

A transformative view on relevance of orientation counselling service to first year undergraduate students at a public university in Lusaka, Zambia

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Abstract

The study sought to investigate how students considered the orientation received in terms of its relevance to their social and academic adjustment at the selected public university. A sample size of 130 was used which comprised 128 students and two Deans from Schools of Education and Humanities and Social Sciences. The study was guided by the Student Departure Theory which focusses on three stages students pass through (separation, transition and incorporation) from home to a new learning institution. The concurrent transformative design was used. By using the concurrent transformative design, quantitative methods were embedded within a qualitative design. The qualitative and quantitative data were collected at the same time during one data collection phase and priority was placed on the qualitative methods and data. The quantitative data was embedded to support the qualitative data. Questionnaire, interview and focused group discussion guides were used to collect the data. Microsoft Word Excel was used to analyse quantitative data while thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data. It was found that 57% of the students viewed the orientation received as relevant to their social adjustment while 43% had contrary views. Notably, 111 of the 128 students either missed or partially attended the orientation. From a transformative view point, it is therefore, recommended that all first year full time students must attend orientation programme.

Keywords: guidance services, orientation, relevance, student

Background of the study

This paper discusses how relevant the orientation provided to first year students was to their social and academic adjustments at selected public university in Lusaka district of Zambia. It was observed that despite students receiving orientation they still engaged themselves in truancy, riotous activities, hired others to write assignments for them, performed poorly in and summative assessments including missing orientation service. As a result, relevance of the orientation received was questioned. This therefore, necessitated the need to investigate how the first year students viewed orientation they received in terms of its relevance to their social and academic adjustments in the university.

In line with Owusu *et al.* (2014), this paper considers orientation as a process to help students or individuals to make a successful separation, transition and incorporation from their previous environment into the university experience. Additionally, orientation is an aspect of guidance and it is synonymous with guidance (Wats, 2013). As such, this paper uses the terms orientation and guidance interchangeably. In line with Perrine and Spain, (2008), the purpose of orientation service may include academic preparation, personal adjustment and increasing awareness to students and parents of the new university environment. Settling and adjustment are critical aspects of transition and incorporation in life (Banja *et al.*, 2018). Parents can also play a role in the orientation of their children (Mathatha & Ndhlovu, 2019). Similarly, Watton (2001) reports that the transition and adjustment between high school and university is influenced by high school performance, living arrangements and orientation services. As such, the focus of this paper is to explore how relevant orientation provided to first year students was to their social and academic adjustments at the selected public university in Lusaka district of Zambia.

The student departure theory by Vincent Tinto (1993) in which he outlined three stages (separation, transition and incorporation) students pass through was used to help explore how relevant the orientation received by students was to their social and academic adjustment at the selected public university. According to Tinto students first go through a separation stage in which they move away or separate from their home environment. This stage can be quite traumatic for students as they worry about a number of issues such as beginning life in unfamiliar environment, coping with university academic and social life. They also worry about the families that they left behind, a situation that leads to being home sick. Eventually, students are able to move to the second stage, which is known as transition. During transition stage, students are torn between their old environment and the new one. They may not feel they belong in their old environments but have yet to find their place in the new one. Third and final stage is incorporation. During stage three, students move into incorporation when they have achieved full membership into the social and academic communities of the institution.

Being mindful of the three phases (separation, transition and incorporation) in the Student Departure theory in which students have to move away from parents (separation) to new university environment, being torn between the old - family and new – university environments (transition) and finally being incorporated in the new social and academic communities can be stressful. In other words, passing through separation, transition and incorporation brings challenges of social and academic adjustments. As pointed out by Abdulla *et al.* (2009), and Malinda and Mandyata (2021) students get anxious as they move through separation, transition to new university social and academic life environments. Students may be confronted with new personal and interpersonal challenges that include the need to establish new relationships as well as develop study skills.

During transition, they get caught up in two worlds – the family values and university values. They find that at the university, competition in social and academic life is acute, classes are larger, lecturers use different styles of teaching from what they knew, the volume of written work is big, frequency of written work and standard expected are very high. In order to help new students, meet new challenges, Ngwenya, (2004) suggests they must change their study habits and rearrange their priorities. There is therefore need for orientation to bring the necessary change in the students' social and academic life while in the university.

