



Emotional and environmental factors affecting first-year university students at a public university in Namibia

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Abstract – This study explored environmental and emotional factors affecting first-year public university students. It also determined the strategies used by the university management to support these students when facing these factors. It adopted a qualitative approach through a single-case study design. Twenty-one first-year university students were selected from various academic programmes (Secondary Education, Upper Primary, Lower Primary) in the study. Two focus group discussions with first-year university students were used in this study. Thematic analysis was then employed to analyse the discussions. The results revealed that first-year university students are affected by stress and anxiety as emotional factors due to academic pressure, adjusting to a new environment, and social integration. These factors and feelings of homesickness and loneliness negatively influence their emotional well-being. Moreover, environmental factors could affect these students due to inadequate access to or understanding of critical university resources such as mental health counseling, academic tutoring services, and involvement opportunities in extracurricular activities. The study underscores the need for universities to implement comprehensive support systems that address both emotional and environmental challenges first-year university students face. These interventions may include counseling services, academic advising, social activities, and improvements to the campus environment. By prioritising the holistic development of first-year university students, universities can create a more supportive and conducive learning environment, ultimately enhancing student success and retention.

Keywords: Emotional factors, Environmental factors, First-year university students, Social integration

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I. INTRODUCTION

FIRST-year university students, often living away from home for the first time, experience significant emotional challenges due to social separation and unfamiliarity with the environment. This "homesickness" (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020) can negatively impact their well-being and academic performance (Smith & Jones, 2023). Namibia's scattered universities force many students, like those at the study site (over 600 km from the capital!), to travel long distances (Murangi, 2021; Rickerts, 2023). This often means leaving behind familiar support systems.

Recent developments in higher learning institutions have heightened the need to create a conducive and enabling environment for first-year university students to achieve academic success (Sheyapo et al., 2023; Choi et al., 2014). Many students face a difficult transition due to traveling far from home and lacking the necessary skills to settle in the new setting (Murangi, 2021). The challenge is especially pronounced for first-generation and mature students with families (Hangula et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2023; Meehan & Howell, 2019; Perander et al., 2021). They also experienced severe anxiety due to social pressure, new environments, and academic demands. Housing challenges like limited on-campus options and cramped off-campus rentals add stress. Feeling isolated and lacking established social networks further contributes to anxiety, especially for students missing familiar support systems (Hako & Shikongo, 2019). Studies reveal higher anxiety levels in first-year university students compared to seniors (Liu et al., 2020; Duarte et al., 2021), manifesting as physical symptoms like fatigue, racing heart, and

sleep problems (APA, 2020). These challenges highlight the difficulties of first-year university students adjusting to university life.

Furthermore, first-year university students faced complex anxieties on top of academic pressure. Social isolation, especially for students with weaker social support networks, can further increase anxiety and depression (Duarte et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2023). Building social connections and friendships is crucial for emotional well-being (Murangi, 2021; Rickerts, 2023). However, this process can be challenging, leading to loneliness, rejection, and not belonging (Murangi, 2021; Rickerts, 2023).

Financial worries, especially for self-supporting students, can further be a source of anxiety and pressure (Cheryan et al., 2014; Fakude, 2012). The cost of textbooks, housing, and daily expenses can exacerbate these anxieties (Cheryan et al., 2014; Fakude, 2012). Moreover, first-year university students face pressure to adapt to a demanding academic environment, potentially lacking adequate study spaces (Hurtado & Alvarez, 2017). Research suggests a link between poor academic performance and unsatisfactory study settings (Rickerts et al., 2023). This highlights the importance of well-maintained facilities like libraries and computer labs (Cheryan et al., 2014; Fakude, 2012). Limited recreational spaces can further strain emotional well-being, hindering stress management (Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018). Access to quality sports and leisure facilities is crucial for overall student health at the university (Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018). Finally, fear of failure can paralyse some students, hindering academic engagement (Credé et al., 2017). However, Abelson et al. (2022) highlighted interventions to improve students' mental health. These include digital resources, environmental changes, and individual therapy, which could reduce

mental health struggles among students at the university. They emphasise the affordability and reach of peer-to-peer and digital interventions.

