

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Student Perceptions on their Transition Experiences at a South African University Offering a First-Year Experience Programme

Annah Vimbai Bengesai,\* Vino Paideya,\*\* Prim Naidoo\*\*\* & Sthabiso Mkhonza\*\*\*\*

### Abstract

The transition from high school to university is often a challenge for many students, as they face numerous academic and social adjustments during this time. For the 2020 cohort, these challenges were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic which further exacerbated the existing concerns and uncertainties. This study reports on the perceptions of a cohort of first-year students enrolled in 2020 at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic regarding their transition experiences. The analysis was carried out against the backdrop of a pilot first-year experience programme at one South African university. Data were collected using a survey method from a sample of 299 students who had participated in the pilot programme. A multi-construct approach was used to assess student perceptions on the success of the First-Year Experience programme in providing (i) a supportive learning environment, (ii) assisting students to understand academic demands, and (iii) creating stimulating learning experiences with acceptable levels of reliability (0.66-0.74). Despite facing many transitional challenges at the beginning of the academic year, student responses to questions on the above three factors were affirmative. This suggested that students perceived their experiences of support and interactions within the university as instrumental in assisting them to cope with transitional challenges. These findings provided the necessary guidance for the continuation and improvement of the support given to first-year students.

### Keywords

first-year experience, student integration, transition

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## *Introduction*

Globally, universities have become increasingly concerned with student retention and dropout rates. This is no different at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). Several cohort studies nationally and globally, have shown that many students who enter higher education leave without obtaining a qualification (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2013; Vossensteyn et al., 2015), with the highest attrition occurring in the first year of study. For instance, the average first-year dropout rate for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries is approximately 30%, with the statistics being higher in Italy, the United States of America and New Zealand, where the rate is almost twice the regional average (Vossensteyn et al., 2015). In South Africa, where nearly 50% of students leave before graduation (CHE, 2013), approximately 20% of those who do not complete their degrees leave in the first year of study (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2019).

Although there are many dimensions of student success, the first year has been identified as the most crucial, given that it poses a density of emotional, epistemological and practical transitional challenges for students (Krause et al., 2005; McMillan, 2013; Tinto, 2017). It is a well-documented fact that first-year students are often underprepared for university learning and struggle to adjust to academic expectations (Tinto, 2017). Apart from adjusting to the new academic environment, first-year students may relocate to new cities, necessitating finding suitable accommodation and deciding on degree majors (Bowles et al., 2011). These decisions can leave students feeling anxious and overwhelmed. For the students enrolled in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic compounded their challenges (Visser & Law-Van Wyk, 2021). The prevailing circumstances under which they experienced higher education were unlike any other, with universities nationally and internationally undergoing dramatic shifts, from face-to-face instruction to digital strategies (Rasheed et al., 2020; Aboagye et al., 2021).

Several studies have suggested that these transitional experiences can potentially influence students' attitudes, motivation and decisions to withdraw from their studies (Krause et al., 2005; Lowe & Cook, 2003). Consequently, universities across the globe are under pressure to develop strategies that will improve student retention rates, especially during the first and second years of a degree programme. These strategies, commonly referred to as First-Year Experience (FYE) programmes, aim to promote successful student transition into the university culture, which is key to the student's resolve to persevere despite the odds, by addressing the educational and psycho-social needs of these newly matriculated students entering the academic world (Schreiber et al., 2016).

Although FYE programmes have existed for more than four decades globally (Gore & Metz, 2017), some South African universities, particularly the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), have been slow to catch up. To illustrate: the focus at UKZN since the inception of the academic and monitoring policy in 2009 had been overwhelmingly on at-risk students whose academic performance was below the progression requirements for a degree programme (UKZN, 2009). Hence, academic support initiatives have consistently remained reactive. For an institution with a large undergraduate cohort,

mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds, there is a need for intentional and proactive interventions that support students before they encounter performance problems.

The FYE programme was piloted at the College of Law and Management Studies (CLMS) in 2019 and was in its second year of implementation when the data for this study were collected. As a new programme, some of the core questions that have been at the forefront of our practice have included understanding the activities that work for the students and the challenges they face, and their perceptions of their overall transitional experiences. Given the complexity of the first-year student's experiences, and the diversity of topics covered in the programme, a multi-construct approach was used in the study to assess the students' perceptions on whether the FYE programme had succeeded in (i) providing a supportive learning environment, (ii) promoting an understanding of academic demands, and (iii) creating stimulating learning experiences. This analysis assisted in determining the needs of first-year students at UKZN, identified priority areas and assisted in creating a comprehensive FYE programme that would best meet these needs. We also contend that universities have distinctive characteristics which may influence the corresponding FYE programmes. Hence, the success or failure of each programme should be assessed in line with the particular needs of the particular institution.

