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Transition from High School to University: Challenges facing Freshmen in the Moroccan Academic Context

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Abstract

The transition from high school to university represents a critical period for students, encompassing various challenges that can significantly impact their success and well-being in the academic environment. This study aims to explore the most influential challenges faced by first-year students during the transition period and provide recommendations for both students and institutions to ease the transition from high school to higher education. The discussion focuses on academic and social challenges, which are identified as key factors affecting students' adjustment to university life. Additionally, the study examines how different groups of students cope with these challenges and addresses the question of how universities can support freshmen in dealing with the various challenges brought about by the transition period. A mixed research method is employed, involving students from different academic disciplines across different universities in Morocco. The findings of the present study suggest that challenges of higher impact on students' success and well-being are mainly related to adaptation to campus life, study workload and assessment, financial pressures, linguistic barriers, and housing issues. These challenges have become sounder with lack of preparedness and assistance on the Moroccan higher education part. The study offers valuable insights and recommendations for improving support mechanisms and facilitating a smooth transition for first-year students into higher education environment.

Keywords: *High School To University Transition; Independent Learning; Academic/Social Challenges; University Life; Freshmen*

Introduction

University life has always been a rich experience for students. It's a course of maturity at all levels through which students experience a new and different environment pregnant with more than just attending classes. The most important part of this course, however is the period of transition from high school to university. For some students, this transition can be highly difficult as they are required to make new adjustments to the new environment and new learning styles that they have not experienced before. Furthermore, the path to university is full with bumps of different nature. They vary from academic to social challenges. Hence, the first year at university remains the most exciting and probably the most challenging for students. Central to the aim of this study are the most influential challenges which face first year students when making the transition to higher education. The present paper provides a discussion about the challenges affecting the transition of freshmen to university life and suggests ways to ease the transition period in the best way possible in the Moroccan academic context.

The discussion is centered around two major types of challenges, namely academic and social challenges being the most influential for students' success and well-being. In this respect questions arise about the inherent characteristics of this critical period of transition and how different groups of students deal with them.

Besides the discussion of these issues, the paper also provides recommendations to help freshmen cope with the various demands of university life as well as recommendations for institutions to help first year students adapt to higher education environment and its new learning and teaching styles.

Literature Review

In the literature, the issue of transition has been tackled from different perspectives and on different grounds around the globe. However, each higher education context has its own characteristics and its inherent challenges, a reason which pushes me to investigate the Moroccan context and disclose its intrinsic challenges from a student perspective. In the available literature, most researchers agree that the period of transition to university (particularly the first semester or the first year by large) is highly critical driving first year students to take decisive decisions related mainly to whether pursue their higher education studies or to abandon (Coertjens et al. 2017; Gale and Parker 2012). Hence, some researchers stress the fact that the first semester or by large the first year has been the period wherein the biggest amount of academic failure and withdrawal take place (Hillman, 2005; McInnes et al., 2000). Thus, this growing academic phenomenon has gained much attention, from specialists, particularly over the last decade as it affects academic institutions on many sides most of which is attrition which leads to substantial waste of human resources particularly in places where the number of university students is limited.

The available literature on the transition period communicates the various challenges that freshmen experience over the transition from high school to university. Researchers such as Nel, Govender and Tom (2016) note that:

Participants experienced both positive and negative adjustment in their first year registered as a student at an institution of higher learning. Positive academic adjustment experiences were associated with academic and financial support, while negative academic adjustment experiences were linked to unsupportive lecturers and departments, too high a workload, different teaching methods (indicating they were not prepared for the shift from teaching at high school), and lack of accommodation in the university residences. Negative social adjustment experiences were associated with disintegration (students distancing themselves from their former friends and family members because of adhering to the new values in the tertiary environment), difficulties adapting to change in a new context, and social isolation caused by homesickness and anxiety of being away from family and former friends. (P. 5)

In the above quote, Nel and others categorize the challenges into positive and negative sets. The positive contains academic, social, emotional, financial support, and independence, whereas the negative include unsupportive lecturer departments, higher workload as compared to the learning operation at high school level in addition to lack of housing and disintegration.

On the other hand, scholars like Edjah, Domey and Ankomah (2019) recognize other aspects like registration for courses, separation from family, movement on campus, adjusting to the lecturers' mode of teaching and marking, swapping between lecture theatres, dealing with roommates and making new friends as some of the challenges that freshmen come across during their transition to university.

Talking about the transition challenges, Ajani and Gamede (2020) approach the issue from a different perspective indicating that first-year students coming from rural areas encounter different challenges related mainly to 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 critical and is affected by various challenges depending on the students' educational backgrounds.

In the Moroccan higher education context, a report from the Higher Council of Education, Training and Scientific Research launched on 2022 indicated that students` dropout rate has become very alarming in Morocco. In this respect, Said Abdellatif Miraoui, Minister of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation pointed out that almost half of the students in Morocco quit universities before graduating making the dropout rate in higher education reach this alarming figure (49.4 %). Besides this high rate of dropout, Morocco still has a relatively low rate of students in higher education. Only 37 percent of the Moroccan population aged 18 to 22 choose to enroll in universities, according to the Ministry of Education. The same institution also indicated that 16.5 percent of university students withdraw in their first year and 8.1 percent drop out in the third. Some other dropouts which constitute 7.8 percent, choose to leave for smaller training institutions. (Basma El Atti, HESPRESS English-Morocco News Society, Wednesday 5 January 2022).

These alarming figures of dropouts unfortunately continue to rise in the Moroccan higher education context without any serious efforts to stop this academic loss. The spokesman of the ministry has attributed the dropout issue to various reasons most of which are related to the whole structure of the educational system. According to the minister, graduates of open access university lack soft skills and linguistic competences in foreign languages, particularly English. In Morocco, scientific and technical disciplines at public schools are typically taught in

Arabic, while at the university level the same disciplines are primarily taught in French language. The shift from Arabic to French has made the transition from high school to university even more complex for freshmen especially rural students. A fact which drives a considerable number of students to quit university for other opportunities. Hence, the last report from the Higher Council for Education, Training, and Scientific Research (CSEFRS) published disturbing figures exposing the rate of school drop out in Morocco.

In an attempt to amend this disparity, the ministry of education has tried to adopt the four-years Bachelor program at the university level while keeping the French modular system of three years in place, which unfortunately has led to more confusion and disorder within Moroccan universities which find it difficult to deal with these two distinct educational systems at the same time.