Namibian university students' experiences are under-researched despite existing research on emotional and environmental factors that affect first-year university students globally and locally. This study bridges the gap by exploring these factors and suggests how student support and well-being can be improved at the university.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study explores environmental and emotional factors that affect first-year students at a university in Namibia. It determines strategies that university management can employ to reduce these factors among first-year students at universities in Namibia.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) guided this research. It views student development as a complex dance between them and their university environment. This environment is not a single stage but a series of nested systems. This theory is relevant to this study because it provided a valuable framework for understanding the complex interplay of emotional and environmental factors influencing first-year students at a public university in Namibia. This theory emphasises the interconnectedness of various environmental systems, such as the microsystem (family, peers, school), mesosystem (interactions between microsystems), exosystem (social settings that indirectly affect individuals, like parents' workplaces), macrosystem (cultural values and beliefs), and chronosystem (historical context). By applying this theory, the researchers explored how these systems interact to shape first-year university students' emotional experiences, academic performance, and overall well-being. For example, the theory helped identify the impact of family support, peer relationships, academic pressures, cultural expectations, and societal changes on first-year university students' navigating their new environmental setting. Bronfenbrenner's theory offered a comprehensive lens through which researchers examined the multilayered influences on first-year university students, informing potential interventions and strategies to enhance their success. The focus here is the university itself (microsystem) and its impact on first-year university students' learning. An inclusive environment allows students to flourish, while one with barriers hinders them. The model highlights the two-way street: students are shaped by their environment and actively shape it (e.g., advocating for resources). By examining emotional and environmental factors (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem), this study sought to identify factors of the university that might be causing stress or hindering success. This knowledge can then be used to improve the learning environment and support systems, ultimately creating a more inclusive and nurturing space for all first-year university students.

IV. METHODS

Qualitative research approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach. The qualitative approach itself facilitated researchers in gaining a firsthand understanding of how first-year university students navigate their new environment. This resulted in collecting detailed and contextually relevant data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A qualitative research approach was ideal for exploring these students' unique experiences. This approach allowed for identifying understated inner emotions and developing grounded theories that could inform future interventions.

Research paradigm

This study used an interpretive paradigm that emphasises understanding social phenomena from the perspective of those involved (first-year university students). It values subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations. This study context is crucial because it allows researchers to investigate the lived experiences of first-

year university students, uncovering their unique perspectives on the emotional and environmental factors they face. By adopting an interpretive approach, researchers gained a deeper understanding of the emotional and environmental factors that shape first-year university students' experiences at a public university in Namibia. This approach could lead to the development of more empathetic and culturally sensitive interventions that address the specific needs of these students.

Research design

This study employed a single case study design to investigate the context of a Namibian public university. Researchers could collect rich qualitative data to understand the emotional and environmental factors that affected first-year university students by focusing on one institution. While not generalisable, this approach provided valuable insights for the studied university and contributed to broader theory building. This design proved advantageous for exploring the complex interplay of emotional and environmental factors affecting first-year university students (Creswell & Plano-Clarke, 2011). By prioritising the "voices" of these students, the case study allowed for rich, in-depth exploration. Data were drawn from detailed discussions with participants lasting between 30 to 90 minutes. The interview protocol was developed to understand first-year university students' emotional and environmental experiences. The interviews were conducted in English. Pseudonyms are applied to each of the participants to protect their identity.

Participants

The study recruited twenty-one first-year university students, primarily first-time university attendees, to participate in two focus groups. Student counsellors facilitated the discussions, which lasted one hour each. An introduction explaining the study's purpose and participation guidelines was presented beforehand. The twenty-one (21) participants were a mix of genders, with 12 (57%) females and 9 (43%) males. Their ages ranged from 18 to 30 years, and they were enrolled in various academic programmes such as Secondary Education, Upper Primary, and Lower Primary.

Data collection method

This study employed focus group discussions as the primary method for data collection. A pre-designed schedule guided the discussions, ensuring researchers focused on relevant topics. This approach was chosen due to its effectiveness in generating rich and informative data through group interaction. To provide a focused and uninterrupted environment, participant interviews were conducted in the afternoons following the conclusion of classes. By conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups, researchers gained a rich understanding of their emotions, challenges, and coping strategies.

