
The Transition of Secondary Students into Higher Tertiary Education: The Perspective of Divine Word University, Madang Province, Papua New Guinea

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Abstract: This paper provides an overview of students transitioning from secondary school to higher education institutions and their experiences with contemporary learning. This study explored the challenges and barriers students encounter when transitioning into tertiary education at Divine Word University (DWU) and identified available support services to aid in student development. This study employed an interpretivist philosophy thus; qualitative methodology was used. Data was collected using one- on- one interview with semi- structured questions. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The results indicated that students faced multiple challenges, particularly when moving from secondary education. Key challenges expressed by DWU students are, getting nervous and anxious, leaving parents behind and becoming independent, mismanagement of time, excessive social media use, limited digital literacy, and difficulty in adapting to the online system at DWU. Additionally, adapting to the environment is a significant challenge, which leads to students losing government scholarships, being distracted from studies, and experiencing peer pressures. However, there are support services offered by DWU Student Services, such as counselling, psychoeducation and peer mentoring programs, weekend sports, and Information, Communication and Technology services that help students adapt to the tertiary education system. Hence, it is significant for students to utilize the services available to overcome the challenges expressed. The findings underscore the importance of early engagement with students and the proactive use of available support services to facilitate their transition into higher education. Thus, enhancing orientation programs, increasing digital literacy support, and promoting greater awareness of the offered support services are vital areas for improvement to empower students in their learning.

Keywords: Students, Transition, DWU

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1. INTRODUCTION

Transitioning from secondary school to higher tertiary education is a critical phase in a student's academic journey. This period is often marked by significant milestones in academia, social, and personal adjustments as students navigate a new learning environment, thus increasing independence and higher expectations.

Understanding the challenges and experiences of students during this transition is essential for improving support systems and ensuring academic success. The low retention rate among students in higher education is a concern globally. A study conducted in South Africa reported the “annual drop rates of students from a secondary school to higher institutions to be 35%”. This rate indicates that students entering university were not counselled or prepared well before their higher education studies. Preparation of students for higher institutions is vital to prepare them physically and mentally to adapt to the new environment.

This study focuses on the perspectives of students at Divine Word University (DWU) in Madang Province, Papua New Guinea. It aims to explore the factors that influence students’ transition, including academic preparedness, socio-economic challenges, cultural influences, and institutional support. By examining the experiences of DWU students, this research seeks to identify key barriers and facilitators in their adjustment to tertiary education. The findings will contribute to developing targeted strategies to enhance student support services and improve retention and success rates.

This study will employ a qualitative approach. The insights gained will be valuable for educators, policymakers, and university administrators in creating a more effective and supportive learning environment for incoming students.

2. AIM

The study aims to explore the challenges and barriers experienced when transitioning into higher tertiary education and to suggest ways to address these challenges and barriers identified.

3. OBJECTIVES

- To explore the challenges and barriers experienced by first- year students at DWU when transitioning into higher tertiary education
- To investigate the effectiveness of the support services offered at DWU for student formation into higher tertiary education
- To suggest solutions in addressing the challenges that students experience in their transition period

4. KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are the challenges and barriers experienced when transitioning from secondary education into higher tertiary education?

4.1 Specific questions

1. What are your experiences from a secondary education level transitioning into tertiary education?
2. What are the challenges that students experienced in their transition period?
3. What are the services or programs provided to assist students in their transition period?
4. What are the expectations that students have when coming into a tertiary institution?
5. What are some ways that can be done to overcome the challenges experienced?

5. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Transitioning into university for the first time presents a significant challenge for students, particularly those coming directly from secondary school. The academic and social environments of universities differ greatly from

the structured and closely guided context of secondary education. At the secondary level, teachers provide continuous support, whereas in university, lecturers and tutors are generally available only during scheduled class sessions. Adapting to this new academic culture and environment is often overwhelming. Students face not only institutional expectations but also pressures from their families to succeed. As noted by Guzman et al., the transition into higher education can be a distressing experience, with financial constraints often compounding the challenges and shaping students' experiences and expectations. Therefore, this study aims to explore the perceptions of first-year students at Divine Word University regarding their transition into university life.

6. RATIONALE

The transition to university is a significant milestone in a student's educational journey, presenting both challenges and opportunities. Common challenges include adapting to a new academic environment, developing independent study habits, and managing increased responsibilities. On the other hand, opportunities may include gaining personal freedom, becoming more independent, and making autonomous decisions. This study aims to explore the perspectives of Divine Word University (DWU) students on their transition experience, identifying key factors that influence their adjustment, academic success, and challenges. Understanding these factors will assist educators, policymakers, and institutions in designing targeted support systems to improve students' academic performance and overall university experience. The findings will contribute to enhancing orientation programs, academic support services, and student welfare initiatives to ensure a smoother transition into higher education.

