

Challenges encountered by first-year university students: problems, expectations, and aspirations

Mohamad Abdullah **Alsaied**, Hady Hussein Abdalla **Farag**,
Mohd Nouh Ali **Maabdeh**, Yousif Ahmed **Omar**,
Rawa Sayed Mansoor Alawi **Kadhem**, Hiam **Almanala**, Zaina **Almahri**

Department of Islamic Studies
Mohamed bin Zayed University for Humanities
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Corresponding author: zyzo58596@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper reviewed critical issue areas of first-year university learners at the Mohamed Bin Zayed University of Humanities (MBZUH) with a focus on their academic performance and outcomes in the United Arab Emirates. A descriptive-analytical research design was employed, and a structured questionnaire was administered to a simple random sample of 126 first-year students enrolled in the 2025 academic session. The instrument demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (means and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (independent-samples t-test). The results showed that the students had academic and psychological challenges despite their high academic dreams and expectations. These structural and psychosocial constraints significantly undermine students' motivation, limit their ability to achieve the academic levels they aspired to, and consequently hinder their professional growth. While gender-based differences emerged in students' perceptions of challenges and expectations, no statistically significant gender variation was found in relation to perceived institutional support. The

study concludes that proper institutional support systems for first-year students are essential for translating academic expectations into tangible achievements.

Keywords: First-year students, challenges (issues), expectation, aspiration.

Introduction

Universities are the central pillars of higher education systems of the world and the ultimate tier of formal education. They are major hubs of scientific knowledge and expertise that support civil society and state institutions (Pee & Vululleh, 2020). Beyond the award of degrees, the universities have the responsibility to produce qualified professionals, promote research and innovation, preserve cultural heritage, and develop critical thinking and civic responsibility. In performing these various roles, universities are not just institutions of learning but also formidable social institutions which determine national development and global competitiveness (Hillman & Baydoun, 2020). In order to be able to discharge these responsibilities, they need adequate funding and well-developed academic, administrative, technological, as well as social infrastructures. Without these facilitating factors, their capacity to foster intellectual growth and productive

influence on society is greatly undermined.

The transition from high school to university is a milestone in a student's life and is often accompanied by a lot of difficulties that require significant adaptation. The first-year students must adjust to an academic environment that is markedly different from the highly structured and supervised system of secondary education (Willems et al., 2021). They are supposed to make crucial academic decisions, particularly in selecting a field of specialisation aligned with their interests, abilities, and future career goals. Meanwhile, they also take more responsibility to fulfil the academic requirements of their selected programmes, such as undertaking independent studies, carrying out research, making presentations and taking exams. Besides academic issues, students are faced with social choices in regard to peer relationships, self-expression, identity formation and

development of cultural, social, political, academic and personal orientations (Briggs et al., 2012). Handling these changes may create emotional pressure, indecision and anxiety, especially during the early stages of university life.

The university environment is much more than an institution where lectures are delivered. It is a rich social, cultural, and intellectual context that has a strong impact on the academic and personal development of the students (Muhammad, 2024). In this complex environment, students are exposed to different perspectives, experiences, and worldviews that do not necessarily match their past experiences. The interconnected factors influencing the adjustment process in the first year are the teaching strategies, the curriculum, evaluation strategies, peer relationships, facilities and support services on the campus (Mulaudzi, 2023; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023). These elements, when working together, help students adjust better and promote active learning. On the other hand, in cases of organisational deficits, lack of clarity or inefficiency in the system, they can increase the level of stress and hinder effective adjustment.

Studies show that numerous psychological and social issues facing university students are directly related to structural aspects of the university, administrative facilities and policies (Leal Filho et al., 2021). The first day on campus for new students is usually characterised by confusion concerning the administrative procedures, course enrollments, schedule formation, orientation on campus and access to the academic facilities. When administrative departments fail to provide effective orientation programmes or clear communication, confusion and feelings of isolation may be further intensified (Garrrick et al., 2023). These structural and procedural factors are therefore important variables in understanding the challenges experienced by first-year university students.

In this context, the research title "The Reality of Challenges Encountered by First-Year University Students: Problems, Expectations, and Aspirations" focuses specifically on the initial (first-day) experience of newly admitted students at Mohamed Bin Zayed University of Humanities (MBZUH). Being a university of higher learning that focuses on humanities and the study of culture,

MBZUH provides a unique academic environment grounded in intellectual discourse, morality, and cultural sensitivity (Samir et al., 2025). For first-year students coming into higher institutions, the transition does not only involve readjusting to the academic requirements of studying in a university, but also acceptance of the intellectual customs and value systems that characterise this institution.

It is important to realise that there is a strong relationship between the challenges students face and their expectations and aspirations, which must be considered for effective institutional planning. When universities are aware of the particular challenges encountered during the first day, they will be able to adopt an elaborate orientation programme (Wanzenböck et al., 2020), mentorship, counselling, and academic support programmes that facilitate easier transitions. Also, the consideration of student expectations helps university administrators to align the practices in the institution with the needs of the students, hence reducing the gap between expectation and lived experience. Knowledge of student aspirations also offers the institution a

good insight into their motivations in order to come up with conducive environments that promote persistence, ambitions, and resilience (Biswal et al., 2025).

The proposed research is designed to contribute to this knowledge by conducting an in-depth examination of the direct experiences of newly admitted students at MBZUH. The research aims to identify the particular challenges first-year students face at the beginning of their university journey, as well as the expectations and hopes that shape their attitudes toward university life, through the analysis of data collected from a representative sample of first-year students. In this way, the study is expected to provide a multidimensional and evidence-based account of the students' first-day experience at MBZUH. Finally, the study also seeks to produce results which can be used to guide institutional policies and reinforcement systems to help students achieve better academic and social results. By capturing the authentic experiences of first-year students, including their challenges, expectations, and aspirations, the research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of

transitional processes in higher education. These lessons are critical towards developing a supportive academic culture at MBZUH, as it enables new entrants to turn initial perceived fear into confidence, challenges into growth opportunities and their dreams into academic and personal realisations.

