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Struggles and Coping Mechanisms of At-risk University Freshmen in Singapore: Revisiting Schlossberg's Transition Theory

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ABSTRACT

While adapting to a completely new learning environment, first-year university students who are less academically inclined and lacking emotional regulation can easily be overwhelmed by independent learning, complex subject matter, and a heavy workload. Such challenges of transitioning into university can compound and lead to student disengagement. The current study aims to understand how at-risk students transitioned into a university in Singapore in the months after their transition. Interview data regarding perceptions, support systems, and study strategies of 13 at-risk students were collected and analysed. Schlossberg's Transition Theory was used as a theoretical foundation to discuss the findings of this paper within the wider literature and propose recommendations for educators. Three themes emerged: (1) the role of peers, (2) struggles of university learning, and (3) coping strategies. Overall, university freshmen were aware of their need to adapt to the demands of university learning, but remained overwhelmed with academic demands, struggled with self-directed learning and time management, and hence, reported a drop in self-efficacy and motivation. This was combatted to an extent by employing solution- and emotion-focused coping strategies. Peers were also highlighted as important sources of support in exchanging knowledge and reducing emotional distress. Implications for educators are highlighted in supporting at-risk students.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning the first year in university is often a major transition in life that requires individuals to rapidly adjust to a completely new environment. Near to 74,000 students enrolled in autonomous universities in Singapore in 2019, a figure that has been increasing every year since 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2020). An increased enrollment of students comes with a greater diversity of student profile in terms of ability, demographic factor, and prior education (Van Rooij et al., 2018). More students are expected to experience a transitional period where they adapt to a new learning environment, school structure, personal change, and academic demands, thus, no two transition experiences will be the same.

Students are at their most vulnerable in the first year in terms of their likelihood of experiencing academic failure, along with being the most at risk with respect to a range of potential social, personal-emotional, health, and financial problems (McInnis, 2001). Previous research has identified a range of first-year students' transition difficulties such as time management, study workload, subject content difficulty, pressure of others' expectations, unpreparedness for university teaching style, and greater responsibility for learning (Brooker et al., 2017; De Clercq et al., 2018; Kahu & Picton, 2020; McGhie, 2017; Webster & Yang, 2012). While some freshmen can adjust to these transitional challenges, others feel overwhelmed and struggle (De Clercq et al., 2018), affecting their learning and subsequent academic performance in university. There is a need for greater inclusion of students' perspectives in literature on transition challenges (Combrink & Oosthuizen, 2020; Kitching & Hulme, 2013). Thus, this study seeks to explore the transition experience of academically at-risk freshmen in a Singapore university, with the central question being: "How do academically at-risk students experience transition in their first year of university?"

Transition theory

One of the landmark theories on "transition"—Schlossberg's 4S Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1984)—remains relevant today. Adapting to transition refers to a process whereby an individual moves to integrate the transition into his or her life. By doing so, the individual integrates several coping resources into their lives, which Transition Theory categorises as the four main elements of situation, self, support, and strategies (4S). "Situation" refers to the circumstances of the transition, with "self" referring to the demographic characteristics and personalities of the individual who is experiencing the transition. External resource options are characterised as "support" for the individual when experiencing transition, such as family and friends. Finally, "strategies" are the internal coping responses or mechanisms that are available to the individual. (Anderson et al., 2012; Karmelita, 2018; Patton et al., 2016).

Transition of at-risk students

According to Abrams and Jernigan (1984), academically "at-risk" students are commonly understood to represent students at risk of performing poorly in school. At the university level, a major predictor of poor performance is students having a history of subpar performance at either the pre-university education level (Polansky et al., 1993) or during initial semesters (Abele et al., 2013; Young et al., 2015). Past research has also identified numerous other factors across the domains of personality traits, motivation, self-regulatory learning strategies, approaches to learning, and psychosocial contextual influences as being predictive of academic performance among university-level students (Richardson et al., 2012).

Building upon the history of educational research on student approaches to learning (e.g., Biggs, 1987; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1982), recent studies have identified additional approaches and added evidence for the link between approaches to learning and performance. In particular, Parpala et al. (2010) found students to fall under four clusters: i) organised students, ii) students applying a deep approach, iii) students applying an

unreflective/surface approach, and iv) unorganised students applying a deep approach. The term "unreflective" is suggested to replace "surface" learning approach, as it better and more neutrally describes this approach (Lindblom-Ylänne et al., 2019). Among these approaches, organised students and those applying a deep approach performed best (Herrmann et al., 2017; Trigwell et al., 2013). A longitudinal study by Haarala-Muhonen et al. (2017) found that unorganised students applying a deep approach and students applying unreflective approach experienced a delay in graduation, suggesting a less successful transition to university. While at-risk students were commonly identified solely by their history of poor academic performance, a range of other factors may also signal a risk of future subpar performance.

