






Psychological adjustment challenges among first-year university students: Crucial link between psychological health and academic success in higher education

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Abstract – This study investigates the psychological adjustment challenges faced by first-year students at a selected University in Namibia and their impact on first-year university students' academic performance. The study aimed to understand first-year university students' psychological adjustment challenges, how those challenges affected their academic performances, and the strategies they employed to overcome them. It employed a mixed-methods approach following a convergent parallel design. Data were collected in two phases. Eighty students (80) were selected in this study. The first composed of 46 (57.5%) secondary phase, 23 (28.7%) upper primary phase, and 11 (13.8%) pre-lower primary phase students, and the second involved 10 (47.6%) secondary, 6 (28.5%) upper primary and 5 (23.8%) pre-lower primary phases. Quantitative and qualitative research techniques involved focus group discussions and an online questionnaire featuring closed and open-ended questions. The qualitative findings indicated that students experienced various psychological and academic challenges, including self-harming behaviours, feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress. The results reported poor concentration, difficulties participating in class discussions, frequent forgetfulness, noticing a decline in academic performance, lacking happiness when attending classes, missing classes, and experiencing memory loss. The thematic results suggested that there were significant influences between psychological adjustment and academic performance among first-year students. These findings implicated that the university management must restructure its operational systems to enhance stability, reliability, and effectiveness. Higher education institutions must be aware of psychological adjustment challenges, which require supporting student well-being, improving overall academic outcomes, and creating a more conducive learning environment.

Keywords: Academic success, First-year university students, Higher education, Psychological adjustment challenges, Psychological health

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I. INTRODUCTION

GLOBALLY, 10-20% of students experience mental health problems (Peltzer & Pengpid, 2017). Adolescents from low-income countries, such as Namibia, are particularly susceptible to mental health issues (Kieling et al., 2011). Previous research in Namibia has revealed alarming rates of health-risk behaviours among adolescents. For instance, 33.2% have engaged in sexual intercourse (Chinsebu et al., 2008), 32.1% use tobacco, 5.1% engage in risky drinking, 75.6% are physically inactive, 35.7% spend excessive time sedentary, and a staggering 36.1% have contemplated suicide within the past year (Peltzer, 2009). This article explores the psychological adjustment of first-year students, focusing on how their mental health affects their academic success. Research on first-year university students is increasing locally and globally (Anbesaw et al., 2022; Esmael et al., 2018; Orlov et al., 2018). These studies reported that first-year university students faced challenges in higher education institutions. Similarly, statistics show that between 2015 and 2022, 11 suicide cases were recounted, 60 suicidal ideations, and over 65 mental health cases were reported at one of the University of Namibia satellite campuses (Asino

& Shipena, 2015–2022). In addition, over 1856 students visited the student counsellor's office during the same period seeking assistance with personal and social problems (Asino & Shipena, 2015–2022). According to Amakali-Nauseb et al. (2019), in many parts of the world, university students are reported to experience stress, depression, and anxiety frequently, which can affect their quality of life and academic performance. This study's significance lies in its potential to shed light on the psychological challenges first-year university students face at satellite campuses, a demographic often overlooked in higher education research. The findings can, therefore, inform the development of tailored support services and interventions to address the specific needs of first-year students at satellite campuses.

Given the relevance of this problem and using multi-research methodologies, we want to shed light on students' journeys into and initial challenges in higher education. However, before reviewing the studies on the research in question, defining "transition." appears appropriate. Ecclestone et al. (2010) noted that experts disagree on what constitutes a transition. Gale and Parker (2014, p. 5) call it "the capacity to navigate change.". Using counselling terminology, Coertjens et al. (2017) refer to transition as a "turning point" or a moment between stability. This term applies to higher education transitions, as large shifts in student roles need role-study context. The shift from secondary to

university education involves a new academic atmosphere and, for some students, a new city and living alone. It also changes their role, such as being more self-responsible for their study content, time, and study mode.

