



Journal of Tertiary Education and Learning (JTEL)

ISSN: 2994-4015 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 3 ISSUE 1 (2025)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

Navigating the Transition to Higher Education: Understanding the Experience among First-Year University Students

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Article Information

Received: December 08, 2024

Accepted: January 12, 2025

Published: February 27, 2025

Keywords

First-Year Students, Higher Education, Transition Theory, Transitional Experience, University Students

ABSTRACT

The transition from high school to university is a pivotal period in students' educational journey and personal development. This study assesses the transitional experience of first-year university students through the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory. A quantitative survey design was employed, and data was collected from 614 first-year university students. Descriptive (mean and standard deviation) and inferential (independent sample t-test and One-way ANOVA) statistics were employed to analyse the data. The results showed that first-year students experienced significant high transitional challenges, including academic, social, financial, and emotional difficulties. There were no statistically significant differences in transitional experience (academic, social, financial and emotional difficulties) based on gender and age. However, a significant difference was found in social challenges based on age category, with students aged 20-25 years experiencing more severe social challenges than those above 25 years. The study's findings supported the transition theory, highlighting the importance of considering the interplay of individual and environmental factors in facilitating a smooth transition to university. Implications for practice and recommendations for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The transition from high school to university is a significant life event that can be both exciting and challenging for first-year students (Baik *et al.*, 2019; Kuh *et al.*, 2006; Tett *et al.*, 2017; Williams & Roberts, 2023). The transition to university is a complex and multidimensional process, requiring students to adjust to new academic expectations, social environments, and personal responsibilities (Cabras & Mondo, 2018; Korhonen, 2021; Schlossberg, 1981; Tinto, 1993). Research indicates that first-year university students often experience a mixture of excitement, anxiety, and challenges as they navigate this new landscape (Cabras & Mondo, 2018; Korhonen, 2021; Wilcox *et al.*, 2005). Many of them feel overwhelmed when making adjustments, ill-prepared for the change, and struggle to adapt to the demands of university (Cameron & Rideout, 2022; Huang & Lee, 2022).

Research has shown that first-year students often experience a range of transitional challenges, including academic, social, financial, and emotional difficulties (Agormedah *et al.*, 2014; Cabras & Mondo, 2018; Edjah *et al.*, 2019; Gosai *et al.*, 2023; Tinto, 1993). Academic challenges include adapting to rigorous coursework and new learning environments, while social challenges pertain to developing friendships and navigating campus life (King *et al.*, 2021; Nunn, 2021; Sterling, 2018; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). Financial pressures can limit students' ability to engage fully in university life (Nelson, 2014; Newfield, 2018; Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). Students may experience feelings of loneliness,

homesickness, or social anxiety. Emotional challenges, often exacerbated by homesickness and stress, can significantly affect student retention rates (Kuh *et al.*, 2007). The combination of academic pressures, personal adjustments, and financial concerns can contribute to increased stress levels and anxiety among first-year students. These challenges can negatively influence students' academic performance, mental health, and overall university experience. Conversely, a successful transition promises transformation, development and higher education completion (Gale & Parker, 2014; Quaye *et al.*, 2019; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017; Van Rooij *et al.*, 2017). Understanding the transitional experience of these students is crucial in fostering successful adaptation and academic achievement.

The transitional experience among first-year students in higher education may be dependent on the demographic profiles, including gender and age. Some studies have shown that female students experience more challenges during the transition to university compared to males (Dafogianni *et al.*, 2022; Gefen & Fish, 2012; Graves *et al.*, 2021; Melese & Fenta, 2009). For instance, previous studies suggest that female students report higher levels of emotional distress, academic demands, financial difficulties and interpersonal challenges compared to male students (Aloka, 2023; Agormedah *et al.*, 2024; Gao *et al.*, 2020; Graves *et al.*, 2021). Edjah *et al.* (2019) discovered that gender has an influence on students' experience during their first year in the university, with females having a high level of transitional experience, while McLean *et al.*

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(2022) reported that male students suffer psychological distress more than the female counterparts in the same learning environment. However, other studies have found no significant differences between genders in terms of transitional experience (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Additionally, research has also shown that older students, i.e., those over the age of 25, may have a different experience during the transition to university compared to younger students (Bauer & Liang, 2003). Additionally, older students may face unique stressors, such as balancing academic obligations with work and family responsibilities (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). However, Edjah *et al.* (2019) found that the transitional experience of first-year students does not vary by age category. Understanding how these factors influence the university experience is vital for developing targeted support programs.

Study Context

In Ghana, students joining universities, like the University of Cape Coast, are given several orientations ranging from university-wide orientations, hall of residence orientations, faculty and departmental level orientations. These orientations mostly focus on academic expectations and demands and social life, among others and often last for a week. The purpose of these orientations is to ease students' transition, help them to be aware of the university environment (i.e., familiarity) and to build social capital and sense of community. Despite these interventions, first-year students encountered challenges, including academic, social, emotional and financial obstacles (Edjah *et al.*, 2019; 2020). Some students also experienced cultural shock, unmet expectations and fear of the unknown. Annotated evidence over the years suggests that students complained about the academic demands, expectations and social life. "Some students claimed that the place is difficulty", and "others indicated that there is no social life here". The problem of this study was to assess the transitional experience of first-year students at the University of Cape Coast.

