Fresher Transition into Tertiary Education: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: - Studies indicate that when freshers are smoothly initiated and integrated into the tertiary education community, it enhances their engagement, performance and consequently, their career success. Unfortunately, most universities see fresher transition as a definite period of events rather than as a process in a continuum from the late phase of completion of high school through the entire period of study in the university. Hence beyond fresher orientation, other services that should aid transition into the higher education culture are rarely operationalized actively. This article highlights the characteristics of freshers, what higher education requires of them for effective academic and social survival. It brings forth the social and academic gap in culture between the actual needs of high school students for the university environment and the experiences they have. Based on existing theories of fresher transition, it proposes a conceptual framework that can be adopted by higher education institutions to facilitate fresher transition into the academic and social environment of universities.

Keywords: **Fresher, Higher Education, Transition, Integration, Assimilation**

I. INTRODUCTION

Every high school graduate aspiring to study in a university often looks forward to a smooth sail throughout their education. Rarely do they anticipate the rigour of higher education learning, the clash in culture and the complexity of socialization on the campuses of tertiary institutions. For some, the dream of having an enviable career after tertiary education hardly becomes a reality owing to the effect on their studies, a backlog of unresolved academic and social challenges experienced during their first-year encounter with tertiary education. In the course of integrating into the university environment, some students may drop out due to difficulties in coping with the university system (Thuo and Edda, 2017). Hodgson, Lam & Chow, (2010) believe that freshers must be given adequate attention, exposure, and resources to assist them to clarify their misgivings in order to enjoy a smooth academic orientation and social integration. Several views and reasons have been expressed on the challenges faced by freshers as they transit form secondary education into tertiary education. Krause (2005) observed that one of the obvious challenges encountered by freshers is the change from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning. Unlike the rote learning methods in high school where teachers provided all information for students to copy and reproduce, higher education learning required students to act proactively to fish out and reconstruct knowledge according to established customs. Unfortunately, because such a system of learning is rarely the practice in high schools, freshers have to struggle to cope with taking responsibility for their own learning.

Wangeri, Kimani and Mutweleli, (2012) noted that freshers undergoing transition are often affected by ongoing challenges of social relations, compatibility among roommates, accessing learning support services, gaining personal autonomy, adjustment to academic programmes and feeding. These challenges interfere with smooth integration into the university system owing to fresher exposure for the first time in their education to a diversity of personalities from varied backgrounds and institutional systems and culture that appear daunting to cope with. A clear example is a challenge of finding friends with similar backgrounds, interests, values, social and economic status (Urquhart and Pooley, 2007). As part of the process of cognitive and emotional disconnection from their previous background of strict and rigid control by high school authorities and parents, they need to quickly reorganize their psyche to think and act independently within the framework of institutional regulations. Against the backdrop of cultural and social complexities, fresher identity formation and the task of assuming responsibility for personal decisions on the use of time, money and other resources to pursue academic goals, becomes a source of internal conflict (Chidzonga, 2014). In most cases, the institutional arrangements designed with the fresher in mind fail to satisfy the expectations of the diverse backgrounds of the freshers. How the institution goes about addressing the needs of freshers tends to be at variance with how some freshers expect the institution to address their needs. While the fresher expects the institution to teach how to access information from institutional online resources, the institution assumes that the fresher is already skilled in accessing online information. This mismatch in belief and expectations constitute another source of anxiety to the fresher.

There seems to be a general consensus among authors that fresher challenges are socioculturally generated. The general idea is that the challenges of fresher integration into higher education come from their sudden encounter of a new culture and trend of socialization at different degrees of variance with the fresher's family background and previous school attended. That sudden change from restriction and control by high school authorities and parents to an autonomous lifestyle certainly becomes a source of internal conflict. The crisis due to adjustment to a new culture and trend of socialisation is

even worse for students from poor and rural backgrounds attending universities in urban areas (Khawaja and Bemsey, 2008) and those who are the first generation of people to attend university in the history of their family (Mullendore and Banahan, 2005).

