

Navigating the transition: a qualitative exploration of first-year university students' challenges, coping mechanisms and support systems

Pauviya Guna Segar¹, Azlina Mohd Kosnin², Lina Handayani³

¹School of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru, Malaysia

²Faculty of Public Health, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Article Info

Article history:

Received Dec 20, 2024

Revised Dec 24, 2025

Accepted Jan 31, 2026

Keywords:

Academic challenges

Coping mechanism

First-year university transition

Non-academic challenges

Support systems

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the challenges, coping mechanisms, and support systems encountered by Malaysian university students during their first year. Using semi-structured interviews with 15 first- and second-year students, the study identifies key non-academic and academic challenges, coping strategies, and sources of support systems. Thematic analysis reveals that students face non-academic challenges such as independence and self-reliance, logistic and environmental challenges, increased autonomy and responsibility, and diminished family and social time. Academic challenges include time management and academic discipline, lack of guidance and support, challenges in course structure and content, academic overload and struggles with balancing university life, and external pressure and expectations. Coping mechanisms include homesickness and emotional support from others, lifestyle, time management and organization, hobbies and leisure activities, participation in university-supported socializing programs, and building friendships at the university. This study highlights the importance of tailored support interventions for first-year students and suggests improvements in university support frameworks. However, the research is limited by its small sample size and reliance on self-reported data. Future research could expand upon these findings with larger, more diverse samples and incorporate quantitative methods to validate and deepen insights into the first-year transition experience.

This is an open access article under the [CC BY-SA](#) license.



Corresponding Author:

Pauviya Guna Segar

School of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

81310 Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia

Email: pauviyapauvi@hotmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The transition to university life marks a significant period of change for students, bringing both excitement and a host of new challenges. Moving into the more autonomous world of higher education requires students to adapt to increased academic demands, independence, and a new social landscape. In addition to academic pressures, students frequently face non-academic challenges, such as managing homesickness, building new friendships, and adjusting to unfamiliar routines and responsibilities [1]–[3]. For many, this period involves navigating complex emotional and social adjustments, including establishing a sense of belonging in a new environment and balancing their lifestyle. Research indicates that students' ability to manage these varied demands strongly influences their well-being and overall success at university [1]–[3].

Academic challenges are particularly prominent during this phase, as students encounter higher expectations, increased personal accountability, and a more complex workload. Many first-year students

struggle with the rigors of university coursework and feel unprepared for the demands of this new academic environment [4]. Adjusting to larger, more impersonal classrooms and differing teaching styles can exacerbate these difficulties [5]. Time management also becomes essential as students balance their academic responsibilities with social activities, often leading to feelings of being overwhelmed [5]. Moreover, the newfound independence that accompanies university life requires students to make critical decisions without the direct guidance they may have relied on before [6].

Coping with or adjusting to university life adds another layer of complexity to this transition. Students must navigate new relationships, develop a sense of belonging, and integrate into the university community [7], [8]. Support systems, including family, friends, and university resources, play a vital role in helping students manage these challenges [7], [9]. Effective support can significantly influence their academic performance and overall adjustment to university life [7], [9].

While prior research has extensively examined student challenges, coping mechanisms, and support systems during the transition to university life [10]–[13], a gap remains in understanding these experiences from the perspective of first-year students themselves. Specifically, much of the existing literature has relied on quantitative methods or institutional viewpoints, which overlook the lived experiences of students during this critical transition. The novelty of this study lies in its qualitative exploration of first-year university students' personal experiences, focusing on their individual challenges, coping strategies, and the role of support systems. By examining these elements, this research offers new insights into the transition process that are often missing in existing studies.

This study aims to address the following research questions: i) what challenges do first-year university students face during their transition to university life? ii) how do first-year university students cope with academic, social, and emotional challenges during this transition? and iii) what support systems do first-year university students perceive as important in facilitating their transition to university? By addressing these key areas, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of first-year university students' experiences, providing insights that can inform future research and targeted interventions to enhance student support during this critical stage.

2. METHOD

2.1. Approach to data collection and participants

This study employed qualitative, open-ended, semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of Malaysian first-year university students transitioning to university life. Purposive sampling, widely used in qualitative research for its focus on selecting information-rich participants [14], was utilized to recruit 15 participants, including first-year and second-year students reflecting on their first-year experiences. Participants were identified through direct outreach, such as approaching university students and their friends, and contacted via phone. Those who expressed interest and provided informed consent were included, with interviews conducted in participants' preferred settings, such as coffee shops or online via video calls. Questions, including "what has been the most challenging aspect of transitioning to university life?" encouraged detailed insights, and further probing fostered dynamic conversations in a comfortable environment. All interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed, and anonymized.