A growing body of research indicates that for most students, their first year at university is a challenging experience to adjust to (Aderi et al., 2013; Buote, 2006; Friedlander et al., 2007; Majumdar & Ray, 2010). According to Coertjens et al. (2017), the South African higher education sector faces high attrition and low retention rates; as much as 50% of the students drop out of university, most during the first study year. The results emphasise the necessity of supporting incoming students to help them integrate into the academic community and graduate from the university. Based on the findings of their qualitative study, Hako and Shikongo (2019) found that emotions are crucial to students transferring from home to higher education. The results further reveal that students who fear failing courses are less likely to pass their first year. Moreover, students seemed to experience the psychological side effects of stress, such as anxiety, depression, worry, and tension. The shift from secondary school to university is undeniably exciting and worrisome for first-year students (Agolla & Ongori, 2009; Topper, 2007). Life transitions, including new experiences and changes, naturally involve an adjustment process in the lives of individuals. They face various difficulties that force them to acquire the abilities necessary to navigate their new surroundings (Malefo, 2000; Soiferman, 2017; Sommer & Dumont, 2011). The issues that could arise from adjusting first-year students' psychological and academic experiences could impact their academic performance and achievement. Most first-year students have stated that the transition to campus is the most stressful adjustment phase during a crucial developmental stage (adolescence). Jackson et al. (2013) underline that the inability to control the transition issues may lead to increased psychological suffering. This study highlights first-year university students' challenges in adapting to university life, focusing on the psychological factors that influence their academic success. We aim to inform strategies to improve higher education student support systems by understanding these dynamics.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopted the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) developed by Albert Bandura in 1977. This theory is based on the idea that cognitive, behavioural, and environmental factors influence learning (Bandura, 2001). Bandura believes that learning occurs in a social context, for instance, in a university setting, with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction of the person, environment, and behaviours. Therefore, this theory is relevant to this study, as through observational learning and interaction with counselling unit staff and peers, first-year students can be influenced to make healthier adjustments and optimistic changes in their lives. This theory aims to understand first-year students' psychological adjustment to the university setting. The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) offers a compelling framework for understanding the psychological adjustment challenges faced by first-year university students. Its emphasis on reciprocal determinism, the interplay between personal, environmental, and behavioural factors, aligns well with the complexities of the university transition. For instance, self-efficacy, a core concept in SCT, directly relates to students' belief in their ability to handle academic demands and social pressures. Observational learning, another key component of SCT, explains how students learn effective coping strategies and study habits from peers and role models. The university environment, including social support networks, academic expectations, and campus culture, constitutes the environmental factors that influence students' behaviours. By examining these interconnected factors through the lens of SCT, this study aims to deepen our understanding of the psychological challenges faced by first-year students and inform the development of effective interventions to support their academic success and overall well-being.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological adjustment challenges encountered by first-year students

Psychological adjustment challenges have been long researched, and scholars have identified stress, depression, anxiety, nervousness, tension, pain in the neck or shoulders, migraine headaches, inadequate resources, financial problems, fear of failure, and academic overload, for instance, in tests and assignments (Agolla & Ongori, 2009; Topper, 2007). In Hako and Shikongo's (2019) study, a considerable number of students (42.4%) expressed that they lacked stress management skills, which affected their learning progress. Students felt that stress distracts them from learning and eventually hampered their academic success. In a similar case in South Africa, Sommer and Dumont (2011) and Malefo (2000) identified motivation, self-esteem, stress and their capabilities, perceived stress and test anxiety, academic overload and performance, students' adjustment self-efficacy, mental distress, and high negative life change as psychological factors that impede learning. Though relating university adjustment to attrition is vital, a focus on developing and monitoring university adjustment indicators is essential if they are to serve as an effective warning system for institutions of higher learning. These challenges can manifest in various ways, such as decreased motivation, impaired cognitive function, and social isolation. When students have low self-efficacy, negative outcome expectations, or limited social support, they are more vulnerable to the negative effects of psychological challenges. Students may observe the behaviours of peers, faculty, and other students struggling with adjustment. This can lead to them adopting similar negative coping strategies or attitudes.

Furthermore, students with low self-efficacy may be more likely to experience academic, social, and personal-emotional difficulties. They may doubt their ability to handle challenges and be more prone to give up. Therefore, by fostering a supportive learning environment and promoting positive mental health practices, universities can help students overcome these challenges and achieve their academic goals.

Psychological adjustments affect first-year students' academic achievement

To determine the effects of psychological adjustment on academic achievement, Mahmood and Iqbal (2015), Malik and Khalid (2012), and Nazli and Irfan (2009) used the Reynolds Adolescents Adjustment Screening Inventory (RAASI) to examine the emotional and behavioural problems of young students that are directly related to their academic achievement. The results showed a significant negative correlation between psychological adjustment and academic achievement of students who passed O' level. This result contradicts the findings of many studies that show a significant positive relationship between psychological adjustment and academic achievement among students (Hallinan & Kubitschek, 1991; Gold, 1978; Larson & Richards, 1991; Searle & Ward, 1990). Esmael et al. (2018) assessed the prevalence and associated factors of adjustment problems among first year Madawalabu University students and found that 30.1% of respondents had adjustment challenges. Female students were more likely to have adjustment challenges with [AOR=4.36, 95% CI (1.96, 9.68)] than males. In addition, social, academic, personal, and change factors tested for adjustment challenges of the students showed a statistically significant association. In another study, Belay Ababu et al. (2018) cross-sectional institution-based study found that a considerable variety of respondents, 103 (19.2%) and 97 (18.1%), had an institutional adjustment and academic adjustment problems, respectively. On the contrary, 82 (18.1) and 45 (8.4%) respondents had a personal-emotional problem and social adjustment problems, respectively. Ayele's (2018) qualitative data depicted that the students were challenged by adjustment problems from four basic dimensions. These adjustment problem dimensions were academic, social, personal-emotional, and institutional attachment dimensions. Cultural differences and variations in academic systems can significantly impact student outcomes. Individualistic cultures prioritise personal achievement and self-efficacy, while collectivist

