

Exploring Academic Difficulties Facing First-Year Undergraduate Students at the Institute of Adult Education, Tanzania

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study was to explore the academic difficulties faced by undergraduate students during their first year of studies at the Institute of Adult Education in Tanzania. A qualitative approach was employed in the study and purposive sampling technique was applied. Fifty (50) first-year students and 6 facilitators were interviewed in 2018. The interviews were conducted according to the principles of in-depth interview. A semi-structured interview schedule and tape recorder was used to ensure accuracy of the research. The findings indicated that academic writing, was an extremely daunting one. The participants also revealed that most first year students have either very little, or no computer literacy and, consequently, are either unable to gain access to materials from the library and other internet sources. They also explained that they find referencing, in the form of both in-text citations and compiling lists of references, very difficult. Other difficulties were workload and transition challenges. The comments made by the students and facilitators could be considered by the institute to improve quality of education during the first year of study.*

Keywords: challenges, first-year, students, Tanzania

1. Introduction

The first year of university life is a crucial time for students as a key transition is taking place. As well as becoming familiar with their discipline areas, they are becoming university students and are 'active participants' in this socialization process (McInnis, 2001). For many, it is the first time away from home where they will have the freedom to make their own decisions. During this year students gain new experiences, new knowledge, and new understandings of themselves. Many first year students look forward to attending college, as it brings new people, fresh ideas, and new skills into their lives (Simpson and Frost, 1993). However, it is commonly known that the transition into college is often accompanied by challenges as well. The transition from high school to college is an exceedingly complex phenomenon, which requires adjustment to a new set of academic and social systems (Terenzini et. al., 1993). Many first year students undergo the most significant changes of their lives while transitioning into college (Simpson and Frost, 1993). The increased personal freedom that occurs during the first year can be experienced as liberating and frightening (Mudhovozi, 2012). Thus, the experience of going to college is complex, and the transition into college life can be loaded with obstacles that may hinder students' academic success (Watton, 2001). This is a time fraught with difficulties for students. Educators and scholars addressing these difficulties need to identify which difficulties to address and how to support students in overcoming them. According to Abdullah et al. (2009) students who are able to adjust well in campus are found to display greater academic performance compared to those who have difficulty to adjust to university life. Students joining universities need every support to ensure that they settle fast with a smooth transition to the university life. This sentiment was also expressed by (Bennett, 2003) who noted that the first years' orientation transition to university requires a collaborative effort that draws on good will of

university librarians, lecturers, non-teaching staff, ICT experts, mentors, caterers among others to help students maximize their learning, and use of modern technology. The situation creates a need for adequate and efficient support services available to up take them. In support of this concern, this study intended to explore academic difficulties facing first year students. Understanding these experiences has positive implications for helping students to engage with their difficulties and develop resilience.

1.1 Problem Statement

First-year students have to make a lot of adjustments. Students face difficulty in adjusting to a completely new lifestyle. University life is totally different from living at home and going to high school. For example, many students are living alone and adjusting to being alone is difficult. Furthermore, students get a lot of freedom since they are renting or living alone. Students joining universities and other higher learning institutions in Tanzania experience academic challenges. Yet they are expected to settle fast in the university life. No study have been carried out on student's challenges with respect to the matter. The problem of this study was to explore academic difficulties facing first year students during their first year of studies at the Institute of Adult Education in Tanzania.

1.2 Aim and Objective of the Study

Given the context which I have described above, the aim of the study was to explore academic difficulties facing first year students that had an impact on the successful completion of the first year of study. The objective of the study was twofold: firstly, to determine academic challenges facing first year students at the institute; and secondly, to find out the strategies of overcoming those challenges which could assist more students to be successful in the learning process.

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1.3 Research Questions

The present study seeks to fill the research gap on explore academic difficulties facing first year students during their first year of studies through addressing the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are the challenges do first year undergraduate students regularly confront at the institute?

RQ2: What can be done to improve the situation?

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research approach

This study is set in a qualitative (Atkinson, 2005) paradigm in search for an understanding of a specific phenomenon. Thus, the study is interpretive in nature. Denzin and Lincoln (2000:19) argue that, all research is interpretive; it is guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied. To this end, Creswell (2007) states that:

We conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored. ...We also conduct qualitative research because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue.We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature. ...We conduct qualitative research because we want to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue.