2.2. Data analysis

This study employed thematic analysis following the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke [15]. The process began with familiarization, which involved transcribing the interviews and thoroughly reviewing the transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the data. This was followed by coding, where relevant text segments related to the research questions were identified and labelled. The codes were then organized into broader themes during the theme generation phase. Subsequently, the themes were reviewed to ensure accuracy and distinctiveness. Each theme was then defined and named to clearly capture its essence. Finally, the writing-up stage involved synthesizing the analysis by integrating participant quotes with the researcher's interpretations into a cohesive narrative that highlights the challenges and adjustments students faced during their transition to university life. This structured approach provided a comprehensive exploration of the students' challenges and adjustments.

3. RESULTS

3.1. University life for first-year students

Based on the interviews with students, several challenges arise during the transition to university life, particularly non-academic and academic challenges. Coping mechanisms are used by students to navigate these challenges. The role of support systems is essential in easing the transition.

3.1.1. Non-academic challenges

Students face non-academic challenges, which can be explained through four themes. These themes are independence and self-reliance, logistic and environmental challenges, increased autonomy and responsibility, and diminished family and social time. Each of these themes is discussed in the following sections.

a. Independence and self-reliance

Almost all the students expressed that during their transition to university, the biggest challenge or self-transformation they noticed was being independent and more self-reliant. Currently, they are living alone without the guidance of family, and they have to manage everything individually. One participant, Student A, spoke about financial management, stating,

"I am living alone in the hostel, and this is the first time I am staying outside without my parents' guidance. It's quite challenging to manage the pocket money they give me."

Another participant, Student B, highlights the increased degree of freedom in university life:

"In this university life, there is no one to spoon-feed me now. During my schooling, my parents used to guide me in everything. But now I have to be independent and manage a high degree of freedom. Initially, it was quite hard to handle, and I struggled to manage it."

b. Logistic and environmental challenges

The second theme is logistic and environmental challenges, such as difficulties with transportation, access to essential resources, and understanding how to navigate university services and infrastructure. Accordingly, Student C stated,

"During the transition to university, the biggest challenge is the transportation from my rental house to my university. I always travel by public transportation, such as buses and MRT, to reach my university. As I am taking two public transports daily, it's quite tiring for me."

Another participant, Student D, expressed concerns about essential resources, saying,

"I don't get proper food in the hostel; I am missing my mother's presence more here."

Meanwhile, Student E discussed environmental challenges in accessing resources, stating,

"I don't know how to access important stuff at university, especially borrowing books from the library or printing study materials. This unawareness makes me stressed at times, as I don't have any resources to study."

c. Increased autonomy and responsibility

Many students noticed a huge difference between university and school life, as there are no pushovers in university, and they have to handle everything promptly. For example, Student F stated,

"In high school, the level of autonomy is low and manageable as teachers provide guidance from time to time. However, in university, we are expected to take the initiative in completing assignments, managing group tasks, and finding notes independently without the lecturer's support."

d. Diminished family and social time

Most of the students worry that after entering university, their preferences and choices will differ as they focus more on university life. Student G stated,

"After entering university, I had to deal with many kinds of stuff individually. My life became so busy, and my phase of life sped up. The time I spent with my family and friends became less, and I feel bad about it."

3.1.2. Academic challenges

Students face academic challenges, which can be explained through five themes. These themes are time management and academic discipline, lack of guidance and support, challenges in course structure and

content, academic overload and struggles with balancing university life, and external pressure and expectations. Each of these themes is discussed in the following sections.

a. Time management and academic discipline

Nearly all students reported that the most challenging aspect of their transition to university is managing their time, particularly meeting assignment deadlines. Student H said,

“Managing time effectively in completing academic workload and assigned tasks is the major challenge I faced during my transition. It is really hard to meet the deadlines as many assignments need to be done.”

b. Lack of guidance and support

The majority of students face academic challenges due to a lack of guidance and support. For example, they are expected to work independently, which is a new phase for them. Many struggles because of unclear guidance, limited support from lecturers, and difficulty accessing the materials needed for academic success. Student I reported,

“I am struggling to find references for my assignments as the lecturers are unfriendly and do not guide me in finding them online. Or the materials at the university are hard to access. Seriously, I don’t know what to do now!”

Moreover, some students reported that the lack of guidance and support during the transition made it difficult for them to adapt to the university environment. Student J reported,

“My first language is Malay, and I went to a Malay-speaking school last time. When I entered university, everything was in English, and I struggled a lot to understand the academic materials. So, I went to seek help from lecturers, but they were unbothered about my difficulty and harsh towards me. And now I don’t know what to study or what to focus on. I only read the lecture notes, but it’s not enough for me to score well.”

c. Challenges in course structure and content

The university’s course structure presents academic challenges that require students to quickly adjust and develop a deeper understanding of complex material. For example, Student K stated,

“I feel like we have such a short amount of time to adjust to the difficulty and structure of these courses. It makes it so much harder to absorb all the information.”

d. Academic overload and struggles with balancing university life

The majority of students highlight the academic pressure that prevents them from participating in extracurricular activities and leads to a sole focus on academic tasks due to difficulty in multitasking. At the same time, due to the high academic workload, students are facing difficulties in balancing academic roles, in facilitating or hindering participation in other university-related activities. Student L reported,

“I really cannot handle the overload of academic demands, so I usually don’t participate in other university-related activities like cultural events or club meetings. On top of that, I have to manage all my household chores by myself since I’m living in a rented house. I’m struggling to find a balance, and now I realize I’m not good at multitasking.”

