

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The 'Double Transition' for First-Year Students: Understanding the Impact of Covid-19 on South Africa's First-Year University Students

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## *Abstract*

*While all students are affected by the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, the first-year student population remains a special category of vulnerability for higher education. This is on account of the way the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted their transition into university and complicated the nature of their entry into and through the formal academic cycle. This article uses the notion of a 'double transition' as a framework for positioning and locating the first-year student transition within the context of the prevailing Covid-19 pandemic. 'Double transition' refers to an additional transition coupled with that of the first-year transition, with regard to the extraordinary situation of students navigating their entry into the unfamiliar terrain of academia while simultaneously navigating the Covid-19 pandemic. The article provides a circumscribed summary of the effects of Covid-19 on university students and looks to describe and explain the nature and shape of first-year transitions in relation to the transition necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. It concludes with four key strategies for supporting first-year students as the pandemic continues.*

## *Keywords*

*Covid-19; first-year students; online teaching and learning; student transitions; transition support systems*

## *Introduction*

This article is written at a very dire time in global and South African history, as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to reconfigure society in devastating and possibly permanent ways. The article herein focuses on one particular aspect of the Covid-19 crisis as it affects higher education: the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on first-year university students.

In recent months, the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic has seen a fundamental and dramatic restructuring of the global and national higher education agenda, including the cessation of normal campus operations and the swift move to online teaching and learning systems. The Covid-19 pandemic caught South Africa's higher education sector mostly off-guard. This sector has had to hastily engage in relatively new and largely untested online teaching and learning systems, showing up and adversely impacting the number of students

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and staff who do not have access to the requisite technologies and connectivity, or even electricity in the case of those staff and students from poor or low-income backgrounds. Never before has the issue of access to, and affordability of, internet services been so crucial. It is within this prevailing context of disruption and uncertainty, that the fate of one of the sector's most vulnerable sub-populations, i.e. students in their first year of university study, has unfortunately become subsumed amongst multiple competing issues on the higher education agenda. It is anticipated and, indeed feared, that universities, preoccupied with online teaching and learning and making up for lost academic time in the academic calendar, may lose the focus on matters of student transition and support.

Over the past two decades a great deal of effort has been invested by South Africa's universities in matters of First-Year Experience, much of which has drawn from an immense body of global scholarship about student transitions and support (Nyar, 2019). Such scholarship makes a persuasive case for seeing the first year of university study as qualitatively different from the rest of the higher education journey and, further, for affording specialised attention to the first year (Gardner, 1986; Upcraft et al., 2005; Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Johnston, 2010; Greenfield et al., 2013).

The first-year transition is based on the idea that first-year students have specialised needs on account of the critical importance of the year. The first year of university study is seen as the foundation of the higher journey, one which sets the emotional and academic tone for the rest of the higher education journey of students and often determines the ways in which students respond to the rest of their studies and their time in the higher education system. Throughput data in many countries and contexts across the world has consistently shown that the initial weeks of the first year are also the time at which students are most likely to drop out from their course in the first year of study. As such, the first year may well function as the basis of students' decision to stay or exit the higher education system (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1996; Kantanis, 2000; Thomas, 2002; Thomas & Quinn, 2006). It is, therefore, recognised as a critical transition period which may well affect the educational outcomes of students in a more profound way than other types of transitions (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Tinto, 1993; Terenzini & Pascarella, 2005).

Given the importance of the first year of study and the corresponding disruption posed to the first year of study by the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of questions arise: How will first-year students navigate the 'new' face of the higher education journey? How is transition understood and experienced in the context of the first year of study? What can universities realistically do to support first-year students through the Covid-19 pandemic? This article seeks to respond to the aforementioned questions, by way of critical reflection and analysis.

