

Transition from high school to university: First-year students' reading experiences

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Background: Various studies have established that the transition from high school to university for first-year students is problematic. Research confirms that most students experience challenges with reading for meaning due to underdeveloped reading abilities.

Objectives: This article investigates the first-year students' transition from high school to university, focusing on their reading engagement as they shift from reading in schools to reading at university. The article draws from a bigger study conducted at a South African university, which focused on teaching reading strategies among first-year multilingual students.

Method: A qualitative approach was used in the study. Two lecturers and 48 first-year extended degree students were purposively selected. Theoretically, the article draws on academic literacy to establish how first-year students' transition from high school to university can be further improved by creating space for them to actively participate in additional reading platforms to enhance their reading abilities.

Results: Among other factors, the article established that first-year students experience challenges with transition due to the following reasons: the complexities and more demanding nature of academic texts, the heavy workload at university, independent learning, and time management.

Conclusion: The results reveal that the current interventions to assist first-year students regarding academic reading are inadequate, which means more strategies should be put in place to achieve a successful transition to university space by first-year students.

Contribution: Additional reading platforms meant to introduce first-year students to various academic literacy conventions and facilitate a successful transition from high school to university are suggested.

Keywords: transition; first-year students; reading challenges; reading practice; critical literacy; additional platforms; reading discussions; reading workshops.

Introduction and background

This article investigates first-year students' transition from high school to university, regarding their shift from reading at school level to reading at university level. This investigation is important because the transition of first-year students from high school to university, with regard to their reading engagement is problematic, mainly because they come inadequately prepared for academic learning and thus struggle to adjust to the demands of the work in academia (Bengesai, Paideya, Naidoo & Mkhonza 2022; Bettinger & Long 2009; Herkulaas & Oosthuizen 2020; Tinto 2017). The article examines the first-year students' transition from high school to university, focusing on their reading experiences which are influenced by their diverse educational backgrounds. The transition period brings a huge shift to academic learning for first-year students who should learn to deal with large volumes of complex texts, cope with the heavy demands of reading, and develop skills to learn independently and manage the time for their studies. Various studies have established that educational backgrounds contribute to some degree towards the problems the first-year students experience with transition from high school to university (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews & Nordström 2009; Fielding & Stott 2012; Herkulaas & Oosthuizen 2020). Some studies indicate that most first-year students come to university with limited reading abilities, which cause them to experience reading challenges when they engage with academic texts (Bergey, Deacon & Parrila 2017; Bharuthram 2012; Gorzycki, Desa, Howard & Allen 2020). Research reveals that the under-developed reading abilities are also a result of the

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literacy crisis in education and the gaps in knowledge of how to teach reading and writing (Reed, Dixon, Biesman-Simons & Pretorius 2020). The implication is that there is need for institutional interventions to address the issues of inadequate reading abilities to facilitate a successful transition for first-year students from high school to university.

Various fields of study in higher education offer intervention programmes to first-year students to help develop academic literacies to promote academic success among these students (Butler 2013; Leso 2018; Regehr, Glancy & Pitts 2013). Schreiber, Luescher and Moja (2016) assert that First-Year Experience (FYE) programmes designed to promote a successful transition for first-year students into university space are critical in helping to address the students' educational and psycho-social needs as they learn the culture of academia. Despite the availability of such intervention programmes, reading at university remains a contributory factor towards the problems experienced by first-year students as they transition from high school to university because, as claimed by Boakye (2015), learning largely depends on reading. Most degree programmes in higher education that are designed to help first-year students' transition usually run from 3 to 4 years (Nel, Troskie-de Bruin & Bitzer 2009; Wilson, Murphy, Pearson, Wallace, Reher & Buys 2016). Since the problems of transition persist in higher education, it means the current interventions are inadequate and chances are high that they are introduced a bit late, considering how critical the early days at university are for most first-year students. As propounded by Wilson et al. (2016), successful transition is determined by the students' experience of the first few weeks at university. These authors consider the first few weeks as a 'window of maximal risk', particularly for the first-generation students and those from low levels of academic capital whose difficulties manifest in patterns of limited engagement with academic activities and low levels of class attendance (Wilson et al. 2016). Wilson et al. (2016) advocated for the need for universities to understand the first-year students' early transition needs to allow for the design of transition-sensitive learning environments and more effective interventions to facilitate transition and reduce drop-out rates. Based on the results from the bigger study from which this article is developed, the author agrees with Wilson et al. (2016) and identifies the initial entry into the university space by first-year students as a critical stage that requires attention, particularly for those with multiple and complex challenges regarding their reading experiences. The article thus examines the value of early provision of supporting structures to help the first-year students engage in reading practice early, as a way of facilitating their transition from high school to university.

