

# The Lived Experience of First-Year University Students: Perspectives, Challenges, and Coping Strategies

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## Abstract

*The transition into university presents academic, social, and personal challenges that affect student adjustment and persistence. This study examined the struggles of first-year B.Ed. Humanities students at a South African university, framed by Tinto's Theory of Student Integration and Schlossberg's Transition Theory. An interpretivist, qualitative case study design was used, with data collected from 12 purposively sampled students through open-ended Google Form questions, and the data was analyzed thematically. Findings revealed challenges such as heavy workloads, language barriers, limited resources, and insufficient academic feedback. Socially, students reported isolation, difficulty forming peer networks, and balancing academic and personal responsibilities, while personal struggles included stress, financial strain, and mental health concerns. Despite these difficulties, students employed coping strategies including peer support, digital tools, counselling, and self-regulated learning. The study confirms the relevance of academic and social integration to student persistence and highlights the importance of resilience in navigating transitions. It contributes to literature by foregrounding student voices in the South African context and calls for strengthened institutional support, inclusive teaching practices, and expanded mentorship and counselling services to ease first-year adjustment.*

**Keywords:** *First-Year Students, Adjustment, Resilience, South Africa, Tinto, Schlossberg.*

## Introduction

The transition from high school to university is a pivotal and often challenging period in an individual's life. It marks a significant shift not only academically but also socially and personally (Mulaudzi, 2023). Entering university is more than an academic milestone; it is a multifaceted life transition that encompasses intellectual, emotional, and social adjustments (O'Shea, et al., 2024). In this study, lived experience refers to students' personal accounts of the meanings, struggles, and strategies associated with adapting to the demands of higher education. First-year students are those enrolled in their initial year of study at a South African university, often encountering new learning environments, independence, and social networks for the first time. Coping strategies denote the behavioural, cognitive, and emotional mechanisms students employ to manage the challenges of adjustment, ranging from seeking peer support to developing study skills (Fullerton, et al., 2021). By situating the study within the South African higher education system, which continues to grapple with historical inequalities and access challenges, the research underscores the contextual realities shaping student transitions.

While extensive global scholarship has examined first-year university transitions, limited research in the South African context captures the nuanced, qualitative perspectives of students themselves. Much of the existing literature in the country prioritises access, throughput rates, and institutional support systems, often overlooking the everyday realities and coping practices of students from diverse backgrounds (Woldegiorgis & Chiramba, 2025). This gap leaves higher education stakeholders with an incomplete understanding of the lived dimensions of student adjustment. By amplifying students' voices, this study addresses the need for context-specific knowledge that not only describes academic challenges but also illuminates personal, cultural, and social dynamics at play in shaping first-year experiences.

The literature on student adjustment presents inconsistencies regarding whether institutional support structures or individual resilience play a more decisive role in successful transitions. While some studies emphasise structural barriers such as financial constraints and academic preparedness, others highlight students' personal agency, adaptability, and peer networks as central to success (Ives & Castillo-Montoya,

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2020; Gamlath, 2022; Pires & Chapin, 2022). Debates persist over whether higher education institutions sufficiently account for students' socio-cultural contexts in designing support mechanisms. This study is offering an integrated perspective: it explores the interplay between institutional conditions, student backgrounds, and individual coping strategies. It challenges deficit perspectives that often frame students as ill-prepared, instead highlighting their adaptive capacities and lived knowledge.

Despite initiatives aimed at improving first-year experiences, many South African universities continue to record high levels of academic attrition and psychosocial distress among new entrants (Bantjes, et al., 2021). The core problem underpinning this study is the limited understanding of how students themselves interpret and respond to the challenges they face during their first year. Without capturing these lived realities, institutional interventions risk being misaligned with actual student needs. This disjunction threatens not only academic success but also the holistic well-being of students navigating this critical transition.