### *How Does Theory Assist in Our Understanding of Student Transition?*

Research and theories on life transitions are abundant in fields such as psychology and sociology, and have helped inform thinking about the subject in higher education. One of the most popular starting points for a theoretical understanding of transition in higher education is that of Nancy Schlossberg, a clinical psychologist (1981). Schlossberg's work

on life transitions is widely used by many student affairs professionals, particularly so in the areas of academic advising and career services. Schlossberg proposed a transition model which describes transition as “any event or non-event which results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 33) and identifies four major factors which allow individuals to deal with transition: Situation, Self, Support and Strategies (Schlossberg, 1981). Later, Schlossberg collaborated with student development theorist, Arthur Chickering, in order to adapt her transition theory to apply to college students. They describe the ways in which college students move through the transition process as a series of phases, termed “moving in”, “moving out” and “moving through” (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995, p.1).

In the field of higher education, student transition is most helpfully framed through the sprawling field of student development theory, which looks to explain and understand the developmental growth of university students (Chickering, 1969; Perry, 1970; Loevinger, 1976; Vygotsky, 1978). The student development literature looks to understand the individual experience and interpretation of transition, but also explores how transition happens in the interface between the characteristics of individual students (socio-economic background, prior experiences of learning, etc.) and the broader social and political context in which the student is located. Towards this end, O'Donnell, Kean and Stevens (2016) explain the role of institutions and larger social contexts in relation to student transition. They understand transition as the intersection between the student and the social context in which the student is embedded. Further, the meaning attributed to the transition by the student experiencing it, and the ease with which the student navigates the transition, depends upon the social contexts in which the transition occurs and the amount of support available to the student.

Accordingly, higher education scholars, such as Vincent Tinto, Alexander Astin, Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini have argued persuasively that universities must support student transitions, and indeed have a responsibility to do so (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Hussey & Smith, 2010). Towards this end, for example, Hussey and Smith (2010) propose that part of the purpose of higher education is to support the transitions experienced by students, and further, that the design and delivery of higher education should be predicated on the concept of student transition.

Hussey and Smith state:

‘Transition’ is not a precise term. Transitions are large, complex and significant changes that occur in a student’s life: a nested pattern of lesser changes. They may concern their learning, circumstances, self-concept, autonomy, maturity and so forth. They are changes that the student, parents, friends, prospective employers and educators judge to be of real significance. Some may be intended and brought about by design, others may emerge by happenstance; some will be evaluated as positive, others negative. Examples include such things as the transition from home to university; from dependent youngster to independent adult; from novice to knowledgeable, skilled practitioner or from engaged student to disaffected dropout. Those involved in education have the task of deciding which transitions are desirable and which are undesirable, and amongst the

former, the priority and order in which they need to be made. Teachers and other staff have to decide how to go about helping students through these transitions and how to detect and measure progress. All this is just describing what higher education has always been about, but describing it in this way changes it from an institution-based system through which students are processed, to a student-centred system, which, at least to some extent, attends to the needs of the individual and their capacity to progress. (Hussey & Smith, 2010, p.120)

While centring the role of higher education institutions, it is also recognised that students hold agency. Students play an equally important role in facilitating their own transitions through higher education. It is argued that students have a joint responsibility to manage their transitions and facilitate their own educational outcomes, and further, that universities must be demanding of their expectations for students and work to develop agency and active self-government in their students (Tinto, 1993; McInnis, 2001). This is in line with Sanford's theory of student development (Sanford, 1968), which suggests a 'challenge-support balance'. The 'challenge-support balance' theory is based on the idea that too much challenge may alienate and frustrate students while too much support may never push students into achieving their full developmental potential. Sanford advocated that optimum student growth and development is best facilitated by an appropriate blend of challenge and support.

Of particular interest to this article for the purposes of understanding student transition, is the work of Gale and Parker (2014). They argue that higher education tends to see transition in terms of three broad conceptualisations of transition, i.e. induction, development and becoming, which may not do justice to the real lived experiences of student transition. They make a case for seeing transition for the dynamic, negotiated and non-linear phenomenon that it is. Similarly, Quinn (2010, p. 127) argues for seeing transition in terms of complexity. She advocates for using the pluralised form of transition, i.e. as in "multiple transitions into, out of, through, across and re-entering higher education".

