

First-year Student Experience of Orientation Week at a university in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this cross-sectional quantitative study was to assess the orientation experience of first-year students at a university campus in Mpumalanga. The study is informed by Tinto's (1997) student integration model that suggests that students' success is mainly influenced by the degree to which the university integrates the students into its academic and social systems. Participants were recruited from first-year students who had gone through a full-week orientation programme at the university. A questionnaire with 23 items on a Likert scale was used to collect data. The responses of 177 participants were analysed using principal component analysis (PCA). The principal components that emerged were health and wellbeing, academic development, student leadership, academic orientation, residence life and living and learning at the university. Further, multiple regression results showed that perceptions of health and wellbeing, academic development, student leadership and residence life significantly predicted living and learning at the university. It can therefore be concluded that these aspects had an influence on students, making it likely that they further influence a positive attitude and commitment on the part of the students. The study recommends that student integration activities at university should be extended even beyond orientation week, so that students are continuously supported in their learning.

Key words: orientation week, adaptation, first-year students, South Africa, student success.

INTRODUCTION

It is a South African standard and a global practice for universities to provide orientation to first-year students. An orientation week or similar period is set aside to enable first-year students to find their way in a new learning institution in higher education. The first-year experience during orientation is a transitional phase in which students strive to strike a balance between high school life and university life. High school norms and values are challenged by the diverse and complex operating systems of a university. In a new university, new buildings are mushrooming, cranes are lifting

heavy objects, excavators are busy digging and builders mingle with students at refreshment outlets and new bathrooms that are not marked whether they are for males, females, people with a disability, or gender-neutral people. Orientation week attracts media attention in South African universities and parents become anxious about their children starting a new life away from the home environment. In the same way, their children in university can be concerned about being reported to parents and education sponsors for uncouth behaviour and other undesirable activities. However, some students enjoy media coverage and report good stories to parents and financial sponsors about their experience during the orientation

week. This study assessed first-year students' orientation experience at a new university in South Africa with particular reference to life on campus, academic orientation, library experience, financial aid experience, student leadership experience, health and safety experience and residence life experience.

Life on campus experience

Life on campus during orientation week is exciting. First-year students meet new people of different races, religions, ethnic groups and social classes. Everyone looks busy and generally looks for entertainment. Culture shock occurs when first-year students have first-hand experience of what they used to read about university students. When international students and local students mingle during cultural expositions and other social events that promote diversity, culture clash or cultural conflict is bound to happen, as some cultural practices are perceived as violating human rights (Mubangizi, 2012). Culture shock happens when there is cultural conflict and it is characterised by anxiety that results from loss of familiar cues, the breakdown of interpersonal communication, and an identity crisis (Shioshvili, 2012). Physical or emotional discomfort is experienced as the student tries to adjust to campus life through interacting with people from various ethnic groups and different cultural orientations (Shioshvili, 2012). The student is challenged by cultural beliefs and artwork that display historical events, traditional or religious beliefs, HIV and AIDS campaigns, new HIV prevention technologies, foods eaten by certain groups of people, racial and ethnic bias utterances, feminist activism and sexual orientation campaigns.

During orientation, students embark on experiential learning guided tours in which they visit places of interest to learn more about other cultures or new places (Long, Akande, Purdy & Nakano, 2008). It is common for students to fight on the bus and to abuse alcohol and drugs during orientation. During the first-year experience, which is a transitional phase between high school life and university life, some of the students taste and learn to drink various types of liquor and sweetened alcoholic beverages and some try drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, opiates, inhalants, stimulants, Ecstasy, and club drugs (Derefinko, Charnigo, Peters, Adams, Milich & Lynam, 2016). The use of alcohol and drugs expose students to HIV and AIDS. Partying and heavy episodic drinking are common activities among university students during orientation week. At this time, tents are pitched over the open spaces, loud music blasted to entertain the crowd and some of the students dancing, walking up and down aimlessly, sitting around a table or lying on the lawn. Playing music is a preferred leisure activity among the youth and it is associated with emotion regulation and social connection (Papinczak, Dingle, Stoyanov, Hides & Zelenko, 2015). Some students choose to smoke cigarettes and cigars in designated places or to smoke hubbly bubbly as a group enjoying life on campus together sharing stories and new experiences in a new university environment.