The research will delve into the multifaceted experiences of first-year students at a South African university, aiming to capture their unique perspectives, the specific challenges they encounter, and the strategies they employ to navigate this critical transition. By focusing on their lived experiences, this paper offers a rich, nuanced understanding that quantitative studies often miss. The aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences of first-year university students within a South African university, with particular attention to their perspectives, challenges, and coping strategies as they transition into higher education. The study seeks to examine the academic, social, and personal difficulties that students encounter during their first year, while also investigating the coping mechanisms and support systems they adopt in response to these challenges. The central research question is: *How do first-year university students in South Africa experience, interpret, and cope with the challenges of transitioning into higher education?*

## Literature Review

### *Introduction*

The transition to university is widely recognised as a critical period that shapes students' academic performance, social adjustment, and overall well-being. Research across higher education systems consistently highlights the first year as a decisive phase in determining persistence, retention, and eventual graduation (Tinto, 2017). For many students, the adjustment involves navigating new teaching and learning environments, building peer networks, and managing increased independence. In South Africa, these challenges are intensified by socio-economic inequalities, the legacy of an uneven schooling system, and institutional disparities (Sithomola, 2021). This literature review explores three core dimensions of the first-year experience: the academic, social, and personal challenges encountered by students; the coping mechanisms and support systems they employ; and the broader contextual realities shaping their adjustment within South African higher education.

### *Challenges encountered by first-year students*

#### *Academic Challenges*

First-year students frequently struggle with academic expectations, particularly the shift from teacher-directed learning in high school to independent, self-regulated study at university. Studies show that students often find it difficult to manage large volumes of reading, critical thinking requirements, and assignment deadlines, especially in unfamiliar disciplines (Bean & Melzer, 2021). In South Africa, these challenges are compounded by linguistic diversity, as many students are required to study in English, which may not be their home language (Omidire, 2020). Students from under-resourced schools often experience gaps in foundational knowledge, making it difficult to keep pace with their peers.

Research has revealed that many students struggle to understand the expectations of lecturers, which are often communicated implicitly rather than explicitly (Wong & Chiu, 2020). This hidden curriculum disadvantages first-year students and lacks exposure to academic discourse and conventions. As a result,

many experience feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and academic underpreparedness, which can affect their confidence and motivation to succeed. The student funding in higher education also directly intersects with academic challenges. Students who are unable to afford laptops, textbooks, data, or other learning resources often struggle to engage fully with course material.

### *Social Challenges*

Beyond academics, first-year students often face difficulties establishing social connections and adjusting to new cultural environments. Moving from familiar home or school communities to a diverse and sometimes alienating university setting can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness (Phillips, et al., 2022). For many South African students, particularly those from rural or township schools, the social environment of universities can appear intimidating and exclusionary (Chitsamatanga, 2025). The challenge of negotiating new peer relationships, finding belonging, and building support networks is often underestimated yet crucial to persistence.

Students may struggle with navigating new forms of social identity. Universities are spaces where students are exposed to different languages, cultures, and belief systems, which may clash with their prior experiences (Costa & Li, 2025). This cultural dissonance can create tension and anxiety, particularly for students who feel marginalised or excluded from dominant groups. Participation in clubs, societies, or mentoring programmes has been shown to mitigate these challenges, but access to such opportunities is not always evenly distributed across campuses,

### *Personal Challenges*

The transition to university also introduces personal challenges, particularly in managing independence, self-care, and emotional well-being. For many students, living away from home for the first time means adjusting to responsibilities such as budgeting, cooking, and time management. These demands, coupled with academic pressures, can contribute to stress and burnout (Jagodics & Szabó, 2023). Mental health concerns are particularly prevalent among first-year students. Studies indicate rising levels of anxiety, depression, and feelings of being overwhelmed within this cohort (Adams, et al., 2021). South African universities often lack sufficient counselling services, leaving many students without adequate support (Makibinyane & Khumalo, 2021; Bantjes, et al., 2023). For some, personal and family expectations add further pressure to succeed, particularly where financial sacrifices have been made to enable higher education participation.

### *Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems*

In response to the above-discussed, students adopt a variety of coping strategies. Many rely on peer networks, where sharing resources, study groups, and emotional support provides a sense of community and belonging (Amponsah, et al., 2020; Van der Merwe, et al., 2020). Others develop personal strategies such as time management, resilience, and goal setting to manage workload and stress. Religion, spirituality, and cultural practices have also been identified as important coping resources for South African students, offering emotional grounding during times of difficulty (Ekwonye, et al., 2020).

Institutional support systems play a critical role in shaping coping outcomes. Orientation programmes, mentorship initiatives, and academic development units provide structured interventions aimed at supporting first-year adjustment. However, research suggests that participation in these initiatives is inconsistent, and many students are either unaware of available resources or unable to access them due to structural and logistical barriers (Tinto, 2017). This indicates a need for more inclusive and student-centred support mechanisms that resonate with the diverse experiences of first-year cohorts.

