

*The Effects of Psychological Adjustment on First-Year Students:  
A Case of the University of Namibia, Hifikepunye Pohamba (HP) Campus*

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**Abstract**

This study investigated the psychological adjustment issues that first-year students encounter at the University of Namibia's Hifikepunye Pohamba (HP) campus, as well as its impact on academic achievement. The study sought to explore the psychological adjustment issues that first-year students had, how these challenges affected their academic performance and the techniques they used to overcome those challenges. Data from eighty students (80) were collected, analysed, and integrated using a mixed methods approach based on the convergent parallel design. The methodology included focus group discussions and a web-based survey with closed and open-ended questions. The study used concurrent data-collecting method to better understand the challenges that students face, their tactics for overcoming these challenges, and the consequences for their academic endeavours. The data show that students encountered a variety of psychological and academic issues, such as self-harming, sadness, anxiety, and stress. Students also reported poor attention, difficulty participating in class discussions, frequent forgetfulness, recognizing a drop in academic performance, feeling unhappy when attending classes, missing classes, and experiencing memory loss. The statistics imply that psychological adjustment has a considerable impact on first-year students' academic success. These findings have significant implications for university management, emphasizing the need to restructure operational processes to improve stability, dependability, and effectiveness. Universities can improve overall academic achievements and foster better conditions for learning by addressing psychological adjustment difficulties and promoting student well-being.

Keywords: Adjustment, Stress, Depression, Anxiety, Higher Education

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## **Introduction**

The study investigated the psychological adjustment issues that first-year students confront at the University of Namibia's Hifikepunye Pohamba (HP) campus. It aims to understand how these issues affect students' academic performance and to investigate the tactics used by students to overcome them. The study's focus on the convergence of psychological adjustment, academic performance, and coping mechanisms attempts to provide insights into the elements that influence the educational experiences of first-year university students in this environment. Statistics show that between 2015 and 2022, 11 suicides, 60 suicidal ideations, and over 65 mental health cases were documented. During the same period, over 1856 students sought help with personal and social issues at the student counsellor's office (Asino & Shipena, 2015-2022 report). According to Amakali-Nauseb et al. (2021), students at universities in many parts of the world suffer from stress, depression, and anxiety regularly, which can harm their quality of life and academic performance. An increasing body of evidence suggests that the majority of students find their first year of university difficult (Majumdar & Ray, 2010; Friedlander et al., 2007; Buote, 2006 & Aderi et al., 2013).

Furthermore, students appeared to experience the psychological side effects of stress, such as anxiety, despair, concern, and tension. The transition from high school to university is both thrilling and worrying for first-year students (Yau et al., 2012; Topper, 2007). Individuals' lives are automatically adjusted during life transitions, which include new experiences and adjustments. They experience several challenges that require them to develop the skills needed to negotiate their new circumstances (Farooq et al., 2011; Fateel, 2019; Malefo, 2000). Adjusting first-year students' psychological and academic experiences may result in challenges that affect their academic performance and achievement. The majority of first-year students report that the transfer to school is the most stressful adjustment period in their lives because it occurs during a critical developmental time [adolescence]. Jackson (2013) emphasizes that the failure to regulate transition concerns may result in higher psychological pain. The figure below depicts that the majority of students engage in self-harming behaviours, sadness, difficulty sleeping, tension, and hopelessness.

## **Theoretical Framework**

To better comprehend first-year students' psychological adjustment to university life, the study used Albert Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). The Social Cognitive Theory holds that learning is influenced by cognitive, behavioural, and contextual aspects (Bandura, 2001). Bandura argues that learning takes place in a social context, such as a university setting, where the individual, environment, and behaviour interact dynamically and reciprocally. As a result, SCT is deemed appropriate for this study because, through observational learning and engagement with counselling unit staff and peers, first-year students can be encouraged to make healthy adjustments and positive improvements in their lives.

