Supporting First-Year Students on Their Transition Journey Through the University: Insights from Literature

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Keywords

Abstract

The shift from secondary to tertiary education is crucial for students' academic success, well-being, and retention. Guided by Schlossberg's Transition Theory, this narrative review of 28 international studies (2016–2024) develops a comprehensive support framework addressing four domains: emotional/social support, academic preparation, barrier mitigation, and success strategies. Unlike prior reviews, this study offers a universal framework across diverse educational contexts, confirming consistent support needs globally. Findings emphasize the need for integrated interventions across all domains, with institutions responsible for proactive support. Gaps in reactive approaches highlight the need for systematic, comprehensive transition programs, providing a robust foundation for future research on diverse student populations.

1. Introduction

The transition from secondary school to university represents a critical developmental milestone that significantly influences students' academic trajectories, personal growth and future career prospects (Pedler et al., 2022; Ricks & Warren, 2021; Thompson et al., 2021). This pivotal period extends beyond a mere change in educational setting, demanding substantial adjustments in learning approaches, social relationships, personal independence and identity formation. Studies consistently demonstrates that, first-year university students often face their first extended period away from established support systems and in that manner frequently struggle with the heightened freedom and self-direction that university life demands (Eberle et al., 2021; Leamnson, 2023; McGhie, 2017; Moro & McLean, 2017; Moore et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2021).

Most of these students, more often than not enter higher education unprepared for these multifaceted challenges, consequently encounter significant obstacles including psychological distress, social isolation, and intensified performance pressures (Ding & Curtis, 2021; Cage et al., 2021; Cifuentes Gomez et al., 2022; Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021; Worsley et al., 2021). In that regard, comprehensive understanding and implementation of evidence-based transition support strategies are essential for transforming this challenging period into a steady foundation for sustainable university success.

Global studies underscore the significance of successful transitions, thus revealing patterns of attrition mainly focusing on the crucial first year of university studies (Opazo et al., 2021; Van Herpen et al., 2017; Van Rooij et al., 2018). Nevertheless, existing literatures have examined this transition phenomenon through various lenses, such as ethnic differences (Parker et al., 2017), mental health challenges specifically amongst students in transitioning process (Cage et al., 2021), and the misalignment between student expectations and institutional realities (Cifuentes et al., 2022). Besides, many reviews are limited in scope, focusing on specialized populations, such as Rillotta et al.'s (2019) systematic review on students with autism spectrum disorder, Maymon & Hall's (2021) on examination of emotional support only in Canada and the USA whilst Lan et al. (2024) narrowed their focus to

academic adjustment in Cambodia, thus lacking broader applicability to diverse educational contexts.

The current review addresses these limitations by synthesizing recent international evidence as from 2016-2024 through Schlossberg's Transition Theory, in that regard providing institutions with a practical, evidence-based framework for comprehensive transition support. The primary research question guiding this literature review is: What strategies are most commonly used by universities to support first-year students in their transition from secondary education to university? By exploring effective support mechanisms documented in the literature, this review aimed at offering actionable insights for educational stakeholders, consequently fostering academic achievement, promoting student well-being and strengthening institutional retention. Through systematic analysis of empirical findings across multiple contexts, this work provides valuable lessons for institutions seeking to transform the first-year transition process into a sound foundation for sustainable success.

2. Theoretical Framework

This review employs Schlossberg's Transition Theory (STT) as its conceptual foundation which provides a broad framework for understanding how individuals navigate significant life changes (Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg et al., 2012). The theory conceptualizes transitions as processes rather than events, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between individual characteristics and contextual factors that influence adaptation outcomes. Consistently, STT identifies four critical dimensions which are the "Four S's" namely: Situation, Self, Support and Strategies. Situation encompasses contextual factors such as timing, control, role changes, duration, and concurrent stresses whilst self refers to personal characteristics, including psychological resources, resilience and coping mechanisms. Besides, support includes the breadth and quality of social networks, institutional assistance and the available help and strategies represent the cognitive and behavioural approaches individuals use to modify their situation, manage stress and facilitate adjustment.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory provides valuable insights onto how individuals, including first-year university students, navigate these complex transitions. It highlights that, such experiences are shaped by situational factors, personal characteristics, support systems and coping strategies. By utilizing the Four 'S' Variables, researchers can effectively address critical questions related to students' transitions from secondary school to university, including the challenges they face and the resources needed for successful adjustment (Byrd, 2017). This framework has been applied in various contexts as exemplified by Alao (2021) who asserted its effectiveness in understanding engineering students' transitions from vocational education to higher education. Similarly, Neber (2018) utilized the theory to illuminate the experiences of non-traditional students during their college transition. Given its proven applicability, Schlossberg's Transition Theory (2012) is also instrumental in the current study.