In order to help students adjust to these social and academic demands, at the selected public university, first year student go through orientation at the beginning of the academic year. In support of providing orientation to first year students, Ndhlovu, (2015) advises that guidance services such as orientation, placement and counselling are needed to help new students make best possible adjustments to situations in the learning institution. However, it was observed at the selected public university that even after the provision of orientation services, students still had challenges with social and academic adjustment. The concern prompted the authors to question the relevance of the received orientation to their social and academic adjustments. Tuchili and Ndhlovu (2016) also reported that the problem of social and academic adjustment among undergraduate students led to poor academic performance at the selected university. The problem of relevance of orientation received became a real cause of concern as adjustment to the university environment is also regarded by other scholars (Petersen *et al.*, 2009) as an important factor in predicting university out comes. Accordingly, the study was guided by the research question; how did students consider the orientation received in terms of its relevance to their social and academic adjustment in the selected public university?

Literature review

The section presents history of orientation service and its relevance to students' social and academic adjustment to college and university life.

History of Orientation Services

History of orientation for first year students in learning institutions dates back to 1870 (Finnegan & Alleman, 2013) when the Young Men's Christian Associations (YMCA) at the University of Virginia in the United States of America recognized needs of incoming students and developed for them entry orientation programmes. Its founder, Clarence Cook Little, came up with the initiative of orientation also referred to as freshman orientation programme. Homesickness, loneliness, lack of understanding of what was expected in a higher learning institution and the complicatedness of its faculties contributed to the introduction of the freshman orientation programme. Beginning in 1878, YMCA members provided incoming freshmen with logistical and academic information, housing and employment opportunities, introductions to faculty and upperclassmen, and eventually student leadership programs as part of their orientation repertoire (Finnegan & Alleman, 2013).

Finnegan and Alleman (2013) attested that in the mid-1920s college administrators adopted fresh man orientation programmes as interventions to ameliorate difficulties faced by first year students as they transition into collegiate life.

As a result, of interventions, in September of 1923, the University of Maine hosted a week long pre-term event for new students and by the early 1930s, freshman orientation week was a common feature of many collegiate across the USA and Canada (Finnegan & Alleman, 2013). Gardner and Koch (2014) also report that due to students' activism and a riot at the University of

South Carolina in 1970, a decision was made to introduce First –Year Experience (FYE) orientation course by the University.

Keup *et al.* (2017) report that since orientation of first year students had significant positive impact, Boards of Freshman Advisors were introduced at John Hopkins and Harvard Universities. Keup *et al.* (2017) also report that orientation courses for college freshman were introduced at Brown and Boston Universities to help freshman/new students adjust to college and university life.

Greenfield *et al.* (2013) report that for more than 130 years, First-Year Seminars (FYS) had provided immense benefits to the first year students who entered the halls of the academy. For instance, due to these seminars, students were able to interact with their peers, lecturers and performed better than their peers who did not participate in the orientation seminars. Similar results were also found in Ghana (Owusu *et al.*, 2014).

Relevance of orientation to students

Relevance of a service is determined by a consideration of its necessity, usefulness, impact and benefits acquired by the consumers (Gardner & Koch, 2014). Therefore, the relevance of the orientation that is provided to first year students in a university is expected to meet the needs of the students and be of benefit to them. In relation to this study, we are yet to know if the first year students consider the orientation received as relevant, useful, beneficial or necessary to their social and academic adjustments in the university.

Evensen (2017) also argue that for the first year university orientation programme to be considered relevant it must benefit the first year students. Similarly, Larmar and Ingamells (2010) allude that relevance of orientation programme include easing into college life; increasing comfort with interaction among peers and unit/school; raising individual retention rates; and better understanding of one's self as well as the perspectives of others. So far however, it is not known how relevant the orientation received in the university is viewed by the recipients.

In line with Gardner and Koch (2014) for the orientation service or programme to be relevant to its consumers, it should build retention, foster academic skills, provide opportunities for peer-interaction, encourage student maturation and development, and among other things, provide a cultural awareness and broadening world view. This argument situates itself well with the it's the three phases (separation, transition and incorporation) of the Student Departure theory. As new students separate themselves from home and transition into university life, they can easily drop out if not well oriented to the university life. Orientation should therefore, be relevant or beneficial to the first year students by helping them to transition and incorporate in the university life of which its evidence shall be social and academic adjustments. However, this assentation remains an assumption until investigations are done to ascertain how students viewed it.

