

# First-Year Students' Challenges and Coping Strategies in Public and Private Universities in Osun State, Nigeria

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## Abstract

The current study examined the challenges faced by first-year students in public and private universities in Osun State. It also examined the coping strategies of first-year students in public and private universities in the state. It further determined if any differences exist in challenges between public and private university students in the study area; it also determined differences in coping strategies between public and private university students in Osun State. These were to provide information on first-year students' challenges and strategies for overcoming them. The research design for the study was descriptive survey research design. The study population entailed all first-year students in the public university of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, and a private university, Oduduwa University, Ile-Ife, Osun State. Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were employed to select 200 respondents from the public university and 150 respondents from the private university among first-year students. A self-developed questionnaire titled First-Year Student Challenges and Coping Strategies Questionnaire (FYSCSQ), which was comprised of four sections, was used to obtain data from the sample. The instrument was validated using face and content validity, and an Alpha Coefficient reliability of .85 was obtained. Data collected were analyzed using frequency counts, simple percentages, and inferential statistics such as independent *t*-tests. The results showed no significant differences in challenges between public and private first-year students with ( $t = .51$ ) and no significant differences in coping strategies between public and private first-year students with ( $t = .268$ ). The study concluded that first-year students in public and private universities encountered myriads of challenges (Academic, Social, Cultural, and economic), with academic challenges being the prevalent challenge, followed by social, cultural, and minor economic challenges in both public and private universities.

**Keywords:** first-year students, first-year students' challenges, coping strategies, public university, private university

## Introduction

University education worldwide offers students advancement opportunities in their academic careers; it brings about physical and intellectual skills that enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of society. University education adds to what other forms of education have offered by increasing the knowledge of the learners that they had previously acquired (Peretomode, 2008, as cited in Ukoette et al., 2021).

(UNESCO, 2023) goes on to say that it provides a rich and scientific asset that enables personal development and promotes economic, technological, and social change, with knowledge exchange, research, and innovation, equipping students with the skills needed to meet ever-changing markets. Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013) highlighted the goals of university education as: 1. To contribute to national development through higher level manpower training. 2. To provide accessible and affordable quality learning opportunities in formal and informal education in response to the needs and interests of all Nigerians. 3. To provide high-quality career counseling and lifelong programs that prepare students with the knowledge and skills for self-reliance and the world of work. 4. To reduce skill shortages through the production of skilled manpower relevant to the needs of the labor market. 5. To promote and encourage scholarship,

entrepreneurship, and community service. 6. To forge and promote National unity. 7. To promote national and international understanding and interaction.

The educated man provides society with human capital due to his income, which represents his earnings and his potential for further achievement. It increases the stock of knowledge and ensures its diffusion. University education raises recipients' productivity, creativity, initiative, and innovation levels. University education also plays a vital role in group occupational effectiveness and the development of self-confidence. It instills discipline, hard work, morality, and human capital. For these reasons, first-year students celebrate their admission to the university of their choice, public or private, without prior knowledge of the university lifestyle.

University education can be provided in public universities and private universities because the government extended its hands to private individuals in funding schools through the National Policy on Education, and that gave the masses the opportunity and wherewithal to attend any institution of their choice, be it public or private schools (Ukoette et al., 2021). Public universities are universities owned by the government, either by federal or state, and they operate in whole or in part on federal or state funds. Education in public universities is heavily subsidized by the government, which allows students to access university education

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regardless of their background, religion, culture, or race with little pay. Private universities are owned by individuals, corporate bodies, religious organizations, and non-governmental organizations. The purpose of establishing this (private university) might be for profit, to contribute to community development, and so on. Private Universities rely heavily on tuition and private contributions, which means students who choose to go to private university will have to pay heavily for school fees, accommodation, health services, library facilities, and other educational materials that are needed to access that university, unlike public university which provides such same materials cheaper or discounted. Regardless of the differences between public and private universities, public and private universities are schools where students are trained and equipped with technical and mental knowledge to be useful in the labor market.

## **Review of the Related Literature**

### ***First-Year Students' Challenges***

First-year students are newly admitted students into universities. Being their first time in this new environment made them have an independent lifestyle, which comes with self-decision-making to get things done on their own without influence from parents or guardians, and this causes challenges in their first year. Nelavai and Ramesh (2020) affirmed that students struggle to cope with the initial university syllabus even though it is a continuation of school. They continue by saying that students face problems adjusting to new environments, becoming active learners, and coping with reading materials, and language barriers. Bling (2003 as cited in Leonard et al 2017), Bernier et al. (2005) and Tao et al. (2000) corroborated that transitioning from high school can be a stressful social and psychological event. Gosai et al. (2023) findings indicated that transition challenges are experienced by first-year students in socializing, adapting to new environments, understanding teaching methodologies, copying with study materials, independence, cognitive challenges, and so on.

