
Transitional Challenges Facing University First Year Students in Kenyan Public Universities: A Case of Kenyatta University

Tabitha Wangeri (corresponding author)
Department of Educational Psychology, Kenyatta University. Nairobi, Kenya.
Email: tabitha.wangeri@gmail.com

Elishiba Kimani
Department of Gender and development studies, Kenyatta University. Nairobi, Kenya.
Email: elishbakimani@yahoo.com

Samuel Mutua Mutweleli
Department of Educational psychology, Kenyatta University. Nairobi, Kenya.
Email: wamutweleli@gmail.com

Abstract: The intention of this paper was to investigate on the transitional challenges facing first year students in Kenyan Public universities. The challenges were investigated in terms of autonomy, social adjustment, compatibility among roommates, the feeding habits, and access to support services and adjustment to academic programs. Hurvighust’s developmental tasks theory informed the study. The study was done in Kenyatta University, a public university in Kenya. Six schools were randomly selected from fourteen from which twenty students were randomly selected from different departments to a sample of 120 students. Further, officers from key university offices dealing with student’s services and welfare were selected for interview. The results indicate that majority of students found the transition challenges in all the areas investigated. In relation to autonomy 13.33 % had high autonomy while 86.67% has average autonomy. With regard to social compatibility only 6.6% showed high compatibility and 73.33% average while 20% showed low compatibility respectfully . Data on compatibility with roommates revealed that only 6.6% were compatible, 40% average and 53.33 % low compatibility. On access to support services 20% had high access, 66.70% average while 13.33% showed low access to support services. For the feeding habits only 3.3% indicated good feeding habits while 96.6% reported poor feeding habits. Data regarding adjustment to show that 3.3% reported high adjustment, 93.33% average adjustment and 3.33 reporting low adjustment. The findings further indicated some differentials in the challenges in relation to gender as well rural and urban orientation of the first year students. The study recommends a need for an effective orientation programme for all first year students to prepare them for university entry. In addition welfare and service providing offices-accommodation, career guidance, mentoring, chaplaincy and dean of students are important in providing useful information to help first year students settle faster in the university and make appropriate decisions regarding their academic and social life in the university.

Keywords: Transitional, Challenges, Kenyan, Public Universities, Students.

1. Introduction
University entry all over the world provides students the opportunity to define and advance careers opportunities. Depending on their home environment and setting, the physical and social environment of the university is new, overwhelming and intimidating to some students. More over majority of Students joining public universities have unexplained fears and expectations about university life and education. Furthermore for some students, secondary schools friends have gone different ways which makes the unfamiliar university community as well as schedules add to the first year students anxieties. The reality is such that while some of the fears are overcome, others are confirmed with some expectations being met, while others are frustrated. Further, although students celebrate admission to university, it is also true that it brings deep anxieties since some students are breaking from familiar places and people for the first time in their lives. This is confirmed by Bernie, Larose and Whippie, (2005) who observe that the transition from high school to university is a difficult undertaking.

According to Bling (2003) the transition from the high school to university is known to shake social security, physical comfort and ability to enjoy gratifying activities for first year students. Consequently, Bling (2003); Bernier, Larose, & Whipple, (2005) affirm that transiting from high can be stressful social and psychological event. The testing of autonomy away from parents and known teachers in high school challenges the first year students who must make decisions regarding daily schedules all by themselves. Talbert (2008) concurs that each first year student has to make decisions regarding when and what to do as well as when to sleep and wake up. Before joining
Influences on the transitional challenges was also of interest to the study. However, while the study adjusted than their female counterparts. The rural-urban orientation of university students and its studying adjustment among first year students in Malaysia found that male students were better the investigation, from a gender perspective. This concern was also raised by Abdullah (2009), who in the biological and socialization process for female and male students, the study intended to carry out with the knowledge and the skills they needed in order to make effective transitions from one stage of life to the next within their communities. As such, the African communities would organize for rites of passage that every cohort of young people was exposed to go through to acquire the expected knowledge and skills, for survival.