Gardner and Koch (2014) also reports that participation in orientation increases probability of success in students' university life. In addition, it reduces anxiety about adjustment in a new environment, provides opportunity for socialisation and important initial information about what is expected in a university. It was however, not clear if the situation at the selected public university was similar to what this literature alludes to.

As new students report to the university for the first time both the students and the university have expectations similar or different. As such, and in line with Singer (2003) first year orientation must convey realist expectations for university life. However, until an inquiry of this nature is done, it remains unclear if students as consumers of the orientation consider it meeting their expectations.

Evensen (2014) conducted a study on the benefits and levels of satisfaction of first year university student orientation in the United States of America. Some of the benefits of university

orientation were building retention in students, fostering academic skills, providing opportunities for peer-interaction, encouraging student maturation and development, providing cultural awareness and broadening their world view. These benefits were consistent to those of Miller *et al.* (2002) who found that due to orientation programme students had better developed relationships; trust in others and in self; better adjustment and transition into college life.

In relation to this study, it was expected that by going through the orientation programme, students at the selected university should consider it beneficial or relevant to their social and academic adjustments in the university. However, until an investigation is done, this remains an assumption. It was therefore, necessary to conduct a study and ascertain how students viewed the orientation they received in terms of its relevance to their social and academic adjustment to university life.

Withers and Randolph (2014) reported on the UK 101: Academic Orientation Course designed to help first-year students in their transition to university life. The course introduced strategies and resources that built a strong foundation for academic success while promoting opportunities for intellectual and personal growth. The student learning outcomes targeted specific issues of student transition, focusing on the purpose and challenges of a college education, promoting student engagement, and increasing knowledge of campus resources. The specific impact of academic orientation courses like UK 101 on retention of first-year students is significant, as documented in the literature (Sidle & McReynolds, 2009; Davig & Spain, 2004). An overview of the UK 101 course by Padgett and Keup, (2011), indicates that the first-year seminar is one of the most important instructional vehicles for achieving the learning and developmental objectives of undergraduate education in the United State.

Similarly, Withers and Randolph (2014) also reported that students enrolled in UK 101 achieved a higher retention rate than those who did not enrol. Literature emphasises that transition to university and the first year experience is important initial experiences on campus and impacts greatly on students' persistence in higher education (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000; 1993; Tinto, 1988). A review of literature by the University of Northumbria (Round, 2004) shows that of the 82 recommendations, 10 related specifically to orientation and transition issues.

In relation to students' expectations, La Trobe University surveyed 1000 first year students annually for three years (1996 – 98) (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). The results were consistent across the three years and indicated that students expected the following from orientation: explanations of expectations; explanations of the different teaching and learning methods used; clear course aims and objectives and an understanding of where units and courses will lead; ongoing academic support throughout first year and support of lecturers, tutors and other students.

Owusu *et al.* (2014) conducted a study in Ghana that focused on the impact of orientation on the academic performance of undergraduate students in the university of Cape Coast. The research used mixed methods. The research findings were that orientation had a positive impact on students' academic performance. It provided new students good academic information regarding academic programs, policies and regulations that enhance student learning.

A study conducted by Foote (2010) in South Carolina to understand the impact of First-Year Seminar Participation.' Findings show that many orientation programmes and first-year seminars shared the common goal of helping students in the early college transition (Hunter, Skipper, & Linder, 2005). Through these programmes and classes, students often had an opportunity to learn about resources, get involved in campus traditions, and begin to understand academic requirements and expectations. It should be noted however that the approach for sharing

this type of information varied from institution to institution. Hence, the need to find out what was obtaining at selected public university.

Methodology

A pragmatism paradigm was used with the belief that a combination of constructivism and positivism methods better complement each other when used. A concurrent transformative design was used. Concurrent transformative design was considered appropriate because it enables use of a theory to guide the study, collection of qualitative and quantitative data. Therefore, a mixed method study using a concurrent transformative design was conducted to explore how relevant the orientation provided to the first year undergraduate students at the selected public university was to their social and academic adjustment.

