

Exploring Inhibiting Factors to Academic Success Among First Year Students in Nigerian Universities

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ejedp.2013/vol13n1115>

Published February 23, 2025

Citation: Osakwe G.N. and Olawunmi K. (2025) Exploring Inhibiting Factors to Academic Success Among First Year Students in Nigerian Universities, *European Journal of Educational and Development Psychology*, Vol.13 No.1, pp.1-15,

Abstract: *This paper examined inhibiting factors to academic success among first year students in Nigerian public universities. The study was guided by two research questions and two hypotheses, it used an ex post facto design with a survey approach. The population for the study involved all the first-year students in four universities in Delta and Edo states, Nigeria. A simple random sampling technique was used to select 50 students from the faculty of Education in each university. A convenient sample size of 200 respondents was used. The data collected was through a questionnaire titled "Exploring inhibiting Factors to Academic Success among First Year Students' in Nigerian Universities" (EIFASAFS), data obtained was analyzed with the use of descriptive and inferential statistics. The questionnaire was made up of two sections, A and B, were used to elicit responses from students. They yielded a reliability coefficient of .80, .76, .78 and .73 for sections A, B, C, and D respectively, which was considered adequate. The mean, and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions while the hypotheses were tested with t-test and Analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistics at 0.50 level of significance. The findings revealed that inadequate finance, institutional and student factors were inhibiting factors to academic success among first year students in public universities in Nigeria, the main coping interventions adopted include; religion and prayer (3.24), choosing roommates wisely (3.17) and prompt and regular attendance at lectures. A significant difference was found between age and gender on coping strategies adopted by students. Based on the findings, it was recommended that the university management should provide loan schemes, adequate orientation programmes, among others.*

Keywords: inhibiting factors, first year students, Nigerian universities

INTRODUCTION

Universities are seen as the ivory tower and the highest citadel of learning where qualified candidates can attain knowledge and skills needed to drive innovations in communities and at the global stage. Universities in Nigeria are either private or public. Public universities in Nigeria are established by law to provide post- secondary education to qualified candidates. Some of the goals of university education according to the National Policy on Education (2014) are to contribute to national development through high manpower training, develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of individuals and society, develop their local and external environment and the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments.

It is the dream and aspiration of most secondary school leavers to proceed to the university to study any course of their choice. They are overjoyed with the excitement of leaving secondary school to the university without a proper understanding of the complexities required to achieve academic success in public universities. A study by Mulaudzi (2023) claimed that the transition to university marks a significant milestone in a students' life bringing forth a myriad of challenges that demand adaptation, resilience and personal growth. Navigating the transition to higher education is an exhilarating yet daunting journey for first year university students. A good grasp of the challenges and expected behavior of the students could lead to academic success. Academic success in this study, is the extent to which learning and acquisition of skills has occurred. It is the accomplishment of the learning process, gaining subject knowledge and developing employability skills. (Moira, Lynam and Stock, 2018). It is the accomplishment of academic tasks under well established conditions, achievement of goals, superior evaluation, and social recognition (Anghel,2023).

However, the pursuit of academic success among students in Nigerian universities is a complex endeavor shaped by an array of institutional, financial and personal challenges which could inhibit students' academic success. Mkumbo, Otieno and Rufyiriza, (2023) suggested that home sickness, poor time management skills, difficulty in understanding academic work, inadequate finance are some of the challenges faced by first year university students in adjusting to university life. In general, other research studies identified institutional, socio cultural and socio economic factors as barriers to academic success of first year students (Martinez, Martinez, and Cabezas, 2023), (Suleiman 2023), and (Husain, Syufiza and Shukor, 2022). Studies in Delta State have highlighted how funding patterns and financial management in secondary schools create foundational challenges that carry into higher education (Nkedishu & Onyekwe, 2024). This study focuses on inadequate finance, institutional and student factors as inhibitors to academic success in public universities in Nigeria.