## **Psychological Adjustment Issues Among First-Year Students**

Scholars have extensively researched psychological adjustment challenges, and they have identified stress, depression, anxiety, nervousness, tension, pain in the neck or shoulders, migraine headaches, insufficient resources, financial problems, fear of failure, and academic overload, such as tests and assignments (Aderi et al., 2013; Yau et al., 2021; & Fateel, 2019). In Hako and Shikongo's (2019) study, a sizable proportion of students (42.4%) reported a

lack of stress management skills, which hampered their academic success. Students believed that worry distracted them from learning and ultimately harmed their academic progress. In a similar case in South Africa, Sommer and Dumont (2011) and Malefo (2000) identified motivation, self-esteem, stress and their capabilities as psychological factors that impede learning. Though the relationship between university adjustment and turnover is critical, a focus on developing and monitoring university adjustment indicators is required if they are to serve as an effective warning system for higher education institutions.

### **The Impact of Psychological Adaptations on Academic Achievement**

Mahmood and Iqbal (2015), Malik and Khalid (2012), and Nazli and Irfan (2009) used the Reynolds Adolescents Adjustment Screening Inventory (RAASI) to investigate young students' psychological and behavioural issues that are directly related to their academic achievement. The findings revealed a negative and significant relationship between psychological adjustment and academic achievement among students who passed the O' level. These results contradict multiple studies that have found a strong positive link between psychological adjustment and academic achievement in kids (Gold, 1978; Larson & Richards, 1991; Searle & Ward, 1990; Hallinan & Kubitschek, 1991).

### **Strategies to Reduce Adjustment Problems Among First-Year Students at Universities**

There have been several initiatives to assist students with the psychological process that they go through during their first year of university. Hazard and Carter (2018) recommend that first-year students change their behaviours and mental processes to achieve academically, culturally, emotionally, financially, cognitively, and socially. According to Majumdar and Ray (2010) and Tuna (2003), university students are expected to engage in greater amounts of learning than they did in secondary school. As a result, students must evaluate how they will adapt to meet the rising requirements of higher education. Having the necessary skills and information is critical for success with this transition. University students appear to interact with people of varied nationalities, religious beliefs, ages, and physical abilities in a variety of settings. These variables will vary from social to intellectual to personal. The extent to which a student benefits from these multicultural connections is determined by their ability to adjust to new cultures; one way to embrace diversity in higher education is to be open and accepting of differences.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a mixed methods approach through a convergent parallel. The method involved collecting, analysing and integrating quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018). The data were collected concurrently using focus group discussions and a questionnaire with both closed and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was sent through Moodle to all first-year students [2023 cohort: 280] which constitutes the population of the study. The total number of students who completed the questionnaire online was (80): 28.5% and a portion of 21 students purposively sampled participated in the two focus groups administered by the student counsellors. Both male and female students participated in the study. However, the majority were female (72.5%), while the male (27.5%) were primarily first-time university students. The age group varied from 18 to 30 years (18-20=57.5%; 21-25=33.8%; 26-30=7.5%; 30+=1.2%). The Secondary department had the most participants (57.5%), followed by Upper Primary (28.7%) and Lower Primary (13.8%).

## **Data Analysis**

The researchers transcribed and analysed the data from both approaches, identifying parallels and differences. The quantitative data analysis was carried out using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, while the qualitative data analysis was done using theme analysis. The five interrelated procedures of theme analysis led to the examination of qualitative data: (1) familiarization; (2) eliciting topics; (3) coding; (4) elaboration; and (5) interpretation and checking. This enabled the findings from the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative databases to be validated and supported one another. This allowed us to confirm and reinforce the conclusions drawn from the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative databases (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018).

## **Research Ethics and Procedures**

The Decentralized Ethics Committee (DEC) of the University of Namibia was contacted to request an ethical clearance certificate. Permission to gather data was obtained from the University of Namibia's Research Ethics Committee (UREC). After receiving approval to conduct the study, the researchers sent a letter to prospective participants detailing the study's objective and conditions. The first-year students provided consent to participate in the study. First-year students were advised that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any moment if necessary, and that the information they supplied would be kept strictly confidential. Participating in this study would have no negative consequences for students. Students were told that their names would not be disclosed throughout the study. The acquired data would be saved in an encrypted file and erased after five years.

