

First Time Entry: Students' Perspectives on their Transition from High School to University

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ABSTRACT The transition of first time entry (FTEN) students into university is a major concern globally. It has long been argued that first-year university experience has a critical influence on a student's intention to complete undergraduate studies. University students in South Africa face a myriad of adjustment issues during transition as they find tertiary study an isolating experience and an alien environment. This study used Tinto's three stages (separation, transition and incorporation) as a lens to view First Time Entry (FTEN) university students' perceptions on their transition from high school to university. A qualitative, contextual, descriptive research design was applied to purposively and conveniently choose twelve participants from a South African University. Data gathering tools used were semi-structured interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FDG) and document analysis. Findings suggest that the period of transition from high school to university is experienced as problematic and stressful regardless of students' backgrounds. Individual FTEN students commence this transition to university as adolescents and complete it as young adults, which is the symbolic end of childhood. Their status evolves from high school to university, siblings to roommates and from a child living within a family to an adult living in university residence. FTEN university students are left to fend for themselves through the maze and have to "learn the ropes" of university life largely on their own. The article concludes that when multiple transitions overwhelm FTEN students' coping capabilities, they feel invincible and can usually take uncalculated risks, which may lead to pressure of not completing their first year studies. The article suggests transitional subsequent adjustment to the university environment, which involves positive aspects, such as opportunities for personal growth and for meeting new people and a period of great change.

Keywords: first time entry, high school, perceptions, students, transition, university

Introduction

The transition into university is a major concern globally, as demonstrated by an extensive and rapidly expanding literature. The majority of studies on transition from high school to university have been undertaken in the North American, European and Australian contexts (Cheng, 2015; Brewer, 2013; Briggs et al., 2012; Baker, 2012; Bowles et al., 2011; Krause & Jennings, 2010). The massification of the higher education system has allowed participation of students who are diverse in terms of age, gender, social background, schooling background and expectations (Crisp, Palmer, Turnbull, Nettelbeck, Ward et al., 2009). These diverse groups of students include mature students (O'Donnell, Kean & Stevens, 2016); students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Hobden & Hobden, 2015); indigenous students and those from isolated locations (Abdullah & Elia, 2009); students in paid employment (Yam, 2010) and first

year students (Tinto, 1988; Brewer, 2013; Brinkworth et al., 2009). In order to increase diversity and inclusion, South African universities have incorporated admission routes for traditionally excluded groups (Nel, de Bruin & Bitzer, 2009). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2018) also listed a range of “non-traditional” students that now attend institutes of higher learning as: adults over the age of 25 (Risique et al., 2008); part time students (O’Donnell et al., 2016); women (particularly in non-traditional areas) (O’Shea, 2013); students from rural backgrounds (Maila & Ross, 2018; Pillay, 2010); international students (Chysikos, Ahmed & Ward, 2017); at-risk students (Sosibo & Katiya, 2015); students who are first-generation students (FGS) in higher education (Bayaga & Lekena, 2018; Heymann & Carolissen, 2011) and first time entering (FTEN) university students. First-time entering (FTEN) undergraduate students refer to all students who are (a) classified as being “first-time entering” and (b) enrolled in formal undergraduate academic programmes (DHET, 2018).

It has been documented that entering university is a challenging period of change for all new students (Cross & Carpenter, 2009). There is a deeper problem with envisioning senior schooling as simply a means of entering university (Crisp et al., 2009). Whilst there are some established partnerships between individual schools and universities (Briggs et al., 2012), students from a particular school or college may scatter to a range of universities (Bridges, 2011). Literature suggests that the transition from high school to the university culture is often complex and difficult, with challenges for all parties involved (Lombard, 2018; Bayaga & Lekena, 2018; Maila & Ross, 2018; Lehmann, 2014; Briggs et al., 2012; Yam, 2010). O’Shea (2013) further argues that entering the university is particularly complex for non-traditional students, since they must negotiate a delicate balance between their previous world and their new social world. Although the transition to university may be particularly difficult for mature students with families, it is more so for first generation university (Bayaga & Lekena, 2018; Heymann & Carolissen, 2011) and ethnic minority students that are underrepresented in a student population (Briggs et al., 2012). Students in South Africa also face a number of adjustment issues during transition as they find tertiary study an isolating experience (Scott, 2012), an alien environment where making friends or building social networks can be difficult (Moja et al., 2016). Failure to successfully manage such a transition may result in significant distress, poor academic performance (Hassel & Ridout, 2018) and increased drop-out rates (Sosibo & Katiya, 2015).

Similarly, Young (2016:25), Conley et al. (2014) found students in the first year of university are likely to be confronted with challenges related to confidence, emotions, relationships and new-found independence. Literature reflects scholars’ concerns across a broad range of disciplines about a very real gap in students’ skills between high school and university, and relates some concerted efforts to ease the transition process for first year students (Brinkworth et al. 2009; Chysikos et al., 2017:98). Various models and frameworks have been developed to ease the transition between high school and university such as Menzies and Baron’s (2014) Model of Student Adjustment; Briggs, et al., (2012) Model for Mapping the Formation of Student Identity; Bridges’ (2011) Transition Model and Risique et al. (2008) U-Curve Theory of Adjustment. Despite such developed transition models and transition programmes, Cheng (2015) is of the opinion that students’ academic success is largely dependent on successful transitioning in the first year. As a result, first year students’ experiences during the first semester at university are critical in students’ decisions to continue or discontinue studies (Bowles et al., 2011). If students do not have a successful transition into university, their first year, they are likely to not continue in

higher education, which sets their life on a different, often times, more challenging path (Moja et al., 2016). Hobden and Hobden (2015) noted that transition from high school to university is fraught with challenges, and there is a need to appreciate these challenges from the students' perspectives. Hence, the article focuses on exploring FTEN students' perspectives on their transition from high school to university.

Research Question

“What are first time entry students' perspectives with regards to their transition from high school to university?”

Literature Review

Conceptualising Transition

Based on contemporary higher education research and practice, transition is appropriately conceptualised as a process of identity development and change brought about through complex interactions between students, staff and institutional contexts, all shifting over time (O'Donnell et al., 2016). O' Shea (2013:139) perceives transition as a “movement that involves revisions in identity and agentic affiliations”. Similarly, Baker (2012) defines transition as ‘...any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles’. Baker (2012) differentiates between three types of transitions, namely anticipated transitions, unanticipated transitions and non-event transitions. Firstly, an anticipated event could simply refer to a graduating high school student deciding to enrol at a university for a specific degree. Secondly, the loss of a financial support source and not being able to study your first choice, are examples of an unanticipated transition relating to loss of anticipated aspirations due to financial pressures or changes in career aspirations. Regarding any of the types of personal transitions, the evaluation of a transition is vital to how one thinks, feels and copes with the transition or non-event (Baker, 2012).