Based on this, this paper seeks to examine the realities experienced by first-year university students. More specifically, it aims to:

1. Determine the academic, social, psychological and financial issues of the first-year students.
2. Study the goals and expectations of students upon gaining admission to the university.
3. Determine the importance of institutional support and academic advising in aiding students to adjust to university life.

The following research questions directed the study:

1. What are the academic, social, psychological and financial issues of the first-year students?
2. What do students aspire to and expect when they come to the university?

3. How does institutional support and academic advising help students adapt to college life?

The null hypothesis was tested at a 0.05 level of significance against the following null hypotheses;

Ho₁: The mean rating of male and female students on academic, social, psychological and financial challenges faced by first-year students has no significant difference.

Ho₂: The mean rating of the male and female students' aspirations and expectations upon gaining admission to university does not have any significant difference.

Ho₃: The mean rating of male and female students regarding the role played by institutional support and academic advising in facilitating the adjustment of the students to university life is not significantly different.

Literature review

The transition between secondary schools and universities has drawn the interest of higher education scholars due to its far-reaching impacts on the academic performance of students and their

emotional states, as well as their retention rates in universities. The first year of higher education has been reported by researchers in different countries and institutional contexts as a determining and influential period (Cicha et al., 2021). Students at this age are faced with new academic requirements, social settings, and a certain degree of autonomy and responsibility (Ding & Yu, 2022). Due to the intricacy of such a transition, there is an abundance of literature examining the various difficulties that face new students, particularly when they are first introduced to the university world. Schaeper (2020) argues that academic, administrative, psychological, social, and environmental factors interact to shape first-year experiences and significantly influence students' ability to adapt successfully to higher education.

One of the first and influential works on this discussion is the contribution by Digoresia et al. (2008), who sought to examine the factors that influence the academic performance of university students in Argentina. Based on interviews conducted with students in state universities, the researchers found institutional factors to be important

determinants of academic performance. They placed emphasis on well-planned course syllabi, logical curriculum planning, equitable examination systems and spelt out institutional policies. Besides structural elements, the research also focused on personal aspects, including motivation of students, their level of engagement, and their time management skills and the faculty-related factors such as quality of teaching and effectiveness in communication. The evidence indicates that the issue of academic difficulties is not an individual weakness, but in most cases, it can be based on the institutional set-up. Confusion regarding academic demands and complex administration procedures may increase anxiety and may make the acclimatisation of new students especially difficult, especially in the first days of their stay on campus.

Further developing this institutional prism, Sherry et al. (2012) analysed the perceptions and challenges of first-year students at Uludag University. Results of the study indicated that a significant percentage of students were more likely to live with their families as opposed to living in campus housing, and this showed the significance of emotional

stability and known systems of support in the transition seasons. A lot of the respondents reported that they do not know where to turn to in case they have any academic or personal-related issues. Also, gender disparities were observed as female students were more anxious about the employment opportunities and their safety in the future. These findings help to depict that the problems of the first-year students are not limited to the academic demands but also extend to more general issues of independence, security, and long-term objectives. When students enter the university with a lack of knowledge of the support services provided, they might feel more confused and isolated, especially after the first day, when initial impressions are created.

In a similar research, Erkas et al (2012) examined the student challenges in the Turkish institutions of higher learning and how they are inclined towards psychological counselling services. In a descriptive-analytical design, the researchers found that students of high socioeconomic status expressed more emotional problems than their counterparts, which implies that psychological strain may result more from high expectations and performance

pressure than from financial constraints alone. The research was also able to demonstrate that female students were more likely than male students to use psychological counselling. These results enhance the knowledge of the complexity of first-year experiences by showing the effects of socioeconomic status and gender on coping mechanisms and preference for support services. In the case of newly enrolled students, particularly in the first few days on campus, where anxiety and self-doubt start to emerge, counselling resource awareness and acceptance may be significant in reducing those feelings.

Doygun and Gulec (2012) went further to investigate factors that face adaptation among university students at Uludag University. In line with their past studies, their research revealed that several students would rather stay with their families and were not well informed about the institutional support systems. Other issues, like concerns about academic performances and doubts about the employment prospects, were common. The study focused on the idea that the first-year experiences are predetermined by both short-term academic stress and long-term

professional outcomes. These fears tend to be felt during the first day of attendance when the students are faced with the stiff and challenging environment of university education. Poor orientation programmes and less academic advising can thus increase the uncertainty and undermine the confidence of students' early academic success.

More recent research by Saadoun and Fallouh (2021) examined the academic challenges encountered by newly admitted students at Wahran University. Utilising a descriptive-analytical methodology and a large sample, the study identified environmental and institutional issues as the most significant sources of difficulty. These were followed by educational, psychological, social, health-related, and relational challenges, while financial concerns were comparatively less prominent. The emphasis on environmental factors--such as campus facilities, transportation, accommodation, and administrative responsiveness--underscores the importance of institutional context in shaping students' adjustment. First-day experiences are often influenced by students' interactions

with university systems and services, and negative encounters during this stage may contribute to dissatisfaction or a weakened sense of belonging. The authors recommended improvements in administrative efficiency and student support services to strengthen institutional support.

