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Exploring the Quality of Life and Academic Success of Students at a University in the Western Cape

Tshiamo Matlapeng[1], Faeez Aref Miya[1], Tandolwethu Mfundisi[1], Makhaya Malema[1] 🆔 and Kelello Moeketse[1,*] 🆔

[1]*Department of Sport, Recreation & Exercise Science, Faculty of Community & Health Science, University of the Western Cape, South Africa*

Abstract:

Background: This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of first-year students adapting to university life. University life encompasses various dimensions impacting individuals' health and wellness. Wellness comprises seven components, namely, physical, mental, spiritual, occupational, emotional, social, and environmental wellness. The present study rests on the premise that students may struggle, which will not only affect their quality of life but rather have knock-on effects and implications on their academic performance. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore and describe students' perceived quality of life and its influence on their academic success at a university in the Western Cape.

Methods: An exploratory, descriptive qualitative study was conducted at the University of the Western Cape. The study involved twelve participants who were first-year students in the Community and Health Science faculty. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling techniques. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Interviews were transcribed manually and through the use of AI software. Themes were analyzed using the Braun and Clarke framework.

Results: The findings of the study revealed that students use various coping mechanisms, which can be categorized into sports participation, social support, and academic planning. These strategies help manage the transition from high school to university and promote a better quality of life. Coping strategies are adopted to manage the challenges during their academic journey. These challenges may be increased workload, how students manage their schedules, and their ability to be independent. These factors play a critical role in academic success, which is further determined by the academic process needs, the institutional support provided through available programs, and the access of students to basic needs or lack thereof.

Conclusion: The study findings highlight a clear link between the quality of life of students and their academic success. However, the study had limitations, including a lack of representation across genders and departments. The findings, along with previous studies conducted outside the Western Cape, suggest the need for additional transition support programs and increased awareness of existing resources. Therefore, recommendations will focus on addressing the identified stress factors to improve students' quality of life and enhance their academic success.

Keywords: Academic stress, Coping mechanisms, Holistic wellness, Quality of life, Student wellness, Academic performance.

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* Address correspondence to this author at the Department of Sport, Recreation and Exercise Science Faculty of Community and Health Science University of the Western Cape, Bellville, 7535, South Africa; E-mail: kmoeketse@uwc.ac.za

1. INTRODUCTION

University life encompasses various dimensions impacting individuals' health and wellness. This holistic wellness is defined by seven components: namely physical, mental, spiritual, occupational, emotional, social, and environmental wellness [1]. If stress is not managed well, it might have a negative effect on an individual's holistic wellness. Stress is defined as the body's biological response to perceived threat or pressure and may lead to emotional, psychological, and physical strain on the human body [2]. Stress affects everyone, with certain groups being more vulnerable than others. University students are at a critical stage of their lives. They are transitioning from a structured environment, like a high school, to an autonomous university environment. This transition can be incredibly challenging for many students as they navigate leaving behind their homes, families, and friends, learning to be independent without their usual support structures [3]. The current study is based on the notion that students might experience difficulties, impacting not only their quality of life but also affecting their academic performance. As students progress through higher education levels, the pressure increases, requiring a deeper understanding of the stress they encounter.

South African universities are based on a semester system, utilizing continuous assessments and end-of-semester examinations to evaluate student academic performance. Continuous assessments include tutorials, presentations, tests, take-home assignments, quizzes, term assessments, and practical work. End-of-semester exams require students to achieve a prerequisite percentage to qualify [4]. This assessment system adds significant pressure on students, who must perform consistently well throughout the semester to progress to the next year's level, potentially resulting in academic stress. Academic stress occurs when there is an imbalance between a student's perceived capabilities and the academic demands placed upon them [4]. These demands include excelling in tests or exams to meet personal academic goals, meeting social expectations from peers, friends, and family, as well as meeting departmental expectations. Academic stress is categorized into four parts: academic frustration, where students feel despondent when they struggle to grasp material; academic conflict, which arises when students must tackle multiple tests or exams on the same day; academic pressure, when students feel overwhelmed by their workload; and academic anxiety, characterized by worry and tension related to academic work [5,6]. These components collectively impact students' well-being, thus hindering both their academic performance and QoL. Identifying the specific stressors that affect students is crucial for developing effective stress management strategies. Enhancing academic performance and overall well-being may be achieved by directly addressing these challenges.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Understanding Quality of Life in the University Context

"QoL is defined as an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live, as well as their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns. It is a broad-ranging concept that incorporates, in a complex way, the person's physical health, psychological state, level of independence, social relationships, personal beliefs, and their relationship to salient features of the environment." QoL is a complex and diverse notion centered on people's opinions of their place in society, which are influenced by their roles, status, and sense of belonging. This perception is intricately linked to cultural and societal standards, which influence goals and expectations [8,9]. Individual well-being is measured against personal standards and future desires; thus, goals, expectations, and anxieties are all important. Physical health is a key component of QoL, comprising not just the absence of sickness but also elements, such as vigor and the ability to participate fully in activities.

