

Students' Adjustment to University Life: Evidence from Lived Experiences

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the challenges students face when adjusting to university life at a public university in Zambia, based on their lived experiences. The transition to university presents numerous difficulties, including adapting to new environments, managing financial and academic pressures, and navigating social dynamics. Rooted in the constructivism paradigm, this exploratory qualitative study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological design to collect data through in-depth interviews with fifteen students who requested for counselling. The study identified key challenges impacting student adjustment, such as unpreparedness for university life, economic hardships, inadequate accommodation, and bullying. Financial instability was highlighted as a major stressor, affecting students' ability to meet basic needs and maintain academic performance. Social factors, including peer relationships and a sense of belonging, were also crucial in influencing adjustment. Negative experiences, such as bullying and isolation, further compounded students' challenges. The study also examined potential interventions, with students suggesting the need for improved orientation programs, accessible counselling services, financial aid, and better accommodation. The findings highlight the importance of institutional support in helping students cope with the multifaceted challenges of university life. By addressing the raised issues, universities can improve student retention, well-being, and academic success. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of student adjustment at public universities and offers practical recommendations for enhancing student welfare services.

Key Words: student adjustment, public university, financial challenges, social support, university life.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Adapting to university life is crucial for students' overall success and well-being, as it affects their academic performance, social integration, and mental health. Transitioning from familiar environments to the complexities of university life presents various challenges, both personal and academic, that require institutional support to navigate effectively (Poquet et al., 2021). Educational institutions play a significant role in facilitating this adjustment by providing guidance, resources, and programs to help students acquire the skills necessary for adaptation to their new surroundings (Saras & Perez-Felkner, 2018). The process of socialization, which involves internalising the cultural norms, values, and expectations of the university environment, is essential for successful adjustment. Without adequate institutional support, students may struggle to develop the competencies needed to thrive, both socially and academically.

The adjustment process is multifaceted and encompasses more than academic adaptation. It involves adapting to new social settings and developing interpersonal relationships (Reyagaletsa et al., 2020). Students entering university must navigate these new dynamics, often with minimal support mechanisms in place to facilitate the transition. While students are expected to take ownership of their adjustment, institutional systems that actively support this process are often unclear, especially in public universities, where resources may be limited.

The adjustment challenges are faced by students globally as shown by studies in Canada (Smith 2008) and the

United Kingdom (Holliman et al (2018) that indicate that academic adjustment is particularly challenging for students, as they encounter new methods of learning, assessments, and expectations. Research shows that despite universities' efforts to manage workloads, individual differences among students can increase the stress associated with academic demands (Ivypanda, 2020). For example, first-year students often struggle with overwhelming academic pressure, unpredictable schedules, and inconsistent workloads, all of which contribute to anxiety and hinder their academic performance (Yau, 2012). This raises critical questions about the effectiveness of institutional support systems in helping students cope with academic pressures and achieve successful adjustment.

At regional level, the adjustment challenges faced by students were inclined towards social-economic adjustments as shown by Dlamini et al (2020) in South Africa and China (2015) in Tanzania. Social-economic challenges are stressor that significantly impacts students' adjustment to university life, particularly in public institutions. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds face additional pressures as they struggle to meet basic needs, such as food, accommodation, and school supplies (Vossensteyn, 2009). These challenges often force students to adopt survival strategies, which may reduce their academic focus and social integration. As governments shift the financial burden of higher education onto students and their families, economically disadvantaged students are increasingly at risk of struggling to adjust, which can lead to higher dropout rates. The financial strain is compounded by limited access to support services, increasing the difficulties faced by students from low-income backgrounds. Conversely, negative social experiences, such as bullying, can severely hinder the adjustment process. Research by Gomez-Galan et al. (2021) highlights the psychological impact of bullying, noting that it can lead to long-term mental health issues, including anxiety and depression.

In the local context, social-economic, interpersonal relationships and peer support networks are considered to play a critical role in the adjustment process. Positive relationships with peers and a keen sense of belonging to the university are essential for helping students feel integrated and supported (Ndhlovu and Mwanza, 2024). Peer relationships offer emotional and social support, which can mitigate feelings of isolation and homesickness, particularly for first-year students who are away from home for the first time. Maunder (2017) emphasizes that strong peer relationships, combined with attachment to the university, foster a sense of belonging, which is crucial for successful adjustment.