In line with the views of Owusu *et al.* (2014), Bryman (2008) and Creswell (2007), by using this design, quantitative methods were embedded within a qualitative design. The two types of data were collected at the same time during one data collection phase and priority was placed on the qualitative methods and data. The quantitative data was embedded to support the qualitative data. In terms of mixing, qualitative and quantitative data was mixed in the presentation of findings and discussion of findings. As regard, to theorising, it is a characteristic in concurrent transformative design that looks at whether a theory guided the research design and whether the study advocates for change in doing things. The study was guided by the Student Departure theory and the study hopes to bring change in the way orientation is done at the selected university.

The study population was (640 School of Education and 640 School of Humanities and Social Sciences) full time first year undergraduate students and their deans at a selected public university. First year students were selected for the study because it was assumed that they had undergone university orientation and had adequate university experience. As such, they could ably provide data to the study.

As regards choice of the two schools, they were chosen because they were the biggest schools in terms of enrolment in the university. The deans of schools were also part of the study population for the purpose of providing expert knowledge and representing the university management in relation to the type of orientation services provided to students.

The sample size was one hundred thirty (130) participants. This comprised 64 students from school of education and 64 from school of Humanities and Social Sciences and two deans each from the two schools. Since this was a mixed methods study with emphasis on qualitative methods through focus group discussions, the sample size was adequate. The choice of the sample size was consistent with the work of Guest *et al.* (2016) who reviewed 101 studies that used focus group discussions and found that sample size of participants per study ranged from six to two hundred forty (6-240). Similarly, Mason (2010) analyzed qualitative doctoral abstracts in Island and Britain and found that sample sizes ranged from one to ninety-five. Additionally, since this study follows mixed research methods, from a quantitative point of view the sample size is adequate as it is based on the 10% of the population formula. According to Alreck and Settle (2004) a good maximum sample size is usually around 10% percent of the population as long as it does not exceed 1000.

Simple random and expert purposive sampling procedure were used to select students. Simple random sampling procedure was chosen because it helps to provide equal chance for everyone in the population to be included in the sample. Expert purposive sampling procedure was used to select the Deans of schools. Focus group discussions, interviews and distribution of questionnaires were done to collect the data from the participants. Thus, in order to have in depth

understanding of how students viewed the orientation received, face to face focus group discussions were conducted. There were eight focus groups, each with eight students per school. In each group students were encouraged to participate actively. The use of focus group discussion helped the researcher to understand how the students viewed orientation. The number eight focus groups used was in line with Kirchbereg *et al.* (2009) who found that saturation was reached after conducting eight focus groups. Guest *et al.* (2016) also found that 90 % of themes were discovered within three to six focus groups as such the use of eight groups is was appropriate. In terms of size of the focus group discussion, Guest *et al.* (2016) suggests that the number of participants per focus group can range from two to twenty-one. In relation to this study eight participants per focus group is appropriate as it is within the available literature.

In order to obtain quantitative data, questionnaires were distributed to students. In addition, questionnaire save time and asks same questions to all participants. This was considered appropriate for purposes of obtaining quantitative data for descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, pie charts and tables. Interviews were conducted with the Deans of schools in order to collect qualitative data from them. Interviews provided opportunity for follow up questions.

Trustworthiness focused on credibility, dependability and conformability of the data. As such the researchers compared data from the interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaires in order to check for the truth of the data collected. In addition, trustworthiness was achieved through participants' data validation during data collection.

The qualitative data was analysed using the thematic analysis while quantitative data was analysed using Microsoft Excel. Microsoft Excel helped to come up with descriptive statistics which were later presented in form of frequency tables and graphs.

The researcher obtained ethical clearance from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Committee at the University of Zambia before going in the field to collect data. Written consent was obtained from the participants and their names were kept anonymous. Participants were told about their right to withdraw if they did not feel comfortable with the procedures of the study. Participants were also informed of their right to avoid answering questions that they would not be comfortable with. They were assured that the data collected through their participation was going to be securely stored and not accessed by anybody else apart from the researcher and her supervisor only. In addition, the purpose of the study was explained to them. While in the field, permission was obtained from the gate keepers in this case the Deans of the respective schools.

Results

In order to address the research question, findings cover three aspects; areas of orientation received by the students, relevance of the orientation received and attendance by the students to the orientation programme.

Areas of Orientation received by the students

Results indicate that students received orientation in the following areas: geography of the university, courses to be registered, social life at the university, academic issues, library and general support services offered by the respective schools.