Mental well-being is also important, as it includes emotional stability, cognitive functioning, and psychological resilience [10, 11]. Individuals cherish independence and autonomy because they allow them to make decisions that are consistent with their ideals without undue constraints. Social interactions are a vital component of QoL, including friendships, family ties, and larger social networks. Personal views, whether religious, philosophical, or value-based, shape people's opinions of what makes a fulfilling life [10-12]. Furthermore, the environment is important, as access to resources, safety, and environmental quality all have an impact on overall well-being. QoL is a broad and subjective notion that varies from person to person and across cultural situations. It emphasizes the necessity of assessing the totality of a person's situations and experiences when evaluating and improving their quality of life [13].

1.1.2. Impacts of Low QoL on the Health and Success of Students

A low QoL can have significant and far-reaching effects on a person's life in several different areas. Firstly, low quality of life significantly impacts physical health [14]. Chronic stress, often associated with a reduced QoL, can weaken the immune system, increase susceptibility to illness, and exacerbate existing health conditions [14,15]. Furthermore, financial constraints and limited access to adequate healthcare resources hinder the adoption of healthy lifestyle habits, further compromising physical well-being. Additionally, low QoL takes a toll on mental health, leading to heightened emotional distress and increased risk of mental health issues [14]. Depression, anxiety disorders, and other mental health problems can result from ongoing emotions of unhappiness, helplessness, and loneliness [4,14]. Psychological distress

is intensified by the inability to reach personal goals and aspirations, compounded by social pressures and a lack of supportive networks. Consequently, a low QoL strains social relationships, leading to weakened connections and a sense of isolation. Individuals may experience strained interpersonal connections, alienation, and a sense of disconnection from their community [16]. Social isolation and loneliness become prevalent, exacerbating feelings of despair and exacerbating mental health issues. This breakdown in social support networks further perpetuates the cycle of poor QoL, as the absence of meaningful relationships deprives individuals of vital emotional and practical support [8].

1.1.3. The Role of a Student in Tertiary Institutions

Students have the responsibility of ensuring that they have the necessary tools and skills to meet their academic demands. They are required to write and submit quality work that will reflect their understanding of the content being covered during the semester. They are assessed throughout the semester using tests, assignments, practical assessments, and examinations and receive a mark based on how well they performed. To pass the modules, they need to be equipped with skills and study habits that promote academic success that involve engaging with the learning material, time-management skills, communications skills, and critical thinking skills. In the tertiary education sector, the main objective of students is to achieve academic success by graduating at the end of the course. To graduate, they are expected to show competency by producing and writing quality work, meeting assignment deadlines, and attending classes [17]. All students have basic needs, which refers to the most essential resources required to thrive as a student. These include safety, which involves traveling to and from campus and staying in a safe environment. Proper nutrition is essential to sustain students through their demanding lives, while financial stability is crucial for covering tuition and study materials [18]. Multiple interventions within the University of the Western Cape are implemented to enhance the student's quality of life and academic success. This includes the Centre for Student Support Services (CSSS) which is focused on assisting students achieve their personal and academic goals. It has four divisions, which include the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSwD), the Office for Leadership and Social Responsibility (LSR), the Office for Academic Support (OAS), and Therapeutic Services (TS). All the divisions aim to help enhance the well-being and academic success of the students. The Faculty of Community and Health Sciences at the University of the Western Cape has a mentorship programme called the First-Year Transition Programme (FYTP) aimed at facilitating the smooth transition of first-year students into the university. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore and describe the perceived quality of life of students and its influence on their academic success at a university in the Western Cape.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory-descriptive qualitative research design. Exploratory-descriptive research is particularly suited for exploring these phenomena, as it allows for open-minded examination while gaining insights through interviews [19]. The objectives of the study were: (a) to describe the perceived quality of life of students at a university in the Western Cape, (b) to explore the factors contributing to the academic success of these students, and (c) to explore and describe the influence of quality-of-life programs on students' academic activities.

2.2. Research Setting

The research took place at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, with interviews conducted on one of the two Belleville campuses. Each interview was conducted individually in private lecture rooms and offices to ensure a comfortable and confidential setting for participants.

2.3. Sample Characteristics

The participants of this study were first-year university students within the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences. A total of twelve participants were recruited from various departments within the faculty for this study. A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants who could provide rich and diverse insights into the research questions. This population was selected because these individuals were aware of the difficulties that they had encountered as first-year students. Moreover, participants in the study were first-year students registered full-time for an undergraduate degree under the Community and Health Science Faculty. Students who were repeating first-year modules were excluded, as well as those from other faculties.

