AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR CULINARY STUDENTS' ADJUSTMENT TO UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to identify and describe the first-year experience of culinary students at a private higher education institution in Malaysia. The research on first-year experience (FYE) of university students has evolved over the past decade in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. However, the FYE research among Malaysian students, especially on culinary students is scarce. Hence, it is important to investigate this phenomenon of students transitioning from the secondary school system to the university as the academic and social requirements and context of these two learning environments may differ. The lived experience of four culinary students in their first-semester of studies was qualitatively explored to determine their social and academic adjustments in the university. The themes that emerged include Approaches to Academic Adjustment, Approaches to Social Adjustment and the "moment" of transitioning as first-year university students.

Keywords: First-year experience, culinary education, academic adjustment, social adjustment.

INTRODUCTION

The massification of higher education, which describes an increase in the higher education population, both nationally and internationally over the last two decades, has witnessed many changes in its student population and profiles. This change can be attributed to democratisation of access to higher education in many countries. As the enrolment in higher education institutions increases the higher education institutions (HEIs) are confronted with demands by multiple stakeholders to produce graduates who can meet the needs of the future workforce.

During the late 20th century the research about first-year experience (FYE) started gaining attention (Mohd Azraai, Mohd Ismail, Balachandran, Mohd Zaki & Doria, 2012). This phenomenon is reflected by the evolvement of dedicated centres for FYE research such as the National Resource Centre for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina. Currently, this centre's mission is to make available opportunities for the development of best practices in FYE through scholarly activities and professional practices (University of South Carolina, 2017). Similarly, the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne generated a two-decade report (1994 to 2014) on FYE for Australia. This implies that purposeful investigation of

FYE programmes and services have been designed and documented in these two regions of the world.

The areas of research and or development in FYE can be traced through the research generated by Nelson, Clarke, Kift, and Creagh (2011) which will be described in the literature review section of this paper. These areas include support by the academic and professional staff as well as institutional strategies (Lamar and Burnett, 2013).

The purpose of this pilot study is to identify and describe the first-year experience of culinary students at a private higher education institution in Malaysia in order to explore preliminary findings for a future university-wide study of first-year students.

1. What are the academic adjustments experienced by first-year university students?
2. What are the social adjustments experienced by first-year university students?
3. How do the first-year university students manage their academic and social adjustments?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on FYE internationally has been dominated by publications from institutions in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. There are limited research publications in the Asian region about FYE, especially in Malaysia. Additionally, this gap is compounded because the study on culinary students and or culinary education in Malaysia is scarce. It is important to identify some of the literature and best practices established in other countries in order for HEIs in Malaysia that would like to design and or implement FYE programmes to determine if some of the programmes and or ideas may be applicable to the local higher education environment. As a result, this section describes the work of Nelson, Clarke, Kift, and Creagh (2011) who conducted a comprehensive review of the literature about FYE programmes and practices, especially in Australasia. An extensive analysis of 400 research reports and conceptual discussions from 2000 to 2010 concluded that the development of FYE can be divided into three stages or time periods. They are:

FYE Literature: 2000-2003

The programmes and or practices identified from the literature published during these three years documented FYE initiatives that we more isolated or silo in nature. This implies that interested individuals who deemed this exercise as an important area of growth for the university and or for the students embarked on this effort in the absence or possibly a macro university-lead strategy or initiative. The activities that were identified during this time period included focusing on the needs of first-year students as the student population became increasingly diverse. Orientation programmes that included camp-like activities as well as other activities such as Transition Workshops were named to reflect first-year concerns. In addition, the focus on studying the influence of student-lead-student initiatives such as Peer Mentoring was significant. In summary, the nature of the work initiated during this three-year period involved more co-curricular programmes. The authors deemed such initiatives as the first-generation FYE approach. Nevertheless, according to Nelson and

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Clarke (2014) there were indicators of second and third generation programmes and initiatives by HEIs to address the latter that is the curriculum for first-year students and the former that is a whole-campus approach to address FYE as a university strategy.

FYE Literature: 2004–2007

These three years of FYE literature saw the emergence of the development of conceptual frameworks, cross-institutional leadership, and more learner-centred programmes. Nelson and Clarke (2014) concluded that first-generation FYE programmes still exist but were more well-defined. They commented, "First generation activities were still prevalent, but they were subtly more sophisticated than the previous period" (p.26). Orientation and peer-mentoring programmes were still the focus of FYE initiatives but changes identified included a longer period for the latter and variations of the former. The significant shift at this time was the emergence of more second generation approaches and indicators of the development of the third generation approaches. First-Year Curriculum Principles were more prominent as more studies were conducted in relation to the subjects in a programme of study or the discipline.