cultures emphasise group harmony and social roles. These cultural differences can influence students' motivation, goals, and study habits. Furthermore, educational philosophies, such as rote learning or critical thinking, can shape students' learning experiences and perceptions of success. Socioeconomic disparities can also affect access to resources, quality of education, and cultural capital.

Strategies preventing psychological adjustment challenges among first-year university students

There have been numerous attempts to help students deal with the psychological process they face during their first year of university. In a study that sought ways to prevent adjustment problems among first-year students, Hazard and Carter (2018) advise that first-year students must adapt their behaviours and mental processes to succeed academically, culturally, emotionally, financially, intellectually, and socially. According to Majumdar and Ray (2010) and Tuna (2003), students at the university level are expected to participate in their learning more actively than they did in secondary school. As such, students need to consider how they will change to fulfill the increased expectations of higher education. The skills and knowledge to meet this adjustment's requirements are essential for success. The university students appear to engage with others of various ethnicities, religious views, ages, and physical abilities in various situations. These circumstances will range from social to intellectual to personal. The degree to which a student gains from these multicultural contacts depends on their capacity for cultural adjustment; one way to embrace diversity in higher education is to be open and welcoming of differences. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) suggests that people learn by observing others. Highlighting successful students who have overcome similar challenges can inspire others and boost their self-efficacy. It is essential to provide opportunities for students to experience success, no matter how small. Additionally, offering constructive feedback and encouraging positive self-talk and visualisation techniques can help students improve.

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study explores first-year university students' psychological adjustment challenges at a selected Namibia university. It evaluated the extent to which psychological adjustment can influence their academic performance. It explored university management's strategies to prevent psychological adjustment challenges among first-year university students.

V. METHODS

Research approach and design

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach through a convergent parallel research design (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018). The method involved collecting, analysing, and integrating quantitative and qualitative data, such as online questionnaires and focus group interviews (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018).

Data collection instruments

Online questionnaire

The data were collected using a questionnaire. An online questionnaire is administered electronically, typically through a web-based platform. It allows researchers to collect data from a large and geographically diverse sample of participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The online questionnaire was sent through Moodle to all first-year students [2023 cohort: 280] who constitute the study population. The total number of students who completed the questionnaire online was 80 (28.5%). An online questionnaire was employed as the data collection method due to its numerous advantages. This approach offered cost-effectiveness, time efficiency, and the ability to reach a wider, more diverse sample of participants, including those residing off-campus. Additionally, online surveys facilitated increased response rates, improved data quality, and enabled real-time data collection and analysis (Cresswell, 2012).

Focus group discussions

This study employed the focus group discussions. Two counsellors conducted the group discussions. Group 1 comprised 11 participants, while Group 2 consisted of 10. Each discussion session lasted between 45 and 55 minutes and was conducted in English. Some questions asked were: Have you ever been to the university before? How do you feel about being at university? What challenges are you experiencing as a first-year student? How do those challenges affect your academic performance?; What strategies can the Hifikepunye Pohamba campus management employ to help you cope well at the university?. To facilitate data analysis and reporting, all discussions were audio-recorded. This method allowed for detailed transcription and careful analysis of each participant's contributions.

Furthermore, audio recording streamlined the interview process, saving time and effort. The focus group discussions provided a socially oriented environment, allowing participants to express themselves freely within their natural context (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018; Cohen et al., 2012). This flexibility enabled the researcher to explore unforeseen issues and quickly gather additional data. While there is a potential risk of dominant participants in focus group discussions, this was not observed in the current study. The researcher remained prepared to intervene and mitigate such situations if necessary.

Participants

The total number of students who completed the questionnaire online was 80: 28.5% and a portion of 21 students purposively sampled participated in the two focus groups administered by the student counsellors. Both male and female students were engaged in the study. However, the majority were female 58 (72.5%) and male 22 (27.5%), primarily first-time university students. The age group ranged between 18 and 30 years (18-20 = 57.5%; 21-25 = 33.8%; 26-30 = 7.5%; 30+ = 1.2%). The most participating students were from the secondary departments (57.5%), followed by upper primary and lower primary, respectively.