Academic orientation experience

During orientation week, students visit faculties and schools in the faculty. They meet with lecturers in charge of academic programmes and they are shown facilities that aid teaching and learning. These include operating theatres, surgical equipment,

mechanised equipment, laboratories, computer rooms, study rooms, workshops, art galleries, music studios, museums and related facilities that are used by lecturers and students as learning media or learning technology. First-year students also gain understanding of the difference between high school teaching and university lecturing. Apart from academics who lecture in the faculty of education, most academics who teach at universities are not well grounded in pedagogical skills (Boyd & Harris, 2010). In contrast, teachers in primary and high schools are trained to be professional teachers (Boyd & Harris, 2010). However, at primary and secondary school level, teachers are mostly trained in didactics, while at university lecturers are expected to be more like facilitators of learning. In didactics, the teacher takes a leading role in the student's learning; however, at university, the students are expected to be self-directed learners who are largely responsible for their own learning while lecturers serve as facilitators. This has serious implications in terms of students coming from high school to university. Thus, an academic orientation programme provides an opportunity to re-orient students' learning dispositions and approaches in accordance with the expectations of learning in higher education.

Academic orientation involves taking students through university academic policies, which include entrance requirements and how they relate to study requirements. Policies and procedures on passing criteria, appeals procedure for those who fail, repeat conditions and the exclusion criteria are explained during orientation week. There is a high exclusion rate among first-year students in South Africa (Letseka & Maile, 2008). Faculties and schools provide

policies and regulations governing undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications. They provide information relating to grades that are required to proceed to the next level at undergraduate level, as there is no automatic promotion from first year to final year. Students are made aware that there are restrictions to higher degrees' admission in South African universities and abroad (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2015).

Library experience

The university library is an integral part of academic life at any university the world over. Top universities in the world have the world's best libraries as well. Libraries support research, teaching and learning, which are core functions that define academic life (Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013). Modern university libraries have digital collections, archives, historical papers, institutional repositories, e-books, e-journals, library intranet, interlibrary loans and spacious reading rooms with computers that have access to the internet and Wi-Fi. Librarians help develop academic literacy skills and competences among first-year students during orientation week by helping them understand the library notation, which includes technical language and symbols used by libraries internationally. First-year students are exposed to the catalogue and how to request books and journals online. Librarians induct first-year students on the sound use of information and communication (ICT) technology to retrieve and store information as well as supporting research (Saleem, Shabana & Batcha, 2013). Students are exposed to electronic resources, including past examination papers in the library that are used to improve teaching, learning and assessment. Librarians play a critical role in

helping students understand the essence of academic integrity including academic offences, such as plagiarism and its undesirable consequences. For instance, students are failed, punished by lowering the mark awarded or expelled from the university for plagiarism after a disciplinary hearing (Adam, Anderson & Spronken-Smith, 2017). To mitigate this problem, librarians, in partnership with academic support staff, orient first-year students to sound academic conventions through writing skills workshops and group training sessions, so that they experience success (Cleary & Sayers, 2017).

Financial aid experience

Sound financial discipline and austerity is key to student success at university. Many students entering university experience challenges regarding personal finance, especially when they are exposed to relatively large sums of money for the first time in their lives. Guidance on financial discipline remains a critical aspect of first-year experience that should commence with orientation. During orientation week, financial institutions visit universities to advertise financial products offered to students. They offer student loans and personal loans, some of which become instantly available in the student's bank account once the application is approved. It is argued that student loans need to be utilised in a way that is effective and efficient (Woodhall, 2004). Independent organisations that provide bursaries to students and companies that offer scholarships to students would give out flyers, t-shirts, caps and other marketing regalia during orientation week. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) offers bursaries to students from

low-income households. First-year students often display financial independence when they go on a spending spree in town and at home buying cell phones, television sets, radios, computers, and other middle-class gadgets. Some of the first-year students experience financial freedom for the first time and start to help parents. Some use the money to pay for their siblings' school fees, renovate houses, buy cars or motorbikes, and some give money to parents to build a cheap flat or small house and demolish the family shack. Community members realise that when a child goes to university, he/she earns an income and stops being entirely dependent on parents (Wangegenge-Ouma, 2010). The student could support parents financially if he/she is on a scholarship funded by multinational companies that cover most of the costs encountered at the university. International corporations provide student finance with the prospect of employing the student after graduation and some provide vacation employment to cushion the student from financial hardships. Student funding develops organisational capacity and it is a form of investment in youth talent for the future survival of organisations (Mawer, 2017). It is argued that higher education funding contributes to transformation in South Africa, as students would have access to financial resources irrespective of race, gender, or social class (Wangegenge-Ouma, 2010).