The first-year students' experience is well-documented in the literature as being critical for student retention, engagement, development, achievement and satisfaction (Bowles *et al.*, 2011; Gale & Parker, 2014; Quaye *et al.*, 2019; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017; Van Rooij *et al.*, 2017). Owing to this importance, a great deal of attention has been paid by researchers to explore and explain the nature and dynamics of the transition experience. However, a majority of this research has been conducted within the European context (Van Rooij *et al.*, 2017; Wilcox *et al.*, 2005), America context (e.g., Bowles *et al.*, 2014), Australian contexts (Baik *et al.*, 2019), Asian context (e.g., Ding & Curtis, 2021; Eusafzaia & Suleman, 2024; Gao *et al.*, 2020; Xu, 2011) and scanty studies in Africa (e.g., Chidzonga, 2014; Edjah *et al.*, 2019; Nthabiseng *et al.*, 2024; Wangeri *et al.* (2012), addressing context-specific demands. However, this crucial phase and experience of academic life remain under researched in African contexts, particularly in

Ghana (Edjah *et al.*, 2019). This underscores the need for further research in the field, specifically focusing on the university transition experience of unresearched population streams of students from Ghanaian contexts. Hence, a holistic understanding of first-year students' transitional mechanisms is needed.

Purpose of the Study

This paper aims to assess the transitional experience of first-year university students from the perspective of Schlossberg's transition theory and to determine if there are any differences based on gender and age. Specifically, the study was guided by the following research question (RQ) and hypotheses (H).

RQ 1

What is the level of transitional experience among first-year university students?

H1

There is no statistically significant difference in the level of transitional experience among first-year university students based on gender.

H2

There is no statistically significant difference in the level of transitional experience among first-year university students based on age.

The outcome of this study aims to contribute to achieving sustainable development goals 3 (Good health and well-being), 4 (Quality education) and 10 (Reduced inequalities). Our findings also inform educators on how to tailor instructions to help students overcome challenges and achieve a smooth transition. The outcome of this study has informed institutions of higher learning to develop effective support systems for students' mental health, academic success, and equity and inclusion. It has informed institutional policies and practices to promote student well-being and success. The findings of this study enrich the literature on the transition experience of first-year university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Underpinning

This study is rooted in Schlossberg's transition theory. Transition theory is a relevant framework that explains how individuals adapt to change (Schlossberg, 1981). This theory suggests that individuals go through a process of loss, change, and adaptation during any transition. It focuses on the process individuals undergo during transitions, emphasizing the significance of personal and environmental factors. This theory focuses on four key factors that influence an individual's transition: situation (the change itself), self (personal characteristics), support (social and environmental resources), and strategies (coping mechanisms) (Schlossberg, 1995). In the context of first-year university students, this theory provides a

valuable framework for understanding their transitional experience. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the transition of first-year students as they navigate changes in academic rigor, social dynamics, and self-identity.

Transitional Experience among First-Year University Students

The transition to university has been widely recognized as a significant life event that can provoke feelings of anxiety, stress, and uncertainty among first-year students (Agormedah *et al.*, 2024; Conley *et al.*, 2020; Edjah *et al.*, 2019; Jorgenson *et al.*, 2018; Liu, 2023). Research suggests that these transitional experiences can result in negative consequences such as lower academic performance, higher dropout rates, and mental health issues (Bowles *et al.*, 2014; Conley *et al.*, 2020; Tett *et al.*, 2017). Previous research has identified various factors that contribute to the transitional experience faced by first-year university students. These challenges are broadly categorized as academic, social, emotional, financial and environmental (Nelson, 2014; Pizzolato, 2006; Strayhorn, 2018; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017).

The shift from high school to university demands higher levels of self-regulation and independent learning, which can overwhelm students unprepared for such academic rigor (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 2012; Tinto, 1993; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). Research suggests that academic challenges, including increased workload, self-directed learning, time management issues, and unfamiliar pedagogical approaches, often lead to feelings of stress and anxiety (Tinto, 1993; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017; Wilcox *et al.*, 2005). Edjah *et al.* (2019) discovered that students experienced high transitional challenges, including academic difficulties. Academic expectations can be a significant source of stress and anxiety for students, particularly those who are not adequately prepared for the demands of university-level coursework (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Kuh *et al.*, 2006).

The social environment of university is vastly different from high school, and it can be daunting. Social relationships are a critical during the transition to university, as students must navigate new social environments and establish relationships with peers and university staff (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Tinto, 1993). Social challenges may involve feelings of isolation and the struggle to establish new relationships (Jorgenson *et al.*, 2018; Liu, 2023; Meehan & Frost, 2012; Tinto, 1993). Studies indicate that social integration is crucial for academic success; however, many first-year students report feelings of isolation and difficulty in forming connections (Jorgenson *et al.*, 2018; Liu, 2023; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Edjah *et al.* (2019) discovered that students experienced high transitional challenges, including social difficulties. The pressure to fit in and maintain social relationships can also add to students' stress and distract them from their academic responsibilities.

Additionally, financial pressures can limit students' ability to engage fully in university life (Nelson, 2014; Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). The financial burden of tuition, textbooks, accommodation, and other living expenses can add additional stress and a strain on students' finances, well-being, mental health, and sense of belonging, particularly for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Lawley *et al.*, 2023; Nasr *et al.*, 2024; Newfield, 2018; Zimmerman, & Parker, 2023). Financial constraints may require students to take up part-time jobs, adding another layer of responsibility and time management challenges. Edjah *et al.* (2019) discovered that students experienced high transitional challenges, including financial difficulties.

The pressures of university life can exacerbate existing mental health issues or create new ones. Emotional challenges, such as anxiety and homesickness, are commonly reported among first-year students. (Baker & Siryk, 1984). Reports show that first-year students experience higher rates of anxiety and depression compared to their peers (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2009). Edjah *et al.* (2019; 2020) discovered that students experienced high transitional challenges, including emotional difficulties (i.e., highly stressed). Emotional well-being is an essential aspect of the transition experience, as students must develop strategies to manage stress, anxiety, and other emotional challenges (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Agormedah *et al.*, 2024). However, it seems that university policies and resources often fall short of addressing these mental health challenges adequately. The combination of academic pressures, personal adjustments, and financial concerns can contribute to increased stress levels and anxiety among first-year students.