Considering these factors, it becomes clear that student adjustment to university life is a complex and multifaceted process that requires active institutional intervention. This study aimed to explore the challenges students undergo at a public university in Zambia, focusing on their lived experiences to identify gaps in institutional support and propose strategies for improving student welfare services.

Statement of the Problem

Student withdrawal from universities is a growing concern, with several factors contributing to attrition rates, particularly during the first year of study (Willcoxson, 2010). First-year students face unique challenges related to separation from their previous environments, the need for individuality, and the difficulty of forming new social connections (Melean et al., 2021). These challenges are compounded by financial stress, academic pressure, and social isolation, which can hinder students' ability to adjust and persist through their university education.

In public universities in Zambia, students face additional obstacles due to limited resources and inadequate support services (Akakandelwa et al 2015). Students' experiences at these institutions remain underexplored, particularly regarding how they navigate the challenges of adjustment. Therefore, this study seeks to document the lived experiences of students at a Zambian public university to better understand the challenges that affect their adjustment and identify potential strategies for improving institutional support.

Study Objectives

1. Explore student challenges in adjustment to university life at a public university.
2. Establish interventions from students' perspectives.

Research Questions

1. What challenges in adjustment to university life do students face at public universities?
2. What interventions could help students adjust to university life?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges in student adjustment to university life

Numerous studies have explored the challenges students face while adjusting to university life across different global contexts. Cong and Glass (2019), in their study conducted in the United States, demonstrated that the academic adjustment of international students is significantly influenced by educational service augmenters such as academic advising, writing support, and immigration advising. Similarly, Wu et al. (2015) highlighted that international students in the United States struggle with academic challenges such as communication difficulties with professors, classmates, and staff, alongside social isolation, and cultural adjustment issues. Supporting these findings, Gautam et al. (2016), in their research on international students in "Small Town USA," identified language barriers, financial difficulties, and social assimilation as recurring challenges. These studies suggest that academic, social, and cultural integration are vital for students' adjustment globally.

In Turkey, Yilmaz et al. (2020) found that academic, social, personal, emotional adjustment, and institutional attachment are key themes that influence students' adaptation to university life. Moving to Russia, Volkova and Kolesov (2022) explored the experiences of both domestic and international students in an English-medium university. Their study revealed that language barriers, friendship networks, and university social life were significant challenges for both groups, with domestic students often avoiding social participation and focusing heavily on academic performance. In Spain, Páramo Fernández et al. (2017) found that the transition to university often leads to issues like depression, loneliness, academic difficulties, and substance abuse, all of which negatively affect student retention and academic achievement. Additionally, English et al. (2017) examined the role of homesickness during students' first semester in college and found that higher levels of homesickness were associated with poorer social outcomes, though academic performance was not significantly impacted.

In the African context, there is a growing body of research on student adjustment challenges, though still underrepresented in comparison to studies from other regions. Dlamini et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study in South Africa at a previously disadvantaged tertiary institution. Their research focused on the adjustment experiences of first-year students and revealed that students often struggle with the breakdown of familiar relationships, independence, and the resilience needed to adapt to the demands of university life. This study emphasizes the distinct challenges faced by students at historically underprivileged institutions in adapting to the complexities of academic and social life at university.

However, despite the rich insights from South African studies, much of the literature on student adjustment in Africa remains limited. Many studies tend to focus on international and first-year students, often overlooking the unique experiences of students from other African countries or those in advanced years of study.

While there is significant global and regional research on student adjustment, there is a clear gap in the literature concerning Zambia and other Southern African countries. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the challenges students face across various years of study at a public university in Zambia. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on international or first-year students, this research takes a broader approach, examining the lived experiences of students in various stages of their academic journey. By doing so, it provides insight into the unique social, cultural, and academic challenges Zambian students encounter as they adjust to university life, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the adjustment process within the regional context of Southern Africa.

