

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Investigation of First-year Learning Experiences in a Rural University in South Africa

Chinaza Uleanya\* & Yasmin Rugbeer\*\*

## *Abstract*

*This study investigated the first-year experiences (FYE) of students in a South African university. Survey research design was used in the study. The quantitative method was used for data collection and 1 479 first-year students were randomly selected. The findings reveal that first-year students in the selected South African rural-based university experience certain specific challenges amongst which are poor orientation to the new context, poor knowledge of the Higher Education system, and poor educational background of parents. The study recommends that a special office under the direct line management of the dean of students be established to observe and closely monitor the progress of first-year students. This office would accommodate orientation of first years, and liaise and collaborate with appropriate offices within the institution to ensure that first-year students are properly guided and assisted in integrating without stress into the university system.*

## *Keywords*

*first-year experience; orientation; placement; South Africa*

## *Introduction*

South African universities have undergone significant changes during the last few decades; however, the increased access of students has not been accompanied by equal increases in levels of student success (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2008). The low graduation output of various comprehensive South African universities has long been a cause for concern (Arends & Petersen, 2018). The Higher Education system in South Africa is expected to produce graduates, who are well equipped to contribute personally, socially and economically to the development of the country (Department of Higher Education, 2014; Allais, 2017).

The mission statement of the selected South African rural-based university is to commit itself towards producing graduates who are globally competitive and relevant to the human capital needs of the nation. At the same time, the institution is cognisant of the fact that the majority of its students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and have additional financial challenges. Meanwhile, according to Tinto (2008), access without support is not

\* Dr Chinaza Uleanya is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Educational Management and Leadership, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Email: chinazauleanya@yahoo.com

\*\* Dr Yasmin Rugbeer is the Director of Teaching and Learning at the University of Zululand, South Africa. Email: rugbeery@unizulu.ac.za

opportunity. In congruence, Akoojee and Nkomo (2008) and Uleanya and Gamede (2018) consider access without support as “participatory access” which is used to mean allowing students to enrol without taking cogent cognisance of the teaching and learning activities. Access without support which, according to Tinto (2008), is not opportunity means that students are enrolled at the university for different courses without tailored efforts to ensure that they get all the support required to succeed at their studies. This implies that students are enrolled without taking into consideration the available facilities that will enhance their innate abilities and skills to learn. Thus, support in this context implies providing necessary information, direction, counsel, orientation and mentorship, where possible, amongst other means of support that are capable of helping students to transition successfully into the university system and happenings on campus. Hence, the FYE at this university is an initiative which seeks to address the transitional needs and concerns that many first-year students face in their transitions from high school to tertiary education and provide the desired support.

The FYE at this university is built on the principle that every first-year student will be treated with the respect due to them, the same way other students are accorded due respect. Additionally, the FYE is premised on the principle that adjustment and transition stages require unique support, especially apparent in first year. According to Arends and Petersen (2018), seminars for first years are viewed as programmes which promote student retention and address the need of first-generation students. This is based on the idea that such seminars are informative and experiences of successful individuals are shared. This implies that first-year students can be oriented and given necessary pieces of information through seminars, in addition to other programmes such as orientation and excursions, amongst others. Meanwhile, as important as these programmes are, in some situations, the students fail to attend such organised programmes and end up missing out on the information to be passed across. Conversely, Tinto (1975) opines that the kind and quality of interactions experienced by first-year students in the institution has an impact on their academic and cultural integration. In support of this, Uleanya, Uleanya and Oluyemi (2019) opine that quality student-lecturer interaction helps students in various ways such as building self-confidence and acclimatising to the university environment. However, getting first-year students to attend seminars, orientation programmes, and to interact with members of staff remains challenging. This makes transition, adjustment and orientation difficult. In some instances, assisting the first-year students becomes challenging. Hence, the reason for this article which seeks to explore the FYE of students in the selected South African rural university, in particular the challenges that inhibit students from attending programmes organised for them. This article explores the way forward.

### *South African Universities*

There are 26 universities in South Africa which are categorised differently based on the expected functions and degree levels. Some of the universities are categorised as Universities of Technology (UoT), Comprehensive and Traditional Universities. The focus of this study is on a selected South African university, which is both rural and comprehensive. It is categorised as a rural-based university due to its location and setting, and it is described as

a comprehensive university based on the functions it is expected to perform. For instance, according to Dani and Shah (2016), rural universities are situated in specific locations with peculiar characteristics. Flora and Flora (2013) and Uleanya and Gamede (2018) explain that rural settings in developing or underdeveloped areas are characterised by features like poor networks, untarred roads, a high level of illiteracy, a high rate of unemployment and dispersed settlement, amongst others. Many of these features describe the location of the selected university. Comprehensive universities, on the other hand, according to Gibson (2012) are established and saddled with various responsibilities, one of which is meeting the demands of their host communities and helping to enhance development in such environments where they are situated. Thus, the selected university is described as a comprehensive university as it is expected to ensure that it focuses on meeting the demands of host communities – that is, their immediate environment and the nation at large.

### *History of the Selected South African Rural-based University*

According to a report by the Advice and Monitoring Directorate Council on Higher Education in South Africa (2010) regarding the selected rural-based university, the institution was a college with few students, staff and facilities. It was called The University College in 1960 and functioned as a constituent of the University of South Africa. The focus then was to cater for the Zulus and the Swazi. These are people from KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa and people from Swaziland respectively. However, by 1970, the status was changed and it was recognised as “The selected South African rural based university” functioning as a traditional university offering formative and professional programmes (Department of Education, 2004). According to the Self-evaluation Portfolio for the Higher Education Quality Committee Institutional Audit (SPHEQCIA) (2010), the scope of the institution changed in 2002 and it began to cater for students from countries other than South Africa and Swaziland, but majorly African countries, amongst which are: Botswana, Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and others. However, the basic focus remained the same, which was to cater for rural-based students (SPHEQCIA, 2010).