Collectively, these studies reveal recurring themes. Institutional organisation, administrative clarity, quality of academic guidance, and accessibility of support services consistently emerge as crucial determinants of first-year adjustment. Psychological elements, including anxiety and uncertainty, frequently accompany the transition process, particularly when expectations differ from lived realities. Gender and socioeconomic factors further shape students' perceptions of challenges and their willingness to seek assistance. A recurring issue across contexts is insufficient awareness of available institutional resources, which can intensify feelings of isolation during early university experiences. Despite the valuable contributions of prior research, much of the literature addresses first-year experiences in general terms rather than concentrating specifically on the

immediate realities of students' first day within a particular institutional context.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the lived experiences of newly admitted students on their first day at Mohamed Bin Zayed University for Humanities (MBZUH). By situating the investigation within a clearly defined cultural and institutional framework, the study aims to examine how academic, administrative, psychological, and environmental factors intersect at the critical moment of entry. Through integrating the dimensions of problems, expectations, and aspirations, the research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of first-year students' transition processes. Such insight is essential for informing policies and interventions that enhance institutional responsiveness and support students in converting initial uncertainty into enduring academic achievement and personal development.

Methods

The research design that the investigator used to achieve the objectives of this research was a descriptive-analytical research design. This design was considered appropriate since the study aimed at a detailed description,

interpretation, and analysis of the lived experiences of newly admitted students without any form of experimental manipulation. The descriptive approach allows researchers to study and examine events in their natural environment of actual teaching (Doyle et al., 2020). This is why it was specifically suitable to research the perceptions, concerns, expectations, and aspirations of students on their first day at university.

The study was carried out in Mohamed Bin Zayed University of Humanities (MBZUH) in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates. The choice of this university was not accidental because the research specifically aimed at examining the lived-in experiences of newly enrolled students at the university within its specific academic and cultural environment. The sample was comprised of all first-semester students in the student body who were enrolled in 2025. A sample of 126 students was picked out of this group using a simple random sampling technique. This sampling method was considered to be appropriate since every single member of the population is given an equal likelihood of being picked, and thus, sampling bias is lessened, and the sample will be more representative. This,

therefore, enhances the level of extrapolation of the findings to the university setting.

A structured questionnaire, developed by the researcher, was used to collect the data. The instrument has been divided into parts that deal with academic, social, psychological, and administrative factors of students during their first years in the university. A structured questionnaire was chosen since it is the most reliable in terms of standardising the interrogation method and enhancing homogeneity in the answers, and also makes it quantitative to analyse. It improves consistency and comparability of the data by making all those involved answer the same items. To ascertain the validity of the instrument, three university experts were able to conduct content validation of the instrument. Their review assisted in ensuring that the items were concise, pertinent and fit the study objectives. This procedure minimised the chances of ambiguity and provided the instrument with the ability to measure the target constructs.

The questionnaire was evaluated, and its internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient to establish the reliability of the questionnaire.

Results of reliability showed that there were coefficients of 0.86, 0.78, 0.82, and 0.86 in cluster A, cluster B, cluster C, and the entire instrument. Cronbach's Alpha was suitable for this undertaking since it considers the degree of relatedness of the items included in each cluster, showing whether they measure the same concept. Sociological research considers a reliability value of 0.70 and above acceptable. Thus, the obtained coefficients allowed accepting that the instrument had a high enough level of reliability and could be relied upon in collecting data. Two research assistants who had undergone training helped in the administration and collection of the questionnaires so that there was smooth coordination of the entire process. The response rate was 100 percent and all 135 questionnaires were returned as complete. This information is highly likely to increase the level of credibility and trustworthiness of the study because it will remove the possible risks of non-response bias and guarantee that the results are true reflections of the opinions of the chosen respondents.

In the analysis of the data, the Statistical Package of the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used because it is efficient, precise,

and appropriate in quantitative research. The research questions were answered by using descriptive statistical methods, i.e., the mean and standard deviation. The average was computed since, as Yaska and Nuhu (2024) remark, the mean is a central tendency indicator that shows the average degree of agreement or experience of respondents in relation to each of the items. This facilitated the researcher in establishing the prevalent challenges and expectations as experienced by the first-year students. The standard deviation was calculated as well to determine the level of variation in responses. The small standard deviation indicates that the data are clustered around the mean, which implies that participants agree with one another, and the larger standard deviation indicates that the data are more dispersed and varied (Franc et al., 2023). The combination of both of these statistics was able to give a clear view of the central pattern as well as the dispersion of the statistics.

In addition to descriptive analysis, inferential statistics were also performed through the use of an independent-samples t -test to test the hypotheses of

the study. The t- test was chosen because it is appropriate for comparing the means of two independent groups, in this case, male and female students. Its purpose was to determine if there was any statistically significant difference in perceptions of challenges and expectations between the two groups. The use of the t-test is justified when the data are close to a normal distribution and measured at the interval level, which are conditions that are usually satisfied in social science research using aggregated Likert scales (DeWees et al., 2020). The study was in a position to evaluate the significance of the differences across groups through the use of inferential analysis, which helped to determine that the differences across groups were not caused by random variation.

Altogether, the selected research design, sampling plan, instrument validation and reliability, and statistical analysis were carefully chosen to guarantee methodological rigour, validity, and reliability. These methodological decisions, combined, made the findings more credible and added to the knowledge of the issues and expectations of first-year students at MBZUH.

Results

Respondents' demographic description

The participants in the study were 126 female and male students at MBZUH. Table 1 represents the distribution of the members of the study sample based on personal variables.

Table 1: General characteristics of the respondents in demographics

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	42	33.3
	Female	84	66.7
	Total	126	100.0
Age	18-22	84	66.7
	22-27	12	9.5
	More than (27)	30	23.8
	Total	126	100.0
students Specialization	Islamic Studies	35	27.8
	Arabic Studies and Literature	10	7.9
	Philosophy	5	4.0
	Sociology	-	-
	Tolerance and Coexistence	76	60.3
	Others	-	-
	Total	126	100.0

The demographic results reveal that the sample of the study consisted of 126 students of MBZUH, which reflects the diversity in the gender of students, age, academic status, major, and grade point

average. In regard to gender, the higher percentage of the respondents was calculated to be female students at 66.7 and male students at 33.3. Such an imbalance depicts that there are more

females than males in the sample, which can be equalised with the overall distribution of students at the university. Considering the age, most participants (66.7) were aged between 18 and 22, which falls within the normal undergraduate students' age range. Fewer percentages (9.5) were between the ages of 22 and 27 years, and 23.8% were over 27 years old, which shows that the institution has quite a significant number

of mature learners as well. In terms of major, the majority of the respondents (60.3) were enrolled in Tolerance and Coexistence programmes, with Islamic Studies students (27.8%) also forming a substantial portion of the sample. Moreover, more than half of the students (53.2) reported a Very Good GPA, indicating that the overall academic performance among participants was relatively high.