The next section describes the CLMS FYE programme, followed by a review of the literature guiding our conceptual and practical understanding of the FYE programme. This is followed by a discussion on the survey methodology used in this study and the emerging results. Finally, the findings, focusing on key trends and lessons emerging from the data, are discussed, and how these findings were used to develop a comprehensive, university-wide FYE programme.

### *The CLMS FYE Programme*

The College of Law and Management Studies' First Year Experience Programme was piloted in 2019, in line with the UKZN Academic Monitoring and Support (AMS) policy and the University Capacity Development Plan, Objectives 1 and 8. The key features of the FYE programme are academic orientation, mentorship support and skills development workshops. The academic orientation component orientates students around undergraduate degree programme requirements, progression rules and curriculum specialisations. FYE peer mentors provide mentorship support and are selected from second, third or fourth-year students with good academic standing. They work with first-year students from orientation onwards and serve as a peer resource that new students can approach with any questions related to their studies throughout the year. Each mentor leads a group of approximately 25 first-year students and holds regular meetings with their mentees through a blended online and face-to-face approach, providing ongoing academic and social support. Skills development workshops are held weekly, with facilitators selected from both academic and student support staff. Topics facilitated during skills workshops include, *inter alia*, how to be a successful online student, reading and writing strategies, time-management, note-taking, discipline-specific study skills, exam preparation and self-motivation.

### *Conceptual Framework*

Tinto (1993) in his most cited theory of student departure, likened the process of persistence to that of becoming incorporated into a community's life which is demarcated into three stages. The first, the separation stage, involves students dissociating themselves from their past communities (e.g. high school), including parting from past habits and affiliations. The second stage is the transition stage, where the student is learning to become part of the new community, while the third and final stage is integration – where the individual becomes incorporated into the life of the university. Although different propositions can be tested at each of these stages, they are nonetheless too diverse to be examined in a single study. Hence, this study focused on the transition stage. During this phase, students learn new rules, expectations, policies and roles in order to develop the *ability to cope with the academic demands*. The transition stage requires students to develop relationships as they engage with others, such as lecturers, tutors and mentors (Tinto, 2017). Tinto also drew attention to what he termed “attributes of effective classrooms”, which include “clear expectations, timely support, feedback on assessment and engaging pedagogies” (Tinto, 2012, p. 4). He further argued that this transition was an “intentional, structured and coherent set of policies and actions that coordinate the work of many programmes and people across campus” (Tinto, 2014, p. 6). With this in mind, the first-year students' transition experiences were explored within the context of an intentional FYE programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

### *Methods*

The study adopted a descriptive survey approach, which saw first-year students completing a questionnaire, comprising background information, the challenges they faced and their perceptions of the FYE strategies in helping them to cope. The focus was on the students' perceptions of their academic difficulties and the support initiatives that might have assisted them in coping with or better understanding the academic demands. In addition, the study was also concerned with the extent to which the teaching environment was supportive of learning and whether the learning experiences were adequately stimulating, given the additional concerns and uncertainties brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. Given that our goal was to gain a holistic understanding of the above three constructs, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) model was selected, which, according to (Child, 2006), allows for illumination of the underlying structure of observed variables. Permission to conduct this study was granted by the UKZN Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC/00000912/2019).

### *Sample*

A total of 1,252 first-year students were enrolled in the CLMS degree programmes in 2020. Although all first-year students were invited to participate, only 1,055 signed up for the FYE programme. Out of these, 309 (24%) responded to the web-based questionnaire, of which 10 were excluded from the analysis due to incomplete information.

## Analytical method

Our analytical method was primarily descriptive and exploratory in nature. We began with a preliminary analysis of the background factors of the sample as well as their motivation for choosing a particular degree programme. To visualise the challenges that first-year students face during the transition stage, we also used a Venn diagram. We opted for this approach because it allowed visualising any overlaps in some of these challenges. To identify the underlying structure of factors which measured students' perceptions of their transition experiences in the context of the FYE programme, we ran an exploratory factor analysis on the survey items. Factor analysis is a data reduction method which condenses many variables (in this case, questions on a questionnaire) into a few factors based on their commonalities (Watkins, 2018).