Improving students' performance, well-being, and study motivation requires an understanding of underlying issues that may interfere with the adjustment process to university. Compared to students' academic performance, their perceptions of university learning may illuminate signs of transition difficulties. However, the understanding of how at-risk students transition through their first year of study, especially their learning experience, remains incomplete.

The focus of previous research on first-year experiences has been placed largely on students transitioning from high school (secondary education) to university (tertiary education) (e.g., De Clercq et al., 2018; Ding & Curtis, 2020; Hassel & Ridout, 2018). Some university students may come from vocational or technical educational institutes, and others may be entering university with relevant working experience (Figuera & Torrado, 2015). These students may have different experiences and expectations of learning, with certain capacities in dealing with academic skills and managing life demands such as finances, work, and family. To consider the complex dynamics of transition, research must keep up with the changing demographic of students.

This study aims to elicit greater depth and gain a more nuanced understanding of at-risk students' transition experience into a higher education learning environment. To conceptualise how transition occurs for at-risk freshmen, this paper builds on Schlossberg's Transition Theory. Through narratives of their perceptions, support systems and strategies, significant challenges that this group of students face during their first year of university can be brought to light.

METHODS

The current study takes place in a Singapore university. Interview data gathered from first-year students who were academically at-risk were examined to understand how they perceived transition, their experience of university that differed from their previous tertiary education, and their coping mechanisms.

Recruitment

The current study draws on qualitative data as a component of a larger study that examined the effect of a gamified micro-learning platform, AdventureLEARN—a non-compulsory gamified intervention designed to introduce topics to help students improve their learning behaviour (Lim et al., 2021). First-year students were asked to complete a Freshmen Survey during their orientation, which included tools to identify academically at-risk students. Students were identified as academically at-risk if they fulfilled at least one of the following three criteria: (1) students with a pre-university performance falling within the lowest quartile, (2) students who scored 60 (out of 90) or above on the School Burnout Inventory (SBI; Salmela-Aro et al., 2009), and (3) students applying an unreflective approach, or students applying a deep but unorganised approach on the Approaches to Learning and Studying Inventory (ALSI; Parpala et al., 2010; Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012). Findings from this larger study are discussed in the paper by Lim et al. (2021).

At the end of their first year, students who had engaged in at least two micro-learning modules from the AdventureLEARN platform and met the criteria of being academically at-risk were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews ($N = 23$) to learn about their experience transitioning into university. For ethical reasons and to avoid causing unintended anxiety, students were not informed that they belonged to the "at-risk" group. Consent to participate was obtained in writing via email for all interviews.

Data collection and analysis

Interviews were conducted online in mid-2020 by a non-teaching researcher, with each interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. Participants were interviewed by the same researcher. Interviews were transcribed and then coded and analysed by three members of the research team using the NVivo software (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018). Thematic analysis was conducted using the procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

First, the research team independently read and reviewed all interview transcripts to become immersed in the data. "Meaning units" (sentences/paragraphs) corresponding to different aspects of the students' responses were categorised and selected using both inductive (emerged from student's responses) and deductive approaches (derived from the prevailing literature and interview guiding questions). During this process, each research team member worked independently, highlighting key words or phrases that captured students' perspectives and perceptions of transition. A list of potential codes and categories was then generated by each team member. To ensure agreement and to determine consistency across coders, the team met to discuss the progress and alignment of the coding. Every meaning unit was condensed and labelled with codes based on the exact words used by the participants (in-vivo coding). After which, the research team collaboratively searched for potential themes and subthemes, noting overlap and divergences. Once completed, themes and categories were evaluated based on how the coded data fit together in a meaningful way by mapping their relationships.