FYE Literature: 2008–2010

This phase saw the emergence of the engagement of a first-year curriculum and the main focus was on the concept of student engagement. The research output produced during these three years primarily were on developing, implementing and measuring the different ways students are engaged with their studies. Discovering more about student expectations and aspects of monitoring students' adjustment to their first year at the university was a prominent emphasis during this time. Additionally, the evolvement of a university approach to address FYE issues and concerns as more HEIs design institutional strategies to facilitate the transition of students from secondary to university studies was observed.

FYE Literature in Malaysia

The literature on FYE research in Malaysia is scarce. Currently, scholarly activities and practices in FYE in Malaysia is the domain of scholars and practitioners. There are journal articles on FYE research published in different journals. A recent publication on FYE research in Malaysia is by Awang, Kutty and Ahmad (2014) who qualitatively studied the social support provided to first-year university students in their ability to adapt to the culture of a university. Sixteen students were interviewed twice during the first and second semester of their studies to ascertain their academic, social and emotional adjustment as first-year students. The results indicate that support from peers, senior students, and family is crucial to the first-year students' ability to adapt to the university's norms and mores.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative methodology was employed for this exploratory study. The philosophy underpinning this methodology is the construction of meaning that belies the experience of individuals and or participants in a particular context or environment. Another characteristic

of qualitative research is the role of the researcher as the instrument in contexts where interviews are conducted.

Research Design

This exploratory study employed the phenomenological approach to investigate the essence of first-year culinary students' experience in their first semester of studies. This approach focuses on the lived experiences of several individuals in order to determine the common thread about the phenomenon.

Demographic Information

Four students in the September 2016 intake of a Diploma in Culinary Arts programme in a private HEI in the city of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia participated in this study. The students were slightly more than half-way through their first semester of studies at the university. Being new students to the programme and university they were purposely chosen as the samples for this exploratory study because their experience as new students may help to shed light on the possible gaps that need to be addressed in order to ensure that first-year students are accorded the help deemed necessary as they adjust to a relatively new environment and academic system. The significant employment of purposeful sampling allows for these students to share their thoughts and insights into the different ways they managed themselves and the new environment because of their "lived experience."

Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants

Students	Gender	Background
S1	Female	Studied in another institution for two years
S2	Male	Studied in another institution for two years
S3	Female	Studied in another institution for 6 months
S4	Male	Worked for a year before enrolling at the university

There is an interesting element that is common among the four students who participated in this pilot exploratory study. All of them did not enrol in the culinary programme immediately after completing their secondary studies. Three of the students initially embarked on a different route of studies but managed to convince their parents to allow them to pursue culinary education as it is their main interest as a career choice. One student

decided to work for a year before enrolling in the said programme because he wanted to be financially prepared.

Data Collection Procedures

Four students volunteered to participate in the interview when a request was made known about the research project during one of their classes. Appointments were made to enable open-ended one-on-one interviews to take place. The informed consent form was presented to the students to fulfil the ethics requirements and protocol of the research. The confidentiality of the information shared was established prior to the interview session. In addition, permission to audio tape the interview was obtained.

Data Analysis Procedures

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The constant comparative approached was used as the analysis of the preliminary data from the first interview was compared with the data from the second and progressively. The data were reduced to specific emerging themes that could be categorized to reflect the experiences of the students during the first-semester of their diploma studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This exploratory phenomenological study resulted in three themes with several sub-themes. They are Approaches to Academic Adjustment, Approaches to Social Adjustment and Transitioning to the University.

Table 2: Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
1. Approaches to Academic Adjustment	a) Adjusting to Group Learning b) Learning by Doing
2. Approaches to Social Adjustment	a) Being with Peers b) Being with Senior Students c) Being with Academic Staff
3. Transitioning to the University	a) Half-way Moment b) Symbolic Moment

Theme 1: Approaches to Academic Adjustment

Theme one highlights the different ways adopted by these culinary students to manage their academic requirements. This theme is supported by two sub-themes, which are Adjusting to Group Learning and Learning by Doing respectively.

Adjusting to Group Learning

The students described adjusting to their group assignment as one of the most challenging hurdles to overcome during their first semester of studies. Although it was an academic task that they had to accomplish, the ability to build the group's rapport was an area of concern. S3 said, "Because need to have better communication with other group members. Sometimes they have different ideas. So, it is a bit difficult to get the same idea." One of the students voiced his concerns about his classmates not lending a helping hand in the kitchen that may affect the completion of a task.

He said:

> *But in my group when some other people are busy they don't help. So, we end class late. That is what I am worried if this continues into the next semester because we are going to do in group and like we have to prepare first the ingredients and stuff. So, if they don't know when to help or how to help that will delay our work and that is what I am afraid* (S2).