Owing to these and many other factors, the effective transition of freshers from high school into tertiary education constitutes the bedrock for academic and career success. To ameliorate the challenges of fresher transition, universities run a programme of orientation to facilitate fresher integration into their new academic and social environment (Longden, 2006; Mullendore and Banahan, 2005). Unfortunately, such orientation programmes do not often address the needs of freshers, either by virtue of their content or duration (Kusi and Alunga, 2018; Chidzonga, 2014). Consequently, a lot of undergraduates continue to experience adjustment crisis, emotional and psychological disengagement and in worst cases, attrition tendencies (Bernie, Larose & Whippie, 2005; Khawaja and Bemsey, 2008). This raises the question of whether university authorities pay due attention to the unique characteristics and needs of first-year students. Secondly and most importantly is the question of availability of adequate and working support services to facilitate fresher integration into tertiary education. Against this backdrop, this article sheds light on the characteristics of freshers and the support they require to surmount the academic and social challenges of tertiary education. It further examines the interventions deployed by tertiary education to facilitate fresher integration, the shortfalls of existing interventions and alternative practices with a higher propensity to enhance fresher integration into tertiary education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Characteristics of Freshers

According to Singh (2018), most freshers entering university arrive in a new environment that differs greatly from their high school environment. Their backgrounds are varied; ranging from very elastic and financially buoyant students to the socioeconomically deprived group. Among them are the fresh from high school, mature age students, people from struggling families, workers, indigenous and foreign students, people from a variety of cultural backgrounds, single parents and many other categories. While in high school, they enjoyed strong bonds and highly dependent relationships with teachers, school authorities and parents, all serving as counselors and guardians. Teaching is more of spoon-feeding. Quite often, the student's task is to cram information and reproduce them when asked to do so during assessments. There is very little provision for students to reconstruct knowledge from existing knowledge and express their findings on a subject. With virtually no experience about the mode of teaching and learning in higher education (HE) and lack of formal introduction to HE and its demands, breaking away from those bonds into an independent academic and social life pertaining to the world of tertiary education

becomes a source of worry. Although freshers are excited about studying in an environment where they are free to undertake personal decisions without any restrictions, their naivety undermines the effective use of the freedom gained in the HE environment to pursue their goals against the countless activities competing for that freedom (Mudhovozi, 2012). Once admitted into the higher education community, freshers are expected to take responsibility for their survival and the success of their academic pursuit by blending their new social and academic roles to meet university expectations.

Wangeri, Kimani and Mutweleli, (2012) looked at the factors militating against fresher integration into HE from the perspective of diversity in the socioeconomic, family and educational backgrounds of freshers. The diversity in social, economic, family and cultural backgrounds of freshers, added to the differences in academic abilities creates variability in the adjustment span for each fresher and the time taken to realize their HE identity. The variability in adaptive potentials creates a positive or negative impact on the integration of freshers depending on their backgrounds and level of conversance with the university system. In many developing countries, for example, Chidzonga (2014) stated that undergraduates from highly elitist backgrounds are few, hence a large number of freshers come from less privileged families and schools. Such kinds of students are usually poorly informed about the university system of education (Briggs, Clark and Hall, 2012). According to a study by Regassa and Fentie (2012), a significant number of freshers opted for higher education because of the anticipated prospects of good living that higher education offers. Unfortunately, those significant proportions have very limited knowledge about how to exploit the academic culture of higher education for a prosperous career.

An online tour of some universities shows that freshers' week is organized for freshers for the purpose of reducing various kinds of barriers to their assimilation into the university system and consequently, their engagement with academic work. From the student angle, those barriers are linked to fresher disposition or characteristics that affect their smooth adaptation to the university system. They include, but not limited to homesickness, safety, accommodation, finance, academics and socialization on campus:

1. Homesickness: According to the University of Sheffield Student Services Information Desk (USSSiD, 2019), virtually all freshers are affected by homesickness; which is a strong feeling of absence from home, loved ones and family members. Homesickness impacts negatively on fresher integration into the university community by obstructing their concentration and engagement (Mersha et al., 2013).

2. Safety: The kind of safety enjoyed in high school under close protection by teachers, parents, and school authorities is quite different in universities where students are expected to bear responsibility for

their own safety and protection from criminals, violence, fraudsters, and online scammers (Thuo and Edda, 2017). This creates anxieties that interfere with the smooth transition into the university system.