In accordance with Creswell (2013), qualitative research approach is meant to explore and understand a central phenomenon. It therefore has to do with understanding the process, social and cultural context which are in line with various patterns of behaviour. Qualitative methods ask mostly open-ended questions (Danzin and Lincoln, 2011). This enables participants to respond freely using their own words. Qualitative study in this regard gave the participants an opportunity to respond more elaborately and in greater detail without any fear or delay. This is due to the flexible nature of the method that enabled the researcher to ask why and how questions concerning a particular issue (Pop and Mays, 2009).

2.2 Research Design

For the purpose of this study, research design is understood to mean a plan to guide one through the research process, from the beginning to the end (Yin, 2009). Consequently, a research design represents the entire research process; it gives direction and guidance in order to arrive at the intended outcomes (Berg, 2001). This means that when one embarks on the research journey, the research design should be the first priority. This study used a case study design, which according to Cohen et al. (2006) has the objective to

create interpretations of experiences which are so close that uniqueness, context and reality are richly described to the point that a sense of an account from a direct witness is obtained. A case study proved to be a very appropriate means of making use of the verbal accounts of all of the participants regarding the academic challenges faced by undergraduate students. It is also important to note that case studies adopt multiple perspectives, in the sense that the researcher does not consider the voice and perspective of one range of actors only. In the case of this broader study, the perceptions of not only peer facilitators were sought, but also those of other players, such as coordinators and students, who interact with the main target group. This enabled the study to give voice to the powerless as stipulated by Feagin, et al. (2010), who in this particular context were the students

2.3 Selection of Participants

The study from which this paper draws its data constituted the population of one institute in Tanzania. It also involved lecturers as facilitators and all first year undergraduate students at the institute. The sample of the study was limited to first year undergraduate students as well as some lecturers. Creswell (2013) believed that purposive sampling is based on the judgment of the researcher that a sample has typical elements that contains the most typical attributes of the population. Therefore purposive sampling was used because the study adopted a qualitative approach. Fifty first year undergraduate students were used for focus group discussion, and six facilitators for in-depth interviews were purposively selected. A form of 'Group Interview' where the reliance was on the interaction within the group to discuss a topic was supplied by the researcher.

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

This study employed a qualitative approach which permitted the use of different kinds of instruments to gather data, such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). A series of various questions were employed as follow up. The interviews were audio recorded with consent by using available software. Later, the participant were asked to read the transcripts to confirm that their views were accurate, well documented and not distorted. Semi structured interview guide enabled the production of in-depth data for peer academic responses to students' academic challenges at the institute under study.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and analyzed in relation to the purpose of the study. The general analytical procedure was used to analyze the qualitative data based on the key themes that emerged from the audio-tape recording and field notes. After coding the data and identifying categories and developing themes, a matrix of the main theme was presented to vividly demonstrate the academic challenges faced by undergraduate students and the response of peer academic support programmes. NVivo software was used to

determine the frequency of thematic words and as a means for organizing data.

2.6 Credibility and Trustworthiness

The study adhered to a social construction approach following a constructivist paradigm (Patton, 2002). Traditional positivist scientific views of validity, reliability and generalizability did not apply. However, as Patton (1999) asserted, the credibility issue for qualitative inquiry depends on three distinct but related inquiry elements (p.1190). Therefore, the study employed this alternative set of criteria for judging the credibility of the study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) and others (eg. Cresswell, 2009, Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, Silverman and Marvasti, 2008) have suggested qualitative approaches use accepted alternatives to validation.

2.7 Ethical consideration

Ethics is defined as a matter of principled sensitivity to the right of others (Cohen et al, 2007). In this case, ethical consideration protects the fundamental right of participants including respect for privacy while maintaining the highest level of confidentiality. Participant in the study were all encouraged to participate voluntarily without any fear. While conducting in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with the participants, anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout and guaranteed. The participant also signed an informed consent letter to participate in the broader study.

3. Results and Discussion

In this section, the qualitative themes that emerged from the textual data analysis are discussed. It is important to note that the quotes that are used are direct quotations and excerpts from the transcriptions of the qualitative interviews. The themes of experience manifest it in the following heading: writing difficulties, referencing, and computer illiteracy. The results show that the most important academic challenges facing first year students include writing difficulties, computer illiteracy, referencing difficulties, transition, and workload.

Theme 1: Academic Writing Difficulties

First year undergraduate students were asked to explain the academic challenges they face. Majority (72%) of students reported that writing was a very serious problem. Most of the students who participated in this study reported that they could not express themselves well in academic language in their assignments, tests, portfolio and examinations. One of the student, during a focus group discussion, said:

"Writing is very difficult for me. I find it a terrible thing to write or construct good sentences that reflect what is in my mind. Most often, I have the idea, but to put it in a better way becomes problematic and troublesome for me." (SFGD 5).

