

# Exploring Experiences of First Year Students at Ambo University: Implication for Success

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore, understand and describe first year students experience about student support services at Ambo University by using qualitative research method. Data were collected through in-depth interview and focus group discussion from twenty five purposively selected information rich participants' ranging in diversity. The data were analyzed thematically by using verbatim quotes. The findings of the study revealed that adjustment difficulties, homesickness and loneliness, struggle to meet the demands of academic issues, exams, assignments, and financial inadequacy as a major concern of first year students'. The analysis revealed that the service rendered for first year students were unsatisfactory. Library, Dormitory, Cafeteria, Health and Academic development and learning support services were found to be inadequate to provide the students optimal learning opportunities. Finally, the finding indicated that introducing guidance and counseling, strengthening academic support system, involving actively all university staff in providing the necessary guidance and help, using senior students as mentor, providing various supports and loan facilities, widening health service programs and matching intake capacity with available places are, thus, found to be the dimensions identified as points that need interventions.

## 1. Introduction

### Background and Statement of the Problem

The first year in university is a critical transition period for students. This is because it is a time when students lay the foundation on which their subsequent academic success and persistence rest. Moreover, it is a time when students faced with a number of challenges; academic, social, emotional, financial and others. Owing to these challenges completing the transition period and achieving academic success is not an easy task for students. And a number of students are forced to leave their study at its early stage which often associated with negative consequences for students, their families, university administration and country as whole.

Higher education institutions were experiencing many changes as a result of an increasingly diverse student population and a more complex system. Current trends regarding higher education enrollment indicate greater diversity in characteristics involving not only gender and ethnicity, but also in the areas of age, socioeconomic background, physical and learning disabilities, and sexual orientation (Gordon, 1984). In an effort to accommodate this new student population, universities and colleges are adjusting their services with the intention of increasing positive student service outcomes.

Student Services have expanded to encompass almost every aspect of the university experience including issues concerning educational, personal, career oriented, and academic needs, just to name a few. Because shifts in society may change the degree in which certain student services are utilized. Because demographic differences are more constant, yet more important in today's diverse society, it is extremely important for student services to understand these differences and provide students with the programs and services that will help them succeed.

Becoming a student in Higher Education is a significant social transition which involves integration into the academic and social spheres of the university (Tinto, 1975). University entrants find themselves in an academic environment in which self-direction and independence in learning is emphasized, in contrast to more didactic approaches experienced in secondary education (Kember, 2001). Students initially find this disorientating and motivating themselves to study remains an issue until they have developed a capacity for independent learning (Winn, 2002). Much effort has been invested in identifying strategies to help students do this (Fazey and Fazey, 2001), but the discrepancy between tutors' expectations of independence and first-year students' desire for more support persists (Lowe and Cook, 2003).

Although attending university is supposed to be a very appealing experience that could give satisfaction to students', previous studies indicated that there are many students who are unable to complete their studies. A study conducted by Tinto (1996) showed that 40% of all students in America who started out in a four year college failed to earn a degree; and nearly 57% of all dropouts left before the start of their second year. Another study conducted by Wintre and Bowers (2007) on the persistence to graduate amongst 944 undergraduate students in a Canadian university reported that within six years, 57.9% of the students had graduated, 9% remained enrolled, and 33.1% were neither enrolled nor graduated. Research conducted in the area revealed that most of this failure was caused by adjustment difficulties (Tinto, 1993). The major causes of students withdrawal from university, according to Tinto (1996), were academic difficulties, adjustment difficulties, uncertain, narrow,

or new goals, weak and external commitments, financial inadequacies, incongruence between the students and the institution, and isolation.

According to Smith and Renk (2007), the combination of many stressors of university life, such as planning for the future, struggling with exams and assignments, coping with demands and challenging professors, deciding on a major, and transitioning into financial and emotional independence, can be an overwhelming experience for many students. Hence, almost all new students go through an adjustment phase upon entry to a university with each student varied in his or her own pace of development. Studies conducted in the area showed that adjustment difficulties are found to be the most common problems among first year students who are going through an active adjustment phase in universities. (Baker, 2003; Baker and Siryk, 1986; Halamandaris and Power, 1999). The first six weeks of the first semester in an institution is considered to be a crucial period in determining retention (Molnar, 1993).

In order for students effectively cope with the aforementioned challenges, the support provided by the university, department, course instructors and experienced peers are of immense importance. Because learners in supportive environments have high level of self-efficacy and self-motivation and use learning as a primary transformative force. The collective expertise and wisdom of the university community have an important role in improving the acculturation and all rounded development of first year students. Hence, this study was aimed to explore first year students' experiences (the challenges and support provided to them so that they can handle the transition with ease) at Ambo University.