2.4. Data Collection Procedures

A total of twelve interviews were conducted on the main campus of the University of the Western Cape. Each interview lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes, with five primary questions and additional probing questions aligned with the study's objectives. The demographic questions included the following: What is your age, ethnic group, level of study, and faculty you are registered under? Some of the main questions included the following: (1) Tell me what does the concept of Quality of life mean to you? (2) In your opinion, what contributes to your QoL? (3) Tell me about your experiences as a first-year student. (4) In your opinion, how do you adjust to a new academic environment? (5) In your opinion, what is the link between your QoL and your academic environment? Data collection activities were facilitated by members of the research team, who recorded each interview using audio recorders

and mobile phones. All interviews were conducted in English, as all participants were fluent in the language. Recordings were securely uploaded to a Google Drive, accessible only to the researchers and supervisors.

2.5. Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis to interpret the data, following the Braun and Clarke framework [20]. Interviews were transcribed using the Otter transcription AI tool. Each transcript was carefully reviewed by the researchers to ensure accuracy, paying particular attention to accents and nuances in speech. After familiarizing ourselves with the data, initial codes were generated by noting recurring terms and assigning words to them. The generated codes were then organized into groups and named under specific themes that contributed significantly to the study. Researchers then selected representative quotes that aligned with each theme to support the findings. Finally, a comprehensive report was prepared based on this analysis.

2.6. Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, multiple methods are employed to ensure that the study is rigorous. This includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure that the quality of the study is not compromised. To enhance credibility, the researchers used the technique of triangulation of data by using multiple sources of data, such as field notes, audio records, and documented transcripts, to ensure that findings are supported by diverse evidence [21,22]. The researchers maintained transparency throughout the research process, including data collection methods and analysis techniques, helping establish credibility. Transferability involves the extent to which findings can be applied or transferred to other contexts or populations. To enhance transferability, the researchers clearly described the research context, participants' demographics, and data collection methods to allow readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings [21,22]. The researchers provided detailed descriptions of the phenomena under study to facilitate comparisons with similar contexts. Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings are shaped by the participants' experiences rather than the biases or preconceptions of the researchers [21,22]. To enhance confirmability, the researchers maintained reflexivity by acknowledging and accounting for personal biases and assumptions throughout the research process. Multiple researchers and supervisors reviewed the data to ensure that interpretations were grounded in the data rather than influenced by individual perspectives. Dependability relates to the consistency and stability of the findings over time and across researchers [21,22]. The research team maintained an audit trail to enhance dependability by

documenting research decisions, data collection processes, and analysis techniques to allow for trans-parency and reproducibility. They ensured consistency in coding and interpretation by establishing clear coding protocols and conducting regular checks for inter-coder reliability.

2.7. Pilot Study

A pilot study, typically a smaller-scale study that aids in planning and refining the main study, is the initial step in the research methodology. It is useful for evaluating the feasibility of the study before carrying out the main trial (also known as the full study or large-scale main trial) [23]. This was done by recruiting experienced qualitative researchers as part of the pilot study to engage the participants with the topic before the interviews. This allowed the researchers to gain insight and experience in conducting interviews with participants and interpreting their body language.

2.8. Ethics

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HS24/5/35) at the University of the Western Cape. Participants signed informed consent before participating in the study. They were also encouraged to ask any questions about the study before the interviews began. Additionally, on the day of the interview, permission was reconfirmed with each participant to ensure they were comfortable proceeding. This process emphasised students' right to voluntarily join the study and to withdraw at any time. The current study conforms to the Helsinki Declaration of 1975. All participants were given pseudonyms by the researchers to ensure confidentiality.

3. RESULTS

This section provides a detailed account of the data collected from participant interviews, with demographic information summarized to provide context for the participants' backgrounds. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity while allowing for a more personalized presentation of their experiences (Table 1). Key themes that emerged from the thematic analysis included coping mechanisms, academic challenges, institutional support, and the impact of quality of life on academic performance. Within each theme, sub-themes were explored, with direct quotes from participants used to illustrate their unique perspectives and challenges. The inclusion of demographic details, such as age, gender, and field of study, added depth to the analysis, showing how various factors influence the quality of life of students and their academic outcomes. This structure provides a holistic view of the factors affecting students and the strategies they use to navigate university life.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Department
Ms A	19	Female	Indian	Sports Science
Ms B	21	Female	Coloured	Sports Science
Mr C	19	Male	Indian	Dietetics
Mr D	19	Male	Coloured	Sports Science
Ms E	19	Female	Coloured	Dietetics
Ms F	22	Female	Other	Sports Science
Ms G	18	Female	Other	Physiotherapy
Ms H	19	Female	Coloured	Dietetics
Ms I	21	Female	African	Dietetics
Ms J	19	Female	Other	Dietetics
Mr K	18	Male	Coloured	Sport Science
Ms L	19	Female	Coloured	Dietetics

Table 2. Overview of the themes and Subthemes.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme
Theme 1: Meaning of the Quality of Life	● Perceived Definition ● The Impact on Academics
Theme 2: Coping Mechanisms	● Sport Participation ● Social Support ● Academic Planning
Theme 3: Challenges During Academic Journey	● Academic Workload ● Schedule Management ● Student Independence
Theme 4: Academic Success	● The Academic Process ● Institutional Support Programmes ● The Lack of Basic Needs

Table **1** illustrates the demographics of the participants in the study, including their names, ages, gender, race, and the department in which the students were registered with the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences.