Likewise, when the students were interviewed on difficulties in writing tasks, 40 students (80%) indicated that they had experienced some degree of difficulty with written tasks at

the institute. Firstly, students had difficulties with the various text structures of both social and scientific writing at the institute. They indicated that they were familiar with the structure of reports from school, but at the institute they are required to use other text structures as well. Secondly, students had difficulties with the amount and detail of content knowledge expected in their subjects. Thirdly, students had difficulties with citation of sources in written tasks. Students indicated that while they had used bibliographies at schools they were not prepared for the emphasis which was placed on appropriate acknowledgement of sources in written tasks at the institute. Finally, students indicated concerns about gaining access to lecturers for guidance and feedback. Students expressed concerns about the difficulties of locating lecturers to ask.

Facilitators were also asked to explain some of the common academic challenges students always bring to them. They said that many first year students complained to them that they were facing problems with writing assignments. As a result, most of the students sought help from facilitators in order to obtain guidance on how to write their assignments. They suggested that these problems may be owing to the fact that most of the students who are admitted to first year courses are not familiar with academic writing, as they had only recently left high school. One of the facilitators said:

"Students come from high schools and some of them are in-service workers who completed high school long time ago, so they need orientation about the institute life. They are faced with issues of assignment writing academically. This is a huge challenge facing not only first year students, but most students because of their disadvantaged backgrounds." (F1 6)

This assessment was echoed by another facilitator in these words:

"Marking student essays in this institute is one of my worst nightmares. I am usually not motivated to mark because the essays are poorly written on all levels. Sometimes I feel like rewriting the essays for the students. I wonder whether they actually read these essays before submission..." (Facilitator response)

Data gathered from the focus group discussions with undergraduate students and the in-depth interviews with facilitators revealed that, there are common academic challenges faced by first year students at the institute. It may be assumed that these challenges hindered their academic performance, thereby affecting rates of retention and throughput, making it imperative to conduct a thorough investigation into the academic challenges encountered by students.

Theme 2: Computer illiteracy

Another challenge which emerged from the data concerned the difficulties which first year students experienced while attempting to acquire the level of computer literacy needed to study effectively. The facilitators explained that most of the students had no prior knowledge of computers when they arrived at the institute. This made it very difficult for them to

search for study materials, type their assignments and submit them online, as they had not been exposed to this technology at high school. The comments of one of the facilitators appear below.

"These days, we have the greatest challenge, which is the use of computers. This is a problem, because we are trying to stop students from submitting hard copies of their work." (FI 5).

Although many of the facilitators agreed that a lack of computer literacy posed great difficulties for first year students, relatively few of the students in the focus group discussions acknowledged it as a great problem. Some of the students explained that their friends usually helped them with the typing of their assignments. It is obvious that students, who are not familiar with the use of computers when they arrive at the institute will encounter difficulties. This is contrary to what is reported in developed countries. For example, in 2004, 80% of Austria's 20–29 year olds had Internet access and 75% of university and high school students used a computer daily (Integral, 2005). This study can thus assume that in general, students entering university level in developed countries have good basic computer skills than those from developing countries.

Theme 3: Referencing difficulties

Many students, during the focus group discussions, mentioned the fact that they do not know how to cite sources when they write assignments. They also explained that they have great difficulty in arranging the references at the end of their assignments. These problems were explained by one of the students in these words:

"We have never been taught how to cite sources properly in our assignments that we write and submit to our lecturers. We can't distinguish between the different referencing styles in the assignments, nor do we know how to put all the references together. We hear that there are different styles of citations and referencing such as APA-Style, MLA, and Harvard-citation and so on." (SFGD 6).

In a similar vein, some of the facilitators stressed the fact that many students' particularly first year students, could not cite the sources of information which they obtained from a textbook, a book chapter, a journal or an internet source. They maintained that it was even worse when it came to arranging referencing according to the required style prescribed by their lecturers. One of the facilitator said:

"In most cases, students don't know how to cite sources they used in their assignments. For example, some students will copy the whole internet website, in most cases very long. They also have problems with coming up with a coherent referencing list at the end of an assignment. If referencing is a challenge to some staff members, what do you expect from first year students? Their own challenge must be formidable and we are here as facilitators to help them succeed in their academic work." (FI 2).

Although the first year students reported that they found referencing very difficult, some of the facilitators agreed that it was difficult. Even though students tend to regard

referencing as being very difficult, most of the peer facilitators did not agree. Consequently, the problems experienced with referencing should not be regarded as having a similar magnitude to those concerning deficiencies in academic writing skills. Referencing is clearly not as difficult as students tend to think that it is, and they are able to ask their facilitators to show them how to cite references and to compile lists of references at the end of their assignments.