Most important, the young persons were never alone in the transitions of life. The parents, the relatives and age mates were always there to provide guidance and support at every step. From the moment of birth onwards, the person moved with others along the well-defined paths of life that the older ones had cleared. Thus unlike the transitional process in our modern societies, life in the traditional set up was predictable with every transition not only known but well planned from birth, naming, initiation, marriage, adult life, parenthood, aging, dying and post humus ceremonies. In most cases, life was lived near kin and kith and in familiar neighborhoods.

In today's world, much has changed and individuals make their transitions in a highly competitive world that is characterized by competition and individualism. The same applies in the educational institutions, including universities. Nuclear family pattern, geographical, social mobility and the technological advances are the new developments that have taken place since modernization took root in many places of the world. Thus, disorientation characterizes the life of the school going children from one level to the next, from pre-school to university. Children have been forced to go through life transitions without the benefit of the inter-generational memory and history. Students go to school not in the neighborhood of their homes but sometimes far away from home.

In Kenya like in the rest of the world, joining university presents the first major break from parental and teacher supervision as observed earlier in this paper. Talbert's (2008) views the university orientation program as an opportunity to manage their life and make decisions that define their careers and professional growth. Raising a concern, Sanoff (2006) feels that first year students are however ill prepared for college life and hence need a good orientation program to prepare them for the challenges they will encounter in all areas of life at the campus. Additionally, the first years’ transitional challenges associated with the preparedness to form new relationships are of concern to the researchers. For instance, the need to make new friends while making socio-cultural and psychological adaptation was identified by Brisset, Saifdar, Lewis, and Sabatier (2010) as a challenger. Another concern according to Klassen, Trybus, and Kumar (2005) is the provision of appropriate food services in a campus setting, which is important as it affects the performance and the quality of the students' life on campus.

According to Abdullah, Elias, Mahyuddin & Uli (2009) students who are able to adjust well in campus are found to display greater academic performance compared to those who have difficulty to adjust to university life. Students joining universities need every support to ensure that they settle fast with a smooth transition to the university life. This sentiment was also expressed by (Bennett, 2003) who noted that the first years’ orientation transition to university requires a collaborative effort that draws on good will of university librarians, lecturers, non-teaching staff, ICT experts, mentors, caterers among others to help students maximize their learning, and use of technology. The situation creates a need for adequate and efficient support services available to up take them. In support of this concern this study intended to explore the transitional challenges facing university first year students in Kenyan public universities. Further in recognition of the differences in the biological and socialization process for female and male students, the study intended to carry out the investigation, from a gender perspective. This concern was also raised by Abdullah (2009), who in studying adjustment among first year students in Malaysia found that male students were better adjusted than their female counterparts. The rural-urban orientation of university students and its influences on the transitional challenges was also of interest to the study. However, while the study
focused on public universities in Kenya, it was a case of one such university, Kenyatta University, near Nairobi City.

1.1 Statement of the problem
Students joining universities in Kenya experience personal challenges ranging from cultural shock due to the diversities of the previous and the present environment, unmet expectations and fear of unknown. Yet they are expected to settle fast in the university life. The problem of this study was to establish the transitional challenges experienced by the first year students in Kenyatta University. In addition the study sought to establish gender as well as rural urban differences in the transitional challenges experienced by first year students at Kenyatta University.

1.2 Objective of the study
The major objective of this study was to identify the transitional challenges encountered by first year male and female students with regard to; autonomy, compatibility and relationship issues, access to support services, nutrition, and adjustment to academic program. The study was carried out in Kenyatta University, a public university in Kenya.