Demographic Profiles and Transitional Experience

Previous research indicates that transitional experience can vary based on factors such as gender and age (Agormedah *et al.*, 2024; Edjah *et al.*, 2019; Hausman *et al.*, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Concerning gender differences, research indicates that male and female students encounter transitional experiences differently (Agormedah *et al.*, 2024; Edjah *et al.*, 2019; Kaenzig, 2007). Male students often report higher levels of anxiety regarding social interactions, while female students are more likely to seek social support during stressful times (Matud, 2004). Studies have shown that females face higher levels of stress related to social connection and emotional well-being (Agormedah *et al.*, 2024; Strayhorn, 2018). Some studies have found that male students possess better adjustment levels than female students (Enochs & Roland, 2006; Abdallah *et al.*, 2009). Wangeri *et al.* (2012) found that male students were more affected in relating with each other than their female counterparts. Age can also be a significant factor in the transitional experience. Age has also been found as an important factor in the successful adjustment of students (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2009). Young or younger students (traditional

students) may adapt differently compared to older students (non-traditional students). Older students may bring greater and diverse life experience and resilience that can influence their social integration and academic performance compared to younger peers. However, they may also face unique challenges, such as balancing educational pursuits with work and family commitments (Engler, 2019; Santos *et al.*, 2016). Grebennikov and Skaines (2009) maintain that there are differences between student's adjustments based on their age; elder students adjust less as compared to younger students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design and Respondents

The study employed a descriptive survey design to explore the transitional experience among first-year university students in higher education and its sensitivity with respect to gender and age. This design is deemed appropriate for the current research because it is versatile and practical and helps to obtain information concerning the current status of a phenomenon without manipulation of any variables (Ary *et al.*, 2010). This makes the study a prerequisite for conclusions and generalisations (Fraenkel *et al.*, 2012).

The population for the study was all regular undergraduate first-year students enrolled in the 2021/2022 academic year at the University of Cape Coast (UCC) in Ghana. The total number of students enrolled in the academic year was 6,386, according to the Students Records Management and Information System of UCC (SRMIS, 2022). This is composed of 3,625 males and 2,761 females. A sample size of 557 was determined from the total population using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sampling table. However, 557 was the minimum sample to be selected. Accordingly, the authors increased the sample size from 557 to 900 students. This was done to avoid sampling errors, ensure representation, provide precise estimates of population parameters, increase statistical power, reliability of findings, and enhance external validity and generalisation. The multistage sampling technique was employed to select the sample for the study. First, the stratified proportionate sampling was used to divide the sample into six (6) strata using the halls of residence. A simple random sampling technique, particularly the lottery method, was used in selecting the sample for the study. In this technique, each member of the population is assigned a unique number (through their index number), and a random sample is selected

using a lottery system. This technique was used to give each student an equal chance to participate in the study.

Instrumentation

The data was collected using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire contains two (2) sections with 20 items. The first section measures respondents' demographic profiles, including gender and age group. The second section explores the transitional experience among first-year university students with 18 items. The 18 items were categorised into four (4) sub-scales, namely, academic challenges, social challenges, emotional challenges and financial challenges. Academic challenges assess difficulties that students face in their academic pursuits (6 items; "Coping with large class size"); social challenges measure obstacles that students face in their social interactions and relationships (4 items; "Coping with roommates"); emotional challenges measure difficulties that students face in managing their emotion and mental health (4 items; "adjusting to the new environment"); and financial challenges assess obstacles that students face in managing their finances and achieving financial stability (4 items; "I am worried about paying fees on time"). The items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale type, ranging from strongly disagree (1 = SD) to strongly agree (5 = SA).

Validity and Reliability

Two experts in the College of Education Studies, UCC, validated the face and content validity of the instrument. After the experts' validation, the questionnaire was pilot-tested using 50 students from Level 200. This was in line with Baker (1994), who stated that a sample size of 10-20% of the actual sample size is a reasonable number of participants to consider in pilot testing. Internal consistency of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (α) and McDonald's coefficient omega (ω) (Cronbach, 1951, 1988; Cronbach & Shavelson, 2004; McDonald, 1999; Hayes & Coutts, 2020). Overall, using Cronbach's Alpha, the instrument yields a coefficient ($\alpha = 0.792$, $n = 18$ items). In addition, with McDonald's coefficient omega (ω), the scale had a coefficient ($\omega = .792$; $n = 18$ items). The sub-scales of transitional experience also produced a sound reliability coefficient. The internal consistency values were judged reliable and acceptable for collecting useful data for the study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2010; Pallant, 2020). No item was deleted or changed on the questionnaire. Table 1 presents the reliability of the research items and sub-scale.

Table 1: Reliability test

Variable	N0. of items	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Omega (ω)
Academic challenges	6	.638	.641
<i>Social challenges</i>	4	.505	.536
Emotional challenges	4	.550	.573
Financial challenges	4	.512	.527
Transitional experience	18	.791	.792

Procedures

Ethical protocols were followed during the data collection. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Head of the Department, Department of Business and Social Sciences Education, University of Cape Coast and Institutional Review Board of the same university to gather data for the study. The letters were used to seek permission from the various administrators of the halls of residence and build rapport with the study participants. The respondents were met at their various halls of residence for the administration of the instrument. The purpose of the study was explained to them and they were made to give written consent. The respondents were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity. The questionnaire took about 15-20 minutes. Nine (900) questionnaires were distributed to respondents across the six (6) halls of residence using a simple random sampling technique. Out of 900 questionnaires administered, 614 of them (i.e., 614 valid questionnaires) were retrieved, giving a 68.2% response rate. Data collection took place during the eighth (8th) week of arrival of the first-year students.