Inadequate finance is a major inhibitor to students' academic success. The high cost of education in Nigeria, coupled with inadequate financial support for students, exacerbates the socioeconomic barriers to academic success. Majority of the families could barely afford three square meals, while youth unemployment rate, stood at 42.5% in 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). As a result, family income, availability of financial aid, and employment pressures, play a significant role in students' academic experiences. The transition from secondary to tertiary education often exposes students to heightened financial responsibilities including tuition fees, living expenses, academic materials, recreation and expanding varieties of options to spend their financial resources on (Obanawu and Wellington, 2024). The inability to meet these demands could result to stress and divert students' attention and energy away from academic pursuit, leading to low academic success. The high cost of education in Nigeria, coupled with inadequate financial support for students, exacerbates the socioeconomic barriers to academic success. Other sources of financial aid such as scholarships, loans and grants are not readily available. Mulaudzi, (2023) observed that the pursuit of financial aid could be stressful, challenging, highly competitive and granted to few successful candidates. In addition, some first year students from low-income backgrounds lack the ability to afford essential study materials, such as textbooks, laptops, internet services which are critical to academic success. The core of this challenge perhaps rests with the psychological domain of students who constantly worry about coping through the entire university programme while constantly struggling to meet up with academic demands.

Institutional factors

This includes limited resources to universities, large class sizes, and inadequate academic support, which could significantly impact first year students' ability to succeed academically in Nigerian public universities. Okonta and Osakwe (2024) claimed that without adequate funds for infrastructural and human development, socioeconomic development will be a mirage. Public universities, face challenges related to inadequate infrastructure, underfunding, and an overburdened faculty. According to data from the National Universities Commission (NUC), most public universities operate at above their intended capacity, resulting in overcrowded classrooms and limited access to facilities (NUC, 2020). For example, a report from Delta state university, (DELSU) indicates that the university has an average student-to-lecturer ratio of 90:1, which is far above the NUC-recommended 30:1 ratio for effective learning (Agbatogun,2019). Such disparities strain resources and reduce students' ability to engage meaningfully with course material, often resulting in decreased motivation and lower academic success. Another area of difficulty among first year students is the lecturers' teaching styles; such as lecture methods, seminars, tutorials, and workshops which are often unfamiliar to students transiting from secondary schools to universities which they find difficult to adjust (Clough, Gibbons, Gibsons, Sum and Yue, 2024). Furthermore, some lecturers could rush through the course outline without

meeting the objectives of the course leaving students with insufficient knowledge and understanding of the course (Ogunode, Audu, and Ahaotu, 2020). Omeni and Nkedishu (2021) found that quality of teaching staff, including their pedagogical skills, subject matter expertise, and commitment to student support, significantly impacts first-year students' academic performance in Nigerian universities, where inadequate faculty development and heavy workloads can impede effective teaching and mentoring. The lack of accessible counseling services at many Nigerian universities compound academic success of first year students, although some institutions have counseling units, they are often understaffed and under-resourced, limiting students' access to mental health support. Additionally, the stigma associated with seeking psychological assistance in Nigeria public universities discourages many students from utilizing available services, which in turn affects their academic success. (Ekpeyong, Udoh and Akpan, 2020). This gap in mental health services means that students often face psychological challenges alone, increasing their vulnerability to academic difficulties. Improper orientation of students could act as an inhibitor to academic success. Bappah, Usman and Magaji (2021) claimed that when students are not well guided at basic requirements such as learning how to answer examination questions poses a serious obstacle to academic success.

