

Educational Policy Changes and Students' Transition Challenges from Secondary to Tertiary Education: An Educational Psychology Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The transition from secondary to tertiary education represents a critical stage in students' academic and psychological development. In Nigeria, this transition is influenced by educational policy changes, socio-economic conditions, institutional structures, and students' emotional and academic preparedness. This article examined educational policy changes and students' transition challenges from an educational psychology perspective. Using a conceptual and descriptive approach, the study reviewed relevant empirical and theoretical literature on students' transition experiences, educational reforms, academic adjustment, and psychological development in tertiary institutions. The article identified major transition challenges confronting first-year students, including academic unpreparedness, financial difficulties, emotional instability, poor social integration, inadequate institutional support systems, and limited access to counselling and educational psychology services. Findings further revealed that although policy reforms have expanded access to tertiary education, weak implementation, infrastructural inadequacies, overcrowded classrooms, and unstable academic calendars continue to hinder effective transition and adjustment among students. From an educational psychology perspective, the study established that successful transition depends largely on students' motivation, self-efficacy, emotional resilience, academic readiness, and the availability of institutional support services such as academic advising, mentoring, orientation programmes, and counselling interventions. The article concluded that improving students' transition experiences requires collaborative efforts among government agencies, educators, counsellors, parents, and tertiary institutions. It therefore recommended strengthened educational psychology services, improved funding, enhanced academic support systems, and comprehensive transition programmes to promote students' academic success and psychological well-being in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Keywords: Educational policy, transition challenges, tertiary education, educational psychology, first-year students, academic adjustment, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The transition from secondary to tertiary education constitutes a critical stage within the educational trajectory of learners and has increasingly attracted scholarly and policy attention at global, continental, and national levels. This phase represents more than a mere progression between educational tiers; rather, it is a complex and dynamic process shaped by the interplay of academic preparedness, socio-economic capacity, institutional structures, and policy frameworks. Together, these factors determine not only students' access to higher education but also their ability to persist and succeed once admitted. Despite notable expansion in secondary school enrolment across sub-Saharan Africa over the past two decades, the corresponding growth in tertiary enrolment has remained disproportionately low, suggesting the persistence of systemic constraints that inhibit effective progression beyond secondary education (Landgards-Tarvoll, 2024).

The transition from secondary school to tertiary education marks a pivotal moment in students' academic lives, characterised by a shift from relatively structured and closely supervised learning environments to settings that demand greater autonomy, independence, critical thinking, and self-regulated learning. This transition is

inherently multidimensional and is influenced by academic, psychological, social, economic, and institutional factors that may either facilitate or hinder students' adjustment and success (Adeyemo, 2020). As students navigate this important developmental phase, they frequently encounter challenges that affect their academic performance, social integration, psychological well-being, and overall educational outcomes (Ogunode, 2022).

One of the major difficulties associated with this transition is academic unpreparedness. A considerable proportion of students enter tertiary institutions without adequate competencies in time management, independent learning, analytical reasoning, and effective study habits (Okeke, 2021). This deficiency often manifests in poor academic performance, heightened stress levels, low self-efficacy, and increased risk of attrition (Adeyemo, 2020). Furthermore, many students struggle to cope with the intensified academic demands of higher education, including increased coursework, unfamiliar pedagogical approaches, extensive reading requirements, and more rigorous assessment methods (Ogunode, 2022).

Beyond academic concerns, inadequate guidance and support mechanisms further complicate the transition process. In secondary school environments, students often depend heavily on structured support from teachers, parents, and peers. However, these support systems become less personalised within tertiary institutions, where students are expected to assume greater responsibility for their academic and personal development (Okeke, 2021). The absence of sufficient guidance and mentoring can result in confusion, emotional distress, social isolation, and institutional disengagement (Adeyemo, 2020). Similarly, bureaucratic procedures relating to registration, course selection, accommodation, and academic regulations may create additional frustration for first-year students (Ogunode, 2022).