3. Accommodation: Besides coping with roommates of diverse personalities and backgrounds freshers are concerned about the suitability, price, and proximity of accommodation (Fleming et al. 2005). Anxieties about the accommodation are even worst for freshers that are taking residence in hostels for the first time.

4. Finance: Rationing of funds for different needs, safekeeping of funds and preoccupation with thoughts of financial sustenance and sponsor dependability constitutes another source of worry to freshers. In some jurisdictions, freshers are concerned about finding employment to support their primary source of funding (Thuo and Edda, 2017). Taking responsibility for greater and broader financial decisions relative to high school financial responsibilities is part of an autonomous way of living. Owing to flashes of doubt about the freshers' ability to make effective financial decisions, immersion into the culture of the university is often impaired.

5. Academics: Freshers arrive in universities with apprehensions about their academic efficacy in the face of highly demanding workload (Zajacova et al., 2005). This affects their smooth transition as they are not sure of the best way to take notes, use library resources, use online resources and write to meet expected standards. Some are also clueless about the best way to deal with their teachers, how they will be assessed and how to present answers to examination questions (Urquhart and Pooley, 2007).

6. Socialization: Fresher socialization within the university community is a key determinant of effective learning (Crafter and Maunder, 2012). This hinges on the fact that transition is a sort of the change in identity arising from uncertainties in the social world of an individual. For successful integration to occur, the fresher should be able to acclimatize with the norms, practices, and values cherished and shared among the members of the university as the building blocks for social coherence and survival.

While these do not represent an exhaustive list of fresher characteristics, they represent an overview of the salient factors likely to constitute barriers to fresher integration into HE. Depending on fresher background, the barriers may include inefficacy in the use of information and communication technology tools, difficulty in participating in extracurricular activities (Berg, 2005) and apprehensions about having mentorship opportunities, informal learning support, assistance with career planning and dealing with stress (Chidzonga, 2014). All of these factors create internal conflicts and anxieties that impede fresher integration into the university community. This might explain why a lot of universities are making frantic efforts to reduce the barriers to fresher transition by adopting various strategies and means of communication to address fresher queries.

III. WHAT HIGHER EDUCATION EXPECTS FROM STUDENTS

A tour of several university sites reveals that undergraduate learning is student-centered. For example, the 2019 student guide of Adelaide University and the 2016-2017 student handbook of Valparaiso University highlights the fact that freshers from high school are expected to take on new identities compatible with the academic and socio-cultural demands of the university community. That new identity requires freshers to reconstruct their conception and perceptions about what constitutes teaching and learning (Kember, 2001). It requires an understanding of university education, not as a routine of cramming and reproduction of knowledge, but as an interactive process of building expertise, which requires students to be effective listeners, writers and researchers, and above all, planners and agents of their own development. Unlike the high school student, the university student must conceptualize the teacher as a facilitative member of a learning community, with the task of aiding the student to discover knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes required to become an effective practitioner in a chosen discipline. In that framework, the student is ultimately responsible for using ingenuity to reconstruct knowledge with practical relevance to solving problems.

According to the 2011-2012 version of Students' Guide to Transition, a document developed by the Office of Students' Services of the University of Queensland, most freshers undergo geographical, academic, social and administrative transition. Thus the university expects freshers to take on new identities, capable of facilitating their navigation through their new geographical terrain and the academic, social and administrative norms of the university. Such identity is underpinned by a strong conviction of having the capacity and capability to withstand the rigour of tertiary education as well as a self assurance of having the requisite efficacy, esteem, and confidence to surmount the challenges of transition. Briggs et al. (2012), as cited in Chidzonga (2014) affirms this notion with the claim that a positive student identity is an essential factor for persistence in the university system of education. This corroborates with the views of Huy (2015) and Hussey and Smith (2010) that a sense of self-worth enhances an individual's membership and participation in a community through rapid adoption of the norms and practices of the community. To reduce the barriers of integration into the Queensland University community, the university expects freshers to have and keep focus on their purpose for enrolling into the university; prioritise their activities; approach learning strategically, associate with dedicated students; aim for understanding and mastery rather than memorization; see lecturers and students as partners in their learning and take advantage of all services designed to support students to

enhance their college experience. The new identity expected of freshers in the four domains of transition is discussed as follows.