RESULTS

Thirteen students, five male and eight female (M_{age} = 25.5), agreed to participate in the interviews. All students were freshmen enrolled in 2019 and had completed over two trimesters at the time of the interviews. At the start of the academic year, there were eight students who scored "considerable to high risk of burnout" in the School Burnout Inventory (SBI) based on the last year of education; this figure reduced to five at the end of the freshmen year. Participant characteristics and their ALSI score are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant demographics and ALSI results from freshmen at start and year end

	Frequency	
Age Range (years)		
20 to 24	7	
25 to 29	3	
30 to 34	3	
Gender		
Male	5	
Female	8	
Previous Education		
Polytechnic	12	
Junior College	1	
Approaches to Learning and Studying (ALSI Inventory)	**Start of Freshmen Year**	**End of Year[1]**
Deep Learning Approach		
Low deep learning	2	1
Some deep learning	3	6
Adequate deep learning	4	4
High deep learning	4	1
Organised Studying Approach		
Low organised learning	3	1
Some organised learning	5	7
Adequate organised learning	3	3
High organised learning	2	1
Unreflective Learning Approach		
High unreflective learning	2	3
Considerable unreflective learning	6	9
Some unreflective learning	4	0
Low unreflective learning	1	0

[1]One student did not complete the End of Year survey

Thematic findings

Three major themes and 10 sub-themes were identified in relation to the students' experience in transitioning into university.

Theme 1: Role of peers

The role of peers in both formal and informal learning situations emerged as a strong and consistent theme in the interviews. Students gave varied and meaningful insights into how peers played important roles in different aspects of the transition into university, from providing informational and emotional support to becoming companions during online learning.

Informational Support. Most students reported having a positive experience in exchanging knowledge and information with their social network. They noted that by revising and having discussions with their peers, they gained a deeper understanding of the module content than if they were to study by themselves. Students also emphasised the benefits of group assignments.

> *I am actively sharing the information that I received from my classmates, and likewise, they are also sharing back. It's an active exchange of knowledge which I think is helping us to get to our solutions earlier and quicker.* (P9)

> *When we meet for group projects, we'll discuss any clarification, and we always correct each other. I think I learn better too that way.* (P13)

Emotional Support. Students highlighted that friendships with peers contributed positively to their learning motivation and provided a sense of belonging and companionship. As noted in the interviews, peers became a source of emotional support for students when facing stress during their learning process arising from issues with transitioning into university. When students were involved as part of a social network, they showed signs of willingness and persistence to continue with their learning despite facing academic difficulties.

> *I think having a friend group is a good support system because we are all going through it together. When we were all rushing together or spending overnights[sic] in school to study before exams, even if it was a bad memory, it was still some form of memories and some rapport built.* (P11)

The presence of peers also affected other emotions. The perceived level of peer support positively influenced students' confidence.

> *More confident…I would say it's because of this group of friends, yes. Because we will be planning the same timetable, everything we do together, so I feel more confident with them.* (P4)

Peers as Learning Partners During Online Learning. Although students experienced minimal contact on campus during the COVID-19 pandemic, online contact with their peers continued to motivate learning. Students expressed being accountable for maintaining contact with friends online and using online collaboration tools for various learning activities.

> *We'll put out all the questions and learning objective in the Google Doc, between me and my friend, and then we will answer the learning objectives together. Then we will have a Skype call weekly just to make sure that we are all on the same page.* (P10)

Peer Pressure. While learning together provided support, some students mentioned experiencing stress when they observed students who were competitive or cliquish. Negative repercussions of their interaction with peers resulted in feelings of inadequacy and anxiety.

> *I would say maybe my class has a more competitive style, where they compare whether you're okay in your studies.* (P3)

> *We had different goals. They have a very high expectation of themselves. They are in cliques with those who did very well.* (P10)

Theme 2: Struggle of university learning

When discussing university learning, students shared that although potential challenges in university were expected, these challenges were also reasons for their low self-efficacy and decreased well-being. They related key struggles to managing academic and time-related demands, the self-directed nature of university learning, and their self-efficacy.

Academically Demanding. Students repeatedly mentioned the higher levels of academic challenge, such as course difficulty, an increased workload, and increased independent learning. Although students were aware of these potential challenges, it still affected their self-efficacy and well-being.

> *The content in university is a bit different. The amount of effort put into studying doesn't really reflect the results. So, [I am] not very confident in getting good results…* (P1)

> *There are a lot unknown[sic] because there are a lot of tough modules coming up. I expect a lot of learnings and practicals to go. So yes, I foresee I need to put in a lot of effort. I will just put it as moderate [level of confidence].* (P8)

Specifically, one student (P11) described a change of focus in their learning goals from intrinsically understanding the content, to merely passing the assessments to get through the course. The student perceived the module to be harder and felt less confident as they were putting in an increasing level of effort for the same grade.