3. Methodology

This study employed a narrative literature review methodology to synthesize and analyze existing research on first-year students' transition support programs from secondary school to university across diverse cultural and educational contexts. A narrative literature review approach was selected due to its flexibility in examining varied perspectives and methodologies, in that regard enabling comprehensive integration of findings from multiple academic sources while accommodating the multidimensional nature of transition support experiences.

Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted systematically across multiple academic databases, including ERIC, DOAJ, Scopus, Wiley Online Library and Google Scholar. Key search terms comprised of core concepts and phrases such as: "first-year students," "transition," "secondary to university," "college adjustment," "freshman experience," "student retention," "university adaptation," and "first-year support programs." Publications were primarily limited to those published between 2016 and 2024 to ensure contemporary

relevance, though foundational works outside this timeframe were selectively included since they provided critical theoretical frameworks and established essential concepts in the field.

Selection Criteria

Publications were selected based on specific criteria so as to ensure relevance and methodological rigor. Inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed studies published between 2016 and 2024 that addressed transition experiences or support mechanisms for first-year university students, particularly those examining adaptation to university environments. Besides, priority was given to studies providing empirical evidence or theoretical frameworks relevant to first-year transitions, with emphasis on international research, in this manner representing diverse educational contexts and student populations.

Exclusion criteria included articles published before 2016 or after 2024, studies focusing solely on transitions to primary, secondary, vocational or technical education contexts and non-English publications. This systematic selection process brought about 28 articles that met the established criteria and provided relevant information pertaining to the current study objectives.

Analysis Approach

Selected literature were analysed using thematic analysis by systematically reviewing and coding each publication according to its primary focus, methodological approach, geographical context and key findings. Through iterative reading and comparative analysis, recurring patterns and themes were identified across the reviewed literatures. The emergent themes were consolidated into four primary categories representing the most significant aspects of first-year transition support: emotional and social support, academic preparation programs and institutional practices, addressing barriers to success and strategies for academic success through the university.

Within each thematic category, the literatures were further analyzed in order to identify evidence-based practices, theoretical underpinnings and cross-cultural variations or consistencies. Particular attention was devoted to

extracting actionable insights from each body of research, focusing on practical implications in relation to higher learning institutions to implement effective first-year transition support programs.

Limitations

This review acknowledges several limitations, including potential publication bias due to English-language restrictions and the inability to carry out quantitative meta-analysis given the heterogeneous nature of the studies included. Besides, the narrative approach, while enabling comprehensive exploration of complex transition phenomena and integration of diverse methodological perspectives, limits statistical synthesis of intervention effectiveness. In that regard, future research should investigate on the intervention effectiveness through randomized controlled trials, examining cost-effectiveness of different approaches and assess long-term impacts on student's outcomes beyond first-year retention. Despite these limitations, the chosen methodology aligns with the study's objective and thus providing holistic insights with regard to first-year transition support programs, thereby informing evidence-based practices across diverse institutional contexts.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents and analyzes pertinent data obtained from the literature review regarding first-year students' transition support programs amongst universities through the lens of STT. The analysis revealed four interconnected domains crucial for successful first-year transitions, each aligning with specific components of the framework while demonstrating significant cross-cultural consistency in determining smooth transitions for first-year university students as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Key Themes from International Literature on First-Year Student Transition Support (2016-2024)