Learning by Doing

Another aspect of adjusting to the academic requirements is the students' adaption to learning by doing, which implies that they are aware that the nature of the culinary programme requires them to build their skills through multiple and repeated hands-on tasks.

S4 described his experience, "Most of the students who take culinary and pastry we are more practical. We are more to touch and feel and to understand the process. We can't catch by people reading it to us or telling us." S1 emphasized that the practical sessions of her classes are more interesting than the classes that are more lecture-type, which is described as a theory class. She said, "I am more of a ….. like everyone prefers practical obviously. But it's fun learning practical stuff more than theory.

Theme 2: Approaches to Social Adjustment

The students described several ways they developed social connections among their peers and academic staff. Three sub-themes were categorized and they are Being with Peers, Being with Seniors and Being with Academic Staff.

Being with Peers

The importance of getting along with one's classmates and or peers may help to establish a comfortable learning environment, especially if the area of study is endorsed. For example, S1 was forced to explore another area of study prior to joining the culinary programme. She described her experience during the orientation programme for new students when someone commented, "You're doing Culinary? That's so cool. I was forced to do another thing. I kind of feel appreciated when I came here." This was refreshing to S1 because there were other situations where she felt that culinary students tend to be looked down by others. In addition, S1experienced the friendliness of the campus environment of the university during orientation and realized that she would be comfortable as a new student.

Being with Senior Students

The reliance on information provided by senior students in the programme helped some of the new students to manage the academic and social environment. The students spent time with the senior students to find out more information about subjects that they are taking, the level of difficulty and the lecturers who teach these subjects. This implies that some new students learned to gather information to help them manage the people around them and the environment that they are in. S3 briefly said, "Hmm… seniors." Another student said:

> *I just met them during classes like Food and Beverage Service in the café because for the first semester we have food and beverage classes. While we were serving and the chefs inside who are Semester Five and cooking the Asean cuisine I would make friends with them and try to understand what's going on and what was the previous semester like. Was the course different? Was the lecturer different? I would ask stuff like that* (S4).

Being with Academic Staff

Academic staff plays a pivotal role in assisting new students to manage their first-semester of studies as they engage with students either in the classroom and or in other settings (Egeaa, Griffiths and McKenzie, 2014). The staff may need students to volunteer to help in the kitchen if there is an event that requires them to provide food and beverage. Through such contexts students are provided the opportunities to build their rapport with the staff. S4 said, "Yeah, I don't mind volunteering to either learn or to get closer to the chef." S1 described her experience when she encountered a problem, "He understands me and accepted what I needed. He found a way to arrange it for me."

Theme 3: Transitioning to the University

The ability to adapt and adjust to a new campus environment is influenced by factors such as peers, seniors and staff. The process may be experienced differently by individual students because of the different ways of thinking and managing a new situation. Hence, there may be different transitioning experiences for students in their first-semester of studies. The two sub-themes in the students' transition to the university, which are the Half-Way Moment and

the Symbolic Moment, reflect the student's experience of managing their adjustment to the university.

Half-Way Moment

One of the ways of managing the transition is the focus on the requirements of their courses, which includes assignments, quizzes, and tests. The mid-term exam which is typically administered during the middle of the semester is considered as the transitioning point of S3 as, ""Maybe week 6….. Like I already arrange all the assignments like which ones to complete first and some of them already completed."

Symbolic Moment

Another moment of realisation for the transition of these culinary students is the symbolic meaning of their identity and their practical classes. S2 said, "In week two, when I entered the kitchen I know how the chef handles how we prepare the ingredients and stuff I know how good the lecturers are. And then I know I think I am fine here." S1 described her symbolic moment as, "The first time we were baking it was nice like finally we get to do something fun." The hands-on sessions in the kitchen engages the students and have been described as a moment where they were looking forward to as part of their first-semester experience.

Implications and Recommendations

The first year of studies for a university student may be a daunting experience as they have to adjust to a new environment and system, which may be different from that of their secondary school experience. Hence, a university that provides an intentionally designed programme to address the potential needs of first-year students may help to ease the transition of these students from a secondary school to university environment and system. In addition, academic and professional staff that is trained in the knowledge of and about first-year experience may be able to help first-year students with their transition in a more meaningful way.

CONCLUSION

FYE studies in the university have been an area of research for many countries such as the United States of America, Australia and the United Kingdom. However, the research in many Asian countries such as Malaysia is scarce. In addition, the research on the teaching and learning experiences of culinary students is equally limited. Hence, it is important for universities in Malaysia to consider exploring this area intentionally to build the literature and potential best practices to help students transition to the university in a meaningful manner.

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