Socio-economic constraints also constitute a major impediment to effective transition. Students from economically disadvantaged households frequently experience financial stress related to tuition fees, transportation, accommodation, learning materials, and feeding expenses. Such financial burdens negatively affect students' academic concentration, participation in university activities, and overall psychological well-being (Okeke, 2021). Limited access to technological resources, unstable internet connectivity, and inadequate academic support systems further deepen educational inequalities among students from marginalized backgrounds (Adeyemo, 2020).

These transition challenges are compounded by broader systemic issues within Nigeria's higher education system. Many tertiary institutions continue to operate under severe infrastructural and financial constraints, characterised by overcrowded classrooms, inadequate laboratory facilities, obsolete library resources, and insufficient academic personnel (Okeke, 2021). Such deficiencies undermine teaching quality, weaken students' learning experiences, and adversely affect their capacity to adjust successfully to tertiary education (Adeyemo, 2020; Ogunode, 2022).

Globally, the transition from secondary to tertiary education is widely recognised as a strategic mechanism for human capital development, national innovation, labour productivity, and sustainable economic growth (UNESCO, 2023). However, in many African countries, including Nigeria, structural bottlenecks continue to hinder smooth and equitable transitions into higher education. These include weak educational policy implementation, disparities in educational quality, limited institutional capacity, inadequate career guidance systems, and persistent socio-economic inequality. Scholars have therefore described the African higher education landscape as characterised by "transition fragility," where students' educational progression is often uncertain and vulnerable to systemic disruptions (Ofor-Douglas, 2024).

In Nigeria, pressure on tertiary institutions has intensified significantly due to population growth and increasing completion rates at the secondary school level. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022), over 1.8 million candidates seek admission into Nigerian tertiary institutions annually, yet less than half successfully secure placement. This demand–supply imbalance is further aggravated by recurrent industrial actions, inadequate funding, infrastructural decay, and unstable academic calendars, all of which negatively affect students' educational planning, motivation, and continuity (Ojo, 2022). Although the expansion of private universities and polytechnics has increased nominal access to higher education, concerns remain regarding affordability, quality assurance, and regional disparities in educational opportunities (Ofor-Douglas, 2024).

For many first-year students, the transition to university life is associated with excitement, uncertainty, anxiety, and emotional vulnerability (Williams & Roberts, 2023). Students must simultaneously adapt to unfamiliar academic expectations, new social environments, financial responsibilities, and independent living conditions (Cabras & Mondo, 2018; Korhonen, 2021). Research indicates that many first-year students feel overwhelmed and inadequately prepared to cope with these multiple demands (Cameron & Rideout, 2022; Huang & Lee, 2022).

Existing empirical studies consistently demonstrate that first-year students encounter transitional difficulties spanning academic, social, financial, emotional, and cultural domains (Cabras & Mondo, 2018; Edjah, Domey, & Ankomah, 2019; Gosai, Tuibeqa, & Prasad, 2023). Academic challenges include difficulties managing coursework, adapting to independent learning systems, and coping with increased assessment pressure. Social challenges involve establishing interpersonal relationships, adjusting to campus culture, and achieving a sense of belonging within the university community (King, McQuarrie, & Brigham, 2021; Nunn, 2021; Sterling, 2018; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). Financial hardship often limits students' participation in academic and extracurricular activities, thereby restricting institutional engagement and social integration (Newfield, 2018). Emotional challenges such as homesickness, loneliness, stress, and anxiety may further undermine students' psychological well-being and contribute to withdrawal tendencies if not properly addressed (Osafo et al., 2025).

In response to these challenges, the Nigerian government and educational stakeholders have introduced various policy reforms aimed at improving transition outcomes. Such reforms include the expansion of open and distance learning programmes, establishment of additional tertiary institutions, implementation of student loan schemes, and promotion of digital learning platforms (Aina & Olatoye, 2022). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these reforms has been constrained by inadequate funding, weak implementation mechanisms, corruption, administrative inefficiencies, and insufficient stakeholder collaboration (Aina & Olatoye, 2022).