Academic

Quite often, universities expect students to have a fair knowledge of what it takes to study at the tertiary level. One of the key expectations pertinent to higher education learning is language proficiency. Against the backdrop that many universities create support systems to enhance students' learning, lecturers hardly spend time to walk students through the rudiments of academic success (Huy, 2015) because they expect students to have some prior knowledge and acquire alongside their studies, the skills for academic success. Those skills include effective listening, notes taking, conducting research, using library facilities, writing academic essays and carrying out presentations. Unfortunately, some students delay in acquiring the requisite skills for academic success. Even up to the end of an undergraduate course, some students are still founding wanting in writing academic essays in the language with which they studied. With freshers expected to exhibit academic success skills, this creates the dual challenge of grappling with curriculum understanding and acquisition of study skills. According to Queensland University (2011), some of the study skills expected of freshers is the efficient management of study time, prompt completion of assignments and timely revision for examinations. In line with these, the university expects students to be conversant with their course profile, past examination questions, lecturers and academic advisors and the various formal and informal modes by which teaching and learning take place in the university.

From the various university sites explored, it is clear that freshers are expected to exhibit advanced skills in listening, notes taking and negotiation (Jama, Mapesela and Beylefeld, 2015). For example, they are expected to be shrewd with taking notes on how to negotiate through the preliminaries to successful academic work during their fresher week encounter with the university. They are also expected to acquaint themselves with course registration procedures, timetable and the various modes of communicating information to students (Davis, 2013). During instructional sessions, students are expected to listen actively, decipher relevant information and make their own notes. Quite often, lecture information is superficial. Students are therefore expected to conduct further research to broaden their knowledge, deepen their understanding and gain stipulated skills (Chidzonga, 2014). Obviously, these skills are rarely taught in high school. For freshers to be confronted with such expectations generates feelings of doubt about their preparedness for the academic demands of the university system. Such feelings often interfere with their smooth integration into the academic community of the university.

According to Kember (2001), learning and research in higher education expect students to have full grasp over the use of library and internet resources to obtain relevant information.

This often requires time, effort and persistence besides know-how. It suggests that students should be able to compose their findings in conformity with standard protocols of writing and referencing. Most importantly, higher education writing demands the originality of work and the addition of new knowledge to existing knowledge (Huy, 2015). While these are requirements that are unanticipated by freshers, they have to be met by students to guarantee their academic progress and completion of their studies. Even though a lot of universities have avenues designed to ameliorate the challenges of academic transition, freshers are still expected to avail themselves of such opportunities by taking personal initiative to access available support. The obstacle to smooth transition by some students still revolves around their assumption of responsibility and control over the seemingly daunting academic demands of universities in a short space of time.

Social

Social integration into the higher education community involves the building of social networks and the exploitation of social resources for personal wellbeing and growth. Successful social transition leads to feelings of belongingness and membership in the university community. That feeling often serves as an inducement for freshers to assume an academic identity that facilitates the pursuit of higher academic achievement (Huy, 2015). For this reason, universities expect freshers to harness social resources to boost their cognitive assets by way of being proactive in managing a leisure, relationships and co-curricular activities alongside the pursuit of academic goals. (Queensland University, 2011; Wangeri et al., 2012; University of Adelaide, 2019). Raffo and Reeves (2000) are of the view that the social identity of students, which impacts their academic identity is linked with the social capital they bring into higher education. That social capital which is the value derived from membership of a social group serves as an asset for aligning with the shared goals of the academic community, exploiting cultural norms, and accessing resources in the university community (Scanlon et al., 2007). The skills required to access valuable resources for academic benefits through the use of social capital are not taught by universities. According to University of Queensland (2011), the skills include but not limited to freshers' ability to design and follow a balanced weekly schedule of academic and non-academic activities as well as the development and maintenance of cordial and mutually beneficial relationships with peers and staff members of halls, departments, faculties, clubs, societies or the university as a whole. Universities expect freshers to possess the fundamentals of those skills and to keep developing them as tools for effective integration into the university community. Considering some factors that may impede social integration of freshers such as low self-esteem, low level of self-confidence, lack of internal locus of control and lack of prior socialisation by parents with HE background (Jama et al., 2009), most universities have programmes and

offices designated to ameliorate the challenges of social transition of freshers (Chidzonga, 2014; O'Donnell et al., 2018).