Research question 1

What are the academic, social, psychological and financial issues faced by the first-year students

$n = 126$

	Item statement: Academic, social, psychological and financial issues	Mean	SD	Remarks
1	It is difficult to cope with the academic pressure in this first year.	3.40	.49	Agree
2	I find it difficult to plan and follow my time.	3.87	.37	Agree
3	I am subjected to frequent tests, which I find to be very stressful.	3.79	.41	Agree
4	I do not find it easy to make friends with other students.	3.64	.48	Disagree

5	I have problems adapting to the teaching methods provided at the university.	2.94	.43	Agree
6	This transition between secondary school and university is overwhelming at times.	3.88	.33	Agree
7	Monetary problems disrupt my concentration in my education.	3.75	.45	Disagree
8	I am worried about the tuition and other educational bills	3.79	.41	Agree
9	Financial strain compromises the general quality of my university experience.	2.99	.37	Disagree
10	Financial pressure occurs due to the cost of textbooks and other learning materials.	3.89	.34	Agree
	Cluster mean	3.59	.41	Agree

Table 1 below shows the academic, social, psychological, and financial problems experienced by first-year students. The aggregate cluster mean of 3.59 (SD = 0.41) points to an overall agreement that students face considerable problems in adaptation to life at university.

Academically, the participants admitted that they had challenges connected to managing academic load (M = 3.40) and

time management (M = 3.87). The stress due to the frequent evaluations was also stated as a stressor (M = 3.79). Moreover, a significant number of respondents have noted being overwhelmed with the transition of secondary education to the university setting (M = 3.88). The average of the adaptation to teaching methods (M = 2.94) indicates a moderate level of difficulty in this subject.

Concerning social adjustment, respondents indicated that making friends was not a major concern ($M = 3.64$, Disagree), suggesting that peer interaction did not pose significant difficulties. On the financial front,

students raised an issue of tuition fees ($M = 3.79$) and the cost of textbooks ($M = 3.89$), although financial hardship was not perceived as a major challenge in the overall university experience.

Ho₁: The mean rating of male and female students on academic, social, psychological and financial challenges faced by first-year students has no significant difference.

Table 2: T-Test analysis of the difference in the mean ratings of male and female students on academic, social, psychological and financial challenges faced by first-year students

Gender	N	Mean	Std.		df	t	Sig	Decision
			Deviation					
Male	42	3.65	.11		124		.001	S
Female	84	3.56	.16			3.321		

S = Significant

The results of the independent samples t-test show that there is a significant statistical difference in the perception by male and female students when it comes to academic, social, psychological, and financial challenges faced in the first year. Though the average scores of male (3.65) and female (3.56) seem near, t-

value ($t = 3.321$, $df = 124$) and level of significance (.001) indicate that the difference is statistically significant at a 0.05 confidence level. As a result, the null hypothesis (Ho₁) can be rejected, and the alternative hypothesis states that the perception of these challenges can be significantly different by gender.

Research question 2

What do students aspire to and expect when they come to the university?

Table 3: Mean and standard deviation analysis of what students aspire to and expect when they come to the university

n = 126

Item statement: What students aspire to and expect	Mean	SD	Remarks
11 I joined the university with clear academic goals.	3.82	.38	Agree
12 I expect to have a high standard of education.	3.84	.37	Agree
13 I am anticipating attaining pragmatic knowledge and proficiency in my future career.	2.98	.30	Agree
14 In my opinion, lecturers will offer adequate academic support.	3.92	.27	Disagree
15 I also hope to graduate with excellent result.	3.90	.32	Agree
16 It is my expectation that the institution will facilitate my general individual development.	3.81	.39	Agree
17 I would like to build significant working relationships in my academic life.	3.03	.18	Disagree
18 I also expect to study in a friendly and supportive environment.	3.87	.34	Agree
19 I am also interested in developing my leadership and communication skills.	3.85	.36	Disagree
20 I anticipate the facilities and resources of learning that are up to date.	3.86	.35	Agree
Cluster mean	3.69	.41	Agree

Table 3 demonstrates the expectations and hopes of the students at the start of their university life. The general cluster mean of 3.69 (SD = .41) is a general agreement that students come to the institution with clear objectives and positive expectations of their academic life. Most of them reported that they had entered the university with definite academic aspirations (M = 3.82) and anticipated that they would obtain quality education (M = 3.84). There were also a number of persons who expressed a desire to obtain excellent academic results (M = 3.90) and improve personal

development (M = 3.81). The anticipations of studying in an encouraging environment (M = 3.87) and having access to updated learning materials (M = 3.86) were also high. However, the answers also exposed certain contradictions in the expectations about the lecturer's support (M = 3.92, Disagree), as regards their ability to create professional networks (M = 3.03, Disagree), and their ability to develop leadership skills (M = 3.85, Disagree). On the whole, the information suggests that students enter university with very high hopes and expectations.

Ho₂: The mean rating of the male and female students' aspirations and expectations when joining university does not have any significant difference.

Table 4: T-Test analysis of the difference in the mean ratings of male and female students' aspirations and expectations when entering a university does not have any significant difference

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	Sig	Decision
Male	42	3.74	.09	124	3.669	.000	S
Female	84	3.66	.11				

S = Significant

Results of an independent samples t-test show that there is a significant statistical difference between the male and female students with reference to aspirations and expectations as they join the university. Although the average score of males (3.74) and females (3.66) seems to be near, the t-value created ($t = 3.669$, df

$= 124$) and the significance level (.000) indicate that the difference is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{02}) is not accepted, and gender is believed to play a major role in developing the aspirations and expectations of the students.