The focus of the article aligns with the arguments established by various scholars. Gale and Parker (2014) argue that students, particularly those from low socio-economic

backgrounds, should be provided with early targeted, appropriate support to complete a successful transition to university space, as they are at an increased risk of early drop-out or failure. Wilson et al. (2016) argue that the transition needs for first-year students should be identified, and possible interventions should be administered during the first three weeks at university to address early problematic issues like time management and preparation for assessment tasks. Pather and Dorasamy (2018) argue that the support by universities should be underpinned by appropriate timing for it to effectively assist first-year students' transition to university. In this article, the author develops further the critical argument that has been propounded by the other researchers regarding the need to address early the transition needs for first-year students for the reasons already discussed. Considering the transition of the students from reading at school to reading at university level, this further extension of the period needed to administer interventions comes from the idea that academic literacy and critical reading skills need to be given time to develop, especially among students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who are likely to have come from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, these interventions would be extra programmes that would run concurrently with the programmes on the university calendar, so administering interventions for more than 3 weeks would help to avoid a situation where the interventions add to the already congested programmes, and instead of facilitating a successful transition, they would end up increasing academic pressure and the reading workload, and then impact negatively on the students' initial experiences of navigating university space. For this reason, the article examines the need to administer and run reading support structures that introduce academic literacy conventions to first-year students during their first month at university. The article targets the first month to administer the interventions, taking into consideration that these are additional structures that are meant to strengthen the already existing interventions designed to achieve a successful transition and enhance students' reading abilities, which in most cases run throughout the degree programme. The first month at university is critical for first-year students, because it is the time they need to adjust to the new environment and at the same time are confronted with large volumes of texts to read, which in most cases, they find difficult to comprehend. Fouché (2024) argues that there should be investments to help students acquire academic literacy practices and conventions for them to follow deep approaches to learning, which are critical for their academic success. Such investments become critical because, besides the orientation they get to familiarise themselves with the physical environment (lecture venues, tutorial venues, library, and others), the students may receive minimal assistance or guidelines on how they should approach academic texts and yet research indicates that academic success is grounded in effective academic reading (Lampi et al. 2023). The first month at university for most first-year students is usually a period of stress and confusion, as they shift from less demanding reading to highly demanding reading of huge volumes of

complex and sophisticated texts. The author argues that, rather than taking this transition period lightly and assuming that with the current interventions available, the students would adjust their reading engagement as they progress, there is a need to practically demonstrate to first-year students how they can understand the difference between reading at school level and reading in academia and work towards developing critical reading skills for them to achieve academic success.

Literature review

Existing literature reports the various challenges that first-year students experience with the transition from high school to university. The study conducted by Nel, Govender and Tom (2016) reveals that first-year students' transition from high school to university involves aspects that have both positive and negative effects. The positives include academic and financial support, social and emotional support, and independence, while the negatives include unsupportive lecturer departments, higher workload as compared to learning at high school, lack of accommodation and disintegration. Edjah, Domey and Ankomah (2019) identify various aspects like registration for courses, separation from family, movement on campus, adjusting to the lecturers' way of teaching and marking, swapping between lecture theatres, coping with roommates and making new friends as some of the challenges that first-year students encounter with their transition to university. Ajani and Gamede (2020) report that first-year students from universities in rural areas encounter problems with academic writing, learning in English, lack of computer skills and access to support services due to their social backgrounds. Megbowon et al. (2023) argue that the challenges first-year students encounter with transition relate to academic expectations, adopting to technology and social experiences. All these research studies reveal that first-year students' transition from high school to university is problematic and is affected by various challenges depending on the students' educational backgrounds.