Despite increasing recognition of these issues, empirical and theoretical investigations focusing specifically on the Nigerian transition context remain limited. Much of the existing literature has concentrated on transition experiences in Western societies, often neglecting the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional peculiarities that shape students' experiences within Nigeria (Ogunode, 2022). Consequently, there remains a pressing need for context-specific research capable of generating evidence-based insights into the complexities of student transition within Nigerian tertiary institutions.

This paper therefore seeks to contribute to existing scholarship by critically examining educational policy changes and students' transition challenges from an educational psychology perspective. The paper explores the multidimensional nature of transition experiences, analyses institutional and student-related impediments, and evaluates the role of educational psychology and counselling interventions in promoting successful adjustment. The study also proposes practical recommendations for policymakers, educators, counsellors, and tertiary institutions aimed at strengthening transition support systems and improving educational outcomes among first-year students in Nigeria.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Concept of Transition from Secondary School to University Education

The transition from secondary school to university education constitutes a significant developmental and educational milestone within learners' academic journeys. This stage often coincides with heightened academic expectations, increased competition, and growing uncertainty regarding future educational and career pathways. According to Lekena and Bayaga (2018), learners frequently experience considerable anxiety and confusion during this phase because they are required to make decisions with long-term implications for their academic and professional futures.

While some learners perceive the transition as an exciting opportunity for independence and self-discovery, others approach it with fear and apprehension. Entering university often signifies a movement away from familiar support systems provided by parents, teachers, and long-standing peer networks. Students are expected

to adapt to new institutional cultures, assume greater personal responsibility, and make independent decisions regarding academics, social relationships, and financial management.

Transition has been conceptualised as an ongoing process of psychological, educational, and social adaptation that occurs as individuals move between educational environments (Mbulaheni & Buyisani, 2024). Rather than being viewed as a singular event, transition should be understood as a dynamic process involving substantial changes in learners' academic practices, personal identities, social relationships, emotional experiences, and behavioural expectations.

Eddaif et al. (2017) identify several dimensions of transition, including movement from dependence to independence, from familiar home environments to unfamiliar university settings, and from passive learning to active engagement in academic discourse. These dimensions highlight the complexity of the transition process and underscore the importance of institutional support mechanisms in facilitating students' adjustment.

The first year of university is particularly significant because it shapes students' attitudes toward higher education, learning, and personal development. Nyar (2021) argues that learners' earlier educational experiences play a vital role in shaping their academic values, self-perceptions, and learning dispositions throughout tertiary education. Consequently, the quality of students' transition experiences significantly influences their academic persistence and long-term educational outcomes.

Tayyab (2019) further observes that many first-year students require structured support to adapt effectively to university demands. Essential components of successful adaptation include the development of learner autonomy, academic confidence, emotional resilience, and positive self-concept. Achieving these outcomes requires collaborative support from families, lecturers, peers, counsellors, and institutional administrators.

Transitional Experiences among First-Year University Students

The transition from secondary education to university is widely recognised as one of the most challenging periods in students' educational lives. Research consistently demonstrates that first-year students frequently experience stress, uncertainty, and emotional instability as they attempt to adjust to unfamiliar academic and social environments (Agormedah et al., 2024; Conley et al., 2020; Liu, 2023).

Academic adjustment represents one of the most significant areas of challenge. Students are expected to demonstrate higher levels of self-regulation, independent learning, and critical thinking than were previously required in secondary school. Trautwein and Bosse (2017) note that difficulties associated with academic workload, time management, self-directed learning, and assessment methods contribute significantly to stress and anxiety among first-year students.

Social integration is another critical aspect of the transition experience. Many students struggle to establish meaningful social relationships and achieve a sense of belonging within the university community (Jorgenson et al., 2018; Meehan & Howells, 2018). Social isolation and loneliness can negatively affect students' psychological well-being and academic engagement, thereby increasing the likelihood of withdrawal or poor academic performance.

Financial pressures also represent a substantial barrier to successful transition. Tuition fees, accommodation expenses, transportation costs, and other living expenses impose significant burdens on students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds (Lawley et al., 2023; Zimmerman & Parker, 2023). Such financial difficulties may compel students to engage in part-time employment, thereby increasing stress and reducing the time available for academic activities.