Research site

The study was conducted at the Hifikepunye Pohamba Campus of the University of Namibia. The campus is in Ongwediva in the Oshana region and specialises in teacher education, focusing on training for pre-lower primary, upper primary, and secondary education, particularly in Mathematics and Physical Sciences. The campus is part of University of Namibia's broader integration of former colleges of education, aiming to become a center of excellence in Mathematics and Science teaching. It offers an engaging academic environment supported by robust research efforts in curriculum development, science education, inclusive education, and early childhood development. There are about three thousand students. The campus provides a vibrant intellectual community, access to well-qualified lecturers, and free internet for students and staff. Students also benefit from various social and leisure activities, making it a well-rounded educational setting.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis

The researchers transcribed and familiarised themselves with the data from both approaches by coding, categorising, and finding similarities and differences. The five interrelated steps of thematic analysis, familiarisation, eliciting topics, coding, elaboration, interpretation, and checking, guided the qualitative data analysis process. The researchers conducted a rigorous data analysis process involving repeated review and listening to the data. They systematically assigned codes to specific data sections, representing significant ideas or concepts. These codes were then categorised based on commonalities and patterns, leading to the identification of overarching themes. Each theme was assigned a concise, descriptive title that accurately conveyed its core characteristics. The researchers analysed these themes about the study's objectives, presenting the findings in a clear and coherent narrative supported by illustrative quotes or examples from the data.

Descriptive statistics

The study used descriptive statistics to summarise the characteristics of the data collected from the 80 students. This involved calculating

measures of central tendency and variability. This indicates that, on average, the students were 22 years old, and most were within 1.5 years of this average age. The study used charts and percentages to illustrate the number of students who indicated the feelings they had about the psychological adjustment challenges they had experienced. Charts are used to visualise the data and make it easier to interpret. This made it possible to corroborate and strengthen the conclusions obtained from the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative databases (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018).

Ethical considerations

An Ethical Review Board clearance was granted by request of the University of Namibia's Decentralised Ethics Committee (DEC). Permission to collect data was sought from the University of Namibia's Research Ethics Committee (UREC). After getting permission to conduct the study, the researchers wrote a letter to prospective participants explaining the study's purpose and conditions. Consent was obtained from the first-year students to participate in the study. First-year students were informed about their voluntary participation, the freedom to withdraw at any time should they deem necessary, and that the information provided would be confidential. Students would not be harmed in any way by taking part in this study. Students were assured of their names being non-disclosure throughout the study. The collected data would be stored in an encrypted file and would be deleted after three years.

VI. RESULTS

Quantitative results

Data collected from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages. The survey results revealed that 76.3% of students have never been to the university, while 23.8% have been there before joining the University of Namibia. 40% of students indicated that they felt great at the university, 38% were excited, 15% were anxious, and 5.6% were afraid. The results are presented in charts to represent the data.

Figure 1. Psychological adjustment challenges

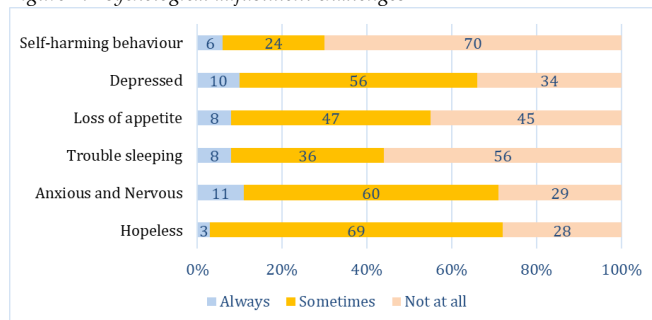


Figure 1 illustrates the psychological challenges students encountered at university. A notable proportion was reported to sometimes engage in self-harming behaviours (24 %), with a small number (6 %) indicating it as a consistent occurrence. Most students (70 %) did not engage in self-harming behaviours. Only 10 % of the students indicated experiencing feelings of depression, while a larger proportion (56 %) reported experiencing such feelings sometimes. It was also reported that 47 % of the students interviewed sometimes experienced loss of appetite. 8 % of the students always had a loss of appetite and experienced trouble sleeping. Feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and stress were prevalent among participants, with a considerable number (60 %) reporting these feelings as consistently.

Furthermore, the students expressed a range of psychological challenges they faced during their first year at university. This included pressure from the classroom and anxiety related to getting high grades. Many also reported feelings of loneliness, social anxiety, and pressure from lecturers, as well as peer pressure stemming from newfound independence. Fear of coping, failing tests, and helplessness when unable to solve problems were common experiences. Some students

mentioned feeling emotionally unstable and depressed due to the new environment, while others lost interest in their studies and experienced humiliation from security officers and senior students. These findings align with existing literature, suggesting that psychological challenges are common among first-year university students (Aderi et al., 2013; Buote, 2006; Friedlander et al., 2007; Majumdar & Ray, 2010). Such insights emphasise the importance of addressing mental health concerns and providing support mechanisms within university settings to promote student well-being and academic success. Overall, these challenges left many students feeling frustrated by the unfamiliarity of university life and the new ways of doing things.

