



A double-blind, peer-reviewed, open-access, and an HEC-recognized Y-category Journal

Research Journal of Human and Social Aspects

Web link: <https://rjhsa.cclll.org>

P-ISSN: [3006-9696](https://doi.org/10.71085/rjhsa.04.04.156), E-ISSN: [3006-970X](https://doi.org/10.71085/rjhsa.04.04.156)

Volume 4 Issue 4, 2026, Page Range: 306-312



From College to University: Exploring BS English First-year Students' Challenges and Strategies in Identity Transition

Muskan Sirohi¹ Doha Zafar² Bushra Mangi³ Mahnoor⁴

¹ BS TESOL, Department of English, The Begum Nusrat Bhutto Women University, Sukkur, Pakistan.

² BS TESOL Scholar, Department of English, The Begum Nusrat Bhutto Women University, Sukkur, Pakistan.

³ BS TESOL, Department of English, The Begum Nusrat Bhutto Women University, Sukkur, Pakistan.

⁴ BS TESOL, Department of English, The Begum Nusrat Bhutto Women University, Sukkur, Pakistan.

Correspondence Author: muskan3.22eng071@bnnbwu.edu.pk

Article information

Article History:

Received: 2026-08-23

Received in revised form:
2026-09-24

Accepted: 2026-09-29

Published Online: 2026-10-26

Keywords:

Adjustment; Identity Development; University Transition; Social Challenges; Students' Experiences.

ABSTRACT

Transitioning to university is one of the most important stages in students' educational Journeys. Students face different kinds of challenges when they move to university, which affect their identity, mindset, and adjustment at university. Therefore, the purpose of this Study is to identify the challenges students face during the transition, how those Challenges affect them, strategies they use to overcome them, and how they develop a New identity which fits in this demanding place. To identify those challenges, a qualitative approach was used to understand students' identity transition experiences. Fifteen participants were selected from the first semester of the BS English department at The Begum Nusrat Bhutto women university Sukkur, who have recently experienced such challenges. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data which were then analyzed and identified the key themes. The findings showed that students face both academic and social challenges when they move to university. They experience anxiety, nervousness, confusion, home sickness, loneliness, language barriers, time management issues, and they also find difficulty in making friends and managing academic pressure. The study also found the different strategies to deal with the Challenges they face, such as asking teachers or seniors for help, communicating with Classmates, and staying connected with families as they are the biggest supporters. Many Students shared that facing these difficulties helped them to grow emotionally and developed a new identity. These findings can help universities and teachers design better Support systems for first year university students as they enter a new environment.



© 2026 by the Authors. Sirohi, Zafar, Mangi & Mahnoor. This article is an open-access distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0) License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>

Introduction

Transitioning from college to university is the most important part of students' life. when they move university they do not face only academic challenges but identity challenges as well. A new institution where environment is totally different from their previous college, here they have to make new friends, relationship with teachers and peers, these changes can affect their identities. When students enter University, they often feel anxiety, stress, nervousness or excluded. Sometimes these challenges let them to quit, especially when they feel alone and unsupported at University (Ding and Curtis, 2021). As they move to a new environment, they start questioning their identities (Mec Farlane, 2018). They often feel that their previous identity has been left behind and now they have to make new identity which fulfills demands of university (Scanlon and Palmer et al., 2007)

Students who come from rural areas can face more difficulties because University environment is different from their previous experience (Turner and Tubbell, 2017). They might be confused first that how to adjust in this new place and how to change the identities which university demands. First generation students also experience emotional difficulties (Knoesan and Maude), because they have no guidance from their families and they are worried about that how to adjust in this new environment. These challenges can be stressful and can affect how they see themselves in this new environment. Understanding these challenges is necessary because the transition from college to University plays an important role in building students' confidence, creating new identity and adjusting in university.

Students feel academic challenges as well. Students need to study independently, they have to manage assignments or presentations and understand that how they will be graded. If they do know about these changes they might be less confident. Researchers give a term all these factors as "in-between stage" (Scheaper, 2020). They feel that their old college identities no longer exist and they have not fully developed a new university identity.

But it is the important time when students start to create their identities as a university learner.

The purpose of this study is to explore how students develop their identity during the transition from college to university and adjust in new environment. It aims to study about the strategies that students use to overcome these challenges and adopt to new environment. Insights from this study can help universities to design support system for students that help them during their transition, build their confidence, and develop a successfully identity.