## **Conclusion**

### **Findings: Quantitative Results**

#### *Feelings That Students Experienced*

According to the report, 40% of students said they were excited to be at university, 38% were enthusiastic, 15% were nervous, and 5.6% were terrified. As seen in Table 1, a significant proportion reported engaging in self-harming behaviour (12), with a minor number (3) suggesting it was a consistent occurrence. Similarly, a substantial number of students (8) stated that they felt depressed, although a bigger proportion (45) reported having such symptoms on occasion. Anxiety, uneasiness, and tension were common among participants, with a significant proportion (48) identifying these sensations as consistent. Furthermore, the students discussed a variety of psychological obstacles they encountered during their first year at university. This included anxiety about getting great grades and feeling overwhelmed by academic pressure. Many students described emotions of loneliness, social anxiety, pressure from professors, and peer pressure as a result of their newfound independence. Common sensations were fear of coping and failing tests, as well as emotions of powerlessness when unable to handle difficulties. Some students reported feeling emotionally unstable and unhappy as a result of the new environment, whereas others lost interest in their academics and were humiliated by security officials and senior students. These findings are consistent with previous research, indicating that psychological problems are widespread among first-year university students (Majumdar & Ray, 2010; Friedlander et al., 2007; Buote, 2006 & Aderi et al., 2013). Such findings highlight the necessity of addressing mental health concerns and implementing support mechanisms in university settings to promote student

well-being and academic success. Overall, these difficulties left many students feeling dissatisfied with the unfamiliarity of university life and new methods of doing things. Table 1 below displays students' feelings.