Unfortunately, all the previous attempts of the Moroccan ministry of education to solve the existing problems in higher education have not made any obvious improvements, especially for the dropout issue. Therefore, the discussion of the prevailing problems at the higher education level has increasingly been taken over by stakeholders and policy makers to pave the way for more practical solutions. Accordingly, the purpose of the present research project is to study deeply the transition process from high school to university and provide effective remedies to ease the transition and ensure that freshmen are equipped with the necessary skills and the know-how to stay on track of university course and complete their university studies.

In this regard, researchers have split the challenges facing freshmen into two major categories: academic and non-academic challenges (Hillman, 2005). Amongst this combination of challenges, the focus of the present study is to understand the most challenging factors for freshmen from both categories. The aim is to gain a profound understanding of the factors which hinder a successful transition from a student perspective and how to amend the course of transition for the next generations of students. The study addresses the most influential factors and provides recommendations to academic institutions to ease the transition for freshmen in the best possible conditions.

Methodology

The motivation for conducting the present study rests on recognizing the challenges of the transition period from high school to university in the Moroccan academic context. Tertiary education is one of the most important stages in students' life as it provides opportunities for students to learn to operate in the so-called 'information society' which requires higher education degrees and a bunch of soft skills to be able to meet the requirements of employment and be active agents of the society. Thus, studying the obstacles which may hinder a successful transition to university would help practitioners and decision-makers to overcome these obstructions and provide practical solutions to ease the transition. In this respect, the present study considers the most influential factors in the transition period that should be deeply examined to ensure a successful passage and integration in university life.

By examining this critical period and its effects on freshmen, the significance of the study rests on providing practitioners, decision makers, and more generally the readership with insights and empirical-based findings on the challenges inherent to the period of transition from a student perspective. Besides, the study is meant to offer a working reference for the various aspects of first year students` transition through their experiences, real-life situations and the roadblocks encountered throughout this period, so far as to provide valuable results and recommendations to ease the transition and determine the most effective practices to adopt.

The discussion of the importance of the transition period and success at the university life has increasingly been taken over by educational scholars; particularly when the success of students comes to the forefront. The purpose of the present study is therefore to determine the academic and non-academic variables that may positively or negatively influence the course of freshmen. To gain such understanding, the present study investigates the perceptions of freshmen towards the various challenges which characterise the transition period in the Moroccan higher educational context and their impact on students' academic success and well-being.

To understand how the transition period affects freshmen; the present study raises the following questions:

What are the most influencing factors which characterize the period of transition?

How freshmen react to different obstacles and how these obstacles influence their decisions on many aspects of tertiary education?

To what extent the influencing factors may drive freshmen to abandon tertiary education?

Answers to these questions, constitute the mainstay of the current study. Accordingly, the central aim of the current research is to see how far the prevailing obstacles of the transition period may impact the academic course of freshmen.

The present research adopts a mixed-methods approach to data collection, using questionnaires and interviews with freshmen, therefore the fulfillment of the aim of the study banks on the elicitation of statistical data drawn from the questionnaires as well as the qualitative data gained from the interviews.

So far as the research practice is concerned, both quantitative and qualitative methods are used in the present study; known in the literature of research by different names such as multi-methods (Brannen, 1992), multi-strategy (Bryman, 2004), mixed methods (Creswell, 2003), or mixed methodology research (Tashakkori & Taddlie, 1998). Besides, the exploratory nature of the study which entails a mixed methodology, Creswell et al. (2003) argue that multi-strategy research can be helpful to researchers and writers in clarifying the nature of their intentions or their accomplishments. Also, combining both methods allow the researcher to bring together a more comprehensive account of this area of inquiry; namely, the impact of the transition period on the academic journey of freshmen and its outcomes. In terms of structure, employing mixed methodology strongly helps in deploying each to answer different research questions of the study. Furthermore, 'context' is given much importance in the present study; hence the combination of research methods is rationalized to provide contextualized understanding paired with generalizable valid findings or in times broad relationships among the existing variables.

The questionnaire and the semi-structured interview which are the two main data collection instruments include quantitative items used to elicit freshmen' attitudes and perceptions towards academic and non-academic factors affecting the transition period. These instruments also contain qualitative items in the form of open-ended questions designed to figure out the functionality of certain academic practices and other school and social operational issues. It is also used to gain insights and understanding of the way of doing things inside higher education institutions. The questionnaire is designed into three sections namely, background information, academic section, and social section including key research questions.

On the other hand, the interview will be conducted during the course of the study, precisely after the collection of data through the questionnaires so as to identify the specific query to be pursued among students. The sample size of this category is made of 24 informants who accepted to be interviewed. The use of semi structured interview in the present research is meant to make the results credible and valid. Hence, by using different methods at various points in the research process, the researcher could build on the strengths of each type of data and minimize the weaknesses of a single approach (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001: 408; Swanson & Holton, 19971:93).

Considering that the study assesses the influence of the transition period on freshmen, the population of the study is composed of 470 first year student from three public universities namely, Chouaib Doukkali University in El Jadida, Moulay Ismail University in Meknes, and Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Fes. The target population includes first and second semester students who experienced the transition period from high school to university. After the distribution of the questionnaires around 24 students from the three universities were invited to take part in the interviews. With regard to the population sample, the researcher ensures that the results and findings apply to the correct category of elements in the larger population of freshmen. In the quantitative part, the researcher adopts a purposive selection. Babbie (2002) argues that in research, it is "appropriate to select a sample on the basis of knowledge of a population, its elements, and the purpose of the study" (p. 178). This method of sampling is appropriate in this study because a particular population is needed to address the research questions. Particularly, to determine the nature of these obstacles from a student perspective. In the qualitative part, the interview serves to gain profound understanding and further illustrations about certain issues relative to particular periods and challenges which require special examination. This category of respondents did experience transition and have their say about the various challenges that they went through during the transition period.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative data was collected and analyzed to identify the respondents` attitudes, perceptions and evaluations regarding the transition period and the challenges that go with it. The collected data is studied and analyzed through Excel software due to the relatively small number of respondents. So, to gain insights into the challenges of the transition period and their effects on freshmen and provide explanatory details, the aim of this section is to display, analyse and discuss the findings of the research study. The results should then help to answer questions relative to the impact of the transitional period on the academic journey of freshmen in the Moroccan academic context.