Table **2** outlines the themes that were generated during the data analysis process, where a thematic analysis was completed. Four main themes were discovered, and eleven subsequent sub-themes emerged. These themes are discussed and summarised below.

3.1. Theme 1: Meaning of the Quality of Life

The topic of quality of life is vast and each participant understood certain aspects of the quality of life. They explained the term in their own words and what it meant to them. QoL is a concept that aims to capture the well-being of an individual or group regarding both positive and negative elements in their life at a specific point in time. The World Health Organization describes it as a subjective evaluation of one's perception of their reality relative to their goals observed through their lens of culture and value system [24]. Additionally, it is defined as how much a person can enjoy the possibility of their lives [24].

3.1.1. Sub-theme: Perceived Definition

The participants in the study had varied definitions of quality of life, and each definition was unique to them. However, their perception is aligned with the literature's position of what QoL is. The comments of the participants are given below:

"I think it means how my life is as a whole. The balance between like my schooling, my emotional health and my physical wellness for example" - Ms A.

"It's like what makes me, me. Whether it is good or bad, it is who I am today" - Mr D.

"Sort of how having like a balanced life not being overly stressed. You're calm, but you're able to get things done like you're not, I think, not too much. You're not overexerting yourself" - Mr K.

"I would say is how you live your life, like in terms of your health, what you do every day, your everyday routine, basically, okay, exercise, eating, wise and just activities you do" - Ms B.

"I think it's how you live your life, so, like your lifestyle, in terms of what you eat, the way you go about things" - Mr C.

"Health, that's the most prominent thing in my mind right now, like health, positive mindset and yeah," - Ms G.

"I think my quality of life would, it means me having access to certain resources, whether that be food, electricity, a roof over my head and the opportunity to have academic practices and facilities" - Ms H.

This subtheme is derived from the first theme (Table **2**) and indicates that each participant understood the quality of life and was able to explain what QoL is based on their experiences. Their definitions align with those previously described.

3.1.2. Sub-theme: The Impact on Academics

QoL may have a positive effect on academics. It can aid in the willingness to study and assist in obtaining good results. QoL can have a detrimental effect on academics. If one's quality of life is low, this corresponds with low academic participation and success. The comments of the participants are given below:

"When I feel good, I do good. Let's say I am feeling good about myself. It encourages me to want to achieve more. It allows me to be inspired to work harder and hopefully pass" - Ms B.

"I find that when I am excelling in all parts of my life, like, say I had a good cricket game, I automatically become better at campus. It is almost like a cycle" - Ms E.

"I think if you adapt to a stable wise lifestyle to fix your schoolwork, for instance" - Ms G.

"When I feel down, then I don't even want to look at my work. It is the last thing I want to see" - Ms J.

"How well my life is going affects my studies. If I fall out with a friend or family member, my studies take a beating as well. I just cannot cope as I am too stressed with everything else going on in my life that I can't focus on school" - Mr K.

"Because I've always been like, academic validation is, like, what validates me? So, like I've always been studying, I've always been with my books" - Ms L.

The findings on this subtheme indicate that participants' quality of life impacts their academic performance, both positively and negatively. There is a direct relationship between the two, as some participants reported that when they feel low, their academic performance also suffers. Conversely, others reported that when positive events occur in their lives, there is a positive impact on their academic performance as well.

3.2. Theme 2: Coping Mechanisms

To manage the transition period, students have developed coping mechanisms to ease their shift from high school to university. In Table **2** , 'coping mechanisms' is one of the main themes identified through the participants' narratives. These mechanisms helped them adapt to the increased demands placed on university students compared to high school pupils. These mechanisms varied from participant to participant, with three main mechanisms primarily used by the majority of students. Moreover, when individuals are subjected to a stressor, varying ways of dealing with it, depending on the traits of the individual, are elicited. These mechanisms act as a defensive way to both tolerate and reduce stress [25].

3.2.1. Sub-theme: Sport Participation

Students actively turned to sports as a means to deal with stress in various aspects of their lives. This included both competitive sports and recreational participation. The comments of the participants are given below:

"I play netball here on campus, and after classes, it is a nice way for me to forget everything else and play. It does not have to be a match. It can be just training or fooling around with the ball" - Ms A.