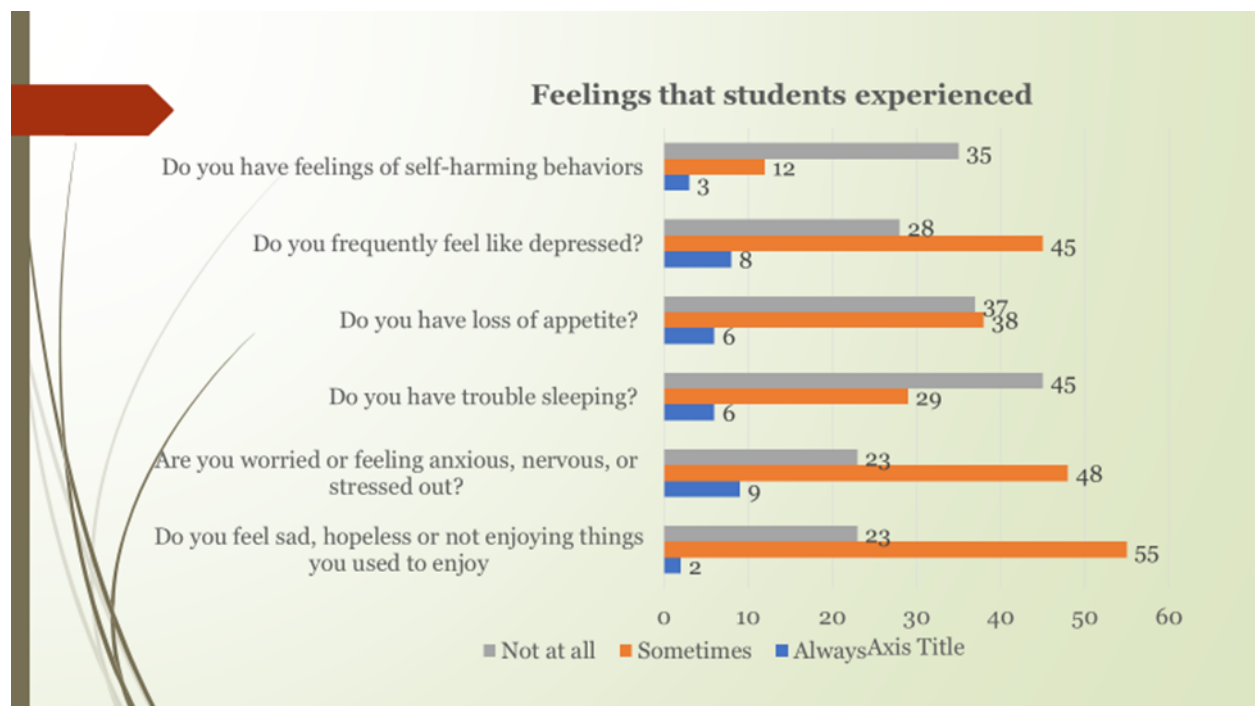


Table 1 displays the students' responses to the questions about their feelings throughout the transition to the university setting.

### ***Academic Aspects That Influence Student Achievement***

As shown in the table below, a considerable number of students reported difficulty maintaining consistent study habits. While some reported always difficulty (3), a considerably greater number (42) admitted to having similar issues sometimes. This shows that developing successful study routines could be a common challenge. Furthermore, 9 students reported feeling overwhelmed while studying regularly, with another 45 experiencing it on occasion. Furthermore, forgetting information readily was a common challenge, with both "always" (9) and "sometimes" (51) respondents emphasizing the issue. These characteristics could have a substantial impact on students' capacity to recall and apply information. Furthermore, the study found a disturbing tendency of students failing to attend all classes (7 always) and having difficulty concentrating in class (12 always, 46 occasionally). These flaws could cause large gaps in their grasp of the content. This disengagement may be evident in the large proportion of students (13 consistently, 45 occasionally) who reported a decline in academic performance. Finally, and perhaps most troubling, a significant proportion of students (17) reported never participating in class discussions, indicating a lack of involvement or confidence. Furthermore, a significant number (10) claimed that they had never felt joyful attending lessons, which could point to a larger problem with motivation or the learning environment itself.

Table 2 below illustrates academic factors that influence students' transition to university.