Additionally, Ecclestone et al. (2010) suggest four ways in which transition is conceptualised. The first, they term, ‘institutional transition’ and refers to moves from one educational context to another, from one occupation to another, or from one structure or system to another. This conceptualisation views transition very much as a linear progression in an upwards direction, moving from one level to the next, but without a focus on the social, cultural or societal factors which may impact upon transition (Ecclestone et al., 2010). A second conceptualisation is more cognisant with the social and contextual aspects of transition as these impact on individual identity and lead to shifts through cognition and emotion. The third conceptualisation, according to Ecclestone et al. (2010), rejects reliance upon particular institutions or contexts as framing transition and focuses, instead, on transition as a process of being and becoming. In this view, transition is not an identifiable event; a transition may occur well after a certain event due to an individual's reflections and developments in feelings or attitudes (Gale & Parker, 2014). The fourth conceptualisation is embedded in post-modern and feminist accounts of transition and rejects the assumptions above regarding the significance of life events, institutions and milestones. Instead, the view expressed here is that transition is an almost permanent human state (Gale & Parker, 2014). The transition from high school to university, thus, is understood as a transition that modifies the student's environment and social role, requiring the activation of cognitive, motivational and psychosocial resources, inseparably interwoven throughout the learning process.

Models of transition

Various models and frameworks have been developed to ease the transition between high school and university. For instance, the Model of Student Adjustment developed by Menzies and Baron (2014) divides the transition process into five phases, namely, 'Pre-departure'; 'Honeymoon'; 'Party's Over' and 'Healthy Adjustment'. During the first phase, pre-departure, students are considered to be in a neutral mood. The Honeymoon phase begins when the student has arrived at university with feelings of happiness and excitement. This phase is believed to last for a number of weeks. Following this, the student enters the "party's over" phase when they begin to experience a number of shocks, such as social changes and changes related to the academic environment. During this phase, the student may become depressed, confused, isolated and experience high levels of stress. Finally, once the student becomes more familiar with the environment and starts coping with the new study demands as well as support from the university, the period of healthy adjustment begins, and mood levels return to neutral again.

Although the Model of Student Adjustment lacks detail, it is very similar to the U-Curve Theory of Adjustment (Risque et al., 2008). The U-Curve Theory of Adjustment (Risque et al., 2008) has three phases of student transitions: 'Honeymoon', 'Culture Shock' and 'Adjustment'. The first phase, the Honeymoon period, is considered to be very short. In this stage, the majority of students who are about to enter university envision a life with opportunities for personal, social and intellectual growth (Hobden & Hobden, 2015). Following the Honeymoon phase, a period of Culture Shock follows, characterised by feelings of disillusionment and dejection. During this phase, the student may experience high levels of anxiety associated with academic demands, feelings of isolation and alienation, emptiness, stress, homesickness, sense of loss, detachment and even boredom. Students experience these emotions due to changes in their environment (location and culture shock), their social life (meeting new people, sharing a flat, interacting with academic staff) and academic and learning environment (Tinto, 1993). The third phase is the Adjustment phase where the student begins to function effectively in the new environment. For example, they become more motivated, develop a sense of community with other students as well as develop new learning routines. This model offers a useful framework to prepare students for the initial academic, social and emotional shocks that they may face during the first year in either undergraduate or postgraduate study.

Bridges' (2011) Transition Model, although developed for an organisational environment, takes a general view of the change process and distinguishes three overlapping phases. People enter the first phase, 'Ending, Losing and Letting Go' when change is first presented to them and they experience emotions of fear, denial, anger, sadness, disorientation, frustration, uncertainty and a sense of loss. This phase could represent the first weeks of students in university when they go through external changes related to the new environment (different location and culture) as well as the experience of sharing a flat or living in a university accommodation with other students along with the shock of the new academic environment (Tinto, 1993). These changes can make students to experience feelings of homesickness, isolation, depression, anxiety, unhappiness and confusion (Bujowoye, 2010). For students from different contexts, this is presented as a discontinuous space of tension and challenges (Hoden & Hobden, 2015). The second phase, 'The Neutral (Transition) Zone', is where people are still attached to the old environment while trying to adapt to their new one.

During this phase, individuals are often confused, impatient and uncertain as they experience scepticism, low productivity and anxiety about their role.

Specific to student transitions, external and internal changes during this phase can result in anxiety due to meeting new people; stress and anxiety regarding academic performance; fear of embarrassment over not being able to answer questions during presentations and stress and anxiety before, during and the days after an exam has taken place (Chidzonga, 2014). People are considered to have entered the third phase, 'The New Beginning', when they have started to embrace the change initiative and begin building skills that they need to work successfully (Cheng, 2015). In other words, they experience openness to learning, high energy and a renewed commitment to their role. In terms of student transitions, this can be when students become more confident as they progress through university and adapt to university learning routines. For example, they are more organised, prepared and have learned how to plan ahead.

The Model for Mapping the Formation of Student Identity (Briggs et al., 2012) suggests that establishing a positive learner identity is essential to student achievement. To accomplish this, support is needed on both sides of the transition bridge (school and university) to enable students to adjust to the university. Taking this into account, Briggs et al. (2012) have developed a model that identifies and maps fundamental organisational influences – influences that are under the control of university administrators, academics and students' school contacts – that enable the growth of learner identity. Briggs, et al., (2012) suggest that the formation of learner identity is central to successful transition. They propose a model for the formation of learner identity that begins well before a student enters university and identifies respective influences of the university and of the student's educational environments prior to entering university (Gale & Parker, 2014). The concepts related to a learner's identity growth are seen to develop through the processes that a student goes through from the time he or she starts thinking about applying to university to the time of completion of studies.