Geographical and administrative transition is the least discussed in the available literature on fresher transition into higher education. For freshers leaving home to university, probably in a different geographical location for the first time, most have concerns about displacement and adjustment to a new environment with issues of getting suitable accommodation, access to utilities, transport, financial services, shopping and cost of leaving as their main sources of anxiety. According to Jama et al. (2009), such worries act as barriers by interfering with fresher integration into the higher education community. Consequently, it affects their engagement until they are able to adjust adequately to the realities of their new environment. In some universities, there is abundant online information on all subjects relating to anticipated questions and anxieties of freshers. Such universities expect prospective first years to browse through their online resources to get acquainted with the university, with the view of resolving their uncertainties before arrival on campus. The 2019 student guide to Adelaide University and the 2011 student's guide to transition into the University of Queensland are typical examples of online resources designed to ameliorate the challenges of fresher transition into the two universities. Such provisions enhance the assumption of a new identity compatible with the demands of the new environment.

Administrative transition poses a challenge to freshers owing to the numerous protocols followed to validate the studentship of freshers. To become recognized as an undergraduate, freshers are required to go through various stages of registration procedures at different offices of the university (Davis, 2013). Above all, they are expected to participate in official matriculation as a sign of the university's confirmation of their studentship (Davis, 2013). Registration procedures encompass fee payment, faculty and departmental registration, course registration, accommodation booking, and check-in, medical examination, student union registration and subject association registration. In addition, they are required to obtain identity cards and time table for the lectures. Following the fulfillment of these onerous customs, freshers are expected to get conversant with their lecture rooms/halls for each course registered and the duration for each lecture. They must also know how teaching and learning resources shall be accessed and how the faculty, department or entire university shall maintain communications and transactions with students. Most importantly, they are expected to be well acquainted with university procedures on complaints, communications, and resolution of grievances (Chidzonga, 2014). Owing to the fact these expectations were rarely part of the culture at high school, freshers are inundated by their first encounter with such norms. In anticipation of such anxieties, a lot of universities have online resources that address these administrative concerns of freshers. What is required of freshers is to access university online or offline information resources to get familiar with all administrative protocols and services.

IV. THE CONCEPT OF FRESHER TRANSITION

Transition is the experience of a change, brought about or influenced by some external or social situation that has the power to revise an individual's identity and self-concept (Crafter and Maunder, 2012). It is the movement from one educational context to another, a period of cognitive and emotional shift, a stage of changing identity from what an individual was, to what the individual is expected to become (Ecclestone, 2006). In educational context, a transition is the process and period of negotiation of new academic and personal challenges during which an individual undergoes cognitive and sociocultural adjustments (Harklau, 2001) to fit into a new environment with peculiar characteristics. These definitions corroborate with the notion of Gale and Parker (2014) that transition is an induction, a process of development and a period of taking on a new identity.

What can be deduced from the definitions is that transition creates a mental conflict of values, goals, and behavior between what an individual considers as appropriate and what a new situation or community requires the individual to consider as appropriate. The conflict would linger over a period until the individual succeeds in reconstructing values, goals and thought patterns to correspond with the demands of the new situation (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). It also requires the re-adaptation of knowledge and skills to deal with challenges in a way that is considered appropriate by the member(s) of the new community. In the university context, the duration of transition, that is, the time taken for a fresh student to adjust appreciably to the demands of the university depends on the economic, academic, geographical and socio-cultural background of the student in relation to the academic, demographic, political, geographical and socio-cultural characteristics of the university. The higher the variance between the student's background and the characteristics of the university, the greater the barriers to rapid transition. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) believe that the barriers can be reduced with student-in-transition support systems designed by universities to ease the anxieties of freshers. Such systems have various institutional structures that deploy a range of strategies to assure students of the universities' commitment to their success. The fresher week and orientation events are typical components of such transition support systems.