The lived experiences of first-year students must be understood within the broader context of South Africa's higher education system. Persistent inequalities in schooling mean that students arrive at university with vastly different levels of preparation. This structural inequity contributes to the high dropout rates recorded in many institutions, with nearly half of students failing to complete their degrees within the

expected timeframe. The massification of higher education and pressures for transformation have created further complexities. While more students from historically disadvantaged groups now access university, the institutional culture of many universities remains alienating, with curricula and teaching practices that do not adequately reflect the realities of diverse student populations (Chitsamatanga, 2025). These contextual dynamics underscore the importance of research that prioritises student voices and experiences, highlighting the intersection between individual struggles and systemic barriers.

### *Theoretical Framework*

This study is informed by Tinto's Theory of Student Integration (1993) and Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981). Tinto (1993) argues that successful student persistence in higher education depends on both academic and social integration. Students who establish meaningful connections within their academic programmes and social environments are more likely to remain and succeed. This framework is particularly useful for understanding the dual dimensions of first-year experiences in a South African University, where academic preparedness and social belonging intersect with structural inequalities.

Complementing this, Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981) provides a lens for examining how individuals cope with life transitions. This theory highlights four key factors: "4S" situation, self, support, and strategies, that influence adjustment. Applying this model allows the study to analyse how first-year students interpret their transition into university, the personal and institutional resources available to them, and the strategies they employ to adapt. Figure 1 shows a summary of the relevance of these theories. Together, these theories offer a comprehensive framework for analysing the lived experiences of first-year students, balancing structural considerations with individual agency.

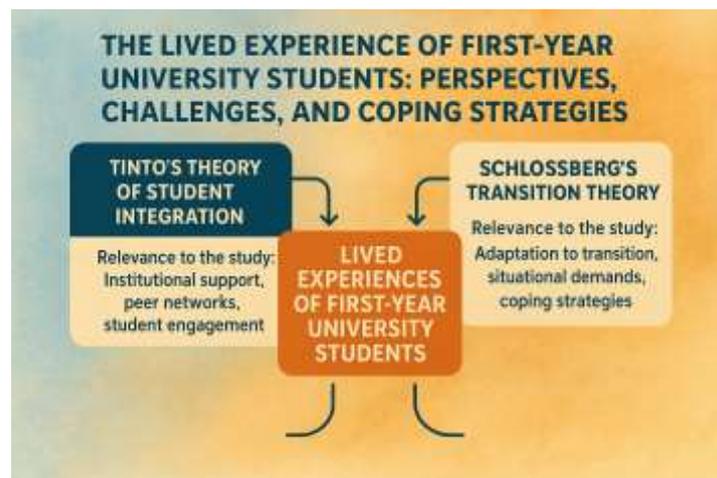


Figure 1: Integration of Theories (Source, 2025).

### **Research Methodology**

This chapter outlines the methodology used in this study. The approach details the underlying research philosophy, design choices, participant selection, data collection, and analysis processes. This study focuses specifically on the experiences first year students, making a qualitative methodology ideal to capture nuanced insights.

### *Research Paradigm*

The study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding the subjective meanings and experiences of participants within their specific contexts (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This paradigm supports exploring how first-year university students in the B.Ed Humanities program interpret and construct knowledge about their transition experiences. Using an interpretivist paradigm is appropriate as it allows

for a deep exploration of students' perceptions, recognizing that reality is socially constructed through their reflections. This approach ensures that the complex realities of the first-year students in the South African context are meaningfully captured.

### *Research Approach*

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study, focusing on the collection and analysis of rich, descriptive data (Stanley, 2023). This approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings related to transition experience. A qualitative approach aligns well with the interpretivist paradigm above, as it allows exploration of how individual students construct their realities within the educational setting. This approach also provides flexibility to capture diverse viewpoints and contextual nuances crucial for meaningful insights.

### *Research Design*

A case study design was adopted to investigate the experiences of first-year B.Ed Humanities students at a specific South African university. This design allows an in-depth examination of the students' experiences within the real-life context of their transitioning to university (Hancock, et al., 2021). The case study approach is suitable for exploring educational phenomena where context plays a significant role, enabling a rich, holistic understanding of transitioning as experienced by the participants.