To this effect, SH2-FGD1 said, “we were oriented in courses to be registered.” A student from the School of Education SE1-FGD1 also said, ‘we received orientation on the courses to register and how to search for academic information on the internet.

As regards social life at the university, a student from the School of Humanities and Social Sciences SH3-FGD3 said, we received orientation on how to live and interact with fellow students at the university. A student from School of Education also said, ‘we were oriented in interpersonal relationships in a multi-culture university. We were also told where to go for worship and to be security conscious in the university.

On health issues, a student from School of Education SE6-FGD4 said, “during orientation, I learnt and understood the preventive measures of COVID19. We were also shown where the university clinic was located.

The Deans also indicated that orientation covered what to expect from interaction with different people, university environment and how to keep it green, COVID19 signs and its preventive measures, introduction of heads of departments, linkage between programmes of study and their career opportunities, course combinations and course registration process. DSE said, that “the School considers orientation of first year students useful and necessary to their social and academic adjustment in the university. As such, the schools draw an orientation programme in which various activities, and areas are covered to help students adjust to university life.” Another Dean DSH added career opportunities of the offered academic programmes.

Relevance of the orientation to students

Results show some mix feelings in the students. Thus, 57% of the students indicated that orientation received was relevant while 43% indicated that it was not relevant. Of the students who indicated that orientation received was relevant to their social and academic adjustment in the university, SE10-FGD8 said, ‘orientation received was relevant. It helped me to adjust to university life. A student from School of Humanities and Social Sciences also said orientation received was relevant. SH7-FGD8 added that, having known about the location about the health facility, how to access academic information from the internet, knowing my head of department brought relief in me. I therefore, consider the orientation received useful and relevant to my social and academic adjustment.

The students who felt orientation received was not relevant did so on the grounds that they missed orientation on tutorials, grading system, study skills and how to manage pressure in the university. In addition, there were so many other competing needs during the same period and that attendance to orientation programmes was not compulsory. As such one student from School of Humanities and Social Science; SH1-FGD4 said,

orientation received was not relevant. There was no mention about tutorials and their importance to the continuous assessment (CA) meanwhile tutorials greatly count towards the CA. A student from the School of Education said, orientation received was not helpful. I was not oriented on how to manage academic pressure, how to write academic assignments, and how to calculate the Grading Point Average (GPA) meanwhile these are the core of academic life in the university.

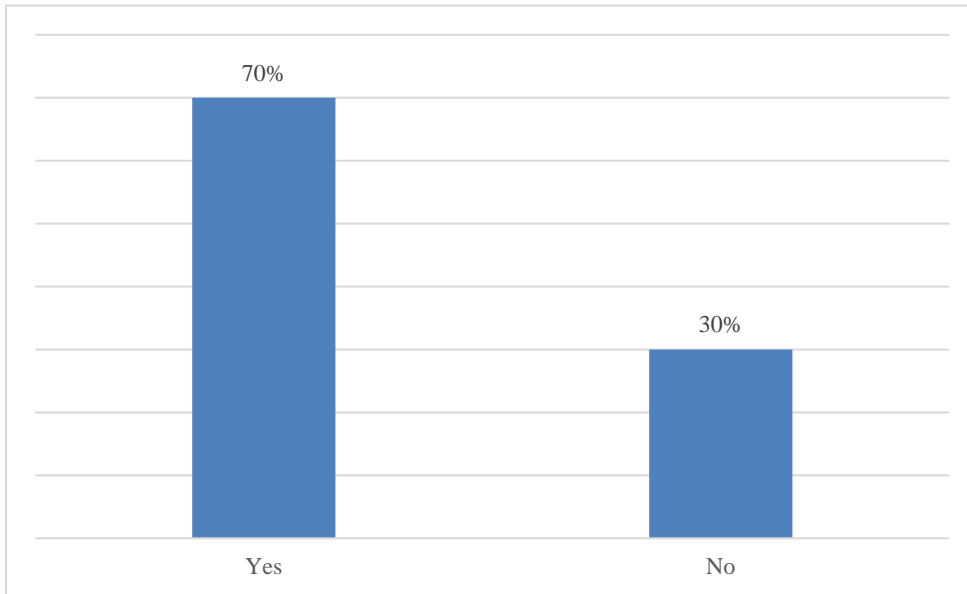
Another student from School of Education SE7-FGD6 also said,

orientation received was not real relevant to me because I had to learn a lot of things on mine own. For instance, how to manage academic pressure, how to write assignments and how the grading system was calculated. If I had known these things early, I could have worked harder than I did.