Students' factors

Freshmen at the universities struggle to cope with new demands, high expectations, increased freedom and peer pressure, pressure to perform well in academics and relationship problems with the opposite sex (Aloka, 2023). In line with this, students attitude towards academics show that they tend to relax at the beginning of the semester but only get serious when examination is at hand. (Bappah, et al, 2021). Piling up studies until examination time generates more stress, tension and poor grades. Another inhibitor to academic success according to Clough et al (2024) is students struggle to adjust to higher education environment, keeping up with pace of lectures, communicate ideas clearly and collaborating with peer group assignment. Another view of this is that some first year students have to work to meet up some financial obligations. Martinez et al, (2023) reasoned that a working student has to adapt to the university's schedules and meet work and study obligations; this could be stressful and weighs heavily on students. Many students have the tendency to mismanage their finances. Brougham et al (2011) cited by Obanawu and Wellington (2024) noted that some first year students at universities exhibit a higher propensity for compulsive purchasing behaviours characterized by impulsive spending on irrational purchase. The increasing accessibility of new banking system provides various options and ways to spend money and quickly obtain cash. This creates a new challenge for the student who is unfamiliar with financial discipline. Behavioral issues and malfeasance acts documented at the secondary level often persist into university, requiring targeted administrative interventions to support student adjustment and academic achievement (Nkedishu, 2021).

Students' previous examination performance at the secondary school level is another inhibitor to academic success. Most secondary school certificates do not show a true picture of students'

ability as a result of examination malpractice in most secondary schools in Nigeria (Bappah, et al 2021). It is argued that when work and leisure time is unbalanced, the result is poor academic performance. Igwe, Egbule and Agbor (2020) observed that students spend a lot of time on social media; browsing, pinging and chatting.

Despite these inhibitors students have found unique ways of coping to achieve academic success in public universities in Nigeria. Zheng and Mustapha (2022) maintained that participation and attendance at orientation programmes helps students to become acquainted with the university system and the behaviors expected of them. Sometimes students opt for guidance and counseling sessions to enable them seek help in areas of difficulties. (Onolemhenhen and Enolekan, 2020). In another study, Mkumbo et al (2023), Gomathi, Ahmed and Sreedharan (2013) observed that students use religion because it allows them to take charge of their emotional state, regulate them so they can experience lowered mood, anxiety and stress. As a way of coping, Graves, Hall, Dias-karch, Haischer and Apter (2021) indicated that students use venting, self distraction, emotional support, and instrumental support as coping strategies. In addition, First-year students cope with the academic rigor by reading for extra hours, having group discussions with friends, attending social activities on campus to be socially fit, making and maintaining interpersonal relationships with friends in departments and halls of residence, going to relaxation and recreation centers on campus, developing a sense of financial management, or engaging in menial jobs on campus. As a result of integration, students can then derive enjoyment from their experiences and come to view them as a normal part of university life (Fabeku and Fasanmi 2023). Similarly, regular and prompt attendance to class, listening carefully and taking down important points, making out adequate time to study are important steps to cope with academic success. (Osakwe and Okonta, 2025)

Research studies have shown that significant differences exist between age and coping strategies adopted by first year students. Aloka (2023) concluded that younger students aged between 17 - 18yrs struggled to adjust while older students reported high adjustment in the universities. This implied that age is a very significant factor which affects adjustment of first year students in the universities. Onolemhenhen and Enokela (2020) also agreed that academic stress was higher in younger students and declined with increasing age of students.

With regards to gender, Graves et al (2021), Peretomode and Ugbomeh (2013) established that gender was an important influence in determining problems encountered by students as more female students encountered more problems than their male counterparts. A related study on accommodation status and gender by Mtani and Nuhu (2019) disclosed that female students were more highly affected by inadequacy of on-campus accommodation as compared to their male counterparts. However, Mkumbo et al (2023) and Gomathi, et al (2013) did not find any

significant difference between gender and coping strategies of first year students and academic success in public universities.

Literature reviewed so far indicates that there are inhibitors and interventions adapted by students to achieve academic success. However there seems to be some gaps in the coping interventions with regards to age and gender. It is against this background that a study on exploring the inhibiting academic success among first year students in Nigerian universities became necessary.

Statement of the Problem

First year students in public universities struggle to cope with new psychological and educational demands, high expectations, increased freedom, pressure to perform well in academics and relationship problems with the opposite sex. These inhibitors prevent students from acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge to achieve the needed curricular requirements while in universities. An identification and proper understanding of these inhibitors would provide relevant data and information on the psychological challenges and stress of first year students and enable the university management to proffer solutions for effective learning to achieve academic success. The study therefore sought to explore factors inhibiting academic success of first year students in public universities in Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore factors inhibiting first year students' academic success in public universities in Nigeria.