Given that factor analysis is concerned with relationships between factors, we first tested the suitability of the data (i.e. whether these relationships existed) using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity (Child, 2006). We then used the principal axis factoring (paf) method with a varimax rotation to extract the factors that best explain how first-year students perceived their experiences in the context of the FYE programme. We used the paf method (Table 3) to focus on shared variances between factors to develop (i) a scale for each domain, (ii) determine the number of factors to be retained, and (iii) their relative importance to the scale (Watkins, 2018; Child, 2006). We then named these factors according to their common theme and subjected them to further analysis (Figure 4).

To provide a holistic understanding of the first-year students' experiences, we also included a descriptive analysis of their overall transition experiences and some of the challenges they experienced.

## Results

### Background characteristics

The sample (Table 1) comprised 36.8% (n=110) male students and 63.2% (n=189) female students. Approximately 83% (n=249) identified themselves as black South African, 14% (n=43) Indian and 3% (n=7) coloured. Approximately 25% (n=76) of the students were registered in the Bachelor of Commerce Foundation programme (BCOF), 24% (n=73) Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting (BCOM-A), 19% (n=56) Bachelor of Law, 17% (n=52) Bachelor of Commerce General (BCOM-G), and 11% (n=34) Bachelor of Administration (BAdmin). Bachelor of Business Science (BBusSci) and Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) constituted 2% (n=5) and 1% (n=3) of the sample.

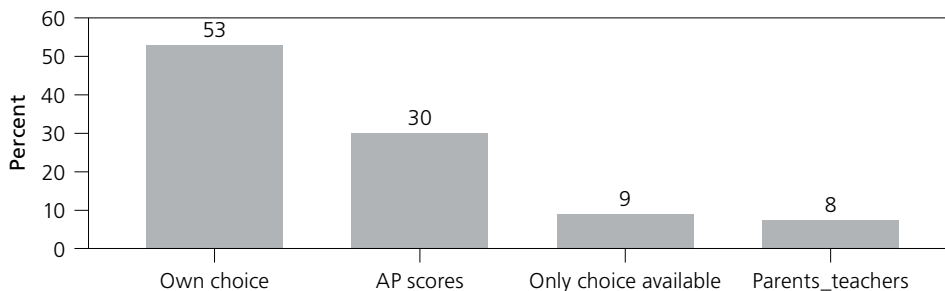
In his theory, Tinto (1993) contended that student intent was a critical aspect of student persistence across the three stages, from separation and transition to integration. While different factors can be used to measure intent, one factor that has a bearing on the transition phase is the student's choice of majors or intended career.

**Table 1: Sample characteristics**

Characteristic	Sample Frequency	Sample %	Population Frequency	Population %
	299		1252	
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	110	36.8	546	43.6
Female	189	63.2	706	56.4
<b>Race</b>				
African	249	83.3	929	74.2
Other	40	16.7	323	25.8
<b>Programme</b>				
BCOF	76	25.4	243	19.4
BCOM-G	73	24.4	239	19.1
BCOM-A	56	18.7	270	21.6
BBusSci	5	1.67	17	1.4
BBA	3	1.00	78	6.2
BAdmin	34	11.4	93	7.4
LLB	52	17.4	312	24.9
<b>First Generation</b>				
Yes	116	38.8	–	–
No	173	57.9	–	–
Not sure	10	3.3	–	–

Figure 1 below indicates the factors that influenced the choice of degree programme among first-year students. It was found that 53% (158) indicated that the choice of the degree was their own, while 30% (n=90) indicated that their admission point scores (AP scores) influenced the choice of the degree. For 9% (n=28) of the students, the programme they enrolled in was the only choice they were offered, while for 8% (n=23), the choice was influenced by either their parents or teachers. These results suggested that nearly 50% of the students in the sample were enrolled in programmes that were not their first choice, a *status quo* that can affect a student's motivation to persist.

#### What influenced your degree choice?

**Figure 1: Factors influencing degree programme choice**

After establishing student intention, the study focused on some of the challenges faced by the students enrolled in these degree programmes.