How first-year students engage with texts at university

According to the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS), students in South African schools are assessed on reading as it is one of the skills that needs to be taught. However, reading in schools is not very demanding, which means the transition from high school to university becomes a huge shift for first-year students who are then expected to provide authentic evidence from various scholarly sources when they write academic essays (Boakye 2017). Bharuthram (2012) argues that implementing reading strategy interventions within the curriculum helps to assist students who enter tertiary education to cope with reading materials in their academic disciplines. If the university curriculum incorporates reading interventions that can welcome first-year students by practically demonstrating the structure and content in academic sources, the students

can understand early that academic texts are complex and should be interactive when they engage with reading (Gao, Gao & Yang 2017). The students' level of academic literacy incompetence reveals the misalignment between high school learning and academic learning (Gorzycki et al. 2020; Graham et al. 2020). There is a need to address this misalignment early to facilitate a successful transition from high school to university learning, particularly the students' reading experiences. Universities should go beyond the assumption that these students know what they are required to do in academic reading (De Jong & Harper 2005; Trenkic & Warmington 2019). From the look of things, orienting first-year students with reading is crucial as this has long-term results, like improving retention and throughput rates in higher education (Bengesai et al. 2022). Considering the diverse educational backgrounds of the first-year students enrolled at universities, it is important to begin providing reading support as soon as the students embark on tertiary education.

Although the first-year students are taught various reading strategies in the courses that are designed to support reading development, the first month should be considered as the rightful period to begin providing reading support before the students get immersed in the high demands of work at university, most presumably without the appropriate strategies of how they can manage the demands of reading at tertiary level. Utilising the first month to introduce academic literacies by offering reading support can also be beneficial because, in some instances, the content of teaching reading strategies can be taught as part of preparations for assignments, during the period when students are still confused about how they should manage their time to cope with the large volumes of work at university. Therefore, early provision of practical guidelines and assistance as to how academic texts should be approached should be considered as a key component that can successfully facilitate the first-year students' transition from high school to university space.

Theoretical framework

This article is informed by academic literacy, a theory that is critical for success in higher education. Bock (1988) claims that academic literacy should be a starting point for a university career, implying that the development of academic literacy skills should be viewed as the starting point of a degree course. Boughey (2000) claims that literacy involves knowing how to write, speak, and think in a particular discourse, which implies that academic literacy is a way of thinking and knowing the appropriate register to use in different academic discourses. Academic literacy is defined as a specific set of linguistic and discourse conventions, which are influenced by written forms and are used primarily in academic institutions (Leibowitz 2004). Students must be linguistically competent to employ various discourse conventions for their academic success. Morrow (2007) discusses academic

literacy as epistemological access to higher education. This claim aligns with Van Schalkwyk (2008), who discusses academic literacy as an indicator of academic success and further argues that having a level of academic literacy plays a crucial role in achieving academic success among students in higher education. This view implies that academic literacy assists first-year students gain access to and achieve success in higher education, as it enhances effective engagement with a variety of texts. McKenna (2004) claims that academic literacy encompasses more than just the ability to read and write but includes the ability to do so effectively within the university context and be able to achieve academic success. Academic literacy encompasses the norms of behaviour in higher education, the things that are valued in each discipline, and those that are not. This claim affirms that there are multiple literacies in higher education, and these are discipline-specific. Students are required to understand and apply the literacies to suit their various fields of study.

Boughey and McKenna (2016) claim that the idea of multiple literacies led to the construct of academic literacy, which is described as ways of engaging with and producing written texts valued in academia. These scholars further elaborate that academic literacy is understood not as singular but multiple phenomena, which can be extended to the idea of academic literacies framed within the parameters of a particular discipline in which it is used. This description infers that the students develop academic literacy when they begin to understand the values and rules in academic contexts. Students develop academic literacy skills at university, as claimed by Boughey (2000), that people become literate as they observe and interact with other members of the discourse until they get used to the ways of acting, speaking, thinking, and valuing common to the members in that discourse. This observation affirms that the first-year students' interactions in academic discourses create room for them to understand and develop various literacies that are valued in their specific disciplines. Boughey and McKenna (2016) claim that the interactions in a particular discourse help in the conceptions of learning, from which students value the need to assimilate new knowledge with existing knowledge at a personal level. The students interact in pairs or groups with other members when they interrogate various texts, and during this process, they develop academic literacy skills. At university, students engage with a variety of texts in their different fields of study and this practice exposes them to discipline-related knowledge. It is during such interactions that the first-year students are oriented to shift from high school discourses to academic discourses. They need to understand the rules of academia and be able to develop different literacies that are required for them to become academically competent.