Emotional challenges are equally important. Many first-year students experience homesickness, anxiety, fear of failure, and emotional instability during the transition period (Osafo et al., 2025). Without adequate counselling and emotional support systems, these challenges can severely undermine students' academic performance and psychological well-being.

Transition Adjustment Processes of First-Year Students

Transition adjustment involves cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social adaptation to the university environment (Cameron & Rideout, 2022).

Building on this theoretical foundation, the present study conceptualizes transition adjustment as a dynamic process comprising three interrelated phases: **separation, identification, and integration**.

Separation Phase: This phase involves psychological and emotional detachment from previous experiences associated with secondary education and family dependence. During this stage, students gradually disengage from familiar routines, support systems, and behavioural expectations established within their home and school environments.

Although parental support remains important during this period, students are required to develop autonomy, independence, and self-reliance (Khatibi & Sheikholeslami, 2016). This stage often involves emotional struggles as students attempt to balance emerging independence with continued reliance on family support.

Identification Phase: This phase involves the development of a new academic and social identity within the university context. Students begin to recognise their strengths, weaknesses, values, and aspirations while attempting to align themselves with institutional expectations and peer groups.

Successful identification enhances students' resilience, self-confidence, and sense of belonging within the university community (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2021). However, failure to establish positive identity alignment may result in feelings of alienation, low self-esteem, and academic disengagement (Fabeku & Fasanmi, 2024).

Integration Phase: This phase represents the culmination of the adjustment process. At this stage, students successfully internalise their roles within the university system and develop adaptive coping strategies across academic, social, and emotional domains (Barringer et al., 2023).

Integrated students demonstrate improved academic engagement, stronger peer relationships, better emotional regulation, and greater institutional commitment. They actively participate in academic and extracurricular activities, seek support when necessary, and develop effective time management and financial management skills.

Effective Transition from Secondary to Tertiary Education in Nigeria

Effective transition from secondary to tertiary education involves successful academic, psychological, social, and career-related adjustment to university life. In Nigeria, achieving effective transition is particularly challenging due to systemic issues such as inadequate funding, large class sizes, poor infrastructure, and limited support services (Aina & Olatoye, 2022; Ogunode, 2023). An effective transition is not merely reflected in students' physical enrolment in tertiary institutions but in their ability to adapt, persist, and thrive academically and psychosocially. Key indicators of effective transition include academic adjustment, social integration, psychological well-being, persistence and retention, and career orientation.

i. Academic Adjustment: Academic adjustment refers to students' ability to adapt to university-level academic expectations, teaching methods, and assessment systems. Effective academic adjustment is influenced by students' prior preparation, access to learning resources, lecturer support, and institutional orientation programmes. Studies indicate that students who receive academic advising, mentoring, and remedial support during their first year demonstrate improved academic performance and higher self-efficacy (Adebayo & Kolo, 2020). Lecturer support and constructive feedback also contribute significantly to students' confidence and engagement (Olawale & Yusuf, 2022).

ii. Social Integration: Social integration refers to the extent to which students feel connected to the university community. Tinto's (2017) emphasises that social integration significantly influences students' persistence and commitment to higher education. In Nigeria, many students relocate from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, thereby encountering challenges associated with diversity, peer

interaction, and adaptation to campus culture. Effective social integration therefore requires supportive peer networks, mentoring programmes, student associations, and inclusive institutional environments.

iii. Psychological Well-Being: Psychological well-being is fundamental to successful transition and academic success. Nigerian students frequently experience stress arising from academic pressure, financial hardship, and uncertainty regarding future employment opportunities (Adebisi & Lawal, 2021). Studies have documented high levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms among first-year undergraduates, especially during the initial months of enrolment (Ogunode & Abubakar, 2022). Access to counselling services, mental health awareness programmes, and supportive institutional climates significantly enhances students' emotional adjustment and resilience.

iv. Persistence and Retention: Persistence and retention are major indicators of successful transition. Students who experience positive academic and social integration are more likely to remain enrolled and successfully complete their programmes (Tinto, 2017). Institutional support systems such as mentoring programmes, financial aid, orientation programmes, and counselling services play important roles in reducing dropout rates and promoting academic continuity.