Research Question

As a guide to the study, two research questions were raised.

- 1) What are the factors inhibiting first year students' academic success in public universities in Nigeria?
- 2) What are the coping interventions adopted?

Hypotheses

Arising from the research questions, two hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance.

- 1) There is no significant difference between age and coping interventions of first year students' academic success in public universities in Nigeria.

- 2) There is no significant difference between gender and coping interventions of first year students' academic success in public universities in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

The descriptive research was used for the study. The population comprised all first year students in the faculty of Education in four public universities in Delta and Edo states in Nigeria. A random sampling technique was used to select 50 students from each university which give a sample size of 200 for the study. The instrument for data collection was a self-designed questionnaire titled, "Factors Inhibiting First Year Students Academic Success in Public Universities" (FIFYAS). The questionnaire was divided into two sections, A and B. Section B was further divided into B1, B2, B3 and B4. A sought information on the demographic variables; age, gender of students. While section B sought responses on the main variables under study; Inadequate finance, Institutional, Student factors and on the coping interventions adopted. The instrument was validated at face value by experts in the department, while the validity was determined with Cronbach Alfa statistical tool and section B yielded a coefficient value of .80, .76, .78, and .73 respectively which was considered adequate for the study. The Mean and standard deviation were used to analyze the data collected and to provide answers for the research questions, while the hypotheses were determined with a t- test, and Analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistics at 0.05 level of significance. The responses were structured on a four point scale of Strongly Agreed, SA= 4points, Agreed, A = 3points, Disagreed, D = 2points and Strongly Disagreed, SD = 1 point. If the computed mean score was 2.50, it indicates that the respondents agreed and if less than 2.5 they disagreed to the reason. The process of data collection was done by a lecturer and two research assistance in each university. The filled out questionnaire were collected on the spot after filling. Only 190 questionnaires were retrieved representing 95% rate of returns.

Results Presentation

Research Question 1: What are the factors inhibiting first year students' academic success in Nigerian public universities?

Table 1: Mean scores and standard deviation on factors inhibiting first year students' academic success in Nigerian public universities

S/N	Financial Inhibitors	Mean	SD	Remarks
1	High cost of Living	3.78	0.62	Agree
2	Inadequate stipend from parents/guardians	3.14	0.91	Agree
3	High cost of Educational materials	3.15	0.99	Agree
4	Lack of scholarship	3.13	0.97	Agree
5	Inflation of goods and services around the university campus	3.19	0.93	Agree
6	Inadequate funding of universities by government	3.13	0.82	Agree
	Total Grand Mean	3.26	0.87	

	Institutional Inhibitors	Mean	SD	Remarks
7	Lecturers teaching styles and personality	3.13	0.75	Agree
8	Lecturer-student ratio	3.25	0.86	Agree
9	Inadequate orientation programme	3.36	0.82	Agree
10	High Academic workload	3.22	0.74	Agree
11	Inadequate teaching facilities	3.21	0.96	Agree
12	Incompatible Lecture Hours	3.20	0.96	Agree
	Total Grand Mean	3.23	0.85	

	Students' Inhibitors	Mean	SD	Remarks
13	Difficulty in understanding Academic work	3.17	0.83	Agree
14	Relationship issues with the opposite sex	3.11	2.73	Agree
15	Choice of Friends	3.18	0.97	Agree
16	Poor time Management Skills	3.12	0.92	Agree
17	Poor Financial Management Skills	3.10	0.98	Agree
18	Difficult Roommates	3.13	0.75	Agree
19	Poor study habits	3.18	0.97	Agree
20	Peer Pressure	3.16	0.66	Agree
	Total Grand Mean	3.14	0.85	Agree

Table 1 showed that all the items on factors inhibiting first year students' academic success in public universities in Nigeria had mean and total grand mean scores above the cutoff mark of

2.50 This indicates that the respondents agreed to the factors as capable of inhibiting first year students' academic success in Public universities in Nigeria.