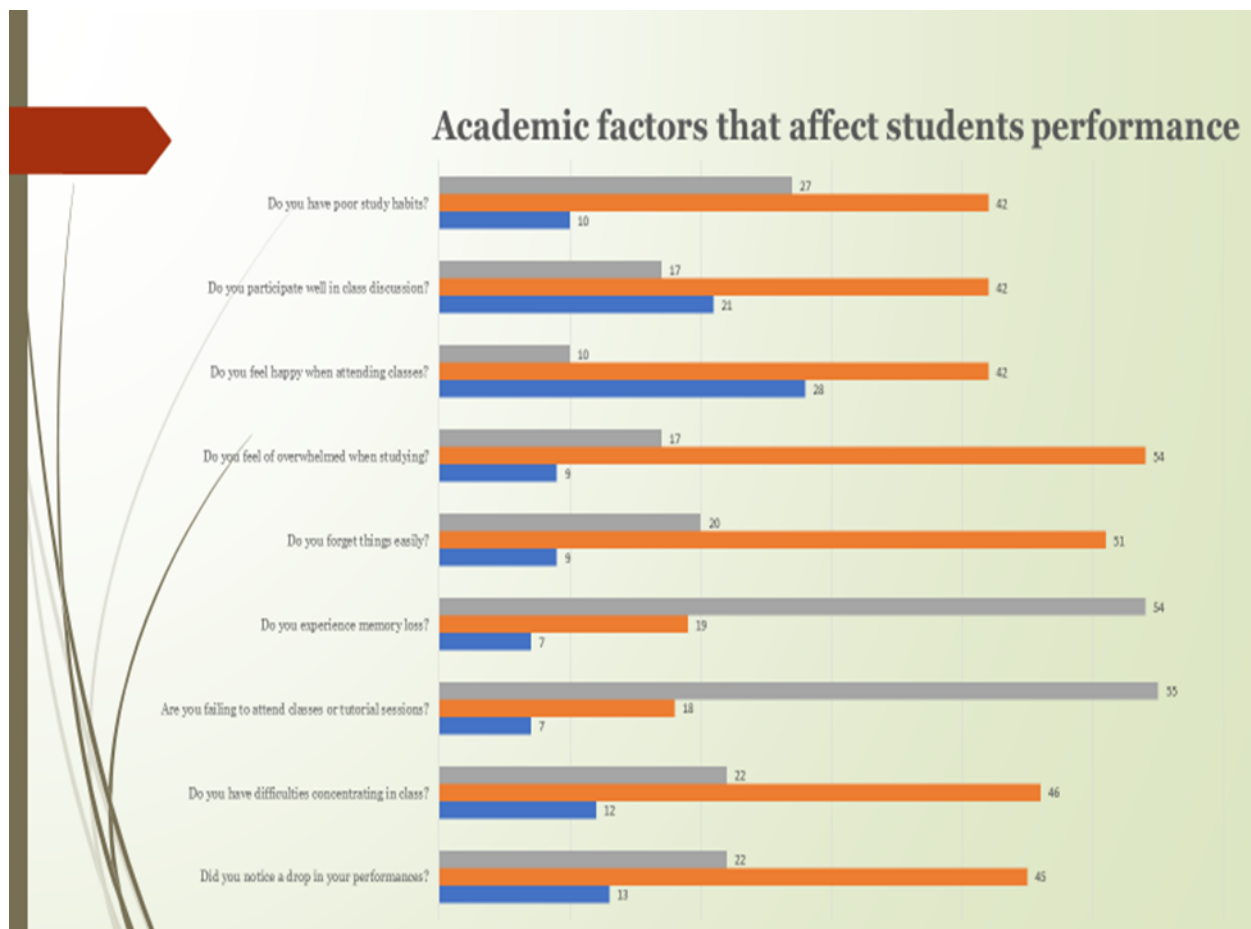


Table 2 displays the students' responses to the questions about academic factors that affect their academic achievement.

## Qualitative Results

### *Psychological Challenges*

According to the study, a large proportion of students reported having difficulties that could have an impact on their academic performance. Some students experience emotional instability and depression as a result of their new environment. They are stressed because they have too much independence, and peer pressure, and are concerned about acquiring a student loan to pay for their studies. These obstacles were divided into three categories, as detailed below: stress and anxiety: A considerable proportion of students expressed concern about earning higher grades. Student #4 stated,

*"I am so scared, you guys." When I applied here, I wanted biology and chemistry, you know? That's what I chose. But then they assigned me chemistry and physics! Physics! I've never touched the stuff! What if I just...? fail? I mean, I have never failed anything before. "Ugh, this is terrifying."*

Many students reported feeling overwhelmed by academic pressure and helpless when they couldn't figure something out. Students expressed feelings of loneliness, social anxiety, and pressure from lecturers.

One student said,

*"This place is fantastic, don't get me wrong, but man, it's lonely." Being surrounded by people might be smothering at times, but when you're alone, it hits hard. This social anxiety is my worst enemy. I want to make friends, I do, but talking to new people feels like giving a lecture to a large group of people."* [Student #10]

Some students also reported feeling emotionally unstable and depressed in their new setting. Students had difficulty adapting to new situations and losing interest in their schoolwork. Another individual commented,

*"Ohhh...mmm... On top of that, the lecturers are piling on the pressure." It feels like there's an endless pile of work to be done, and they expect us to somehow magically know how to accomplish everything. Ugh!* [Student #11]

On the same topic, one student stated,

*"And don't even get me started on this whole 'independence' thing." Sure, having independence is great, but sometimes I miss having someone tell me exactly what to do. It's all a little overwhelming, you know? The university is meant to be fun, but lately, it has seemed stressful."* [Student #19]

### **Academic Factors**

The findings show that students are dealing with many technology-related concerns that may jeopardize their academic performance. One student commented,

*"Ugh, grades are worrying me out! Every time I think about them, I feel as if I am drowning in studies. It's as if there's a vast mountain of information to study and not enough time to tackle it. The worst part is that I'm afraid of failing. What if I do not perform well? How will I explain that to my parents? They demand so lot from me, and the thought of disappointing them kills me. I just wish there was a way to feel less overwhelmed and more in control."* [Student #8]