Transition Challenges and Adjustment of First-Year Students

1. Academic Transition Challenges: Academic transition challenges remain among the most prominent difficulties confronting first-year university students. Increased workload, extensive reading requirements, unfamiliar teaching methods, overcrowded lecture halls, and examination pressures often create stress and frustration (Sun & Zorah, 2015). Students transitioning from highly structured secondary school systems frequently struggle to cope with the demands of independent learning and self-regulation. Consequently, many students experience declining academic confidence, poor academic performance, and increased psychological stress (Bayaga et al., 2022).

2. Social Adjustment Challenges: Social adjustment challenges arise from separation from family members, adaptation to new environments, and the need to establish fresh interpersonal relationships (Zhuhra et al., 2022). Students often encounter difficulties managing shared accommodation, balancing social and academic responsibilities, and navigating peer influence. Such social pressures may negatively affect students' emotional stability and academic engagement (Panja et al., 2023; Tormon et al., 2023).

3. Cultural Adjustment Challenges: Cultural adjustment challenges emerge when students encounter unfamiliar cultural practices, languages, values, and social norms within university environments (Chow & Healey, 2008). Students studying outside their ethnic or linguistic regions may experience cultural alienation, identity confusion, and communication difficulties. Language barriers, religious differences, and unfamiliar social expectations may hinder social integration and academic participation (Nguyen et al., 2020).

4. Student-Related Factors: Student-related factors include poor study habits, weak time management, financial mismanagement, peer pressure, emotional instability, and inadequate academic preparation. Some students display relaxed attitudes toward academic work during the early stages of university life, only intensifying study efforts close to examination periods (Bappah et al., 2021). Excessive social media usage and poor financial discipline further undermine academic productivity and emotional stability. Additionally, examination malpractice at the secondary school level raises concerns regarding the validity of school-leaving certificates as indicators of academic competence (Bappah et al., 2021).

5. Coping Strategies and Adjustment Mechanisms: Despite these challenges, students adopt various coping strategies to facilitate adjustment. Participation in orientation programmes, peer support networks, counselling services, and religious activities helps students manage stress and improve resilience (Zheng & Mustapha, 2022). Students also engage in group discussions, independent study, time management practices, and extracurricular activities to strengthen academic engagement and social integration.

Admission Policy and Students' Transition from Secondary Schools to Tertiary Education in Nigeria

The admission policies of tertiary institutions play a significant role in shaping students' transition from secondary to higher education. These policies comprise the rules, criteria, and procedures governing students' entry into universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. In Nigeria, the admission process is coordinated by institutional authorities alongside regulatory bodies such as the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) and the National Universities Commission (NUC). Beyond determining access to

tertiary education, these policies substantially influence students' preparedness, adaptation, and overall transition experience within higher institutions.

Admission Policy and Access to Tertiary Education: Admission policies determine students' eligibility for higher education based on examination performance and institutional requirements. However, variations in secondary school quality and resource availability create disparities in students' preparedness for tertiary education. Students admitted with inadequate academic foundations may struggle significantly with university-level coursework and independent learning demands (Ogunode, 2023).

Admission Policy and Academic Preparedness: Although standardised examinations such as the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) serve as important selection mechanisms, they do not adequately assess students' critical thinking, creativity, and self-regulation abilities (Oloyede & Adeyemi, 2022). This limitation contributes to gaps in academic preparedness among incoming university students.

Admission Policy and Social Adjustment: Admission policies promoting diversity through quota systems and affirmative action expose students to culturally diverse university environments. While such diversity enhances inclusiveness, it may also create adjustment challenges for students from homogeneous backgrounds (Adeyemi & Onasanya, 2020). Orientation programmes, mentoring systems, and inclusive campus cultures are therefore necessary to facilitate effective social integration.

Admission Policy and Institutional Preparedness: High student enrolment resulting from competitive admission policies often places additional pressure on institutional infrastructure and academic resources (NUC, 2020). Institutions implementing remedial programmes, foundation courses, and structured orientation initiatives are better positioned to support students' transition and academic adjustment.