A key indicator of a successful transition is the self-esteem and confidence with which freshers exhibit control over academic and social challenges. It is evident as a strong feeling of attainment of the expectations of the university system. According to Cuseo (2012), when a student's transition is successful, it is seen in the student's attitude and disposition expressed in behavioral tendencies that are indicative of a sense of purpose, active participation, reflective thinking, social integration, self-awareness, self-

efficacy and personal validation. These signs of successful transition and their maximization are often the reasons why universities conduct induction sessions like orientation and freshers week to facilitate fresher assimilation into the university system. Besides the induction sessions, different kinds of institutional structures are put in place to maximize fresher engagement by way of supporting them to maintain their new identity as bona fide citizens of the university community and as agents of their personal development and growth. As stated by Hussey and Smith (2010), the effective functioning of such institutional structures has the potential to guarantee fresher contentment with a membership of the higher education community which in turn bolsters fresher confidence to meet the demands and expectations of higher education learning.

With reference to the seven indicators of successful student assimilation into the university system, having a sense of purpose suggests that the student has come to a point of appreciation of the entire experience of the university system and its relevance to their aspirations. Hence their active participation and involvement in academic and non-academic activities are neither at a cost to their wellbeing nor a barrier to their effective interaction, collaboration and networking with peers, staff and all other members of the university community that impact their wellbeing. They are able to think reflectively by evaluation of new experience in relation to prior experiences. This informs their ability to make a good judgment about their college experience and its relevance to their aspirations. Similarly, they are adequately informed about their capabilities and limitations and how to exploit institutional resources to aid their smooth negotiation through the academic and non-academic demands of the university. Most importantly, successfully adjusted freshers have a strong positive belief about their capability and capacity to surmount the challenges of the university system with their personal effort (Judge and Bono, 2001). Above all, they have a strong feeling of ownership of the university culture, identity with the system and a sense of community members with a significant contribution toward the development of the academic heritage. With these indicators as predictors of successful fresher adjustment into higher education, poorly integrated freshers can easily be delineated in a university system.

V. THEORIES ON TRANSITION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

The higher education environment is a complex community with diverse intellectual, social and cultural dynamics. It is a community of interaction between and among people from different social, economic, cultural, religious, family, ethnic, occupational and academic backgrounds. Hence, scholars have theorized the concept of fresher transition from different perspectives. A lot of the theories emphasize emotional, psychological and cognitive adaptations which are believed to impact students' academic and social engagement with the higher education community. With the focus of this article on fresher transition and consequently, engagement with the higher education learning community, this article shall discuss the sociocultural, integration and retention theories.

Sociocultural Theory

According Vygotskys' sociocultural theory of 1978, as cited by Crafter and Maunder (2012), transition is a process of identity reconstruction between disparate social and cultural settings involving the reorganisation of knowledge, mindset and thought patterns in response to a new experience as a way of deploying historical social and cultural capital to make meaning out of the new experience. This theory assumes that individuals would continuously wish to perpetuate the culture and social experiences they are used to. Upon encountering a new experience in a different social and cultural context, as in the case of migrating from home to university, an internal struggle for adaptation commences and continues until the individual's thought pattern, mindset and awareness become homogenous with that of the new social and cultural setting. Once that homogeneity is attained, the individual gains confidence in making meaningful interpretations of experiences from the new social and cultural context.

What this theory suggests is that fresher adaptation into the higher education environment is a function of experiences acquired from home, school, friends and all other historical social and cultural networks with whom the fresher had interacted. Because the mindset, awareness, interpretations, and actions of the fresher are predicted predominantly by their pre-tertiary educational, social and cultural backgrounds, active involvement and interaction with the diverse constituents of the university environment is required by the fresher to facilitate their interpretation of new experiences in consonance with the norms of their new social and cultural setting.

Integration Theory

Like the sociocultural theory of identity reconstruction, Tinto's theory of integration has similarly been used to explain fresher transition into higher education. According to Tinto (1975), as cited in Jama et al (2015), student retention or attrition at universities depends on how well or poor the student is integrated into the academic and social life of the university. He stated that students face integration challenges due to stress arising from separation from one social group to join a new and unfamiliar social group. Among the variables, he noted to have impacted fresher integrations are adjustment and adjustment difficulties, isolation from peers, learning difficulties, external commitments, financial difficulties and incongruence in expectations between universities and students. As cited in Chidzonga (2014), Tinto (2008) purported that fresher integration into universities can be maximized by institutional support systems, working effectively to encourage students to build social assets for efficient negotiation through the university system. Incidentally, some students are endowed with an appreciable level of social assets prior to enrolment at the university. Very

likely, they acquired them by virtue of their previous educational experience, parental backgrounds, and life exposure. Having had the privilege to have interacted with people who had gone through tertiary education, their assimilation into the university system is less stressful (Thomas, 2002). Unfortunately, that privileged class does not represent the majority of African University students as indicated by Chidzonga (2014) and Wangeri et al (2012).