"Yeah, so I exercise. I do gym now and then, especially when I'm feeling can I say demotivated like that" - Ms B.

"So, I was thinking of hockey, but I'm leaning more to going back to athletics. Because, yeah, I was always a runner" - Ms E.

"Yes, the swimming was definitely a coping mechanism. Like, it helps me relax, get out, like, getting out of my space where I'm usually studying, helps just to, like, calm my brain" - Ms G.

"I myself play cricket. Not here on campus, but for a club. We practice twice a week and play social games on the weekend. It is difficult to sometimes find time for it, but I think it is necessary for my sanity otherwise, I would not be able to manage in my life" - Mr C.

The findings in this theme indicate that participation in sports is a prominent avenue used by the participants in coping or dealing with their academic stress. Engaging in sports allows them to forget, even for a moment, the stressors in their lives. It offers them a way to relax and take a break from their normal environment. Participation in sports is seen as a way for participants to reset their focus and clear their minds. This shift in attention leads to a positive change in their attitudes and moods. Along with the calmness provided by sports and the motivation to engage in it, participants found this coping mechanism beneficial in easing their transition from high school to university.

3.2.2. Sub-theme: Social Support

This coping mechanism was highlighted by most participants, who relied on support from their social networks as a strategy to navigate the challenges of their first year at university. The comments of the participants are given below:

"Without my friends that I made this year I don't think I would have been able to cope honestly. Like I initially was doing very badly in varsity, but my friends kept me up, and now we all help each other" - MS B.

"I can't emphasize enough how important it is for me to be able to live with my family. Other students live far away from their homes, but just having family around makes a huge difference...It allows you to feel so supported and comfortable as you navigate through varsity" - Mr. C.

"and then I spend some time with my family, friends, maybe go out mingle, just to bring that life back into and really" - Ms E.

"So then how I managed to overcome that was my friends. So, then they'll remind you, if you need something or whatever, like, maybe there's an assignment, and then we'll make sure that we remind each other, so that we don't forget there's a quiz, and then the quiz closes" - Ms H.

The findings of this study suggest that the support participants received from their social circles enabled them to cope effectively with the demands of their first year at university. This social support came from both family and friends. Familial support was primarily available to participants who lived with their families, while support from friends included both those made during the current year of study and those they have known for years. Social support allowed participants to feel that they were not alone in managing their challenges. Additionally, it provided them with aid and guidance, such as advice and assistance with assignment tracking, helping them stay on top of their academic load.

3.2.3. Sub-theme: Academic Planning

Students adapted to university life by developing organizational skills and planning their daily routines, to effectively manage the demands of their academic responsibilities. The comments of the participants are given below:

"I found that writing down what I need to do every night allows me to get through the work easily" - Ms G.

"I just started doing my work on time. Don't leave things last minute. Try and see how you can compensate. Maybe, if you can't do something today, make sure that at least, maybe, by the end of the week" - Ms I.

"Never did I see myself being so organized. I write down all the upcoming assessments and plan for them. It really helps me a lot to manage the work and still do well in it" - Mr K.

These findings reveal how participants adapted to cope with the challenges of their first-year transition. Many adopted strategies, such as noting down due dates for upcoming assessments, while others developed effective time-management skills, starting their work on time and avoiding procrastination. These strategies promote organization, which is essential for success, not just for students but for anyone. Academic planning enabled participants to stay aligned with academic demands and, in some cases, even stay ahead. This coping strategy helped participants perform well in their academic assessments.

3.3. Theme 3: Challenges During the Academic Journey

In all aspects of student life, individuals encounter various challenges, both in high school and at university. Academic demands, such as the shift in academic difficulty and independence, pose a great challenge to the student's transition to university. The transition from a structured high school environment to the freedom of university can prove to be overwhelming. University brings together a diverse community, which may lead to feelings of homesickness and difficulty in establishing new social networks. These all, coupled with additional factors, play a pivotal role in one's stress levels [26]. The study identified three primary challenges that were commonly experienced by the majority of participants.

3.3.1. Sub-theme: Academic Workload

Many participants highlighted that one of the major differences between high school and university was the increased workload, which proved to be a significant challenge to overcome. The comments of the participants are given below:

"The amount of work that we now have to do compared with what we had in high school is a huge difference. The workload is extremely high, and you cannot always manage this" - Ms B.

"Workload is so high at university. I did not expect it to be as such. There are so many different requirements and assessments. It becomes almost unbearable" - Mr D.

"That is just me being honest, because coming to high school pressure wasn't that bad, or the workload" - Ms I.

"And then another challenge, I think, or something that I wasn't expecting was the workload. Like, it's a lot" - Ms J.

"And so now it's like it's a lot of work, and I need to manage all of that alone" - Ms L.