### **Objective**

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of first year undergraduate students at Ambo University. More specifically, it was aimed at identifying first year students' major concerns/issues, assessing supports provided to them and finding out the deficiencies of student support system at Ambo University and finally forwarding suggestion regarding strategies or ways on addressing/helping students better adjust themselves to the university environment and succeed in their academia.

### **Research Question**

1. What are major concerns of first year students?
2. How do students describe the nature of student support provide at Ambo University?
3. What are the problems or deficiencies of students support services at Ambo University?

## **2. Methodology**

### **Design**

The research design adopted for this study was qualitative case study, which was aimed to get a better understanding of participants' perspectives through firsthand experience, truthful reporting and quotations of actual conversation.

### **Sample and Sampling Techniques**

The sample for the study was drawn from all first year regular undergraduate students from Ambo University. Regarding the sample selection, Merriam (1998) asserts that since generalization, in a statistical sense is not a goal of qualitative research, probabilistic is not necessary or even justifiable in qualitative research. Thus non-probability sampling is the method of choice for most qualitative research. Individuals for this study was located purposively based on their willingness to participate in the study, Academic Background/stream- Natural Science, Social Science and Language, Gender - mixed sex. Hence, a total of 25 first year students, of which 9 were females, participated in the study.

### **Data Collection and Procedures**

Sem-structured interview and Focus Group Discussion was employed to obtain data from the informants. According to Patton (2002) the interviewing is "to capture how those being interviewed view their world, to learn their terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences. Interviewing provides a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives. With regard to the focus group discussion Flick (2002) state that "the use of FGD led to the production of opinions expressed and exchanged in everyday life and tool for reconstructing individual opinions more appropriately". Having the advantage of FGD, it will also be used to allow discussion among small group of individuals and secure more detailed data from the discussant. As to the procedures before I could begin the process of recruiting research participants, I applied to the university to obtain permission to conduct a study within the university. Then I secured permission of the informants. Finally, I entered in the data collection process.

### **Data analysis**

Methods used in analyzing data for a case study includes categorization and interpretation of data in terms of common themes, and the synthesis of data into an overall portrait of the case. For present study, the data collected via interview and FGD was transcribed verbatim, coded and divided in to categories, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba and Lincoln (1985) in an attempt to discover common themes. Through repeated readings of

the transcript, I found themes and patterns and develop categories- which involve putting conceptually similar happenings or events under the same group.

#### **Ethical Guide Line**

In any research undertaking, researchers are expected to employ high standards of academic rigor and to behave with honesty and integrity. Accordingly, the following areas of ethical and moral concerns were addressed in this research study: harms and benefits were assessed for the well being of the participant, informed consent was obtained, and privacy and confidentiality were secured.

### **3. Result and Discussion**

#### **Concerns of First Year Students**

When asked to talk about their first year concern during the interview and FGD, students who participated in this research explained that their first year experiences were full of worries, anxiety and fear. Here is an example of excerpt reported during FGD with informants:

*...For many of us first year experience was a stressful experience. The academic and social environment was new and we faced adjustment problem. We are isolated from our family and we did not feel as home. The academic issues were tense and we failed to meet the demands of the course. Our school experience did not match with the university experience. We were told to photocopy different handouts, notes etc but, we failed to do so because of financial problem. We were tensioned in coping up with exams, assignments and project works...*

In the description above, it is evident that these participants underscore the adjustment difficulties, homesickness and loneliness, struggle to meet the demands of academic issues, exams, assignments, and financial inadequacy as a major concern of first year students' experience. This finding affirms what Tinto (1996) stated as academic difficulties, adjustment difficulties, uncertain, narrow, or new goals, weak and external commitments, financial inadequacies, incongruence between the students and the institution, and isolation as a major concern of first year students.

#### **First Year Students Experience about Student Support**

First year students were asked to describe and explain the nature of their first year experience. After listening to the students' responses in the course of data collection for the study, I tried to learn that they were not happy with the nature of services and supports they provided. All the respondents stated that the services and support provided by the university were not satisfactory. The sentiments of most participants are summarized in the following quote:

*...we came to this university directly from the high school. We were new to the campus life, to the environment, to the climate, to the university academic etc and this exposed us to many social, academic and health problems. Owing to this, we need different support from different people. We expected the environment to be caring and supportive. However, we found that the environment was not supportive. The health service is poor, no guidance and counseling service, our dormitory was overcrowded, poor library service...*

Although student support services in higher education plays an important and pivotal role for successful completion of their study and making transition from high school to university smooth, the description above was evident that the participants were not satisfied with service provided to them. With regard to the role of supportive environment Jarmon (2000) succinctly stated that student retention shows that a supportive college environment can have a crucial effect on the student's ability to maintain continuous enrollment and to meet the minimum grade point average requirements in order to fulfill the expectations and requirements for a college.