Research question 3

How does institutional support and academic advising help students adapt to college life?

Table 5: Mean and standard deviation analysis of how institutional support and academic advising help students to adapt to college life

$n = 126$

	Item statement: How institutional support and academic advising help students	Mean	SD	Remarks
21	Academic advising also helps me to know more about my academic path.	2.81	.60	Agree
22	The institution offers orientation programmes to facilitate my adaptation to university life.	3.88	.33	Agree
23	Academic counsellors provide useful suggestions on course selection.	3.89	.32	Agree
24	Support services at the university help me to alleviate academic stress.	3.84	.37	Agree
25	I am more confident when I receive advice provided by academic advisors.	3.04	.20	Agree

26	Constant communication with the advisors has a positive impact on my academic development.	3.94	.23	Agree
27	The support systems of the universities bolster my belongingness.	3.87	.33	Agree
28	The motivation is maintained through support programmes created by the university.	3.80	.40	Agree
29	It has academic advisors who are friendly and helpful when one is in need.	3.01	.09	Agree
30	To successfully adapt to university life, I need institutional support.	3.83	.38	Agree
	Cluster mean	3.59	.33	Agree

As Table 5 shows, institutional support and academic advising can contribute significantly to the adaptation of students to university life. The general mean of the cluster of 3.59 (SD =.33) indicates that, in general, the respondents agreed that support services have a positive effect on their adaptation process. Students also admitted that they found orientation programmes to be helpful in transitioning (M = 3.88) and that academic counsellors offer useful advice when it comes to course selection (M = 3.89). The perception of academic development has been strongly affected

positively by frequent communication with advisors (M = 3.94). Support services were also considered to be effective in academic stress reduction (M = 3.84), but also reinforced a sense of belonging among students (M = 3.87). Also, students believed that they would need institutional support in successful adjustment (M = 3.83). Comprehensively, the findings indicate that support systems provide an excellent way of boosting the confidence levels of students, their motivation, and their assimilation into university life.

Ho₃: The mean rating of male and female students regarding the role played by institutional support and academic advising in facilitating the adjustment of the students to the university life is not significantly different.

Table 2: T-Test analysis of the difference in the mean ratings of male and female students regarding the role played by institutional support and academic advising in facilitating the adjustment of the students to the university life

Gender	N	Mean	Std.		t	Sig	Decision
			Deviation	df			
Male	42	3.61	.09	124		.100	NS
Female	84	3.58	.12		1.657		

NS = Not Significant

The findings of the t-test do not report any statistically significant difference in the perceptions of the institutional support and academic advising between the male and female students ($t = 1.657$, $df = 124$, $p = .100$). The null hypothesis (H_{03}) is accepted given the fact that the significance value is more than 0.05. It means that male as well as female students have similar opinions on the significance of institutional support and academic advising in supporting successful adaptation to university life.

Discussion of findings

This article investigated the issues facing the first-year students in the university, their expectations and goals at the time they gained admission to the university, and how the institution support and academic advising helped them to adjust. The presentation of the foundations is based on the three research questions and hypotheses to present the complete interpretation of the findings. Examples in the African and Arab contexts are also incorporated in the discussion to put the

findings in a broader educational context. The statistics revealed that academic workload, time management, frequent testing, and financial loads associated with tuition and learning resources are the major areas of challenge to students. Such challenges indicate the fact that the transition from secondary school to university demands serious changes in the style of learning, academic independence, and personal responsibility in the institution. This is because most first-year students are faced with the challenge of adapting to a relatively independent academic setting at the university as opposed to the more orderly learning setting of secondary school. In this study, students cited that stress and anxiety were caused by the pressure associated with frequent examinations and the high level of academic expectations placed on them. This finding is in line with the results reported by Kural and Ozyurt (2023), which revealed that learners tend to be anxious and suffer from adjustment challenges during the first semester at the university. On the same note, Cameron and Rideout (2022) noted that new students often experience academic and environmental difficulties due to the need to adjust to new learning conditions. Such results are

also comparable to the results of the research in some African settings. For example, Kanu et al (2025) found that students in the universities of Nigeria tend to experience time management problems and excessive coursework, particularly where they are asked to adapt to semester assessment systems. Similarly, Muthuuri (2021) recorded that first-year students in Kenyan universities often complain of stress caused by academic load and the necessity to adjust to learning conditions in which they have to work independently.

The same tendencies have been witnessed in the Arab states. Indicatively, research done in Pakistan by Javaid et al (2024) has shown that first-year students are mostly under stress because of their high expectations, especially from their family and the institutions. The academic pressure can be augmented by cultural pressures which link academic success at the university to future professional standing (Chemagosi, 2024). In the view of the researcher, these research findings support the fact that challenges related to academic transition are universal in systems of higher education, regardless of geographical location. Nevertheless, these challenges can be different in terms of

their nature and intensity, based on institutional support structures and cultural contexts.

Interestingly, the findings revealed that social integration was not considered a key challenge among the respondents. Students tended to disagree with the belief that they found it hard to make friends, and this indicated that they could form social relations rather easily in the university environment. The result is contrary to Corti (2023), who indicated that most students in universities find it difficult to adapt socially and feel isolated during the initial months of their higher education. From the perspective of the researcher, the smooth social integration that is relatively detected in this study could be affected by the cultural setting of the institution. Most of the Arab communities tend to promote interpersonal relationships and help one another in the form of collective social practices, communal values and cultural identity shared among students. Likewise, in most African cultures, the social relations being communal-oriented can enable peer bonding among students with similar cultures or language backgrounds with ease.