Theme	Authors (Year)	Country	Publisher
Emotional and Social Support	Trautwein & Bosse (2017)	Germany	Springer
	Thompson et al. (2021)	England	Taylor and Francis
	Naylor et al. (2018)	Australia	Nature
	Maunder (2018)	UK	Taylor and Francis
	Meehan & Howells (2019)	UK	Taylor and Francis
	McLean et al. (2023)	Ireland	Springer Nature
	Marhamah & binti Hamzah (2016)	Indonesia	DOAJ
	Kavindi et al. (2024)	Tanzania	AJOAL
Academic Preparation Programs	Worsley et al. (2021)	England	Taylor and Francis
	Sutton (2018)	UK	Wiley Online Library
	Sæle et al. (2017)	Norway	Springer
	Uleanya & Rugbeer (2020)	South Africa	AJOAL
	Fabeku & Fasanmi (2024)	Nigeria	DOAJ
	Beard et al. (2023)	Developing countries	Wiley Online
	Osoro & Nyamwange (2023)	Kenya	AJOAL
Addressing Barriers to Success	Van der Zanden et al. (2019)	Netherlands	Taylor and Francis
	Thompson et al. (2021)	England	Taylor and Francis
	Worsley et al. (2021)	England	Taylor and Francis
	Shcheglova et al. (2020)	Russia	Wiley Online Library
	Trautwein & Bosse (2017)	Germany	Springer
	Van Rooij et al. (2018)	Netherlands	Springer
	Gosai et al. (2023)	Cambodia	Elsevier
	Musyoka et al. (2020)	Kenya	PLOS ONE
Providing Strategies for Academic Success	Hope (2016)	England	Taylor and Francis
	Haktanir et al. (2021)	United States	SAGE
	Eberle & Hobrecht (2021)	Germany	Elsevier
	Lan et al. (2024)	Cambodia	Research Gate
	Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020)	South Africa	AJOAL
	Brooker et al. (2017)	Australia	DOAJ
	van Rooij et al. (2018)	Netherlands	Springer Nature
	Willems et al. (2021)	Belgium	Frontiers

Emotional and Social Support

The literature consistently demonstrates that, emotional and social support systems serve as fundamental prerequisites for student's successful university

transitions, directly validating Schlossberg's Transition Theory (2012) assertion that, support functions are crucial resource individuals can leverage during major life changes. This is evidenced by the quantitative study from Germany which revealed that, social needs, account for approximately 14% of students identified requirements (Trautwein & Bosse, 2017), thus providing concrete validation of the support dimension's significance within STT's framework.

Moreover, cross-cultural analysis reveals striking consistencies in support needs despite diverse educational contexts. This is in line with the study by Thompson et al. (2021) who reported that, many 18-year-old students in England struggle with the newfound independence required for university life, indicating that, social connections provide essential emotional scaffolding during this critical period. This finding is particularly significant as it demonstrates how the "support" factor operates across different cultural contexts, subsequently reinforcing STT's universal applicability. Similarly, Naylor et al. (2018) demonstrated that, approachable academic staff considerably impact transition success by recognizing individual student's differences and needs, which aligns with the theory's emphasis on personalized support in coping with transitions.

Further, the geographical diversity of findings strengthens the theoretical foundation considerably. For instance, in the Asia-Pacific region, Indonesian research revealed that, students with high social support experienced markedly lower academic stress levels (Marhamah & binti Hamzah, 2016), while in the Tanzanian context research found that, 38% of first-year students experienced severe psychological distress, with social support serving as a primary protective factor (Kavindi et al., 2024). These findings are particularly compelling as they demonstrate that, regardless of the economic development level or cultural context, the fundamental need for social support remains constant which is a critical insight that validates STT's cross-cultural robustness.

Furthermore, critical analysis of effective support systems, reveals several consistent characteristics that operationalize STT's (2012) support dimension such as approachable faculty member who recognizes individual differences

(Naylor et al., 2018), structured peer networks that foster belonging (Meehan & Howells, 2019), proactive support including well-being advisors (Worsley et al., 2021) and gender-sensitive approaches recognizing varied support needs (McLean et al., 2023). Notably, the emphasis on gender-specific initiatives, highlights a crucial gap in traditional transition support which is the failure to recognize that, support needs are individually variable as the model suggests.

