

University students' adjustment to campus life

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Abstract: Studying in a university is different than in school. Those who have just enrolled in a tertiary institution for the first time as new undergraduates need to be independent adults and adjust to different surroundings. They need to adjust their life from school to university life. If the adjustment is not done well, the students may experience self-doubt and anxiety which may impede their quest for academic excellence. This paper focuses on the issues and challenges faced by young freshmen among others; adjusting to new environment, managing money and facing academic pressure. The paper further discusses the adaptation process that the new students have to go through especially in the first few semesters of their study whereby they have to understand their roles and responsibilities in adapting and integrating with the university culture.

Keywords: University life, challenges, adaptation process, academic, social and personal adjustment, resilient individuals.

INTRODUCTION

Many school leavers may not realize that they need ample preparation to face the outside world especially if they are continuing their study at a higher institution. They may think that it is not really important to know or to take heed of challenges that await them at university or having the point of view that school education is sufficient to make them ready for university life. This is indeed untrue as school graduation is not adequate to make students ready for academic and social independence at a tertiary level [1]. College life requires students to be positive and strong so that they will be able to face any hardships. The success or failure of a student depends on how she/he leads his/her life at university. "The students deal with adjustment problems differently. Some deal with the adjustment problems constructively while others feel overwhelmed and fail to cope with life at a university" [2].

Thus, it is vital for undergraduates to realize the challenges of a university life. One of the challenges is that they have to cope with higher standards of education like hectic teaching- learning procedures [3]. Failure to overcome this challenge can cause stressful situations for the students. In fact, academic pressure may cause mental illness among young undergraduates if they fail to face the reality of higher education programs in the university.

In this paper, we explore other various issues and challenges faced by young university students. Not only

that we discuss university adaptation process that the students have to undergo and factors affecting their university life, but we also outline some ways on how the challenges can be overcome.

University Life vs. School Life

University students, particularly those who have just finished schools, cannot avoid from dealing with numerous issues and challenges as they step into a whole new world for them; university life. Among the many challenges faced by freshmen are needing to be independent adults (e.g. managing financial issues and daily essentials on their own), and having to adjust to a totally new and different environment [4] and maintaining greater academic amounts [5].

The first challenge for new university students is the need for them to be independent adults. In the effort to become one, he or she must be able to endure and succeed without depending on the assistance that his or her parents normally offer [6]. Managing financial issues on their own is one of the tasks that they need to handle in becoming independent adults. As compared to the life they had when they were in schools, where financial matters were managed by the parents, a research found that these university students are more likely to have lack of preparation [7] in terms of financial when they first begin their new journey in universities.

A totally new and different environment [8] is another significant difference that first year university

students have to face after leaving schools. Having to leave their hometowns [9] where the familiar and reliable surroundings (family, existing friends, and home environment) are missing from their present environment [10] can lead to stress and depression [11]. This new environment also includes making their way on large campus grounds, and attending physically bigger classrooms can also act as the factors that contribute to difficult times for these first year university students [12]. Enrolling into a university would also mean that they have to go through the process of making new friends [13] because they are no longer in the circle of familiar social networks [14].

Most students see university life as more complex than those times in schools because apparently they have to face an extreme degree of academic studies [15]. This academic pressure has been found to be a significant obstacle to their academic achievement [16]. First year university students often see educational challenges as threats where they have to compete for good grades, perform well in their studies, and face the risk of failure which often lead them to experiencing mental stress [17].

Adaptation process

The term adaptation refers to individuals struggle to survive in their social and physical environment [18]. The same goes to university students. University students need to adapt to the new environment they face. This is because university life is different from school life.

University life is different from school life. University life gives more freedom to students since these students have to be responsible on what they do without much guidance from parents and teachers like going to classes, submitting assignments and meeting the deadlines given by the lecturers, making new friends and navigating around the campus in finding help when needed. At times adjusting to university life can be hard especially for the first year students. [19] The first semester particularly will be the most difficult semester for the new students since they need to move from their familiar and safe environment of their school to the impersonal college world. As a result, they should look after themselves either in the classroom or in other institutional spaces. Furthermore, the students need to assume new roles and responsibilities and this creates challenges to those who are not prepared [20]. Because of that, university offers a strong network of people, organizations and also services that might help the students in pursuing their study.