> *…but then we have four modules or five modules of such, and I think we didn't expect the difficulty of it to be this sky high, so that's why our confidence slowly, slowly dropped, so that's why it went from trying to strive for excellence to just striving to pass.* (P11)

Challenges with Time Management. Students also reported having lesser downtime outside of academic activities, with extra time dedicated to studying.

> *…we did a lot of overnight studying, etc. It was just very mentally tiring, but there was just a lot more stress because sometimes we would be rushing projects and we would only have a day or two before the test to study and sometimes there will be two tests on the same day.* (P11)

With the lack of time, some students made the choice of sacrificing leisure activities to focus on their studies. Students also reported the lack of time to continue with resources that help with self-improvement (i.e., AdventureLEARN).

> *We just don't have much time to go into other platforms or just try other software like AdventureLEARN.* (P11)

> *I joined CCA during my trimester one. My academic-wise is affected in trimester one, but it got slightly better when in trimester two as I stopped going for CCA.* (P2)

Some students also had responsibilities outside of school; they had to dedicate time and effort to these responsibilities, ultimately reducing study time.

> *Now I've got a lot of other things to worry about. Bills and my parents, because they are so old. Then [with] all these things, I'm not able to, how to say, 100% focus, give my attention [as] how I did in Poly[technic].* (P13)

Struggling with Self-directed Learning (SDL). Most students demonstrated subtle awareness of their approaches to studying and recognised differences in expectations placed upon them in current university settings, in contrast to their prior pre-university education. Students were aware of the expectations of SDL in university. A few students seemed unprepared for SDL and were still searching for more effective ways to learn. They held back from approaching lecturers for help, while struggling to cope.

> *I think university expects you to learn everything by yourself instead of being spoon-fed.* (P4)

> *In university, I think I am required to do more of my own self-learning more[sic]...I wouldn't necessarily ask my lecturers how to get it done because I had a feeling they expect us to get our own answers.* (P9)

Perception of Self-efficacy. The multitude of challenges that students faced influenced their perceived levels of self-efficacy, thus, reducing their belief in succeeding both academically and occupationally.

> *There was this one period when I actually lost confidence in myself, asking why am I in this course? Because I couldn't even follow my peers and then follow my lecturer. I have no idea what they were talking about.* (P2)

> *... the fact that I'm quite incompetent right now worries me, because I'm worried that, if I go into the workforce, I am not able to fulfil my job or do well in my work.* (P6)

Theme 3: Coping Strategies

Despite the increase in challenges, students detailed various ways they adapted to overcome specific difficulties and setbacks. Based on students' narratives, two groups of coping strategies were categorised— solution-focused and emotion-focused strategies.

Solution-focused Strategies. While students were very reactive to the course difficulty and increased workload, some demonstrated active planning, engaging with positive appraisal, seeking alternative reinforcement, and trying out different study techniques.

> *A lot of my modules are very specific, and I feel it can be broken down into topics or subjects, and that helped a lot. It's helping me focus and know what's going on.* (P7)

With the increase in academic complexity and workload, students discussed efforts to refine their study techniques. These students experimented with different study techniques and demonstrated self-reflection about their own learning methods.

> *Because the first two strategies didn't really work for my first year, so for next year, the strategy will just be, even if it's online lecture in the next year, we will attend it more actively and just really try to be more active during class so that we will have lesser to revise later on.* (P11)

> *It's about finding information on your own, finding it online, finding it from your friends, and accrediting it with your friends, your peers to find your solution. And it works now because we are actively connected through the internet or Facebook or during lectures or other third-party meeting software.* (P9)

Emotion-focused Strategies. There were also students that adopted emotion-focused strategies. Reducing anxiety by carrying out other tasks, accepting responsibility, and preparing for the worst outcome were raised as some examples.

> *I will recognise or find the good aspects in things to help normalise things. If I find something is too good, I am afraid I might be overconfident. I would balance it out and try to undermine that overconfidence.* (P9)

Some students spoke of actively reminding themselves of their initial intention of entering university, a reminiscent coping strategy to motivate current studying behaviour. These students appeared conscious of the need to take responsibility for their own learning.