Furthermore, they emphasized that academic, institutional, socio-cultural, and psychological factors are seen as the sum of factors that hinder students' successful transmission in the university. Kong et al. (2016) contributed that education styles, language barriers, socio-cultural issues, technological issues, and family and health challenges are among the challenges confronting first-year students in their new environment. Taking from a broader position, it can be assumed that first-year students are faced with multiple challenges, ranging from social challenges, economic challenges, academic challenges, and cultural challenges, which accumulate to myriads of challenges that can impede adjustment in the new academic settings first-year students find themselves in regardless of how bright they were in high school before entering university. Therefore, it is a fact that high school graduation is not sufficient to prepare students for challenges, be it academic or social, cultural or economic, at university (Mudhovozi, 2012). First-year students who identify the challenges the new environment brings will settle faster and adjust to academic programs, experience healthy social relations, and make informed career decisions. Mastery over one's difficulties in any domain is associated with healthy development and well-being (Brooker & Lawrence, 2012; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005, as cited in Brooker et al., 2017). Conversely, first-year students who cannot identify and cope with the demands of the new environment will invariably have difficulties settling down, have poor academic grades, and likely drop out of university.

### ***Coping Strategies***

Coping strategies include how well students deal with educational demands, such as motivation to complete academic requirements, academic efforts and satisfaction, and academic environment (Friedlander et al., 2007; Tao et al., 2000). Aggarwal (1998, as cited in Samuel, 2011) corroborated that coping or

adjusting is a continual process by which a person varies his or her behavior to produce a more harmonious relationship between himself or herself and his or her environment. It implies students' satisfaction with the university experience in general and with the college or university he or she attends. It can also be managing circumstances, expending efforts to solve personal and interpersonal problems, and seeking to master, minimize, and reduce or tolerate stress or conflict. That is, changes in one's thinking and way of life are required to meet the demands of the situation. Melanie et al. (2022) stated that coping with stress involves cognitive and behavioral efforts to reduce the external and internal demands placed on the individual. Also, coping could be seen as a condition or state in which one feels that one's needs have been (or will be) fulfilled and one's behavior conforms to the needs of a given environment (Samuel, 2011). Therefore, it is imperative for first-year students to develop strategies in order to fit into the norms and reality of the university's lifestyle, as well as adjust and settle down successfully. Otherwise, the expected intentions will not be Achieved.

## **Statement of the Problem**

University education is a powerful instrument that develops individuals and prospects in life. For this reason, students get excited and celebrate admission to universities. However, on getting to the university, first-year students realized that their preparation for university life fell short of their realization, and this resulted in challenges. The inability to identify and handle the challenges may lead to poor academic advancement and dropout. As a result, the study investigated first-year students' challenges and coping strategies in public and private universities in Osun State.

## **Objectives**

The study's main objective is to identify challenges encountered by first-year students in public and private universities and their coping strategies at Osun State Universities. The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine the challenges of first-year students in public and private universities in Osun State.
2. Investigate the coping strategies of first-year students in public and private universities in Osun State.
3. Determine if any differences exist in challenges between public and private universities students in Osun State.
4. Determine if any differences exist in coping strategies between public and private universities students in Osun State.

## **Research Questions**

The following were the research questions raised to pilot the study:

1. What are the challenges faced by first-year students in public and private universities in Osun State?
2. How do first-year students cope in public and private universities in Osun State?

## **Hypotheses**

1. There is no significant difference in challenges of first-year students in Public and Private Universities in Osun State
2. There is no significant difference in coping strategies of first-year students in Public and Private Universities in Osun State

## **Methodology**

The research design for the study was descriptive survey research design. The population of the study entailed all first-year students in the public university of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, and a private university, Oduduwa University, Ile-Ife, Osun State. Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were employed to select 200 respondents from the public university and 150 respondents from the private

university among first-year students. A self-developed questionnaire titled First-Year Students Challenges and Coping Strategies Questionnaire (FYSCCSQ), which was made up of four sections, was used to obtain data from the sample. The instrument was validated using face and content validity, and an Alpha Coefficient reliability of .85 was obtained. Data collected were analyzed using frequency counts, simple percentages, and inferential statistics such as independent *t*-tests.