Research Question 2: What are the coping interventions adopted by students in public universities in Nigeria.

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation on the coping interventions adopted. N= 190

S/N	Coping Interventions	Mean	SD	Remarks
21	Religion and Prayer	3.71	0.97	Agree
22	Avoid unnecessary peer groups	3.09	0.70	Agree
23	Learning to live within ones means	3.13	0.84	Agree
24	Chose roommates wisely	3.24	0.91	Agree
25	Prompt and regular attendance at Lectures	3.13	0.74	Agree
26	Venting	3.09	0.97	Agree
27	Seeking Guidance and Counseling	3.12	1.00	Agree
28	Attendance at Orientation programmes	3.12	1.00	Agree
29	Plan out study time and adhere to it	3.12	1.00	Agree
	Total Grand Mean	3.13	0.90	

The result in table 2, revealed that all the items on coping interventions adopted had a mean and total grand mean score of 3.13 which was above the cut off mark of 2.50. This showed that the respondents agreed to the coping interventions adopted in eradicating the factors inhibiting first year students' academic success in public universities in Nigeria.

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference between age and coping interventions of first year students' academic success in public universities in Nigeria.

Table 3: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on age and coping interventions of first year students' academic success in public universities in Nigeria

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig
Between	621.855	2	310.928	9.538	0.000
Within	6095.955	187	32.599		
Total	6717.811	189			

Table 3 shows the F – value of 9.538 and a p-value of 0.000. Testing the null hypothesis at an alpha level of 0.05, the p-value of 0.000 was less than the alpha level of 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there was a significant difference between age and the coping interventions adopted by first year students’ in public universities in Nigeria.

Hypothesis 2.

There is no significant difference between gender and coping interventions of first year students’ academic success in public universities in Nigeria.

Table 4: Independent t-test analysis of gender and coping interventions of first year students’ academic success in public universities in Nigeria.

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Df	t	Sig (2-tailed)
Male	80	32.65	2.43	188	5.556	0.000
Female	110	28.13	6.98			

Table 4 shows that the t- value of 5.556 and a p-value of 0.000. Testing the hypothesis at an alpha level of 0.05, the p- value of 0.000 was less than the alpha level of 0.05. Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected. This revealed that there was a significant difference between gender and coping interventions of first year students’ academic success in public universities in Nigeria.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The findings from the first research question revealed that the main inhibiting factors to academic success among first year students in public universities were financial inhibitors which included high cost of living, inflation of goods and services round the campus, and high cost of educational materials with mean scores of 3.78, 3.19 and 3.15 respectively. The main institutional inhibitors were, inadequate orientation programmes, lecturer student ratio, and high academic workload with mean scores of 3.36, 3.25 and 3.22. With regards to student inhibitors, the main inhibitors were, poor study habits, choice of friends, and difficulty in understanding academic work with means scores of 3.18, 3.18 and 3.17. This finding supports the works of Mkumbo et al, (2023) and Suleiman (2023) who classified inhibiting factors of first year student’s academic success as, institutional, socioeconomic and sociocultural. High cost of living and its associated implications signifies the inability of students to afford essential study materials, such as laptop, internet services which are critical to academic success. As a result of students not been able to meet their needs, worry, anxiety and stress takes a toll on their mental health and affects their academic output and self management skills. Lending credence to this, Fabeku and Fasanmi (2023) and Mulaudzi (2023) found that the rising cost of tuition fees,

accommodation and living expenses are a significant financial burden on the students and their families.

Similarly, the major institutional inhibitors include, inadequate orientation programme (3.36) lecturer – student ratio (3.25) and high academic workload. Orientation programmes provides vital information about the function, structure of universities and student support services to aid students adjustment and succeed academically. When orientation programmes are inadequately planned they fail to serve the needs of first year students. Another inhibitor is lecturer –student ratio. Large lecturer- student ratio induces distraction, inattentiveness and demotivation which are inimical to academic success.