Therefore, the student first imagines and aspires towards being a university student and goes about acquiring higher education-related skills and knowledge, which leads to commitment in applying for admission and getting accepted to the university. When the student arrives at university, he or she adjusts to the academic environment where they develop higher education learning skills as well as gain confidence and autonomy and finally achieves success as a higher education learner. The organisational influences that support transition and growth of learner identity are separated into school and university (Tinto, 1993). While still in school, potential students benefit from access to timely up-to-date information, encouragement and one-to-one support concerning university entry, activities that enable learning about higher education and advice and guidance through the application process. Students start to form expectations and feel disappointment and great stress if the university does not later meet these expectations (Brinkworth et al., 2009). On the other hand, students with more accurate expectations tend to have a better transition (Cheng, 2015). Once the student goes to university, the transition process is enhanced by an induction process, personal contact with peers and academic staff and formative feedback on progress and group activities, which enable learning and reinforce a sense of belonging (Cheng, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Tinto's Theory of Separation, Transition and Incorporation

Tinto's (1988; 1993) stages of separation, transition and incorporation, are utilised in this paper as a lens with which to view FTEN university students' transition from high school to university. Van Gennep (1960) argues that the process of transmission of relationships between succeeding groups is marked by three distinct so-called "rites of passage" often referred to as stages of separation, transition and incorporation. Each stage serves to move individuals from youthful participation to full membership in adult society, providing through the use of ceremony and ritual for the orderly transmission of beliefs and norms of society to the next generation of adults and/or new members. Van Gennep (1960) believed that the notion of rites of passage could be applied to a variety of situations, especially those involving movement of a person or group from one place to another. As a result, Tinto's (1988; 1993) theory on separation, transition and incorporation is an extension of Van Gennep's (1960) work applied to educational perspectives. Tinto used Van Gennep's (1960) three stages of passage as a basis for his reasoning on how a student becomes integrated within the institutional system over time.

The Stage of Separation

Tinto (1988) contended that the process of student persistence is similar to that of becoming incorporated into the life of human communities, a process usually marked by similar stages of passage to those that students must typically pass through to persist in university. The result of unsuccessful negotiation of this process is that the individual fails to become integrated into the intellectual and/or social fabric of the institution (Tinto, 1993). The first stage of the college career, separation, requires students to disassociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in past communities, most typically those associated with the local high school and place of residence. According to Tinto (1993), first-year students are in a separation phase where they have to distance themselves as members of their past communities, for example, home and school. Ecclestone et al. (2012) states that one has to 'dis-identify with one's previous roles' in the first phase of transition and take up the role of being a student. Tinto (1993) reasons that it is a student's 'meaning-making system' (values, beliefs and perspectives on what a higher education degree entails and what it means to be a student) that determines institutional fit and commitment.

The Stage of Transition

The second stage of the university career and transition is a period of passage between the old and the new, between associations of the past and hoped for associations with communities of the present (Tinto, 1993). The transition phase refers to the shift from the old to the new by conforming to the norms, values and behaviour of the new community. Large discrepancies between the values, norms and behaviour of the old and the new complicate the transition to the new community (Van Gennep, 1960). The transition phase, according to Tinto (1993), is not always identical for each student because individual experiences vary considerably, and the shift is not necessarily clearly sequenced. Individual goals and intentions play a role in making a successful transition and differ between students. Students who are able to adjust to the new environment experience a sense of belonging to the environment and those who do not experience feelings of isolation (Tinto, 1993). Anyone who experiences a life-course transition begins a period of active changes, aimed at adjusting his or her life to the

new environment, new role, or both. In this sense, transitions are opportunities for development, enabling new understandings and the elaboration of personal redefinitions (Tinto, 1998).

The Stage of Incorporation

During the incorporation phase students are required to become involved in the academic and social communities of the institution (Tinto, 1993:59). They become involved by establishing meaningful relationships with existing sub-cultures on campus. According to Baker (2012), a student does not necessarily have to conform to the dominant culture of the institution to become integrated or experience cultural connections (sense of belonging) but rather a can join a 'cultural enclave'. Cultural enclaves are subgroups within the institution that share similar norms, values and beliefs to that of a 'minority' student's culture (Tinto, 1993: 60). Cultural enclaves help students to adapt and have a sense of belonging to the institution (Moja et al., 2016). Baker (2012) states that students have to make a 'cultural connection', which is as a subjective sense of belonging with others from the institution. For Tinto (1993) the term 'membership' would be more appropriate because it allows for more diversity of participation. Membership at an institution is also by definition always temporary (Tinto, 1993). According to Tinto (1993:50), lack of incorporation is caused by two sources, namely 'incongruence' and 'isolation'. Incongruence refers in general to a mismatch between the entry characteristics of the student and the characteristics of the institution. This sense of mismatch develops from the perception of the student that he does not fit or belong to any of the systems of the university, academically or socially. Tinto unpacks each of these systems as sources of incongruence. Tinto (1993) states that 'incongruence' manifests in students' evaluations of the 'intellectual' and 'social' values of the university compared to their own values and preferences.

Research Methods

A holistic, qualitative and interpretivist approach within an interpretivist paradigm to explore, understand and describe FTEN university students' perspectives on their transition from high school was utilised. Kumar (2019:16) views a paradigm as a systematic set of beliefs and methods that provide a view of the nature of reality (ontology), the relationship between the researcher and the reality (epistemology) and what methods can be used for studying reality (methodology). Gibbs, (2018:109) and Cohen et al. (2011:34) maintain that a qualitative approach looks at the narrative and descriptive nature of situations, relationships or people, dealing with the description of human beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, perceptions, emotions and feelings. A non-probability approach employing convenience and purposive sampling was employed to sample research participants and the research sites. The population was drawn from FTEN students who underwent orientation programme during the first week in the first semester after enrolling at the institution. Twelve first year students across various disciplines were purposively selected. The perspective of FTEN students, who are key players in the whole learning process, might provide relevant information to the continuous improvement of support programs offered to First year students when entering higher education.

Data Collection Techniques adopted were Focus Group Discussions (FDG), Semi-structured Interviews and documents analysis with 12 students who were admitted for the first time in the university in 2019. The sampled students were from five faculties: Education, Management & Commerce, Nursing Science, Law, Social Sci-

ence & Humanities. The main advantage of the group interviews is that they are “data-rich, encourage the respondents and support them in remembering” (Flick, 2018: 127). Each recorded interview lasted approximately one hour and followed a similar semi-structured guideline. Participants were given an informed consent letter to ensure privacy, confidentiality and anonymity in their responses. Through one-on-one and face-to-face interviews, the twelve interviewees provided insight into how certain access factors influenced their transition from high school to the university in the first semester. Triangulation between researchers was used as criteria of rigor in the analysis discussing as a team the coding of the texts and the organization of the resulting categories, as well as their description and organization into comprehensive models (Cohen et al., 2011). The main findings were summarized, thus describing the interviewees’ entry trajectory and its principal characteristics, challenges, and difficulties faced by students in their first year, as well as the enablers and projections about future. Qualitative research data analysis illuminated the psychological complexity of the trajectories of FTEN university students, which were frequently invisibles. Thematic analysis, as a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes or biases (Gibbs, 2018:172) was applied. Data analysis used the graphic narrative tool, which allowed the narratives of entering higher education to be expressed schematically.