Data Processing and Analysis

The data gathered was screened to identify and remove incomplete and invalid questionnaires, after which it was coded and entered into SPSS version 27 for data processing. Frequency and percentage were used to check for data entry errors, and generate results on their demographic characteristics. The data was analysed using both descriptive (means and standard deviations) and inferential (Independent samples t-test and One-way ANOVA) statistics. The mean and standard deviation were used to explore the transitional experience among

respondents. Further, the mean score was converted into a percentage for each challenge (see Figure 1). To determine the intensity or the level of the transitional experience of the respondents, a mean score interpretation was given based on the 5-point Likert scale as follows: a mean score of 1.00 – 2.32; 2.33 – 3.66 and 3.67 – 5.00 was considered as low, moderate and high transitional experience respectively. Hypothesis one (H1) was tested using an independent samples t-test. Independent samples t-test was used to gauge the difference in transitional experience of first-year students based on gender. One-way ANOVA was used to test for Hypothesis Two (H2), which sought to find differences in the experience of first-year students in terms of age categories. All inferential statistics were done at a 0.05 significant level. Prior to hypotheses testing, some diagnostics or quality tests (test of normality and homogeneity of variances) were run to assess the appropriateness tests. The following sections present the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This part of the study presents preliminary results, including the assumption of parametric tests, the background information of the respondents and the actual results in relation to the research question and hypothesis that were formulated to guide the study.

Test of Normality

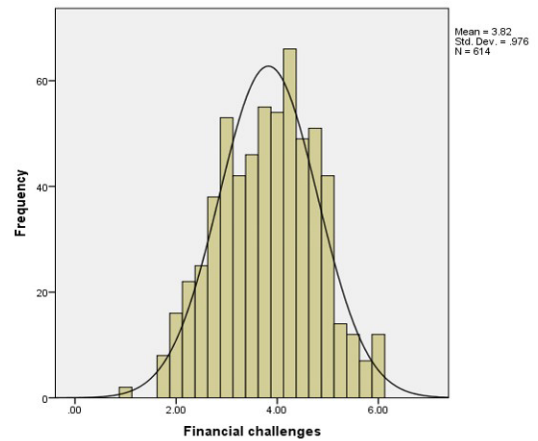
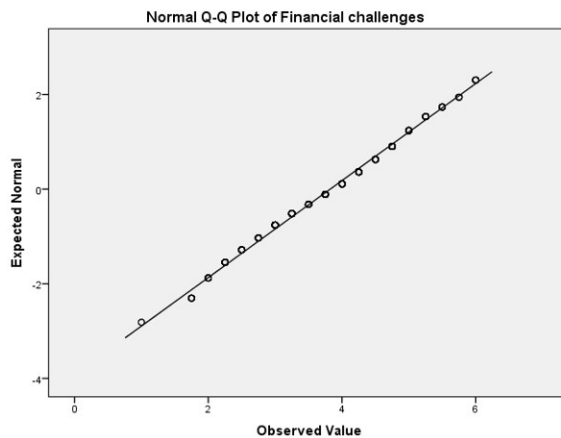
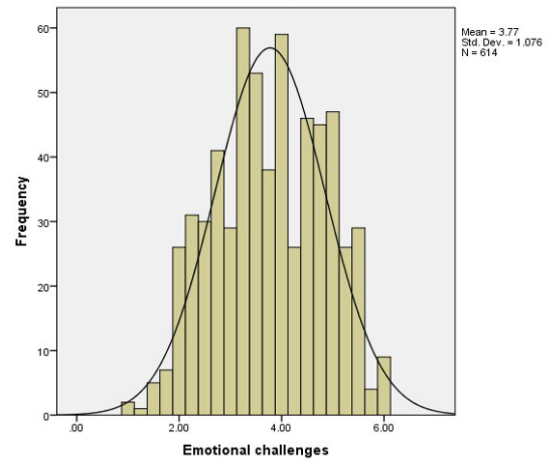
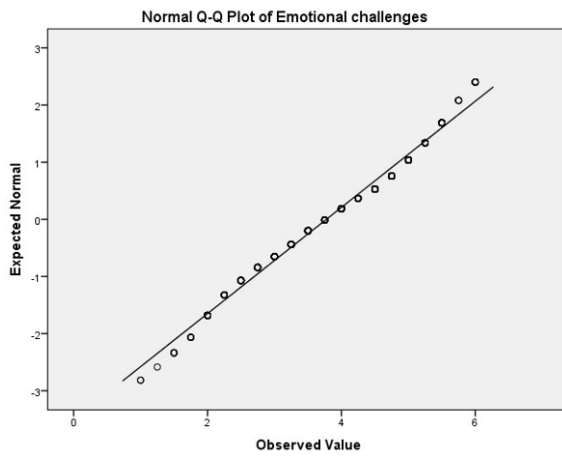
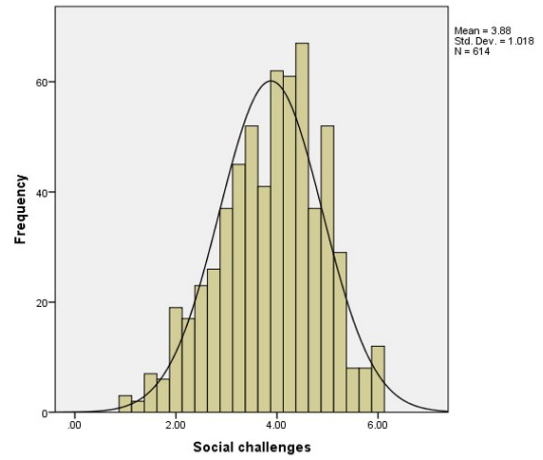
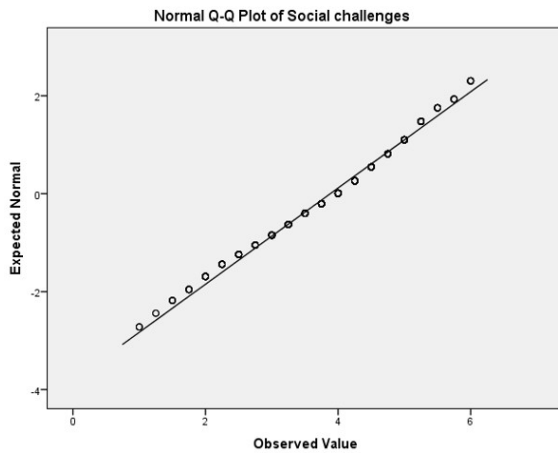
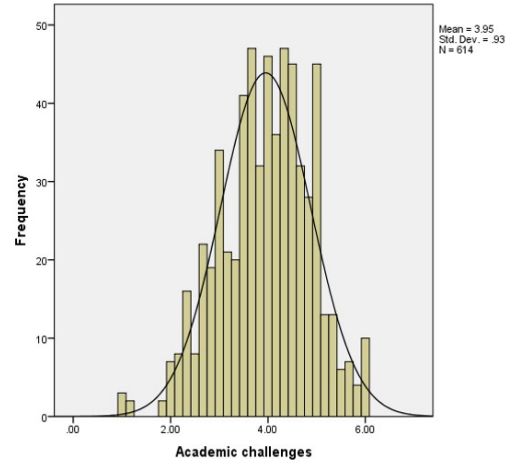
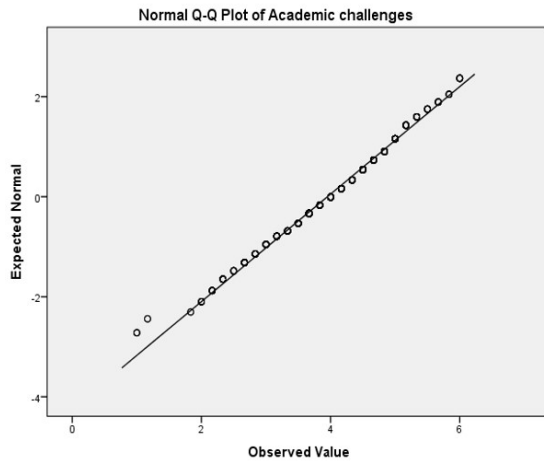
The first diagnostics was to test for the normality of the variables. This was done by using descriptive statistics (mean, median, skewness and kurtosis). The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Normality test