Attendance to orientation programme by the students

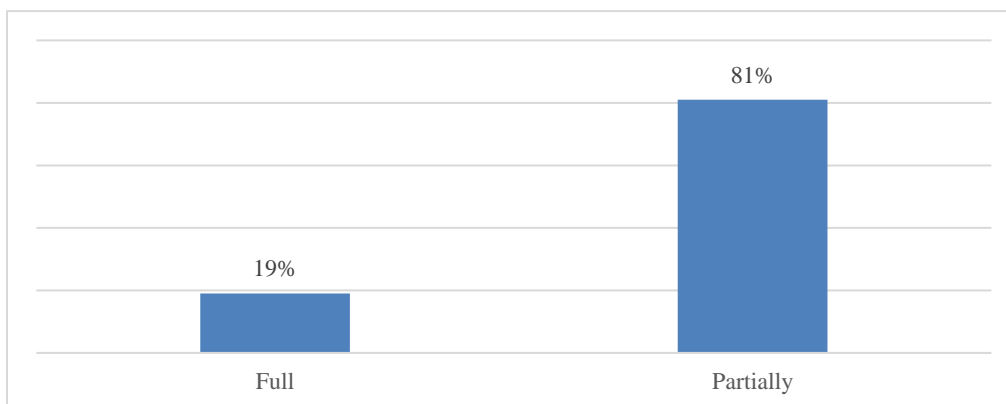
Results show that 70% (90) of the 128 students attended the orientation programmes. As shown in figure 1, other students did not attend the orientation programme.

Figure 1: Attendance of orientation programme by students



As regards, to full and partial attendance to orientation, results were that only 19% (17) of the 90 students who indicated to have attended the orientation programme were there to the end of the programme. Figure 2 shows that the majority (81%:73) of the students partially attended the orientation programme.

Figure 2: Full and partial students' attendance to orientation

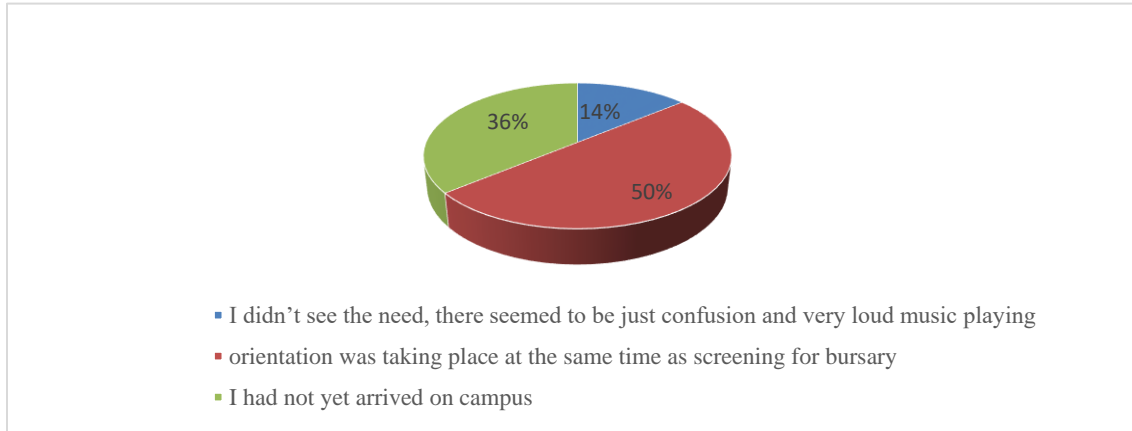


Reasons by students for not attending orientation programme

Most of them stated that they were attending to bursary/loan scheme screening at the time orientation was going on and some of them indicated not to have arrived yet on campus when

orientation was taking place. While others stated not to have seen the need because there seemed to have been confusion going on and very loud music playing. This is illustrated in figure 3

Figure 3: Reasons by students for not attending orientation



The Deans also alluded to the fact that there was poor attendance to orientation programme by students. The Dean School of Humanities and Social Sciences (DSH) said,

“Over the years’ attendance of students during orientation has declined due to several reasons. From our side, maybe we put a lot of activities in the orientation period such as registration for loan scheme and attending to the other orientation activities”

Similarly, Dean School of Education (DSE) confirmed the low attendance of orientation by the students in the following statement:

“Attendance of the students during orientation is very low. Most of the students shun orientation programmes. You know the excitement that comes with starting school in a university. Most of them just attend the big orientation where the vice chancellor presides”

In order for the students to have a smooth transition from secondary school to university it is very necessary for them to undergo orientation.