Results

Pre-Transition Stage

With regards to preparation to access university programmes, students cited varying perceptions. Although students mentioned that in some high schools there were sessions of preparation for accessing higher education; other students claimed not to be aware of such campaigns done by university. Students who were not adequately prepared for university entry were aware of missed opportunities and of information being offered at inappropriate times. Students mentioned that they attended high schools that are poorly resourced. This then implies that students were not well prepared for university and may have no career guidance services. Researchers noted that many students are underprepared for university studies, have no access to social networks that have knowledge and experience of university study (Bayaga & Lekena, 2018; Hemann & Carollisen, 2011; Lombard, 2018, Brinkworth et al. 2009). Pre-communication with high schools, visits to the university by prospective students and guidance through the application process, are cited as areas of concern. A possible reason, according to Maila and Ross (2018) is that these students have higher underlying motivational levels because of possible challenges they have faced during their life as well as overcoming many obstacles just to enrol at the university. Therefore, there is an articulation gap between high school and university and between high school subjects and academic programmes.

Although academic qualifications, contributing to their families’ socio-economic status (SES), personal and social development were some of the reasons given as motivation to undertake university studies, the most crucial motivator was career development. One student claimed: “*I want prepare myself for my career and need guidance and assistance in helping me learn whatever I need to know (SS11)*”. Students were motivated to join the courses they perceived would enable them get good jobs. Similarly, studies show that the majority of students join university for career and/or job aspirations, not necessarily because of interest, but to improve their job opportunities (Scutter et al., 2011). While some students struggled with issues of moti-

vation and confidence, others were eager and ready to learn. In the initial phase of pre-transition when approaching change, according to Young (2016), students begin to think about going to a university and their decisions are based on factors such as relevance for career planning, knowledge and familiarity of programmes, as well as university culture, family, work commitments and financial factors. The motivation for upward professional, social and economic mobility resonates with DHET's goal to improve the capacity of the Post-School Education and Training (PSET) system to meet the skills and developmental needs of the country through: "A skilled and capable workforce to support an inclusive growth path" (DHET, 2018). By implication, access to university appears not to be forced or imposed on FTEN students but rather intrinsically and extrinsically motivated.

Frustrations over waiting for unreasonable periods for responses for application, admission and registration were mentioned. Students reported to have felt "*ill-prepared to choose first or second choice of study when applying for admission*" and thus according to Ecclestone et al. (2010) they tend to experience an "early transition shock". With the high competition for access into a university and the limited number of spaces available within HEIs, students have to make strategic decisions of their ranked choices (Young, 2016). Students (75%) pointed out that they did receive good advice aligned with their performance, for purposes of course selection. This is so because students are informed on the possible courses they can join, based on their results, at the time of submitting their application forms (DHET, 2018). At times, there may be fewer choices due to the limited numbers of institutions offering the students' "preferred" courses. This tends to occur in developing countries where facilities are limited (Abdullah & Elia, 2009). The application process, while it may seem quite ordinary, subtly forces students to make appropriate choices in their application forms (DHET, 2018). The literature shows that the information students need relates to basic communication issues around critical items such as enrolment, the understanding of university terms and obtaining basic course and institution information (Scutter et al., 2011). Nevertheless, this information should be available to the students while at high school well before they submit their application forms for admission. Students were not happy with the admissions department and felt that the admission policy was not clear. "*We were not happy with the admissions department especially online registration processes as we are not familiar with university policies. For instance, I forgot to upload my documents, bank receipts and my statement of results until that was pointed out by one of my friends (SS3)*". While initially being accepted and allowed entrance to university, some students articulated the position that the degree they had chosen was not a field that they were passionate about. There has been increased scholarly concern that students are inadequately prepared for entry level university courses and a perception that this has led to falling standards (Smit, 2015). Because FTEN students have a multitude of decisions to make such as determining their living situations, selecting and registering for courses, choosing their majors, determining which clubs or organizations to join and so on, students felt very overwhelmed and faced a great deal of stress. Due to these new decisions and transitions, first year students often experience "the highest levels of distress of all college students" (Baker, 2012). This leads to the transition phase being affected by an interplay between the social and academic circumstances of the students and the institutional systems that should support them (Briggs et al., 2012). For most students, there is significant social displacement when they leave for university intensified by factors such as being the first in their family to attend university (Bayaga & Lekena, 2018) or coming from an ethnic group under-represented in the university population (Briggs et al., 2012). Regardless of their back-

ground, students are expected to be more “grown up” in their learning when starting their degree. It may be that students look forward to learning independently, but do not fully appreciate what is involved or how challenging they might find it in reality.

Separation Stage

Moving past the initial joy of acceptance, admission and registration, the first few weeks at the university emerge as a strange, complex and challenging period for FTEN students. Strangeness is understood as the feeling of not fitting in with the new environment, increased by the observed inefficacy of previously effective strategies for social integration and academic performance (Brewer, 2013). During this phase, external changes related to the new environment as well as the new social life can make students to experience emotions of homesickness, isolation, depression, fear of being ignored by other students and feelings of not belonging in the new setting (Tinto, 1998; Bujowoye, 2010). **SS7** echoed, *“I was so over the moon with joy, anticipation of a new exciting life ahead, meeting new people, freedom from parental control. However, I soon realised that university life is different from high school as you are expected to be more independent”*. Chidzonga (2014) noted that adult separation anxiety disorder (ASAD) can become obvious in young adults as they transition to college and become homesick. Homesickness is defined by Conley et al., (2014) as being “the distress or impairment caused by actual or anticipated separation from home”. *“My happiness of joining varsity was short-lived when in a twinkle of an eye, my life was turned upside down due to feelings of loneliness, being separated from my family and siblings, at the same time having mixed emotions as I had to familiarise myself with campus life” (SS1)* commented.

Pillay (2010) noted that coming from a rural environment could also facilitate feelings of isolation in HEIs. Students may also be hesitant to attend classes; they may experience extreme anxiety and distress or have nightmares about separation (Tinto, 1998). Bridges (2011) concurs that students’ experience separation anxiety during college. Although many universities have programs that introduce students to the campus, both the academics and the social aspects of college life, claim Conley et al. (2014) do not have programs that address “needs of students experiencing persistent and intense symptoms of separation anxiety and homesickness.” For Young (2016), it might take time for students to liberate themselves from the learning habits of high school. **SS6** claimed, *“I went home every day, travelling to and from school by train. Sometimes I would get lost as I was not familiar with the routes”*. The best indication that this is a stressful time for many students is the reality that the majority of high school students who go to university or college may withdraw from that institution before graduation (Bujowoye, 2010). Students who experience a very difficult transition from secondary education to university may be extra anxious with regard to another educational transition (O Donnel et al., 2016). In Hussey and Smith’s (2010) viewpoint, the freshman year of college presents “a turning point in the educational life course”.