This study can help us to identify the gaps, lacks and restrictions students face during the university transition. When students enter University, they often do not what they are feeling or what their needs are. Through this study we can come across all these factors. This study can change the university environment and educational patterns like curriculum and schedules and even teachers. This study can help university to analyze students' needs at first instead of focusing on subjects only.

Literature Review

Moving from college to university is one of the most important turning point in a student's life. This phase is not about entering a new environment, it includes some changes in their identity, how they see themselves, interaction with people, and how they deal with the new expectations. A new institution introduces a new environment, new teachers and new peers so students face difficulty to find out where to fit in. This sudden changes affect their identity. According to MecFarlane (2018), when students enter University, they start questioning their old identities and slowly developed new one as University learners. For rural students, this can be even more difficult because University life is different from their past experiences (Turner and Tubbell, 2017).

Scanlon 2007 and Palmer et al. say that when students move to university, they often feel detached from the previous identity. The identity they had in school or college no longer exists, yet they have not fully formed a new identity as a university student. This makes many students feel lost or excluded. This confusion is the beginning of

Identity change as they leave their old identities behind and slowly form a new one in a bigger and most challenging environment. Students often experience “in between” when they move from college to University. They are not part of school anymore, but they also have not fully adjusted in university environment. It can be stressful because they lost their friends, support system and sense of comfort. Now, they have to make new friends, learn new academic rules and adjust to a new environment. (Scheaper, 2020)

At the university level, students are required to work independently, think critically and understand the universe system. Many students face difficulties because University teaching methods are different from their previous college method. (Huges and Smail, 2015). Many students often struggle because they do not know, how they work will be assessed, how to handle the workload and how to communicate effectively with teachers. (Berzonsky and Kuk, 2000) say that students who have well-developed identity and think about the decisions adjust better in University. Students who avoid decisions or do not understand themselves usually face more academic problems. This shows that identity strongly affects how well students adapt to new university life.

Roman and Darwin (2014) say when students leave home for University often feel lonely and find it hard to adjusting socially because they have left behind the comfort and support networks. Kneosan and Maude point out that when a student from rural or first-generation background, struggle with emotional difficulties and develop a sense of not adjusting in university. According to Bilal et al. (2021), students who feel attached to university, called “institutional identity” tend to feel more confident and motivated. Moving to University can be emotionally challenging often leading to stress, anxiety, low self-esteem and fear of failing (Bowles et al. 2011). Sometimes emotional and academic challenges push students to quitting, especially when they feel isolated or unsupported at University (Ding and Curtis, 2021).

Thomas et al. (2012), say that students feel more confident and motivated when they perceive

University positively, a negative reputation can cause disconnection and low confidence. Eccles and Roeser, (2011) argue that student's identity also shaped by how other people see their institution, feeling respected by others help them to feel positive, while negative views can affect their identity. Many researchers have discussed about the challenges they face during transition, but very few discussed about development of Identity. There is a few research on strategies students use to overcome these challenges and how they adjust to this new academic methods, a new environment, and the development of new identities.

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative research approach to explore students' experiences of Identity transition from college to University. Qualitative design was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the students' personal experiences, perceptions and adjustment process during their first year at University. As identity development includes personal meaning, social relationships, and emotional growth, qualitative research allows these experiences to be explored in depth.

Fifteen participants from first year students from the BS English department who had recently transition from college to University. Purposive sampling was used to collect participants who met the criteria of having direct experience with its transition. The selected participants were considered suitable for providing rich and relevant information related to the research objectives.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Open ended questions were asked to explore how students perceived changes in their identity after entering University, the challenges they face during the transition, and the strategies they use to adjust to the new academic environment. This method allows participants to express thoughts and experiences. All interviews were conducted with prior permission and informed consent from the participants.

Ethical considerations were maintained through the research process. Participants were informed

about purpose of the study and were assure that their participation was voluntary. They were also informed that their personal information would remain confidential and the data would be used only for academic purposes.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The interview responses were read multiple times to gain understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions. key ideas were identified and coded, and similar codes were organized into broader categories through a systemic process. Six major themes were developed., reflected how student's identities evolved during their first year university. The thematic analysis provided a clear and structured interpretation of Identity development during the transition process.