**Table 1**  
Demographic Information of the Participants

Demographic characteristics	Focus group	
	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	160	45.7
Female	190	54.3
Religion		
Christian	223	63.7
Muslim	127	36.3
School types		
Public	200	57.1
Private	150	42.9
Mode of entry		
Pre-degree	135	38.6
UTME	191	54.6
Direct entry	24	6.9

Note. Data collected by the author in 2023.  
*N* = 350.

The age of the sample ranged between 17 and 25 years, with the mean of ( $\bar{x}$  = 21.00) years and a deviation of (*SD* = 2.49) years. The result also showed that the majority of 223(63.7%) respondents were Christians, while 127(36.3%) were Muslims. Most respondents, 200(57.1%), were from public universities, and 150(42.9%) were from private universities, all being first-year students. The majority, 191(54.6%) of the respondents, enter university through UTME, while 135(38.6%) of the

respondents enter university through pre-degree and 24(6.9%) enter through direct entry.

## Results

Research question 1: What are the academic challenges of first-year students in public and private universities in Osun State?

To answer the question, the responses of first-year students in public and private universities were collected and presented as follows;

Table 2 shows the analysis of the responses that were obtained from first-year students in public and private universities. Most students, with an average of 120.4(60.2%), agreed that they were confronted with various economic challenges in their first year in public university, while the minority, with an average of 79.6(39.8%), disagreed. The majority of the students, with an average of 157(78.5%), agreed they were confronted with various academy challenges, while the minority, with an average of 43(21.5%), disagreed. The responses of the students, with an average of 153(76%), which constitutes the majority of the students, agreed they were challenged socially, while the minority of 47(24%) disagreed. Furthermore, the majority of the students agreed that they faced various cultural challenges, with an average of 147.8(74.4%), while the minority, with an average of 51.2(25.6%), disagreed.

Table 2 analyzes the responses obtained from first-year students in private universities. The majority of the students, an average of 96(64%), agreed that they were confronted with various economic challenges in their first year in university. In contrast, the minority, with an average of 54(36%), disagreed. Also, most students, with an average of 109.6(73%), agreed they were confronted with various academic challenges, while the minority, with an average of 40.4(27%), disagreed. Of the responses, students with an average of 108(72%), which constitutes the majority, agreed they were challenged socially, while the minority of 42(28%) disagreed. The majority of the students, an average of 108.6(72.4%), agreed that they were faced with various cultural challenges, while the minority with an average of 41.4(27.6%) disagreed.

**Table 2**  
First-year Students' Challenges in Public University and Private University in Osun State

Views	A (%)		D (%)		Total (%)	
	Public university	Private university	Public university	Private university	Public university	Private university
Economy challenges						
Financial difficulties, inadequate funds to buy educational materials	108 (54)	107 (71.3)	92 (46)	43 (28.7)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Academic workload	111 (55.1)	86 (57.3)	89 (44.9)	64 (42.7)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Inadequate learning materials	146 (73)	112 (74.7)	54 (27)	38 (25.3)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Unconducive physical environment of classrooms	100 (50)	80 (53.3)	100 (50)	70 (46.7)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Inflation of price on commodities on campus	137 (68.5)	95 (63.3)	63 (31.5)	55 (36.7)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Average	120.4 (60.2)	96 (64)	79.6 (39.8)	55 (36)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Academic challenges						
Frequent disruption of the academic calendar	132 (66)	105 (70)	68 (34)	45 (30)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Lecturer-student's ratio	143 (71.5)	136 (90.7)	143 (28.5)	14 (9.3)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Indifferent attitudes of lecturers and staff on campus	196 (98)	94 (62.6)	4 (2.0)	56 (37.3)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Teaching style and methodology	137 (68.5)	117 (78)	63 (31.5)	33 (22)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Underfunding of higher education by the government	177 (88.5)	96 (64)	23 (11.5)	54 (36)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Average	157	109.6	43	40.4	200	150

Views	A (%)		D (%)		Total (%)	
	Public university	Private university	Public university	Private university	Public university	Private university
	(78.5)	(73)	(21.5)	(27)	(100)	(100)
<b>Social challenges</b>						
Disengagement from friends at home and high school	151 (75)	126 (84)	49 (25)	24 (16)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Inadequate recreation facilities	159 (79.5)	120 (80)	41 (20.5)	30 (20)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Difficulty in associating with a roommate in the hall of residence	124 (62)	114 (76)	76 (38)	36 (24)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Incessant disrespect of personal property by roommates in the hall of residence	175 (87.5)	97 (65)	25 (12.5)	53 (35)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Incessant stealing of properties in the hall of residence	152 (76)	83 (55)	48 (24)	67 (45)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Average	152.2 (76.1)	108 (72)	47.8 (23.9)	42 (28)	200 (100)	150 (100)
<b>Cultural challenges</b>						
Religion and cultural differences	191 (95.5)	119 (79.3)	9 (4.5)	31 (20.7)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Language differences among students	170 (85)	127 (84.7)	30 (15)	23 (15.3)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Difficulties in understanding the culture of the locality where the university is situated	132 (66)	90 (60)	68 (34)	60 (40)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Tolerance of the host community where the university is located	119 (59.5)	107 (71.3)	81 (40.5)	43 (28.7)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Lack of orientation from the university about the community where the university is situated	132 (66)	100 (66.7)	68 (34)	50 (33.3)	200 (100)	150 (100)
Average	148.8 (74.4)	108.6 (72.4)	51.2 (25.6)	41.4 (27.6)	200 (100)	150 (100)