Procedures

Before conducting the study, the researchers sought permission from the University of Namibia. The researchers explained the purpose of the study to the participants both orally and in writing and obtained their consent. The pseudonyms are used to ensure their anonymity. The focus group discussions were conducted over two weeks, from July 8 to 18, 2024. The researchers interviewed participants in the student-counsellor's offices after classes to avoid disrupting students' normal class schedules. The interviewing process lasted approximately 45 to 55 minutes. During the interview, the interviewers had a neutral position. The researchers opted for focus group interviews as Bertram and Christiansen (2014) accentuate that an interview is the best method of collecting data when you inquire about the participants' ideas, beliefs, views, and opinions. The participants' answers were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Research sites

The study was conducted at Hifikepunye Pohamba Campus, a branch of the University of Namibia located in Ongwediva. Ongwediva's strategic location and growing economy make it an attractive destination for students and lecturers. This campus is the second-largest student population (3000). The campus offers three pre-lower primary, upper primary, and secondary educational

programmes. These programmes aim to equip aspiring educators with the necessary knowledge, skills, and values to excel in the field of education. As a predominantly teacher education institution, it provides a focused environment to explore the emotional and environmental factors affecting first-year university students, particularly those transitioning from high school to tertiary education.

Data analysis

Following the focus group discussions, researchers transcribed and immersed themselves in the data through coding, categorisation, and identifying similarities and differences. Thematic analysis was then employed to analyse the data. Five interconnected stages guide this approach: (1) familiarisation, (2) generating initial themes, (3) coding the data, (4) refining and developing themes, and (5) interpreting and verifying the themes (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018). To ensure the credibility of the research, the researchers spent significant time studying transcripts, reviewing and verifying the data. This helped verify the findings and provided a detailed description of the research. Detailed records of the research process were maintained from data collection to analysis to ensure the study's dependability. Finally, to minimise bias, the researchers reflected on participants' perspectives and shared the interpretations with participants for validation. By employing these strategies, the researchers aimed to enhance the trustworthiness of the research findings.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure ethical conduct, the research team obtained approval from the University of Namibia's Decentralised Ethics Committee and the University of Namibia's Research Ethics Committee. Following these approvals, researchers informed potential participants through a written letter that explained the study's purpose and participation requirements. First-year university students provided informed consent to participate. They were clearly informed about the voluntary nature of their participation, the right to withdraw at any point without consequence, and the confidential treatment of all information provided. Researchers emphasised that participation would not cause any harm, and participants' anonymity would be guaranteed throughout the study. The collected data would be securely stored in an encrypted format and deleted after three years.

V. RESULTS

Several activities and experiences they undergo such as orientation programme, attending classes both physical and online, using the student portal, using a system called Moodle for self-studies, notes and writing assignments/tests, using the library, meeting new friends, interacting with family members and becoming a university student, in addition to navigating the new campus environment, students expressed that there is a shortage of signpost to guide the new student on the various venues and offices.

All these activities proliferate emotional pressure on first-year university students. Participants explain that they suffered different emotions, such as managing autonomy, different ways of doing things, lack of understanding over certain operations and routines, insufficient time to relax, and being overwhelmed by academic demands of completing tasks and tests.

In addition, the study revealed that there is only one orientation programme. At the same time, students wish there would be two orientations, one at the beginning and one at the end of the registration, to cater to those who registered late. They further suggested that there should be departmental orientation programmes that focus on the uniqueness of each programme.

The study further revealed that students with no smartphones missed much information normally shared on electronic platforms concerning admission, regulations, and policies governing the institution. They suggested that the university provide printed materials to accommodate students who may not have access to smartphones, laptops, or reliable internet.

Any issues that are not in harmony will cause some emotional

imbalance that will require emotional management on the student's part and might hinder student success. One student says,"

When you hear that you have been admitted to the university, you feel excited, but when you come to the campus, things are complicated and different from high school, where we are forced to attend assemblies, classes, and studies. Hmm,... at the university, you are on your own, timetables are complicated to read...the different venues...just write C2 and A1... and all that...but you feel lost and have no one to help you. You feel lonely, confused, and overwhelmed (Student 5). Another one says I used to get lost all the time and attend the wrong classes. Sometimes, core modules are a mixture of students and maybe a few first-year university students, and you will be. Ah! Am I supposed to be here? You will end up confused" (Student 8).

Another student discourses

"Oh, yah... when you come to university, there are many quizzes and tasks you have no time for yourself. Most of the activities or tasks are done on the computer. Hmm, so by that time, not all the students had gadgets that they could use. When you come to the computer labs, it is usually crowded, and the quizzes have a time limit. So, how can I say it stresses us out and gives us sleepless nights? It is your first time, and it might even be the first quiz you attempt at the university. You start to think... and feel like you want to drop out. For real, just that one quiz makes you feel so helpless." (Student 12).