1.3 Theoretical Framework
The study is informed by Havighurst (1972) theory of developmental tasks. Havighurst (1972) postulates that, as people develop from infancy, childhood, adolescence, early, middle and late adulthood they make age specific transitions. These transitions require a person to master various skills at every stage. According to the theory, the tasks for young adults include achievement of new and more mature relations with age mates of both sexes and achievement of a masculine or feminine social role. The young adults should learn to accept their physique and use the body effectively. In addition the young adults achieve emotional independence from parents and other adults. Preparation for marriage and family life achievable before age thirty is another developmental task for young adulthood. Accordingly, individuals should acquire a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behavior and should also desire and achieve socially responsible behavior. Selection of an occupation is another developmental task, expected of young adulthood.

The theory informs the study in as far as the first year students joining university are obliged to adjust to the university environment, master the task of breaking from parental and high school teachers’ support and venture to carve a niche for themselves in life intra-personally, interpersonally and career wise. Students who are successful in making a smooth transition to university life are assumed to have navigated their university life successfully with the ability to make good personal and inter personal decisions relating to social, academic and career development.

1.4 Conceptual Framework
Anticipating first year students to have challenges on joining the University for the first time in their life is a concern as this can affect their career development and advancement some may even perform poorly or drop out from university education. The university is thus expected to put in place programmes to assist the first year students to settle faster and also make informed decisions concerning their social academic and career advancement. Interceptive strategies for the university may include orientation programmes and services such as mentoring, chaplaincy, wellness, counseling and student welfare centre. As a result male and female students are expected to make more informed decisions, have healthy social relations, eating habits and adjust well to the academic program. As shown in figure 1, where conditions prevail first year male and female students are expected to settle faster in the university life with prospects for an enjoyable university life, successful career and adult life. On the other hand failure to make a successful transition to university life may lead to difficulties in personal, social and academic adjustments.

2. Methodology
Kenyatta University has fourteen schools. Six out of these were sampled based on the diversity of programs and number of students they have, namely Schools of education, Pure and Applied Sciences, Humanities, Environmental, Business Studies and Economics. From each of the schools selected, (20) twenty students were randomly selected from different departments to a sample of 120
students. Further, officers from key university offices dealing with student’s services and welfare were selected for interview as follows: Office of the Dean of students, mentoring program, chaplaincy, counseling, catering and accommodation and career guidance and placement.

2.1 Study Findings
Transitional challenges faced by male and female students in Kenyatta University were identified on the basis of level of autonomy, social relationships, compatibility with other students in the hostels, access to support services, feeding habits, and adjustment to academic programs as discussed. Levels of significance in terms of relationships were also established where applicable.

2.2 Level of autonomy
Students were asked their perceived level of autonomy in managing their life in the university during their first year of study. Data for this objective were collected through items that sought to find out the students response to being free from high teachers and parent control, gaining personal autonomy, fear of the unknown and ability to manage personal finances since joining university. Further to this other items sought to find out if the students felt mature enough to take responsibility, make decisions and plans for daily living in the university. This was intended to reflect on the level of preparedness and autonomy for a smooth transition to university life. As shown in figure 2 only a small percentage of males and females both at (13.30%) demonstrated high level of autonomy. The majority of subjects at 36.70% for both males and female respondents demonstrated average levels of autonomy.

The average levels of autonomy demonstrated by the findings of this study are indicative of transitional challenges in this area. This further indicates that the male and female first year students do not settle fast enough in the university life. This can further imply that the orientation programme and other services that the university has put in place to help the students settle in the university need a re-evaluation as well as scaling up.
The study sought to establish whether the male and female students were comfortably associating with fellow students regardless of their socio-economic diversities. Further, they were asked to indicate whether they had joined friends in social activities in the last one week prior to data collection. As demonstrated in Figure 3, the results show that only 10% of female subjects and 23% of male subjects had high levels of compatibility. Further, 40% of female and 23% of male subjects showed average levels of compatibility while 3.33% of males had low levels of compatibility. The analysis of data collected from the male and female students indicated that male students were more affected in relating with each other than their female counterparts. This observation was corroborated by selected hostel wardens in both male and female hostels.