Interventions to student adjustment

Existing literature presents a variety of interventions aimed at addressing student adjustment challenges,

particularly for international and first-year students. Wu et al. (2015), following a study on international students' challenges and adjustment, argued that universities with a deeper understanding of students' academic difficulties can better equip faculty and staff to recognize student needs and offer effective support services. The study emphasizes that institutions must be prepared to meet students' academic, social, and cultural needs, suggesting that adequate preparations should be made to welcome international students upon their arrival.

Similarly, Zerengök et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study examining the impact of active leisure participation on the social adjustment of international students at a mid-sized university in Turkey. Their findings showed that active involvement in leisure activities led to improvements in social adjustment and provided both psychological and physical benefits to the students.

Focusing on peer support interventions, Alharthi (2020) studied the College Buddy Program, which connects first-year students with third-year students to facilitate academic and social adjustment. The case study revealed that first-year students benefited significantly from the program, particularly in social and academic integration. Graham et al. (2022) corroborates these findings by showing that students who feel connected to at least one person in the university community are more likely to persist in their studies. This echoes earlier findings by Hernandez et al. (2017), who demonstrated the benefits of informal mentoring programs for promoting professional identity, motivation, and persistence, particularly among female undergraduates.

Orientation programs have also been identified as key predictors of student retention. Arhin et al. (2021) used a correlational design to investigate how orientation impacts retention in distance learning at the University of Cape Coast. Their study found that orientation is a significant predictor of retention but emphasized that ongoing staff-student engagement is crucial for long-term retention outcomes. The authors suggest that orientation should be viewed as a continuous process, not just a one-time event, to maximize its positive impact on student retention.

Orientation programs continue to be seen as essential in helping students navigate the challenges of university life. Bongani (2020) emphasized the importance of designing orientation programs to help first-year students understand the academic and social challenges they are likely to face. Meanwhile, McConney and Fourie-Malherbe (2022) examined the "Be Well Peer Mentoring Program" at Stellenbosch University, finding that adjustment outcomes were strongly influenced by the intensity of peer mentoring, as well as factors such as mentor attributes, time invested, and the wellness components of the program. Their study highlighted the importance of selecting intentional mentors and the need for effective implementation and monitoring of peer mentoring programs.

In a case study focused on National Diploma students at Delta State School of Marine Technology, Emmanuel and TPTIB (2015) explored adjustment problems faced by these students, which included social, academic, internal, and external challenges. The study suggested that trained counselors could play a critical role in helping students overcome these adjustment issues.

Overall, the literature identifies several critical interventions to address students' adjustment to university life, including peer mentoring, leisure participation, orientation programs, and counseling services. However, there is a notable gap in the literature on these interventions within the context of Zambian higher and tertiary education, warranting further study in this area.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study was rooted in the constructivism paradigm because it focused on interpreting the subjective, co-constructed realities of individuals' lived experiences. A hermeneutic phenomenological design was picked because it is concerned not only with describing lived experiences but also with interpreting them. The research adopted an exploratory qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of university students and understand the challenges they face during the adjustment period. The qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences, enabling the study to uncover underlying meanings and themes (Baum, 2005).

Sampling

Purposive criterion sampling was utilised to select fifteen (15) students at the public university as this approach offered well-informed diverse perspectives on the phenomenon (Nyimbili and Nyimbili, 2024). The criteria for selection also took into consideration students with diverse backgrounds, academic discipline, age, and level of experience in the university who requested for counselling. This approach ensured that the study captured a wide range of experiences, enhancing the richness and depth of the data collected.

Data Collection

Data collection involved students responding to open-ended questionnaires followed by in-depth interviews. These in-depth interviews were conducted one-on-one in a comfortable and confidential setting to facilitate open and honest communication. The two approaches allowed for capturing the study's detailed insights into students' experiences.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns, themes, and meanings within the qualitative data collected. Drawing upon Gestalt theory, the analysis focused on understanding students as a whole rather than as isolated parts. The process involved coding the data, identifying recurring themes, and exploring how students' awareness and self-actualisation contribute to their ability to overcome obstacles during the adjustment period.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines for research involving human participants were strictly adhered to throughout the study. This included obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and minimising potential harm or discomfort. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board before commencing data collection.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations are acknowledged, including the potential for bias inherent in qualitative research, the subjective nature of participants' accounts, and the limited generalizability of findings to other contexts or populations. Despite these limitations, the study provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by students in adjusting to university life, as perceived through their lived experiences.