Discussion

Areas covered during orientation

Findings from students and their Deans indicate that orientation provided to first year students covered many areas such as locations of supportive services such as library, clinic and hot spot points for Wi-Fi. It also covered learning programmes and their relevant courses, social and academic life of a student in the university. These areas were common to orientation programmes for many other learning institutions in the world. For instance, Owusu *et al.* (2014) observed that at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana, orientation programmes given to new students covered academic information such as policies and regulations that affect student learning in the learning institutions. As noted by Hunter *et al.* (2005) and Foote (2010) there were many areas of orientation but with a common goal of helping students in the college transition period. Gardener *et al.* (2013) also noted that although orientation programmes varied institutionally, they were almost universal in higher education institutions. However, what remains to be known is how

relevant these areas were to social and academic adjustment of students in the selected public university.

Relevance of the orientation to social and academic adjustment of students

The majority (57%) of the students indicated that orientation received was relevant to their social and academic adjustment in the university. Reasons advanced included receiving guidance on how to choose the people to associate with, hints on how to secure their personal belongings. Relevance was further attributed to receiving guidance on the course registration, course combinations, location of the supportive facilities such as clinic, hot spots for Wi-Fi, and library. This is a positive view of orientation. Similarly, Gardner and Koch (2014) posited that orientation reduced anxiety about university life. Tuchili and Ndhlovu (2016) observed that students who received guidance and counselling performed better than their counterpart in interpersonal, study, vocational and problem solving skills. Tuchili and Ndhlovu (2017) also argue that orientation helps new students to know where to seek support services when they are in need. Other scholars with similar findings include Evensen (2017) and McRenolds (2009) who report that orientation was considered relevant by students as it impacted positively on students' adjustments in the university. From the administration point of view, an orientation seminar course referred to as UK 101 was considered the most important instructional vehicle for easing students' adjustment to college and university life in the UK (Padgett & Keup, 2011).

Orientation received also covered a number of extra- curricular activities that kept first year students busy in the university and prevented them from indulging themselves in bad vices. Orientation also included linking students to their religious groups for their spiritual adjustments. In relation to the Student's Departure theory, clearly effort was made by the university to help students pass through separation, transition and reach incorporation in the university life. However, this was the view of the 57% of the students. There was need to understand why the 43% of the students felt the orientation received was not relevant to their social and academic adjustments to university life. Results show that their dissatisfaction of the orientation was either they did not attend at or partially attended it. It was found that of the 128 students who participated in the study, on 70% attended orientation. Of the 70% only 19% attended in full while the majority 81% of those who attended only partially attended the orientation.

Orientation Attendance by the Students

As pointed out in the preceding section, orientation attendance by students was very low. Thus, of the sampled 128 first year students 111 (87%) either did not or partially attended the orientation. As much as their reasons for missing the orientation could be appreciated, the fact is, they did not get what the schools intended to prepare them for. Such a high rate of absenteeism to orientation can be a predictor of high failure rate, distorted information about grievance procedures, social and academic adjustments to university life. However, from a transformative view, students are a vulnerable group (Brule & Eckstein, 2017). As a result, they must be heard. Their reasons for not attending orientation could help future provision of orientation. The students gave several reasons such as having not yet reported on campus when orientation took place, having seen no the need for attending orientation, attending to other competing needs such as registration for bursary or loan scheme that took place during the orientation period and that attendance to orientation programme was not compulsory.

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the findings, it is concluded that orientation provided was consistent with what other universities across the world offer. However, students had mixed feelings on the relevance of the orientation received as 57% considered it relevant while 43% had contrary views. Since orientation is meant to help students adjust to university life, their reasons for not attending orientation need to be considered. Based on the findings, it is recommended that orientation of first year students must continue as it is considered relevant by the students and administration; schools should make attendance to orientation compulsory by keeping attendance register, and an orientation course similar to the UK 101 needs to be introduced so that even students who miss the initial orientation can catch up through the course.

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