A male student said these.

"There are no relaxing activities on campus; I wish a gym were open 24/7 where we could go and exercise. Another asserts that sports activities are limited on this campus" (students 11 & 19).

Most students express disgruntled with using the student portal and Moodle for the first time, and the internet network is slow and tripping, mainly because it is overcrowded.

One student explains the following.

"Student portal misbehaves at times. Information is disappearing and appearing, and things are complicated. You can just be in the middle of attempting a test/quiz, and then an error will happen, and when you try to connect, it will never come back until the time for the test/quiz is up. So, most students will be stressed. Some lecturers can understand re-opening the test /quiz, and some will not, so the students are frustrated" (Student 16).

Furthermore, the mesosystem comprises interactions with different groups of people, family members, fellow students/classmates, Student Representative Council (SRC) members, faculty officers, counsellors, and academic staff on campus. These interactions greatly impact how first-year students adjust at a public university in Namibia.

Interaction with SRC members

Just a brief preamble: The SRC consists of student representatives who mostly liaise with the university management on student affairs. They own different portfolios (SRCs for academics, accommodation, sports, social, and others). Most students expressed a satisfying relationship with the SRC members, with limited variation here and there. A student says

"The SRCs are doing their best regarding the problems we face as new students. They explain and direct us where things are. They are making our lives a bit easier" (Student 3).

Another student says,

"Whenever I could not find the venue for my lessons, I would run to the SRCs office, ask them, and then run to the lecture venue" (Student 20).

Interaction with friends and classmates

Some students seek information from SRCs, officers, and friends. In some situations, the students felt more comfortable taking advice from their friends than SRCs or officers. For instance, one male student stated,

"I often like to talk to my friends because... I think they also have the same problems, and they better understand my problems" (Student 12).

Furthermore, the students indicated that their friends influenced their decisions about visiting the office and the advice they should consider. A student bragged

"...with technology, it is easy now, we have different WhatsApp groups to discuss our problems" (Student 10).

Most female students said if they have a question concerning their studies, they will first consult their friends or classmates, and if the problem persists, they will then consider seeking advice from the office.

Many students knew of the student counselors but were unenthusiastic about utilising the services except for financial issues. Some expressed that they were unaware the counselors could help them with any emotional distress.

Interaction with family members

Some students expressed that some parents have high expectations for their children without understanding first-year students' circumstances on campus. Such students tend to think about their parent's reaction when they fail tests or exams. As one student lamented,

"As a kid, I am trying to do my best. Yeah, and then... I tried hard to attend the quizzes, but something happened to the system, and I got a few marks. How do I tell my parents that I failed? The parents will be over you. So, it affects us emotionally" (Student 17).

Another student mentioned this.

"One day, I was taking a test, and it was full when I went to the computer lab. I called my sister at home and asked her if I could come and use her laptop. She said yes and helped me with her internet" (Student 2).

Interaction with academic staff and faculty officers

Most students express mixed feelings and dissatisfaction in this regard. Some academic staff and faculty officers are said to be understanding and helpful, while others are not. However, there seems to be no closer connection between academic staff and faculty officers assisting first-year students. For example, some faculty members do not clearly understand the registration requirements.

A student described that he had a problem with one of his modules, which was registered full-time but showed distance, and that the student kept going back and forth between the subject lecturer and faculty offices. The process was time-consuming, though the student was ultimately helped and felt happy.

Additionally, the exosystem refers to the larger social system in the surrounding environment or the environmental element that affects one's daily activities. For example, transportation, governing bodies, extended families, institutional policy, social support systems like student funding bodies, and many others,

Transport Arrangements

Some students express how transportation to and from campus affects their adjustment and success as first-year students. The university does not have a transport arrangement to ferry students to and from the campus. As a result, students use public transport like taxi/cab. One student narrated these.

"I woke up early enough to attend my 7h30 lessons, but when I took a taxi/cab, I told the driver I was going to campus. There were already two customers. The driver went to drop off those customers first, and I was late when I arrived at the campus. The university policy is that students can enter the lesson after 15 minutes. You wasted your money and time and will not attend your lessons even though it is not your fault" (Student 1).

Another student added these.

"When you do not attend the lessons, you will not complete the attendance list, contributing to our continuous assessment marks. It is frustrating" (Student 6).