The findings indicate that participants found the university workload to differ significantly from what they experienced in high school. This difference involved a substantial increase in workload, which can be difficult to manage effectively. If not handled appropriately, it negatively impacts academic success. Additionally, the increased workload raises stress levels, as participants face pressure from numerous assessments throughout the year. Many participants reported not being aware of this increased workload before joining the university, and some indicated they were unable to cope with it on their own. Thus, the university workload, in comparison to high school, presents a significant hurdle.

3.3.2. Sub-theme: Schedule Management

In high school, timetables are easily manageable, with set times and adequate space between assessments, making them easier to handle. In university, however, assessments may overlap, and the scheduling of classes can make it increasingly difficult to balance both academic responsibilities and life on and off campus. Students mentioned this challenge as follows:

"There are multiple tests and assignments and sometimes these are on the same day. You struggle to put in a hundred percent effort into all things as there is so much due always" - Ms F.

"You cannot really plan your day because I have one class in the morning, then the next in the afternoon. The

schedule I find is so haphazard and I struggle to manage that. In school we just used to come in the morning and leave in the afternoon" - Ms G.

"I struggle to find balance in my days. There is just so much all the time, and I am unable to manage this. The planning of the schedules needs to be looked at or something" - Ms J.

"I preferred the structure we had in high school. Here there is a lack of organization I feel like, and because of that, you cannot manage their schedule or even yours" - Ms L.

The findings of this subtheme indicate that the academic schedule at university, particularly in the first year, differs significantly from that of high school. According to the participants, the university schedule is less structured and more disorganized. As a result, many students struggle to manage their time and find balance in their lives, leading to a lack of effort in their work, which ultimately impacts their academic performance. This, in turn, increases their academic stress levels. Some participants even questioned the organization and planning of the schedules, suggesting that improvements should be considered. The difficulty in managing their schedules left participants feeling a lack of control over their work, resulting in further disorganization and negative consequences.

3.3.3. Sub-theme: Student Independence

As a first-year university student, one transitions from being a child to a legal adult, which brings added pressure to take on more responsibility. As an adult, students must establish independence in all areas of their lives, including academically. This increased demand for independence can be challenging and difficult to manage. Students mentioned this challenge as follows:

"Teachers used to chase after us if work was not handed in. Now, if we do not do work, we simply fail. There is much more responsibility placed on me this year, and sometimes I can't handle it" - Ms B.

"We are no longer kids. The decisions we make will affect our grades. Sometimes I make the wrong choices, and it affects my work" - Mr D.

"So, what surprised me was it's not like high school, how teachers are like always, they'll remind you of assignments or something. So now you have to check your emails make sure you don't miss something" - Ms F.

"The independent learning thing, like, I know we were mostly spoon-fed by our teachers in high school" - Ms G.

The findings of this subtheme suggest that becoming a first-year university student placed increased responsibility on the participants. They revealed that, in high school, teachers were more involved in keeping their academics on track, such as checking whether they had started their assignments. In contrast, the university is the complete opposite. While reminders are sent *via* email, as one participant pointed out, they are not as frequent. This creates a greater need for participants to be independent, a demand that some find difficult to manage. For some

participants, being unaccustomed to this level of responsibility can negatively impact their academic performance.

3.4. Theme 4: Academic Success

The main goal of the university is to achieve academic success and progress in the world. Academic success itself is defined as inclusive of academic achievement, attainment of learning objectives, acquisition of desired skills and competencies, satisfaction, persistence, and post-college performance [27]. This definition is an all-inclusive definition that considers the prior knowledge of the students, where they are now, what they are currently learning, the challenges they are facing, and the prospects that arise from it. Many factors shape academic success, acting either as hurdles or stepping stones. The following factors were identified as sub-themes:

3.4.1. Sub-theme: The Academic Process

First-year students quickly realized that the shift to university academics presented unexpected challenges as they struggled to keep up with new demands and heightened expectations. Despite these obstacles, many students adapted by developing personalized coping strategies, such as time management skills, setting structured study schedules, and seeking out help to bridge knowledge gaps. Through resilience and shared experiences, they not only managed to overcome these hurdles but also became proactive in identifying additional needs for support. Their comments were as follows:

"Yeah, so I exercise. I go to the gym now and then, especially when I'm feeling demotivated like that" - Ms B.

"I think the first semester was kind of okay, and then, yeah, the second semester was a lot. So, then it's just time management. So then at the end of first semester, I applied for, like, a mentor from the first-year transition program" - Ms E.

"I would be studying for an hour, like, with my notes and my books, and then I'll take like, a 15-minute break and shift to like a book that I like, so that I want to study. And that helps me also cope" - Ms J.

The findings of this sub-theme focus on the academic processes students undertake, which vary significantly from one participant to another. For instance, some engage in extracurricular activities like joining the gym or becoming a mentor, while others adopt reformed study methods. The findings above highlights how participants spent their academic lives and how their approaches impacted them, with one participant mentioning that reading helped them cope. Therefore, way participants handle their academic demands will inevitably influence their academic success due to the cause-and-effect relationship between their approach and performance.