Variable	Mean	Median	Skewness	Kurtosis
Academic challenges	3.95	4.00	-.265	-.092
Social challenges	3.88	4.00	-.325	-.289
Emotional challenges	3.78	3.75	-.065	-.804
Financial challenges	3.83	3.88	-.078	-.483
Transitional experience	3.87	3.83	-.126	.273

As evident in Table 2, the mean and median scores for each of the variables were approximately close, indicating the data was approximately normal. For example, the transitional experience had a mean score of 3.87 and a median score of 3.83. These values are approximately the same, reflecting the normal distribution of the data. Further, the value of skewness (-.065 to -.325) and kurtosis (-.092 to .273) of the variables were within the acceptable range of 2 and -2, indicating that the data was normally distributed (Byrne, 2016; George & Mallery, 2019; Tabachnick, & Fidell, 2019; Hair *et al.*, 2022). Further, the Q-Q plot and histogram were used to confirm the normality results (see Figure 1). Normality

is assumed when the observed data is on or close to the expected normal diagonal line generated from a theoretical probability distribution (Pallant, 2020; Field, 2024). Using the Q-Q plots, it was noted that the data points follow the straight line or are very close to the diagonal line with marginal deviations at the tails. In addition, using the histogram, it was realised that the data for each variable is approximately normally distributed because the histogram is bell-shaped, with only one peak, and is symmetric around the mean. Accordingly, from both statistics and graphical results, it is concluded that the data is normally distributed.



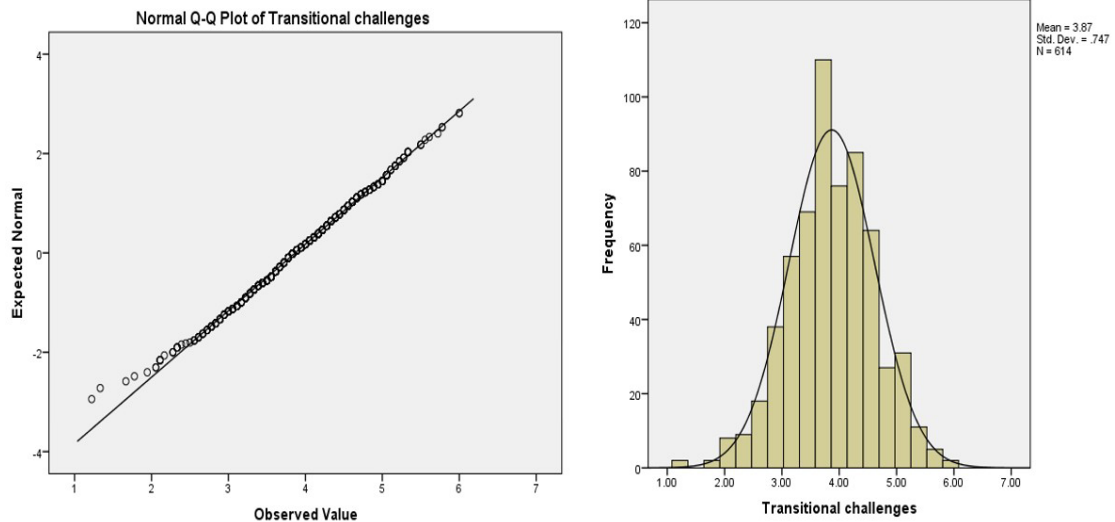


Figure 1: Normality using Q-Q plot and

Test of Homogeneity of Variances

Ensuring the validity of inferential tests requires meeting the assumption of equality of variances. The independent samples t-test and the One-way ANOVA assumed that the variances of the groups were equal in the population