Findings of the Study

The study explored students' adjustment challenges to university life and potential solutions based on actual lived experiences at a Zambian public university. The findings were presented according to research questions. The sample consisted of seven male respondents, with four in their second year and three in their third year; four males lived on campus, while three lived off-campus. The female respondents totalled eight, with four in their second year, two in their third year, and two in their fourth year; six females lived on campus, while two lived off-campus. The diversity in year of study and living arrangements allowed for a comprehensive view of how diverse groups of students adjust to university life. The age of the students that took part in-depth interviews ranged from 19 to 37 years.

Challenges in Adjustment to University Life at a Public University

Based on the thematic analysis of raw data, several issues emerged as affecting adjustment to university life among students.

New environments and unpreparedness for campus life

Reporting on the issue of adjusting to new environments and unpreparedness for campus life, various students noted several reasons as attributing to student adjustment challenges. Two respondents noted:

“First-year experience is very challenging because you get to adapt to a new environment” (Respondent IDI_Student_eleven and Respondent IDI_Student_02)

Another further stated:

“In the first year, adjusting was particularly challenging for me because of the new life that the university brought. Still, currently, there are too many people due to over-enrolling. Also, there is work overload and hardships in living conditions and you feel depressed because you cannot afford certain things” (Respondent IDI_Student_03)

Some respondents also revealed the importance of coping strategies and processes. Further, other respondents reported a connection between living and sanitary conditions and student adjustment to university life as indicated in the response below:

“... Adjustment is not easy because you must adjust to new and different personalities, and it is hard to accept other people’s cultures. The toilets are terrible and sometimes you just find yourself getting sick without being sure if it is the sanitary conditions or water problem” (Respondent_IDI_Student_12)

While another added:

“Adjusting to university environment is not easy because you are living with different people around each time, it’s had to satisfy everyone around basically and whatever you do people always find negatives in your actions” (Respondent_IDI_Student_08)

Financial, economic, and academic hardships

Financial and academic stresses were noted to pose challenges to adjustment to university life as reflected in student responses. A respondent stated that:

“Many challenges come such as financial problems that may lead to dropping out of school due to lack of food, or lack of pocket money, you have to study extra hard just so as not to fail...” (Respondent IDI_Student_13)

In line with these sentiments, other respondents stated that:

“There is too much pressure from various things especially if you are not financially stable. You experience a lot of things like what to eat thinking about how your parents will pay your fees, stress from lessons, a lot of assignments and how to balance the eleven courses. All the above can make you feel overwhelmed and go back home and lecturers give you too much work and pressure.” (Respondent IDI_Student_07)

Commenting on the issue of financial challenges, a responded noted:

“Some students run out of food and have financial challenges hence they end up going out with lecturers who are supposed to be their helpers. Also, there is a lot of sexual abuse and sometimes you do not even know that you are been abused” (Respondent IDI_Student_06)

Unpredictable class times were mentioned yet as another concern. In a new place, facing unpredictable schedules was an experience that affected students. A respondent stated that:

“Everything was new to me, and it was not as I imagined, some classes were even falling in on weekends it was not easy for me, and some classes were being moved up instead of starting at 8 they would start later it was all new to me and on top of it all I had to knock off to go and cook for myself” (Respondent IDI_Student_10)

Concerning academic challenges, a respondent said:

“At times the learning process can present a lot of pressure so when you get used to pressure you fail to sleep even when you are free” (Respondent_IDI_Student_03)

Residential accommodation

Issues of accommodation where some respondents stay away from campus and must cover distances to access the institution were noted among the challenges in adjusting to university life. A respondent stated:

“It is easy to attend lectures and your studies when you are on campus unlike people coming from boarding houses” (Respondent IDI_Student_02)