Transition Stage

Students reported having received narratives from peers and older university members that *“initially it would be difficult,”* but they had been chosen *“for a reason”*. Conley et al. (2014) believes that students know that university is going to be different to high school but do not expect a huge difference, the extent of change or transition. **SS9** ech-

oed, *"I find it strange that certain staff and administrators could be that cold. I expected the warmth and love we always received from our high school teachers"*. Tinto (1998) advocated that unsupportive environments could lead the first year students to be potential drop outs. Feelings of loneliness have been identified as a growing concern for students for successful transition. FTEN University students attempting to commence study appear to be prime candidates for a conflict of identity to occur. In the case of mature age students who have been absent from education for a substantial period and who are well established in existing long term social, family and work contexts, the individual is attempting to assume the new identity and role required as a university student. In addition, students who have had negative experiences in secondary school and who may have experienced a disengagement from education, are attempting to re-engage with a role which may have substantial negative emotional associations. It would be expected that where a student experienced difficulty in performing the role of a successful university student, their commitment to that identity and to the completion of tertiary study would be adversely influenced. An associated problem for the aspiring undergraduate student is that the adoption and development of the new identity as a university student occurs relatively slowly.

Furthermore, loss and lack of social support have been found to lead to negative psychological experiences such as tension, confusion and depression (Pillay, 2010). For FTEN students, entering university involves substantial changes in their living and education environments. University transition involve changes in residence, where the student was previously residing with parents and may now need to reside away from home for the first time. Living in residence on campus is, according to De Vilbiss (2014), the main place where students begin to learn and develop life skills such as time management and responsibility. Living in residences is particularly important at first year level because of dropout rates which are noted as high (De Vilbiss, 2014). Residences are therefore not just places where students are living and eating but provide scaffolding for academic activities and projects (Sosibo & Katiya, 2011). Chryssikos et al., (2017) explained that living in on-campus residences increased the investment of the student, both physically and emotionally and has a positive influence on retention. According to Tinto (1993), having a positive on-campus living experience has an important effect on a student's social integration into college. Nel et al., (2009) note that by living on campus, students have easier access to peers, staff and faculty. Non-residential participant had this to say: *"When I could not find a place to stay on campus, I lived with the relatives in a township of which I had to commute by train to the university. I don't remember how many times I got lost, I felt so frustrated I went back home up until friends decided to accommodate me in their residence SS2"*. SS7 concurs, *"I couldn't cope with the stress, anxiety, worries of not finding accommodation, funding and other circumstances around university life"*.

Students reported experiencing financial difficulties during the first weeks of the first semester on arrival to the university. This culminated to challenges such as skipping lectures; endless queuing in the finance department and missing tests. Leese (2010) is of the opinion that financial challenges for students increase the impact of strain while studying. Students mentioned that they bridged their financial gap by finding part time jobs, juggling between their studies and their paid employment. The need for students to undertake paid work has been implicated in rates of non-attendance at lectures, which is a growing problem in higher education (Crisp et al., 2009). Consequently, mature students with parental responsibilities often have to negotiate with their families, employers, co-workers and friends to establish priorities, time commitments and responsibilities and thus may not perform well academically or psychologi-

cally (O Donnell et al., 2016). This is interesting because students recognize that lecture attendance is important for their academic performance (Crisp et al., 2009). Given that missing lectures and teaching sessions can disadvantage FTEN students, this is likely to lead to causes of drop out in the first year of study (DHET, 2018). Affordability remains one of the barriers that prevent students from enrolling and successfully integrating in a university environment (DHET, 2018). Students who, for instance do not have the financial support to study a degree will decide not to study at all, or enrol but only later withdraw if financial support is still not available (Tinto, 1993). While a myriad of financial aid programs are available to help families pay for university, recent shifts in policy (for example, reliance on loans and merit aid) may have materially changed the way aid influences student behaviour, especially regarding enrolment and continuation decisions (Chrysikos et al., 2017). The loss of a financial support source and not being able to study one's first choice are examples of an unanticipated or a non-event transition relating to loss of anticipated aspirations due to financial pressures or changes in career aspirations (Baker, 2012).

Incorporation Stage

Students reported to have experienced difficulty in adapting to university life. Poor quality in student life was cited as one of the contributing factors to cope with the challenges of transition from high school to university environment. Student life is impacted upon in matters like sports facilities, access to ICT in residences, cultural activities and student leadership development. To that end, student transition into university culture has been identified as very complex and difficult. As a result, some institutions have designed programmes to facilitate first year experiences that will enhance and ease students' transition (Smith, 2015). In assisting new students through the vital transition phase of university, peer mentoring also represents a valuable tool that institutions could use to simultaneously address issues of attrition and enhance student experience. According to Heyman and Carolissen (2011), transitional peer mentoring works by providing the means by which new students can quickly gain a sense of 'belonging'. **SS8** added: *"I also attended the first year welcoming party which allowed me to relieve the stress that came with my transition to university. The social connections I made during these activities certainly eased my tensions, worries and concerns"*. Establishing a support network can be one of the strategies to help reduce stress. In contrast, students who have good levels of social support tend to produce the most desirable outcomes in academic, social and emotional adjustment. Menzies and Baron (2014) posit that friendships help in integrating students into university life and provide companionship, valuable emotional support, advice and information. Forming friendships helps students adjust to their new surroundings more readily by allowing them to improve their language skills as well as develop an understanding of the host culture. These friendships may also act as a protective factor against mental health and well-being issues (Conley et al., 2014).

In the social sphere, the feeling of not belonging to the institution or to the peer group creates a problematic transition for the student (O Donnell et al., 2016). *"Things are done differently from what you know at high school and you do not get much help from staff especially funding, and are not living in the residences you miss out on lectures"*, **SS3** commented. In adapting to university life, FTEN students are expected to adjust and hopefully reorganise the way they think about themselves as learners and social beings. This adjustment helps them develop learner identity and autonomy (Meinzis & Baron, 2014). Bowles et al. (2011) are of the opinion that the

institutional environment consists of three factors that influence a student's subsequent commitment to the institution, namely institutional integrity, institutional commitment to student welfare and the cost of the education. Students who do not understand or who are unable to adapt to the norms, values and expectations of the institution are more likely to feel alienated and have intentions to withdraw voluntarily. Ecclestone et al., (2010) perceive first year tertiary study as an identifiable period of transition while transition phase is perceived as the period between having a firm offer of a university place and waiting for the upcoming orientation week (Tinto, 1993). Orientation is therefore, an important aspect of managing transition and helping students to develop their sense of belonging.