### Challenges faced by first-year students

A considerable number of student responses indicated that their main challenges were related to the teaching and learning environment (Table 2). Approximately 65% (n=194) experienced significant challenges with adjusting to online learning, 60% (n=178) of students felt challenged by the teaching style, 37% (n=110) struggled with understanding the course content, while 33% (n=98) experienced challenges with self-motivation. In addition, 29% (n=88) were concerned about finances, 20% (n=6) struggled to balance family commitments with their studies, and 16% (n=49) indicated they had mental health-related problems.

In most cases, these challenges overlapped, with some students reporting having experienced more than five of these during their first year of study (Figure 2). Regarding the top four most-experienced challenges, the greatest overlap was between online learning and adjusting to teaching and motivation (14%, n=41), and adjusting to online learning, teaching and understanding the course content (13%, n=39). In addition, 8% (n=23) also experienced all the mentioned challenges. Only 6% (n=19) of the students in the sample did not experience any of these top four challenges.

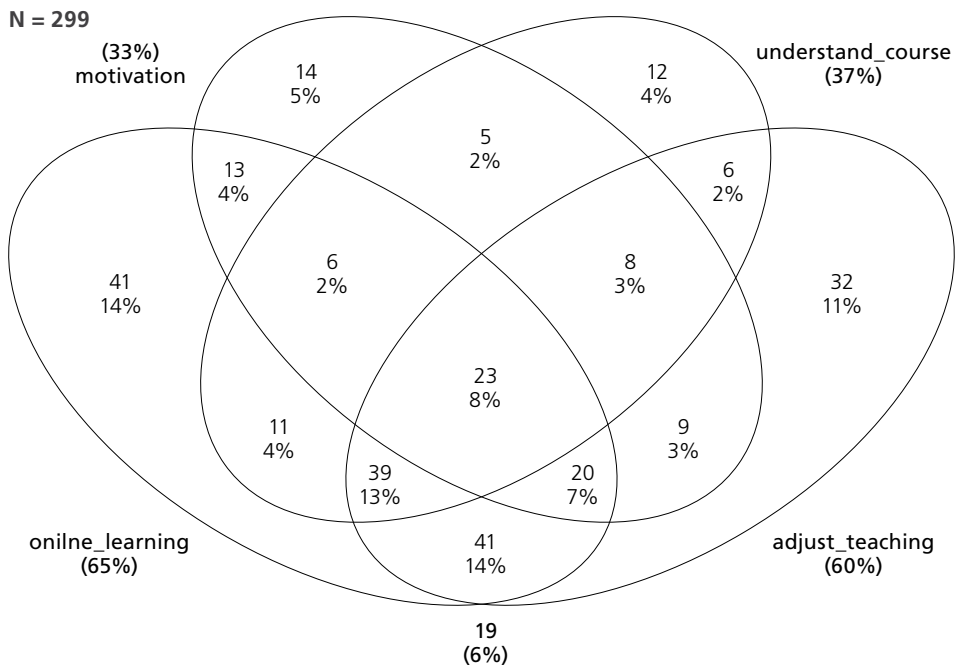


Figure 2: Venn diagram showing the overlap of the challenges faced by first-year students

### Possible withdrawal from studies

Undoubtedly, first-year students experience many challenges as they transition from secondary school into a learning environment defined by the demands of academia (Tinto, 1999). While these challenges might be temporary for some students, they can have deleterious consequences, such as early withdrawal from the university, if not timeously addressed. Hence, the first-year students in this study were asked whether they had considered withdrawing at any point.

**Table 2: Proportion of students who considered withdrawing by risk factor**

Challenge	Freq.	% Experienced challenges	% Considered withdrawing (n=90)
Online learning	194	64.9	75.5
Adjusting to teaching style	178	59.5	60.0
Understanding the course content	110	36.8	42.2
Motivation	98	32.8	51.1
Financial concerns	88	29.4	36.6
Family commitments	60	20.0	21.1
Mental health	49	16.4	21.1

Student responses to the question regarding withdrawal were then cross tabulated with their responses to the question on challenges faced (Table 2). Approximately 30% (n=90) of the students in the sample indicated that they had considered discontinuing their studies before the end of the first year. The key reason for considering deregistration was mainly due to challenges with online learning (75.5%, n=68), adjusting to the teaching style (60.0%, n=54), lack of motivation (51.1%, n=46) and understanding the course content (42.2%, n=38). In addition, 36.6% (n=33) of students who considered deregistering had financial concerns, and 21.1% (n=19) experienced family commitments and mental health challenges, respectively.