Retention Theory

This theory came out of a study by Jama et al. (2015) on non-traditional students in South Africa, with a focus on their integration and consequent retention in higher education. It states that the predictors of student transition, engagement and subsequent retention in tertiary education are in four levels, depicted by pre-entry characteristics, initial entry characteristics, teaching and learning experiences, and ongoing social and academic integration. At the first level of pre-entry into university, students' propensity to remain in universities is determined by their family background, school attended, language proficiency and financial background. For the non-traditional students investigated, neither their families nor the high schools attended by most of them could resource them with the social capital needed to facilitate their immersion into the university system. Asidefrom that, many

of the students were financially under-resourced and lacked language proficiency to boost their self-efficacy and engagement with the university system. Jama et al. (2015) came to the conclusion that at the initial entry-level, the responsibility for effective fresher transition rests with the university; based on how the university is able to help freshers through orientation programmes to adjust to academic demands, get accommodation, acquire language skills and manage finances effectively.

VI. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR FRESHER TRANSITION

Fresher transition into higher education is conceptualized in this article as a continuum of change, adaptation, and assimilation into the social and academic culture of tertiary education. This conceptualization is adopted from the retention theory of Jama et al. (2015), applied to the integration of non-traditional students into higher education in South Africa. Within the context of the higher education environment, the theory considered students with academic, language, socio-cultural and economic setbacks as non-traditional students. The retention theory is adopted against the consideration that a a majority of higher education students in Africa have similar backgrounds. The conceptualization of fresher transition is as shown in fig.1
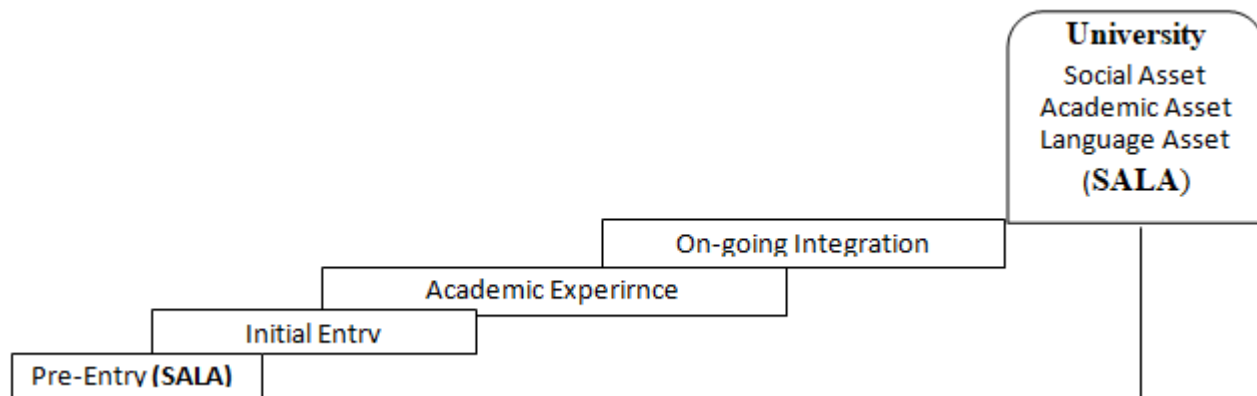

Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework for Fresher Transition into University

Adopted from Jama et al. (2015)

The capacity of a student to succeed academically is conceptualized as a function of the social, academic and language asset differential between what the fresher possesses and what is required to succeed in a university. The greater the differential, the higher the barrier to successful integration. Prior to initial entry as freshers, students ought to have developed as an asset, the skills for effective interaction with peers, teachers and school authorities. Besides the capacity for autonomous learning, they should have mastered the use of the English language for effective academic and social communications. The shortfall in social, academic and language asset (SALA) by virtue of family orientation and pre-tertiary school experiences becomes a drawback to

smooth transition during the initial entry into the university. The pre-entry SALA deficit creeps into the initial entry phase of transition and this impacts negatively on fresher assimilation into the university system.