3.2. External pressure and expectations

Most students complain about the external pressures they face, including family expectations, societal demands, and the need to perform well in university to secure scholarships and future career opportunities. For example, here are the different challenges faced by three students: Student M highlighted,

“My family expects me to perform well by comparing me with my siblings’ achievements, and it is very stressful.”

Student N stated,

“The pressure from society has really intensified since I entered university. I feel pressured to score well because my neighbors and relatives constantly remind me of their children’s achievements, telling me how great they are and making me feel like I’m not measuring up.”

Student O reported,

“I was forced to get good marks for the sake of getting the scholarship.”

3.3. Coping mechanisms to navigate

The analysis identifies six themes for coping mechanisms used by students. These themes are homesickness and emotional support from others, lifestyle, time management and organization, hobbies and leisure activities, participation in university-supported socializing programs, and building friendships at the university. Each of these themes is discussed in the following sections.

3.3.1. Homesickness and emotional support from others

Most of the students highlight that homesickness is the main challenge in adjusting to their social environment at university. Students frequently miss their families and the emotional support they get from their parents. Student L stated,

“I cannot focus on my university life thoroughly as I’m missing my family, especially my parents. I always depend on their emotional support.”

To cope with homesickness and adjust to university life, many students rely on emotional support from family, friends, or seniors to help manage university demands. This strategy is seen as highly effective in managing stress, providing relief, and offering guidance. For example, Student A gets emotional support from seniors and states,

“When I was struggling in university, I often chatted with my seniors. Their experiences were a lot like mine, and their advice helped me figure things out.”

3.3.2. Lifestyle

Some students use health-conscious strategies like maintaining a balanced diet, regular exercise, and getting enough sleep. Those approaches are effective in improving mood, keeping things organized, and promoting overall well-being. Student J stated,

“I make self-care a priority by focusing on my physical and mental health. I stay active at university by exercising regularly, eating a balanced diet, and getting around eight hours of sleep.”

On the other hand, some students choose unhealthy lifestyles or habits to cope with university demands, such as turning to smoking, vaping, or consuming alcohol. These methods provide temporary relief but can negatively impact their academic performance and well-being. Student E stated,

“Vaping and smoking give me quick relief from the stress of university demands. I usually turn to them to cope, even though I know they can have negative effects.”

3.3.3. Time management and organization

Some students reported that structured time management, creating detailed schedules, and breaking down tasks into smaller pieces are key strategies to cope with the demands of university life. These methods are effective in balancing academic and personal life and staying on top of responsibilities. Student F stated,

“I used to create a detailed schedule for me to follow as this helps me manage my time effectively and balance university life with personal responsibilities.”

3.3.4. Hobbies and leisure activities

Most of the students stated that engaging in hobbies like reading, watching television shows, or playing video games is a common strategy for stress relief. These approaches help students escape from academic pressure and have been reported as effective. Student J stated,

“I usually read fantasy novels or play video games, and they help me unwind from the stress of university life.”

3.3.5. Participation in a university-supported socializing program

Almost all the students reported that during the first year, universities conducted several supported socializing programs for the freshmen. The university provides programs and events that facilitate student interaction, helping students to connect. Student H stated,

“It’s hard to adjust to the social environment at university as it’s a diverse group of people compared to school, but I have been gradually finding my place by participating in group activities, joining clubs, and attending events at university.”

Because of these supported socializing programs offered by universities, students can make a rapport with other students across different races and cultures. Student J also highlighted cultural unity, stating,

“There is no issue adjusting to or living with friends of other races, as we live happily under the concept of 1 Malaysia. By joining club activities, we build a good rapport with others.”

Even though the universities offer supported socializing programs, some students still struggle with social adjustment as they are not interested in participating in any activities. For instance, Student M reported,

“Usually, I spend more time alone rather than finding new friends. I am not even involved in any social activities at university, as I prefer to be alone.”

3.3.6. Building friendships at the university

Most of the students shared their experience in building friendships in university while they were adjusting to the university environment. Some students find close-knit, supportive friends who help them emotionally. Student A stated,

“It was a pleasant experience as I was able to find friends here, and they helped me in my bad situation. And I am lucky to have friendly seniors who guide me throughout my first-year journey.”

Although some students struggle to make friends, either due to a lack of a common mindset or being unable to connect deeply. Student K stated,

“It’s tough to find someone who thinks like me, so I usually keep to myself and don’t engage with others. My roommates are always trying to start conversations and build a connection, but I’m just not into it. I end up pretending to be friendly just to maintain a good relationship with them.”