Student leadership experience

For some of the first-year students, it is a first-time experience in a learning institution to come face-to-face with eloquent, boastful and ranting student leaders who show little respect for the president of a country, minister of education, vice-

chancellor of a university, chairman of university council and other people in society who occupy influential positions. Sometimes student leaders coax first-year students to participate in violent protests. Some student leaders and university students display high levels of hooliganism during orientation week (Savides, 2016). The Student Representative Council (SRC) represents the interests of university students, and its members appear in the governance structure and decision-making bodies of the university (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). First-year students are free to join political associations on campus that are affiliated to political parties in the country. Political violence among university students is common during orientation week (Areff, 2015). There are clubs and societies advertise to recruit members during orientation week. There are vibrant sports and recreation clubs that attract student membership. In South Africa and overseas, sport occupies a central position in university life; There are university teams that compete nationally in various championships (Kelly & Dixon, 2011). Some of the societies are based on regional development, activism for the support of a noble cause, or prevention of an undesirable situation (Cleeve et al., 2016). Leaders of clubs and societies recruit first-year students during orientation week. Student leaders encourage first-year students to participate in leadership and advocacy training for the promotion of student rights and human rights on campus and globally (Long, Lee, Federico, Battaglia, Wong, & Earnest, 2011). It is not uncommon for first-year students to take up leadership roles for the first time in their lives and gain leadership qualities and confidence through helping diverse groups of students and visitors on campus under the guidance of student leaders.

Health and safety experience

Healthy and safety is an important precondition for successful learning at university by students at any level of study. Universities ensure that first-year students visit the university clinic for advice on infectious diseases, new HIV-prevention technologies, general health and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Students receive information on contraception and use of condoms to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, HIV and unwanted pregnancy. The 15 – 24 age group is the most vulnerable group to HIV infection in South Africa (Bekker, Johnson, Wallace & Hosek, 2015). During orientation, students visit the university security office and learn about escort service if they need security help and protection from abusers. Sometimes, relations between campus security and students can be strained when the police are called in by campus controllers to quell violence or to arrest student suspects. Students are uncomfortable with armed campus security guards and university guards are scared of students with guns and dangerous objects (Birnbaum, 2013). Individual counselling is offered to students in distress and career guidance is provided to students who are not sure about what they want to study and achieve in life. Some students quit their studies after realising that they made wrong choices, while some change degree programmes during the orientation week (Trotter & Cove, 2005).

Residence life experience

Residence life experience is an important predictor of successful study at university. There has been a shift from treating university residences as hostels or dormitories where students relax and sleep

after study to treating them as extended learning spaces. This brings to the fore the concept of living and learning, where learning is conceptualised as not only happening in the four walls of the classroom, but also in the residences. The first-year experience in university residence is that of communal life. First-year students in many universities are allocated shared rooms. The reason given by residence personnel is that students need to learn how to share space and live with others in harmony, irrespective of gender, race, religion, social class, disability, sexual orientation or political affiliation. The orientation week experience in residence could cause difficulties for students who studied in private schools without the experience of sharing bathroom facilities and limited living space. The room space can be small and some of the roommates could leave clothes lying on the floor and some invite friends and chat till late. The noise in residences during orientation week causes sleep deficiency and that ultimately affects learning (Brown, Qin, & Esmail, 2017). During orientation week, residence staff encourage first-year students to form learning networks in residences. Students in residences form learning communities in which students studying related disciplines form a learning group. It has been demonstrated that students who join learning communities tend to perform better than students who learn on their own in residence and off-campus (Hobbins, Eisenbach, Jacobs & Ritchie, 2017). South African universities support study groups in residences and some provide extra-tuition on weekends. Student leaders in residence could make the life of first-year students difficult when they force them to participate in initiation activities that are performed to welcome the newcomers and to socialise them into the way of life of a

university student in South Africa. Universities in South Africa regard initiation in residence as a violation of a student's human rights and the use of coercion is against the law. Initiation could cause physical and psychological harm as the tasks performed could be demanding and humiliating (De Klerk, 2013). However, some of the students participate voluntarily and regard initiation in residence as a rite of passage from high school "childhood" to university "adulthood".

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Tinto's (1997) student integration model, which explains students' retention and success behaviours while at university. The theory starts from the premise that for students to persist with their studies and experience success, the university need to integrate them well within its academic and social systems. Successful integration leads to positive institutional experiences and attitude that in turn improves commitment to shared goals and eventually leads to retention and success in one's studies (Luescher-Mamashela and Moja, 2014). Conversely, poor experiences will reduce the student's commitment and could even prompt him/her to drop out (Manaan, 2007). According to Tinto (1997), the institution should strive to fulfil both the academic integration and social integration needs of the student so as to scaffold their learning. The student integration model therefore suggests that for institutions of higher learning to have high retention rates they should set conditions that will give students experiences that will increase their commitment to their studies for them to be successful.