Figure 2. Academic factors affect academic performance

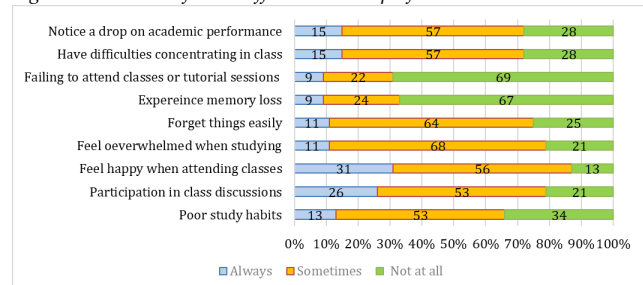


Figure 2 depicts the proportion of first-year university students who are affected academically. A significant number of students indicated trouble with consistent study habits. While some reported always struggling (13%), a much larger portion (53%) admitted to facing these challenges sometimes. This suggests that forming effective study routines might be a widespread hurdle. In addition, the feeling of being overwhelmed when studying was a significant concern, with 11% of students reporting it as a constant issue and another 68% experiencing it occasionally. Furthermore, forgetting information was another prevalent obstacle, with both "always" (11%) and "sometimes" (64%) responses highlighting this difficulty. These factors could significantly impact students' ability to retain and apply knowledge.

Furthermore, the survey revealed a troubling trend of students failing to attend classes entirely (9% always) and facing concentration difficulties within class (11% always, 58% sometimes). These issues could lead to significant gaps in their understanding of the material. This disengagement might be reflected in the high number of students (11% always, 56% sometimes) who noticed a drop in their academic performance. Lastly, perhaps most concerning, most students (21%) reported never participating in class discussions, suggesting a lack of engagement or confidence. Additionally, a significant number (21%) stated they never felt happy attending classes, which could indicate a broader issue with motivation or the learning environment.

Qualitative results

Psychological challenges

The study revealed that many students reported facing challenges that could impact their academic performance. Some students feel emotionally unstable and depressed by the new environment. They experience stress due to too much independence, peer pressure, and anxiety about getting a student loan to cover their studies. These challenges fell into three main categories, as discussed below:

Stress and anxiety

Many students felt anxious about achieving higher grades (shown by the symbol). Many also reported feeling overwhelmed by academic pressure and helpless when they could not figure things out. Following are excerpts from the focus group discussions: Student #4 said:

"I am so scared, you guys. When I applied here, I wanted biology and chemistry, you know? That was what I picked. But then they stick me with chemistry and physics! Physics! I have never even touched the stuff! What if I just... fail? I mean, I have never failed anything before. Ugh, terrifying". Sometimes being around people can feel so suffocating, but when you are alone, it hits you" (Student #4).

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) posits that individuals' behaviours are influenced by their environment, cognitions, and biology. In the case of

the student's anxiety, their fear of failure stems from a combination of factors. Their environment, including the academic setting and perceived social consequences, contributes to their anxiety. Cognitively, their imposter syndrome, perfectionism, and social anxiety create additional pressure. While biological factors might also play a role, the focus is primarily on the interplay of environmental and cognitive factors. Specifically, the student's low self-efficacy in physics, stemming from their lack of prior experience, can contribute to their anxiety.

Additionally, observing others struggling or failing can lead to vicarious learning of anxiety. The belief that failure will have negative consequences can also contribute to their anxiety. Furthermore, their perfectionist tendencies and high standards may reflect a lack of effective self-regulation strategies, leading to increased anxiety and stress.

Social and emotional challenges

Feelings of loneliness, social anxiety, and pressure from lecturers were all highlighted by students. Some students also indicated feeling emotionally unstable and depressed by the new environment. One student added: *"This place is great; do not get me wrong, but man, it is lonely. Sometimes, being around people can feel so suffocating, but when you are alone, it hits you. This social anxiety is, like, my worst enemy. "While I desire to make friends, conversing with new individuals feels like delivering a presentation in front of a large audience"* (Student #10).

Another one added:

"hgh...mmmm... On top of that, the lecturers are piling on the pressure. It feels like there is a never-ending mountain of work to do, and they expect us to just, you know, magically know how to do it all. Ugh!" (Student # 11).