(equal variance assumed) (Pallant, 2020; Field, 2024). To ascertain this, a test was performed using Levene’s test for homogeneity of variances, and the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Levene’s test for equality of variances

Variable	Factor	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	
		F-value	Sig.
Academic challenges	Gender	1.550	.214
	Age	.833	.435
Social challenges	Gender	1.770	.184
	Age	6.142	.002*
Emotional challenges	Gender	.054	.817
	Age	.681	.506
Financial challenges	Gender	.000	.986
	Age	1.757	.173
Transitional experience	Gender	3.242	.072
	Age	.884	.414

*Welch’ ANOVA

As seen in Table 3, the results of Levene’s test indicated that there was homogeneity of variances between groups for all the variables, indicating that equal variances were assumed. However, Levene’s test for equality of variances was violated for social challenges in relation to age category, $F(2, 122) = 6.142, p = .002$. Thus, equal variances were not assumed for age regarding social challenges; accordingly, the Welch-Satterthwaite test

(Welch ANOVA) was performed.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The background information of the respondents who participated in the study was sought which includes gender and age category. Data gathered on these variables was analysed using frequency and percentages, and the results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Demographic profile of respondents (n = 614)

Variable	Category	Freq.	%
Gender	Male	388	63.30
	Female	226	36.80

Age	Below 20yrs	170	27.70
	Between 20-25yrs	394	64.20
	Above 25yrs	50	8.10

In Table 4, there were more male students (n = 388; 63%) than females. The gender variable helped to appreciate the transitional experience of respondents. Globally, the literature points to the fact that female students experienced more transitional experiences than males (Edjah *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, this difference was investigated. The respondents were distributed among three age groups, as shown in Table 4. The respondents within the age category of 20-25 years dominated the study (n = 394; 64%), and those within the age group of above 25 years had the least members (n = 50; 8%). The differences in the respondents' age might influence their first-year experience on campus. In addition, this observation was investigated.

Transitional Experience of First-year University Students

The study explores the transitional experience of first-year university students. The data was analysed using mean and standard deviation. To determine the level of the transitional experience, a mean criterion was established. A mean score of 1.00 - 2.32 was considered a low challenge, while a mean score of 2.33 – 3.66 and 3.67 to 5.00 was considered moderate and high experience, respectively. The details of the results are presented in Table 5. The mean score was further converted into percentages for a graphical representation (see Figure 2).

Table 5: Transitional experience among first-year university students (n = 614)

Items	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
<i>Academic challenges</i>	3.95	.93	-.265	-.092
Adjusting to the new system of teaching	3.94	1.47	-.483	-.725
Coping with large class size	3.75	1.63	-.306	-1.068
Finding time with other commitments (e.g, reports, church)	3.94	1.58	-.449	-.899
Number of assignments/quizzes	3.94	1.56	-.419	-.909
Registration of courses	3.98	1.65	-.495	-1.012
Adjusting to the new system of learning	4.16	1.46	-.660	-.469
<i>Social challenges</i>	3.88	1.02	-.325	-.289
Making and keeping new friends	3.99	1.56	-.524	-.881
Coping with roommates	4.00	1.61	-.510	-.888
Balancing personal relationships with studies	3.83	1.58	-.412	-.961
Separation from family and friends	3.71	1.67	-.241	-1.193
<i>Emotional challenges</i>	3.78	1.08	-.065	-.804
Adjusting to the new environment	4.11	1.47	-.595	-.652
Finding my way out on campus/movement on campus	3.72	1.70	-.345	-1.261
Compiling of timetable	3.69	1.72	-.210	-1.260
Switching between lecture theatres	3.58	1.71	-.127	-1.299
<i>Financial challenges</i>	3.83	.98	-.078	-.483
I am worried about paying fees on time	3.84	1.65	-.370	-1.087
I am worried about the cost of textbooks/educational materials	3.93	1.62	-.428	-.987
I am worried about living expenses (e.g, accommodation and food)	4.04	1.51	-.529	-.695
I am concerned about unexpected expenses (e.g. medical bills)	3.50	1.50	-.065	-.992
Transitional experience	3.87	.75	-.126	.273

From Table 5 and Figure 2, it was observed that the respondents encountered a high transitional experience (M = 3.87; SD = .75; 77%). Among the transitional experiences, the academic challenge was the highest experience (M = 3.95; SD = .93; 79%). For example, they experienced the challenge of adjusting to the new system of learning (M = 4.16; SD = 1.46) and registration of

courses (M = 3.98; SD = 1.65). These challenges were followed by social challenges (M = 3.88; SD = 1.02; 78%), such as coping with roommates (M = 4.00; SD = 1.61) and making and keeping new friends (M = 3.99; SD = 1.56) while least transitional experience encountered by the respondents was emotional challenges (M = 3.78; SD = 1.08; 76%). For example, they faced the challenge