By 1984, the institution was given autonomy to practise as a full-fledged university like other standard universities within the country. In 2002, the university was enlisted as one of the six comprehensive universities in South Africa (SPHEQCIA, 2010). By ‘comprehensive university’, it means that it began to offer a mix of formative, professional and vocationally oriented programmes in which degrees are awarded. Moreover, according to the Department of Education (DoE) (2002), comprehensive universities are to be directed towards programmes ranging from formative, professional to vocational. A new campus, called Richards Bay Campus due to its location, was established. Different vocation-related degrees such as Maritime, Shipping, Transportation and Logistics, amongst others, are offered at the Richards Bay Campus. During this period, five faculties known as: Agriculture and Science, Arts, Education, Law, and Commerce and Administration were in operation. However, by 2005, the Faculty of Law was merged with the Faculty of Commerce and Administration. Hence, the university operates with four faculties since then, with each faculty having a dean and a number of heads of department who oversee the activities that take place.

### *Rationale for FYE in South African Universities*

The increased access of students has not been accompanied by equal increases in levels of student successes, though South African universities have undergone significant changes during the last few decades. Following on the publication of the national cohort students by Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007), it is possible to assess the efficiency of the HE sector on the basis of the performance of the 2000 cohort of entrants. Higher education participation rates remain low in comparison to those of other countries (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2013). The Higher Education of South Africa (HESA, 2016) report on pathways to a diverse and effective South African Higher Education system suggests that South African universities experience low participation rate due to challenges such as: funding, academic enrolment planning and quality assurance issues, amongst others. Scott et al. (2008) further state that approximately 30% of the (limited numbers of) students who enter the South African Higher Education system annually drop out during their first year of studies. However, Uleanya and Gamede (2018) state that the dropout rate is approximately 40% and it is as a result of challenges experienced by students. Uleanya, Rugbeer and Duma (2018) explain that some students who eventually graduate fail to do so in minimum time. Suffice to state that students seem to experience various challenges that make some drop out, while others struggle to complete in record time. According to Scott et al. (2008), less than 50% of the students who enrol for diplomas or degrees do not graduate, and only one in three students of the intake into three-year degrees in contact institutions graduate, even within four years. Meanwhile, according to HESA (2016), student dropouts cause very substantial losses in subsidies to Higher Education Institutions. Mitra (2011) opines that such experiences of a high dropout rate or learning challenges lead to a lack of sustainable development within the society. Suffice to state therefore that though different universities in South Africa, especially those that are rural based, experience a low intake of students, and only a few of the intakes get to graduate in record time; some eventually drop out before the completion of their first year. Naong, Zwane, Mogashoa and Fleischmann (2009) suggest that the common challenges experienced by first years include: feeling disconnected, struggling to develop good habits such as prioritising daily activities, managing time properly, as well as eating and staying healthy. Acclimating to academic expectations that may be more challenging than anticipated, managing a level of social and cultural diversity that may be different from the communities with which they are most familiar, comparing oneself to others and becoming discouraged and having difficulty managing relationships both at home and at school are considered as other challenges experienced by first-year students. Case, Marshall, McKenna and Mogashana (2018) suggest that issues bordering around financial issues, choices of students and social structures, amongst others, are factors constituting constraints for students and affect them in various ways when trying to acclimatise to their new environment (university system). Hence, the principle of Tinto (1988), which identifies factors that enhance first-year student access and progression at the university, is adopted as the reason for FYE programmes in South African universities. These principles are: (i) students should be given the opportunities to acquire skills needed for academic success; (ii) students should be given enhanced networks that extend beyond

the university and may be fostered by personal agencies to ensure maximum functionality; (iii) students should be allowed to respond to systematic retention actions; and (iv) students respond best to early interventions that address their needs, hence should be given such interventions early enough. Also, students respond well to retention programmes that are student centred, thus, teaching and learning activities should be student centred. In other words, teaching methods which promote student-centred learning should be promoted. For instance, paired learning and role playing, amongst others, should be encouraged. This should be as opposed to traditional methods where lecturers are the focus.

The FYE in the selected South African rural-based university is therefore an attempt to draw the best from current practices – nationally and internationally – and to develop, incrementally, an overarching and coherent transitional experience for incoming students. This includes cooperation and collaboration with all stakeholders within the community of the selected university.

### *Principles of a FYE Programme at the Selected University*

The FYE is a complex process, involving many different disciplines, worldviews and understandings. It was therefore decided to base the planning and further conceptualisation of this programme on an epistemological framework that could inform the planning, structure and actions of this working group. The Integral Model as developed by Wilber (1977) is chosen. The reason for this choice is because it is open and collaborative, research based, and values participatory reflective practices, while providing the necessary structure. The Integral Model serves as a tool for linkage, leverage, correlation and alignment that informs the further development of the programme. This model characterises the FYE in the following ways: the FYE programme is holistic and possesses an encompassing body, mind and spirit. Hence, the programme is expected to be treated as such.