Hallett (2013) states that literature related to learner-focused support views academic literacy as the mastery of a set of skills that include reading, writing, speaking,

listening, and thinking or reasoning. Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2015) give a developed perspective of academic literacy, which includes a complex set of skills and accomplishments required when students enter higher education institutions as well as skills required for them to successfully exit from universities and become independent researchers. That successful exit is determined by a successful transition from high school to university in which first-year students become academically literate and can critically engage with various texts for their academic success and critical development. Given the value of academic literacy skills and critical reading skills in academic learning, this article highlights the shortcomings in what is done to assist first-year students' transition to university and argues for the need to establish more reading structures that can expose students to more reading activities.

In this article, the problem of transition from high school to university among first-year students is examined in line with the challenges they encounter in understanding the complexities and more demanding nature of academic texts, the difficulties in coping with the heavy workload of reading, the shift to learning independently and the ability to manage the time for their studies. The article examines the value of introducing academic literacy conventions that should be run during the first month of commencing university studies to facilitate a successful transition from high school to university. The interventions involve practical demonstrations of how students can approach academic texts to read for meaning, the strategies of how they can cope with the heavy reading workload, how to administer independent learning, and how they can manage their study times.

Methodology

The article draws from a larger research project that was conducted on academic reading strategies among multilingual first-year university students at a South African university. The study followed the interpretive paradigm and drew on a qualitative research approach. The case study design was used to explore the reading strategies that are taught to first-year extended degree students and to examine how helpful these strategies are in enhancing reading skills among these students. Before data collection, the research instruments were piloted to ensure credibility of the research data. Two experienced lecturers in teaching reading strategies and a representative sample of 48 first-year extended degree students were purposively selected to participate in the study. Interviews, focus group discussions and an open-ended questionnaire were used for data collection, which was done during the most convenient times for the participants to ensure objectivity and trustworthiness of their responses. These instruments were used to elicit data on the participants' perceptions of the strategies used to read texts at university, and how helpful these strategies are in addressing the challenges first-year

students encounter in reading academic texts. The instruments used were also meant to elicit data regarding the first-year students' experiences of studying at university as compared to studying at high school level. The open-ended questionnaire was used for triangulation purposes and to ensure credibility of the research data. The results indicate that most first-year students experience challenges with transition and understanding the complexities of texts at university as compared to the texts they were reading in school. This article focuses on the data that refers to the transition of first-year students from high school to university and their perceptions of the complexities of the content in academic texts, the reading workload, independent learning, and time management.

Ethical consideration

An application for full ethical approval was made to the University of Johannesburg, Faculty of Humanities, Ethics Committee (REC) and ethics consent was received on 15 October 2020. The ethics approval number is REC-01-182-2020. The participants were requested to complete a confirmation of their consent to participate in the study and were also requested to indicate the most convenient times for them to participate in the interviews. The issues of informed consent, voluntary participation, right to withdraw, confidentiality and anonymity were explained in the information letters that were sent to the participants with information about the purpose of the study.

Results and data analysis

The data obtained through focus group discussions and the open-ended questionnaire were transcribed and then analysed qualitatively, using thematic and authentic narrative analysis (Creswell 2021; Creswell & Poth 2016). The data were coded and examined by combining the codes and collapsing them together into more meaningful patterns which were then established into themes (Terry et al. 2017). Coding was used to make sense of the data, develop insights, and provide a rigorous and thorough foundation for analysis. The process of data interpretation employed the authentic narrative to give a rich description of the narratives that were extracted from the participants' responses with brief quotations representing their views (Bamberg 2020; Lewis & Adeney 2014).

The interview questions that address the focus of this article, which the participants were asked, are as follows:

- I would like you to tell me about how you find reading texts at university.
- How do you describe your experiences of reading texts when compared to reading at school level?

The open-ended questionnaire had similar questions to those of the focus group discussions but were phrased differently. The participants' responses from the open-ended questionnaire were like those that emerged from the focus group discussions. The data revealed the various challenges most first-year students encounter with the transition from high school to university. Among other challenges, this article focuses on four

issues that were reported as negatively impacting the students' transition from high school to university. These include the problems of understanding the complexities in academic texts, the difficulties in coping with the heavy workload of reading at university, the expectations of independent learning, and the inability to manage time for their studies.