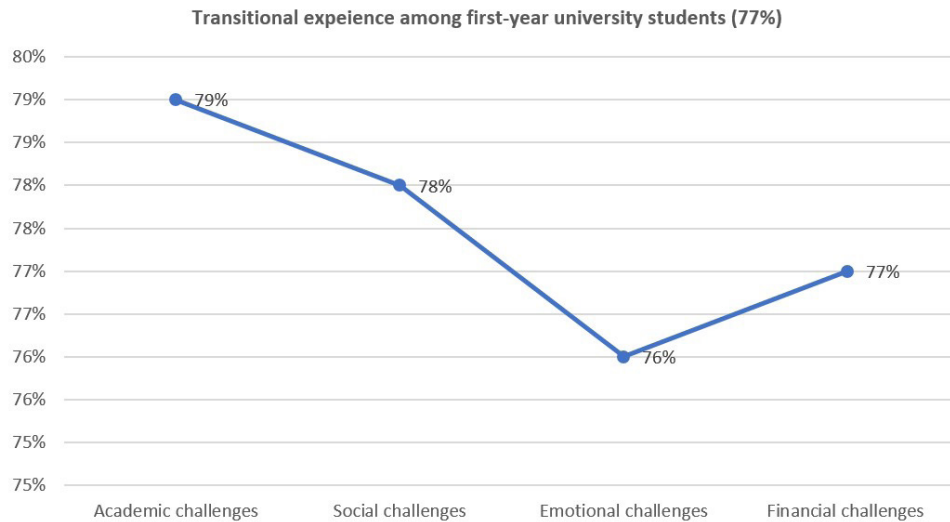


Figure 2: A pictorial representation of the transitional experience

of adjusting to the new environment ($M = 4.11$; $SD = 1.47$) and finding their way out on campus/movement on campus ($M = 3.72$; $SD = 1.70$). Although the students acknowledged major challenges during their transitional period, there were variations in their responses as indicated by the SD scores. Thus, the responses are spread from the mean scores.

Hypotheses Testing

In order to determine the differences in the level of transitional experience that students face with regard to demographic characteristics, an independent samples t-test was used to determine differences with regard to gender. In contrast, One-way ANOVA was used to test for differences in terms of age. Table 6 provides a summary of the results.

Table 6: Demographic profiles and students’ transitional experience

Variable	Factor	N	Mean	SD	t/f-value	df	p-value
Gender distribution							
Academic challenges	Male	388	3.97	.96	.631	612	.528
	Female	226	3.92	.88			
Social challenges	Male	388	3.89	1.04	.272	612	.786
	Female	226	3.88	.98			
Emotional challenges	Male	388	3.80	1.08	.650	612	.516
	Female	226	3.74	1.08			
Financial challenges	Male	388	3.85	.97	.973	612	.331
	Female	226	3.77	.98			
Transitional experience	Male	388	3.89	.77	.835	612	.404
	Female	226	3.84	.71			
Age distribution							
Academic challenges	Below 20yrs	170	3.82	.98	2.649	2(611)	.072
	Between 20-25yrs	394	4.01	.90			
	Above 25yrs	50	3.91	.96			
Social challenges	Below 20yrs	170	3.78	1.04	4.455*	2(122)	.030
	Between 20-25yrs	394	3.97*	.96			
	Above 25yrs	50	3.58*	1.27			
Emotional challenges	Below 20yrs	170	3.73	1.13	.298	2(611)	.742
	Between 20-25yrs	394	3.78	1.05			
	Above 25yrs	50	3.86	1.09			
Financial challenges	Below 20yrs	170	3.69	.99	2.156	2(611)	.117
	Between 20-25yrs	394	3.88	.98			
	Above 25yrs	50	3.87	.85			

Transitional experience	Below 20yrs	170	3.76	.78	2.785	2(611)	.063
	Between 20-25yrs	394	3.92	.72			
	Above 25yrs	50	3.82	.81			

* $p < .05$

As presented in Table 6, the results of the independent sample t-test revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in the overall transitional experience mean scores for male ($M = 3.89$; $SD = .77$) and female first-year students ($M = 3.84$; $SD = .71$), $t(612) = .835$; $p = .404$. This observation was also seen in academic challenges, $t(612) = .631$; $p = .528$; social challenges, $t(612) = .272$; $p = .786$; emotional challenges, $t(612) = .650$; $p = .516$; and financial challenges, $t(612) = .973$, $p = .331$. This result implies that both male and female first-year students experienced equal transitional challenges. The results of a one-way between-groups ANOVA showed a non-significant difference in the overall transitional experience mean scores across the age groups, $F(2, 611) = 2.785$ $p = .063$. This was also evident academic challenges, $F(2, 611) = 2.649$; $p = .072$; emotional challenges, $F(2, 611) = .298$; $p = .742$; and financial challenges, $F(2, 611) = 2.156$; $p = .177$. This result implies that irrespective of the age group of first-year students, they go through the same level of transitional experiences. The result may not be significant because the age groups were not the same in terms of numbers; some groups were overly represented. However, using the Welch-Satterthwaite test (Welch ANOVA), a statistically significant difference was observed in social challenges mean score across age groups, $F(2, 122) = 4.455$; $p = 0.30$. The post Hoc tests using Games-Howell revealed that the first-year students within the age category of 20-25years ($M = 3.97$; $SD = .96$) experienced higher social challenges than those within the age category of above 25years ($M = 3.58$; $SD = 1.27$; $p = .038$). This result implies that social challenges among first-year students at university vary according to age.

Discussion

Achieving SDGs 3, 4, and 10 is a pressing concern among stakeholders, and addressing transitional experiences among first-year university students is crucial to creating targeted support systems for students from diverse backgrounds. This study assesses the transitional experience of first-year university students in higher education in Ghana.