Also, the FYE programme is to be considered as an intentional programme which promotes wellness within a caring and invitational institution. In other words, the FYE programme in universities is desired to accommodate students from various backgrounds by giving them necessary supports through counselling, tutorials and mentoring, amongst other ways. This guides the reason for the concern, care and support to be given to first-year students before, during and after registration, orientation, lectures and examination periods. Thus, the FYE programme fosters an enabling and empowering environment to enhance student development through various counselling, tutorial and mentorship activities provided to first-year students. This is expected to help students to function better in different spheres of life to themselves, family, institution and society at large. Additionally, the FYE programme seeks collaboration and partnership within and outside the university with appropriate and supportive stakeholders such as parents, NGOs, community leaders, and government, amongst others. This is based on the ideology that the programme does not operate on its own. Support is needed from various channels. Also, the FYE programme is guided by ongoing research from multiple perspectives. This research will be the premise upon which the FYE programme of the selected university is built.

### *The FYE Committee Structure of the Selected University*

Based on the holistic and all-encompassing nature of the FYE programme, the following structures were identified to support a fully integrated FYE approach for students in each faculty and across the two campuses of the institution. This committee structure comprised: faculty-based FYE committee representative(s) in different capabilities, various special interest and research groups representatives, and first-year representatives who made up the FYE student forum of the selected university.

The first two workshops were attended by representatives from the various faculties – deans, deputy deans, heads of departments, coordinators and departmental representatives. During the second workshop the following sectors within the selected university were identified to seek collaboration and to form the FYE Committee. This working committee was coordinated from the office of the Dean of Students Affairs (DSA). Several entities and structures added to the established working group led by the Teaching and Learning unit in collaboration with all four faculties across the university. The entities included: library staff who are responsible for providing basic readable and learning materials; housing unit which is responsible for accommodation; communication department (CMD) which is responsible for disseminating information; students’ service department (SSD) which is responsible for the affairs of students within the institution; campus health clinic which is responsible for the health issues of students; admissions units which are responsible for the admission and enrolment processes of students; registrations unit which takes charge of registration matters; and financial aid units which take care of bursary and other financial matters of students. The Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) unit was also represented in the structure, as well as representatives from the Richards Bay Campus of the institution. Other units represented in the structure include protective services, sports and recreation, student faculty representatives, special interest and research groups. This makes the committee unique as universities very rarely engage across multiple sectors like this.

The researchers ensure that different faculties, departments and units within the institution are adequately represented.

### *A New Paradigm for Promoting Learning*

This study proposes a new paradigm for promoting learning in Higher Education where students, from the very first point of contact, form an explicit partnership with the selected university. Jogee, Callaghan and Callaghan (2018) opine that many students in South African universities are alienated due to the way and manner in which the institutions are structured and the expectations of the universities. For instance, Everatt (2016) quoted in Jogee, Callaghan and Callaghan (2018) buttress this by stating that: “Students arrive and are expected to meet imported norms, seminar rooms, unknown customs, foreign authors, hard marking and the plain hard slog of tertiary education, while being young and going through their own life transitions, and doing so in ‘othered’ spaces, out of vernacular, and so on” (Everatt, 2016, p. 1). This is contributory to the failure and dropout rate experienced by students (Jogee, Callaghan & Callaghan, 2018). The partnership is based on success of

both the student and the institution. In both cases, success is marked by the successful completion of the programme the student has embarked on. Students provide critical information about themselves on registration. Amongst this information are their goals, their strengths, weaknesses, parents' level of education, future aspiration, and support if available. This makes the FYE a personalised institutional response to learners' needs and challenges. For the FYE to be successful, assessments have to be conducted at critical points in the first year of study (Leibowitz, 2009). Hence, the reason for this study, which aims to investigate the experiences of first-year students, using the selected South African university as a case study.

### *Conceptualisation of Terms*

#### **First-generation students**

Lucier (2019) describes a first-generation student as one who is in the process of getting a university degree though no one in the family has ever attained such height. He further explains that as long as the parents or sibling(s) of a student are yet to get a university degree, regardless of whether they are enrolled for one or not, such student should be referred to and treated as a first-generation student. Jury, Smeding and Darnon (2015), Wilbur and Roscigno (2016) and Lucier (2019) opine that first-generation students are usually disadvantaged compared to their counterparts. This is due to the lack of exposure and inadequacy of information possessed by their family members, especially parents and older siblings. In this study, first-generation students are regarded as those studying in the selected university in pursuit of a bachelor's degree and are from homes where no one possesses such a degree or its equivalent. In other words, the said students are the first to pursue university degrees in their family. This is considered to have an impact on the academic achievement of first-generation students in various ways considering the lack of university experiences of family members.

#### **Academic success**

In this study, academic success is used to imply achievement of students with regard to their educational attainment. In other words, attainment of good results by students is referred to as academic success.

#### ***Problem Statement***

The annual admission offered to students into universities is expected to aid their success in life and help them in attaining their goals. In light of this, students embark on their university journey with the hope of reading, attending lectures, writing examinations and acquiring the desired success. However, the students seem to encounter several challenges in their first year at the university and the challenges hamper their dreams and hope of succeeding as desired. Some of the students eventually drop out before the end of the first year due to the different challenges. These challenges are experienced due to different reasons and factors. Hence, the need to explore the FYEs of students in the selected university.

## Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions.

1. Does the time of issuing firm offers contribute to the first-year students' performance/belonging/commitment?
2. Does an orientation programme contribute to the first-year students' performance/belonging?
3. Do the first-year students get adequate support to ensure academic success?
4. Are the FYEs of first-generation students different from those of their counterparts who are not first-generation students?