As mentioned earlier in the methodology section, the 470 respondents who were targeted in the administration of the questionnaires were positively engaged with the survey questions. The response rate was (96 %), which is

approvingly adequate for analysis. The descriptive statistics of the survey were counted and then converted to percentages. The same formula was applied to the analysis of the participants' responses to questionnaire items. A detailed profile of respondents of this category which includes age, gender, educational level and major is displayed in the following charts:

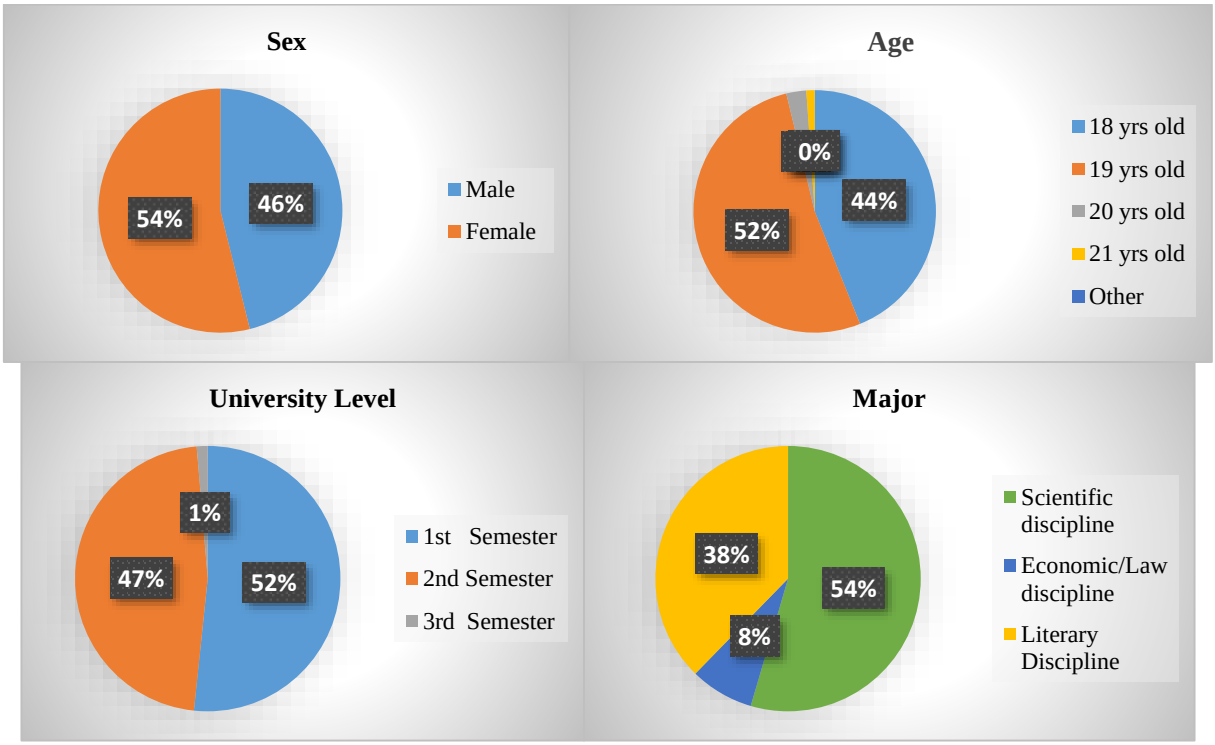


Figure 1: Respondents profiles

The above figures provide a general picture about the respondents' profiles which would ease the understanding and analysis of their engagement with the survey questions. The combination of the background features helps ensure that the responses reflect the actual experiences of respondents at different stages of the transition period and university course.

To address the research questions, the following survey items are selected among others for study and analysis. To pave the way for further examination and analysis, the first item concerns the reasons that drove these respondents to attend university studies as displayed below.

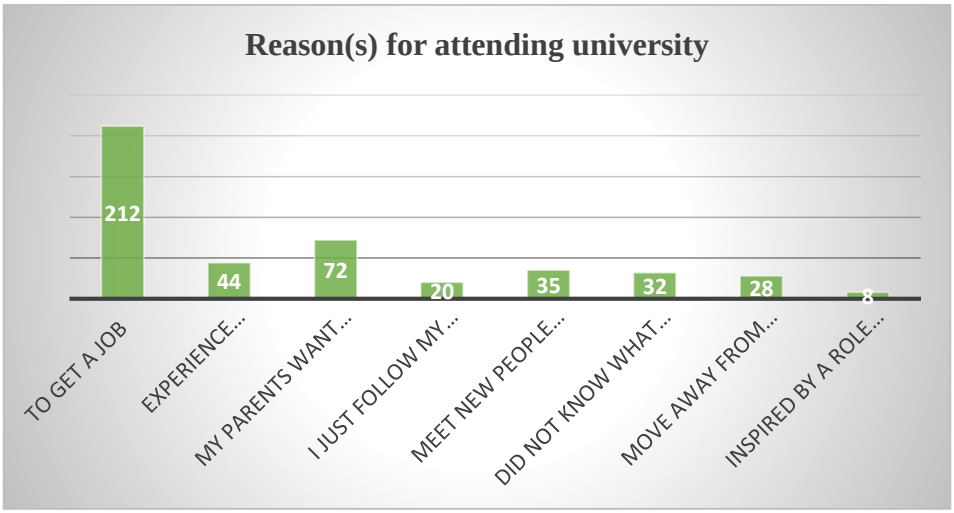


Figure 2: Reasons for attending university studies

A reading through the above figure shows that a considerable number of students (212) were driven to university to ultimately get a job. This very reason translates that inner motivation resulting mainly from parents to push their children from an early age to attend school. There is a plain liaison among Moroccans between attending school and securing a decent job in the future. Most Moroccan students are motivated to attend school by this association which is culturally constructed and perpetuated among late generations that it becomes a driving and compelling force for attending school and getting a university degree which would allow them to rapidly climb the social ladder. This belief is also confirmed by that other significant number (72) of respondents who said that they went to university out of their parents' desire. Students grow fully convinced that getting a decent job in Morocco requires a higher university degree as unemployment rates remain on top for ages and candidacy for professions has become severely competitive. The third reason in sequence was to experience university life. Most high school teenagers desire to move on to the next level and discover university life which grants them much room of freedom and independence. Adulthood is the time in the human lifespan for making the move towards more independence and intellectual maturity.