Bullying On Campus

The study revealed that bullying was a concerning challenge to student adjustment. Further exploration showed that being laughed at for a wrong response in class and being ridiculed over ones dressing affected student adjustment. A respondent recounted:

“There is laughing and talking about people who are repeating a course. More mature roommates try to pick fights with the students who cannot defend themselves” (Respondent IDI_Student_02)

“Sometimes maybe you have not dressed well they will start bullying you in class. And sometimes, feeling homesick when you fail to fit in is natural because of seeing people from rich backgrounds looking down on you because of clashing with others due to coming from diverse backgrounds” (Respondent IDI_Student_03)

The existence of bullying was also noted in the lecture rooms. A respondent stated that:

“I have noticed students laughing at their fellow students in situations where they have failed to give a correct answer in class” (Respondent IDI_Student_07)

Bullying and being picked on by other students, especially senior students was noted to be another challenge to adjustment to university life.

“Yes, because I am more on the quiet side I would be harassed and abused verbally and physically. It would be mostly by students who have been in school longer than me and they say that I will fail. Most students are inconsiderate they just do things whenever they feel e.g., male students touching my breasts, some who know that I am a virgin laugh and mock me for that which just attracts more sexual abuse for me.” (Respondent_IDI_Student_14)

Peer pressure and poor social support

Issues of peer pressure and poor social support were noted as challenges in adjusting to university life among students as reflected by a respondent:

“Peer pressure from friends, having less supportive family members, arguments with roommates, exam pressure, and a lack of friends you can call real and helpful has been difficult such that even when you have issues, there is no one to turn to” (Respondent_IDI_Student_14)

Overall, findings indicated challenges of new environments and unpreparedness for campus life, financial, economic, and academic hardships, staying away from campus, on-campus bullying, peer pressure and poor social support.

Interventions to challenges of student adjustment

According to the viewpoints of the students, the study attempted to explore remedies for challenges related to students adjusting to university life. The respondents' views, derived from their individual experiences, were as follows.

Student orientation and recreational programs implementation

Some respondents in the study emphasized the significance of orientation programs in addressing challenges faced in the adjustment process. When asked about the ways through which adjustment to university life could

be made easier, respondents reflected the following:

“If they could just prepare us well in advance that things are hard here it would help. If they could also invest more in sports activities and exercise and gym it would help us to manage” (Respondent_IDI_Student_IDI_08)

Another respondent stated:

“If more work can be done to help students know how to handle themselves in the university right at the foundation, then most students should manage better later. Also fair across the various years of study, there would be fewer cases of bullying of first-year students if this is done, also putting first years with first years would reduce bullying in rooms” (Respondent_IDI_Student_IDI_07)

Another respondent stated:

“Teaching students how they can be accepting all angles of life that might form from different sectors and not forgetting who they are, their background and life in university it can help them to adjust easily” (Respondent_IDI_Student_IDI_06)

Support services and safe spaces access.

Emphasizing the importance of counselling services in assisting students to adjust to university life, respondents stated:

“Make sure the counselling office is always open for everyone. Encourage students to come for counselling in case they experience some traumatic experience. Students go through a lot” (Respondent_IDI_Student_04)

Another proposal in line with counselling services was noted by a responded who stated that:

“I think the college should not just consider the academic affairs of students but emotional, spiritual, and intellectual challenges that students are afflicted with around them. The college should therefore find best ways to overcome these facts e.g., through guidance and counselling” (Respondent_IDI_Student_09)

Another suggestion made on ways to help students adjust to university life was to have service providers that are equipped with people-friendly skills that are welcoming, sensitive to human dynamics, and ready to support young people as indicated in the statement:

“Offices in direct contact with students especially such as the clinic and counselling should be more user-friendly and welcoming” (Respondent_IDI_Student_07)

Another suggestion was on advertisement of safe spaces location on campus as proposed by a respondent who said:

“Knowing where places of safety are located especially those offices that deal directly with student issues. Not everyone knows about such places” (Respondent_IDI_Student_06)

Investing in student accommodation

Improving the adequacy of accommodation facilities and spaces was suggested as an intervention that would assist in improving student adjustment to university life. Respondents said:

“To put up or build more hostels so that even those staying in boarding houses can be on campus” (Respondent_IDI_Student_10)

“Building more hostels and extending the campus this place is too small” (Respondent_IDI_Student_02)

“If universities provide enough bed spaces it can help because sometimes squatting spaces cause problems”
(Respondent_IDI_Student_01)

Economic and financial support provision

Support for the financially and economically challenged students on campus was highlighted as a measure to avoid challenges in adjustment for students.