## Research Methodology

The quantitative method was followed in gathering empirical data through questionnaires that were administered amongst first-year students in the selected university. The total number of student enrolment at the selected university in March 2016 was 3900. The total first-year enrolment was 3900. Approximately 38 percent (1479) of the entire first-year population was represented in the study. Hence, the 38 percent, which is a good representation of the first-year students, was used. The statistical software SPSS version 23 was used to perform descriptive and inferential statistical tests. Results are as represented in the form of graphs and tables presented below.

## Results

The results of the analysed data are presented based on the research questions.

### Research Question 1: Does firm offer contribute to the FYEs of students?

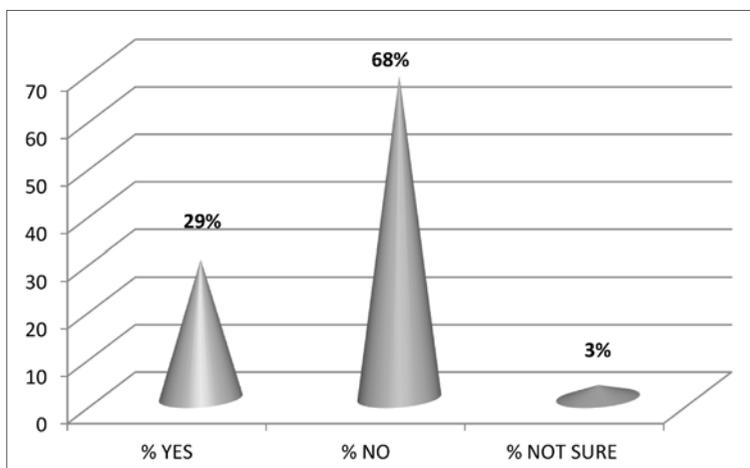
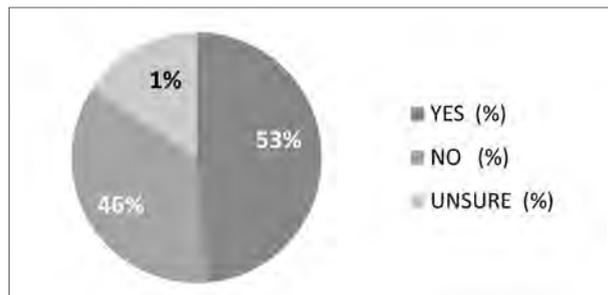


Figure 1: “Did you get a conditional/firm offer in 2015 while waiting for your final matric results?”

Figure 1 shows that the majority of the students (68%) did not receive a firm offer while waiting for their final matric results in 2015. However, a few (29%) received firm offers,

while 3% were not sure if they received firm offers. This finding suggests that delays in the issuance of firm offers by universities are caused by a range of factors amongst which are condition and availability of infrastructure, accommodation and high rate of application against few available spaces. Condition and availability of infrastructure implies the state of and actual structures like library, lecture theatre, laboratories, amongst other facilities that aid teaching and learning. Accommodation refers to the available place of abode such as hostels for students, while high rate of application against few available implies having many applications to review as against having only a few spaces. According to Gater and Isaac (2012) it is wrong for students to be offered admission to study in dilapidated buildings. Souriyavongsa, Rany, Abidin and Mei (2013), in support of the need for suitable infrastructure prior to the admission of students, aver that poor infrastructure hampers the learning abilities of students. This implies that in order for students to be provided with firm offers, the infrastructure and accommodation available in the universities must have been duly considered and properly fixed, so as to ensure good and safe conditions for students. Suffice to state that delay in the lack of necessary infrastructure and accommodation can be attributed as factors which hindered the issuance of firm offers to first-year students in the selected university in 2016. This, however, constituted part of their FYE.

**Research Question 2: Does an orientation programme contribute to the FYEs of students?**

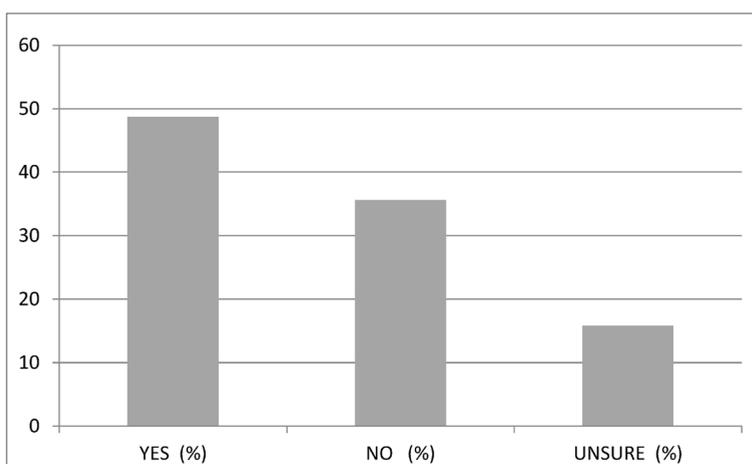


**Figure 2: “Did you attend the orientation programme offered by University of Zululand?”**

Figure 2 reveals that 53% of the students agree that they attended the orientation programme, while 46% did not attend and 1% of students is unsure. The reason for the non-attendance of 46% of the students could be due to personal challenges and accommodation issues, amongst others. The finding concurs with the works of McGhie (2012) and Muhuro and Kang’ethe (2016) who opine that students fail to attend orientation programmes for different reasons such as timing and poor social life style, amongst others. This is in alliance with one of the reasons for this study which aimed at exploring why students fail to attend orientation programmes organised for them despite their importance and usefulness.

Additionally, Steenkamp and Baard (2009) state that proper orientation helps to boost the learning abilities of first-year students, thereby ensuring good academic performance.