Life is going to be different as compared to the kind of life that these students have during their school time. It can be said that college life can be a foreign culture to some students.

Culture here refers to things or values that we do and accept without having to think hard of them. In other words this kind of culture is our way of life. Without proper physical and mental preparation, some students may experience difficulties since we have expectations in life. Students need to integrate well during their university years. The integration process is not easy. Factors like age, previous academic performance, social skills, character, origin and career choice may cause students to give up their studies [21].

Moreover, when students enter their university, they need to think on how to manage their life in a new surrounding and environment. Therefore, they need to adjust and this adjustment thing will come gradually. Some students can easily adapt to the new environment and some others might need more time, but they hardly realize that the adjustment is really taking place as they are busy with their academic activities. However, this cultural adjustment process is similar to most every one of them. [22] Proper integration is one of the most important aspects for persistency in university life. In addition, integration does not only imply conformity, but it can also lead to innovation or maybe the modification of elements that make up a particular culture or society. Integration in other words refers to a process where a group or individual adjusts its/his/her behaviour to fit into a social environment in order to exist or survive.

Besides, a foreign environment faced by new students must be overcome in order to achieve students' academic goals. In addition, stress and anxiety might cause the students to be vulnerable and this in the end will lead to various maladjustments [23]. Academic pressure can act as a trigger to mental illness. This is because some students have a genetic predisposition for depression and this leads to depression. Some of the warning signs of depression are having loss of interest in activities that they prefer, feeling sadness, decreasing in energy in doing something, losing appetite and having a feeling of committing suicide. Majority of the students may not experience mental illness due to academic pressure, but they are experiencing self-doubt and anxiety especially in their transitional period of adjusting their life from school to university life.

Factors affecting students' university life

There are three factors that affect students' life in university. Those factors are academic, social and personal adjustment. Academic adjustment refers to any modifications students made in their learning process in university to meet the standard requirement so that they will have an equal access to the educational opportunities that are offered by the university. When in university, students need to make transitions to the new learning environment that requires them to adjust their

habits to meet the university standard requirement. They need to be independent in university so they should balance their time between studies and other academic activities organized inside or outside university [24]. At times they need to sacrifice a lot in terms of time in order to do well in their study. They need to adapt and adopt the different teaching methods by different lecturers and professors. Sometimes students may face confusion in the sense that they need to face new culture and maybe language used in university besides the different ideologies people have in university. University teaches students to be independent and the culture of 'spoon feeding' that is practiced in school does not present in university. Therefore, the new students entering university life need to be well prepared physically and mentally. This is so true for school leavers who do not have any experience staying in the hostel during their school years.

Besides, students need to adjust themselves socially. Social adjustment refers to the psychological process which involves one's coping with the set of standards and values conform by the society. In other words, social adjustment is the students' ability to get along well with others in the campus. Students need to familiarize themselves with the support system in university so that they can cope well with their university life. In general, many first year students who have never been apart from their family tend to feel homesick [25]. However, these students need to embark on the period of detachment from their family as to survive and excel in their study. Social support proves to show that it helps in reducing negative effects like depression, loneliness and anxiety among students [26]. In addition, students should also be wise in choosing friends as they will be with them for at least three to four years. Students need to behave well to be liked by others. At times some students experience peer pressure as they need to ensure that they are fit in the group [27]. Peer group is one of the most important influences on university students' lives since most of the time it replaces family and community support systems.

Finally, personal adjustment is also required. Personal adjustment refers to one's relationship in terms of dating, courtship, friendship and parenting. Parenting is also part of the personal adjustment in campus as there are students who are married. These married students need to manage their family time and study time properly as not to affect both in a negative way. Furthermore, students come from different background and during university years they need to share most of the things. Failing to adjust and adapt them to the new surrounding that requires them to 'give and take' will eventually lead them to misery [28]. Since students have different abilities, some tend to be

good in certain subjects as compared to the rest of their peers. Rival among them might lead to broken friendships since they want to do their best in their studies. In addition, there are students who stay outside the campus known as 'non-resident' students. These students tend to face additional stressors. One of the factors like inefficient transport network to access university facilities and services may lead to depression among them. In addition, these students also have to spend more to pay for the bills and rental. To conclude, personal adjustment affects students' achievement in an indirect way. Students who fail to adjust themselves well in university may face psychological problems. Therefore, they need to always stay and think positive because their other friends are also experiencing the same thing.