Note. Data collected by the author in 2023.

SA = *strongly agreed*, A = *agreed*, D = *disagreed*, and SD = *strongly disagreed*. The responses for SA and A collapsed, and responses for D and SD collapsed in interpreting the data gathered from the field.

Research question 2: How do first-year students cope in public and private Universities in Osun State?

The respondents' responses for this study were analyzed using simple percentages to answer these questions. A summary of the results is presented as follows;

**Table 3**

*How do first-year students cope with challenges at public and private universities in Osun State?*

Options	Public university		Private university	
	No. of responses	%	No. of responses	%
<b>Economy challenge</b>				65.3
Often	120	80	98	34.7
Rarely	80	40	52	00
Never	00	00	00	100
Total	200	100	150	
<b>Academic challenge</b>				
Often	94	47	94	62.7
Rarely	71	35.5	40	26.7
Never	35	17.5	16	10.6
Total	200	100	150	100
<b>Social challenge</b>				
Often	137	68.5	95	63.3
Rarely	50	25	54	36.0
Never	13	6.5	1	.7
Total	200	100	150	100
<b>Cultural challenge</b>				
Often	149	74.5	83	55.3
Rarely	32	16	39	26
Never	19	9.5	28	18.7
Total	200	100	150	100

Note. Data collected by the author in 2023.

The frequency point scale of 1 = *often*, 2 = *rare*, 3 = *never*.

Table 3 shows that most first-year students in public universities, with an average of 120(80%), employed various strategies to cope with economic challenges, while 80(40%) rarely did. Also, the majority of the students, 94(47%), often cope with the academic challenge, while 71(35.5%) rarely did, and 35(17.5%) never did so. Also, the majority of the students, 137(68.5%), often cope with social challenges, while 50(25%) rarely did, and 13(6.5%) never did so. The results also show that the majority of the students, 149(74.5%), often cope with cultural challenges, while 32(16%) rarely, and 19(9.5%) never did.

Table 3 shows that most first-year students in private universities, with an average of 98(65.3%), employed various strategies to cope with economic challenges, while 54(34.7%) rarely did. Also, the majority of the students, 94(62.7%), often cope with academic challenge, while 40(26.7%) rarely do, and

16(10.6%) never do so. Also, the majority of the students, 95(63.3%), often cope with social challenges, while 54(36%) rarely did, and 1(0.7%) never did so. The results also show that the majority of the students, 83(55.3%), often cope with cultural challenges, while 39(26%) rarely, and 28(18.7%) never did.

**Testing of Hypotheses**

This session reveals the tests conducted on two research hypotheses postulated to enhance the achievement of the specific objectives raised for this study. The study employed a *t*-test to test the differences between challenges.

Null hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the challenges faced by first-year students in public and private universities in Osun State.

**Table 4**  
*Comparison of Challenges Between Public and Private University First-Year Students in Osun State*

Parameters	Public university		Private university		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
	24.6	4.98	22.8	4.98	.51	348	.62

*Note.* Data collected by the author in 2023.  
Significant at *p* < .05.

The result shows no statistical significance between public and private universities' first-year students in terms of their academic challenges. This means the null hypothesis is accepted (*p* = .62)

Null hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in academic coping strategies of first-year students in public and private universities in Osun State State.

**Table 5**  
*Comparison of Coping Strategies Between Public and Private University First-Year Students in Osun State*

Parameters	Public university		Private university		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
	8.61	2.05	8.71	2.03	.268	348	.688

*Note.* Data collected by the author in 2023.  
Significant at *p* < .05.