As a matter of interest, the study sought to establish the relationship between the level of adjustment and the parental level of education. The results presented in Figure 3 show a significant relationship between parental college/university education and level of compatibility ($X^2 = 14.02$, df= 6, $p< 0.05$). However, the highest compatibility was found where both parents had college education (4.2%).
These results indicate that male and female students coming from parents with none or low level of education may have challenges in settling in the university life during their first year of study.

**2.4 Level of compatibility among roommates**

The study also sought to investigate the extent of compatibility of the male and female students with their roommates. The students were required to respond to issues such as: If given a chance would they select a different roommate or whether they would have opted to seek for accommodation off campus. The results show that 6.70% of female and 3.3% of male subjects had high compatibility with roommates while 16.70% of female and 20% of male subjects had average compatibility with roommates. Incompatibility with roommates was high for both female and male subjects at 26.70% each.

The high incompatibility rates were confirmed to have been caused by the fact that roommates did not know each other prior to meeting in the rooms on the first day of registration at the university. Other challenges were found to have been caused by the diversity in ethnicity, culture and economic backgrounds of the students. Female students were found to have been more affected by these diversities as compared to their male counterparts. These findings correspond with those of Halualai, Chitgopekar, Morrison & Dodge (2004) who found out that in a multicultural university students were not interacting across cultural lines.

**2.5 Level of access to support services**

The study sought to establish whether male and female first year had visited the offices of dean of students, mentoring program, chaplaincy, wellness, careers advice and/or any other university offices meant to provide services to the university students. As indicated in figure 5, the results reveal that 6.70% female and 10.00% male subjects had high access to university support services while 33.30% of female and 36.70% of male subjects showed average access to support services respectively.
Interestingly a significant relationship was found between home background and the level of access to support services ($X^2 = 21$, df=12, $p<0.05$). While more male students were found to have utilized the services as compared to their female counterpart, students from rural backgrounds reported to have the highest access to support services in the university whereas fewer from the urban background reported to have high access to support services. This coincides with Malehlohonolo (2005) who observed that lack of access essential services or underutilization of the same can result in transitional challenges.

2.6 Feeding habits

The study sought to find out feeding habits of male and female first year students, such as: how many meals they had in a day (one, two or three meals a day), whether they were able to afford animal or plant proteins and if the food money they had been given for food run out before the semester ended. Other items sought to find out whether the students applied the rule of a healthy diet (proteins, carbohydrates, vegetables and fruits) or if they relied exclusively on fast foods (chips, sausages, chicken, and burgers). Specifically the concern was whether these issues contributed to challenges in the transition process.

Figure 6 shows that only 3.30% of male subjects reported to engage in healthy feeding habits while 50% of female and 46.70% of male subjects reported to have poor feeding habits.

Fig 5: level of access to support services

Fig 6: feeding habits
The results thus confirm that first year male and female students as majority put it, this was the first time that some of them were planning for their own meals. They indicated having challenges in managing their finances and particularly prioritizing budgetary needs to cater for meals properly. Additional challenge was found to have been experienced due to the geographical and socio economic diversity of students which determine what different students will eat or not eat. On the other hand the study established that students from affluent backgrounds were likely to have the money to eat three square meals while those from poor backgrounds may be restricted to eating one major meal a day.

2.7 Adjustment to the academic program
For this aspect, the concern was to establish whether the students had difficulties adjusting to the academic programs. Specifically the items sought to investigate whether the male and female first year students got their timetables during the orientation week and whether they were able to locate lecture halls during the first week of learning. Further to these other items sought to find out if students had missed lectures, if they found studying at the university difficult, whether they were able to hand in assignment on time as well as prepare adequately for semester examinations.

The findings as shown in figure 7 indicate that 10% of female and 0% of male subjects reported high adjustment to the academic program while 40% of female and 46% of male subjects reported average adjustment to academic program. In addition 3.30 % of male subjects reported low adjustment to academic programs.