> *It's very important for me to reflect upon my own performance instead of [relying on] other people to keep on reminding you. In that process I tell myself, what is my initial goal when I enter this university. And those remind me that I have to keep on going.* (P2)

> *In university, I think it's an opportunity to pursue my interest. You will know the content of the study's hard[sic], very deep content, hard to understand ... but the interest is there to inspire to learn all these things too.* (P3)

When asked about well-being, one student related changing her mindset as a strategy that led to improvements in her well-being and overall stress management.

> *It has definitely improved because I finally understood…I think my professors spoke about being able to have a growth mindset. I only understood that growth mindset when I faced failures. That was something impactful. That really made me think about how I could grow from this instead of just being stuck and thinking that failing is, that's it, it's the end.* (P10).

DISCUSSION

This paper sought to explore how at-risk students perceived their transition into a university environment by examining their experiences after almost one year in a Singapore university. Based on the interview findings, students adapted their learning approach and coping strategies during that period of transition. They mentioned how the academic demands were different from their previous learning experiences in polytechnics and junior college. Changes in learning methods, content complexity, increased workload, and difficulty with time management leading to low self-efficacy and decreased well-being were also brought up. Students were aware of the importance of self-directed learning but found it difficult to apply it in a university context. Despite facing multiple challenges, resilience and strengths were also exhibited by this group. For instance, they found peers to be a positive source of informational and emotional support, which in turn produced a sense of belonging and study motivation among students. Solution-focused and emotion-focused strategies further assisted students in coping with difficulties associated with transition.

We mapped our findings to the categories of Schlossberg's Transition Theory to present a more detailed understanding of the transition experiences of at-risk students at university. When individuals engage in the process of transition, their beliefs and behaviours change over time and their experiences connect them with needed support to cope with challenges (Schlossberg, 1984). This can be observed in all forms based on the interview findings; students shared deeply about the coping resources they gained or were hoping to gain after becoming a freshman. With regards to the *situation*, students recognised the importance and expectation of self-directed learning and time management. Perceptions of the learning experience impacted the *self* of students—their well-being, self-efficacy, and motivation. Highlights of their *strategies* include experimenting with different methods of studying, as well as solution- and emotion-focused coping. Lastly, the importance of peers as sources of *support* was strongly emphasised in adapting with the transition. The components of the 4S influence the ability of an individual to cope and deal with the event differently (Anderson et al., 2012)—the circular arrows in between the 4S denote how one coping resource potentially affects other coping resources (see Figure 1). Segmenting students' transition experience in this manner can better support at-risk students, with the following section discussing viable recommendations for educators and institutions.
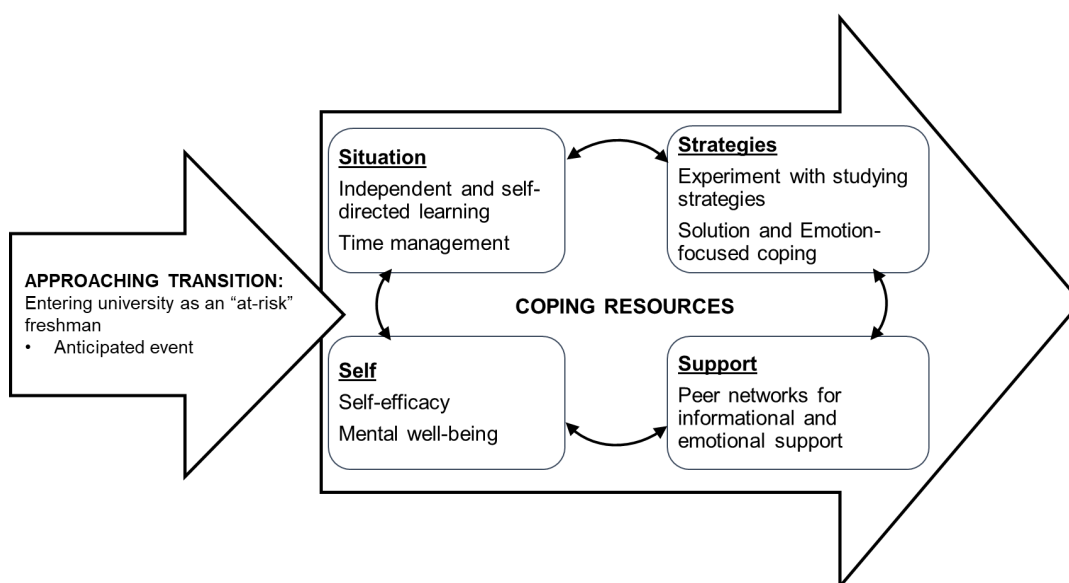