The result shows no statistically significant difference in academic strategies between public and private university first-year students. This means the null hypothesis is accepted (*p* = .688).

meeting multiple and overlapping assignment deadlines, and preparing to take examinations. In the study conducted by Javed (2020) on Pakistani

**Discussion**

The present study found that first-year students in public and private universities encountered challenges in their first year due to the new environment. This finding is consistent with numerous research studies that have reported the transition challenges new university students encounter. Kearney et al. (2018) reported that first-year students encountered challenges interpreting non-traditional students' first-year experiences. Javed (2020) reported that first-year students experience difficulty adapting to the university environment. Nelavai and Ramesh (2020) also opined that the university transition is tough for first-year students, with many students having difficulties in the foundational course.

The study also reveals that first-year students' challenges are not limited to their academic pursuits; it was found that cultural, economic, and social challenges are part of the challenges facing first-year students. This aligns with the findings of Doyle and Walker (2002, as cited in Mudhovozi, 2012) that university students encounter a myriad of challenges. Brooker et al. (2017) also opined that first-year students experience multiple difficulties at a time. Javed (2020) corroborated that academic, social, linguistic, and environmental adaptation are part of the difficulties experienced by first-year students. Furthermore, the study reveals that academic challenge is the most difficult experience encountered by first-year students, with an average of 157(78.5%) public university students and 109.6(73%) private university students on this web, regardless of their academic background. This is also corroborated by Melanie et al. (2022), who posited that the challenges of first-year students are primarily at the academic level, which include course workload,

It was seen that university entrants have high academic adaptation difficulty, among other difficulties, due to the heavier academic workload in universities than the academic workload in colleges or high schools. First-year students would have expected academic activities to follow the same order of rote learning, spoon-feeding, and mentoring that they were exposed to in colleges and high schools by teachers and instructors. However, the reality is otherwise on getting to university.

The result of the study also revealed how well first-year students cope with various challenges encountered in public and private universities. This coping strategy is necessary if they need to progress in higher education. Foster et al. (2020) opined that students transitioning from college or high school to a university environment must quickly adapt to new environments and expectations. It has been established that first-year students struggle to find a balance between their personal and academic lives due to separation from homes, friends, and loved ones and coping with adjustment in the new environment. However, the transition requires immediate adjustment to new conditions and environments, which can be achieved with various methods. Foster et al. (2020), who work on exploring coping strategies of transfer students joining universities from colleges, pointed out that peer support, learning expectation, cue seeking, and efficiency are multiple ways first-year students adjust to the new environment.

The result of research hypothesis one showed that there is no significant difference between public and private university first-year students in their academic challenges. This is confirmed by Melanie et al. (2022), who states that all university students face personal stressors during their studies. This result also aligned with Chalapati et al. (2018) findings in the study conducted on

factors affecting first-year students' learning experiences at a private university in Taiwan. Since university, regardless of type, is an environment that accommodates students from different political, social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, Human beings tend to face challenges when they move from one phase of life to another phase. The challenges result from the discrepancy between what they expect and what actually happens around them. The same situation is expected to confront first-year students as they make the transition from high school to university.

The result of research hypothesis two shows that there is no significant difference between the coping strategies of first-year students in public and private universities. This shows that the students must have accepted and developed adaptive mechanisms in the new environment. Ching et al. (2020), in their study of stressors and coping of nursing students in clinical placement, indicated that the students identified similar stressors and adapted different coping strategies in dealing with the stressors. Adaptation is a needed problem-solving skill to cope with unfavorable situations or environments. This skill helps to develop strategies for coping with circumstances that prevent growth and development. When this is achieved, it leads to a successful outcome; when it is unachieved, it leads to distress.

### Conclusion

The study examined first-year students' challenges and coping strategies in public and private universities in Osun State. From the study, it was found that first-year students in public and private universities encountered a myriad of challenges. The academic challenge was found to be the predominant challenge, followed by the social challenge, cultural challenge, and the least economic challenge; also, various coping strategies were adopted for academic, social, cultural, and economic challenges. Further to these findings, statistical analysis showed no significant differences in the challenges faced by first-year students in public and private universities on their challenges and the study also shows no significant differences in their coping strategies. Since the university is an environment that accommodates students from different political, social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, it indicates that university education, regardless of the type of university, is drastically different from that of high school, and high school graduation is not sufficient to prepare students for academic adjustment at university be it public or private university. Therefore, it is imperative for universities to integrate first-year students successfully into the university system through different support services in order for them to make advancements in their academic pursuits.

### Recommendations

Based on the study findings as well as the conclusions, this study recommends that the high schools and homes should be encouraged to prepare students to be autonomous as they join university. In addition, public and private universities should develop a comprehensive orientation programme and follow up mechanisms to ensure that all first-year students are assisted to settle fast in the university. In particular, students at risk of poor adjustment should be identified and given extra attention.

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