7. METHODOLOGY

7.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the transition experiences of secondary school students entering tertiary education, with a focus on Divine Word University (DWU) in Madang Province. Qualitative research is appropriate for examining participants' perspectives and lived experiences in depth. A phenomenological approach was adopted to capture the essence of the transition experience from the viewpoints of both students and academic staff.

7.2 Research Setting

The research was conducted at Divine Word University, a nationally recognized tertiary institution in Madang Province, Papua New Guinea. DWU was selected as the research site due to its diverse student population, which includes individuals from various secondary schools across the country. This diversity provided a rich context to examine the challenges and facilitators of the secondary-to-tertiary transition.

7.3 Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals who had directly experienced the transition process. The sample included:

- 15 continuing (second-year, third-year & fourth-year) university students from different secondary school backgrounds.

This sample size is considered adequate for phenomenological studies, which priorities depth over breadth.

7.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method allowed for flexibility in exploring individual experiences while maintaining consistency in the topics discussed. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and was conducted in person at the DWU campus, in a private and comfortable setting. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed into words.

7.5 Data Analysis

Transcribed data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) Miner Lite was used to assist with data management and coding. Emerging themes were compared across student and staff narratives to identify commonalities and differences in perceptions of the transition experience.

7.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Divine Word University Research Ethics Committee. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participant data and securely storing all research materials.

8. LITERATURE REVIEW

The transition from secondary school to tertiary education is a critical period in a student's academic and personal development. This process often involves not only adapting to a new learning environment but also dealing with academic, social, and emotional challenges. For students in Papua New Guinea, particularly those entering universities like Divine Word University in Madang Province, this transition is shaped by factors such as educational preparedness, socio-economic background, cultural expectations, and institutional support.

The Concept of Educational Transition

Educational transition refers to the shift from one level of education to another, typically involving increased academic demands and independence. At the secondary-to-tertiary level, students often experience a significant change in curriculum style, expectations, and support systems. According to Kift, a successful transition depends not only on individual resilience but also on how well the institution scaffolds the learning experience in the first year.

The PNG Context

In Papua New Guinea, the transition from secondary school to university is complicated by geographical disparities, limited access to quality secondary education, and a lack of preparation for university-style learning. Many students from rural and under-resourced schools enter tertiary institutions like DWU with insufficient academic foundations, especially in English, mathematics, and information technology. Additionally, cultural and linguistic diversity in PNG adds another layer of complexity. Students often face challenges adjusting to English as the primary medium of instruction in universities, given that many come from vernacular-speaking regions.

Institutional Perspectives: Divine Word University

Divine Word University (DWU) has recognized the unique challenges faced by first-year students and has implemented programs to ease this transition, such as orientation weeks, foundation courses, and peer mentoring initiatives. However, there remains a gap in the literature documenting the effectiveness of these interventions from the perspectives of the students themselves. Studies conducted within DWU have highlighted issues such as

homesickness, academic pressure, limited ICT skills, and difficulty in self-directed learning. These findings align with broader research on tertiary transitions, which emphasize that emotional and academic adjustment are closely intertwined.

The Role of Support Systems

Research shows that family support, peer networks, and institutional mentorship programs play vital roles in helping students adjust to tertiary education. In the PNG context, extended family obligations can either support or burden students, depending on socio-economic circumstances. For DWU students, access to mental health services, academic counselling, and faith-based support groups has been cited as a key factor in coping with university life.

Gaps in the Literature

While much has been written about tertiary education challenges in PNG, there is limited qualitative research specifically addressing student perspectives on their transition into Divine Word University. Most studies focus on administrative or policy-level issues without delving into the lived experiences of first-year students. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring students' insights into the transition process at DWU.

9. RESULTS

9.1 Theme: Challenges Experienced When Transitioning into Higher Tertiary Education

One-to-one interviews conducted with continuing students at Divine Word University revealed that the transition from secondary school into tertiary education was marked by a range of academic, technological, emotional, and socio-cultural challenges. Participants - ranging from second-year to fourth-year students—shared retrospective accounts of their first-year experiences, offering insights into the long-term impact of these transitional difficulties.

9.2 Academic Transition Difficulties

All participants described their first year as academically overwhelming. The sudden shift from teacher-led instruction in secondary school to self-directed learning in university was a major adjustment. Many recalled being unfamiliar with university-level expectations, such as academic writing, referencing, and independent research. *“At first it was not easy, everything I saw was not easy. I had to find my way around to learn. There is more free time, but when I came in it was different from what I expected. I have to adjust myself and get on with my studies, I should not wait for the lecturers to tell me what to do, and I want to do well and complete my studies.”* (Participant 6, 3rd Year)

9.3 Technological and Digital Challenges

Many continuing students recalled struggling with digital tools and online learning platforms during their first year. Some had never used a computer before entering DWU and were unfamiliar with basic programs such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Moodle.