3.4. The role of support systems in easing the transition

The analysis identifies three themes for the role of support systems in easing the transition of university students. These themes are family support, friends support, and university support. Each of these themes is discussed in the following sections.

3.4.1. Family support

The primary source of emotional and moral support for many students came from their parents, siblings, and other close family members, helping them adjust and manage university life. Two students shared about their support systems: Student B mentioned,

“My parents and sister are my main support. Even with the new challenges of university life, having them to talk to has made the transition easier. I’m really lucky to have their support—it’s helped me stay grounded.”

Student J shared,

“My grandpa and aunt are my biggest support. They’ve shared their struggles with me and how they got through them, always reminding me that life has its ups and downs. Their support keeps me going and helps me adjust to university life.”

3.4.2. Friend support

Most of the students stated that friends from both school and university provided moral support, which aided in the transition process. Student M stated,

“My close friend, who goes to a different university, is someone I can always rely on for support. She shares her transition struggles with me, so I never feel alone—she’s always there for me.”

3.4.3. University support

Most of the students said that university social support is important during the transition. University clubs, course mates, seniors, and friendly lecturers contributed to helping students form new relationships and adjust to the university environment. Student A stated,

“University clubs always have get-togethers, which really help in building good connections with seniors and course mates. Honestly, seniors and peers were my biggest support during the transition—they helped me a lot.”

Some students also mentioned that having access to resources like academic advising, mental health services, and ice-breaking sessions was helpful for them. Student M mentioned,

“My university offers useful resources for first-year students, like academic advising and mental health services. They’re really helpful when we need advice or just someone to talk to.”

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Non-academic challenges faced during the first-year university transition

This study investigated the challenges first-year students face during their transition to university life. While previous research has explored various aspects of this transition, it has not explicitly addressed the complexity of autonomy, social isolation, and logistical difficulties, which are significant in shaping students’ experiences during this critical period. For instance, earlier studies have explored the academic and emotional struggles students face during the transition, but they have not fully explored the depth of these challenges, especially with autonomy and self-management [16], [17].

We found that students encounter multiple challenges, particularly the shift toward greater independence. The transition from family-supported routines to managing their responsibilities is overwhelming. Students face not only academic pressure but also social isolation and logistical difficulties, as evidenced by their struggles with navigating transportation and managing finances without parental guidance. These findings align with broader literature on the psychological and emotional toll of moving away from familiar support systems and learning to cope with adult-like responsibilities [16], [17]. Moreover, logistical and environmental difficulties, such as navigating public transportation and accessing resources, significantly increase stress during the transition. Inadequate transport infrastructure exacerbates these challenges, while students’ lack of knowledge about sustainable logistics strategies further worsens the situation [18].

The challenges of increased autonomy are also particularly evident in the context of online learning. During emergency online teaching, students’ struggles with autonomy and social isolation were amplified, leading to heightened feelings of vulnerability [19]. This finding emphasizes the compounded difficulties that students face when they are forced to learn independently without the usual physical interaction and support systems, making it harder to cope with the demands of university life.

Our study suggests that while increased autonomy can foster personal growth, it often brings uncertainty, especially in academic settings. Many students struggle with the transition from structured schooling to self-driven learning, feeling uncertain about meeting academic demands [20]. Student-centered learning environments, though beneficial, can sometimes overwhelm students [21]. However, fostering autonomy has the potential to promote personal growth, and interventions based on positive psychology could enhance students’ confidence and self-directed learning [22]. This suggests that while autonomy offers development opportunities, it must be carefully supported through structured guidance and psychological interventions.

Finally, social challenges emerge, particularly the reduced time spent with family and friends. The fast-paced nature of university life can result in social isolation, contributing to feelings of guilt and emotional strain. This emotional toll of the transition is evident in students’ reflections on how their relationships have changed, highlighting the need for strategies to maintain personal connections during this period [23]. Thus, our findings indicate that first-year students’ transition to university is marked by

a complex interplay of academic, social, and logistical challenges. The increased autonomy and responsibility that students experience require targeted support systems to foster their personal growth and academic success.

4.2. Academic challenges

This study examined the academic challenges first-year students face during their transition to university. While previous research has explored time management and academic struggles, it has not fully addressed the connection between procrastination, poor time management skills, and feelings of being overwhelmed by academic demands [24]. We found that the shift from structured high school schedules to the more flexible demands of university life leads to procrastination and difficulties in managing time effectively [24]. Self-regulation in study habits is also a major challenge for many students [25]. Additionally, a lack of academic guidance further complicates the transition, with unclear instructions and limited access to resources, particularly for non-English-speaking students [26], [27]. Instructional dissonance, where a mismatch between lecturers' expectations and students' experiences leads to confusion and performance issues, was also identified as a key issue [26], [27]. Clear communication from lecturers is essential for student success [28], [29].