The week-long first-year student orientation programme that is offered by the university under study is meant to integrate students thoroughly into the academic and social aspects of university life as a precondition for success. The programme comprises a suite of programmes, activities and initiatives that are developed and implemented by stakeholders from many divisions and units across the university. These stakeholders include the academic support services, student affairs, finance, counselling unit, academic literacy unit amongst others. This approach is informed by Tinto's (2014) observation that institutional student success requires intentional, structured and systematic proactive action that is coordinated in nature and involving many people across the campus.

All activities planned for orientation are meant to provide support to the students and this is informed by Tinto's (2014:115) view that "access without support is not opportunity". Student goals and intentions are set at the beginning of a process, hence this orientation for first-year students. Although social and academic integration continue after orientation, the integration that is nurtured during orientation is vital, as it sets the foundation that influences future goals, attitudes and approaches to their studies.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study was to assess factors that influenced the orientation week experience of first-year students in a new university.

Hypotheses

1. The orientation week questionnaire will demonstrate 23 clear factors, each

clustered around the 23 items of the questionnaire.

2. Principal component factors will influence a student's life on campus.

METHOD

Research design

This was a cross-sectional quantitative study in which data were collected from participants at one time. This design was preferred since it allowed the study to be conducted in a relatively fast and inexpensive manner.

Participants and sampling

Participants were purposively sampled from a group of first-year students who were recruited at a new university in the Mpumalanga Province. The inclusion criterion was that every participant should have undergone the week-long university orientation programme. This was considered important, since participants were required to comment on any aspect of the orientation programme. The responses of 177 participants were used in this study.

Instruments

A 23-item questionnaire was used to measure participants' experience of the orientation week on a 4-point Likert scale. A rating of "1" indicated that the student did not benefit from the orientation experience and a rating of "4" indicated that the experience was quite beneficial.

Procedure

Participants voluntarily participated in the study to evaluate their orientation experience. The questionnaire was administered to participants.

DATA ANALYSIS

Principal components analysis (PCA) was used to analyse data. It was a suitable technique to reduce the number of factors that explained variation in the observed variables.

Ethical consideration

Participation was voluntary and no names of participants appeared on the questionnaire. Data were analysed as archival data without participants’ names. The study was cleared by the university’s ethics committee.

RESULTS

Principal components analysis (PCA) was conducted, with varimax rotation. This type of rotation maximises the variance between different factors, and is especially useful for dimensions that are correlated. Principal components analysis reduces the number of factors on a scale and only principal components will remain. In this study, the 23 survey items were designed to tap the orientation experiences of a single cohort of first-year students. The items were very likely to be inter-related. Only factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted. The principal components that emerged in this study explained a total variance of 61.16%.

Table 1 shows the loadings of each item on the three factors yielded by the PCA.

Table 1 outlines drug abuse, infectious diseases and student finance loaded on Factor 1, which explained 32.13% of the total variance. Factor 1 was interpreted as health and wellbeing. Academic literacy, academic integrity, transition from high school to university, graduate attributes and values, and study skills and time management loaded on Factor 2, which accounted for 6.13% of the variance. Factor 2 was interpreted as academic development. Clubs and societies, sports and recreation, and senior students’ guidance loaded on Factor 3, which explained 8.22% of the variance. Factor 3 was interpreted as student leadership. Two factors - guided tours and sessions with course coordinators -loaded on Factor 4 and explained 5.42% of the variance. Factor 4 was interpreted as academic orientation. Residence-based activities and career counselling loaded on Factor 5 and explained 4.73% of the variance. Factor 5 was interpreted as residence life. Last, living and learning at the university loaded on its own separate factor (Factor 6), and explained 4.53% of the variance. Thus, Factor 6 was interpreted as living and learning at the university.