“The school should implement services where they can help the less privileged (such as orphans) by providing necessities such as books and pens and giving access to those without computers to the computer lab” (Respondent IDI_Student_04)

Apart from the suggestion of assisting vulnerable students with stationary to reduce adjustment challenges, still commenting in line with the provision of economic support to students, respondents noted the need for assisting students to adjust to university life via food, funds, and sanitary pads provision, especially to needy students.

“All universities should provide meals for the less privileged, help some needy students with a certain amount of pocket money at least once a month, help girls with donations of pads at least once a month and create a union which can support those who have failed to finish tuition fees. They should have evidence of vulnerability to stop them from dropping out of school” (Respondent IDI_Student_02)

Concerning the provision of food packages and related funds to students as a student adjustment enhancer, respondents added:

“Providing meal allowances or food at the dining halls for students would reduce a lot of stress and help students focus on academic work” (Respondent IDI_Student_03)

Still, on the intervention of empowering students to adjust to university life, respondents suggested a different approach of granting students the permissions to utilise their entrepreneurial skills on campus to increase their pool of funds and hence reduce the challenge of adjusting to university life.

“Legalizing businesses on campus would help. Not all students come from financially stable homes, and you cannot always ask for money from home because you sometimes just know that they do not have it. So doing business in school can help to source for money to survive” (Respondent_IDI_Student_08)

Improved operations in academic systems

A respondent proposed that:

“Setting up proper timetables for lessons because sometimes lecturers end up at 20:00hrs which means there will be no resting and no time to study well. Also, the preparation of exams should not be out of the syllabus.” (Respondent_IDI_Student_05)

Another respondent suggested that:

“Putting up a favourable environment, enough studying material, and setting up good timetables for lessons” (Respondent_IDI_Student_IDI_01)

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study explored the multifaceted challenges affecting students' adjustment to university life at a public university in Zambia, as well as the potential interventions that could support this transition. These findings were contextualized within existing literature to highlight the broader implications of these challenges and the necessary strategies to improve student health and wellbeing and academic success. The key emerging themes reflected both personal and institutional factors that contribute to students' struggles with adjustment, along with suggestions for institutional reforms.

New Environments and Unpreparedness for Campus Life

The transition to an unfamiliar environment, particularly for first-year students, was one of the most significant

challenges identified in the study. Many students struggled to adapt to the overwhelming nature of university life, characterized by unfamiliar surroundings, a high population of students, and academic workloads. Respondents described the difficulty of adapting to a new social and physical environment. This echoes the findings of Briggs et al. (2012), and Wu et al., (2015) who assert that students often experience heightened stress when faced with new academic and social environments, leading to adjustment difficulties.

The study also highlighted how unpreparedness extended beyond academics. Students found it difficult to cope with the diverse personalities and cultures encountered on campus. Respondents expressed frustration with the challenges of coexisting with peers from diverse backgrounds. These findings affirm those of Volkova and Kolesov (2022) in their study in Russia. These social struggles add another layer to the already complex process of adjustment. The need for early preparation, such as more thorough orientation programs, was suggested as a remedy to ease this transition.

Financial, Economic, and Academic Hardships

Financial instability was a recurring theme, with many students highlighting how economic difficulties increased their adjustment challenges. Respondents revealed that financial stress led to poor academic performance, food insecurity, and increased dropout rates. These findings align with Mofatteh (2021) and Ivemark and Ambrose (2021), who emphasize that financial difficulties are primary stressors for university students, severely affecting their academic success and mental health. Increased access to financial aid or student loan services could alleviate some of these financial pressures, enabling students to focus more on their studies.