A large proportion of students reported problems using university online platforms such as Moodle or the school site. One student mentioned that:

*"the university environment is already tough enough, you know?" But lately, it seems like there's a whole new hurdle and struggle with technology! Ugh, I swear I am not good with them. For example, I struggle to complete and submit assignments online and make deadlines when I can't even figure out how to save a document."* [Student #16]

These challenges included finding class notes and having trouble using printing services. The results revealed that several students lacked fundamental computer skills. This made it difficult to complete homework and take quizzes or tests online. Another one said,

*"And don't even get me started on online tests!" I get so worried that the computer kicks me out before I finish. It happened once before, and I can assure you that scrambling to log back in while the clock ticks down are not fun. I simply wish I was*

*more tech-savvy. Maybe then the university wouldn't seem so overwhelming."*  
[Student #20]

Students also expressed anxiety over online examinations and quizzes, maybe due to new formats or technological issues. In other situations, students reported marks missing from the online portal, which could be related to technical issues with university systems.

### **Strategies to Avoid Adjustment Problems Among First-Year Students**

The study attempted to uncover solutions for the university to assist students in adjusting to their new surroundings. Several solutions aimed to directly address student worries and challenges. These included mandated counselling sessions to help students cope with academic and social pressures. Motivational speakers were also suggested to inspire and encourage pupils. Furthermore, unfettered Wi-Fi connectivity would enable them to use online tutoring materials. One student stated,

*"It is difficult for us to obtain information on time, especially since those of us who do not have smartphones do not join WhatsApp groups for information exchange. Therefore, it is better if the information is communicated both online and in print (Poster and notice board)."* [Student #14]

The recommendations further emphasized creating a supportive and inclusive campus environment. Activities and events fostering connections among students were suggested. Open communication channels were also highlighted, including suggestion boxes, designated support staff, and online resources. This would ensure students feel comfortable seeking help when needed. Another one added:

*"It is really important to have different ways for us students to speak up or get help when we need it. Like, Suggestions boxes are cool because we can drop our thoughts or worries there without feeling awkward. And having support staff, like counsellors, who we know are there to listen and help us out, that's reassuring. Oh, and online stuff too, you know? Sometimes it is easier to type out what has become in our minds rather than saying it out loud. Making sure there are all these options makes us feel like it is okay to ask for help when we need it."* [Student #13]

Finally, the study proposed promoting student well-being through information on healthy habits like exercise, stress management, and healthy eating, empowering students to take charge of their physical and mental health.

### **Implications of the Study**

This study reveals a concerning trend of psychological challenges like stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness among first-year students. Recognizing these issues is critical, as they can significantly impact academic performance. Students struggling emotionally may find it difficult to concentrate, participate, or maintain consistent study habits, leading to a decline in grades. Universities must prioritize student well-being by providing readily available counselling services and fostering a supportive campus environment. Organizing activities to build connections, offering stress management and healthy habit resources, and ensuring open communication channels are all crucial. Additionally, improving access to academic resources like library materials, technology, and basic computer skill support is



essential. The study also highlights the need for policy review. Instances of student mistreatment warrant revising university practices to promote a respectful and inclusive environment. Finally, the research suggests implementing tailored support strategies like mandatory counselling, motivational speakers, and improved Wi-Fi access for online resources. By offering multiple avenues for help, universities can empower first-year students to thrive. All in all, the implications of the study emphasize the importance of addressing psychological adjustment challenges and providing holistic support to promote the well-being and academic success of first-year university students.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study, like any other, has limitations. The use of self-reported questionnaires may be affected by participants' desire to give socially desirable answers or difficulty recalling experiences. Furthermore, the findings may not apply to other universities due to the unique environment of the HP campus and its cultural context. Finally, the study focused on the HP campus and may not reflect the experiences of first-year students across the University of Namibia. Hence, limits the generalizations of findings to other contexts.

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