![Level of Adjustment to Academic Programme * Gender Crosstabulation](image)

Figure 7: adjustment to academic program

The results are in agreement with Elias, Mahyuddin & Uli (2009) whose study indicated that ability to study, do assignments and prepare for university examinations are important indicators of smooth transition to university life. The average adjustments to academic programme revealed in the findings of this study may be indicative of challenges not only to the academic programmes but to other areas as well. In addition these results may indicate that the first year students experience transitional challenges as the whole approach to teaching and learning has changed with university entry. As was confirmed, in high schools there are tight controls in attendance and assessments which is not the case in university teaching, learning and other expectations.

3. Conclusion
The results of the study indicated that the first year male and female students experienced transitional challenges in all the areas investigated that is; personal autonomy, social relationships, compatibility among roommates, accessing support services, feeding habits and adjustment to the academic programme. Female students were found to have had higher levels of adjustment in social relationships feeding habits and adjustment to academic programmes than do their male counterparts. First year male students showed higher levels of access to university support services.
than the female students. The findings further revealed that both male and female first year students have equally poor adjustment to roommates.

Further to these findings the statistical analysis showed significant relationship between parental college, university education and level of compatibility. The highest compatibility was found where both parents had college education. Male and female students coming from parents with none or low level of education had challenges in settling in the university life. A significant relationship was also found between home background and the level of access to support services with both male and female students from rural backgrounds reporting the highest access to support services in the university where as fewer from the urban background reported to have high access to support services. The average levels of adjustment in the areas investigated confirmed observations by Sanoff (2006) that first year students are ill prepared for college. The study further confirmed that students from affluent and middle classes are at an advantage when they enter university because they have the resourcefulness necessary for smooth transition as opposed to their counter parts coming from less advantaged backgrounds a view that is corroborated by (Kane, 2011).

4. Recommendations
Based on the study findings as well as the conclusions, this study recommends that the high schools and homes should be encouraged to prepare male and female students to be autonomous as they join university. In addition public universities should develop a comprehensive orientation programme and follow up mechanisms to ensure that all first year students are assisted to settle fast in the university. In particular, students at risk of poor adjustment should be identified and given extra attention.

High schools and universities can also develop programmes to equip the students with skills for social adjustments as well as the ability to make socio-cultural and psychological adaptation, a view that has also been expressed by (Brisset, Safdar, Lewis, and Sabatier, 2010). In addition universities should establish and support students’ services’ systems and structures such as mentoring, career advisory, wellness and chaplaincy as in Kenyatta University to guide and advise students on how to cope with new academic and social environment. This recommendation is also supported by Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, (2004).

Given the challenges identified in this study, it is recommended that first year students be taken through a thorough orientation programme that ensures that students know where the services are and how to access them. With the large numbers of first year students reporting at every beginning of academic year in the public universities, the programme could be decentralized to Faculty and departmental levels, as also expressed by Brent, Bell, Reid, Holmes, and Williams (2010) in their study on outdoor orientation programmes that focused on training students on how to bond.

The results of this study have shown that except for a few female students who have healthy feeding habits the majority of other students have poor eating habits. Students thus need to be trained on how to budget their money and make sound priorities so that they do not run out of food money. The universities need to be more engaged in the students feeding habits and provide appropriate food services in a campus setting which is important as it affects the quality of the students’ life on campus, a view expressed by (Klassen, Trybus, and Kumar, 2005).

References
Brent J. Bell, Marion Reid Holmes, and Brady G. Williams (2010). A Census of Outdoor orientation Programs at Four-Year Colleges in the United States. 10.5193/JEE33.1.1 Journal of Experiential Education. Volume 33, No. 1 pp. 1–18


Zimit, C. (2006). “Improving quality of teaching is part of improving retention: A study of first year students in an Australian University”. In proceedings of the 9th Pacific Rim First in Higher Education Conference, Griffith University, Australia.