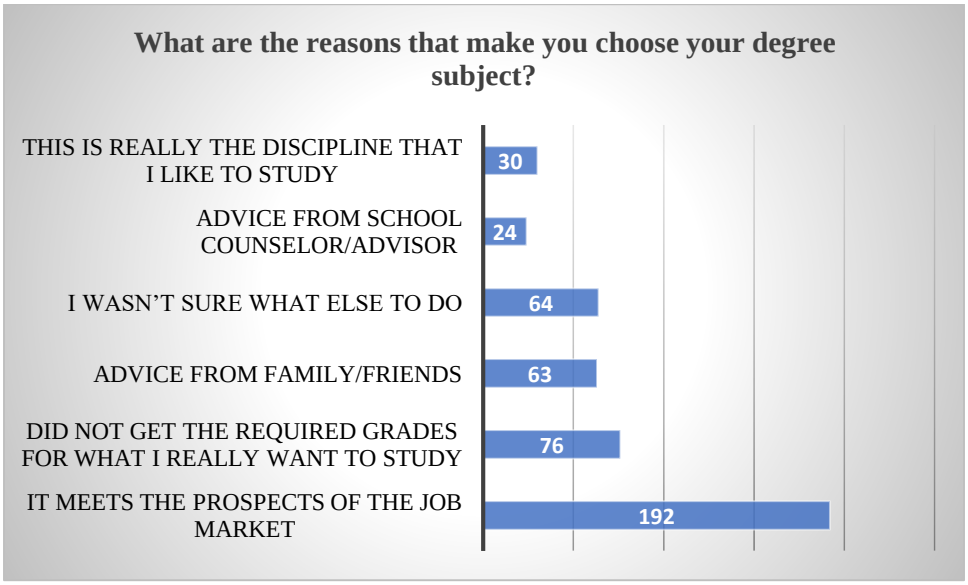


Figure 4: Reasons for choosing the degree subject

Interestingly, the big part of students (192) still makes a plain connection between the choice of the subject degree and the most demanded professions of the job market. This culturally built conviction despite its minor validation, its repercussions are widely detrimental in terms of productivity and creativity in the workplace environment. Graduates of this type once they get a job, they find themselves confined within the walls of a profession that does not really appeal to them. They would exercise that job just for the sake of ensuring a livelihood. The psychological effects of such choice would certainly affect their productivity and creativity as they find themselves exercising a profession, they don't really like in the first place. A considerable part of respondents was kind of obliged to switch their choice as they couldn't meet the requirements of the desired major. It should be noted here that Moroccan higher education system is structured around two types of schools: Open-access schools and Restricted-access ones. The latter type requires distinction grades and different types of entry exams. When students could not access these Restricted-access schools, they find themselves compelled to opt for any major within open-access schools to fill in the gap. Unfortunately, this uneven restriction prevents students to study majors of their choice and drive them towards ineffective alternatives. The third and fourth categories in sequence communicate the fact that students in high school lack practical guidance and orientation that would help them make informed and convenient decisions about their future higher education majors.

To gain more insights about these choices, couple of respondents were invited to the interview to explain with certain dept the motives of their choices. Some of them put the case as "the advisor paid us one single visit in the last year and we could barely ask a single question given the big number of students in the classroom. Besides, the advisor spoke superficially about the available schools in Morocco and we could not get a chance to ask the questions we have in mind". Other interviewees, particularly students coming from rural areas explained that they didn't have any chance to meet the advisor as he didn't pay them any visit at all. Hence, a considerable part of

students moves to university empty-minded and unprepared for the requirements and challenges of each discipline. Their choices of the subject degree rely mainly on advices from friends or parents. As the graph also tells only 30 students confirmed that they chose the discipline they really like. It remains a very slim minority that could really choose the major of their passion.

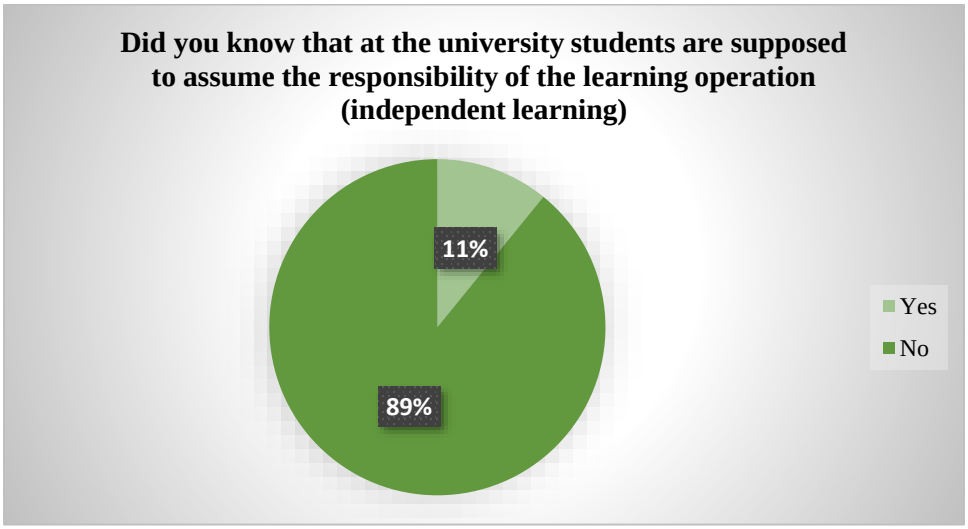


Figure 5: students' knowledge about independent learning

With regard to independent learning which stands a defining characteristic of higher education, the big majority of respondents (89%), as the graph shows, confirmed their unawareness of it. High school graduates when making the transition to university are expected to be independent learners with the ability to assume the responsibility of the learning operation with less dependence on the teacher. It's rather a more learner-centred way of learning which drives students to look for the information, assess the quality and convenience of the information and then be able to use the information. Students should not expect all knowledge to be given to them or need their work progress to be constantly monitored by the teacher. This autonomous learning remains key to ensure employability, further postgraduate studies and life-long learning. Unfortunately, Moroccan students are not prepared for such learning mode and hence a considerable part of them could not meet the requirements of university studies which open the door wide open for dropout phenomenon in the Moroccan academic context. Preparing students for the challenges of university studies is done through orientation sessions before graduation. It is the job of high school advisors and instructors to enlighten students, before making the transition, about university challenges and expectations including the mode of study, mode of assessment and the academic workload. This preparation remains an excellent introduction to academic life also ideal for discovering areas of interest and exploring potential concentrations.