Table 1: Principal components analysis results

| <i>Principal Component Analysis of the Orientation Questionnaire</i> | | | | | | |
|--|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| | Factor 1 | Factor 2 | Factor 3 | Factor 4 | Factor 5 | Factor 6 |
| Drug use and abuse | .82 | | | | | |
| Infectious diseases | .80 | | | | | |
| Student finance | .67 | | | | | |
| Clubs and societies | | | .73 | | | |
| Sports and recreation | | | .63 | | | |

Experience of Orientation Week at a university

| | | | | | | |
|---|--|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Senior students` guidance | | | .70 | | | |
| Residence-based activities | | | | | | |
| Academic literacy | | .73 | | | | |
| Academic Integrity | | .60 | | | | |
| Transition from high school to university | | .66 | | | | |
| Graduate attributes and values | | .63 | | | | |
| Study skills and time management | | .66 | | | | |
| Guided tours | | | | .79 | | |
| Sessions with course coordinators | | | | .61 | | |
| Residence-based activities | | | | | .77 | |
| Career counselling | | | | | .73 | |
| Living and learning at the university | | | | | | .76 |

Multiple regression was conducted to assess the association between the identified factors and studying at the university. The independent variables, health and wellbeing, student leadership, academic development and residence life predicted the dependent variable, living and learning at the university. However, academic orientation involving

guided tours and sessions with course coordinators did not predict living and learning at the university.

Beta coefficients for each of the predictor variables showed a significant relationship with the dependent variable. Table 2 illustrates the results.

Table 2: Multiple regression results

| Factor | β | T | P |
|----------------------|---------|------|--------|
| Health and wellbeing | .26 | 2.88 | .005** |
| Academic development | .24 | 2.49 | .015* |
| Student leadership | .48 | 3.42 | .001** |
| Academic orientation | .01 | .59 | .560 |
| Residence life | .21 | 2.14 | .036* |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

DISCUSSION

Health and wellbeing among first-year university students is a critical factor in

student attrition. Sexually transmitted infections, alcohol and drug abuse, insecurity, financial problems and HIV affect

university students in South Africa. It would be expected that first-year students in this study showed greater awareness about health and wellbeing (Bekker et al., 2015). Students who are in and out of hospital for the greater part of the academic year are more likely to get poor grades, while some opt to drop out (Harvey & Luckman, 2014). Health and wellbeing predicted participants' perceptions of living and learning at the university, as previous studies show a connection between health and academic success (Bruffaerts et al., 2017).

Academic development in this study included an orientation week experience that focused on academic literacy, academic integrity, managing the transitional phase, cultivation of graduate attributes and values, study skills and time management. It was shown in this study that academic development was beneficial to participants. A change of attitude during orientation to fit in with the university culture of learning is associated with graduation success (Letseka & Maile, 2008). Academic development predicted living and learning at the university. Students who adjust well and adapt to the prevailing university environment tend to like their studies and enjoy university life (Flynn & MacLeod, 2015).

Student leadership experience had a significant influence on participants during the orientation week. The Student Representative Council (SRC) members including the SRC President have an overarching influence on first-year students and the student community in general in South Africa. Students follow advice they are given by SRC and take action when instructed to do by the student leaders. University students in South Africa tend to

listen more to student leaders about their welfare than they would listen to university authorities (Areff, 2015). The findings of this study show the need to actively involve student leaders in the management of the orientation week in universities, as they have a significant influence on first-year students during orientation week (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013).

Academic orientation included guided tours and sessions with course coordinators. This experiential learning and interaction with academics who manage learning programmes was exciting to students. Previous studies indicate that university students like outdoor experience (Long et al., 2008). Even though academic orientation emerged as a principal component factor, it did not predict living and learning at the university.

Residence life experience had a significance influence on participants' understanding of communal life (Brown et al., 2017). Residence life predicted living and learning at the university. In South Africa, students who fail to live harmoniously with others and those who feel that the residence environment is hostile are more likely to move out of residence (Munyuki & Vincent, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Supporting students during their first year of study is not only important, but key to their success. This study has assessed how a first-year orientation programme at one university in Mpumalanga had a significant effect on students' learning experiences.

Consistent with the existing literature, the study revealed that a well-coordinated, systematic and meaningful orientation programme integrates students into the

university's academic and social systems and is strongly regarded as a strong predictor for their success. The study also established that independent variables such as health, well-being, academic support services and residence life had strong impact on the quality of student learning and success. It is therefore critical that universities invest significant time and effort in researching the effective planning, implementation and evaluation of orientation programmes for their students. Further research could focus on adaptation processes that a student goes through after their first week of stay at the university.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that universities should carefully plan the conceptualisation, implementation and evaluation of orientation programmes, as these provide a strong integrative role that students need to succeed in their studies. It is also important that supportive initiatives introduced at orientation stage be continued throughout the year, so that students are supported in their transition from high school to university.

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