Gale and Parker's (2014, p. 737) definition of transition as "the capability to navigate change" is particularly instructive in its acknowledgement that transitions affect students differentially, particularly those from low-income or historically disadvantaged backgrounds (Gale & Parker, 2014; Briggs et al., 2012; Thomas, 2002). As expostulated by Thomas (2002, p. 413): "If a student feels that they do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is under-valued, they may be more inclined to withdraw early." Reference is made here to Pierre Bourdieu's seminal theoretical work on habitus and cultural capital, which helps to explain differences and disparities in educational outcomes (Bourdieu, 1973). Bourdieu theorised that less advantaged students who have not had the benefit of exposure to the discourses and practices of the higher education system, will not adapt as easily as those who have already had the benefit of cultural capital acquired from their backgrounds and networks. Students from privileged class backgrounds are less likely to encounter constraints or barriers than those who are less advantaged.

Together, these various theoretical arguments provide a framework for understanding student transition. One may, therefore, draw the following conclusions about transition:

- (a) Transition is about more than the student's individual experience of it. Transition cannot be understood without reference to the context in which the transition takes place, and the social and cultural factors involved in that transition;
- (b) Universities have an obligation to support students throughout transition; and that support must involve agency from students to help facilitate their own success in their studies;
- (c) Transition affects students differentially. Some students will fare better than others. This is due to the amount of cultural capital to which they have access.

This more general conceptualisation of transition helps better understand the nature of educational transitions, more specifically, the first-year transition, and further, how this particular educational transition has been complicated and, indeed, disrupted by the advent of Covid-19. The first-year student population can be said to be facing a 'double' transition of sorts: first, a first-year transition involving the challenges typical of the first year of university study; and, second, an overlapping, equally unsettling, transition, involving the adaptation to a Covid-19-mediated way of life at university.

### *Understanding the First-year Transition in the Context of Covid-19*

Transitions are a permanent and indeed inescapable part of the human condition, and often have far-reaching consequences for those experiencing them. The process of transition can require individuals to alter their perceptions of self, relinquish familiar reference points, objects or persons, de-link from previous or existing support structures, and sometimes make uncomfortable adjustments to accommodate their altered or new realities. As such, transitions can involve a wide array of emotions, some of which can leave individuals feeling disoriented, or even traumatised. Feelings of anxiety, depression or trauma can accompany transitions. In line with the arguments of scholars advocating support for the transition that takes place in higher education, there is an urgent need to develop support frameworks for students. Such support frameworks can mitigate some of the effects of the two transitions taking place simultaneously at the point of vulnerability in the higher education journey, which is the first year of study.

### **Challenges of the first-year student transition**

The first-year student transition serves as an example of a life transition involving fundamental change in which individuals struggle to adapt and require support and coping resources. The first year of university study can be aptly described as a 'culture shock'. Students in their first year of study must familiarise themselves with the complex ecosystem of processes, procedures and specific requirements of the university system. For example, logistical competencies are required to navigate such basic university processes and procedures as timetables, maps, schedules, lecture notes, finances, etc. There is an

acute emotional and psychological component to the first-year transition for students, as students navigate the complex bureaucracy of the universities, establish new relationships and adjust to the discourse and demands of academia. They face a wide range of challenges and stressors in their new environment, which predisposes them to high levels of anxiety and stress (Clark, 2005; Christie, 2009). While some students may possibly navigate this transition with relative ease, other students experience difficulties in adjustment and require support (Briggs et al., 2012; Gale & Parker, 2014).

The new and changing nature of academic learning, involving departure from the predictable frameworks of school to the relative anonymity and autonomy of university, represents one of the most significant challenges for the first-year student. Students often struggle in order to develop the requirements for academic learning, i.e. flexibility, autonomy and self-directed learning involving reading and critical thinking in ways that are profoundly different from high school learning strategies (Ramsden, 1992; Cook & Leckey, 1999; Krause, 2006; Lowe & Cook, 2010). First-year students also struggle to adapt to teaching which takes place most often in large and unfamiliar classroom settings, generally under conditions of relative anonymity. Large class learning is typically associated with limited student engagement and insufficient depth of learning, and may, as Cuseo (2007, p. 2) notes, “initiate maladaptive learning habits or predispositions to learning that linger beyond the first year”.