FTEN students reported that the week-long orientation programmes, counselling services and university-led social activities were ineffective in assimilating them to university life. Briggs et al. (2012) argue that a week is not a long enough time to establish effective social and peer support groups. The authors also remark that students are often quite passive during induction, which can limit the extent to which they can feel involved in the process. These pre-transition skills and knowledge are important in preparing the students for independent undergraduate life and learning (Briggs et al., 2012). Orientation programme preferentially aimed at first year students included tutoring, campus tours and academic levelling. Interviewees positively evaluated their participation in induction periods before starting their first semester. For students, the orientation was a highly-valued landmark in their transition, because they were given access to academic levelling and were able to anticipate difficulties. With regards academic levelling, students from some departments noted that it served as a reference to face the first classes; however, the progress of the semester revealed personal limits which were derived, in their opinion, from a "*weak previous education*". For FTEN students, if there had been no induction experiences, the experience of academic gap would have been greater; the start without levelling "*would have been even worse chaos*" echoed SS1.

A major benefit of the orientation reported by the students was the formation of a peer group, consisting of other first year students who entered before the start of the semester. SS4 commented: "*On a personal level, perhaps the biggest key to my happiness during the transition was the strong support systems available to me. First and foremost was continuous family support. I called my parents about every other day, then gradually less as I made friends, associated myself with peers and interacted with different members of the university community.*" Having established contact with other members of the institution, some new students may come to find that the social and intellectual communities of university are not to their liking. Rather than adopt values and behavioural styles seen as discordant with their own, they may decide to voluntarily withdraw to seek membership in other settings (Bayaga & Lekena, 2018). This reduces the concern about social integration in the university (Tinto, 1988). Establishing friendship groups, as well as a sense of belonging to the university programme and peer group, are viewed by Menzies and Baron (2014) as essential in aiding personal and social adjustment to university life. Students need to develop a sense of belonging and connection with new peer groups and the wider academic community (Tinto, 1998; Anderson et al., 2010). Although the orientation programme was perceived as useful, there is need to separate academic and social issues during this period (Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Young, 2016; Cheng, 2015). Currently, these are more information giving activities and socialising gatherings and they need to move to the level of seminars especially in the first weeks of the first semester of the first year academic year.

Discussion of Findings

In the first few weeks at the university, diverse students from low or high socio-economic status; young and fresh; old and mature from different locations enrol in university as FTEN. FTEN students enter university with various characteristics, gender, race, academic aptitude, academic achievements, family socio-economic background, parent educational levels - and different levels of initial commitment to the institution. First time entering university students are either not familiar with or have been ill-informed about what to expect from university education. For Brewer (2013) and Brinkworth et al. (2009), the freshman year is a critical time of transition and adjustment for young adult students. Adjustment includes making connections between pre-university experience and experience at university (Scutter, et al. 2011) and is enhanced by the opportunity to form positive social relationships with other students and with staff (Tinto, 1998; Scott, 2012). This process begins before transfer, through visits to higher education institutions and contact with current students, which enable applicants to imagine what 'being a student' would be like (Briggs et al., 2009) and continues through the early months at university. Moja et al., (2016) noted that students adjust quicker if they learn the institutional "discourse" and feel they fit in. During this initial period, students need to form a sense of their student identity (Conley et al., 2014) and learn to act autonomously as a university student (Smith, 2015); otherwise they will experience disorientation and loss of personal identity (Chrysikos et al., 2017). During the transition to university, individual FTEN students begin as adolescents and end up as young adults; they change from high school to university status; siblings to roommate and child in the family to adult in the resident hall. FTEN students feel invincible and can usually take uncalculated risks which may lead to pressure of not completing their first year studies. When multiple transitions overwhelm their coping capabilities, anxiety and depression may lead to drop outs.

Sosibo and Katiya (2015) believe that students decide within the first few weeks of school whether they will pursue higher education seriously. For many students, this is the first time they have lived apart from their parents or guardians and are faced with making life decisions independently of their families (Tinto, 1993). Separation occurs prior to and at the outset of the institutional experiences in both the academic and social systems (Bridges, 2011). As students enter college, they are required to disassociate to some extent from family membership (Tinto, 1993). FTEN university students move from one community or set of communities, most commonly those of the high school and the family, to higher education institutions (HEIs) (Anderson et al. 2012). To some degree, FTEN university students have to separate themselves from past associations in order to make the transition to eventual incorporation in the life of the university (Menzies & Baron, 2014). In attempting to make such transitions, they too are likely to encounter difficulties that are as much a reflection of the problems inherent in shifts of community membership as they are either of the personality of individuals or of the institution in which membership is sought (Risquez et al., 2008; Menzies & Baron, 2014). It can be argued that the process of institutional departure may be seen as being differentially shaped over time by the varying problems new students encounter in attempting to navigate successfully the stages of separation and transition and to become incorporated into the life of the college (Tinto, 1993: 440).

Transition from high school to university is an important milestone that holds potential for personal growth and behavioural change (Krause & Jennings, 2010). Changes are expected on students' physical, psychological and social environments (Moja et al., 2016; Menzies & Baron, 2014). Bridges (2011) makes a distinction be-

tween “transition” and “change” as they view change as external and visible, while transition is internal and less visible. The transition from high school to university marks a distinct step in a student’s academic career. For Tinto (1993), this step denotes the move from a dependent to independent learner, from studying in a carefully monitored environment with a highly regulated timetable to students learning to manage their own time and making decisions in a more adult and responsible manner. Anderson, et al. (2012) states that transition is a set of inter-connected personal, social and academic processes that often occur alongside a geographical (campus size, class location, new city) relocation. Anyone who experiences a life-course transition begins a period of active changes, aimed at adjusting his or her life to the new environment, new role, or both (Menzies & Baron, 2014). In this sense, transitions are opportunities for development, enabling new understandings and the elaboration of personal re-definitions (Anderson et al., 2012). However, students tend to plummet into confusion, despondency and destructive behaviour during transition (Gale & Parker, 2014). Abdullah and Elia (2009) look upon the transition phase as comprising a series of adjustments that need to be made, not only by the students, but also by the academic staff as they have to be accommodating and responsive to the students’ needs. Stress levels in dealing with transition at university are aggravated by coping with the daily life on campus, and this can subsequently influence students’ psychological well-being (Conley et al., 2014). Conley et al., (2014) categorise coping mechanisms during transition into two: Firstly, emotional-centred coping which regulates emotional distress without addressing the origin of the stress. It, therefore, prolongs and intensifies the effect of stress.

