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AGE DIFFERENCES AND ADJUSTMENT AMONG FRESHMEN AT ONE SELECTED PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Freshmen in Kenyan universities face numerous adjustment challenges in their transitioning to higher education. This study examined age differences and adjustment among freshmen at one university in Kenya. Student Integration Theory was chosen to inform this study. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design. The research participants comprised 213 freshmen in one public university. The quantitative data from questionnaire was analyzed by using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) statistical test. The findings of the study indicate that older students showed better adjustments as compared to younger students, thus age freshmen determines their adjustment. This study concludes that age is a very significant factor which affects adjustments among freshmen at universities. It is recommended that counselors at universities should develop unique orientation programs which suit younger students who join the university.

Introduction

New learning environments are a challenge to students worldwide. Students joining higher learning institutions for the first time are prone to stressful events which may affect their lives. Calvete and Connor-Smith, (2016) reiterate that there are numerous challenges at new learning environments associated with emotional and social aspects that the freshmen struggle to cope with. The freshmen students are thus facing adjustment challenges at universities. Adjustment is defined as the process where students strive to address the challenges that they encounter including tensions, stress, and meet their needs (Kulshrestha, 1979). Thus, in an effort to adjust to new learning environments, students strive to attain best relationship with the universities. Literature indicates that the various aspects of adjustments include the social, emotional and academic dimensions. Al-Qaisy, (2010) argues that students' efforts to foster academic work, goals, and positive valuations of their academic environment is referred to as academic adjustment. Moreover, the academic adjustment also encompass the students' determination to meet academic requirements, complete academic work, and finally satisfaction with academic requirements at universities (Kyalo & Chumba, 2011). On the other hand, the process by which students cope with increasing personal life demands and conflicts that they encounter is referred to as social adjustment (Dortaj, et al., 2013). Thus, in this aspect, students strive to abide by social norms, social rules, and principles and finally establish efficient social contacts with all other members of the communities. On the other hand, Sekar and Lawrence, (2016) define emotional adjustment as the ability of students to develop stable emotional relationships with other individuals within the school and in the community environments. Moreover, Sekar and Lawrence, (2016) argues that to be able to process information received from the environment, an individual needs to be properly adjusted in their personality. Rienties, and Tempelaar, (2013) reiterate that there is need for students to develop better coping mechanisms to be able to adjust appropriately to new learning environments. Hupert, (2009) concludes that the efficient functioning of freshmen at universities is critical in making them to adjust to the new learning environment. Therefore, freshmen who adjust well are able to function appropriately at universities and complete their education within the required time.

According to Kadison and Digeronimo, (2014), freshmen, at universities struggle to cope with new demands including high expectations, increased freedom, and peer pressure, pressure to perform well in academics, academic demands, and relationship problems with the opposite sex. Therefore, the freshmen have to develop coping mechanisms which could help them to appropriately adjust to the university environment. Thus, universities strive to develop support mechanisms which are aimed at ensuring best adjustment among freshmen,

including enhanced interpersonal relationships, teacher-student connection, student-student relationships, roommate relationships, and love relationships (Gurung, 2015). According to Owuor, (2012), Kenya has witnessed growth of universities in the last decade. For example, universities in Kenya continue to witness growth in the numbers of freshmen due to expansion strategies that have been established by the Government. In addition, Ng'ang'a (2016) reiterate that the enrolment of freshmen at public universities in Kenya has tripled between the years 1998 and 2015, however very little was done to address the students' accommodation issues. As the number of students continue to rise in Kenyan universities, there are numerous cases of stressful incidences also reported among students. Thus, the stressful conditions among students result to poor physical and mental health leading to death if not well managed by the freshmen. Moreover, research also indicates that most students at universities resort to alcohol abuse in an effort to manage stress and poor mental health (Njare, 2013). Moreover, Ndegwa, et al., (2017) reported that there are reports of increased cases of drug and alcohol abuse among students in universities in Kenya. This indicates that there are poor adjustment issues among students in Kenyan universities, of which the first the freshmen are the most affected.

Theoretical Framework

The Student Integration Theory developed by Tinto in 1993 was used as the theoretical framework in this study. According to the theory, students can achieve persistence from three conditions, that retention programmes that are developed by institutions should be those that are student centered and not institution centered in nature. In this case, the orientation programmes that are student centered would meet their needs to adjust to the new learning environment. Secondly, there should be focus on developing orientation programmes that caters for all students at the university irrespective of age, gender, class, socio-economic status or race. Moreover, there should be retention programming for all students who join colleges and universities (Chrysikos, et al., 2017). Tinto (1993) argues that if successful retention programme have to be implemented at universities and colleges, then it is important to develop both academic and social adjustment aspects of students. The theory continues to argue that, both the social and academic integration are very crucial in relationship to outside efforts of students and also to the student's commitment to the institution. At the institutions such as universities or colleges, students recognize the fact that they need to have goals, commitments and intentions to perform academic work (Chrysikos, et al., 2017). Thus, to ensure success at universities, then the administrators should guide all students to develop realistic expectations in their academic lives. Moreover, there should be programmes at universities for students to integrate both social and academic skills to be able to adjust appropriately to the university environment. Therefore, Tinto (1993) concludes that to adjust well to the university environment, students need to set goals and aspirations that are realistic. Thus, this theory argues that students who are new in universities face adjustment challenges which should be addressed to ensure that they finish their education.