The 2017 *Students Guide* of the University of Cape Town (Faculty of Humanities, 2017b) suggests that orientation performs the following functions: release of several important pieces of information at a time in one place; helps students to start university experience on the right track; and puts students in touch with people who will provide due and necessary assistance as they progress in their studies while on campus. Suffice to state therefore that the orientation programme of the selected university might have issues with the timing of organisation and package resulting in only 53 percent attendance by students which is relatively low. This implies that such students are expected to have received certain vital information which will serve as a guide towards contributing to their success while on campus.



**Figure 3: “Did you have a better understanding of the South African Higher Education system after attending our orientation programme?”**

Figure 3 reveals that 41% of students who attended the orientation programme agreed that they had a better understanding of the Higher Education system after attending the orientation programme. However, 46% disagreed, saying that they did not have a better understanding of the Higher Education system after attending the orientation, while 13% were unsure. This finding suggests that either there are issues with regard to the orientation programme, or the students seem to be experiencing challenges that make them unable to comprehend what is done during the orientation. The work of McGhie (2012), who avers that students sometimes attend orientation programmes for social activities and not to seek and get vital pieces of information, can help to account for the low percentage in students’ attendance. While, the social activities are important, some students get ‘carried away’ by such, rather than being focused, enjoying the social activities, and still receiving the needed information. On the contrary, the Green and Healy (2008) report for the United Kingdom Council of International Students Association (UKCISA) suggests that the poor planning of the programme and delivery of keynotes can hinder students from absorbing the information being communicated during orientation programmes. Suffice to state

that access to valuable information in relation to where support can be received, reading strategy, motivational talks, faculties and departments, amongst others, empower students.

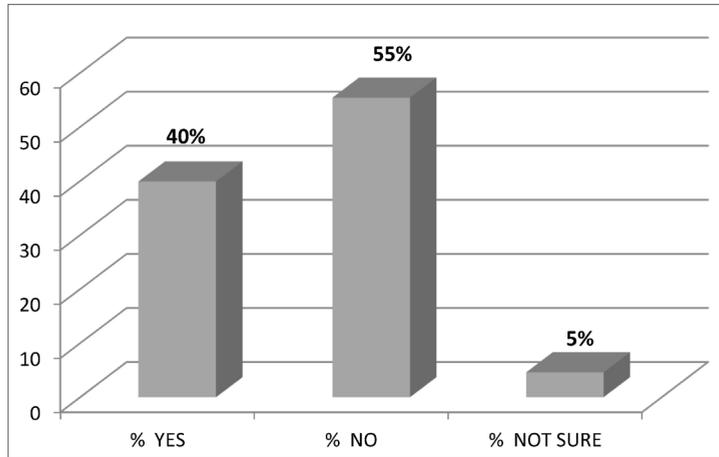


Figure 4: "I had a place to stay during orientation"

Figure 4 shows that while 40% of the students had accommodation during the orientation programme, the majority (55%) of the students had no place to stay. This finding implies that the majority of the students had challenges with accommodation during the orientation programme as some had to move from one place to another seeking somewhere to squat or travel back home. This would have contributed to their composure and ability to receive the desired information during the programme. Speckman and Mandew's (2014) states that lack of accommodation during orientation programmes and learning sessions impacts negatively on the quality of learning received by the students. Thus, lack of adequate accommodation for students during the period of the orientation programme would have hampered the quality of learning that would have taken place. Moreover, students learn better in conducive environments and when their minds are relaxed. They tend to be disturbed and experience unsettled mindsets when they fail to secure accommodation (Holgate, 2012).

**Research Question 3:** Do the first-year students get adequate support to ensure their success?

Table 1: Response of students on having adequate support to pass

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Valid	True	713	48.2	48.2	48.2
	False	369	24.9	24.9	73.2
	Not sure	397	26.8	26.8	100.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1479</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

Table 1 shows the result of students' responses on having adequate support to pass the first year. The finding shows that 48.2% of the students agree that they have adequate supports such as psychological, infrastructural and academic to pass that year. However, 24.9% disagree, claiming they do not have adequate support, while 26.8% are unsure of having adequate support to pass that year. The number of students who agreed to have adequate support is less than 50% (precisely 48.2%). This suggests that students having adequate support to pass is a major challenge. Support in this regard refers to available space for lectures, accommodation and socioeconomic balance, amongst others.

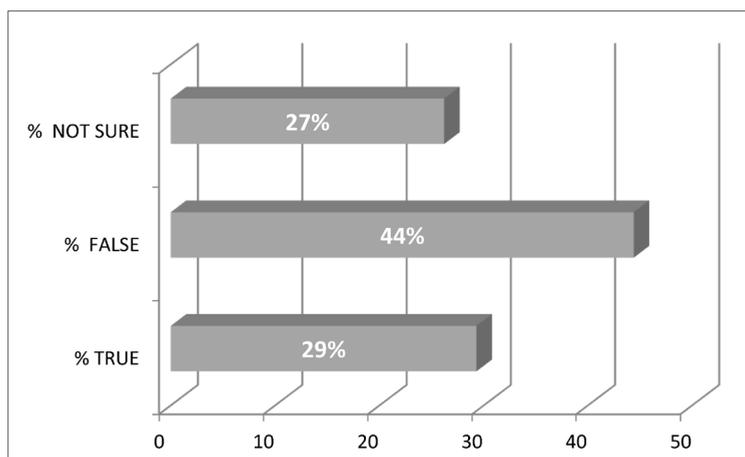
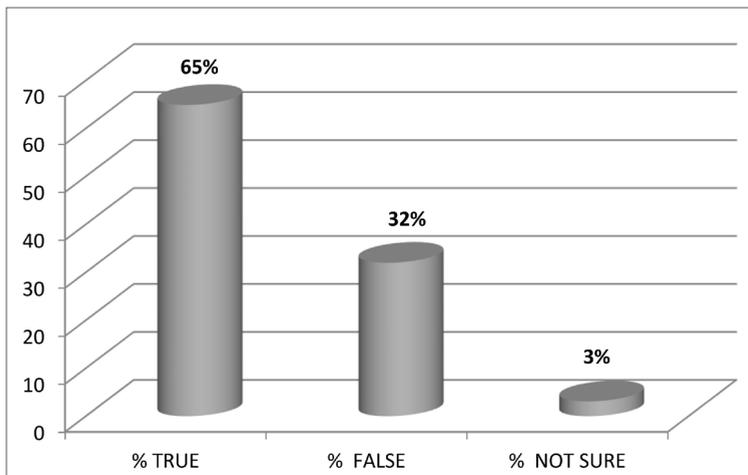