All in all, this evidence challenges institutions to move beyond generic support approaches toward more sophisticated and individualized frameworks. The convergence of findings across diverse contexts suggests that, emotional and social support systems are not supplementary but fundamental to first-year success, thus requiring strategic institutional investment in peer connections, approachable academic environments, and belonging initiatives tailored to diverse students' populations.

5. Academic Preparation Programs and Institutional Practices

Literature asserts that, academic preparation programs demonstrate significant impact when strategically designed to address the gap between secondary and tertiary education expectations, directly addressing STT "situation" factor by modifying students' readiness for university contexts. In the same vein, broad evaluation of English programs revealed that, effective initiatives substantially help students to develop practical competencies including budgeting, time management and independent learning skills while explicitly addressing differences in teaching approaches (Worsley et al., 2021). This finding is particularly significant as it demonstrates how institutional interventions can actively re-shape the "situation" component of transitions.

Likewise, international implementation models reveal remarkable consistency despite varied educational systems as studies from Kenya (Osoro & Nyamwange, 2023), Nigeria (Fabeku & Fasanmi, 2024) and South Africa (Uleanya & Rugbeer, 2020) consistently demonstrate that, well-structured

orientation programs enable smooth transitions and maintain student well-being in the universities.

This cross-cultural consistency is theoretically significant since it concurs with the current study as it suggests that, certain situational modifications work universally, supporting STT's applicability across diverse contexts while highlighting the critical importance of timing which is a key element of framework's situation factor.

On similar note, European and North American approaches, emphasize gradual autonomy development with regard to structured guidance that progressively increases independence as students develop confidence and competence. This scaffolded approach exemplifies how effective programs operationalize both the "situation" and "strategies" factors simultaneously, in this manner, it modifies the institutional context while building student's capacity for independent coping.

Remarkably, critical examination reveals that, successful academic preparation programs share key characteristics such as structured guidance which provides clear frameworks, faculty commitment with institutional support, explicit skill development in time management and academic literacy as well as strategic timing that provides support at optimal transition moments. However, a substantial gap emerges in the literature regarding long-term effectiveness measurement of which most studies focus on immediate outcomes rather than sustained impact throughout the first year and beyond.

Further, the evidence indicates that, academic preparation is most effective when customized to address specific student population's needs rather than applying generic approaches, thus supporting STT's emphasis on individual differences in transition experiences. For that reason, these finding challenges institutions to develop more nuanced, population-specific preparation programs rather than one-size-fits-all approaches.

Addressing Barriers to Success

Regarding student's barrier to success, research identifies multiple, often interconnected barriers that impede successful transitions as revealed by Dutch studies that, 22% of students experience significant first-year challenges hence affecting both student's academic performance and social relationships (Van der Zanden et al., 2019).

Concurrent studies prove that academic adjustment is basically induced by intrinsic motivation, self-regulated study habits and program satisfaction, collectively accounting for 72% of student outcomes (Van Rooij et al., 2018). These findings directly connect to STT's "self" factor which take in personal traits and psychological resources.

Similarly, Trautwein and Bosse (2017) developed a comprehensive framework identifying four interconnected barrier categories namely personal barriers which balance life demands and managing workload, organizational barriers which navigate institutional systems, content-related barriers which meet curriculum demands and social barriers regarding building relationships. This framework provides practical operationalization of STT's multidimensional approach which illustrates how multiple factors spanning all four S's determine transition outcomes.

Likewise, international evidence reveals effective mitigation strategies, with Russian research depicting that systematic monitoring of attendance and assignment completion, coupled with academic advisor intervention, basically reduces attrition rates among at-risk students (Shcheglova et al., 2020). In addition, Kenyan research recommended building more student's accommodations as many first-year students living in private housing experience social difficulties (Musyoka et al., 2020) while Cambodian studies found that, low academic stress and good health positively affect performance and retention (Gosai et al., 2023).

Critical analysis reveals that, barriers to first-year success are multifaceted and interconnected, requiring broader institutional approaches rather than isolated interventions as STT's suggests. However, a significant concern emerges regarding the reactive rather than proactive nature of many

interventions. While early identification systems show promise, most institutions wait for problems to manifest rather than systematically preventing them through environmental modifications.