Literature Review

Adjustment issues among students at universities and colleges have received interest among different researchers for several years now. The reviewed studies have varied results in different contexts. Dawborn-Gundlach, and Margetts, (2018) study suggest that older students struggle on their social and personal adjustment aspects, but they adjust well in the academics at university. In addition, Pike, et al., (1997) study reported that age affects the student's adjustment and those who are young struggle to adjust while the students are mature or older relatively adjust easily to the new university environment. In another study, Laidro, et al., (2007) argues that academic success and adjustment of students is determined by age of students. Similarly, Aderi, et al., (2013) argues that young students have better adjustment mechanisms as compared to older students who struggle to adjust to new university environment. In another study, Grebennikov and Skaines (2009) argued that, older students struggle to adjust socially at new university environments while the young students adjust well academically and socially. Nwoke (2011) study in Nigeria reported that social adjustment of students at universities is determined by their ages because older ones have better coping mechanisms to stress at new environments.

Schlosnagle, (2009) indicated that, students who are mature in age struggle to adjust socially at universities while the young students experience positive adjustment. Maqbool, et al., (2021) study argues that social adjustment of students in new tertiary institutions is dependent on their age. Another study conducted by Sheryl, et al., (2007) suggested that young students at universities struggle with adjustment at their first phase of joining university, but older ones are more adjusted at their academic setting. In addition, Malau-Aduli, et al., (2021) indicated that social adjustment of students is dependent on age because the mature and older ones are

adjusting better as compared to the young students in their freshmen of study. Dong et al., (2021) study reported that older students at advanced years of studies adjust well to the university environment as compared to the freshmen who have difficulties adjusting to the university. Kirtania, et al., (2021) study revealed that the older students reported better emotional adjustments as compared to the younger students, thus age is a critical factor in the adjustment of students at university. In Kenya, Opondo, et al., (2017) reported that age affects adjustment of students in secondary schools because young ones have not developed better coping mechanisms, while the older ones have developed adjustment patterns in their lives.

Herwandha and Prastuti, (2020) study showed that the emotional maturity of students is greatly affected by their age, because older students have better social skills to manage their emotions. Asrori, (2015) also reported that the emotional maturity of students depends on their ages because those at the adolescent stage of development have low self-control and anxiety while older ones have stable emotional maturity. In another research, Keyes et al., (2014) reported that age has a negative influence on emotional maturity. Yahya, (2016) study also argues that social adjustment of students is dependent on their ages because young ones struggle to cope in new environments while the older ones have better adjustment mechanism. Janardhanam and Murthy, (2020) study indicated that the younger students have poor adjustment than the older and mature students. Most recently, Al Abiky (2021) study indicated that younger students struggle to adjust to new learning environments while older students are successfully well adjusted. Aderi, et al., (2013) quantitative study also reported that age is critical in adjustment of students at universities because freshmen have better coping mechanisms when compared to the older ones. Valås, (2001) study reported that age is a significant factor on performance and adjustment students because older students demonstrate more success in coping with new challenges as compared to young students in similar learning environments. Azniza et al., (2011) also indicated that the relationship between emotional intelligence and adjustment is mediated by age of students.

On the contrary, Papageorgiou and Callaghan (2020) study in South Africa indicated that the effect of motivation, performance and adjustment is not mediated by the age of students, which implies that irrespective of age, adjustment is determined by students' academic performance at university. In another study, Pratt, and Cullen, (2000) reported that older people adjust in better ways as compared to the younger ones. However, Shabani, et al., (2010) reported that the relationship between intelligence and mental health of students is not moderated by their age. Moreover, Napoli and Wortman (1998) study reported that social adjustment of students is affected by age and that the older students struggle to adjust while the young students adjust better to the university environments. In addition, Brooks and Dubois (1995) study reported that age does not affect to the academic wellness and adjustment of students at universities. However, Atteraya (2021) reported that the academic adjustment among students is not affected by their age. Moreover, Tadese, et al., (2022) study argues that academic performance is affected by age of students because older students have better adjustment mechanisms as compared to younger students who struggle to cope with academic performance. Moreover, Al-Hendawi, et al., (2022) study indicated that adjustment and school performance is negatively affected by age of students and older students struggle to cope with challenges, while young ones have better coping mechanisms. Similarly, Aloka (2022) study in Kenya argues that adjustment of freshmen at universities is affected by age and that older students have better coping mechanisms while the young students struggle to adjust to the university environment. Most recently, Alhussain, et al., (2023) study reported that adjustment of students is dependent on their age because older students have better coping strategies while the young students struggled to adjust to the new university environment challenges. From the reviewed literature, there are mixed results on effects of age on adjustment among freshmen. Moreover, some students were on adjustment but did not focus on age of students. Thus, the present sought to analyze age differences on adjustment among freshmen from Kenyan perspective.