The comparison of Hypothesis One also showed that there was a significant difference between male and female students in the perception of academic, social, psychological and financial challenges, which were statistically significant. This implies that gender is a significant factor that determines the transition process to university among the students. Female students may experience different forms of stress compared to male students, particularly in relation to academic pressure and emotional responses to academic demands. Gender-specific socialisation patterns in African and Arab settings could be one of the factors that define the way students perceive and address academic challenges. Indicatively, academic anxiety levels have also been reported to be high among the female students in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, where some studies have indicated that the female students are also highly committed to academic achievement (Ibrahim et al., 2025; Al-Shehri et al., 2022). From the researchers' perspective, it is important to understand that there are gender-based differences, and this should be considered to create a tailored support service that meets the needs of various groups of students.

The results demonstrated that the university students came to the university with a definite academic goal and high expectations of the quality of education, their personal development, and career opportunities in the future. The majority of the respondents had great desires to succeed in their studies, acquire leadership and communication skills, and accumulate knowledge that would prepare them for their future careers. These results indicate that higher education is viewed by the students as a valuable course of individual progress and socioeconomic mobility. This observation is consistent with the study conducted by McCallen and Johnson (2020), which established that students generally have high academic expectations and strong expectations of institutional support upon entry into university. On the same note, Toth and Bedzsula (2021) have also highlighted the importance of the content of the curricula and academic organisation in influencing the expectations of the students concerning university education. These findings also correlate with findings made in some African nations by Lebeau and Oanda (2020), where higher education is largely regarded as one of the important tools of enhancing job opportunities and social

status. As an illustration, studies carried out in Ghana by Nkansah et al. (2025) have indicated that students usually look at university education as a bridge towards professionalism and financial independence.

The same pattern is observed in many Arab nations, where students typically enter university with high expectations of contributing to national development and securing employment in prestigious sectors such as education, government service, and business. The families also attach great importance to the educational performance, which further strengthens the students' motivation to excel (Scales et al., 2020). The researchers of this study believe that these high expectations show the lasting significance of higher education as a source of personal and societal development in the African and Arab societies.

Nevertheless, the results also showed that there were students who were not sure of the degree of academic support they would get from lecturers, as well as the presence of networking opportunities in the university. This observation is unlike the findings of Loberiano (2025),

who reported high confidence in the institutional counselling and support system among the students. The discrepancy can either be attributed to institutional communication differences or students' knowledge of the services offered. From the researcher's perspective, the universities need to make sure that the structures of support are well communicated and readily available to the students to make the best use of them.

Hypothesis Two revealed a significant difference in the aspirations and expectations of male and female students. This suggests that students of different genders may prioritise different aspects of university life or hold varying perceptions of institutional opportunities. The variations in gender in educational aspirations have been recorded in other African and Arab studies, where the society at times dictates career patterns and academic goals. From the researchers' perspective, universities must be sensitive to such differences in an attempt to establish inclusive learning environments that can be used to nurture the dreams of every student.

The outcomes revealed that institutional support services and academic advising play a crucial role in helping students adapt to university life. There was a strong positive response by students that orientation programmes, academic advising, and counselling services can assist in reducing academic stress and enhancing students' confidence. The orientation programmes were especially appreciated since they familiarised students with the policies, academic expectations, and available resources in the university. Such results align with Aphane (2025), who suggested enhancing student support services to increase adaptation and retention rates in higher education institutions. Likewise, Athiemoolam and Njage (2021) pointed out the significance of academic guidance systems that enable the successful transition of students to university education. Across many African countries, orientation and mentoring programmes have been launched in various African universities to assist the students navigate the complexities of university life. As an illustration, Mntuyedwa's (2023) findings show that South African universities have adopted peer mentoring programmes in which first-year students are paired with senior

students who offer academic and social advice to them.

A large number of universities in the Arab countries have also come up with elaborate support programmes to benefit first-year students. As an illustration, in many universities in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, orientation programmes are extensive and several academic advising centres are in place to assist students in selecting courses and organising their academic studies (Umar & Rahman, 2023; Wilkins, 2020). To the researchers, these institutional programmes are necessary as they aid the students to gain a sense of belonging and confidence in the academic setting.

The fact that Hypothesis Three was accepted meant that there was no statistical difference between the perceptions of institutional support services between male and female students. This indicates that students (male and female) have equal access to the support systems that are offered by the university. Nonetheless, this result contrasts with the research conducted by Hysen-Duraku et al. (2023), which reported that female students had higher probabilities of using psychological and

advisory support services than male students. The variation in this study may be attributed to the cultural or institutional factors that support equal attendance of support programmes. The researchers feel that the lack of gender gap shows that the institutional support system is inclusive and seems to be effective for all students.

In general, the discussion of the findings shows that the transition to university is a complicated phenomenon that depends on the academic expectations, financial realities, and the availability of institutional support. Although students are exposed to a number of challenges, their determination to succeed and good institutional set-ups are useful in facilitating their adjustment and long-term academic success.

Conclusion and recommendations

The results of this research offer valuable information on the experience of first-year university students, especially regarding the difficulties that they face, their expectations at the time of entering the university, and the contribution of institutional support in helping them to cope. The findings indicate that the transition from secondary school to

university is characterised by various academic, psychological, and financial pressures. Students usually find it hard to control the academic load, adapt to the new teaching techniques, cope with frequent examinations, and solve financial problems connected with tuition and study materials. These problems underscore the fact that universities should be conscious of the complications that are involved in the first-year transition and offer sufficient support systems that will enable students to effectively adapt.

Regardless of all these challenges, the research also demonstrated that students go to the university with high expectations and goals to succeed in education and self-develop and future career opportunities as well. This observation represents the great importance that societies attribute to higher education in both African and Arabic settings. University education in most of the countries in these regions is viewed as a stepping stone to professional success, social growth and nation building. Consequently, students embrace their university life with hopes and a strong desire to succeed.