Results

The data analysis of the interview revealed six major themes that illustrated the transition experiences of BS English first year students moving from college to University. These themes emerged the social, emotional and the academic challenges during initial phase of University Life, along with support system and coping strategies that helped them to adjust. The findings highlighted how transition process influenced personal growth and identity development over time. Over all, these themes presented a comprehensive understanding of how students experienced, managed and transformed through the transition into university life. Furthermore, these themes are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Emotional challenges during transition

The transition to University was emotionally challenging for students particularly during the initial period. Students reported that they were feeling alone and really anxious and did not know what to do or where to go, which made the early days very difficult. This indicates that entering a new environment can create fear and confusion among students. Student said that transition was challenging at first because it was a completely new environment where everything felt unfamiliar. Overall, they experienced emotional challenges

such as anxiety, loneliness during the transition period. They described their emotional challenges like this.

When I first came to University I felt alone, anxious, nervous. It was a new environment where everything was unfamiliar, which made the transition very difficult for me.

Social adjustment and role of initial support

Social adjustment played an important role to cope with these emotional challenges particularly through support from friends, parents and teachers. Students said that social adjustment was difficult because they had left many of their old friends and forming new friends was challenging for them. They emphasized that having peer support was most important at the initial stage. On the other hand, there were few students who said that they were confident at first and did not need any kind of support because University environment itself contributed to building their confidence. These finding suggest that some students rely on peer support and others gain confidence through the broader University environment and its support system.

When I came to University, I was alone and did not know where to go or what to do. I found it hard to adjust because I had left all my friends behind and now had to make new friends.

Academic experience and learning environment

Students reported that their academic experience and learning environment was positive and their expectations before entering University have largely been met. They expressed satisfaction with the overall standards of education and the level of study. Students stated that they expected high quality education and believe that they are achieving it. However, they identified one main challenge that college, where everything was planned and teachers centered, but now University requires them to Manage their responsibilities independently. Although students did not report any kind of pressure, but they considered time management to be a major challenge.

I am satisfied with the overall University education and environment, and what I expected before entering University has been totally met with my expectations. I expected high quality education and I am achieving it. The main challenge was that in college everything was planned, but at University I have to manage all my responsibilities independently. There is not much pressure, but time management is the most challenging thing for me.

Personal growth and identity development

Students reported that they are learning and growing through these challenges. Initially they did not know how to manage different responsibilities, however, over time they have gradually learn to handle them. They shared that in the begining they were shy and faced difficulty in interacting with other girls but they are now developing confidence. At first they struggled to communicate effectively with others but now they are able to communicate better. They also emphasized that they were worried about study, time management, but it has become easier for them over time.

Now I am learning and growing through these challenges. Initially, I did not know how to manage different responsibilities, but gradually I am learning. At first, I was very shy and faced many difficulties in interacting with other girls, I was unable to communicate effectively before, but now I feel more confidence and able to communicate better.

Role of teachers and institutional support

Participants reported that teachers were easy to communicate and supportive which help them adjust to University Life. Students shared that faculty members were approachable, polite and willing to listen to their questions and opinions. Teachers understood that they were new students and gave them time guidance and support and helped them to reduce feelings of isolation and help them to settle down comfortably. The supportive attitude of teachers plays the important role in building students confidence and enhancing their learning. These experiences were reflected in participants' statements such as

I found the university education standard useful, faculty was cooperative and helpful, teachers guided me step by step that what to do or where to go, when i was alone. Overall, the faculty was supportive, respectful, and responsive to our questions.

Copping strategies and adaptation

Student reported ab adopting various strategies to cope with the challenges of transition and adjust in university life. Students described that they have developed their confidence by interacting with others. Feeling of loneliness, nervousness and anxiety were reduced through forming friendships or peer relationships. Students also reported increasing self-motivation by focusing on their academic goals and future aspirations particularly their aim to become competent professionals. Many participants highlighted the importance of Independent learning, including reading blogs, seeking guidance from teachers and using social media as a source of learning in self-improvement. Students said that they found adjusting in university and making friend a challenging thing, but over time and support from teachers and friends helped them to reduce their challenges and adjust them to university life.

I have changed a lot and become much more confident. I developed my confidence by interacting with different people. My loneliness and anxiety reduced as I formed friendships and pear relationships. At first, I was unable to communicate effectively, but I realize that if I wanted to achieve my goals, I need it to improve myself. This motivated me to build my confidence. My teacher is also played an important role in motivating me to communicate and speak effectively, which help reduce my challenges

Conclusion

The study "from college to University: understanding vs English 1st year student's challenges and strategies in identity transition" highlights that the transition from college to university is not simply entering a new institution, but an important transformation in students personal, social, and academic identities. Students often experience confusion, anxiety, loneliness and

uncertainty as they leave a familiar environment and enter a new one. This shift requires them to leave behind their previous identities and begin a new journey.