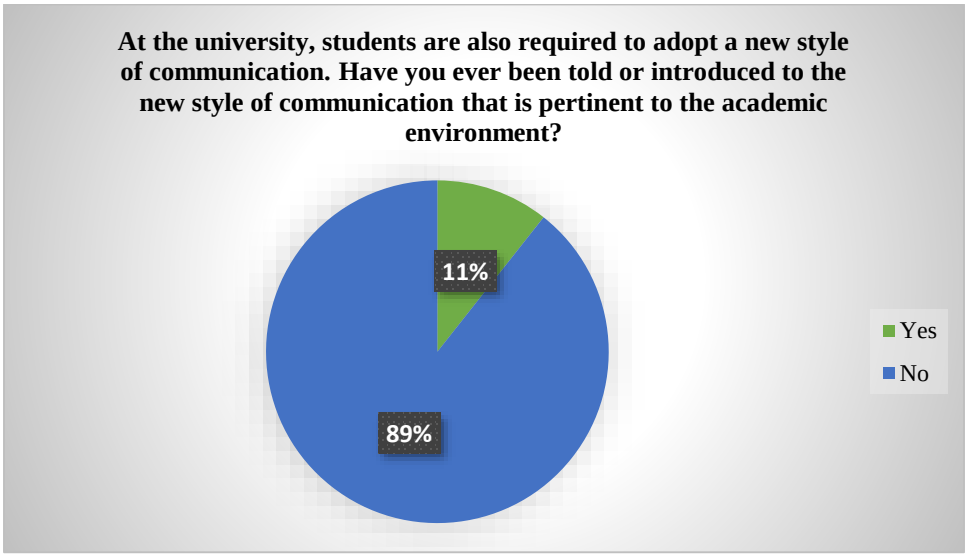


Figure 6: Awareness of students about the communication style needed in the academic context

To learn more about students' preparation for the challenges of the academic environment, respondents were asked about the communication style they are required to adopt in the academic context. Surprisingly, the big majority (89%) remained unaware of this style of communication. By definition, this is an effective communication style which characterize interaction between university instructors and students and plays a vital role in fostering a positive learning environment. Students at the academic context are required to act like grown up people showing respect towards the professors and their fellow students and adopt an ethical conduct in and outside university environment. The lack of such attribute among freshmen is attributed once more to the absence of adequate preparation of high school students to make the transition to higher education. The disparity in percentage tells the level of preparation to deal with university requirements. One should not be surprised to find a considerable part of students lost in the academic environment as the root cause of such loss is utterly due the lack of awareness among policymakers, instructors and advisors about the significance and criticality of the transition period.

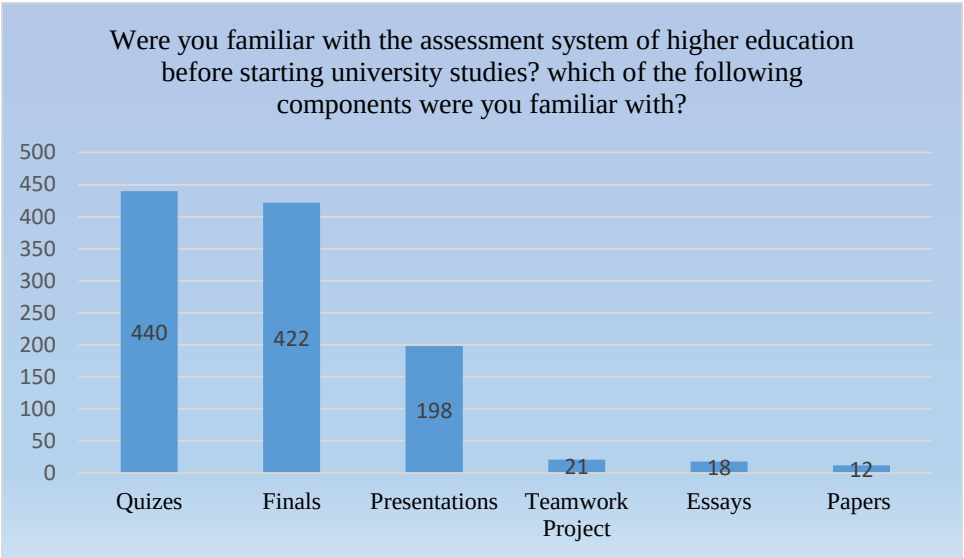


Figure 7: Students awareness about university assessment system

Once again, to check students' preparedness for academic challenges, respondents were asked about this important variable of academic success. As the graph reads, a substantial majority of respondents were ignorant about the assessment system of higher education. All they know about are quizzes and finals simply because they were used to them in high school. Their knowledge about the other components of the assessment system such as teamwork projects, essays, and papers are very limited as they were never been told about them not at high school period nor during the transition period. Thus, students find themselves face to some requirements of different genre that most of the time they find very challenging and consequently push a considerable part of them to surrender and quit university for other less demanding options.