Research Hypotheses

The following research hypothesis were tested:

H₀₁: *There are no significant effect of age on adjustment among freshmen in one selected public university*

Methodology

Research Design

The cross-sectional survey design was adopted in this research. This design is utilized to guide studies when there is need to make conclusion from a sample size of population of participants under study and all data is collected at one time (Lavrakas, 2008). Moreover, cross-sectional surveys are regarded as snapshots of the populations about which they gather data. This research design was chosen in this research as it helped to ascertain differences in adjustments among freshmen on the bases of their ages.

Research Participants

The research participants comprised 213 freshmen from schools in one public university in Western Kenya. There were 40 first year's students in the 17–18 years' age category, 129 freshmen who were between 19–20 years' of age, 44 first year's students in the 21 and above years in age category.

Research Tools

The overall adjustment of freshmen on various aspects was measured using an Adjustment Questionnaire. The section of Academic Adjustment sub-scale had 10 items, two examples are; *"I feel very jittery when taking an important test"*, and *"Even when I am well prepared for reporting to school, I feel very anxious"*. Emotional Adjustment scale has 15 items some of which are; *"My eyes get wet on seeing the difficulties of others"*, and *"I feel very much frightened even in minor frightful places"*. Social Adjustment scale has 12 items some of which are; *"Being ignored, or being socially awkward at school, would reduce my sense of self-worth"*, and *"My self-esteem is affected by my status as a first year"*. The Psychological Adjustment sub-scale had 12 items some of which are; *"I have to be careful at parties and social gatherings for fear that others would not approve of my status"*, and *"In class, or in a group, I am unlikely to express my opinion because I fear that others may not think well of it or of me"*. Each sub-scale of Adjustment Questionnaire had a 5-point Likert response scale namely; *Strongly Agree* (5); *Agree* (4); *Neutral* (3); *Disagree* (2); and *Strongly Disagree* (1). The Bartlett's Test for Sphericity and the results of validity indicate that all measures of the questionnaire were highly significant ($p < 0.05$). The reliability Adjustment Questionnaire was tested, and results indicate that the Academic adjustment subscale had alpha of 0.672, the Emotional adjustment sub-scale had alpha of 0.813, the social adjustment had alpha of 0.743, the Psychological adjustment had alpha of 0.701. In overall, internal consistent reliability mean average rating of 0.732 indicate that all the scales had adequate reliability co-efficient.

Procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Deputy Vice chancellor student affairs at one university. On the day of data collection, the researcher was introduced to the academic registrar who with the assistance of the Dean of schools, assisted to obtain sampled freshmen. The selected 213 freshmen were requested to assemble at the university assembly hall. Then, they signed the consent forms which were issued to them. Each participant took approximately 45 minutes to fill in the questionnaires.

Data Analysis

The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) statistical test was used to analyze quantitative data obtained from questionnaires. The independent variable, age was group into three categories, and the adjustment scale data was in ratio scale, this, made it possible to use a parametric test. The hypothesis was tested at 95% level of confidence.

Findings

The descriptive statistics findings are presented in the Table 1 below:

Table 1: Descriptive results on overall adjustment

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
17-18 Years	40	1.5761	.31539	.04987	1.4752	1.6769	.93	2.19
19-20 Years	129	1.7364	.36884	.03247	1.6721	1.8006	.79	2.66
21 Years and Above	44	2.0661	.47764	.07201	1.9209	2.2113	.59	2.87
Total	213	1.7744	.41554	.02847	1.7183	1.8305	.59	2.87

In the Table 1, students in the age groups 17-18 years struggled to adjust to university environment. Moreover, the students who are older than 21 years, reported high adjustment to the university environment. Descriptive results also indicate that 19-20 years old students had overall adjustment rating of 1.74 with a standard deviation of 0.37. To ascertain whether age had significant effect on adjustment of the freshmen, a One-way ANOVA was used. The results of ANOVA are presented in Table 2:

Table 2: ANOVA results on age and overall adjustment

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	5.504	2	2.752	18.581	.000
Within Groups	31.103	210	.148		
Total	36.607	212			