The study discovered that first-year university students experienced high transitional challenges. The prominent transitional experiences were academic challenges (adjusting to the new system of learning and registration of courses), social challenges (coping with roommates and making and keeping new friends), financial challenges (living expenses, accommodation and food and cost of textbooks/educational materials) and emotional challenges (adjusting to the new environment and finding a way out on campus/movement on campus). The findings of the current study align with previous

inquiries that first-year students often experience a range of transitional challenges, including academic, social, financial, and emotional difficulties (Agormedah *et al.*, 2014; Cabras & Mondo, 2018; Edjah *et al.*, 2019; Gosai *et al.*, 2023; Jorgenson *et al.*, 2018; Liu, 2023; Nelson, 2014; Strayhorn, 2018; Tinto, 1993; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). The findings suggest that first-year university students face a multitude of challenges as they transition to higher education. These challenges are not limited to academic difficulties but also encompass social, financial, and emotional struggles. Academic challenges include adapting to rigorous coursework and new learning environments, while social challenges pertain to developing friendships and navigating campus life (King *et al.*, 2021; Nunn, 2021; Sterling, 2018; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). Financial pressures can limit students' ability to engage fully in university life (Nelson, 2014; Newfield, 2018; Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). Emotional challenges, often exacerbated by homesickness and stress, can significantly affect student retention rates (Kuh *et al.*, 2007). The combination of academic pressures, personal adjustments, and financial concerns can contribute to increased stress levels and anxiety among first-year students. This comprehensive set of challenges highlights the complexity of the transition experience. These challenges can have a profound impact on students' academic success, mental health, and overall university experience.

The study established that there was no statistically significant difference in the transitional experience (academic, social, financial and emotional challenges) based on gender. The finding of this current study is consistent with previous research that gender does not influence transitional experience (Chickering & Reisser, 1993); conversely, it contradicts the evidence of previous findings that gender has an influence on students' experience during their first year in the university (Aloka, 2023; Agormedah *et al.*, 2024; Dafogianni *et al.*, 2022; Edjah *et al.*, 2019; Gao *et al.*, 2020; Gefen & Fish, 2012; Graves *et al.*, 2021; McLean *et al.*, 2022; Strayhorn, 2018). The finding suggests that first-year university students, regardless of gender, experience similar levels of transitional experience. This indicates that both male and female students face equally comparable difficulties in adjusting to university life, including academic, social, financial, and emotional challenges. The findings highlight the importance of providing comprehensive support services that cater to the needs of all students, regardless of gender.

Finally, the study found that transitional experience does not vary irrespective of the age group of students. The finding suggests that first-year university students

across different age categories experience similar levels of transitional experience in academic, financial, and emotional domains. This finding confirms the study of Edjah *et al.* (2019) that age does not influence the transitional experience of first-year students; however, Grebennikov and Skaines (2009) maintain that there are differences between students' adjustments based on their age; elder students adjust less as compared to younger students. However, a significant difference was found in social challenges based on age category, with students aged 20-25 years experiencing more severe social challenges than those above 25 years. This finding lends support to the study of prior authors that non-traditional first-year students (i.e., those over the age of 25) may have a different experience during the transition to university compared to younger students (Bauer & Liang, 2003). The support services and programs aimed at addressing transitional experiences should prioritize social support for students aged 20-25 years. This age group may require targeted interventions to facilitate social integration and adjustment to university life.

Implications

The outcomes of this study have both theoretical and practical implications. The study's findings validate the transaction theory, which posits that individuals experience a range of challenges (e.g., academic, social, emotional and financial difficulties) during significant life transitions, including transition to university. It further supports the concept of students' integration, which suggests that students' transitional experiences (e.g., academic, social, emotional and financial difficulties) are interconnected and intertwined. The findings have significant implications for universities, policymakers, and stakeholders. They underscore the need for targeted support services to address the diverse challenges faced by first-year students. Moreover, the findings suggest that universities should adopt a holistic approach to student support, recognizing that academic success is intertwined with social, financial, and emotional well-being. The support services and programs should be designed to cater to the needs of all students, regardless of gender. This approach can help ensure that resources are allocated efficiently and effectively. The support services and programs aimed at addressing transitional experiences should prioritize social support for students aged 20-25 years. This age group may require targeted interventions to facilitate social integration and adjustment to university life.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Studies

The strength of this study lies in its contextual relevance, quantitative approach, contribution to literature, and implication for practice. The study's focus on first-year university students in Ghana adds to the strengths, providing new insights into the transitional experience, and these experiences may vary across different cultural

and educational settings. The use of parametric inferential statistics provides a robust quantitative analysis of the data. The study further contributes to existing literature on the transitional experience of first-year university students, and the study findings have implications for university administrators, policy makers and educators. The study only examined the experience of first-year students from the 2021/2022 academic year. This may not be representative of previous or subsequent batches, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Hence, the findings should be interpreted with caution. The study's findings should be replicated with different samples and methodologies to increase confidence in the results. The use of self-report questionnaires may introduce social desirability bias, as respondents may provide inaccurate or incomplete information. This may affect the validity and reliability of the findings. Future studies should consider using multiple data collection methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to triangulate the findings and reduce self-report bias.

CONCLUSION

The transition to university is a challenging experience for first-year students, marked by academic, social, financial, and emotional difficulties. The study found no statistically significant differences in transitional experience among first-year university students based on gender and age groups. However, a significant difference was found in social challenges based on age groups. It is essential that universities and policymakers take a proactive and comprehensive approach to supporting first-year students during this critical transition period.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. The universities should continue to design comprehensive support services and programs (e.g., academic support workshops, academic advising, orientation programs, mental health counselling, and financial assistance) that address academic, financial, and emotional difficulties and cater to the needs of all students regardless of gender and age categories.
2. The universities should explore ways to provide financial support (e.g., scholarships, grants, and emergency loans) to all first-year students regardless of gender and age categories.
3. The universities should provide targeted social integration programs and social support services (e.g., peer mentoring, social skills training, and counselling) that help all first-year students adjust to university life and foster a sense of belonging and community, taking into consideration the age categories, especially for students aged 20-25 years, regardless of gender.
4. The universities should promote age diversity and inclusivity by providing a welcoming and supportive environment for students of all ages.

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