Figure 1. Transition process for at-risk freshman (Adapted from Anderson et al., 2012, p. 62)

Helping transitioning students to develop self in meeting university expectations

Relating to the *situation* and *self*, students in this study had a shared perception of university which was increased amounts of independent learning as compared to their previous learning experience in the polytechnics and junior college. The element of *situation* is influenced by an individual's change in role, existing stress, and previous experiences with similar transitions (Anderson et al., 2012). Transitions in one area (e.g., becoming a university student) stimulate other stresses and coping resources (e.g., increased self-directed learning). Low self-efficacy and sense of uncertainty were experienced by students when overwhelmed by the differences in teaching, and the lack of time, paralleling Webster and Yang's (2012) work.

Apart from focusing on academic achievements, personal growth and well-being are also crucial parts of the university experience. Given that these students were identified as being at-risk, there might be a risk of poor mental well-being spiraling into burnout if they continued using ineffective study patterns and were not able to find balance between academic demands and other activities. Results suggest the importance of students' time management in response to shifting academic demands, as well as identifying stressors in influencing students' well-being and self-efficacy. Academic staff could offer support by having awareness and understanding of common challenges faced by freshmen students, and ideally, fostering nurturing environments for students to feel safe reaching for help and discussing concerns to ease their transition challenges.

Encouraging learning community and peer support

Regarding the aspect of *support*, the salient highlight was the importance of peers in building information networks and emotional support. The analysis of the interview data yielded the role of peers as a surprising finding, despite the topics of "social support", "friends", or "peers" not being included in the interview guiding questions, signifying that it was considerable enough for the students to talk about it unprompted. As students progressed through their first year, they mentioned that having peer groups helped them when they were struggling with academic demands. In line with Schlossberg's Transition Theory, it is suggested that individuals who receive external support, such as peers, during their transition adapt better to their new situation (Anderson et al., 2012).

The finding suggests that when supporting at-risk students during transition, it is important to find ways to enable peer learning, especially with the rise of online learning where first year students had less opportunities to interact face-to-face. Forming a learning community can foster a sense of belonging and membership that in turn increases study motivation and self-efficacy (Van Rooij et al., 2018).

Coach students to identify effective strategies

When students were aware that their learning environment (*situation*) was no longer familiar or negotiable, they found ways to attempt alternative *strategies* and study techniques as part of their newfound identity as a university student. However, these study techniques appeared to evolve through trial and error. They were unsure of learning methods best suited for their learning style, and thus found themselves repeatedly engaging in ineffective study techniques. Nonetheless, the students did find some useful strategies. When supporting at-risk students during transition, one recommendation would be for academic staff to coach students on examining the strategies that they use and how these strategies can be adjusted for greater effectiveness (Lim, 2021). It would be advantageous in enabling students to be aware of the difficulties faced during their learning, providing students alternate resources to develop appropriate coping strategies, or to develop perspectives that help in changing their appraisal of difficulties (Brooker et al., 2017). When students feel competent in their repertoire of strategies to deal with demands, they are likely to have confidence in tackling more diverse

stressors, leading to better university adjustment (Friedlander et al., 2007). Furthermore, academic staff supporting at-risk students could also encourage them to recall their initial goals, passions, or interests as a coping strategy to stay motivated.

While the experiences of students after their first year were qualitatively assessed, the long-term effects of certain coping mechanisms remain unknown. Future longitudinal research could uncover how these strategies evolve over time, providing insights into how at-risk university students develop their learning approaches and coping strategies into their second, third, or fourth year of study.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provided relevant insights into understanding the personal learning experiences of at-risk student freshmen transitioning from a tertiary education institute to university. Overall, students recognised that they were expected to handle the more complex content and heavier workload by increasing independent and self-directed learning behaviours. They also demonstrated a strong understanding of the need to evaluate their own studying strategies more critically, due to the heightened need to cope. Other coping mechanisms were discussed as well, including recalling their purpose for entering university, as well as relying on an extensive peer network for informational and emotional support. While the students developed insights on adjusting learning strategies in higher education settings at the end of their first year, a few seemed to be still struggling to overcome various transition difficulties, especially with regards to managing available time and personal well-being. The recommendations for educators proposed herein aimed to target transition difficulties by utilising Schlossberg's transition theory as a framework to segment the experiences of at-risk students.

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