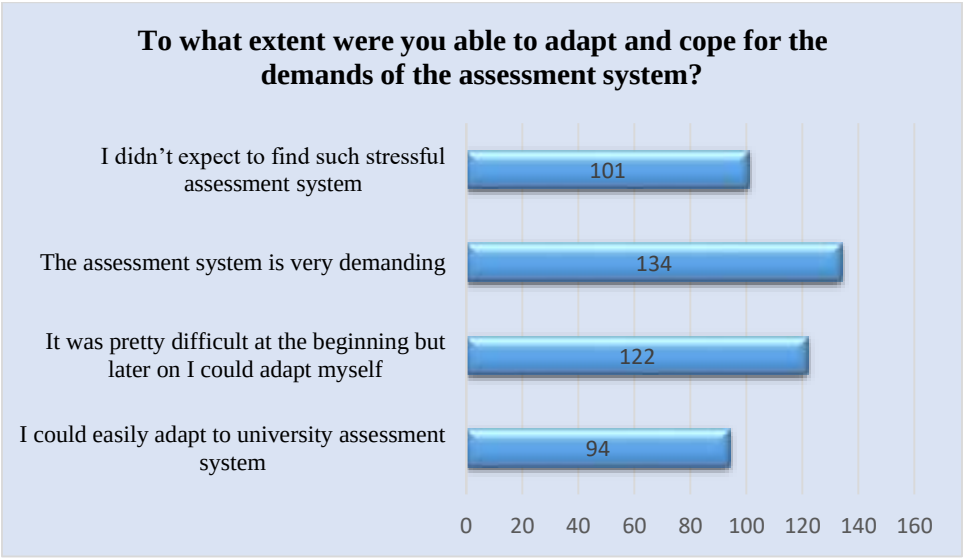


Figure 8: Students' adaptation to academic assessment

With regard to the assessment system, respondents were asked to evaluate their understanding of the higher education assessment components and their degree of adaptation to multiple levels of assessment. The assessment load of higher education stands as one of the biggest challenges which affect the university course of students. Hence, it was necessary to check their understanding and preparedness towards the assessment system as it stands as a decisive variable of continuation or withdrawal from university. As the graph shows, the big part of students (101/134) found higher education assessment stressful and highly demanding. These reactions are due to lack of preparation when making the transition from high school to university. In North American universities and others around the world, university could solve the problem and prepare students well enough to handle the challenges of the transition period by offering freshmen the so-called First Year Seminars. The purpose of these seminars is to introduce freshmen to university life in all its aspects. These seminars are designed to engage new arrivals in the learning operation and guide them to the scholarly community from the very beginning and ease their adjustment to higher education expectations, demanding workload, academic liberties and lead them to develop the convenient strategies and habits to enjoy good scholarship. Successful integration to university life requires such preparation that could be delivered through these seminars or other practical methods to ease the transition of freshmen to academic life. It's worth noting that the transition period is the most critical time of academic journey which judge success or failure of students.

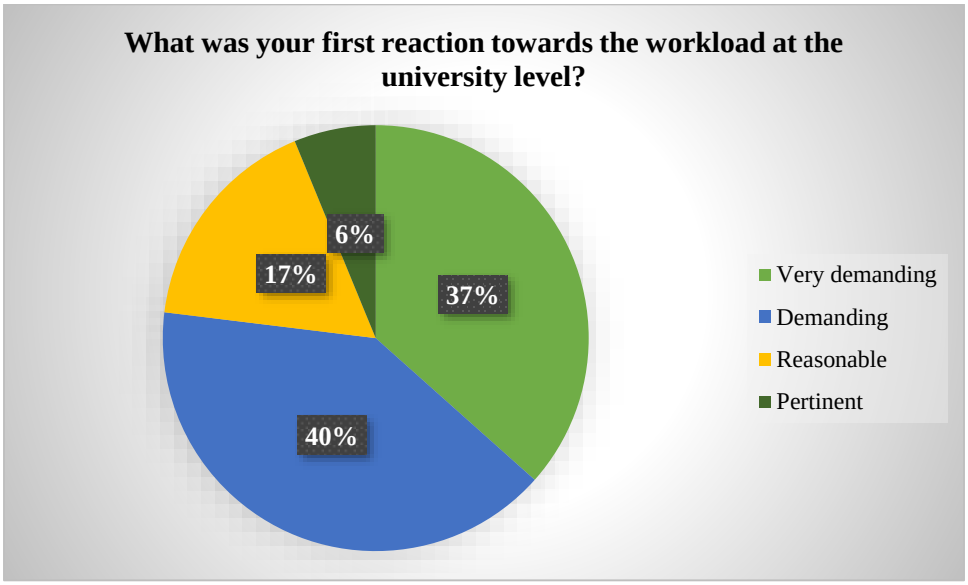


Figure 9: Students reactions towards the workload

Respondents' reactions towards the above question confirms once more the assumption that students were utterly ignorant about the very nature of academic workload. It was until the mid of the first semester that they started to realize the workload they got to deal with. During the interviews, couple of interviewees explained that their choice of the discipline was wrong in the first place as they didn't expect the workload relative that discipline to be that demanding. Others noted that the language of instruction in scientific disciplines was alone a major challenge for them as they were required to speak and carry on various assignments in French language. They didn't expect that French would be required that much in the classroom context as they used to study scientific courses in Arabic in high school level. Students were, also, not expecting to assume a major part of the learning operation where they were required to do teamwork projects, engage in classroom discussions, take part in classroom activities and perform well enough in continuous evaluation, especially those unexpected quizzes that may pop up anytime over the semester. Thus, most students found it difficult to deal with the workload especially at the beginning as they were not prepared to deal with the amount of work assigned to them. Language barrier and time management were two challenging factors to handle the workload properly and efficiently as two interviewees explained.

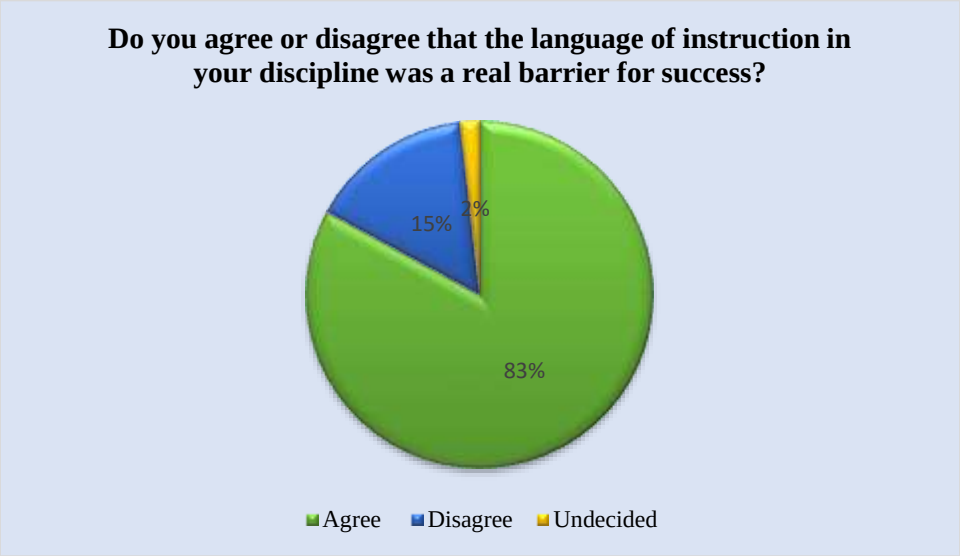


Figure 10: Language barrier

Language barrier stands as a major obstacle which impacts academic success in the Moroccan academic context. The Moroccan educational system in Morocco is characterized by the use of two languages of instruction, namely Arabic from primary to high school level and French language at the tertiary level, particularly in scientific and technical disciplines. This discrepancy has been a subject of much contention among policymakers, educational experts, and language policy specialist in the Moroccan linguistic landscape due to its major influence on students' academic performance and productivity. As the above chart indicates, a substantial part of respondents agreed with the fact that the language of instruction particularly in scientific and technical disciplines stands as a real barrier which negatively impact their academic performance. In this regard, interviewees explained that when they opted for these scientific majors, they didn't expect to have an upper intermediate level in French language to cope for the demands of the workload. The problem is even more critical for students coming from rural schools due to the insufficient supply and quality of instructional material. The poor quality of education in these areas becomes even greater due to Arabic and Berber language issues. Students coming from Berber areas they could barely adapt themselves to Arabic language to find themselves face to a bigger challenge coming from French. These language disparities make it harder for Moroccan students to exceed in their studies especially in tertiary level where the workload requires a certain proficiency in French language.