“The online system of doing the test was new because nothing like this was taught in the secondary schools. I was hit hard to really understand aah, the online learning and computer use was all new to me.” (Participant 9, 4th Year). Internet access and affordability were also cited as major issues, particularly among students from rural backgrounds.

“Back then, I had to buy my own data to access Moodle. It was expensive, and sometimes I had to skip meals just to buy credit.” (Participant 5, 3rd Year)

9.4 Emotional and Social Adjustment

The emotional impact of the transition was strongly felt. Students shared experiences of homesickness, loneliness, and culture shock during their initial months at DWU. Being away from family and living in a new environment with unfamiliar people contributed to feelings of isolation and anxiety. *“The first semester was the hardest. I cried a lot at night because I missed my family, and I didn’t feel comfortable talking to new people.”* (Participant 1, 2nd Year)

Some students found it difficult to make friends initially, especially if they came from remote provinces or spoke a different language. *“I stayed quiet most of the time because everyone spoke differently. I felt like an outsider.”* (Participant 4, 3rd Year)

These accounts indicate that transitioning into higher tertiary education at DWU presents multi-dimensional challenges, many of which continue to influence students’ academic performance and emotional well-being in later years. The interviews underscore the importance of early interventions in first year such as digital literacy training, academic mentoring, and orientation programs to support student retention and success.

10. DISCUSSION

10.1 Theme: Challenges Experienced When Transitioning into Higher Tertiary Education

The findings from one-to-one interviews with continuing students at DWU revealed that the transition from secondary to tertiary education is characterized by significant academic, technological, and emotional challenges. These reflections provide critical insights into the initial struggles faced by students and how those experiences shaped their adjustment and ongoing academic journey.

10.2 Academic Adjustment

Consistent with prior studies, students described a marked shift from teacher-guided learning in secondary school to the expectation of independent, self-regulated learning at the university level. This abrupt change was challenging for many, especially those from rural or under-resourced schools where rote learning was more common. Difficulties with academic writing, time management, and understanding lecture content in English support existing findings that first-year students in the Pacific often lack the academic literacy required for higher education. This suggests that bridging programs or extended foundation years could be beneficial, especially for students with limited academic exposure prior to entry.

10.3 Technological and Digital Barriers

Participants' accounts of struggling with digital tools mirror the findings of Azila-Gbetteo et al., who reported that students with limited ICT experience often feel alienated in blended and online learning environments. At DWU, although the provision of laptops has improved digital access, many students still reported difficulties with basic computer use and navigating platforms (e.g., Moodle, Microsoft Word). These findings reinforce Cheong et al.’s assessment of the digital divide in Papua New Guinea, where poor infrastructure and high data costs limit meaningful participation in digital education. It is evident that access alone is insufficient—training and ongoing digital support are necessary to close the digital competency gap.

10.4 Emotional and Social Adjustment

The emotional challenges described—homesickness, loneliness, and cultural dislocation align with literature emphasizing the psychological toll of academic transitions. Students who moved from rural or remote areas reported feelings of exclusion due to language differences or social discomfort, echoing Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital,” where students from underprivileged backgrounds may lack the social tools needed to integrate into university life. These emotional struggles, particularly during the first semester, could hinder academic

engagement and retention unless addressed through early socialization programs, peer mentoring, and culturally responsive support structures.

10.5 Integrating Student Voices into Institutional Planning

A significant contribution of this study lies in its focus on continuing students' reflections. Their retrospective insights provide a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of early transitional challenges. Unlike first-year students still navigating the adjustment, continuing students are able to articulate what specific supports they lacked and what interventions would have made a difference. This perspective is crucial for informing policy and practice at DWU, particularly in areas such as first-year experience programming, mental health services, digital literacy training, and inclusive pedagogy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study suggests several actionable strategies for DWU and similar institutions:

- **Strengthen First-Year Orientation** to include academic literacy workshops and digital skills training.
- **Provide Peer Mentoring** through upper-year students to reduce feelings of isolation.
- **Expand Financial Aid** to include living expenses, not just tuition.
- **Enhance Pastoral Support** with culturally sensitive counselling and peer-led wellness groups.
- **Implement Early Warning Systems** to detect and support at-risk students in their first semester.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of continuing DWU students highlight that the transition into tertiary education remains a multi-dimensional challenge that goes beyond academic performance. Addressing these barriers requires an integrated, student-centred approach that combines academic support, technological empowerment, emotional well-being, and financial aid. By listening to and learning from students who have already navigated this transition, DWU can design more effective, equitable, and sustainable support systems.

ACKNOWLEDGE

We would like to acknowledge PIURN for accepting our abstract to present in the conference. We also acknowledge the Australia Awards and Solomon Island National University for their sponsorship and support. To our participants, thank you for your valuable engagement. Above all, we give thanks to our Heavenly Father for His abundant blessings throughout this journey.

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