The other significant finding of the research is that the institutional support services play a vital role in ensuring that students adjust. The orientation programmes, academic advising, and counselling services were identified as the factors that enhance students' confidence, reduce academic stress, and promote a sense of belonging within the university community. Such services will be of special value to first-year students who are struggling to cope with challenges associated with new academic settings and institutional structures. The lack of gender differences among the respondents in terms of their perception of institutional support is also an indication that these services are available and supportive to all students.

This study also has important implications for university administrators and policymakers. The findings highlight the need for universities to take a holistic approach towards the development of the student. Academic achievement cannot be realised only through classroom education; it also presupposes supportive learning conditions which touch upon the psychological, social, and economic aspects of students' living. Schools that invest in an extensive support system will

have more chances of enhancing student satisfaction, retention, and performance.

Based on these findings, there are a number of recommendations. Universities ought to intensify academic skill development initiatives that will assist students in knowing how to manage their time, enhance their study strategies and handle examination perceptions. Academic writing, research skills, and independent learning workshops can play an important role in increasing the academic preparedness of students. The financial support mechanisms ought to also be increased in order to help students with financial problems. Financial stress can be alleviated through flexible tuition payment schemes, scholarships and textbook support programmes, which will enable students to concentrate more on their studies. Moreover, universities ought to increase the volume of academic advising to make certain that students are given lifelong advice on the type of courses to take, academic planning and career development. It can also be helpful to develop systematic mentorship, which involves pairing first-year students with senior students or faculty mentors to give

them the academic and social assistance they need. These programmes have been successful in most African and Arabs colleges where mentoring of peers has enhanced student attendance and retention.

Lastly, the universities are to establish frequent evaluations of experiences, expectations, and the problems of students. Surveys and focus group discussions are the feedback mechanisms that can aid institutions in recognising emerging issues and making appropriate changes in their policies. Universities can build responsive learning environments that facilitate both personal and academic development by continually tracking the needs of the students.

To sum up, the researchers are convinced that the achievement of first-year students is not only a personal choice but also the effectiveness of the support systems used in the institution. Colleges which build their policies and practices on the student-centred approach and focus on comprehensive development will be in a better position to promote academic excellence and sustainable education results.

ORCID

Mohamad Abdullah Alsaied: Orcid no: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4739-8891>

Hady Hussein Abdalla Farag: Orcid no: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0360-666X>

Mohd Nouh Ali Maabdeh: Orcid no: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3567-4151>

Yousif Ahmed Omar: Orcid no: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2422-217X>

Rawa Sayed Mansoor Alawi Kadhem: Orcid no: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-53974529>

Hiam Almanala: Orcid no: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8791-9133>

Zaina Almahri: Orcid no: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4726-3420>

References

- Al-Shehri, M. M., Harazi, N. M., & Elmagd, M. H. A. (2022). Prevalence of depression, anxiety and stress among secondary school students in Jeddah city, Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Psychiatry*, 23(6), 1-12.
- Aphane, T. (2025). *Student well-being: a case study of first-year B. Ed. students in an open distance e-learning curriculum* [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Africa].
- Athiemooram, L., & Njage, R. (2021). Effectiveness of secondary school guidance programmes in preparing learners for successful transition to university: A case of Moi University. *European Journal of Education and Pedagogy*, 2(3), 88-95.
- Biswal, L., Malap, V., Chaudhury, S. K., & Mahapatra, B. P. (2025). A Study on the impact of motivation for post graduate students for their achievements. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 2(2).
- Briggs, A. R., Clark, J., & Hall, I. (2012). Building bridges: Understanding student transition to university. *Quality in Higher Education*, 18(1), 3-21.
- Brown, D., Barry, J. A., & Todd, B. K. (2021). Barriers to academic help-seeking: The relationship with gender-typed attitudes. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(3), 401-416.

- Cameron, R. B., & Rideout, C. A. (2022). 'It's been a challenge finding new ways to learn': first-year students' perceptions of adapting to learning in a university environment. *Studies in Higher Education*, 47(3), 668–682.
- Chemagosi, M. J. (2024). Student well-being in higher education institutions: Academic pressures. In P. Aloka (Ed.), *Student well-being in higher education institutions* (pp. 81–106). IGI Global.
- Cicha, K., Rizun, M., Rutecka, P., & Strzelecki, A. (2021). COVID-19 and higher education: First-year students' expectations toward distance learning. *Sustainability*, 13(4), 1889.
- DeWees, T. A., Mazza, G. L., Golafshar, M. A., & Dueck, A. C. (2020). Investigation into the effects of using normal distribution theory methodology for Likert scale patient-reported outcome data from varying underlying distributions, including floor/ceiling effects. *Value in Health*, 23(5), 625–631.
- Digoresia, L., Fazio, M. V., Porto, A., Ripani, L., & Sosa Escudero, W. E. (2008). Public university students' performance in Argentina: Factors influencing academic outcomes. *Well-Being and Social Policy*, 3, 67–100.
- Ding, F., & Yu, B. (2022). First-year university students' perception of autonomy: An individualistic approach. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(2), 211–224.
- Doygun, O., & Gulec, M. (2012). The problems faced by university students and proposals for solution. *Rocedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 47, 1115–1123.
- Doyle, L., McCabe, C., Keogh, B., Brady, A., & McCann, M. (2020). An overview of the qualitative descriptive design within nursing research. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 25(5), 443–455.
- Erkan, S., Özbay, Y., Cihangir-Çankaya, Z., & Terzi, Ş. (2012). University students' problem areas and psychological help-seeking willingness. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, 12(2), 787–811.