All direct quotations referred to in Extract 1 to Extract 8 were obtained from focus group interviews with first-year extended degree students in the Faculty of Humanities enrolled for the English 1C course at a South African university (Chimenya 2022).

The complexities in academic texts

Extract 1

The reading materials at university are complicated 'because of certain terminology and higher-grade words that are used ...' Studying at university is 'harder because there are abstracts in the reading texts and the words are difficult to understand'.

Extract 2

The readings are much more condensed than the ones we received in high school. The texts at university have words that I have never been exposed to and some of the words are jargon.

The texts are difficult because they contain 'higher level of information. The words that I don't know make it difficult for me to read and when I don't understand something, I easily lose interest'.

The issue of complexities in academic texts was revealed as the major problem that causes most first-year students to experience challenges with the transition from high school to university. Extract 1 reveals that most first-year students struggle to read for comprehension, because of the new terminology and the abstract nature of academic texts. Similarly, Extract 2 reports that the students find texts at university 'more condensed' than texts in high school and they find it difficult to read for comprehension, which causes them to lose interest in reading. Boakye (2017) corroborates the results by indicating that, at tertiary level, texts that are discipline-specific are abstract in nature and contain various theories that are unfamiliar to students. The complexities of texts in higher education compound the reading challenges the first-year students experience when they engage with academic texts, because reading at university is denser and more sophisticated than reading in schools (Bergey et al. 2017; Bharuthram 2012). Although the problem of reading in higher education has been well documented, with various suggestions and interventions put in place to assist students improve their reading abilities (Graham et al. 2018; Ludwig, Guo & Georgiou 2019; Schiff & Calif 2004), the results indicate that most first-year students struggle with the abstract and complex words in academic texts, which subsequently impacts on their transition to learning at university. This finding aligns with other researchers who claim that an educational misalignment exists between high school and tertiary education, which causes students to enter university underprepared for tertiary learning (Ajani & Gamede 2020;

Lewin & Mawoyo 2014). Most first-year students come to university with inadequate preparation for academic learning and this complicates their transition period, as they find it difficult to manage the multiple experiences of adapting to a new environment and learning academic literacy conventions. Academic literacy is regarded as an epistemological access to higher education (Morrow 2007), which means that for a successful transition to be achieved, students should be academically literate. Van Schalkwyk (2008) views academic literacy as an indicator of academic success. The implication is that academic literacy enhances effective engagement with a variety of texts, which subsequently assists first-year students to succeed academically. Regrettably, most first-year students encounter challenges with transition from high school to academic learning due to academic literacy incompetence.

The heavy demands of reading at university

The results revealed that most students find it difficult to cope with the amount of work at university, as reported in the following responses.

Extract 3

I am trying to manage but I feel like it's not working but I keep on trying because the last semester it was very hard, the amount of work was too much. ... I had a breakdown because of that but I'm trying to manage, but I'm not managing really.

Extract 4

At first it was difficult, I couldn't keep up with the work, it was a lot since it was all piled up together in Term 1. There are too many texts to read and a lot of bombastic words beyond my standard.

Extract 5

Even though I am familiar with some of the words used in the texts, ... most of the time there is too much to do, I end up flying over the text instead of reading to understand.

The heavy workload at university emerged as another challenge that negatively impacts the students' transition from high school to university. The results indicate that even though some students are familiar with some of the words that are used in academic texts, they find the demand of work at university overwhelming. Most students cannot cope with the work to an extent that 'it ends up piling up' and when this happens, instead of reading intensively for comprehension, they 'end up flying over the texts', as they find that there are too many texts to be read, and, more so, texts which are loaded with information and complex content. Even though some students may find the new terms in academic texts familiar, they still struggle to cope with the reading because of the amount of work, which is very demanding. The results reveal that meaningful reading is not achieved by most first-year students, meaning that institutional support is required to help improve the students'

reading engagement. Pather and Dorasamy (2018) argue that university support provided should be appropriately timed in facilitating the alignment of student expectations and experiences for it to be effective and subsequently help them achieve academic success.