### The role of first-year experience strategies in coping with transitional challenges

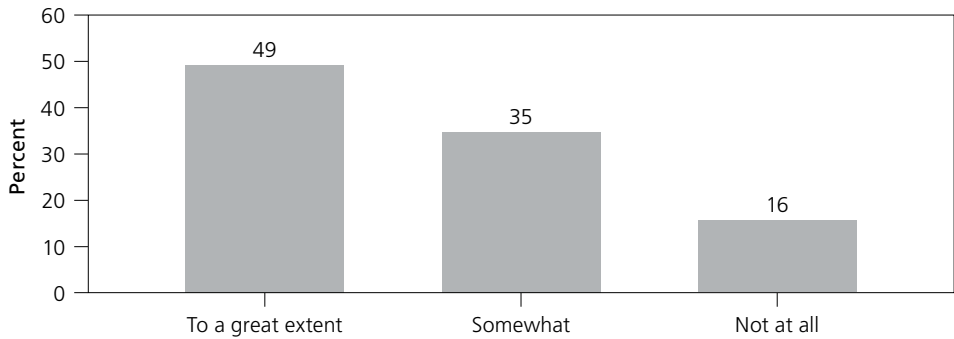
The following analysis focused on student responses to the strategies to support them through their transition experiences. Students were asked to indicate how the FYE interventions influenced their decisions to remain on the programme. Figure 3 below indicates that almost half of the students (49%) attributed their decision to persist with their studies to the FYE programme. Approximately 35% felt that, although the FYE programme influenced their decision to continue, it was not the only determining factor, while 16% of the students indicated that their decision to stay on had nothing to do with the FYE programme.

The next level of analysis presented data from the three EFA scales (*supportive teaching environment, understanding academic demands, and stimulating learning experiences*) developed from Tinto's theory of student integration in the context of the FYE. Factor loadings for



the three scales and the relevant statistics are presented below (Table 3). This is followed by graphical representations of students' overall responses to each scale (Figure 4).

**To what extent did the FYE programme influence your decision to stay on?**



**Figure 3: The role of the FYE programme in students' decisions to remain in the academic programme**

Factor analysis was conducted on 13 items from the questionnaire (Table 3). Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant for all three factors, and the KMO measure of sampling adequacy showed that the strength of the relationships among variables was 0.74 for the first factor, 0.66 for the second factor and 0.73 for the third factor; hence, the data were appropriate for factor analysis. Almost all items loaded with sufficient magnitude on both constructs (i.e. above 0.1), which suggests that the items had sufficient interpretive value for the specified models. The reliability estimate for the supportive teaching environment was 0.79, understanding academic demands, 0.65, and stimulating learning experiences, 0.78.

**Table 3: Factor loadings for supportive teaching environment, understanding academic demands and stimulating learning experiences scales**

Scale Items	Factor		
	1	2	3
<b>Supporting teaching and learning</b>			
My lecturers were helpful	0.165		
My programme was well organised	0.233		
My mentor was helpful	0.546		
The FYE programme helped me adjust to online learning	0.766		
The FYE programme helped me adjust to academic teaching	0.837		
<b>Understanding academic demands</b>			
My lecturers' expectations were clear		0.520	
The programme was what I expected		0.514	
My mentor helped me understand the university requirements		0.364	

Scale Items	Factor		
	1	2	3
<b>Stimulating learning experience</b>			
I am happy with my academic programme			0.245
My chosen programme is aligned with my career goals			0.191
I am happy with the mentorship I received			0.594
The FYE programme helped me adjust to university life			0.782
The FYE programme helped me make new friends			0.728
Percentage of variance	54.2	58.7	53.2
Eigen Values	2.712	1.761	2.662
Cronbach's Alpha	0.788	0.645	0.777

The student responses were analysed using bar graphs of grouped item means. The 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) in Table 4 below, was subdivided into five equal intervals for analysis as follows:

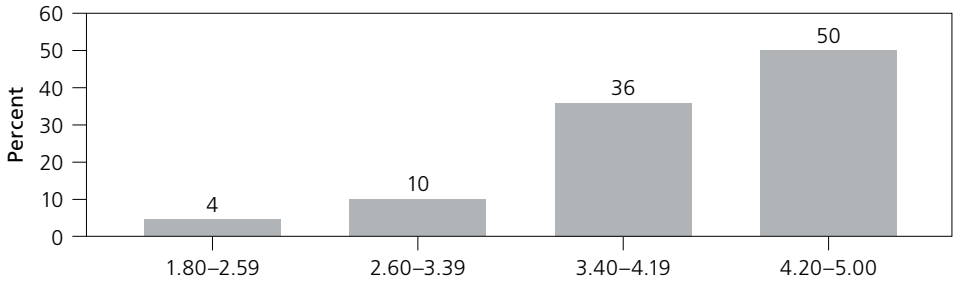
**Table 4: Classification of the mean for the 5-point Likert Scale**

1.00-1.79	Disagree
1.80-2.59	
2.60-3.39	Neutral
3.40-4.19	Agree
4.20-5.00	

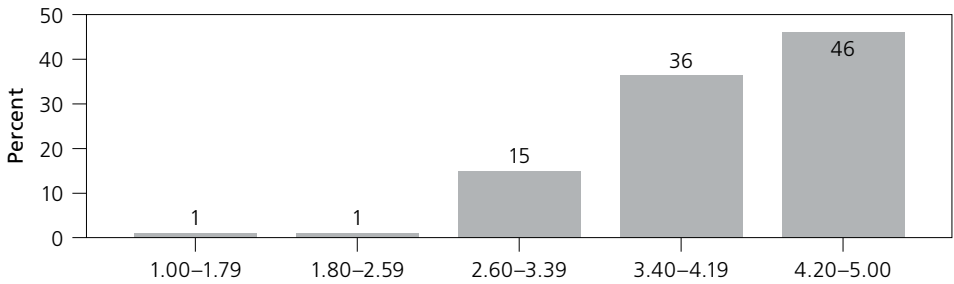
Students' responses to all three items, namely: a supportive teaching environment, understanding academic demands, and stimulating learning experiences, were generally positive (Figure 4 below). Approximately 86% of the students felt that the teaching was supportive. Lecturers were rated as helpful in engaging with the content and the facilitation aspects of online learning. Peer mentors and the FYE programme were deemed pivotal in assisting students to adjust to online learning and the academic teaching styles.

Similarly, 82% of the students in the sample indicated that they understood the academic demands of their different courses. This was attributed to lecturers' clear expectations and the FYE programme, which helped first-year students understand academic requirements. These students also felt that their academic programme met their content, workload and assessment expectations. In terms of stimulating learning experiences, 81% of the students responded in the affirmative. These students indicated overall satisfaction with their entire programme (i.e. the academic curriculum and the available support). They also felt that the academic programme was aligned with their career goals. The overall scale mean for the supportive teaching environment scale item was 4.05 (CI=3.97-4.14); whereas understanding academic demands was 4.10 (CI= 4.00-4.16) and stimulating learning experiences was 3.95 (CI=3.86-4.04).

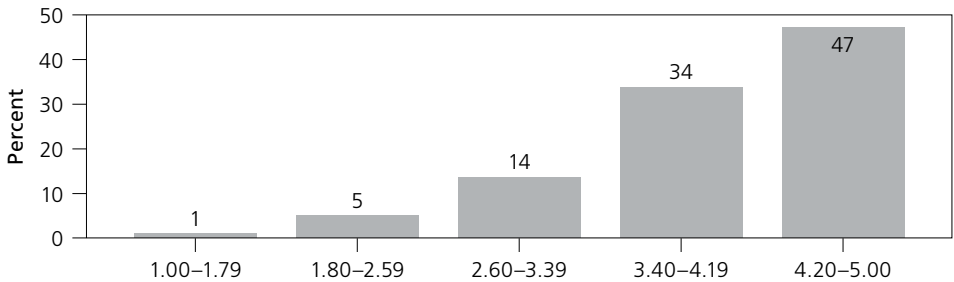
**Distribution of students' responses to items on supportive teaching environment**