Researchers describe the period as a “between Stage,” where students no longer fully identify with their previous selves but have not yet completely adopted to their new University identity. This phase can be emotionally demanding, especially for students from rural or first generation backgrounds who may lack proper guidance and prior exposure to University life. The main purpose of the study was to explore how students rebuild and reshaped identities during this transition and to examine the strategies they use to adapt successfully. To achieve this aim, this research used a qualitative research design, which was

appropriate for gaining deep insights into students' lived experiences. Students from the BS English department at The Begum Nusrat Bhutto women university Sukkur participated in semi-structured interviews. This method allows participants to openly share their feelings, expectations, and personal thoughts about their experience.

The findings show that the transition to University brings multiple emotional, social and academic challenges. However, students gradually learn to manage responsibilities independently, build new social connections, and develop confidence. Institutional support, particularly from teachers and peers, plays a vital role in helping students overcome their fears and adjust successfully to University life.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to research.

Funding Statement

No funding is received for this project.

References

Rind, G.M., & Malin, K.R. (2024). Achieving access and equity in education: An analysis of higher education reforms in Pakistan. *Journal of comparative and international higher education*, 16(4), 73-87. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v16i4.6284>

Shaukat, S, Ayub, N., & Tara, A.H. (2021). Students' identity and mental well-being among Muslims and Christians in Pakistan. *Pakistan journal of psychological research*, 36(2), 263-278. <https://doi.org/10.33824/PJPR.20.21.36.2.15>

Naudé, L., & Breshears, D. (2024). It has given us a title: identity transitions in first generation students at a South African University. *Journal of education*, (97).

<https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i97a05>

Ding, F., & Curtis, F.(n.d.). “I feel lost and somehow Messy”: A narrative inquiry into the identity struggle of a first-year university student. *Institute of education*, University of reading.

Hassan, B., & Unwin, T. (2018). Mobile identity construction by male and female students in Pakistan: On, in, and through the phone. *Information technology for development*, 24(4), 694-714.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02681102.2018.1468483>

Eusafzai, H.A.K., & Suleiman, N. (2024). “villager, you are not for this place!”

University transition experience of rural Pakistani students. *Cogent Education*, 11(1), article 2365603.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2365603>

Hang, Y., & Guo, J. (2025). Light and Shadow: students' first-year transition through the complexities of higher education. *International journal of educational research*, 129, Article 102499.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2024.102499>

Griffin, S.M., Lebedová, A., Cruwys, T., McMahon, G., Foran, A.M., Skrodzka, M., Gallagher, S., Ginty, A.T., & Muldoon, O. T. (2024). Identity change and the transition to University: implications for cortisol awakening response, psychological wellbeing and academic performance. *Applied psychology: health and wellbeing*.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12608>

Worsley, J.D., Harrison, P., & Corcoran, R. (2021). Bridging the gap: Exploring the unique transition from home, school or college into university. *Frontiers in public health*, 9, article 634258.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpunh.2021.63428>

Mini literature review: student identity development theory (n.d).

Bilal, Z., Ghayas, S., Naeem, T., Kayani, S., Xie, R., & Biasutti, M. (2021). Construction and validation of institutional identity scale for University students. *Children*, 8(8),665. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children8080665>

Ghayas, S., & Bilal Z. (2021). Institutional identity of adolescents: A thematic analysis. *Pakistan journal of educational research*, 4(3).

Naz, M.A., & Ijazat, T. (2015). The development of an indigenous identity pattern scale (IPS) for universities students. *Pakistan journal of social and clinical psychology*, 13(2),30-36.

Berzonsky, M. D., & Kuk, L. S. (2000). Identity status, identity processing style, and the transition to university. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 15(1), 81-98.

Eccles, J. S., & Roeser, R. W. (2011). Schools as developmental contexts during adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 21(1), 225-241.

Hughes, G., & Smail, O. (2015). Which aspects of university life are most and least helpful in the transition to HE? A quantitative snapshot of student perceptions. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39(4), 466-480.

Scanlon, L., Rowling, L., & Weber, Z. (2007). "You don't have like an identity.... you are just lost in a crowd": Forming a student identity in the first-year transition to university. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 10(2), 223-241.

Palmer, M., O'Kane, P., & Owens, M. (2009). Betwixt spaces: Student accounts of turning point experiences in the first-year transition. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(1), 37-54.

Schaeper, H. (2020). The first year in higher education: The role of individual factors and the learning environment for academic integration. *Higher Education*, 79, 95-110.