Figure 11: The challenge of making new friends on campus setting

Moving to the social challenges that freshmen face when making the transition to higher education, the first question of this section concerns the challenge of making new friends on campus setting. As the above graph

shows, the big part of respondents (202) found it difficult to make new friends once they started their university journey. The transition from high school to university is a tough undertaking as students leave behind their loved ones (family/friends) and all the people and things they are accustomed to and they got to deal with new people of different mentalities, origins, and interests. The job gets even harder if they move to big universities where they feel kind of invisible among the masses of students of different kinds. Freshmen find themselves fighting on many fronts where they have to deal with the requirements of the discipline, adaptation to new setting, and distance from their loved ones. These many fronts keep them busy to make new friends, especially that new friendships need to be developed slowly and surely through finding common points and common ground on which new friendship can develop. A considerable part of students, during the transition period, get affected by homesickness and heartache for their family and friends and started to nurse the idea of quitting university and get back to their comfort zone. Hence, the transition period requires careful attention and support from family, advisors and friends to help freshmen make it successfully to the next level.

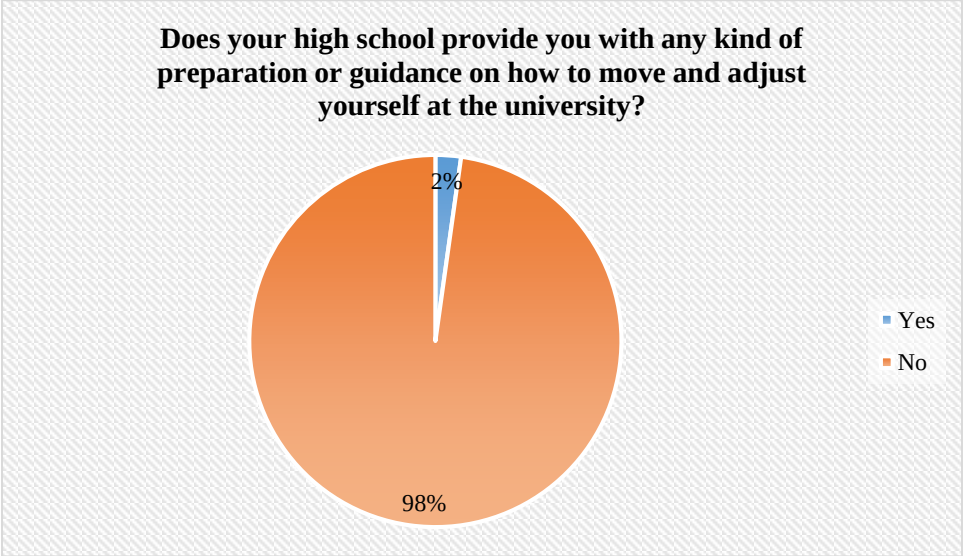


Figure 12: High school support for adjustment on campus setting

To check the role of high school in providing students with the assistance they need to make a smooth adjustment at the university, the above question was asked and surprisingly the biggest majority of respondents confirmed the absence of such guidance and assistance as the graph indicated. Adjustment to university life requires assistance from different sides including family, school, friends, and counselors to help freshmen experience the transition period in the best way possible. Therefore, all these parts got to play their consigned role to ease the transition and help avoiding dropouts. It is the period where all sorts of help is most needed given the various challenges and temptations coming at once from many fronts.

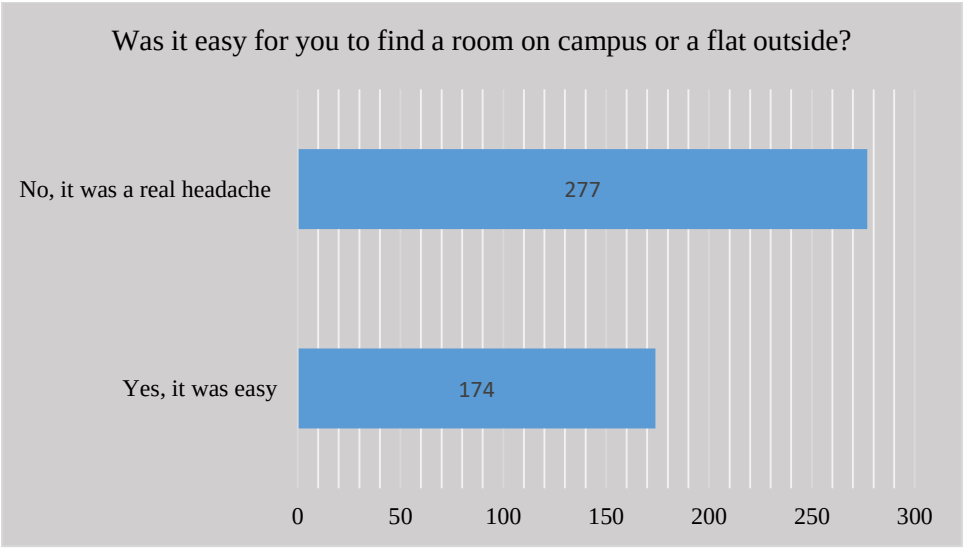


Figure 13: housing challenge on campus setting

Housing issue on campus setting is still a real challenge, particularly for freshmen as the housing capacity continuous to fall short of demand due to the rapidly growing population of students around the kingdom. Hence, the big part of students got to find other housing alternatives outside the campus. However, finding a flat brings about relative challenges, namely the difficulties students and families face in getting adequate, affordable and safe housing. Additionally, renting a flat adds up to the already existed problems of budgeting and finding suitable roommates. The question of budgeting, also, stands as a major concern of a considerable part of Moroccan students as students attending public universities usually come from lower class and find it difficult to cope for the various needs with the limited budget they have.