During the initial entry stage, freshers begin to become aware of the reality of having to blend with strangers from different backgrounds and cultures, arrange for their accommodation, live independently, manage their finances and adjust to the customs of the university. Effective transition through the stage is a predictor of effective assimilation into academic work. For freshers from rural settings and small schools, the experience is bizarre (Toni, 2002). According to Jama et al.

(20015), not even orientation programmes are able to guarantee an effective transition during the initial entry. This is due to the crash nature of orientation programmes where freshers are bombarded with lots of information that often leave them overwhelmed.

With smooth initial entry, students have a good start to a positive academic experience. Notwithstanding, they will have to conform to new methods of teaching, academic regulations, assessment styles, large class sizes, independent research methods, academic jargon and lecturers with different styles of teaching and students' relations (Toni, 2002). Coping with the academic experience equips freshers with the confidence and assurance to cope with the rest of the continuous and ongoing process of integration into the evolving and dynamic challenges of the university system.

Adjustment to the ongoing social and academic transition challenges is with respect to taking on professional roles in the discipline of study (Jama et al., 2015). It requires students' application of theoretical concepts to professional situations, development of expertise in knowledge creation and academic writing using higher-order critical thinking skills (Lau, 2003). According to Jama et al. (20015), students at that stage equally need peer and social support, and most importantly, role models in their academic disciplines to assist them to develop their careers. The absence of these support could lead to demoralization and academic disengagement.

All of these show that fresher transition into higher education commences from the winding up of high school through the first year of entry into tertiary education to the last year of completion. Most freshers arriving at universities come along with a deficit of cultural, social and academic needs. In that context, universities are to provide academic and social support services to facilitate fresher transition and integration into the complex learning community. A week's programme of orientation where students are given basic general information about the ethos of a university is inadequate to support effective transition and assimilation into the tertiary education system.

VII. OPPORTUNITIES FOR EFFECTIVE FRESHER TRANSITION

In so far as a transition is a continuum of change, adaptation, and assimilation rather than an event, tertiary institutions need to develop on a continuous basis, personnel, structures, systems and services that make the tertiary education environment less stressful and appealing. Since tertiary institutions have little control over the high school completion stage of the transition process where students wander in anxiety and uncertainties about career pathways, university choices, and courses to study, there is the need for a literacy programme for freshers on how to navigate successfully through the higher education terrain. Such programmes should extend beyond the weekly course of orientation to include ongoing social and academic interventions for students.

Araujo, et al. (2014) draw attention to the need for transition pedagogy in teaching first-year students. Alongside teaching academic subjects, they suggest incorporation of literacy classes on academic norms, institutional values, campus events, and student services into formal instructional hours so as to facilitate students' assimilation into the institutional ethos. Alternative, a well-crafted comprehensive student guide to tertiary education can be a substitute. For example, the 2019 students' guide of Adelaide University provides more than necessary information that students can use to negotiate their way through the academic and social demands of the university community. Most importantly, the guide provides details of electronic access to designated offices and staff for consultancy on all matters that students might need assistance and support. African Universities can adopt such literacy tools to facilitate student transition into tertiary education.

According to Pratt and George (2005), positive peer relations are key facilitators of transition. They propose the creation of situations that bring staff and learners of diverse backgrounds and class to undertake a common task for the purpose of enhanced networking and peer support. Typically, freshers and older students could be assigned on projects through which freshers gain experience and peer support from their seniors. If staff is approachable, accessible and readily available, students can build confidence to seek information and negotiate their way smoothly through the demands of the university community

VIII. CONCLUSION

Fresher transition into tertiary education is a process and not an event. It has a sociocultural undertone, making it a challenge to students whose previous social and cultural experiences are out of congruence with the academic and social culture of higher education. Hence the usual orientation programme organized for matriculated freshers impacts very little on facilitating fresher transition, integration, and assimilation into the tertiary education environment. Universities need a more robust, friendly and efficient system or programme of student support services in all facets of the university community that can engender smooth initiation and integration of freshers, and above all, ensure sustained acculturation of students for the entire duration of their study.

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