### **Challenges of the Covid-19 transition**

Covid-19 is a novel disease and hence unanticipated and unexplored. The rapid transmission rate and high mortality rate of Covid-19 renders the disease especially frightening. For first-year students undergoing their introduction to university while coping with the Covid-19 pandemic, their transition can be described as especially traumatic. As Schlossberg et al. have noted, the impact of a transition increases exponentially when the transition is unanticipated (Schlossberg, 1981). While the challenges of the first-year transition are anticipated for the most part, they are often not fully understood or the extent of those changes are unappreciated. Students are often not fully aware of the nature and extent of the first-year transition, until they are able to fully experience the transition for themselves. The Covid-19 pandemic heightens the complexity of the first-year transition on account of the wholly unanticipated nature of Covid-19.

The unanticipated nature of the Covid-19 pandemic echoes the theoretical understanding of the fundamental nature of transition as unpredictable and irregular (Briggs et al., 2012; Gale & Parker, 2014). Under normal circumstances, the first-year transition is a destabilising process. When coupled with the exigencies of the Covid-19 pandemic, the first-year transition may well become impossible for students to navigate. For first-year students, the Covid-19 pandemic has come to represent an additional layer of complexity in the context of their introduction to higher education.

The impact of transition is also measured in terms of the degree to which it alters familiar routines and daily lifestyle. First-year students have had to negotiate their transition

to online learning, while living under conditions of enforced social distancing – all in the context of the new and unfamiliar setting of academia and the world of the university. Due to problems with registration processes, they were only able to experience approximately six weeks of traditional contact learning before the commencement of the national lockdown on 26 March 2020 and the subsequent implementation of a raft of Covid-19 restrictions on daily life. Mathiba's article (2020) describes the challenges facing students as a result of Covid-19 as a "raft of problems". Campus closures took place in a haphazard and confusing way, with many students having to incur costs for unplanned travel, housing and last-minute relocation. Moreover, the hasty nature of South Africa's national lockdown has ensnared many students in bureaucratic predicaments regarding accommodation, transport and food, for example, in terms of refunds for meals and accommodation, or problems of lease agreements for those students who are renting accommodation off-campus and are locked into contracts with landlords.

Many students are experiencing financial hardships on account of sustained job and income losses as a result of Covid-19. The closure of universities has also cut certain students off from employment opportunities, such as those students who may have had part-time work in libraries or cafeterias; or resources, such as those students who may have been receiving food as part of a meals programme offered by their university. Accordingly, first-year students are most likely to be suffering psychological impacts on account of the profound disruptions to their daily lives. Such disruption is compounded by the Covid-19 imposed restrictions on their social lives and the sudden removal of their daily routines of socialisation. It is possible to surmise that prolonged social distancing may well predispose students towards modifying or changing their socialising habits, including their willingness to be in crowds or any or all highly populated spaces.

As an unanticipated transition, the move to online teaching and learning has been sudden and unprecedented for all of South Africa's students. While South Africa's universities have had some limited experience with online teaching and learning, including blended learning, universities are generally not well-positioned to support large-scale online learning. The move to online teaching and learning has been hasty, with little preparation and limited educator training. Students have struggled to transition to online teaching and learning, despite the availability of learning materials and zero-rated applications. Moreover, the overload of information through different software platforms, mobile applications and emails may be an additional source of anxiety and stress for students (Dell, 2020; Macupe, 2020).

Given the sudden onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic, there are limited studies on the effects of Covid-19 on the mental health of university students. It can, nonetheless, be surmised that the Covid-19 pandemic holds serious mental health and trauma implications for students (Brookes et al., 2020; Salari et al., 2020; Rajkumar, 2020). Students may experience the disruption to the normal routines of daily life as destabilising, requiring an adaptation of their normal coping strategies towards adversity and putting them at risk of adverse adaptive strategies. For those students who may also be preoccupied with illness or

caring responsibilities on account of Covid-19, this may represent time taken away from their studies and further anxiety about the effect on their studies. Constant exposure to news and information about the pandemic, including misinformation and sensationalist news, may also continue to compromise the mental health and well-being of students.