The students' experiences of loneliness, social and emotional anxiety, and pressure from lecturers can be understood within the framework of SCT as a complex interplay of environmental, cognitive, and potentially biological factors. SCT postulates that their environment, cognitions, and biology influence individuals' behaviours. In the case of the students' experiences, their loneliness, social anxiety, and pressure from lecturers can be understood through this framework. Their environment, including the new surroundings and academic expectations, contributes to their feelings of isolation and anxiety. Cognitively, their negative self-beliefs, perfectionism, and fear of rejection exacerbate these emotions. While biological factors might also play a role, the focus is primarily on the interplay of environmental and cognitive factors. Specifically, the students' low self-efficacy in social situations, stemming from their lack of prior experience, can contribute to their loneliness and social anxiety.

Additionally, observing others struggling with social interactions can lead to vicarious learning of anxiety. The belief that social interactions have negative consequences can also contribute to their avoidance behaviours. Furthermore, their perfectionist tendencies and high standards may reflect a lack of effective self-regulation strategies, leading to increased anxiety and stress.

Analysing this result shows that the student feels alone despite many other students around him. This could emanate from the notion that huge crowds can be overwhelming for people with social anxiety. As the student confirmed, he wants to make friends despite his fear. This willingness to engage with others demonstrates a yearning for social interaction, even if social anxiety makes it difficult. This student's experience is common among people with social anxiety. SCT suggests this student might have low self-efficacy, doubting their ability to handle social interactions. Observing others who socialise well could be a game-changer. The student can learn and build confidence in their social skills by seeing positive social interactions. University campuses provide possibilities for socialising, but social anxiety can make it difficult to take advantage of these opportunities. The university can, therefore, help students overcome social anxiety by providing social skills training, encouraging positive interactions, and providing encouragement. This approach can help students develop confidence and overcome low self-efficacy, enhancing their social opportunities.

Difficulties with adaptation

Students reported struggling with new ways of doing things and losing interest in their studies. On the same note, one student narrated, *"And do not even get me started on this whole "independence" thing. Having freedom is cool, but sometimes, I miss having someone tell me exactly what to do. It is all a bit overwhelming, you know? The university is supposed to be fun, but lately, it feels stressful"* (Student # 19).

It appears that this student misses having clear instructions and guidance, which he might have been used to in high school; however, the university requires more self-directed learning, which can be overwhelming initially. Most students come to college expecting it to be all fun and freedom, but the reality of managing independence and responsibilities is causing stress. If students come to the university with these expectations, they might fail their first academic year. SCT helps us understand the experience of students who learned in high school that simple instructions improve learning. This idea conflicts with self-directed study, which she has not mastered yet in university. This discrepancy is challenging; however, observing other students who manage their studies well could boost her confidence. Seeing how others succeed in this new environment (observational learning) could show her it is achievable.

Academic factors

The results indicate that students struggle with various technology-related issues that could hinder their academic success. Many students indicated problems using university online platforms like Moodle or the school portal. These issues included finding class notes and difficulties using printing services. The results further highlighted that some students lacked basic computer skills. This resulted in challenges in completing assignments and taking quizzes or tests online. Students also reported feeling anxious about online exams and quizzes, possibly due to unfamiliar formats or technical problems. In some cases, students mentioned marks disappearing from the online portal, which could be due to technical problems with the university. One student said,

"Ugh, grades are stressing me out! Whenever I think about them, I feel like I am drowning in schoolwork. It is like this huge mountain of stuff to learn, and not enough time to climb it. The worst part is that I am so worried about failing."

"What if I do not do well? How am I even going to explain that to my parents? They expect so much from me, and the thought of letting them down is killing me. I wish there were a way to feel less overwhelmed and more in control!" (Student #8).

The student is battling the pressure to succeed academically and the fear of failure. The burden of balancing homework and meeting expectations impacts their emotional health. It may be helpful for him to seek help from professors, counsellors, or trustworthy individuals who can advise him on stress management and devise techniques to deal with academic pressure. Furthermore, the student may benefit from learning healthy stress-coping strategies such as self-care, time management tactics, and getting help when necessary.

One student alluded to saying,

"The university environment is already tough enough, you know? Lately, there has been this whole other hurdle, and I struggle with computers! Ugh, I swear I am just not good with them. I struggle to finish and submit assignments online and meet the deadline when I can barely figure out how to save a document" (Student # 16).

The student faces technology-related challenges in his academic environment. His lack of confidence affected his learning.

The student feels stressed about taking online tests and the academic environment. So, he should seek help and resources to improve his computer abilities, such as workshops, tutorials, or IT support services. He could also ask lecturers or classmates for help navigating online platforms and completing homework more effectively. Learning basic computer skills can help students reduce stress and improve their academic experience. Another one resonated:

"And do not even get me started on online tests! I become so anxious that the computer will, you know, probably shut me down before I finish. It happened once already, and let me tell you, scrambling to log back in while the clock ticks down is not fun. I just wish I was a little more tech-savvy. Maybe the school

would not feel overwhelming" (Student #20).

