


Chapter 1

Expectations, Culture, and Adaptation to Higher Education Institutions by First-Year Students

Peter Jo Aloka

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4298-9211>

University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

Christine Mwajuma Opondo

Maseno University, Kenya

Mary Ooko

University of Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzed expectations, culture, and adaptation to higher education institutions by first-year students. By adopting a conceptual review as framework, data were obtained from published literature. The results presented in the chapter indicated that most first-year students have unrealistic expectations and that the university culture often presents new and confusing expectations to the majority of first-year students. Moreover, many students are still starting their experience with either high or unrealistic expectations for what to expect during their first year of university. It is recommended that the managers of universities should develop more positive alignment between perceived expectations and levels of student satisfaction with the quality of their experience.

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INTRODUCTION

Transition to higher education from secondary school can be a complex and challenging task for the first year students. The higher education environment and secondary school contexts are quite different in terms of the teaching, learning and expectations for the first year students. The first year of study is a critical period for students as it is a transitional step from secondary school (high school) to more adult life. The beginning years in higher education institutions is a crucial period for mitigating risks of attrition as this is the time when students develop a sense of belonging, and academic and personal connections. First year students must adjust to being away from home for the first time, maintain a high level of academic achievement, and adjust to a new social environment (Ross et al., 1999). However, on arrival at campuses, first year students might experience a culture shock, which becomes replaced by issues of assimilation and absorption of values of the university (Harvey et al., 2006). Therefore, the first-year students often feel isolated, separated, or socially and academically alienated from the college experience, which can affect their decision of withdrawal from higher education (Kerby, 2015). It is expected that first year students adjust appropriately to the new university environments, but, research indicates that with a more diverse student body entering higher education, universities in high-participation systems face challenges of student attrition (Sneyers & De Witte, 2017). Research also indicates that the first-year students mostly struggle with social and academic integration, academic workload, new learning and teaching styles and low support from the university (Ishitani, 2016). Stiburek et al., (2017) reiterate that majority of students who do not graduate within four to six years of initial enrolment, leave the university within the first year of study. Therefore, on the basis of this predicament, first-year student attrition continues to gain much attention at two-year and four-year post-secondary institutions. In addition, first-year student attrition rates continue to increase and this causes concern for administrations at two-year and four-year post-secondary institutions (Leonhardt & Chinoy, 2019). Moreover, first-year student attrition rates are soaring at a high pace (Lake & Cheng, 2020). Therefore, the high first-year attrition presents adverse consequences for first-year students and their institutions. When students withdraw from college during their initial year, they often do not return and face low socio-economic outcomes due to not acquiring credentials or skill sets that lead to a career path. It is also reported that individuals often move away from home for the first time during this period and are cut off from family and friends who have provided significant social support in their lives (Pancer, et al., 2000). Some students share increased levels of depression and absent-mindedness within the first few weeks of the first term. Moreover, other research indicates that “students who are passive and mildly depressed prior to leaving home have been found to be those most likely to show raised levels of homesickness following the move to college” (Fisher, 1994, p. 46). Homesickness is an unpleasant and stressful experience for students, and it can lead them to a state of grief, anxiety, and depression. Some students’ homesickness diminishes as the academic year passes. Homesickness can debilitate a student, making it difficult for them to study or cope effectively with academic life (Fisher, 1994). The next sub-section discussed the expectations for first year students.

Expectations for First Year students

First year students have numerous expectations such as social, academic, and professional goals that they believe they have to work to fulfill while they are in university (Thompson et al., 2007). Expectations can be defined as personal beliefs or preconceived thought about how future actions or events would

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