Secondly, problem-centred coping, which is aimed at alleviating stressful situations, is more beneficial to students because it directs students to seek additional help. Yet, a rich and smooth transition to university will prevent student dissatisfaction with their academic experience and thereby reduce poor performance and ultimately withdrawals from the university (Sosibo & Katiya, 2015). When the transition from high school to university is planned properly, students develop pre-transition skills and knowledge that support independent undergraduate learning. However, many students tend to make uninformed decisions with regard to the institution of choice or programmes they wish to pursue at university (Young, 2016). Yet, planning the transition is important as it leads to better-informed decisions being taken (Ecclestone, 2006). Students entering university face a variety of challenges ranging from making new relationships, modifying previous relationships with family and friends (Tinto, 1993), learning new study habits for a relatively new learning environment (Anderson et al., 2012) and functioning independently as adults. Once students arrive on campus, it is possible they are met with one or more offerings aimed at easing the challenges of the transition to university, such as: credit-bearing first-year seminars, programmes developing academic and personal skills, or workshops designed to foster information literacy development (Scott, 2012). Orientation programs are an important part of fostering persistence among students and retaining them. The purpose of most orientation programs is to assist in the “successful transition of the diverse group of students that are enrolled at today’s colleges and universities” (Baker, 2012).

Baker (2012, p. 12) stated, “A successful transition to college has been consistently linked to overall measures of student success and transition”. Often times, academic and social aspects of college are addressed at orientation or transition programmes (Tinto, 1993). Transition programmes have historically been specialised (having a narrow focus on providing a particular service), localised (residing within a particular faculty or functional area or office), and aimed at a particular group of stu-

dents (those in a particular programme of study, academically underprepared). More often than not, Hussey and Smith (2010) claim students are passed from one transition programme to the next like a baton in a relay race. Speaking of first-year programmes, Scott (2012) suggested that first-year programmes, like all other programmes supporting students in transition, should be a special but not discrete part of the educational process. During the first year, the most student-focused members of staff should be assigned to guide the first year students (Briggs et al., 2012). However, in resource-limited environments, this is not possible as the numbers of university students is increasing in the face of diminishing numbers of academic staff. Briggs et al. (2012) indicate that some of the important university support systems during the transition phase include: systems of information-giving; orientation; tours; student hand-outs; course outlines with clear statements of aims; objectives and assessment methods; career information integrated into courses; and information about staff availability. However, students may be over-burdened with information during the induction period and suggests that effective induction should be spread over the whole of the first semester or even all throughout the first year (Briggs et al., 2012). Students should be encouraged to participate in seminars and workshops during their first year as a way of sustaining socialisation (Bridges, 2011). There is thus a need for an intensive activity-based orientation programme purposely designed to introduce the students to the university.

As students enter university, they are expected to make connections between pre-university experience and the experience at university (Nel et al., 2009). The external environment plays an important supportive or demotivating role in decisions to enrol at a higher education institution in the first place. Students at commuter institutions typically have off-campus commitments in addition to their academic responsibilities on campus. These responsibilities influence the time students have to engage with their academic work. The external environment can have a positive or negative influence on students' decisions to withdraw. With close proximity to academic resources such as the library and social outlets like the student union, it is likely for students that live in residence to integrate with the campus community and have a successful transition. Whereas students that live at home generally do not have the ease and proximity to campus support and resources (Leese, 2010). This supports Sosibo and Katiya's (2015) identification of non-residential first year students as being "at-risk students". Furthermore, students that live off campus are more likely to drop out than those students that live on campus (Sosibo & Katiya, 2015). This could be due to the lack of engagement and support students receive when they live off campus (Chryskos et al., 2017). Students experience an extended, unsettled period of adjustment while at the same time, they need to become familiar with the availability and location of resources and services and facilities in the large and overwhelming environment. For Tinto (1993:50), lack of incorporation is caused by two sources, namely 'incongruence' and 'isolation'. Incongruence refers in general to a mismatch between the entry characteristics of the student and the characteristics of the institution. This sense of mismatch, according to Tinto (1993), develops from the perception of the student that he does not fit or belong to any of the systems of the university, academically or socially. Further expectations are that they could include making use of opportunities to form positive social relationships with other students and with staff members (Baker, 2012). This normally happens when students are encouraged to visit institutions of higher education and making contact with current students, enabling them to imagine what it feels like "being a student" (Briggs et al., 2012).

Nel et al. (2009) contend that students adjust quicker if they learn the institutional “discourse” and feel they fit in as a result of visiting the institution prior to admission. It is during this period that students need to form a sense of their student identity (O’ Shea, 2013) and learn to act autonomously as a university student (Risquez et al., 2008). Unfortunately, if they miss out on this opportunity, there is a tendency for them to experience disorientation and loss of personal identity (O’ Shea, 2013.) This may make them feel that they are in the wrong place (O’ Shea, 2013). Establishing a positive student identity is thus an essential factor in being persistent and successful as a university student (Briggs et al., 2012). Students are encouraged to develop peer interaction as a mode of developing concepts of self-associated with learning and achievement (O’ Donnell et al., 2016). Tinto (1993) mentions that students who are able to make friendships easily could help a student to be integrated into the social system much quicker. Tinto also recognises ‘social experiences’ that could hinder or facilitate interaction, because in some instances the social environment is totally different to that which is experienced in their own communities (Tinto, 1993: 58). For Gale and Parker (2014), the greater the perceived institutional integrity, the more students commitment to the institution. Therefore, Abdullah and Elia (2009: 499) argue that an individual not only has to adjust to the new environment, but has to adapt too. Bridges (2011) defines adaptation as a decision to cope with an environment and compare adaptation to Tinto’s (1993) idea of integration. Within Tinto’s (1993) frame of reference, adaptation could refer to the process of incorporation of a student into the institutional environment. According to Nel et al.’s (2009) definition of adaptation, students use coping mechanism to deal with stressors of the environment. For Pillay (2010), coping refers to the behavioural and cognitive changes that a person has to make to deal with various demands inter-personally or from the environment, perceived to be intimidating in some way.

Institutional support is seen as crucial to coping with the stress FTEN students experienced. The challenges confronting first year students can be experienced as stressful or supportive, depending on personal resources and the social support available (Nel et al., 2009). Leese (2010) suggests that students adapt better to their university environment when they feel supported by their peers and when they are part of a social network and overall culture. The importance of ensuring students assimilate into the university culture is highlighted by Bridges (2012) who argues that an institution’s role is to assist students socially and academically to foster their success. Moja et al., (2016) also believes in a process of building a campus climate that nurtures student involvement in their university experience to assist in enabling transition. Thus, it is important for first-year students to believe they belong to a learning community (O’ Donnell et al., 2016). Furthermore, social transition, that is, the change in students’ social group and relations, is highlighted as an important dimension of student retention and progression (Hussey & Smith, 2010).