The results further reveal that the workload can be so heavy that some students find themselves 'breaking down' because the amount of work is too demanding to an extent that they cannot cope or manage it. These results reveal real challenges that affect the first-year students' transition from high school to university and for such challenges to be resolved, there is a need for institutional support. James (2002) claims that awareness of student expectations and addressing their needs can reduce their psychological stress. There is a need for higher education institutions to devise structures that can help first-year students develop a sense of belonging and connectedness with their new peer groups and the wider academic community to help them make a successful transition to university life (Pather & Dorasamy 2018). Early introduction of academic literacy, particularly during the first-year students' initial entry to university, becomes critical because issues like strategies for coping with academic learning should be addressed early so that students do not find themselves in academic depressions, which can eventually affect their academic progress. Most first-year students find it difficult to cope with the reading demands in higher education because they lack the reading skills that can leverage their ability to effectively read high volumes of texts within limited time. This happens because most first-year university students are inadequately prepared for tertiary education. Moreover, most first-year students find reading at university challenging because they shift from less demanding texts to 'reading materials which are much more condensed' than the ones they were reading in high school. The major reason behind the challenges experienced with coping with the demands of reading is the issue of difficult vocabulary and the unfamiliar terms in academic texts, which makes it difficult for students to read for meaning and they thus, eventually 'lose interest' in reading. The expectation is that at tertiary level, students should move beyond decoding and focus on synthesis of information from various sources (Boakye 2017), which they need for their different tasks, both written and oral.

Challenges with independent learning

The challenges associated with learning independently emerged as another factor that impacts the first-year students' studying at university.

Extract 6

No one is there to break down and analyse the texts for you like it was done in high school, now you have to do everything yourself. ... At university there are lecture notes, there are explanations of lecture notes that the teacher gives during and between classes ... there are readings as well.

The results reveal that the students find themselves in a completely new environment where they are expected to learn independently. The students are expected to read a variety of scholarly sources on their own to supplement what they learn during lectures, without anyone assisting them to break down and analyse the content. After lectures, the students are expected to read lecture notes and further their understanding by independently reading other material. Research indicates that reading at tertiary level requires students to consult various sources to supplement the notes they get during lectures (McCulloch 2013; St Clair-Thompson, Graham & Marsham 2018). The students need to consult additional texts to reinforce the content they get during lectures and to broaden their understanding, which subsequently improves their academic success (Akabuike & Asika 2012). The expectation to read additional sources independently becomes a new experience for most students and this impacts negatively on their transition, as they need to adjust to the culture of learning in academic discourses.

Time management

Extract 7

It sometimes happens that I fail to manage time for reading, as reading requires time so as to understand and be able to interpret the text in order to understand.

The results report that the heavy workload of academic reading contributes to the difficulties of time management. Academic reading on its own requires time. Extract 7 reveals that students 'fail to manage the time for reading', since they are expected to read large volumes of texts from their various fields of study. Herkulaas and Oosthuizen (2020) corroborate these results and reveal that most students at university struggle with time management. The transition from high school to university brings a huge shift to a new learning experience for most first-year students; hence, the complexities of the content, the high demands of reading, independent learning, and the inability to manage their study time impact heavily their transition to tertiary learning.

Additional reading platforms

Extract 8

University should provide reading clubs or reading societies ... like a reading class whereby we are taught how to read.

Extract 8 reports that students need additional platforms which can be established as reading clubs, reading societies, or reading classes. Such platforms are critical as they create space for students to be further assisted with practical activities on how to approach academic texts.

Discussion

The analysis has revealed the complexities in academic texts, high volumes of reading materials, independent learning, and time management as the factors contributing to the challenges first-year students encounter with transition