### *Population and Sampling*

The population of interest included first-year students registered for the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) in Humanities at the selected university. From this population, a purposive sample of twelve (12) students was drawn. Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure that participants were directly relevant to the study's focus, as they were actively navigating the academic and social transition into higher education. The small, focused sample size was adequate for qualitative exploration, allowing the researcher to gather detailed accounts while managing the depth of analysis.

### *Data Collection*

Data was collected through an online survey using a Google Form, which contained a series of open-ended questions. This method was selected to allow participants to express their experiences in their own words, providing rich, qualitative data. The questions were carefully drafted to elicit detailed narratives about their transition, challenges, and coping strategies. The link to the Google Form was shared with the selected participants, providing them with a secure and convenient platform to respond at their own pace and in a private setting. This method also ensured consistency in the questions asked to each participant while allowing for individual depth of response.

### *Data Analysis*

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method involves systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or "themes" within the data (Peel, 2020). The process began with reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the participant's responses. This was followed by an initial coding phase, where keywords and phrases were highlighted and categorized. These codes were then grouped into broader, overarching themes that captured the core aspects of the first-year student experience. This process was iterative and involved refining the themes to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' narratives.

### *Discussion of Data Quality*

The quality of the data was ensured through the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established by providing a detailed and transparent account of the research process, allowing the reader to judge the findings' trustworthiness (Hayre, 2021). The use of verbatim

quotes from participants will further enhance credibility. Transferability will be addressed by providing “thick descriptions” of the context, enabling readers to determine if the findings are applicable to other similar settings. Dependability was maintained through a consistent data collection and analysis procedure. Confirmability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail of the research process, demonstrating that the findings are based on the data and not the researcher’s biases.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Although no formal ethics clearance certificate was required since the data was collected as part of a module survey, the study adhered to ethical principles. Informed consent was implied through voluntary participation, and students were informed that their responses would be used for research purposes. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by assigning pseudonyms (S1–S12) to participants instead of using their real names. The use of Google Forms also ensured privacy, as no identifying details were requested. These measures upheld ethical integrity and protected participants’ rights.

### *Study Limitations and Delimitations*

The study had certain limitations: the small sample size of twelve students means the findings cannot be generalized to all first-year students, even within the same university. Furthermore, reliance on self-reported data may have introduced subjectivity, as participants might have omitted or exaggerated aspects of their experiences. These limitations were balanced by the richness of the qualitative data. The delimitations of the study include its focus on first-year B.Ed. Humanities students at a single South African university. This deliberate narrowing allowed for a more in-depth exploration of a specific group’s experiences, while acknowledging that findings may not reflect other faculties or institutions.

## **Presentation of Findings**

This chapter presents the findings from responses gathered from twelve first-year B.Ed Humanities students (referred to by pseudonyms S1–S12) regarding their lived experiences during the transition into university life. The data, collected through open-ended online survey questions, revealed themes related to academic, social, and personal challenges, coping mechanisms, and suggestions for improving institutional support. These findings are organized under key thematic areas aligned with the literature and theoretical framework.

### *Theme 1: Academic Challenges Confirm Hidden Curriculum and Structural Barriers*

Several participants highlighted the overwhelming nature of academic demands, especially given the segmentation of Humanities modules into multiple parts:

**S1:** *“I think there should be a program or people to help humanities students in their modules because their modules are separated into two or three, ... so that makes the work overwhelming towards student.”*

**S9:** *“You never told me that I’d have 4 history and 2 Geography modules, that’s very hard.”*

These experiences confirm findings in the literature that first-year students often struggle with managing academic workloads and disciplinary expectations (Bean & Melzer, 2021; Wong & Chiu, 2020). The difficulty in navigating multiple module demands relates to the implicit expectations described as the “hidden curriculum,” which leads to feelings of inadequacy (Wong & Chiu, 2020). Participants also addressed resource needs, identifying academic advisors, tutors, and access to learning materials (library, YouTube, Google Scholar, AI tools) as crucial for academic support:

**S10:** *“Academic advisors, tutors, library resources and academic support events that we sometimes have on our campus.”*

**S1:** *“Google scholar, AI, ChatGPT, Gemini.”*

Such findings align with the literature emphasizing the importance of both formal institutional supports and informal resources for coping with academic challenges (Amponsah et al., 2020; Van der Merwe et al., 2020).