3.4.2. Sub-theme: Institutional Support Programmes

Transitioning from high school to university is challenging for most students. To ease this transition, universities offer programs designed to support students

and promote academic success. The importance of these programs was highlighted by students as part of the first-year transition initiative, as follows:

"The first-year transition programme has definitely made it easier for me to handle the first year. I think without it, I would definitely struggle with my academics more" - Ms A.

"I think the programmes are really vital. Like I am part of the first-year transition programme and I think it allows me to deal with academic challenges and paves the way for my academic success" - Ms B.

"I think that really helped me, because then you just have someone to talk to and also give you advice" - Ms F.

The findings above indicate that the programmes offered at the university to help students transition from high school to university played a pivotal role in their lives, particularly the first-year transition programme. Participants reported that it allowed them to deal with academic challenges and inherently paved the way for their academic success. Other participants stated that it offered them an outlet and someone to turn to. This support not only positively impacted their academic success but also enhanced their overall quality of life. The support programs offered first-year students a helping hand, providing a safe space they could rely on when facing academic challenges. Such an environment enables participants to achieve more academically.

3.4.3. Sub-theme: The Lack of Basic Needs

The lack of basic needs such as food, shelter, and financial stability emerged as a critical barrier to academic success among university students. Participants highlighted that limited access to essential resources negatively affected their ability to focus on academics and maintain a satisfactory quality of life. They mentioned:

"In impoverished communities, children don't always have food or clean water to even make themselves ready for school. In contrast, private school students have access to tutors, proper nutrition, and other resources" - Mr C.

"Sometimes I'm so stressed about managing finances for food and transport that it becomes difficult to focus on my studies" - Mr D.

"There is so much on my plate in terms of finances and saving up for a better laptop. I struggle to manage with all of it" - Ms I.

"I do not own certain things that I know will allow me to do better at university, nor do I have the ability to access such things on a daily basis" - Ms J.

The findings under this sub-theme suggest that a lack of basic needs impacts academic success. Participants faced financial struggles for necessities such as food and transport, which prevented them from focusing entirely on their academics. While basic needs might be available in some areas, participants did not have access to them. One participant noted the difficulty of dealing with this issue, while another mentioned that their academic performance could improve if these needs were met. This report highlights the strong connection between access to basic needs and the challenges faced when they are unavailable, ultimately affecting the academic success of participants.

4. DISCUSSION

The intricate relationship between QoL and academic success in first-year university students focuses on how factors such as mindset, interests, social and institutional support, and coping strategies collectively shape the well-being and academic performance of the students.

A positive mindset and engagement in personal interests were found to be central to maintaining QoL. Physical activities, such as sports, emerged as effective outlets for relieving academic stress, offering a mental reset that fosters better balance [28]. Physical activity serves as a stress buffer and provides psychological release, which aligns with research showing that students who engage in sports or other active interests experience greater resilience [29]. This was highlighted by participants who noted that the engagement in physical activities, in this case through sport participation and working out, offered a way for them to forget about the stressor in their lives, even for just a moment. It allowed them to refocus their mind and divert their attention away from current difficulties.

Time management and planning skills also emerged as vital coping strategies for the demands of university. Unlike high school, where schedules are often predetermined, university life requires students to develop self-discipline and manage their time independently. Many students found that daily planning gave them a sense of control and structure, reducing academic stress and increasing focus [13]. This shift toward intentional planning reflects a major change in responsibility, allowing students to navigate their increased workload with greater confidence and efficiency. Social support is another fundamental contributor to QoL, particularly during the transition to university, which can be isolating for many first-year students. Research supports the notion that social relationships foster a sense of belonging and well-being, which in turn positively influences motivation and academic success [1].

Students who adopted strategies that aligned with their interests, such as engaging in activities they find enjoyable, were found to have an impact on their overall academic stress levels. Students who reported feeling connected to friends and family were often better able to cope with the academic demands of university life, underscoring the importance of peer and family support in promoting resilience and engagement. Coping mechanisms used by students can play a positive role in stress management. Research conducted at other institutions in similar fields has shown that, due to the increased pressure in fields like medicine, students often experience burnout. In response, they adopt resilience strategies and coping mechanisms that help them effectively manage this stress and prevent burnout [30].