The Role of Educational Psychology on Students' Educational Development during Transition to Tertiary Education

Educational psychology provides important theoretical and practical insights into students' learning, motivation, adjustment, and overall development during the transition from secondary to tertiary education. Within tertiary institutions, educational psychology contributes significantly to students' academic achievement, emotional well-being, social adaptation, and career development.

Academic support services constitute a major component of educational psychology interventions. These services assist students in understanding institutional expectations, selecting appropriate courses, and developing effective academic and study strategies. According to the American College Counselling Association (ACCA, 2021), academic advising significantly enhances students' academic engagement, adjustment, and retention in higher institutions.

Career development interventions also play a vital role in helping students align their educational choices with personal interests, abilities, and future career aspirations. Jackson and Wilton (2022) observed that effective career counselling improves employability, career readiness, and long-term occupational satisfaction among students.

Furthermore, educational psychology addresses students' emotional and social needs through counselling and psychological support programmes targeted at stress management, self-esteem development, resilience, and interpersonal relationships. Programmes designed to strengthen communication skills, emotional intelligence, and coping strategies contribute substantially to students' adjustment and overall well-being during educational transition (Kitsantas & Givens, 2023).

Comprehensive educational psychology services therefore support students' holistic development and contribute positively to academic success, institutional attachment, educational persistence, and successful transition into tertiary education.

CONCLUSION

The transition from secondary to tertiary education represents a complex and transformative stage in students' educational and psychological development. In Nigeria, this transition is shaped by multiple interacting factors, including educational policy reforms, academic preparedness, socio-economic conditions, institutional capacity, emotional well-being, and social integration.

From an educational psychology perspective, successful transition depends not only on students' cognitive abilities but also on their emotional resilience, motivation, self-efficacy, and access to supportive institutional environments. The evidence reviewed in this paper demonstrates that many first-year students encounter substantial academic, social, financial, emotional, and cultural challenges that negatively affect their adjustment and educational outcomes.

Although educational policy reforms aimed at expanding access to tertiary education have improved enrolment opportunities, persistent structural deficiencies continue to undermine the quality and effectiveness of transition experiences. Inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, weak counselling services, unstable academic calendars, and socio-economic inequalities remain major impediments to successful transition.

Ultimately, improving students' transition experiences requires collaborative efforts among government agencies, tertiary institutions, educators, parents, counsellors, and policymakers. Sustainable educational reforms grounded in educational psychology principles are essential for enhancing students' academic success, psychological well-being, and long-term educational attainment in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussions presented in this paper, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Strengthening Orientation Programmes:** Tertiary institutions should implement comprehensive orientation programmes designed to familiarise first-year students with academic expectations, institutional regulations, study skills, time management techniques, and available support services.
2. **Improvement of Guidance and Counselling Services:** Universities and other tertiary institutions should strengthen counselling units by employing qualified counsellors, increasing funding, and promoting mental health awareness to reduce stigma associated with seeking psychological support.
3. **Enhancement of Academic Support Systems:** Institutions should establish academic mentoring programmes, peer tutoring systems, remedial classes, and academic advising structures to support students experiencing academic difficulties during the transition period.
4. **Increased Educational Funding:** The Nigerian government should increase funding allocations to tertiary education to improve infrastructure, expand learning facilities, recruit qualified academic staff, and reduce overcrowding within institutions.
5. **Review of Admission Policies:** Admission policies should incorporate broader assessment measures capable of evaluating students' critical thinking, creativity, emotional readiness, and independent learning skills rather than relying solely on standardised examination scores.
6. **Integration of Educational Psychology Services:** Educational psychology interventions should be integrated into institutional support systems to address students' motivational, emotional, and developmental needs during the transition process.
7. **Strengthening Collaboration between Secondary and Tertiary Institutions:** Secondary schools and tertiary institutions should collaborate in curriculum alignment, career guidance, and transition preparation initiatives to enhance students' readiness for higher education.

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