Figure 5: “If necessary, I know where to find psychological support”

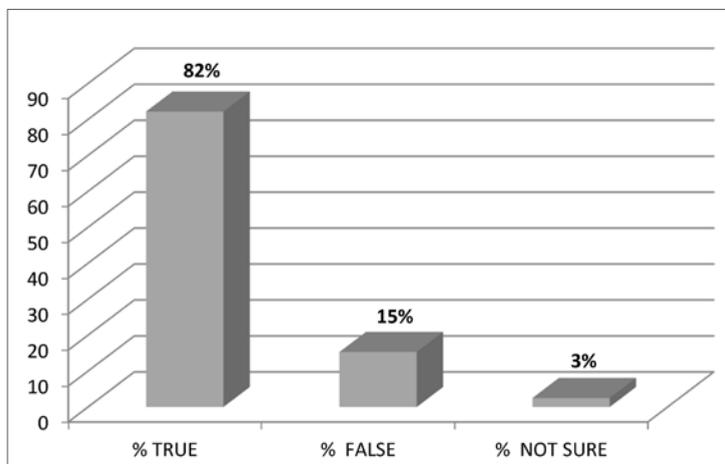
Figure 5 shows that 44% of the first-year students do not know where to find psychological support. However, 29% know where to find psychological support while 27% are unsure whether they know where to find such support. This finding suggests that lack of knowledge as to where to find psychological support is contributory to the challenges experienced by first-year students. Steyn, Harris and Hartell (2014) as well as Mugume (2017) aver that first-year students do not know where to get access to the necessary supports, one of which is psychological support. A review of the 2017 first-year students' guide of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Faculty of Humanities, 2017a) suggests that first-year students do not know their way around campus and are usually unable to access the necessary supports as and when due. Wu, Garza and Guzman (2015) aver that most international students do not know where to get necessary basic supports because they are novices in terms of both the environment and the institution. By extension, this is the case with first-year students who tend to live on the assumptions of knowing whereas they do not know where and how to access psychological support because they are new to the environment. This implies that first-year students experience certain situations within their first few months on campus due to unawareness of where and how to access certain forms of supports. Moreover, failure to adjust quickly due to lack of knowledge of where to get needed supports may contribute to their challenges and possibly affect their desired performance.



**Figure 6: “I am worried about accommodation”**

Figure 6 reveals that the majority of the first-year students in the selected university (65%) are concerned and worried about how to get accommodation. This suggests that the majority of the students are perturbed and hence, psychologically affected, and find it difficult to remain focused. Meanwhile, a review of the works of Hussain, Guppy, Robertson and Temple (2013), Novotney (2014) as well as Chiguvu and Ndoma (2018) shows that students are psychologically affected and find it difficult to concentrate on their studies due to lack of accommodation. Moreover, Holgate (2012) opines that lack of sufficient accommodation in South African universities has led to different crises which have impacted negatively on students. Lack of concentration of students in this regard is based on the outcome of crises which have emanated from shortage of accommodation on campus. Makoni (2014) avers that shortage of accommodation troubles students and it hinders them from staying focused. Uleanya and Gamede (2017) state that campus-based students perform better compared to their off-campus-based counterparts. This finding suggests that limited distance between lecture venues and residences, as well as extra time to students' advantage in enjoying various campus facilities, are contributory to their academic performances. Suffice to state that first-year students, desiring to obtain accommodation on campus due to benefits such as security, continuous access to campus facilities, as well as because campus students appear more integrated, and develop a stronger sense of belonging, amongst other reasons, may cause them to become worried about accommodation due to the shortage in the number of available hostels within and around the campus.

**Research Question 4: Are the FYEs of first-generation students different from those of their counterparts who are not first-generation students?**



**Figure 7: “I am a first-generation student (my parents did not graduate with a degree)”**

Figure 7 shows that the majority (82%) of the first-year students of the selected university agree that they are first-generation students and their parents are not graduates. However, 15% disagree saying that they are not first-generation students and their parents are graduates, while 3% are unsure. The response of 82% (the majority) of the respondents stating that they are first-generation students could be attributed to the fact that the institution is a Historically Black University (HBU). This is an indication of the quest for Higher Education in such rural area where the institution is situated. First-generation students are referred to as those pursuing a degree though their parents and guardians have not completed any. This is said to put such students in a disadvantaged position. Conversely, the selected institution as a rural-based university is already disadvantaged. Hence, students in the institution will be advantaged if their parents are educated. However, the majority of them are first-generation students, meaning that they are disadvantaged both at home and within the university. This finding corroborates the works of Stebleton and Soria (2012), Jury, Smeding and Darnon (2015) and Wilbur and Roscigno (2016) who hold the view that first-generation students are disadvantaged in various ways such as exposure to classified information and experience, amongst others. Meanwhile the work of Koricich (2014) shows that most students from rural institutions of learning are first-generation students and are usually at risk of poor performance and are negatively affected academically due to lack of adequate guidance, especially from the home. Additionally, since the university is a rural university, most of its students will fall within the range of first-generation students and are prone to failing or dropping out due to lack of desired family support. Suffice to state that first-year students at the selected university will be the most vulnerable if not given adequate support and care, especially when they fall into the category of first-generation students.