**Distribution of students' responses to items on understanding academic demands**

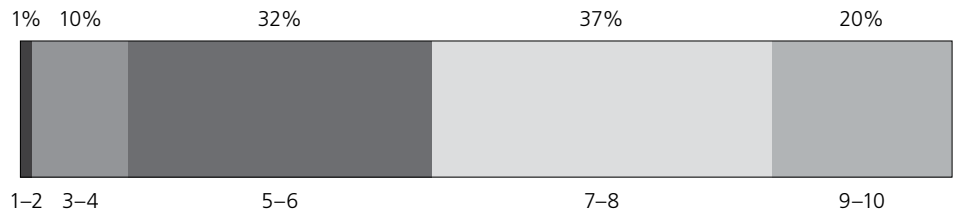


**Distribution of students' responses to questions on stimulating learning environment**



**Figure 4: Students' responses to questions on supportive teaching environment, understanding academic demands and stimulating learning experiences**

Please rate how well you feel you have made the transition to university:



**Figure 5: Overall rating of transition experiences**

Students' self-rated perceptions of the level of their transition by the end of the first year was measured on a scale of 1–10 (Figure 5) where 1 represents poor experience and 10, a great experience. Using this scale, only 20% (n=58) rated their transition 9–10, and 37% (n=109) rated theirs 7–8. In other words, only 57% of the respondents in the survey rated their transition experiences to be above average. Approximately 32% (n=97) rated their transition 5–6, while 11% (n=35) gave a below-average rating of 1–4.

### *Discussion*

This study presented the findings from an FYE survey conducted in 2020. The survey aimed to investigate student experiences of their transition into first-year university studies and the extent to which the intentional transitional opportunities (Tinto, 2014) offered by the FYE programme assisted students in coping with their academic demands. Overall, the findings suggested that first-year students who enrolled in 2020, were enrolled in degrees that were not their first choice and experienced challenges related to preparedness for online learning and the transition to university teaching.

Choosing a degree major is one of the most important decisions students have to make, influencing their entire career trajectory (Stock & Stock, 2016). However, when students are enrolled in degree majors they did not choose for themselves, they are likely to be less motivated, which could negatively affect their academic achievements. Some research suggests that a lack of motivation may also lead to course switching (Astorne-Figari & Speer, 2019), which, although common, comes at a high cost for both the student and the institution. Therefore, there is a need for the university to develop marketing strategies that will reach out to prospective students early on in their high school studies (Bonnema & Van der Waldt, 2008). A well-planned strategy that fosters the student's identification with the university and its degree programmes will also increase the number of enrolments, and forge strong institutional commitment (Tinto, 2017). In the case of UKZN, which identifies itself as a transformative university catering to disadvantaged students, there is a need to identify the information needs and source preferences of different sub-groups within this target population and tailor marketing strategies that reach out to them timeously.

Although the challenges faced by first-year students at the UKZN were varied, for most, these were related to the teaching and learning environment, with significant co-occurrence among the top four challenges. The student's adjustment to online learning was the most concerning issue during the period under study. While the COVID-19 pandemic has made online learning inevitable, students worldwide have struggled with the drastic shift from traditional classroom face-to-face learning to emergency online remote learning (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). The swift move to digital platforms has presented a steep learning curve for both students and academic staff, which was exacerbated by the low-level preparedness amongst students regarding the use of learning management systems such as Moodle (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Combrink & Oosthuizen, 2020). At UKZN, this was notably worse for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who comprised approximately 65% of the student population (UKZN, 2017).

Furthermore, the lockdowns imposed by the South African Government (Combrink & Oosthuizen, 2020) also aggravated the challenges students faced (Barrot et al., 2021). The temporary physical closure of universities implied that students' homes had to become online classrooms; hence it was not surprising that the notable challenges experienced by students in the sample related to limited access to the internet and devices such as laptops, poor internet connectivity and electricity outages in some communities. In addition, students reflected on the high data costs, balancing household chores whilst committing to a study schedule, lack of adequate spaces conducive to learning, and no quiet study time due to overcrowded family households. In contrast to our findings, a systematic review of online learning challenges faced by students in 27 countries found that technological literacy and competency was the main challenge faced by students (Rasheed et al., 2020). In one Canadian study, the authors found that overall, students rated online learning positively, with some indicating that the shift had given them more time with family, while some reported increased anxiety due to the shift (Lemay et al., 2021). Regardless, findings concerning the challenges faced by students in our sample mirror those found at other South African universities (Combrink & Oosthuizen, 2020) and in other developing countries (Aboagye et al., 2021; Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Thus, it can be concluded that the students' online learning experiences might differ in a developing country like South Africa (Rasheed et al., 2020), where they are mediated by resource availability and family conditions. Moreover, these challenges are not only technological or instructional but also social and affective (Lemay et al., 2021).