Theme 4: Transition

It is acknowledged that the transition from high school to higher learning institution is a challenge for the majority of new first-year students (Green, et al. 2009; Scott 2009). It was the same for many of the students in this case. It emerged as a challenge for fourteen students from the start in written reflection no. 1 (October, first semester) and the students reported it as a reason why they had failed some of their modules at the end of the first semester in written reflection no. 2 (October, beginning of the second semester). Responses were:

Adjusting to university life was hard.

It was difficult to adapt myself to the new challenges at university.

Fitting in and working hard is very hard to adapt to.

I'm used to education being strict and structured, but in higher learning things are not structured, you may attend lectures anytime, you may postpone to write a test etc.

I see how different university or institute is from school. It takes a while to adapt and to get use to the way the University works.

It is a very stressful experience, lots of things to learn

The responses above indicate that the students experienced their transition from high school to the Institute environment as challenging. Student no. 20 explained that he was used to a schooling system in which education was strict and structured, but that at university things are not structured, you may attend lecturers anytime, you may choose not to write a test or you may post pond. He thus found the transition from school to institute challenging, especially the fact that he was free to do whatever he wanted without anyone standing on top of him. Considering one is coming from high school whereby they were monitored from the minute they wake up to minute they go to sleep, with a strict program to direct every activity; on landing to university it then becomes quite a challenge to program oneself without supervision from the parents or lecturers. One has to therefore develop self-discipline in order to be able to make and adhere to his or her own schedule based on their course work and still enjoy the freedom. Not using one's freedom wisely could result in one doing things that are not conducive to or productive for studying and could have tremendous implications, as Yorke and Longden (2004) suggest. But this student also had other challenges to learning. He had difficulty understanding some of the modules and he had serious financial challenges as well. All these challenges could have accumulated to such an extent that he could not deal with or overcome them all even if he had the will to learn (Barnett, 2007). He therefore,

succumbed to his challenges and he had passed only five of the eight modules that he attempted in the first semester.

Perspectives on Transition

As students settle into the program, there appears to be a marked increase across courses in the amount of time students report studying. Many attribute this time period as a time of transition and adjustment to university life and learning:

"Much of the first year workload comes from the fact that people have to get adjusted to university life before too much stress is put on. A lot of people are living without their parents for the first time and many students come from far and have many things to adjust to."

"It took a while to get used to university mainly because we had to figure out that maybe some lectures aren't worth going to, because other professors are better or just that your prof isn't very good and YouTube is better."

While the reason for this is not clear, it does suggest that students may be adjusting to substantial differences between what they anticipated would be and what is required in a University program. The challenge of first-year transition across disciplines is well-documented, though the role transition plays on perspectives of student workload realities warrants further investigation.

Theme 5: Workload

Students also face a common problem of managing the workload. Course work is often bulky requiring writing numerous assignments from the various lecturers as well as reading for the continuous assessment tests (CATs) and end of semester examinations. This may pile up to huge amounts especially if one keeps on procrastinating. Traditional definitions of workload incorporate the time needed for contact and independent study, the quantity and level of difficulty of the work, the type and timing of assessments, the institutional factors such as teaching and resources, and student characteristics such as ability, motivation and effort (Bower, 2012). First-year students are often confronted with far higher volumes of work than they experienced at high schools (Price and Maier 2007). However, a lack of planning and time management leading to procrastination and late or non-submission of coursework could also be a reason why students perceived the workload as heavy. Students discovered in their first year that they have to take far more responsibility for their studies by scheduling a workload that may seem impossible. As student no. 20 notes:

Now that I am putting my whole effort but still I don't make it. Too much is expected from us, e.g. the work to have in order to pass.

Student no. 3 reported in written reflection no. 1 that she expected institute to be different from high school and that hard work was needed. She wrote:

At first I didn't know what to expect, I just knew an institute is at a higher level than high school and that I had to work harder and would be left alone meaning lecturers won't stand behind me to hand in a task/assignment.

It seems as if these two students realized from the start of their studies that institute would be demanding and challenging and that hard work was required. It is as if they adopted a pragmatic approach to deal with the demands of the workload because they realized that they had to take responsibility for their own learning. But Student no. 20's remark about too much is expected from us could also be valid. Johnson et al (1995) states the more pressure placed on students to achieve and the more difficult the material to be learned, the more important it is to provide social support within the learning situation. They argue that challenges and social support must be balanced if students are to cope successfully with the stress inherent in learning situations and that is why the student's remark could be considered as valid.