The complexity of university courses leads to academic overload, leaving little time for extracurricular activities, which are vital for personal development [30]. While extracurricular involvement is linked to better academic performance and career readiness [31], many students prioritize academics over personal growth, which can hinder overall adjustment and success [32]. Some students adopt positive coping strategies, such as seeking help from peers and lecturers, while others resort to unproductive behaviors like procrastination and academic dishonesty. Hence, universities must provide clearer academic guidance and support systems to help students manage their academic workload and develop effective coping strategies.

4.3. Coping mechanism

This study examined the emotional and social challenges faced by first-year university students, particularly homesickness and disconnection. While previous research has explored various aspects of student adjustment, it has not fully addressed the impact of homesickness on social engagement and overall well-being in the context of first-year students' transition to university [33]. The findings indicate that homesickness significantly affects students' ability to engage in university life, hindering both social and academic adjustment. Students who experienced higher levels of homesickness reported greater difficulty in adapting to their new environment. This reinforces prior research that highlights homesickness as a key barrier to effective social integration [33]. Furthermore, social disconnection, which is often tied to homesickness, leads to feelings of isolation and contributes to higher stress levels, further complicating students' adjustment to university life [34].

In addition, our study demonstrated that emotional support from family, friends, and mentors, as well as adopting health-conscious lifestyle choices, were identified as crucial strategies for managing the university transition. These strategies helped students cope with emotional challenges and academic pressures, aligning with findings from existing literature on the importance of emotional support and health management [3], [34], [35]. However, some students resorted to unhealthy coping strategies, like smoking or vaping, which negatively impacted their well-being and academic performance, a trend observed in previous studies [32], [36].

We found that the role of gender in coping mechanisms was also a significant finding. Female students reported higher levels of stress and a greater tendency to engage in maladaptive coping strategies compared to their male counterparts, as supported by research on gender differences in coping strategies [37], [38]. Moreover, effective time management and organizational skills were key to managing stress, with students who used structured schedules showing better academic performance [39].

University-supported social programs, such as clubs and group activities, play a pivotal role in facilitating social adjustment by fostering cultural exchange and building social connections. These programs have proven effective in helping students navigate the social complexities of university life [40], [41]. However, some students who prefer isolation may experience delayed social integration, which could increase psychological challenges [42].

In conclusion, homesickness and emotional support play significant roles in the transition to university for first-year students. The study's findings suggest that addressing homesickness and promoting healthy coping mechanisms can enhance student well-being. University-supported social programs also play an important role in facilitating students' social and academic integration.

4.4. The role of support systems

This study investigated the role of various support systems in helping first-year university students navigate their transition. Although past research has highlighted the general importance of family, peer, and

university support, gaps remain in understanding their specific contributions during the first year. This study, therefore, examines how this support systems influence first-year adjustment and academic success.

Our study's findings underscore that family, friends, and university support systems are central to first-year students' success. Family support, including emotional and informational resources, significantly aids students in managing stress and adapting to academic life. Emotional support from close family relationships fosters a sense of belonging and stability, which is essential for managing university-related stress [43]. Informational support from parents, such as guidance on academic decisions, further eases students' adjustment, though some parents may lack knowledge about the university system, limiting their ability to provide effective advice [44]. Peer support, particularly from friends, plays a vital role in students' emotional well-being, social integration, and academic engagement. Studies suggest that peer relationships, whether from high school connections or new university friendships, help alleviate feelings of loneliness, contributing to greater academic success and well-being [1], [45]. Additionally, friends' support enhances academic engagement, which in turn contributes to better psychological well-being and adjustment to academic environments [46]. University resources such as academic advising, mental health services, and orientation programs provide critical support. Programs like "skills for success" offer practical skills training, especially for underrepresented groups, improving both academic performance and mental health outcomes [3], [47], [48].

Our study suggests that family and peer support systems directly influence students' mental health and academic success, aligning with previous studies that emphasize the importance of emotional and informational support for first-year students [1], [43]. Moreover, university resources contribute significantly to students' adjustment. University services like mentorship and counselling programs enhance both academic performance and emotional well-being, which is consistent with earlier research showing the effectiveness of these programs [3], [48]. In collectivist cultures, such as Malaysia, peer relationships and family support are particularly significant in reducing stress and fostering academic competence, as these cultural values emphasize community and relational ties [49], [50]. Overall, the findings provide strong evidence that a combination of family, peer, and university support systems is essential for a successful transition to university. These support networks not only ease emotional challenges but also enhance students' academic engagement, fostering a sense of belonging and improving their overall university experience.

4.5. Limitations and recommendations for future research

While this study provides valuable insights into the challenges, coping mechanisms, and support systems of first-year university students, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study's qualitative, cross-sectional design limits the generalizability of findings, as it does not capture long-term trends or causal relationships. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases such as selective memory or social desirability. The voluntary nature of participation may also have resulted in a sample skewed toward more resilient students, potentially underrepresenting those struggling with the transition. Furthermore, the study primarily focuses on first- and second-year students, limiting broader applicability across different student populations.

Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to examine how students' experiences, coping strategies, and academic outcomes evolve. Expanding sample diversity and incorporating quantitative methods could provide a more comprehensive understanding of transitional challenges. Additionally, research could explore how specific academic and social support interventions, such as mentorship programs, time management workshops, and peer-led support systems, impact students' resilience and adjustment. Investigating the role of language support for non-English-speaking students and targeted interventions for homesickness could offer further insights into effective university support strategies. Evaluating the effectiveness of structured programs, such as skills training initiatives and mental health services, particularly for underrepresented groups like first-generation students, could help universities develop more inclusive and tailored support systems. By addressing these gaps, future studies can contribute to a deeper understanding of the university transition process and inform policies that enhance student well-being and academic success.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study explores the transitional experiences of first-year university students in Malaysia, emphasizing the challenges, coping mechanisms, and support systems crucial during this period. It highlights the importance of understanding students' academic and personal needs to facilitate their successful integration. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive support strategies in higher

education to enhance students' well-being. Ultimately, such strategies are key to promoting a smooth transition and fostering academic success.

FUNDING INFORMATION

Authors state no funding involved.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Pauviya Guna Segar	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Azlina Mohd Kosnin	✓	✓		✓						✓	✓	✓		
Lina Handayani	✓										✓	✓		

C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research involving human participants complied with all relevant national regulations and institutional policies and adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Research Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research (Reference No: UTMREC-2025-159).

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [PGS]. The data, which contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants, are not publicly available due to certain restrictions.

REFERENCES

- [1] P. Bijmans, J. de Bruin, and A. Groen, "It's like two different worlds': the multifaceted nature of social support in students' transition from high school to a problem-based learning undergraduate programme," *European Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 149–165, Jan. 2025, doi: 10.1080/21568235.2023.2289037.
- [2] J. Muca *et al.*, "Insights into the psychological strains of university life: a study of Albanian students," *Qeios*, vol. 6, pp. 1–72, Aug. 2024, doi: 10.32388/Q30W3Z.2.
- [3] M. Stokoe, D. Nordstokke, and G. Wilcox, "First year students' perceptions of the transition to university: the role of informational, instrumental, and emotional support," *International Journal of Research in Education and Science*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 377–393, May 2024, doi: 10.46328/ijres.3392.
- [4] R. B. Cameron and C. A. Rideout, "It's been a challenge finding new ways to learn': first-year students' perceptions of adapting to learning in a university environment," *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 668–682, Mar. 2022, doi: 10.1080/03075079.2020.1783525.
- [5] S. S. Gosai, A. T. Tuibeqa, and A. Prasad, "Exploring the transition challenges of first-year College of Business students in Fiji," *International Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 117, p. 102131, 2023, doi: 10.1016/j.ijer.2022.102131.
- [6] J. D. Worsley, P. Harrison, and R. Corcoran, "Bridging the gap: exploring the unique transition from home, school or college into university," *Frontiers in Public Health*, vol. 9, p. 634285, Mar. 2021, doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2021.634285.
- [7] I. C. Mulaudzi, "Challenges faced by first-year university students: navigating the transition to higher education," *Journal of Education and Human Development*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 79–87, Dec. 2023, doi: 10.15640/jehd.v12n2a8.