Ways to overcome challenges faced by the university students

It is no doubt that living in university can be either exciting or daunting new experience for those young international or local adults. In fact, this new transition of life might bring positive impact for those who manage to face the challenges independently. While for others, the challenges are stressful and distressing. The challenges are problems related to financial difficulties, language barriers, differences between cultures [29], homesickness [30]; time management, climate, transportation, peers [31]; facilities, social environment, academic system and international programs [32]; personal responsibilities, family responsibilities and relationships with others [33]. [34] Interpersonal, intrapersonal, academic and environmental conditions are the factors that contribute to the stress of students as they are not able to adapt with the university life. Hence, there is a need to highlight some of the ways to overcome these challenges.

Initially, students who had the first experience entering university life would need to make changes and adjustments to ensure the environment is comfortable. That is, students need to be resilient individuals to motivate themselves to face the challenges positively [35]. The concept of resilience is important as it helps individuals to eliminate stress that can adapt to the problems encountered in their daily lives.

Furthermore, they believed both internal and external factors affect resilience in which the ability of individuals to be adaptable in difficult situation. When they are facing the obstacles, they are able to be calm and rediscover their passion, power, and purpose of reality in dealing with their daily life.

Family support plays significant role in the adaptation to students' university life. Some students

tend to experience homesickness and depression when they are detached from the love ones. The situation could be more stressful for the international students who have to pursue their education away from their country of origin [36]. Due to this situation, a study done by Thurber & Walton [37] has suggested on some prevention strategies to cater the homesick students. According to them, parents should be trained to provide positive messages and be optimistic, instead of making “pick – up deals” whenever their sons or daughters contacted them. Furthermore, warmth, affection, cohesion, communication, problem solving, understanding, commitment, and emotional support for one another are family factors that have been found to be associated with mental health in youth [38]. Therefore, collaboration among the parents, resident advisors, faculty and mental health professionals on and off campus is essential as it promotes adjustment and eliminates the homesick feelings.

In addition, social integration is necessary for the student’s proper adaptation in the university environment. When students enter college, they are not only developing new ways of thinking but they must initiate new social and cultural relationships with their teachers and peers [39]. This could lead to new social support networks. Besides that, the emergence of social network sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram have created opportunities to establish peer-support networks upon the arrival of students in university, social media websites developed by universities are more likely to enhance interactions among graduate students, faculty, and staff[40]. As a matter of fact, there is a need to provide counselling services for students who experience severe feelings of alienation being in university life indicated that it is essential to provide special counselling and related services to international students[41].

However, social support seems to be the factor that improves adjustments that may prepare international students with opportunities to develop an understanding of the new culture [42]. It is indeed true that students adapt better to the foreign situations they face in college when they have greater support networks [43].

Organising orientation programmes for first year students is essential, as it can assist them to know about the services offered and how to attain them. Whatever questions in their mind need to be answered and clarified as to reduce their anxiety level, or else they will feel confuse and startled which will affect their academic performance. As for international students specifically, the more competent they perceive they are in a second language environment, they would have better adjustment in a new culture [44]. When they

experience positive communication, they are more likely to adapt successfully.

In conclusion, as university students, regardless of local or foreign may need to adjust themselves to the new university life as to eliminate the stressors that influence them. Adequate and successful social support from family, friends, university itself and social network sites are the factors contributing to the students’ university life adjustment. By having these, it will ensure that the needs of the students are met.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have discussed several problems and challenges that will be faced by new college undergraduates when they step into the university world. We have also demonstrated how the students can survive their college life through an adaptation process whereby they need to realize their new roles and responsibilities as a way to integrate with the new social environment. This paper also illustrates how academic, social and personal problems can be overcome with the help from family, friends and the university. In sum, higher tertiary institutions will produce successful graduates socially and academically if the students know how to handle well their university life.

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