:

“The main challenge that is affecting me, is that I am staying far from campus because there was no accommodation for me even though the close by accommodations were fully booked. Getting transport to campus was a challenge for me and I have even been robbed because I asked the wrong people for directions.”

S6 supported the above participants by saying:

“I feel lonely because I am not staying on campus and cannot even stay late because some of us are staying far from campus and that limits us from making use of facilities like the library and interacting with others who are staying on campus.”

S2 said:

“The campus is just far from everything, and I take the longest time to get to campus and go back home on the other hand crime is high.”

The participants from the discussion indicated that accommodation for students is very critical because they will not be exposed to areas where crime is rife. A study by Boral et al., argues that students should check the safety of the location before deciding to relocate and should prepare a Checklist of all the required things.³¹ However, the participants of the study made it clear that places of stay here on this campus and the surroundings are very limited. A study by Jin et al., found that adjusting to a new

³⁰ Motsoeneng and Mahlomaholo, “Entrepreneurship Education for Further Education and Training College Lecturers.”

³¹ Pratiksha Boral et al., “Issues and Challenges Faced by Students Staying Out of Their Hometown For Study,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Cycle Research*, 2021, 687–707.

environment, with people and cultures being different becomes a challenge, which is why the first years under the study find it challenging to get around this new place in question for them.³² Participants indicated that accommodation on campus deprives them of their rights of being in their first years and adjusting without any challenges. S6 said he becomes lonely because he is just staying far from campus, he cannot be able to engage others and collaborate with them. Research has found that students who are not housed on campus, limit them from social contact opportunities with others and hinder them from the enhancement of their learning and development.³³ The authors argue that off-campus students spend a considerable amount of time travelling to and from university. Limited accommodation on campus does not give students peace and they have no freedom, closeness, and no equality as they are not staying on campus as CER advocates.³⁴ In light of the challenges that participants have highlighted regarding limited accommodation space, therefore, the study suggests the building of more residential accommodation.

OVERCOMING UNIVERSITY ADJUSTING CHALLENGES

The paper does not only highlight the adjusting university challenges that first-year students face but also presents possible solutions that participants discussed regarding the paper's second research question, which is, in which ways can adjustment challenges be overcome? In making suggestions to improve smooth adjusting and settling within the university, participants highlighted the suggestions that could mitigate the challenges. The first strategy raised is the development of study strategies to address the challenge of university workload.

Development of Study strategies

Through the dialogue with the participants, study strategies were raised as a way of overcoming some of the adjustment challenges. Participants highlighted support in the academic and their point of departure from their adjustment challenges in settling well at the institution of higher learning. This is what they had to say:

"I wish we could get support and be given advice on study skills. I would also like our lecturers to communicate amongst themselves regarding many tests at once." S3

In support of what S3 has said, S9 put it in this way:

"If we can be guided as to how we can schedule our time and manage all the other academic activities."

"I think at least four classes a day would be better especially in the first semester because we are still getting used to the system, be assisted to create study groups, I think that would work for me. oh! And again, may the lecturer just go slow at least just for the first semester for us to get used to the university's method of doing things." S6

Participants from the discussion highlighted that the study support and study skills strategies are what they think would solve their anxiety about being in the new environment where things are done differently from the way they used to. The other point raised here was that the participants would like their lecturer to understand their situation and they raised how critical communication can assist them in their situation. They made a point of saying they would require their lecturers to have a plan for test dates done just being imposed without checking that other lecturers have already proposed tests with them. If test dates are not discussed and well planned by lecturers' students become pressurized, yet they are still new at the university. Participants further indicated that guidance on approaching university work would assist them from being overwhelmed with everything. The participants were asking just to be empowered with some skills as the CER advocated for the empowerment of the community. For them to have peace and freedom it would be through support, in navigating difficult academic requirements.³⁵ Dart & Spratt argue

³² Ruining Jin et al., "A Gender Study of Food Stress and Implications for International Students Acculturation," *World* 4, no. 1 (2023): 80–94.

³³ Tatenda C Mbara and Cynthia Celliers, "Travel Patterns and Challenges Experienced by University of Johannesburg Off-Campus Students," *Journal of Transport and Supply Chain Management* 7, no. 1 (2013): 1–8.

³⁴ John Palfrey, *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces: Diversity and Free Expression in Education* (MIT Press, 2017).

³⁵ Stephanie Cuellar and Taryn Ozuna Allen, "A Qualitative Study on the Socialization and Transitions of Early College High School Graduates in Texas," *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 2024, 1932202X241229450.

that first-year university students need support as they deal with new interpersonal, and professional development, unfamiliar campus spaces, increased personal responsibilities, and identity exploration.³⁶ For the first years, the uniqueness that they face as they transition to the new environment exacerbates the uncertainty and complexity in transition, based on those challenges—based on the mentioned challenges, Ding and Curtis suggested college readiness programs.³⁷ Those programs are providing the support that participants have raised during the discussion. Participants are suggesting fewer classes during the first semester as that would allow them to adjust to the new environment without much pressure of having too much to deal with.

Financial support

Participants have indicated timely distribution of funds might solve some of their challenges. They further indicated that free meals would also play a major role in their proper adjustment at the university. This is how they put it, S7:

“If the institution can provide a meal allowance, while the grant (NSFAS) is not yet received. Some of us, struggle with being in class from 7:55 to 4:30 without anything to eat due to lack of finances.”