Ten other students also reported the workload as a challenge to their academic success. Their responses included:

One of my biggest challenges is the workload that one gets at university.

My challenges are coping with all the work at once.

The stress and heavy workload at campus.

Another challenge is the workload. Each subject gives you assignments to do and test to write and many of us can't cope.

Some of the lecturers delay in teaching the course, and this lead to have the load of work thereafter few days before doing semester examinations

Their responses imply that they were struggling to handle the workload because the workload was perhaps too much or because they did not know how to apply effective time management techniques. This is based on the fact that it was the same students who reported a lack of time management techniques and two of them reported given into peer pressure as well. As explained earlier, if students do not plan and manage their time effectively, they could perceive the workload as heavy and will find it challenging. The consequences for not handling the workload are similar to those of ineffective planning and time management. The workload challenge was also identified in the studies conducted by Louw (2005).

As regards ways in which the challenges faced by students can be addressed, students suggested that the institute should draw a specific programme to cater for adult learners and other students at the institute. The other measures suggested were that some topics such as those which were too bulky and wide in scope should be reviewed in order for students to concentrate with moderate pressure in any given semester. As one male student in a face-to-face interview stated:

"Group discussions really play a cardinal role in preparing students for examinations and tests." The bulkiness of the courses poses a great challenge to most students. You find even a very intelligent students

failing some courses due to having a lot to study and comprehend in a short specified time.

The respondents also indicated that the lecturers were too fast as they delivered their lessons in order to complete the course. To this effect, they proposed that the curriculum should be reviewed to reduce the amount of work to be covered in a semester. Of all the responses, the issue of reducing on the workload was very prominent by all (50) respondents. Likewise, students generally come at the institute with few expectations and with little notion of how to be successful; they often view it as a continuation of high school. For example, Lowe and Cook (2003) reported that nearly a third of their cohort of first year students expected that lecturers would use similar teaching styles to those they had experienced at school. Thus, students found themselves unprepared for the more relaxed and informal style of teaching they encounter at the institute.

Measures which were suggested by students to overcome difficulties

Providing adequate latest reference books and journals in adult education and other fields of study, providing introductory lectures, improved internet facilities, building hostels to accommodate more students at the institute, encouragement to students to work in groups and study consistently and providing the necessary leaning facilities such as computers etc. for practical lessons. Establishing new curriculum documents should create space for intensive academic reading and writing activities which allow for experimentation with different writing challenges. These activities should promote and encourage critical self-reflection on academic writing exercises (Fernsten and Reda, 2011).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

The findings revealed that there were some academic difficulties faced by first-year students at the institute under study. The students who participated in the study explained that while they may have a particular idea or a particular understanding of what they have been taught, the prospect of trying to express it coherently, in writing, is always an extremely daunting one.

They also explained that they find referencing, in the form of both in-text citations and compiling lists of references, very difficult. As a result, their assignments often fall foul of the regulations concerning plagiarism, owing to their being unable to paraphrase or to acknowledge sources correctly.

The inability to use computers in order to gain access to the vast array of material, which is stored in computer databases and is available on the internet, constitutes a severe stumbling block for any academic pursuits today. The participants revealed that most first year students have either very little, or no computer literacy and, consequently, are either unable to gain access to materials from the library and other internet sources or else have great difficulty doing so.

Lack of computer literacy also stems from the poor socio-economic backgrounds of the students, which resulted in their having no access to computers during their school years were placed at a particularly serious disadvantage at university, where all students are required to obtain access to materials from the library database and the internet and to type their assignments.

This research has explored the difficulties facing first year students at the institute of adult education, Tanzania. The findings have implications for designing, planning and delivering appropriate teaching strategies in education programs for the future. The findings indicated that first year students encounter great difficulties in writing, computer use, referencing, transition and workload.

The students are not expecting differences between writing at school and at the institute at the beginning of the first semester. They come to realize during second semester that they are not adequately prepared for the writing demands required at university.

5. Other Recommendations

Based on the study findings as well as the conclusions, this study recommends the followings:

- 1) Given the challenges identified in this study, it is recommended that first year students be taken through a thorough orientation programmer that ensures that students know where the services are and how to access them.
- 2) This study recommends that, the level of computer literacy and patterns of computer usage of first-year students at the institute of adult education must be critically examined.
- 3) Facilitators should deliver the materials in time to minimize workload to students
- 4) The institute must improve its library to enable students acquire current materials in the learning process.
- 5) The new curriculum documents should create space for intensive academic reading and writing activities which allow for experimentation with different writing challenges. These activities should promote and encourage critical self-reflection on academic writing exercises (Fernsten and Reda, 2011).

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