from high school to university. Considering that there are interventions available, the implication is that such interventions are inadequate and there is a need for additional institutional support that can facilitate a successful transition to academic learning. For this reason, this article suggests creating space for additional reading platforms in the form of reading clubs or societies and reading classes, which are meant to offer practical demonstrations of how first-year students can approach academic texts. Such platforms are meant to expose the first-year students to different types of texts to show them how to consult various sources and how to interrogate the content. This is a critical practice because these additional platforms create space for the students to engage in social interactions among themselves and their facilitators (tutors, mentors, or lecturers). The reading clubs could be organised by course coordinators in collaboration with the writing centre at the university. The students could be assigned different roles and responsibilities of selecting reading materials that would be discussed during the reading sessions, while lecturers, tutors, and the coordinators from the writing centre coordinate the running of the reading programmes. The social interactions during reading discussions and reading clubs or societies create conducive grounds for the students to learn from each other as they develop and learn the culture of academic discourses. This approach aligns with academic literacy practices that students become literate as they observe and interact with other members of the discourse until they get used to the ways of acting, speaking, thinking, and valuing common to the members in that discourse (Boughey 2000). Moreover, Boughey and McKenna (2016) claim that the interactions in a particular discourse help in the conceptions of learning from which students value the need to assimilate new knowledge with existing knowledge at a personal level. The additional reading platforms would create room for students to interact in pairs or groups with other members as they interrogate various texts, and during the process they develop academic literacy skills. These reading platforms would also function as scaffolding structures which are meant to shift the students' reading habits from high school to reading in academic discourses. Research reports that the students' reading abilities should be improved to enhance their engagement with academic texts for them to succeed academically (Bergey et al. 2017; Poole 2019). The reading clubs can create additional space for students to be guided with practical demonstrations of how to approach academic texts and get more exposure to interact with various texts, starting with the ones students select which are not as complex as those prescribed in their different fields of study.

However, reading clubs or reading societies have some limitations. The article suggests that the reading clubs could be organised by course coordinators in collaboration with the writing centres. This could be problematic since the writing centre coordinators would need to adjust their programme to accommodate a new intervention, which can be effective depending on the resources available. Additional interventions also mean extra work for the

course coordinators, the lecturers, and the tutors who would need to facilitate extra reading discussions. Another limitation is that, if they are not coordinated properly, instead of further helping to improve students' reading abilities, conducting extra reading classes can add to the already heavy workload the students struggle with. However, despite such limitations, the article strongly argues that more interventions are required, as the ones available are inadequate and reading clubs can work as supporting structures that can help to improve the first-year students' reading abilities and assist their transition to university.

The article advocates for the introduction and practical demonstrations of academic literacy conventions in which students engage in social interactions as they get familiarised with academic learning. Such discussions are critical because, as the students interact, they begin to understand the values and rules in academic reading (Bouhey & McKenna 2016). If first-year students develop academic literacy skills during their early days at university, it means the degree to which the issues of complex texts, the heavy workload of reading, independent learning and time management affect their transition to academic learning would be reduced. Therefore, introducing additional reading platforms for students to engage in reading discussions during their first month at university becomes critical, as their early development of academic literacy skills can potentially contribute towards a successful transition and academic success.

Limitations of the larger research project

The research only involved the cohort of first-year extended degree students and not all first-year students. If the study had involved all first-year students, this would have helped to determine the reading challenges and needed interventions on a broader scale and to allow the study to make recommendations that could be applicable to all first-year students. Another limitation was that the study used a small sample because getting access to participants was limited, as there was no contact teaching due to the restrictions caused by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

Conclusion

The article has examined the complexities and more demanding nature of texts at university, the heavy workload at university, independent learning, and time management, among others, as factors that contribute to the difficulties first-year students encounter with transition from high school to university. The article claims that if first-year students are introduced to academic literacies and get oriented on how they should approach academic texts during their initial stages at university, this is most likely to yield positive results. This is because they would start early to practise using various reading techniques to engage with various scholarly sources so that they would not be

overwhelmed when they are confronted with the heavy workloads of reading at university. The article recommends that the introduction to academic literacy conventions and administering reading support should be part of the orientation process to provide first-year students with hands-on experience of what they should expect as they embark on academic learning. The article further recommends practical demonstrations through reading clubs or societies and reading discussions for students to engage in activities in which they are practically shown how to approach academic articles. Finally, the article argues that additional reading discussions and reading clubs or societies should be administered during the first month at university to equip students early with academic literacy skills that can potentially enhance their reading abilities, orient them with strategies to cope with the demands of academic work, devise approaches to study independently, and learn how to timeously plan for academic studies. Such additional reading platforms can strengthen the available interventions and eventually improve the students' transition from high school to university.

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Competing interests

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Author's contribution

U.C.M. is the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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