The student feels stressed about taking online tests and the academic environment. His concern about technical issues during assessments demonstrates the influence that technological challenges can have on his academic experience. It may be suitable for him to seek assistance and resources to develop his technological skills, such as online lessons, workshops, or IT support services. Additionally, practising relaxation techniques and strategies for controlling test anxiety may help individuals feel more secure and less stressed throughout online assessments. Addressing his technological concerns and establishing coping techniques for exam anxiety may help this student have a more positive academic experience.

Strategies preventing adjustment challenges

The study aimed to identify ways the university could help first-year university students adjust to their new environment. Several suggestions focused on directly addressing student anxieties and challenges. These included mandatory counselling sessions to equip students with coping mechanisms for academic and social pressures. Motivational speakers were also proposed to inspire and encourage students. Additionally, unlimited Wi-Fi access would allow them to utilise online tutoring resources.

The recommendations further emphasised creating a supportive and inclusive campus environment. Activities and events fostering connections among students were suggested. Open communication channels were also highlighted, including suggestion boxes, designated support staff, and online resources. This would ensure students feel comfortable seeking help when needed. Finally, the study proposed promoting student well-being through information on healthy habits like exercise, stress management, and healthy eating, empowering students to take charge of their physical and mental health. Students' extracts said this,

"It is hard for us to get the information on time, especially those who do not have smartphones. We do not join WhatsApp groups to share information. Therefore, it is better if the information is communicated online and in print (poster and notice board)" (Student #14).

These results advocate for more inclusive communication strategies in the academic setting. Students understand that depending entirely on online platforms such as WhatsApp groups may exclude students who do not own smartphones or prefer not to join such groups. By advocating the usage of print media such as posters and notice boards, the student proposes a more accessible and inclusive method of information transmission. This observation emphasises the need to recognise students' different needs and preferences while delivering crucial information in academic contexts. Various communication methods can help guarantee that all students receive information, regardless of their access to technology or engagement in online platforms. Another added:

"It is essential to have different ways for us students to speak up or get help when needed. Suggestion boxes are cool because we can drop our thoughts or worries there without feeling awkward. Having support staff, like counsellors, who we know are there to listen and help us out was reassuring. Oh, and online stuff, too, you know? Sometimes, it is easier to type out what is on our minds rather than say it out loud. Ensuring all these options makes us feel it is okay to ask for help when needed" (Student #13).

These results support the need for implementing more inclusive communication tactics in the academic setting. They recognise that relying solely on online platforms like WhatsApp groups may exclude students who lack cell phones or choose not to participate in such groups. The student suggests promoting print media, such as posters and notice boards, as a more accessible and inclusive means of transmitting information. This discovery highlights the need to acknowledge students' diverse requirements and preferences while imparting essential knowledge in academic settings. Employing various communication strategies can ensure that all students receive information, irrespective of their technological access or involvement in online platforms.

VII. DISCUSSION

Psychological challenges and SCT framework

This study shows that first-year students at one of the University of Namibia satellite campuses have complex psychological transition issues. Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) is crucial to comprehending these events since the obstacles significantly impact their academic progress. First-year university students struggle with self-harm, depression, anxiety, stress, concentration, and class participation. Aderi et al. (2013), Buote (2006), and Hako and Shikongo (2019) all reported similar findings. Physical symptoms such as forgetfulness, memory loss, and academic deterioration increase psychological problems. Compared to other studies, these findings highlight the significant impact physical symptoms like memory loss and forgetfulness can have on student learning. This supports the SCT's emphasis on cognitive, behavioural, and environmental factors in learning and adjustment. SCT states that learning occurs in a social setting through dynamic and reciprocal personal, behavioural, and ecological elements. This study supports SCT by demonstrating how environmental (university resources and support systems) and personal (student mental health) factors influence behaviours (e.g., academic performance and participation). Bandura's SCT emphasises how social observation influences learning and behaviours. First-year university students interact with classmates, seniors, and faculty, which influences their adjustment. Interactions with counsellors and classmates significantly impacted students' ability to make healthier and more positive adjustments. This observation contributes to SCT's observational learning, in which children learn and adapt to their surroundings and individuals.

Impact on academic performance

The study discovered a significant relationship between psychological adjustment and academic success. Students who experienced anxiety and despair did poorly academically. SCT's assertion that the environment influences personal factors (e.g., emotional well-being) and behaviours (e.g., study habits) is supported. Malefo (2000), Soiferman (2017), and Sommer and Dumont (2011) all obtained the same results. The study demonstrated SCT's reciprocal determinism, in which personal attributes, behaviours, and environment interact. For instance, the academic and social environment at the university had an impact on students' anxiety and depression (personal factors), which in turn affected their academic performance (behaviours). The link between psychology and worse academic achievement and disengagement from class demonstrates this dynamic interaction.