- [8] L. M. Nunn, *College belonging: how first-year and first-generation students navigate campus life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021.
- [9] A. N. Hako, T. P. Shikongo, and A. Bozkurt, "Psychological adjustment challenges among first-year university students: crucial link between psychological health and academic success in higher education," *International Journal of Studies in Psychology*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 1–8, 2025, doi: 10.38140/ijpspy.v5i1.1542.
- [10] A. Alkhawaldeh *et al.*, "Stress factors, stress levels, and coping mechanisms among university students," *The Scientific World Journal*, vol. 2023, no. 1, p. 2026971, Jun. 2023, doi: 10.1155/2023/2026971.
- [11] M. S. Islam and M. F. Rabbi, "Exploring the sources of academic stress and adopted coping mechanisms among university students," *International Journal on Studies in Education*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 255–271, Mar. 2024, doi: 10.46328/ijonse.203.
- [12] O. G. Lacanilao, "Coping strategies among criminology students: basis for the development of a support program," *EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR)*, vol. 6, no. 10, pp. 540–544, Jun. 2024, doi: 10.36713/epra17565.
- [13] O. Ukoba *et al.*, "Stressors and coping mechanism among university students," *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 468–481, Aug. 2024, doi: 10.30574/wjarr.2024.23.2.2288.
- [14] M. Q. Patton, *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2002.
- [15] V. Braun and V. Clarke, *Successful qualitative research: a practical guide for beginners*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2013.
- [16] L. Lee, "Improving first-year students' transition to college by fostering skills in time management, communication, self-efficacy, and self-advocacy," Ph.D. dissertation, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, United States, 2025.
- [17] E. Ungureanu, "First-year students' knowledge understanding during the transition from high school to university," *Journal of Pedagogy - Revista de Pedagogie*, vol. 73, no. 1, pp. 115–136, Jul. 2025, doi: 10.26755/RevPed/2025.1/115.
- [18] A. Verma, "Assessment of barriers and challenges of sustainable logistics," *International Journal of Scientific Research in Engineering and Management (IJSREM)*, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 1–9, May 2024, doi: 10.55041/IJSREM32913.
- [19] J. Eberle and J. Hobrecht, "The lonely struggle with autonomy: a case study of first-year university students' experiences during emergency online teaching," *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 121, p. 106804, Aug. 2021, doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2021.106804.
- [20] J. Petrachenko, "Dwelling in the in-between: a self study of moving into a classroom with unconventional learners," Ph.D. dissertation, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada, 2024.
- [21] J. Fang, X. Ren, and V. A. Sotardi, "Rethinking student wellbeing in higher education: a multifaceted approach to stress management," *Education Sciences*, vol. 15, no. 7, p. 872, Jul. 2025, doi: 10.3390/educsci15070872.
- [22] V. Bhardwaj, S. Zhang, Y. Q. Tan, and V. Pandey, "Redefining learning: student-centered strategies for academic and personal growth," *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 10, p. 1518602, Feb. 2025, doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1518602.
- [23] S. Lippke, T. M. Schalk, U. Kühnen, and B. Shang, "Pace of life and perceived stress in international students," *PsyCh Journal*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 425–436, Jun. 2021, doi: 10.1002/pchj.426.
- [24] A. Faure-Carvallo, S. Nieto-Fernández, C. Calderon, and J. Gustems, "Relationship between procrastination, time management, personality, and psychological distress in higher education," *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, vol. 49, no. 4, pp. 417–429, Apr. 2025, doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2025.2459852.
- [25] L. David, F. Biwer, R. Crutzen, and A. de Bruin, "The challenge of change: understanding the role of habits in university students' self-regulated learning," *Higher Education*, vol. 88, no. 5, pp. 2037–2055, Nov. 2024, doi: 10.1007/s10734-024-01199-w.
- [26] M. Li, "Non-native English-speaking (NNES) students' English academic writing experiences in higher education: a meta-ethnographic qualitative synthesis," *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, vol. 71, p. 101430, Sep. 2024, doi: 10.1016/j.jeap.2024.101430.
- [27] T. Kaur and S. Newell, "The silent struggle: experiences of non-native English-speaking psychology students," *Australian Journal of Psychology*, vol. 76, no. 1, p. 2360983, Dec. 2024, doi: 10.1080/00049530.2024.2360983.
- [28] M. Schickel, L. Schürmann, and T. Ringeisen, "Three facets of lecturers' support and relations with students' self-efficacy and performance regarding presentations," *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 10, p. 1640339, Oct. 2025, doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1640339.
- [29] I. Valantinaite and V. Navickiene, "The phenomenon of lecturer competences as a prerequisite for the advancement of sustainable development ideas in the context of student-centred studies," *Sustainability*, vol. 16, no. 4, p. 1472, Feb. 2024, doi: 10.3390/su16041472.
- [30] N. M. Yaacob, N. S. Afindi, A. S. M. Zahari, and R. N. Awang, "Factors that influence academic stress among public university students: the case of Malaysia," *International Journal of Social Science Research*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 54–63, Feb. 2025, doi: 10.5296/ijssr.v13i1.22366.
- [31] D. Kang, "Prioritizing career preparation: learning achievements and extracurricular activities of undergraduate students for future success," *Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 13, no. 7, p. 611, Jul. 2023, doi: 10.3390/bs13070611.
- [32] D. O. Ashipala, F. S. Albanus, and T. M. Nghole, "Overview and management of burnout among academics," in *Handbook of Research on Dissecting and Dismantling Occupational Stress in Modern Organizations*, A. ul Haque, Ed., Hershey, PA: IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2023, pp. 200–215, doi: 10.4018/978-1-6684-6543-1.ch015.
- [33] K. Koo, I. Baker, and J. Yoon, "The first year of acculturation: a longitudinal study on acculturative stress and adjustment among first-year international college students," *Journal of International Students*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 278–298, May 2021, doi: 10.32674/jis.v11i2.1726.
- [34] G. Gause, L. A. Sehlaro, and M. J. Matsipane, "Coping strategies used by undergraduate first-year nursing students during transition from basic to higher education: a qualitative study," *BMC Nursing*, vol. 23, no. 1, p. 276, Apr. 2024, doi: 10.1186/s12912-024-01938-5.
- [35] R. Penrattanahiran, "Adjusting to university life: guidelines and strategies for first-year students," *The Journal of Faculty of Applied Arts*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 1–17, Dec. 2023, doi: 10.14416/j.faa.2023.19.007.
- [36] F. A. Paul, A. U. R. Ganie, and D. R. Dar, "Substance use in university students: a comprehensive examination of its effects on academic achievement and psychological well-being," *Social Work in Mental Health*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 452–484, May 2024, doi: 10.1080/15332985.2024.2306935.
- [37] R. Prowse *et al.*, "Coping with the COVID-19 pandemic: examining gender differences in stress and mental health among university students," *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, vol. 12, p. 650759, Apr. 2021, doi: 10.3389/fpsy.2021.650759.
- [38] P. Stang, M. Weiss, P. Jaensch, and S. Scholz, "Exploring stress and recovery among students: implications for well-being and academic performance," *Research Square*, May 2, 2024, doi: 10.21203/rs.3.rs-4239872/v1.
- [39] M. Mokhampanyane, "Adjustment dynamics of first-year students to university life at a rural university in South Africa," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, vol. 5, no. 7, pp. 1238–1249, Jul. 2024, doi: 10.38159/ehass.20245714.
- [40] A. Naidoo, H. Byles, and S. Kwenait, "Student support and transition through a buddy programme to foster social integration," *Journal for Students Affairs in Africa*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 47–63, Dec. 2021, doi: 10.24085/jsaa.v9i2.3698.