### *Theme 2: Social Integration Remains a Critical and Under-Resourced Dimension*

Feelings of social isolation and difficulty in building networks surfaced indirectly but notably. Participants suggested increased follow-ups and mentorship:

**S9:** *“They should always do a follow up on students, trust me, that helps a lot.”*

**S3:** *“Mandatory orientation programs, partnership and use mobile apps.”*

These recommendations resonate with Tinto’s Theory of Student Integration (1993), which posits that academic and social integration are fundamental to student persistence. Follow-ups and orientation programs can bolster both social connectedness and academic adjustment. The participants’ calls for better communication and more opportunities to engage directly reflect the necessity to bridge institutional support with student needs, confirming concerns in the literature regarding inconsistent participation in support programs and lack of access for some students (Tinto, 2017).

### *Theme 3: Personal Challenges and Emotional Well-Being*

Personal adjustment challenges, particularly linked to self-care and emotional resilience, were mentioned implicitly within advice and coping reflections. One participant noted:

**S7:** *“There is a lot of Comfort here, so they should be not comfortable as that much they should work hard on their academics.”*

Another advised students to remain humble and start early, signaling awareness of the need for self-regulation and proactive coping strategies:

**S12:** *“To be humble and start early.” (S12)*

These confirm Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (1981), which highlights the interplay of situation, self, support, and strategy in navigating transitions. Participants’ emphasis on responsibility and preparedness echoes the ‘self’ and ‘strategies’ dimensions that influence adjustment outcomes.

#### *4.4 Theme 4: Technological Access as a Critical Factor in Transition Success*

Participants highlighted the critical role of technology in their academic success but also pointed to inequalities and limitations in access.

**S4:** *“To give them more daily data that night for Online Learning.”*

**S11:** *“Laptop, WIFI & monthly-data played a significant role in addressing academic challenges as it’s easier and more efficient to approach academics.”*

This theme reflects the contextual realities of South African students, where technological access can be a significant barrier or enabler, reinforcing the literature on persistent socio-economic inequalities affecting academic preparedness and participation (Sithomola, 2021; Bantjes et al., 2021).

### *Theme 5: Timely Feedback as a Catalyst for Academic Integration*

Several participants emphasized the need for timely, clear, and consistent feedback from lecturers and academic staff to aid their learning process and reduce feelings of inadequacy:

**S1:** “All the lecturers should give feedback to students regarding our performance on our academics.”

**S9:** “When the lecturer does a follow up on topics we didn’t understand and explains them to us again and again so we’d understand.”

This reflects the need to address the “hidden curriculum” (Wong & Chiu, 2020) and supports Tinto’s (1993) argument that academic integration requires clear communication and meaningful academic interactions. Effective feedback helps students align expectations, build confidence, and engage more deeply with their studies.

## Discussion of Findings

This chapter discusses the major findings in light of the literature review and theoretical framework, exploring how the lived experiences of first-year B.Ed Humanities students confirm or challenge existing knowledge on university transitions.

### *Academic Challenges Confirm Hidden Curriculum and Structural Barriers*

The overwhelming experience described by students in managing multiple module demands confirms literature that characterizes the first-year academic transition as fraught with implicit expectations and learning gaps (Wong & Chiu, 2020; Bean & Melzer, 2021). S1 and S9’s vivid descriptions reveal how structural segmentation of courses may unintentionally heighten cognitive load, aligning with studies noting the difficulties in shifting from teacher-directed learning to independent study (Omidire, 2020). The emphasis on academic advisors, library services, and digital resources reflects the multifaceted supports needed to bridge foundational gaps (Amponsah et al., 2020). However, challenges reported with access to such resources also mirror persistent inequalities within South African higher education (Sithomola, 2021), underscoring the systemic nature of the problem.

### *Social Integration Remains a Critical and Under-Resourced Dimension*

Participants’ calls for enhanced orientation, mentorship, and follow-up activities substantiate Tinto’s (1993) argument that social integration strongly correlates with student persistence. The experiences of S3 and S9 highlight how proactive institutional engagement can mitigate cultural dissonance and social isolation described in the literature (Costa & Li, 2025; Chitsamatanga, 2025). Their reflections also reinforce challenges noted by Phillips et al. (2022) regarding the intimidation and exclusion students from rural or township backgrounds face on campus. These findings advocate for more culturally responsive and accessible social support mechanisms that address not only academic but also socio-emotional needs.