Given the well-established intersection between poverty and mental health, the demographic likely to be most severely affected by Covid-19 are those from low-income or disadvantaged communities. Students from such backgrounds may experience pronounced isolation and frustration in the course of their learning, in addition to the customary stressors of their daily existence, such as financial hardship, food insecurity and precarious home environments. Certain categories of vulnerable students in the first-year student population may face an increased risk of anxiety and depression during the pandemic, such as those students who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (questioning), Intersex, Asexual and Other non-heterosexual people (LGBTQIA+), disabled or with some form of illness or impairment.

The double transition is summarised below in a tabular synthesised form as Table 1. This table helps to succinctly illustrate the nature of this 'double transition' and all the disruption that is involved in the double transition with regard to the dynamics of the first-year transition which is being simultaneously experienced. By closely positioning the two transitions under the organising framework of common transition categories, viz. Academic, Social/Psychological and Logistical, it is possible to appreciate the depth and extent of the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic and how the pandemic has deepened and intensified all the existing challenges of transition.

### *Predicted Long-Term Impacts of the Double Transition*

#### **Prolonged financial hardship**

Depending on the trajectory of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa, financial hardships for students could possibly continue and extend for several years to come. First-year students may well be disillusioned by their untimely introduction to the higher education system. They may even question the value for money of an education under the restrictions of Covid-19 and possibly make the decision to leave the system altogether in light of the longer-term outlook for employment. Some may leave the system altogether simply on account of Covid-19 induced impoverishment. It is possible to surmise that South Africa's 'missing middle' (i.e. those students from poor or middle-income backgrounds who do not qualify for national government funding support on account of their combined family incomes being higher than the minimum family income amount stipulated for assistance) may expand on account of Covid-19 job losses and impoverishment of families and communities.



Table 1: The double transition of first-year students

Transition Categories	First-Year Transition	Covid-19 transition
Academic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change in expectations and assumptions about the nature of academic learning as well as the style and pace of instruction.</li> <li>• Need for self-directed learning, in ways that are profoundly different from high school learning strategies.</li> <li>• Immersion in the large classroom setting, under conditions of relative anonymity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abrupt entry into a complex learning modality, which puts pressure on students to access the required computer hardware and internet connectivity.</li> <li>• Possibility of boredom and academic disengagement in an online teaching and learning environment.</li> <li>• In the case of infection, time lost towards studies.</li> </ul>
Social/ Psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wide range of challenges and stressors in the new environment, including the establishment and negotiation of a range of different personal relationships with both peers and faculty.</li> <li>• Predisposition to loneliness, self-doubt and homesickness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heightened levels of psychological distress on account of disruption to daily routine, anxiety about increasing infection rates and fears about financial hardships and academic delays.</li> <li>• Health-related fears about Covid-19, including fear of illness or death, particularly with regard to those students who have experienced the illnesses of family members with Covid-19, especially older family members. Older adults are at the highest risk for Covid-19.</li> <li>• Possible assumption of caring responsibilities for ill family members or acquaintances.</li> <li>• Isolation on account of restrictions on social life.</li> <li>• Anxiety on account of constant exposure to Covid-19 news and possible misinformation.</li> <li>• Impact of sickness or even death of a classmate, roommate, and/or university staff member known to the student.</li> </ul>
Logistical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New or greater requirements for logistical competencies in terms of all matters of their own food, transport and accommodation, as well as university processes and procedures (e.g. timetables, maps, schedules, lecture notes, finances, etc.).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need for proficiency in new online learning tools and methods, while learning to comply with Covid-19 safety and hygiene protocols in daily life.</li> <li>• Insecure access to personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks and sanitisers.</li> </ul>

### **Mental health crisis for students**

A long-term mental health crisis is predicted for students. The implications of a sustained immersion in the Covid-19 pandemic, with all the attendant fear, anxiety and depression in parallel with pre-existing high levels of stress, have not yet been explored for students. The timeframe of the double transition must be taken into account. Short spells of the double transition can obviously be considered less detrimental than prolonged exposure to the stresses and uncertainties of the pandemic. The potential long-term consequences for students may only be understood in the future, as the pandemic continues and depressive symptoms fully present themselves. It would be prudent for universities to invest in the mental health of students, before mental health problems become entrenched. Therefore, it can be said that monitoring and oversight of the mental health of students should be seen as an immediate strategic priority for universities. It is necessary to follow the trajectory of the mental health and well-being of students, as the pandemic continues.