All in all, the literature consistently reveals that, strengthening connections between secondary and tertiary education systems can prepare students more effectively for university life hence reducing adjustment shock that contributes to early withdrawal. This finding suggests that effective barrier mitigation requires systemic panacea beyond individual institutional boundaries.

Providing Strategies for Academic Success

Research demonstrates that, specific academic strategies can be taught and developed, subsequently leading to improved outcomes across diverse institutional contexts. Studies in Belgian reveal that, students who proactively adjust behaviours and attitudes to fit higher education environments achieve profoundly better academic results (Willems et al., 2021), directly concurring with Schlossberg Transition Theory's "strategies" factor emphasis on learnable coping mechanisms.

Besides, cross-cultural strategy effectiveness shows remarkable consistency despite varied educational systems as in Australian the study emphasizes structured time planning as crucial for first-year success (Brooker et al., 2017) whilst in Norway the study demonstrated that, deep and strategic learning techniques improve first-year GPAs (Sæle et al., 2017). Moreover, in the US, research identifies resilience and positive academic self-concept as significant predictors of successful adjustment (Haktanir et al., 2021) whereas in Germany research during COVID-19, demonstrates the importance of developing flexible coping skills for unexpected challenges (Eberle & Hobrecht, 2021).

Along similar lines, Cambodian research identified specific effective strategies including time management, utilizing support services, engagement, study habits, goal-setting and resilience (Lan et al., 2024), representing concrete examples of what Schlossberg Transition Theory describes it as strategies to "change the situation" and "manage stress." These

findings emphasize skill building, peer mentoring, adaptability training and self-regulation for effective strategy implementation.

Furthermore, critical evaluation reveals that, academic success strategies must be adaptable to changing circumstances, suggesting that flexibility and problem-solving should be core components of transition support programs. However, a significant gap exists in understanding how to effectively teach strategy flexibility rather than simply providing static skill sets. In this manner, the research emphasizes that, strategies initially developed for specific populations, often have broader applications when appropriately implemented, hence supporting the universality of certain strategic approaches while maintaining the need for individualized application of the strategies.

In general, the interconnection between STT's "self" and "strategies" factors are becoming evident as psychological resources directly influencing students' ability to implement effective coping strategies. In that regard, they suggest that strategy development programs must address both skill acquisition and psychological preparation simultaneously.

6. Conclusion

This study has synthesized international studies on evidence-based strategies in supporting first-year students' transition from secondary school to university, guided by STT framework. The findings revealed four interconnected domains namely, emotional and social support networks providing stability during adjustment, structured academic preparation programs bridging knowledge and skill gaps, targeted interventions addressing specific transition barriers and strategic development of academic success skills fostering self-regulation and independence. These domains closely align with the "4 S's" in STT (2012) which are Support, Situation, Self, and Strategies, hence confirming the theory's applicability across diverse educational contexts while demonstrating that successful transitions require simultaneous attention to all four dimensions rather than isolated interventions.

The current research contributes substantively to educational literature since; it offers an integrated theoretical framework for understanding the issue under study that transcends specific institutional structures while stressing contextually sensitive implementation. The cross-cultural consistency of findings, validates STT's universal applicability while revealing gaps in current practice, mainly the dominance of reactive rather than proactive approaches and the continued reliance on generic rather than individualized support strategies employed.

Practical implications include developing comprehensive support programs that facilitate transition from structured assistance to greater independence, executing the early identification systems for at-risk students, establishing peer mentoring initiatives, providing faculty development focused on first-year student challenges and strengthening alignment between secondary and tertiary education sectors.

However, this review identified critical areas requiring urgent attention. Initially, future research should explore how effective support strategies can be adapted for increasingly diverse student's populations, including first-years, international and non-traditional students. Besides, investigation on the long-term effectiveness of transition support programs beyond immediate first-year outcomes is essential, mainly exploration of how rapidly evolving educational environments, particularly hybrid and online learning contexts affect traditional transition support approaches. Most critically, research must address the systemic changes needed to move from reactive intervention models to proactive prevention frameworks that basically re-shape the transition experience rather than merely responding to difficulties as they arise.

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