P<0.05

From the table 2 above, [$F(2, 210) = 18.581, p = .000$], age has significant effect on the adjustment among freshmen at university. It was therefore necessary to carry out follow up tests using the post-hoc tests, because the results of ANOVA were significant. To find out where these differences in overall adjustment lie, post hoc tests was performed on the data. The post-hoc test results are presented in table 3 below:

Table 3: Multiple Comparisons Tukey HSD -Dependent Variable: Overall Adjustment

(I) Age of Respondents	(J) Age of Respondents	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
17-18 Years	19-20 Years	-.16031	.06965	.058	-.3247	.0041
	21 Years and Above	-.49004*	.08408	.000	-.6885	.2916
19-20 Years	17-18 Years	.16031	.06965	.058	.0041	.3247
	21 Years and Above	-.32974*	.06719	.000	-.4883	.1711
21 Years and Above	17-18 Years	.49004*	.08408	.000	.2916	.6885
	19-20 Years	.32974*	.06719	.000	.1711	.4883

Significance at 0.05

The post-hoc tests results indicate that the adjustment were significantly different among freshmen older than 21 years of age and those in the 17-18 years category, overall adjustment levels; between 21+ years and 19-20 years' overall adjustment levels ($M=1.74; SD=0.37$). However, a significant difference was not established between 19-20 years and 17-18 years' overall adjustment levels, as reflected by non-significant ($p = .058$) mean difference of 0.16. Moreover, the results indicated that an eta squared value of 0.15 was reported implying that the adjustment of freshmen could be accounted for by 15% from their age as a factor.

Discussion

This research analyzed age differences on adjustment among freshmen at a public university. The findings reported that younger freshmen had poor adjustments to university as compared to older freshmen at the university. This implies that age is a very significant factor which affects adjustments among freshmen at the university. In agreement, Pike, et al., (1997) reported that age affects student's adjustment and that young students struggle with adjustment while the older students have better adjustment mechanisms. Similarly, Dawborn-Gundlach, and Margetts, (2018) agree that the mature students demonstrate better adjustment in their academic aspects but were struggling in their personal and social aspects of adjustment. Sheryl, et al., (2007) study also showed in academic settings, the younger students adjust poorly when compared to mature students. Similarly, Malau-Aduli, et al., (2021) indicated that adjusting was better off among mature and older students, which was significantly higher than for who are younger. Dong et al., (2021) also reported that as compared to the young students, the older ones adjust better to the university environment, implying that age is a significant factor contributing to adjustment. Kirtania, et al., (2021) also reported that the older students reported better emotional adjustments as compared to the younger students. In addition, Opondo, et al., (2017) argues that older students adjust better to challenges at school as compared to the younger students who struggle to cope with difficulties that they face. Janardhanam and Murthy, (2020) and Al Abiky (2021) study indicated that one of the main biographical factors that affect adjustment among new students at universities is their age, as older ones have developed better coping strategies to challenges that they face. The findings also agree with the Tinto (1993) theoretical framework which that, both the social and academic integration are very crucial in relationship to outside efforts of students.

However, Atteraya (2021) argues that on academic adjustment, age of students does not contribute. Moreover, Papageorgiou and Callaghan (2020) indicated that in the adjustment of students at university in relation to motivation and performance, age does not mediate the relationships. Similarly, Maqbool, et al., (2021) reported that there are both young and older students have similar levels of adjustment at university. In addition, Shabani, et al., (2010) reported that, the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic adjustment of students is not mediated by their ages. However, a study by Napoli and Wortman (1998) reported that an inverse relationship occurs between social adjustment and age of students, while, age is positively correlated with their academic adjustment. In addition, Brooks and Dubois (1995) reported that age does not affect the psychological and academic adjustment of freshmen at university. Similarly, Aloka (2022) study in Kenya argues that older students who are first borns in their families have better adjustment mechanisms as compared to the young students. Most recently, Alhussain, et al., (2023) study reported that adjustment of students is dependent on the age of students as the older students have better adjustment mechanisms as compared to the young students at universities.

Conclusion & Further research

This study concludes that age is a very significant factor which affects adjustments among freshmen at the university. This is because the results indicated that the older students showed better adjustments as compared to younger students at the university. Thus, with the significant age differences on adjustment among freshmen. Thus, the implication of this finding is that, it's necessary that university administrators pay close attention to the younger freshmen who join universities. From the findings, it implies that younger freshmen are unprepared emotionally, physically, socially and psychologically to cope with the challenges that present themselves at the institutions. It is recommended that Dean of students at universities should prioritize behavioural approaches in developing the counseling programs for freshmen at universities. Moreover, counselors at universities to create unique programs which suit younger students who join the university. One limitation was reported in this research because only freshmen at a particular public university were involved. The study has limitations in that it was carried out in one public university in Kenya. Future studies could consider a large scale survey among freshmen in many universities to obtain a wider view of the investigation. Moreover, the study was also quantitative in nature and future studies could focus on mixed methods approach in the investigation.

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