## *Conclusion*

The study explored various challenges experienced by first-year students in universities, using a selected South African rural-based university as a case study. The study indicated that many students do not attend orientation programmes, and consequently fail to benefit from the information provided. In some cases, where they do attend, they still fail to comprehend the information provided. This could be due to the level of involvement of students during such programmes, as well as their personal issues or challenges. Also, the findings of the study show that first-year students in the selected institution are prone to various challenges ranging from transition from high school to acclimatisation to the university system. The findings suggest that the challenges are caused by a lack of adequate support from appropriate quarters in both the institution and the home, especially in the case of first-generation students. For instance, some of the challenges emanate from the various forms of support received from home which in most cases is based on the educational background of parents as well as the socioeconomic background of the family. Other challenges include university accommodation, orientation programme, counselling support system and prompt issuance of firm offers to the students.

## *Recommendations*

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Orientation programmes should be informative, well planned and organised, taking into cognisance factors such as time, needed facilities and personnel, amongst others. This will help to ensure that students are informed on the basic facilities available to them on campus and how to access such facilities. It will also help to show students how to navigate their way around campus towards overcoming challenges.
- The scheduled time for an orientation programme should be timely. In other words, the timing of the programme should be such that the majority of the students will be able to attend.
- Orientation programmes should be well structured and monitored to help the students stay focused and avoid all forms of distraction. This will encourage many first years to participate, and thus the desired aim of the programme will be achieved.
- Good facilitation of the orientation programme means that resourceful, motivating, innovative and well-informed personnel should be allowed to handle the orientation programme. This will help to ensure that the programme is well packaged, planned, implemented and students are well stimulated to work.
- Good mentorship programmes which give students the opportunity to relate with mentors, express themselves freely regardless of their challenges, taking cognisance of their disadvantaged background, should be provided for first-year students. This will help them to properly integrate into the university system.

- Good counselling activities should be encouraged. This is to be done through the office of the Students Service Department (SSD). It will enable the students to perform better academically and otherwise.
- Promote campus-wide focus on the student experience. By so doing, students will become aware of the activities on campus, services available for them and the necessary offices that can be of help to them in the advent of encountered challenges.
- Engage students in the intellectual enterprise and socialise students into university work expectations. This should be done periodically – at the beginning and midway into the semester or session.
- Expose first-year students to various learning opportunities – formal curriculum, student life, co-curricular programming, community-based and global experiences.
- Ensure transformation in learning by bringing together teaching, extracurricular activities, counselling, mentoring and peer tutoring during and after the orientation exercise.
- Students should be motivated to attend orientation programmes considering the benefits. This can be done by attaching and giving gifts to students who attend. This will motivate students to attend.
- Attendance of orientation programmes by students should be encouraged. This can be done by requesting lecturers and other members of staff to help to inform students on the importance of such programmes, why they should attend and ensure that they pay maximum attention to provided information. Also, senior students such as levels 2 and 3 who previously attended and benefited from such programmes, can be given opportunities to give brief testimonies of the benefits of the programmes. In addition, lecturers can be encouraged to attend such programmes. This can motivate students to attend, knowing that their lecturers will be there. Meanwhile, other exciting activities such as games, quizzes and awards can be included as motivating factors for students. Moreover, students are likely to pay more attention, knowing that they will be asked questions at the end of such programmes.

## References

- Advice and Monitoring Directorate (2010). *Council on Higher Education Report on University of Zululand*. South Africa: CHE.
- Akoojee, S. & Nkomo, M. (2008). Access and quality in South African Higher Education: the twin challenges of transformation. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 21(3), 385-399. <https://doi.org/10.4314/sajhe.v21i3.25712>
- Allais, S. (2017). Towards measuring the economic value of Higher Education: lessons from South Africa. *Comparative Education*, 53(1), 147-163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2017.1254985>
- Arends, D. & Petersen N.F. (2018), 'The role of first-year experience excursion in promoting social integration at university: Student teachers' views', *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 8(1), a543. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v8i1.543>
- Case, J.M., Marshall, D., McKenna, S. & Mogashana, D. (2018). *Going to University: The Influence of Higher Education on the Lives of Young South Africans*. Cape Town: African Minds.