### **An uncertain future for online teaching and learning**

The extent to which online teaching and learning is able to find purchase with students, will only be seen in the coming months and years. There are few learning strategies which explicitly speak to the special needs of first-year students. The subject of specific pedagogies for first-year students remains one which is largely unexplored (Nathan, 2005; Erickson et al., 2006; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). While the move to online teaching and learning has happened on account of necessity, it has also been propelled by far-reaching and naïve assumptions about South Africa's digital readiness and the idea that the 21st-century student population will be more adept at online teaching and learning than previous generations of learners. It can be argued that while students are, on average, more acclimated to technology than previous generations of students, this should not automatically assume the high levels of technological proficiency that would, for example, be needed for successful online teaching and learning. The latter is particularly true in light of the fact that modern forms of technology are continually updating and changing.

Long-term academic disengagement is a risk of the double transition. Students may quickly become bored with learning materials, particularly so in a home-centric learning environment which can be isolating and prone to distractions. The double transition may inculcate poor learning styles and habits during the pandemic which may linger throughout their time in the higher education system. It is also possible to predict that some students may embrace online teaching and learning, and appreciate the flexibility and convenience of online teaching and learning as a more appealing option than traditional classroom forms of instruction, which has long been criticised for its redundancy in terms of 21st-century learning. Of course, much depends on educator expertise, and the ability of institutions of higher education to provide the training and education which can strengthen teaching strategies.

### Loss or dilution of 'the university experience'

Universities offer a sense of social engagement and connection for students. The Covid-19 pandemic has deprived first-year students of all the experiences involved in an active and engaged student life, as well as the multiple opportunities for personal growth and social development that university life has to offer. The experiential aspect of university goes beyond teaching and learning and extends to a wider universe of campus-based experiences, such as accommodation, employment, career advice, mentoring, psychological support services, all of which encompass the student lifestyle (Morgan, 2012). Under the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic, first-year students miss out on the vibrancy and immediacy of the engagement with the totality of student experiences at university. Moreover, all the tools traditionally employed by universities to aid students transition (e.g., orientation, mentoring and various support services) are now significantly diluted or weakened by the recourse to all online modes of interaction.

It goes without saying that theories of transition in higher education must now take into account the 'double transition' and find ways to mitigate its insidious impact on the educational outcomes of first-year students. The Covid-19 pandemic may be seen as a critical watershed issue that could influence the life trajectories of students in both short term and long-term scenarios. As the first year is understood to be the crucial determining year for how students respond to the rest of their studies, this experience of the Covid-19 pandemic and their 'double transition' may well prove to be a formative one for students and exert a lasting impact. As this moment is evolving, it will remain incumbent on educators to study the effects of the 'double transition' on future generations of learners.

### *Strategies to Mitigate the 'Double Transition'*

It is difficult to make definitive pronouncements in the prevailing contexts of uncertainty and unpredictability surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. It is, in fact, impossible to predict the effects of Covid-19, and there is also much about the Covid-19 virus that yet remains clinically unclear or unknown. There are, however, a number of ways in which the double transition can be addressed in the hopes of ameliorating the challenging circumstances of first-year students and providing some (short- and long-term) relief for their circumstances. Several recommendations are advanced here, some of which relate to the broader macro-environment, and some of which can be reasonably effected within the higher education system.

First, financial relief for cash-strapped students is a matter of critical urgency. Higher education should be included in the national financial stimulus plans for economic and social recovery. Universities are also urged to explore and possibly tap into various social and economic funding measures put in place by national government in order to alleviate the financial hardships caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The matter of fee reductions for students has not been explicitly addressed by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) as well as the university sector (Deklerk, 2020). Given the costs borne by students of the shift to online platforms, the variability in quality of online teaching and the lack of access to critical elements of learning such as labs and clinical experience,

the current fee structure bears the need for review. Moreover, innovative ways to design a safety support for students should also be considered and explored with the private sector and donors, both local and international. This recommendation for a financial safety net for students is made in light of the financial hardships suffered by universities on account of Covid-19 and the likelihood of subsidy reductions, and the curtailment in student admissions.