#### **Deficiencies of Student Support Service**

In the course of my data collection, the respondents identified the negative aspect of their first year experience which was discussed below.

#### **Library Service**

In the FGD and interview held with informants, I learnt that there was poor library service in the university. The participants explained that although library has contributed a lot for the success of their university education, the existing library in the university was too small in size. Besides, it was not equipped with enough reference materials and not rendered appropriate serve for the students. The following excerpt was an indicator of this regard:

*Library service is one of the basic things that contribute for academic success of students. However, here (in Ambo University) the library was very small, one in number and accommodate few students at a time. This is very problem and deserves attention. Today, let alone the university secondary schools have better library. Besides, its smallness, books (reference materials) were not available as required.*

It is evident from the above description that the library, which is one of the most important thing for the teaching learning process, was very small, ill-equipped and not rendered its serves properly. This is one of an

area that affects an institution's efficiency and effectiveness, and quality of education.

### **Cafeteria Service**

Ideas I have assembled sustaining discussion with my informants signify that the cafeteria service for students were in adequate and poor. The excerpt of FGD participant clearly shows this:

*The cafeteria service that we have at this university was not good. Its room was very old, dilapidated and not good looking. It was not hygienic. It was very small. The services rendered were poor. This enforces the students to went out of the campus to search for cafeteria which in turn took students time and incur students additional cost. This has a negative impact on students' success...*

The response shows that the informants were no happy with the cafeteria service provided for them. According to them lack of appropriate cafeteria service within the campus exposed them for additional cost and west their time.

### **Dormitory Services**

In the course of my in-depth interview and FGD with the informants I understood that there were no sufficient dormitories for students. Owing to this, the dormitories were overcrowded by accommodating more than their capacity. The following excerpt taken from the FGD was illustrative of this:

*...The dormitories were overcrowded by accommodating more than their capacity. Owing to this, it was suffocated and causes to have difficulty in breathing. The university management knows the case but, failed to take measure. They kept quite while we were suffering. Dormitory buildings and their surroundings, dormitory rooms and corridors lack cleanliness. Toilets are not only inadequate but also unclean and, even, are misused. There are no standard walkways and adequate seats for entertainment...*

The Dean of Students office is responsible for providing dormitories for all regular undergraduate students. The finding of the study indicated that the dormitory service was inadequate, unclean and overcrowded, which was according to participants create suffocation and noise around the dormitory.

### **Health Service**

Health service was one of the basic necessities that significantly contribute for students' success in their academic endeavor. During the interview and FGD session of the data collection all the participants complained the inadequacy and low quality of health service they received. Here is an example of excerpt given by the respondent:

*we came to this university from other places in country. The environment in which we grown up was different from this environment in many aspect. We faced many difficulties to become accustomed to this environment. Meanwhile many students were sick and need health service. However, the university clinic or health center was failed to provide us with the service that we need. Not well equipped, no well qualified staffs, there is critical shortage of medicines. For the majority of the students visiting the clinic seeking health service, the same medicine was transcribed. This was surprising how every individual can have prescribed the same medicine for different diseases with different symptoms'. This was very difficult to accept. No Medical Doctor for this large amount of students. This was very critical. It needs due attention.*

The above mentioned quote indicated that the participants unanimously felt dissatisfaction about the health service they received from the students' clinic. According to the participants, the students clinic has no the required human and material resources to render quality health service for students.

### **Academic support**

The academic support and development of university students is essential. Universities must provide students with academic skills, learning and training competencies to ensure that they are able to face future educational challenges and occupational demands, and to enhance the notion of life-long learning. According to Agar, Hofmeyer and Moulder (1991) educational support and development programmes compensate for educational disadvantaged and offer educational enrichment to underprepared students. These disadvantaged students are admitted in the colleges, and therefore it is incumbent upon the college to provide a reasonable and maximum opportunity for these students' to achieve some success. With this understanding the university has been providing academic support for students through tutorial services. However the participants strongly remarked that the tutorial service provided by instructors missed its target. The following quote summarizes the sentiments of most participants:

*As we understood tutorial class was prepared to help students understood the subject matter well and to minimize the achievement gap between students. What we heard and observed during tutorial service was shocking. Tutorial was arranged to tell students the exam. This is very discouraging. By telling the exam to students, it was reported that the tutorial service brought a good result. This was the fact. It was obvious that all students did not take part in the tutorial. Hence, only those students who took the tutorial service and those having relationships with them*

*benefited, because they told about the content of the exam. This is unfair treatment of students and not tutorial support at all. It should be corrected.*

The report of the participant clearly shows that the academic service provided through tutorial service was not used for intended purpose rather it was abused and miss used by the teachers providing the service. Similarly, the FGD, the discussant explained their experience in the following way:

*At the beginning the class did not start on time. Due to this many classes were wasted. However, as the exam approached teachers started to give many assignments, tests and run to cover the bulky portion/ content with in few weeks. Because of this we were overloaded, tensioned and started to worry about whether we real succeed...*

From the above explanation I found that the academic support provided for students were inadequate, abused and not provide students with the maximum learning opportunity.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In today's world of knowledge based economy, higher education is recognized as a major actor in economic development and growth of any nation; developed or developing. It plays multiple roles in this changing and challenging world, where knowledge based economy is craving more intellectual property. It is an important foundation for the allocation of people to different positions in society and a prerequisite for many professions. In order to produce qualified graduates, who meet the demand and realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century work place, higher education should be expected to provide unreserved, adequate and caring support for their students in general and first year students in particular.

In this paper I examined first year students experience in Ambo University with the aim to understand the main concern/issue, nature of support they received and deficiencies of student service from their perspective by using semi-structured interview and FGD which allowed for the emergence of details and thick descriptions of the phenomena understudy.

The study indicated that adjustment difficulties, homesickness and loneliness, struggle to meet the demands of academic issues, exams, assignments, and financial inadequacy as a major concern of first year students'.

The perception voiced by the first year students regarding their first year experience clearly indicated that they were unhappy about the support they received from the university. It was revealed that the service rendered by the university were not adequate to enhance their academic, intellectual, social, emotional, cultural adaptation and development.

Over the course of the study, the participants commented on the deficiencies and problems of student support service which they experienced during their stay at university. Library, Dormitory, Cafeteria, Health and Academic development and learning support services were found to be inadequate to provide the students optimal learning opportunities. Moreover, the study revealed that there was no guidance and counseling service.

#### **5. Implication for Practice**

The goal of student support is to promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical, academic and occupational development of students at the university and prepare the students for the opportunities, responsibilities experiences of adult life. It plays a vital role in helping students of widely divergent backgrounds to find and effectively use the information, skills, insight, and understanding they need in order to be successful, primarily in the university and secondarily in later life. Hence, the university should revisit and re-evaluate the current ways of rendering different services for students and redesign students support system that nurture student all rounded development. Besides, there should be a system in a place that effectively functions in helping and caring students in the university.

The findings of this study are believed to have some practical implication which might show areas of intervention to improve student support. Firstly, there is a need to identify concerns or problems experienced by first year students. Appropriate intervention programmes can be planned to assist new students who have problems in coping with the demands and challenges that could create stress and tension to their life in campus. Guidance and Counseling interventions are necessary to retain students who are having serious emotional problems. Academic interventions such as 'learning centres' and 'freshman interest group' can be introduced to help students who fail to meet the academic demands in their courses.

All university staff, especially faculty members and academic advisors should be more actively involved in providing the necessary guidance and help to enhance first year students' adjustment skills and abilities. The involvement of senior students as university mates to new students should be encouraged as senior students significantly influence students' social adjustment and attachment (Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler, 1996). In order to achieve the purpose, senior students could function as leaders in orientation programs, advisors in hostels, academic advisors, mentors as well as tutors. Tutor or mentor consists of trained seniors students who are well accepted and liked by new students and are seen as the most effective people to help these groups of students. (Popejoy, 1994).

The findings of this research also showed that students faced financial difficulties. Hence, the university should give specific attention towards students' financial needs as serious financial problems could leave a negative impact towards their adjustments in university. Various supports and loan facilities need to be provided by the government and the institutions by providing financial facilities such as special financing assistance so that financial aid for new students could be speeded up. Widening health service programs by equipping the students clinic with the required human and material resource and matching the number of students with the admission capacity of the university to resolve the problem of dormitory were also some of the area that need intervention.

### Limitation of the study

Case studies are not intended to generalize to a broader population. This case study should not and cannot be generalized to any other context. However, the case is described in sufficient detail that readers will be able to connect or transfer key findings and insights to their own context as appropriate. Moreover, although it would have been better to include other concerned bodies in the study, this research was only figured out the views of the student.

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