- CHE (Council on Higher Education) (2013). *Annual Report 2012–2013*. Pretoria, South Africa: CHE.
- Chiguvu, D. & Ndoma, J. (2018). The effects of shortage of accommodation on students' performance in private tertiary institutions in Botswana. *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development*, 9(4), 97–104.
- Dani, S., & Shah, S. (2016). Call and definition of rural university. *IOSR Journal of Economics and Finance*, 7(1), 64–66.
- DoE (Department of Education) (2002). *The Restructuring of the Higher Education System in South Africa*. Report of the National Working Group, 31 January, South Africa.
- DoE (Department of Education) (2004). *Creating Comprehensive Universities in South Africa: A Concept Document*. Pretoria: DoE.
- Everatt, D. (2016). What must fall: Fees or the South African state? <https://www.enca.com/opinion/what-must-fall-fees-or-the-south-african-state> [Accessed 10 June 2019].
- Faculty of Humanities (2017a). *First Year Students Guide*. Durban, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Faculty of Humanities (2017b). *Students Guide*. Cape Town, South Africa: University of Cape Town.
- Gibson, C. (2012). New Times Demand New Scholarship I: Research Universities and Civic Engagement: A Leadership Agenda. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 16(4), 235–248.
- Green, D. & Healy, L. (2008). Planning and running orientation programmes for international students. London: U.K. Council for International Student Affairs.
- HESA (Higher Education of South Africa) (2016). *Pathways to a Diverse and Effective South African Higher Education System*. Pretoria: Unisa Sunnyside Campus.
- Hussain, R., Guppy, M., Robertson, S. & Temple, E. (2013). Physical and mental health perspectives of first year undergraduate rural university students. *BMC Public Health*, 13, 848–855. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-13-848>
- Jury, M., Smeding, A. & Darnon, C. (2015). First-generation students' underperformance at university: the impact of the function of selection. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 710–720. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00710>
- Koricich, A. (2014). *The Disadvantage of Rural Students in College Enrollment and Choice*. Texas: Texas Tech University.
- Leibowitz, B. (2009). What's inside the suitcases? An investigation into the powerful resources students and lecturers bring to teaching and learning. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 25(3), 261–274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360902839875>
- Lucier, K.N. (2019). What is a first-generation college student? <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-first-generation-college-student-793482>
- McGhie, V.F. (2012). Factors Impacting on First-Year Students' Academic Progress at a South African University. DPhil dissertation, Stellenbosch University, South Africa.
- Mugume, Taabo. (2017). Higher education access in South Africa for students with criminal records. *Lau, Democracy and Development*, 21, 25–41. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ldd.v21i1.2>
- Muhuro, P. & Kang'ethe, S.M. (2016). Gaps associated with the timing of students' orientation programs in two institutions of higher learning in South Africa. *International Journal of Education Science*, 14(1,2), 137–144. <https://doi.org/10.31901/24566322.2016/14.1-2.16>
- Naong, M.H., Zwane, M.G., Mogashoa, L.G. & Fleischmann, E. (2009). Challenges of teaching first-year students at institutions of higher learning. *International Education Studies*, 2(2), 170–179. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v2n2p170>
- Novotney, A. (2014). Students under pressure: College and university counselling centres are examining how best to serve the growing number of students seeking their services. *American Psychological Association*, 45(8), 36–47. <https://doi.org/10.1037/e522492014-013>

- Scott, I., Yeld, N. & Hendry, J. (2007). A case for improving teaching and learning in South African Higher Education. Research paper prepared for the Council on Higher Education. Centre for Higher Education Development, University of Cape Town, South Africa.
- Speckman, M. & Mandew, M. (2014). *Perspectives on Student Affairs in South Africa*. South Africa: African Minds.
- SPHEQCIA (Self-evaluation portfolio for the Higher Education Quality Committee Institutional Audit) (2010). <http://reportal.uzulu.ac.za/UZAudit/index.htm> [Accessed 11 June 2019].
- Stebleton, M.J., & Soria, K.M. (2012). Breaking down barriers: Academic obstacles of first generation students at research universities. *The Learning Assistance Review*, 17(2), 7–20.
- Steenkamp, L.P. & Baard, R.S. (2009). Factors influencing success in first-year accounting at a South African university: A comparison between lecturers' assumptions and students' perceptions. *SAJAR*, 23(1), 113–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10291954.2009.11435142>
- Steyn, M.G., Harris, T. & Hartell, C.G. (2014). Institutional factors that affect black South African students' perceptions of early childhood teacher education. *South African Journal of Education*, 34(3), 01–07. <https://doi.org/10.15700/201409161107>
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from Higher Education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45, 89–125. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089>
- Tinto, V. (1988). Stages of student departure: Reflections on the longitudinal character of student leaving. *Journal of Higher Education*, 59(4), 438–455. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1981920>
- Tinto, V. (2008). Access without Support is Not Opportunity. Speech presented at the 36th Annual Institute for Chief Academic Officers, The Council of Independent Colleges, 1 November, Seattle, Washington.
- Uleanya, C. & Gamede, B.T. (2017). Access with success: Approaches to sustainable social changes in developing african societies. *The Anthropologist International Journal of Contemporary and Applied Studies of Man*, 30(2), 174–179.
- Uleanya, C. & Gamede, B.T. (2018). Comparative learning challenges among undergraduate university students in Nigeria and South Africa. *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development*, 20(2), 90–100.
- Uleanya, C., Uleanya, M.O. & Oluyemi, S. (2019). Revisiting high school teachers' education. *Cogent Social Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2019.1653545>
- Wilber, K. (1977). *The Spectrum of Consciousness*. Wheaton: Quest.
- Wilbur, T.G. & Roscigno, V.J. (2016). First-generation disadvantage and college enrollment/completion. *Socius*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023116664351>
- Wu, H., Garza, E. & Guzman, N. (2015). International student's challenge and adjustment to college. *Education Research International*, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/202753>

#### **How to cite:**

Uleanya, C. & Rugbeer, Y. 2020. Investigation of First-year Learning Experiences in a Rural University in South Africa. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 8(1), 29–46. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v8i1.3824