Role of self-efficacy in adjustment

The proposals for improved counselling services and supportive environments demonstrate how altering the environment affects self-efficacy and psychological and behavioural outcomes. Hako and Shikongo (2019) found similar results in students reporting worry, tension, and loneliness. According to SCT, self-efficacy is the ability to believe in or have confidence in one's abilities. The study findings show first-year students have low self-efficacy when confronted with new academic and social demands. Hence, students may experience challenges adjusting to new academic expectations, teaching styles, and course content, leading to lower grades. The studies of Malik and Khalid (2012), Nazli and Irfan (2009), and Halliman and Kubitschek (1991) discovered a link between transitioning to a new environment and academic achievement. For example, transition can disrupt existing social networks, leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation, which can negatively impact academic performance. More so, the transition can be emotionally challenging, causing stress, anxiety, or depression, which can interfere with learning and concentration. It is, therefore, essential to note that counsellors and motivational speakers can boost students' self-efficacy at their institutions. SCT argues that boosting self-efficacy can improve coping strategies and academic accomplishment by instilling students with confidence in their ability to overcome problems.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The study sheds light on the significant psychological adjustment and academic and social challenges first-year university students encounter. The transition to university life often brings about feelings of emotional instability, depression, and stress, compounded by newfound independence and peer pressure. Frustration with adapting to new academic norms and instances of humiliation by security officers further contribute to the stress and anxiety experienced by students. Moreover, concerns about obtaining study loans add to the academic pressures faced by some. Furthermore, our findings underscore students' practical difficulties in their academic endeavours. Procrastination, time management issues, and difficulties in utilising library resources and computer systems pose substantial challenges.

Additionally, technical issues and unreliable WIFI connections make completing assignments, group presentations, and online tests difficult. Limited access to materials, especially for science students, exacerbates these challenges, highlighting the urgent need for improved resources and support structures within the university. Addressing these issues is crucial for promoting first-year university students' well-being and academic success. Instances of student humiliation by security officers call for a review of university policies and practices to ensure a respectful and supportive campus environment. Measures should be implemented to address any instances of mistreatment and promote a culture of dignity and inclusivity. Moreover, the study underscores the need for universities to enhance support services for first-year students, particularly in addressing emotional and social challenges; hence, counselling services should be readily available to assist students dealing with emotional instability, depression, stress, and peer pressure. However, this study used an online questionnaire, and the data collected or relied on for self-reporting may introduce bias or inaccuracies due to social desirability or memory recall issues. Also, some participants may have underreported or exaggerated their experiences. Therefore, the findings may have limited generalisability beyond the study's specific context, as factors unique to the Hifikepunye Pohamba University campus or cultural context might influence the results and might not apply to other institutions or settings.

Future research could focus on longitudinal studies to track the same cohort of students over multiple years to understand how their adjustment evolves and how specific interventions or support programmes impact their long-term psychological well-being and academic success. Alternatively, the study could be expanded to include students from multiple satellite campuses and the main campus to capture a broader range of experiences and challenges.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study suggested strategies to help first-year students adjust. These include compulsory counselling, motivational speakers, and improved Wi-Fi for online tutoring. Activities and open communication channels contribute to a welcoming and inclusive campus climate. Hazard and Carter (2018) and Majumdar and Ray (2010) propose comparable solutions. SCT suggests a positive and supportive environment that enhances student observational learning and self-efficacy. The study also demonstrated the importance of social support for student adjustment. SCT argues that social relationships and support can influence behaviours. Peers, instructors, and counsellors increase students' likelihood of adopting positive behaviours and coping mechanisms. Social support enables university students to overcome psychological issues, boosting academic and personal performance. Providing counselling to first-year students and inviting motivational speakers to address students boost self-efficacy and promote observational learning. Counselling and motivational speaking are complementary approaches that can significantly enhance first-year university students' psychological adjustment and academic success. By addressing the psychological health of students, institutions can foster a supportive environment that promotes both personal and academic

growth. To summarise, the study's findings support using SCT as a framework for identifying and treating first-year university students' psychological adjustment issues. Recognising the interplay of personal, behavioural, and environmental factors allows universities to develop more effective measures to support students' adjustment and academic achievement. This comprehensive approach improves academic achievement and increases general student well-being, creating a more conducive learning environment. Rheinecker (2015) reported that the University of Michigan successfully offers a comprehensive first-year experience programme that includes academic advising, social activities, and leadership development opportunities. The university also strongly emphasises mental health support, with counseling services and wellness programmes available to all students.

X. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author.

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XIII. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

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