Furthermore, unpredictable academic workloads and erratic timetables added to the pressure, as students had difficulty balancing academic responsibilities with personal tasks like commuting to and from the university or preparing meals. As highlighted by Páramo Fernández et al. (2017), unpredictable academic schedules can cause anxiety, particularly when they conflict with students' personal lives. Flexible academic scheduling and improved communication from university faculty could reduce this source of stress and contribute to smoother adjustment processes.

Residential Accommodation and Sanitation Issues

Accommodation problems, particularly for students living off-campus, were another significant challenge affecting student adjustment. Respondents noted that commuting long distances or living in overcrowded facilities impacted their academic engagement and well-being. Poor sanitation conditions were also a concern, with respondents reporting frequent illnesses due to unhygienic facilities. Cong and Glass (2019) highlight that inadequate housing and sanitation significantly contribute to students' stress levels and health problems, suggesting that universities should invest in infrastructure improvements to foster a more conducive living environment.

Bullying and Peer Pressure

Bullying was a prominent issue affecting the mental health and academic performance of students, with both physical and psychological harassment reported by respondents. Bullying often stems from socioeconomic differences or academic struggles, leading to feelings of inferiority and isolation. This aligns with the findings of Gomez-Galan et al. (2021), who note that bullying significantly affects students' mental health, increasing rates of anxiety and depression. Effective anti-bullying programs and the establishment of safe spaces on campus could mitigate these effects and promote a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Social Support and Peer Mentoring

Social isolation and homesickness were identified as prevalent issues, particularly among first-year students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Respondents expressed how the lack of social support increased feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Literature emphasizes the importance of social support systems, such as peer mentoring programs, in reducing these negative emotions and fostering student integration (English et al., 2017; Bongani et al., 2020). The establishment of mentoring programs that connect first-year students with their senior peers could enhance social cohesion and reduce instances of isolation, helping students navigate the complexities

of university life.

Interventions for Supporting Student Adjustment

The study's findings pointed to several key interventions that could ease student adjustment to university life. First, enhancing orientation programs to better prepare students for the academic and social challenges of university life was a recurring suggestion. As noted by Lizzio (2006), structured orientation programs can equip students with the necessary knowledge and coping mechanisms, making the transition smoother.

Second, accessible counselling services and the establishment of safe spaces were identified as critical needs. Respondents emphasized the importance of having open and welcoming counselling services to address their mental health concerns. Studies done by Mwanza and Mwale (2023) and Aljaberi et al. (2021) underscore the significant role of counselling services in supporting students' emotional and psychological well-being. The availability of safe spaces, where students can express their concerns without fear of judgment, is essential for creating a supportive university environment.

Additionally, respondents called for financial support programs targeting economically disadvantaged students. Respondents suggested the need for meal allowances and access to essential supplies, while others advocated for food and financial aid provisions for vulnerable students. Havlik et al. (2020) demonstrate that financial support programs significantly enhance student retention and success, enabling students to focus on their academic work without the burden of financial insecurity.

Finally, improvements in academic systems, such as more structured timetables and greater access to study materials, were also suggested. Flexible academic schedules and clearer communication of timetables, as suggested by Páramo Fernández et al. (2017), would reduce academic stress and allow students to balance their personal and academic lives more effectively.

CONCLUSION

Students' adjustment to university life is a complex, multifaceted process influenced by factors such as financial difficulties, academic stress, inadequate living conditions, bullying, and a lack of social support. Enhancing students' ability to adapt can be achieved through initiatives like flexible academic scheduling, robust financial assistance programs, comprehensive counseling services, and improvements in campus living conditions. Future research could benefit from exploring the long-term effectiveness of these interventions through longitudinal studies and comparative analyses across various universities, offering deeper insights into the sustainability and universality of these support measures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this study have practical implications for university administrators and policymakers. Implementing flexible academic schedules and ensuring clear communication of timetables can alleviate academic stress. Increasing financial support programs and providing budgeting workshops can help mitigate the financial challenges faced by students. Further, establishing comprehensive counselling services and safe spaces can support students' mental health and well-being alongside improving accommodation facilities and sanitation standards to make these environments conducive for student living. Developing anti-bullying programs and increasing awareness of available support services can also assist in creating a safer, inclusive, and more supportive university environment.

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