Furthermore, the main students inhibitors were; choice of friends with mean scores of (3.18), poor study habits (3.18). Lack of effective time management results in poor study habits and academic success. Difficulty in understanding academic work could arise from academic deficiency from the secondary school schools and the choice of friends could help build or mar academic success.

These ideas are in consonance with Garba and Mohammed (2022) pointed out that prior knowledge is one of the most important factors influencing academic success. Igweh et al (2020) and Al-Zhoubi (2016) also argued that poor time management, students' social activities and too much leisure time have a significant positive relationship on academic performance. Garba and Mohammed (2022) pointed out that prior knowledge is one of the most important factors influencing academic success.

Findings from the second research question revealed the coping interventions adopted by students, they were; choosing roommates wisely (3.24), religion and prayer (3.17), prompt and regular attendance at lectures (3.13) and learning to live within ones means (3.13). Choosing the right roommates who can provide emotional support, friendship and collaboration are indispensable to achieve academic success, while religion and prayer helps to achieve a sense of peace, calmness and balance that enhance academic success. In the same vein, regular and prompt attendance at lectures affords students the opportunity of listening, asking questions taking down notes and getting clarification on areas of difficulty were interventions that students adopted to achieve academic success in public universities in Nigeria. Lending credence to this, Suleiman (2023) emphasized that friends can play a great role in the success or failure of a student's academic life, having good friends impact on one's character and academic achievement. Odulate et al (2024), insisted that religion allows individuals to take charge of their emotional state and is very helpful in regulating anxiety and stress. Osakwe and Okonta (2025) also found that lecture attendance is critical to academic success, attending lectures provides opportunities to ask questions, collaborate with peers and gain from lecturers explanations.

The third finding indicates that there is a significant difference between age and coping strategies among first year students in public universities in Nigeria. It was established that the age group of 16-18yrs reported more inhibitors than older students. This is in line with the saying that with age comes wisdom tolerance and patience. Whereas, the younger the students are impatient, more prone to emotional instability and intolerance. This finding resonated with Aloka (2023), that children in the age group of 17yrs struggled to adjust to the university environment while the older students reported high adjustment. It also supports the findings of Onolemhenhen and Enokela (2022) who pointed out that there is a significant difference in the academic stress experienced among undergraduate students at public universities in Nigeria.

The fourth finding from the study indicates that male are better than female students at coping with inhibiting factors among first year students' in public universities in Nigeria. This finding supports the view of Graves et al (2021) that female students utilized more emotion based coping strategies than males, accenting to this, Peretemode and Ugbomeh (2013) found that gender is an important determinant in problems encountered by first year university students. They surmised that female students encounter more difficulties than their male counterparts. However, Mkumbo et al (2023) did not find any significant difference between male and female students.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the inhibitors of first year students in public universities are classified as; financial, institutional and student factors. These inhibitors impact on first year students' academic success they could lead to non attendance at lectures, wastage of educational resources and dropout. The main coping interventions adopted include; choosing roommates wisely, religion and prayer, learning to live within ones means and prompt and regular attendance at lectures. The study established that there was a significant difference between gender and coping interventions adopted by students and there was also a significant difference between age and coping interventions by students.

Recommendations

- 1) The university management and Government should institute bursary allowance, student work scheme programmes, loan schemes, encourage communities, philanthropic and religious organizations to award scholarships and other financial aids to deserving students.
- 2) The government and university management should employ more lecturers to reduce lecturer student ratio.
- 3) University orientation programmes should be well publicized, to be an enriching experience for first year students where such issues as time and financial management, choice of friends, guidance and counseling and other student services are addressed.

- 4) The Government should increase funding for higher education to boost the construction of lecture halls, and other infrastructures.
- 5) The university management should invest in student's mental health programmes by providing adequate counseling centers in universities.

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