This is what S1, said:

“Some of us who are financially unstable, at least if we can be placed under any supporting programs like Steam KOS (Food for free). At least textbooks are in the library for some of us who cannot afford to buy books.”

S8, said:

“NSFS should have been distributed earlier, now we are not attending regularly because we are struggling financially, with transport, meals, and buying of academic resources.”

According to the participants, one of the contributing causes is that they come from homes where socioeconomic status is not favourable and are not financially supported. Participants highlighted the solution that would make them adjust it would be if they could be provided with meals. That says socioeconomic issues are what first needs to be addressed. Therefore, CER advocates for peace, social justice, and equality as some of the principles of the theory, that need to be practised, making sure students adjust well without any human challenge of being hungry because of being from families where they cannot afford it. Every student has a right to be treated with respect, therefore, the rightfully basic needs of every citizen should be provided to those who cannot even afford food.³⁸ Participants have indicated that meals and fast track of the payment of the allowances would assist them in their dire situations. NSFAS should come to their aid as the institution that allocates the financial resources for students. Lack of financial capability has been raised by the participants as one of the factors contributing towards their adjusting challenges to the university. But if allowances can be given on time and those who cannot afford meals can be served, they will be improved in adjusting smoothly.

Residential Accommodation for First-year Students

Drawing from the nature of the research approach underpinning this study the PAR gives participants their voices to be heard and comes up with solutions to the challenges that they are confronted with, they come up with suggestions for the increase of residential accommodation for students. This is what they suggested.

“I would suggest the first years be given priority especially those who are not from Welkom when it comes to accommodation because they are new to the place some of us are not from here.” S5

³⁶ Sarah Dart and Belinda Spratt, “Personalised Emails in First-Year Mathematics: Exploring a Scalable Strategy for Improving Student Experiences and Outcomes,” *Student Success* 12, no. 1 (2021): 1–12.

³⁷ Feng Ding and Fiona Curtis, “‘I Feel Lost and Somehow Messy’: A Narrative Inquiry into the Identity Struggle of a First-Year University Student,” *Higher Education Research & Development* 40, no. 6 (September 19, 2021): 1146–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1804333>.

³⁸ Thierry Ngosso, “What, If Anything at All, Do African Societies Themselves Owe to Their Own Citizens in Terms of Health?,” *International Journal for Equity in Health* 22, no. 1 (2023): 5.

S10 said:

“If the institution can build more student accommodation or at least the private companies have provided rooms closer to campus, the campus could build more hostels for students.”

“To get to campus is difficult. I did not get to be accommodated on campus and this institution does not even have rented rooms close by. It is so difficult to get to campus, this campus is very rural no places for renting. I would suggest more accommodation for students.” S2

The participants from this discussion highlighted important issues of being considered first as they are transiting to the university, they need to be given priority when it comes to accommodation that would make them settle and adjust smoothly as they would be able to access everything within the campus.³⁹ Participants suggested the building of new residential places for students as that would solve their problem. They even made a national call for private companies to invest in rented rooms close to the university. According to the participants, the university, notably the location where the study is being conducted, is located in a remote area far from anything, making it difficult for students to come to campus.⁴⁰ Therefore, the study suggests more residential areas would overcome the lack of accommodation which frustrates first-year students.

Discussion Summary

The finding of the study helped answer the two research questions: What adjustment challenges are experienced by first-year accounting university students? In which ways can adjustment challenges be overcome? The study acknowledged that first-year students experienced various challenges that negatively impacted their smooth adjustment at the university, which sometimes led to academic failure rate or sometimes dropping out of university. Challenges such as Heavy university workload, lack of financial support and insufficient accommodation. In light of the challenges, CER as the theory and approach of gathering data enabled the participants to give their input in solving their challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends:

- The university has more systems in place that would assist first-year students with study methods, that would be more mentors and Supplemental leaders to help where possible on academic activities.
- More residential areas.
- Financial support by the NSFAS for those who are struggling financially.

CONCLUSION

Even though first-year students encounter many obstacles, some of which they can overcome or adapt to, helping them acclimatise to the unique challenges of life at a rural South African university is still a crucial task that must be given top priority. Hence, this issue must be handled through university systems, including the finance department, student social support programmes, and student development departments, last but not least, peer mentorship programmes at universities, where senior students help newcomers get used to university life and dynamics. In doing so, interactions with study participants have demonstrated that this will help first-year students settle into the university and achieve their academic potential in their modules without being stressed out by other issues.

³⁹ Paula Wilcox, Sandra Winn, and Marylynn Fyvie-Gauld, “‘It Was Nothing to Do with the University, It Was Just the People’: The Role of Social Support in the First-year Experience of Higher Education,” *Studies in Higher Education* 30, no. 6 (2005): 707–22; Senel Poyrazli and Kamini Maraj Grahame, “Barriers to Adjustment: Needs of International Students within a Semi-Urban Campus Community,” *Journal of Instructional Psychology* 34, no. 1 (2007): 28.

⁴⁰ Md Abu Issa Gazi et al., “An Empirical Study on Emergency of Distant Tertiary Education in the Southern Region of Bangladesh during COVID-19: Policy Implication,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 5 (2023): 4372.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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