The social community involves informal interactions and is usually more recreational in nature although it also refers to formal social events organized by university student bodies or residences. Tinto (1993) mentions that students who are able to make friendships get integrated into the social system much quicker. Tinto also recognises ‘social experiences’ that could hinder or facilitate interaction because in some instances, the social environment is totally different to that which is experienced in their own communities (Tinto, 1993: 58). Support is needed on both sides of the transition bridge to enable students to adjust to university and develop learner identity and autonomy. ‘When students begin their first-year at university, they are required to re-organise the way they think about themselves, as learners, and as social be-

ings' (Conley et al., 2014). For FTEN students, the move to university is a personal investment of the cultural capital accrued through high school and college education. It would be beneficial for institutions to understand what helps to make a positive transition for first year students.

Conclusions

Students from low and high socio-economic status and diverse backgrounds attend university after succeeding in high school and the transition have an effect on their aspirations and levels of attainment. While high rates of student admittance into university are often desirable, it is important to retain students once enrolled. However, the period of transition to higher education study has been found as problematic for FTEN students, regardless of their background. Problems encountered during the transition period are compounded by the increased student population with diverse backgrounds. The transition period from high school to higher education is largely shaped by lack of preparedness of students. Transitioning from high-school to university can be difficult, and students feel often ill-prepared for the change. The transition from high school to university marks a distinct step in a student's academic career. The step denotes the move from a dependent to independent learner, from studying in a carefully monitored environment with a highly regulated timetable to students learning to manage their own time and make decisions in a more adult and responsible manner. Upon successful conclusion of the transition, when the new student's continuity in the institution is confirmed, their identity is transformed, thus integrating the past, opening up a context of development in the present and outlining possible futures. Even though the first year is an important transition point, the major underlying reason identified for the disjuncture between access and success is mismatch between higher education and post-secondary preparedness. Many new students are either not overly familiar or have completely ill-informed preconceptions about what they may encounter in the course of their choice. In turn, these factors may impact on their academic success, or may ultimately influence their decision to drop out.

Autonomy is one attribute that is expected of university students and the students are likely to have challenges during the transition period as they have to move away from the sheltered environment they are used to in high school. With regards to the struggle of fight or flight for survival in the university environment, FTEN university students need hand-holding as they lack independence and autonomy required from them to be independent students. In high school the institutional climate was such that it encouraged a sense of belonging. Feelings of loneliness is a growing concern and for students' successful transition, they need to develop a sense of belonging and connection with new peer groups and the wider academic community. FTEN university students are left to make their own way through the maze of institutional life and have to "learn the ropes" of university life largely on their own. The transition and subsequent adjustment to the university environment involves positive aspects, such as opportunities for personal growth and for meeting new people; although it is also a period of great change that can be perceived as stressful.

Recommendations

The first year is the period in which most students face serious challenges in adjusting socially and academically, and thus efforts have to be made to assist them to adapt to the different set of university learning expectations and experiences. It is critical that

students entering university for the first time have a successful first year so that they do not stop out, drop out or not complete their first year of study. The primary responsibility of whether a student can afford to attend a higher education institution rests with the individual; however, both the government and the institution should play a more integral role in assisting FTEN university students. Students transitioning to university should be able to access information to develop their own pathways for growth. Students given more opportunity to understand the demands and realities of studying at university prior even to applying, can aid transition. Good communication is needed to alert students to up-coming guidance opportunities, application deadlines and off-site events. In order to make a successful transition from high school to university, students need to make their own adaptations and to be supported by the people and systems around them. Students have to be encouraged to separate from their established high school routines and develop new ones as well as take on new responsibilities such as independent living and adapt to new academic challenges, all of which can have an impact on their well-being. Students should also be encouraged to participate in seminars and workshops during their first year as a way of sustaining socialisation. Therefore, coordination between the high schools and the university so that potential students are given adequate information, encouragement and one-to-one support concerning the university entry is recommended. Furthermore, career guidance strategies should be done during high school period to minimise fears of adapting to university culture.

In understanding the nature of transition phase, the University, faculties, academics and administrators need to have some knowledge of the learning culture students have come from, to find out what their expectations and aspirations are. There is also a need for the university to establish dialogue with the schools that the students come from so as to give them prior information about learning at university, and also work out the best approach to prepare the students for learning at university. These pre-transition skills and knowledge are important in preparing students for independent undergraduate life and learning. Universities and academics need to be sensitive in terms of supporting first year students through transition phase by providing accurate information, enculturation into the discipline and guidance. Higher education support programmes ought to focus not only on academic transition and adaptation in the first academic year, but also holistically on the relevant academic, social, cultural and financial challenges prospective students experience in the pre-university phase. In order for such an environment to exist, faculties and administrators should take a multi-faceted approach, which may include recruiting and retaining diverse students. In this regard all elements of the university academic units, support services, administration, accommodation units, bursaries and loans offices as well as student organisations should be involved.

Implications for Practice

FTEN university students are likely not to achieve a successful transition on their own but require support of a knowledgeable and caring faculty and HEI. There seems to be no holistic and integrated approach towards pre-university interventions in schools that articulate with the extended support programmes for first year students. Better preparation for the transition and continuing support are needed if students are to proceed smoothly through the transition phase. Therefore, the universities can successfully maximise chances of a smooth changeover from high school through an adoption of university orientation programmes and support services. Practical implications of this

study are that the particular HEI where this study is undertaken may adopt relevant student support systems in the area of recruitment and academic enterprise support. This could be sustained through faculty involvement in various internal structures. In terms of policy, the findings of this study parallel the initiatives championed by the Quality Enhancement Project, whose mandate is to feed into the university's student support policies. Some of these amongst others are the Recruitment Policy, Student Academic Support Policy, Admissions policy. Taken together, these university policies can pinpoint from the very beginning of the year those students who are at risk of failure and thus need specific attention. The early identification of FTEN profiles could be useful to prevent drop-out and failure. The institution has to develop an institution-wide approach to orientation and develop orientation activities with both an academic and social content to embrace the first-year experience that extends well beyond the first few weeks of the semester.

Study Limitations

Several limitations that might affect the findings of this study have been identified. Firstly, the study was conducted at only two out of the three campuses of the chosen Higher Education Institution. In spite of the fact that the majority of participants attended the Orientation programme in their first week; however, the participants that responded were primarily female, thus limiting the perspective of male students. Although, the study recruited a small number of participants across different university programmes in five faculties, however the imbalance of the number of male and female participants could confound findings. According to Cohen et al. (2011) qualitative approach design requires a relatively small sample of research participants. Thirdly, a limitation to the study is that it predominantly focused on students' own perceptions. Their perceptions might, however not be a reflection of reality that can be generalised throughout all FTEN university students. Lastly, there are several theories that support transition such socio-cultural, psychological and sociological theories which have great explanatory power; however, Tinto's theory of (1993;1998) Separation, Transition and Incorporation Stages seem to be more appropriate for this study as it encompassed all the components of change and development that first year students encountered.

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