Students also reported experiencing challenges with adjusting to the academic teaching styles at universities. Due to a lack of exposure to a university setting, students expected the teaching style to be similar to that of a secondary schooling environment. This, however, is not the case in a university setting, and first-year students need to adjust over time and become accustomed to the style of teaching unique to this setting (Krause et al., 2005; Lowe & Cook, 2003) and the heutagogical approach encouraged by lecturers, which qualitatively differs from the pedagogical approach used by teachers in secondary schooling environments (Canning, 2010). Thus, it is to be expected that first-year students, as newcomers in a university setting, would be unaccustomed to the teaching approach and independent learning expectations (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Boughey, 2005).

Understanding the course content, particularly for most second language students at UKZN, is fraught with challenges, as they often lack the language proficiency required at the university level (Mgqwashu & Bengesai, 2016). These proficiency challenges continue to thwart first-year students' attempts to understand course content and disciplinary vocabulary (Mgqwashu & Bengesai, 2016; Boughey, 2005). In addition to language, understanding the course content also depends on the mastery of disciplinary practices and the conceptual and socio-cultural knowledge of particular disciplines (Lin, 2002). To support students' understanding of disciplinary practices and ways of thinking, epistemological access is essential (Schreiber et al., 2016), and this requires that lecturers make explicit rules and conventions that determine what counts as

“appropriate” in constructing academic knowledge. As Tinto (1999, p. 2), points out, “if the *most academically gifted* and *socially mature* students experience some difficulties making the transition from secondary school to the demands of college” (emphasis added), then it can be assumed that the transition experience must be all the more challenging for the *average first-year student* from a disadvantaged schooling background.

Certainly, some of the challenges faced by the students, such as family commitments or financial issues, are beyond the university’s control. However, as the findings emanating from this study revealed, most of the challenges related to the teaching and learning environment were addressed in one way or another via the FYE programme, especially through the assistance of the peer mentors, the first-year lecturers and student academic support services. Although there is room for improvement, the results from this survey suggested that students were generally satisfied with most aspects of the FYE programme (i.e. academic orientation, mentorship support and skills development workshops). Students also reported satisfaction with the supportive teaching environment provided by their lecturers. They reported that the FYE programme assisted them in adjusting to university requirements, teaching approach, online learning, and coping with academic demands, while their lecturers were generally perceived as empathetic and helpful.

The high degree of satisfaction with the mentorship support component is likely due to the social proximity of the peer mentors and/or cognitive congruence with their mentees (Loda et al., 2019). This is because peer mentors and mentees share knowledge, familiar language and similar roles as students (Garcia-Melgar et al., 2021). Thus, peer mentors can explain concepts and requirements at a level that first-year students can access more readily. Tinto (2017, 1993) also argued that supportive staff, positive staff–student interaction and mutual understanding are essential for students’ successful transition into the university milieu. Hence, it is gratifying to note that, despite the many constraints experienced by lecturers at UKZN under remote teaching conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a concerted attempt to support students as best they could.

There are, however, some limitations to this study. The first limitation relates to the sample size. Only 24% of the 2020 CLMS first-year cohort responded to the survey. Although this sample was sufficient for statistical measurement, it is not representative of the student population in CLMS. Hence, the findings should be considered exploratory at best. The second limitation relates to the survey questionnaire. Although reliability tests were conducted, and the items included had sufficient interpretive potential, some omitted questions would have assisted in providing a clearer understanding of the FYE for students enrolled in the CLMS. It is important to note that student satisfaction is complex, multidimensional, and influenced by many factors beyond the variables measured in this study. Apart from the teaching and learning environment and the students’ interactions with the FYE programme, there are other dimensions, such as administrative services, student support services, institutional image, student housing, and student funding, which have been shown to influence the overall experiences of students.

Despite these limitations, the findings from this study, based largely on student perceptions, offer some support for the continued implementation of the FYE programme. Although these findings are preliminary, they suggest a positive link between the FYE programme and the students' perceptions of their transitional experiences, and in particular, the value of the mentorship programme. Although more studies are required to rigorously evaluate the programme in future, for now, it suffices that first-year students at UKZN, much like at many other institutions, both locally and globally, stand to benefit from this kind of programme and the improvements that may follow this research.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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