- Franc, J. M., Hung, K. K. C., Pirisi, A., & Weinstein, E. S. (2023). Analysis of Delphi study 7-point linear scale data by parametric methods: use of the mean and standard deviation. *Methodological Innovations*, 16(2), 226-233.
- Garrick, A., Arendt, S. W., & Bosselman, R. (2023). Inadequate orientation and ineffective communication: the case of the intern. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Cases*, 11(3), 90-92.
- Hillman, J. R., & Baydoun, E. (2020). Review of the roles of governments and universities and their interrelationships: An urgent need for governance reform in the Arab World. In *Higher education in the Arab world: Government and governance* (pp. 1-79). Cham: Springer International Publishing
- Hyseni Duraku, Z., Davis, H., & Hamiti, E. (2023). Mental health, study skills, social support, and barriers to seeking psychological help among university students: a call for mental health support in higher education. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11, 1220614.
- Ibrahim, F. M., & Elhabashy, H. M. M. (2025). Relationship between academic performance, personality traits, and anxiety level among Egyptian undergraduate nursing students: a correlational research study. *BMC nursing*, 24(1), 115.
- Javaid, Z. K., Chen, Z., & Ramzan, M. (2024). Assessing stress-causing factors and language related challenges among first-year students in higher institutions in Pakistan. *Acta Psychologica*, 248, 104356.
- Kanu, W. N., Emenalo, F. C., & Alisigwe, H. C. (2025). Work-study-life balance: Challenges and impact on academic performance of students in higher institutions in Imo state, Nigeria. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 30(2), 58-70
- Leal Filho, W., Wall, T., Rayman-Bacchus, L., Mifsud, M., Pritchard, D. J., Lovren, V. O., ... & Balogun, A. L. (2021). Impacts of COVID-19 and social isolation on academic staff and students at universities: a cross-sectional study. *BMC Public Health*, 21(1), 1213.

- Lebeau, Y., & Oanda, I. O. (2020). *Higher education expansion and social inequalities in sub-Saharan Africa: Conceptual and empirical perspectives* (UNRISD Working Paper No. 2020-10). United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. <https://hdl.handle.net/10419/246252>
- Loberiano, M. (2025). *Confidence and utilisation of counselling services among first-year students: Basis for enhancing services at the University of Eastern Philippines*. SSRN. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5747649>
- Loberiano, M. (2025). *Confidence and utilisation of counselling services among first-year students: basis for enhancing services at the University of Eastern Philippines*. SSRN. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5747649
- McCallen, L. S., & Johnson, H. L. (2020). The role of institutional agents in promoting higher education success among first-generation college students at a public urban university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 13(4), 320.
- Mntuyedwa, V. (2023). Exploring the benefits for first-year university students joining peer groups: A case study of a South African university. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 11(1).
- Muhammad, N. (2024). Exploring cultural and intellectual experiences: A study of students campus life at a public sector university in Pakistan's Federal Capital. *Review of Law and Social Sciences*, 2(2), 17-25.
- Mulaudzi, I. C. (2023). Factors affecting students' academic performance: a case study of the university context. *Journal of Social Science for Policy Implications*, 11(1), 18-26.
- Nkansah, J. O., Khai, T. S., Rose, E. S., & Asaduzzaman, M. (2025). Overcoming the odds: first-generation college students' journey to higher education in the Global South—A phenomenological study from Ghana. *European Journal of Education*, 60(2), e70064.
- Owusu-Agyeman, Y., & Mugume, T. (2023). Academic adjustment of first-year students and their transition experiences: The moderating effect of social adjustment. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 29(2), 189-209.

- Pee, S., & Vululleh, N. (2020). Role of universities in transforming society: Challenges and practices. In E. Sengupta, P. Blessinger, & C. Mahoney (Eds.), *International perspectives on policies, practices & pedagogies for promoting social responsibility in higher education* (Vol. 32, pp. 67–79). Emerald Publishing Limited, Saadoun, S., & Fallouh, A. (2021). The reality of the problems of new university students: A field study in the University of Oran, Algeria. *Rawafid Journal of Studies and Research in Social and Human Sciences*, 5(1), 259–278.
- Samir, H. E. D., Haidara, N. B., & Badran, M. A. (2025). The impact of language immersion on Arabic Language acquisition for speakers of other languages: "Enhancing Arabic language skills for speakers of other languages" Programme as a model. *Journal of Posthumanism*, 5(3), 1373–1408.
- Scales, P. C., Van Boekel, M., Pekel, K., Syvertsen, A. K., & Roehlkepartain, E. C. (2020). Effects of developmental relationships with teachers on middle-school students' motivation and performance. *Psychology in the Schools*, 57(4), 646–677.
- Schaeper, H. (2020). The first year in higher education: the role of individual factors and the learning environment for academic integration. *Higher Education*, 79(1), 95–110.
- Sherry, M., Thomas, P., & Chui, W. H. (2010). International students: A vulnerable student population. *Intercultural Education*, 21(5), 493–503.
- Tóth, Z., & Bedzsula, B. P. (2021). What constitutes quality to students in higher education? An empirical investigation of course-level student expectations. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 29(2–3), 116–134.
- Umar, S., & Rahman, M. M. (2023). International student migration to the GCC states: A comparative study. *Migration and Development*, 12(1), 111–140.
- Wanzenböck, I., Wesseling, J. H., Frenken, K., Hekkert, M. P., & Weber, K. M. (2020). A framework for mission-oriented innovation policy: Alternative pathways through the problem–solution space. *Science and Public Policy*, 47(4), 474–489.

- Wilkins, S. (2020). The positioning and competitive strategies of higher education institutions in the United Arab Emirates. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 34(1), 139-153.
- Willems, J., Coertjens, L., & Donche, V. (2021). Entering higher professional education: unveiling first-year students' key academic experiences and their occurrence over time. *Frontiers in psychology*, 12, 577388.
- Yaska, M., & Nuhu, B. M. (2024). Assessment of measures of central tendency and dispersion using likert-type scale. *African Journal of Advances in Science and Technology Research*, 16(1), 33-45.