### *Personal Agency and Coping Strategies Align with Schlossberg’s Transition Theory*

The study confirms Schlossberg’s (1981) theory by illustrating how personal factors (‘self’) and coping strategies impact adjustment. Advice from participants such as S7, S11, and S12 emphasizing responsibility, early preparation, and humility reflects individual agency amid contextual challenges. This finding contests deficit views framing students solely as unprepared, supporting the integrated perspective proposed in the introduction. Furthermore, participants’ reliance on peer networks and digital resources complements Schlossberg’s ‘support’ and ‘strategy’ dimensions, showing adaptive capacities despite institutional constraints (Ekwonye et al., 2020).

### *Technological Access as a Critical Factor in Transition Success*

The prominent role of technological resources such as laptops, data, and Wi-Fi, highlighted by participants like S4 and S11, confirms that digital access is not only a facilitator but a necessity for contemporary academic engagement (Bantjes et al., 2021; Sithomola, 2021). This theme reinforces the socioeconomic disparities discussed in the literature, where unequal access to technology exacerbates academic and social challenges. Ensuring equitable technological support aligns with Schlossberg’s ‘support’ element, emphasizing institutional responsibility to provide enabling resources.

### *Timely Feedback as a Catalyst for Academic Integration*

The participants' emphasis on clear and consistent feedback from lecturers validates literature emphasizing the importance of academic communication in mitigating the hidden curriculum challenges (Wong & Chiu, 2020). Providing constructive feedback enables students to understand expectations and foster academic confidence, critical to their retention and success as proposed by Tinto's framework (1993). This finding suggests that educational practices must foreground feedback mechanisms as central to first-year support.

### **Summary**

The recurring theme of insufficient structural support supports the critique from the literature that higher education institutions often fail to adequately consider socio-cultural contexts in their designs (Pires & Chapin, 2022). Students' experiences suggest a need for more inclusive, student-centered programs that recognize diverse backgrounds while fostering both academic and social integration. The proposed use of more consistent follow-up, feedback, orientation, and resource provision is not only a practical recommendation but also aligns with the theoretical lens emphasizing integrated support systems as key to persistence (Tinto, 1993; Schlossberg, 1981). Overall, this study confirms much of the existing literature on the challenges faced by first-year university students globally and within South Africa, while highlighting the nuanced realities of Humanities students navigating fragmented modules and resource constraints. Importantly, it foregrounds students' voices to emphasize their agency and coping strategies alongside systemic barriers, validating the dual theoretical framework of integration and transition. Future institutional efforts should prioritize bridging structural deficits with student-centered, culturally responsive supports to enhance first-year experiences and reduce attrition.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations**

### *Conclusion*

This study explored the lived experiences of first-year B.Ed. Humanities students at a South African university, with a particular focus on their perspectives, challenges, and coping strategies during the transition into higher education. The findings revealed that the first year is marked by intertwined academic, social, and personal challenges. Students struggled with heavy workloads, insufficient feedback, language barriers, and limited access to learning resources. Socially, many experienced feelings of isolation, difficulty in forming meaningful relationships, and balancing peer interactions with academic demands. On a personal level, the transition to independence brought about stress, financial strain, and mental health challenges. Despite these difficulties, students demonstrated agency and resilience by drawing on coping mechanisms such as peer networks, online resources, counselling services, and personal strategies like focus and time management.

The discussion highlighted that while these challenges mirror global trends, they are intensified by South Africa's historical inequalities and resource constraints. The findings affirm Tinto's Theory of Student Integration by showing the importance of both academic and social integration, and Schlossberg's Transition Theory by illustrating how the interplay of situation, self, support, and strategies shapes student adjustment. The study contributes to the body of knowledge by amplifying first-year students' voices and confirming that resilience and adaptive strategies coexist with systemic barriers. It underscores the need for context-sensitive interventions that go beyond deficit views of students, instead recognizing their lived experiences and capacities as critical to successful adjustment.

### *Recommendations*

Based on the findings, universities should strengthen student-centered support mechanisms that address both structural and personal dimensions of first-year adjustment. This includes providing timely and constructive academic feedback, expanding access to affordable data and digital learning resources, and improving the visibility and accessibility of counselling and mentorship programmes. Orientation initiatives

should not only focus on academic preparedness but also incorporate social and emotional transition support to foster belonging and resilience. By aligning institutional interventions more closely with students' lived realities, universities can enhance academic persistence, reduce attrition, and promote holistic well-being among first-year students.

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