Institutional support, such as first-year transition programs, was also acknowledged by students as

invaluable. These programs provide essential resources to help students adapt to the academic and social demands of university life. Access to structured support can help reduce feelings of being overwhelmed, making it easier for students to focus on their studies [3]. A lack of such support structures, or difficulty accessing them, may lead to the development of harmful coping mechanisms, such as alcohol consumption, as noted in a research study conducted in Nigeria [31]. Participants in the study highlighted the importance of having a positive environment where they felt comfortable. This support provides students with a sense of reassurance, knowing they have a place to turn when the challenges they face become more numerous and difficult. It offers a space of solace for students. This aligns with studies that show transition programs can help mitigate stress by providing students with the tools they need to navigate academic life with greater confidence. Increased academic workloads and the need for self-discipline were recurrent themes, with many students noting the significant jump in responsibility from high school to university. The university requires students to take on greater responsibility in organizing their schedules, which can be a challenging adjustment. This increased autonomy can be both rewarding and stressful, highlighting the importance of time-management skills to prevent academic stress from negatively impacting QoL [26]. Academic stress, driven by the constant demands of assessments and self-discipline, directly impacts students' QoL. Emotional well-being is closely tied to study habits and motivation levels, with positive emotions enhancing focus and productivity. This correlation emphasizes the importance of psychological resilience and emotional stability for academic success, as students who maintain a positive QoL are more likely to engage effectively with their studies [13]. Positive QoL has been associated with improved academic outcomes, underscoring the need for support systems that promote mental health alongside academic achievement.

Basic needs, such as food, shelter, and financial stability, emerged as critical factors affecting students' QoL and academic performance. Economic disparities force many students from disadvantaged backgrounds to juggle part-time work with academic responsibilities, creating significant stress. Financial concerns often take priority over academic goals, limiting students' ability to focus on their studies and negatively impacting performance [5]. Addressing such disparities is essential to fostering an equitable academic environment where all students can succeed. An additional study on medical students observed their well-being and found that students needed to be taught how to manage their schedules and life in general to achieve wellness in three key areas: physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being [32]. This aligns with the earlier point about the role of support groups in helping students develop these skills. However, a student's ability to manage these aspects independently can positively influence their academic success and overall quality of life.

On the other hand, students who struggle and cannot access these programs may experience negative effects on both their academic performance and quality of life. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balanced quality of life (QoL) for academic success. A combination of a positive mindset, support networks, organization, and institutional resources significantly enhances students' ability to navigate the challenges of university life. By addressing basic needs and providing accessible support resources, universities can promote both student well-being and academic success. Recognizing and addressing these interconnected factors enables educational institutions to better support students in reaching their academic potential and improving their overall quality of life (QoL). These recommendations align with a previous study suggesting that universities should implement transition models, such as self-management programs, to assist students in managing these challenges [26].

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Our first recommendation is to better advertise the various programs offered at the University of the Western Cape to support students in managing their quality of life and academic success, as many participants were unaware of these programs. We also recommend that a dedicated program be created within the Community Health Sciences faculty, as each faculty faces similar but distinct challenges. Additionally, these programs could be further tailored to individual departments to address specific needs related to the courses offered. We suggest that the university provide an overview of these programs to first-year students during orientation week at the start of each academic year.

Furthermore, we would recommend that separate classes be offered to assist with guidance on how to navigate through the first year of university.

9. LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this study include the inability to access 12 participants who were registered students and part of the First-Year Transition programmes. Therefore, the influence of these programmes cannot be generalized to a larger population within the institution. While the study included various departments in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences, they were not all represented. Additionally, the study involved a significantly higher number of female participants, which limits our ability to assert that all genders were equally represented.

Consequently, we cannot conclude that males managed to voice their challenges and seek help. In the future, a larger study including males may be done across various faculties to obtain a broader understanding of the topic and assess the quality of life of all genders.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provides evidence that students have similar yet different lived experiences while studying at an institution of Higher Education. The findings from this study underscore that Quality of Life is

a multidimensional concept that significantly impacts the academic success of the students. Elements, such as a positive mindset, involvement in physical activities, social connections, and institutional support contribute positively to the QoL of the students, helping them manage the stresses of university life. For universities, enhancing support structures and fostering an environment that promotes a balanced lifestyle is crucial for improving the QoL and academic outcomes of the students. Such an approach not only aids students in achieving academic success but also fosters a healthier, more resilient university community. These results offer valuable insights for universities, providing more tools to assist students across different faculties and establish programs focused on first-year students transitioning from high school to university.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The authors confirm their contribution to the paper as follows: Study conception and design: T.M., F.M., and T.M.; draft manuscript: M.M. and K.M. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FYTP	=	First-Year Transition Programme
LSR	=	Leadership and Social Responsibility
OAS	=	Office for Academic Support
TS	=	Therapeutic Services
OSwD	=	Office for Students with Disabilities
CSSS	=	Centre for Student Support Services

ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

The researcher's ethical clearance was obtained from the Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HS24/5/35) at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa.

HUMAN AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of institutional and/or research committee and with the 1975 Declaration of Helsinki, as revised in 2013.

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

STANDARDS OF REPORTING

COREQ guidelines were followed.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data and supportive information are available within the article.

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