The future of online teaching and learning is uncertain as universities are re-examining their customary approaches to teaching and learning on account of Covid-19. A great deal of institutional introspection is currently taking place about the renewal of the current teaching and learning model, and with regard to lessons learned during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is, however, clear that universities must now disengage from the emergency mode in which the transition to online teaching and learning first took place. Universities must now improve their pedagogical practice in terms of the delivery of online teaching and learning. It is also imperative that educators receive training and support, as they continue the work of online teaching and learning under the Covid-19 pandemic. Knowledge transfer from Unisa (University of South Africa), South Africa's largest open distance higher education institution, is critical and, indeed, expected during this time.

Mental health is considered a priority under normal circumstances of the first-year student transition. In the context of the first-year double transition, provisions for the mental health of students and access to high-quality mental health services, assumes ever greater importance. It is therefore imperative that student support be scaled up as the Covid-19 pandemic runs its course. While this may mean large-scale interventions such as ensuring sufficient numbers of well-trained counsellors, it can also mean smaller thoughtful strategies such as exploring the use of electronic devices for counselling, and possibly relaxing bureaucratic restrictions on such things as loaning of devices or access to lending resources. During this time of anxiety and uncertainty, it is urged that universities actively work towards inculcating a wider institutional culture of treating students with greater care and kindness than they have previously done. All departments who actively interface with students, i.e. admissions, fees, and security, should be trained in the dynamics and nuances of the double transition for first-year students, with the goal of developing more thoughtful and considered interactions with students during the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, it is important to recognise that provisions for mental health support should not only be the province of universities. It should be considered holistically as a critical element of South Africa's broader response to the Covid-19 pandemic and expanded into the country's primary health care services, so that all those who need it have immediate access to skilled psycho-social support

While the Covid-19 pandemic has inevitably endowed universities with a new singularity of purpose in their operations (i.e. focusing on the curriculum and recovering lost academic time), matters of student support should not be overlooked or compromised in any way. It is incumbent upon the First-Year community, and indeed all university staff, at all institutions of higher education, to ensure that matters of First-Year Experience and student support remain central to institutional agendas.

## *Conclusion*

This article has shown the complexity of the various challenges involved in the double transition of first-year students to higher education. While the large body of theoretical work as detailed in the first part of this article, has provided a roadmap of sorts to guide student transitions, it nonetheless offers no clear roadmap to dictate how this particular transition – the double transition – can best be managed. There is a need to develop a framework, as has been advanced herein and encapsulated in Table 1, that will best understand the complex trajectory of the double transition. Only time can predict how first-year students may move into different phases in this particular transition. This may involve moving beyond the current experience of turmoil and distress towards a period of acceptance in which the double transition is incorporated into the lives of first-year students. The implications of this double transition will vary widely in terms of the personalities of students and their individual repertoire of coping strategies. As Bourdieu and his various proponents remind, the extent of social capital and networks at the disposal of students will play a significant, if not defining, role in the way the double transition is managed.

It is possible to reframe the double transition as an empowering experience, despite the stress and trauma involved in this type of ordeal. Indeed, all transitions can be seen to hold a silver lining of sorts in the ways that they propel psychological growth and bring to the fore many positive qualities and characteristics in the personalities of individuals that will increase their ability to negotiate difficult and complex situations in their future. This article has advocated some strategies to mitigate the worst of the double transition, all of which can be reasonably effected by those in the higher education sector. It can be said, in closing, that for those working in the higher education sector, it is critically important to be aware of the impact of transitional experiences on the student population, and to continue to practise the kind of intentional care, trust and respect needed to guide and encourage first-year students through the challenges of the double transition.

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## *Conflict of Interest*

The author certifies that she has no affiliations or involvement in any organisation or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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