Student funding

Most students reported failing to get the government student loan, even though they applied on time. The extract of one student mentioned these.

"...as first-year students, we thought we would acquire government student loans to pay for our education. Our parents cannot afford to pay for us, and some of us are even orphans... You have good grades, but no one will pay for you" (Student 4).

Another explains these.

"We are renting in unsafe areas with bars, and the music is playing loud the whole night while you have a quiz the next day. Even if space is not conducive, it affects many things. Because you are a first-year student, what can you do? You are forced to accept the circumstance" (Student 7).

When asked why they are not using the university hostel, they answer that it is not affordable and that renting in the vicinity is more affordable. One student highlighted these.

"We cannot afford the university hostel, which is very expensive because of the lack of student loans, so if one just finds a room, it does not matter where you are renting if it is cheap. Finance is a huge problem for us" (Student 15).

A female student explains how she was sent to live with relatives who live near the university campus because of family finances, and she ended up being used as a nanny and not allowed to move freely. Her extract illustrated these.

"I am sent to live with my aunt, and now I do all the house chores and babysit my little cousins (5 and 2). Even when we have group work, I cannot go to campus because I will get into trouble. I accept the situation because my parents cannot afford it, and I do not have a student loan" (Student 5).

VI. DISCUSSION

This study explored the experiences of first-year university students at a public university in Namibia. The findings highlight several key themes that impact student success: Students reported feeling overwhelmed, lonely, and confused due to the new academic environment, lack of familiarity with routines, and difficulty making connections. These emotions mirrored findings from previous studies, suggesting the universality of these challenges (Smith & Jones, 2023; Lin et al., 2023; Meehan & Howell, 2019; Perander et al., 2021). The study suggests that students may lack adequate support within this microsystem, potentially due to insufficient guidance, limited social connections, or restricted access to support services. The lack of a familiar social network and limited access to stress-relieving resources further contribute to emotional difficulties (Hako & Shikongo, 2019; Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018). Difficulties adjusting to new learning styles, increased academic demands, and a lack of career guidance can contribute to emotional stress and hinder academic performance (Perander et al., 2021). The vast difference in educational approaches compared to high school further amplifies these challenges. The study suggests implementing two orientation programmes, providing signposts and printed materials, and incorporating career guidance education in schools. This aligns with previous research (Ruckert, 2015) on the importance of effective communication and outreach for student awareness of available resources. The findings suggest increasing awareness of existing services through posters, flyers, pamphlets, and billboards can encourage students to seek help when needed. Offering printed materials caters to students who may not have reliable internet access. Professional advisors can develop strategies incorporating peers' perspectives while minimising potential biases in peer-to-peer advice. Options like group advising on student platforms can facilitate interaction.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that the university continue supporting and improving SRC initiatives as a crucial support system for first-year university students (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hako & Shikongo, 2019). Ensuring access to secure student loans and comfortable on-campus accommodation can alleviate financial and housing-related stress (Cheryan et al., 2014; Fakude, 2012; Ferguson et al., 2013). Moreover, the importance of family support in promoting student success cannot be overstated (Rizcky & Melly, 2019). Addressing noise pollution in student housing based on its established negative impact on mental health and academic performance (Evans, 2006; Estrada, 2007; Hurtado & Alvarez, 2017; Rickerts, 2023; Cheryan et al., 2014; Fakude, 2012; Choi et al., 2014) can further enhance student well-being. By implementing these recommendations and remaining aware of the emotional and environmental factors affecting first-year university students, the university can create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment, ultimately fostering student success and retention.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The study explored emotional and environmental factors affecting first-year students at a public university in Namibia. First-year students

experience numerous emotional challenges, both internal and external (microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem). Some of the emotional challenges are universal, such as homesickness, loneliness, and how to transition from high school to university. However, some findings are specific to the environment, such as lack of resources or rather limited resources like lack of recreation and relaxing facilities, limited library computers, lack of skills on how to use the systems, issues of trust in using or seeking professional advice, unable to access student financial loans and family supports are more ecological specific that requires the immediate attention of the specific institution. Some recommendations were put forward, for example, providing necessary infrastructures for first year's students (computer lab, sports facilities, etc.), strengthening SRC support, motivating first-year students to use professional advice and counseling services, assisting students in getting study loans, providing first-year students with hostel accommodation and improve student family support. Consequently, if students' emotional and environmental challenges are not met, they might find solutions, harming their well-being and academic success.

IX. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

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