- [41] Y. Wu, D. Wu, and Y. Wang, "Enhancement of international students' psychological well-being and social integration through peer-to-peer support networks," *International Education Forum*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 41–45, Feb. 2024, doi: 10.26689/ief.v2i1.6654.
- [42] E. Liu, "Exploring social connectedness and its impact on university adjustment and well-being: a mixed-methods study in New Zealand," *Rangahau Aranga: AUT Graduate Review*, vol. 2, no. 3, Oct. 2023, doi: 10.24135/rangahau-aranga.v2i3.209.
- [43] P. D. Sampe, D. P. Sari, and I. J. Makulua, "Family influence on student mental health and academic achievement in university transition," *Jurnal Bimbingan dan Konseling Terapan*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 172–178, Jul. 2024, doi: 10.30598/jbkt.v8i2.2009.
- [44] J. Apps and S. Christie, "First in the family to attend University," *International Journal about Parents in Education*, vol. 10, pp. 59–69, Apr. 2023, doi: 10.54195/ijpe.14128.
- [45] H. Zhang, N. Abbott, D. Waldeck, and A. Holliman, "Social interaction, sense of belonging, and psychological wellbeing: a study of Chinese international students in UK higher education," *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 10, p. 1677348, Sep. 2025, doi: 10.3389/educ.2025.1677348.
- [46] S. Chaudhry, A. Tandon, S. Shinde, and A. Bhattacharya, "Student psychological well-being in higher education: the role of internal team environment, institutional, friends and family support and academic engagement," *PLoS ONE*, vol. 19, no. 1, p. e0297508, Jan. 2024, doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0297508.
- [47] E. Davison, R. Sanderson, T. Hobson, and J. Hopkins, "Skills for success? Supporting transition into higher education for students from diverse backgrounds," *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 165–186, Apr. 2022, doi: 10.5456/WPLL.24.1.165.
- [48] P. M. van Lamoen, M. Meeuwisse, A. M. F. Hiemstra, L. R. Arends, and S. E. Severiens, "Supporting students' transition to higher education: the effects of a pre-academic programme on sense of belonging, academic self-efficacy, and academic achievement," *European Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 340–361, Apr. 2025, doi: 10.1080/21568235.2024.2331122.
- [49] S. F. Azmi, A. A. Marof, H. Abdullah, and Z. Zarimohzzabeih, "Culture and communication styles: collectivism vs individualism cultural orientations from Malaysian perspectives," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, vol. 13, no. 16, pp. 201–214, Oct. 2023, doi: 10.6007/ijarbss/v13-i16/18738.
- [50] H. Purnamasari, F. Kurniawati, and T. Rifameutia, "Systematic review: a study of college adjustment among first-year undergraduates," *Buletin Psikologi*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 187–259, Dec. 2022, doi: 10.22146/buletinpsikologi.71892.

BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS



Pauviya Guna Segar    is currently pursuing a fast-track Ph.D. in Educational Psychology at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, which she commenced in March 2023. She graduated with a Bachelor of Psychology (First-Class Honors) from Raffles University, Malaysia, in 2022, enabling her to advance directly to a fast-track Ph.D. program without the requirement of a Master's degree. Her research interests, among others, include education, academic achievement, immediate social environment, and psychological well-being. She can be contacted at email: pauviyapauvi@hotmail.com or pauviya@graduate.utm.my.



Azlina Mohd Kosnin    is a professor at the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Technology, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, specializing in Educational Psychology and Child Development. Her research interests, among others, include the professional development of educators, student learning behaviors, and holistic development. She can be contacted at email: p-azlina@utm.my.



Lina Handayani    is an associate professor attached to the Master's Program of Public Health Department, Faculty of Public Health, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan. She graduated with her Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. She is interested in the area of health education and promotion. She can be contacted at email: lina.handayani@ikm.uad.ac.id.