The housing crisis is not only affecting students financially, but emotionally and academically as well. Being left alone devoid of enough social skills make it difficult for freshmen to share housing with new roommates as such living experience is usually pregnant with various problems and challenges which impact academic success par excellence. To approach the issue with enough dept, the housing challenges were addressed to couple interviewees who put the case as "I had to change the flat three times during the first semester as the roommates were kind of different in terms of interests and behaviors. Some of them smoke inside the room others have weird sleeping habits which I couldn't really stand". Others noted that "my ex-roommates were fully addicted to videogames and kept playing until sunrise and unfortunately I was driven by their routines and started missing morning classes until my parents got news and stopped by to move me away to another flat". Roommate difficulties should not go unnoticed as their impact is strongly affecting emotional and social stability which drives freshmen to feel homesick or out of place. This feeling of being disconnected is more likely to affect their mental health and academic performance as being independent can be both exciting and scary.

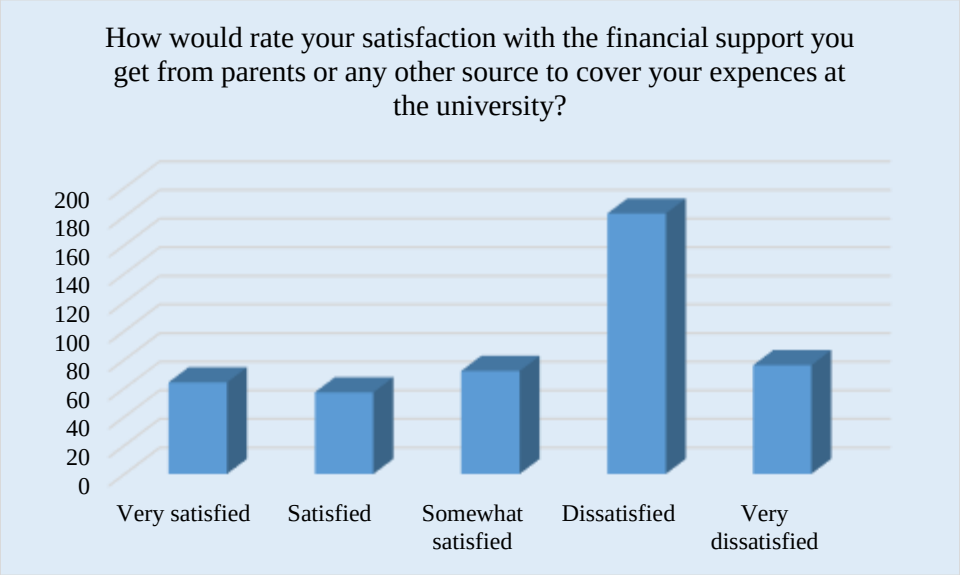


Figure 14: Students satisfaction with financial support

With regard to financial challenges, the above question was posed to learn about the extent to which students could manage their expenses with the budget allocated to them. Moroccan public universities generally host students from lower class with limited budgets face to the increasing cost of living which has intensified the financial pressures on students, particularly over the last five years which have witnessed economic uprising on the international scale leading to an unprecedented rising cost of living. As the above graph displays, the big majority of students were either dissatisfied (40%) or very dissatisfied (17%) with the budget allocated to them to cover the living expenses. The financial landscape of university students (same to each and every Moroccan citizen) has become increasingly challenging as the whole society is undergoing substantial increase in basic elementary needs. Products of all sorts have witnessed major uprise leaving Moroccans in short of basic needs. With such limited budgets, students face financial burdens which not only affect their academic performance but their overall wellbeing at the university. Burdens like rent, food, transportation, tuition fees and other taxes have made it quite impossible to manage the limited budget allocated to them no matter what strategies they try to adopt. The only way possible, as some interviewees explained is to find parttime jobs which affect directly their academic performance and expand their university journey beyond the formal period and sometimes drive them to dropout.

Rising living costs drive students to seek impractical options of compensation such as living in crowded apartments, grabbing low quality and unhealthy food, avoid engaging in extra curriculum activities and social events as they remain unfordable. Other interviewees reported forgoing basic necessities such as clothes, healthy food and adequate housing to barely manage their study expenses. In brief, the prevalence of financial hardships among students stands as one of the most critical challenges which broadly affect not only academic performance but their overall wellbeing in society.

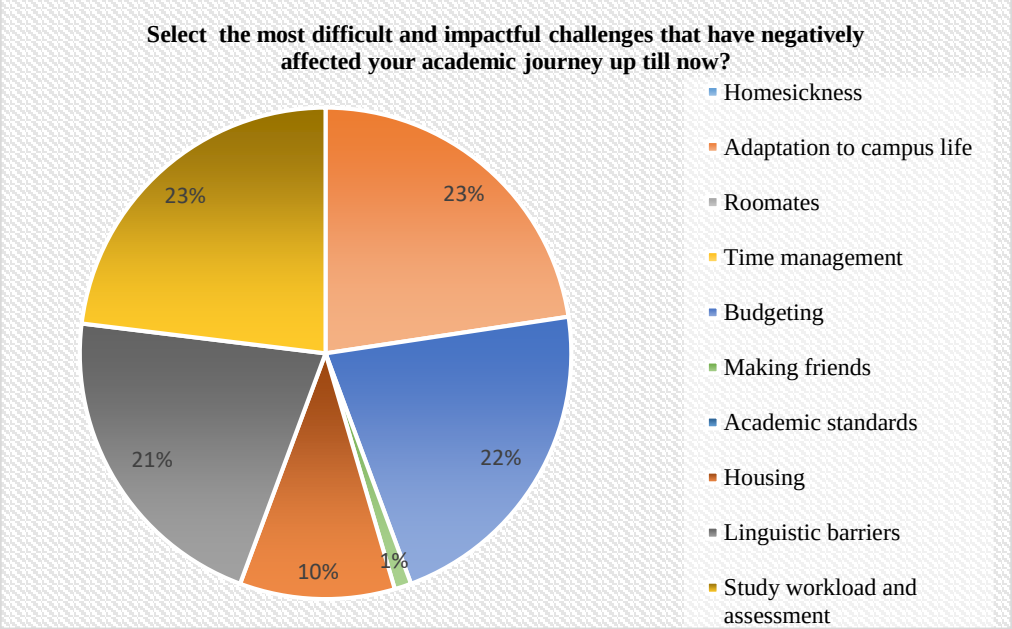


Figure 15: The most perplexing challenges affecting students' academic journey

To culminate the discussion about the challenges affecting the transition period, respondents were asked to select the challenges of higher effects on their academic journey. As the graph communicates, the challenges of greater impact are adaptation to campus life (23%), study workload and assessment (23%), financial pressures (22%), linguistic barriers (21%) and housing (10%). To effectively handle these challenges, students have to undergo a convenient preparation during the transition period to introduce them to university life and the various requirements of the academic course. This preparation usually takes the form of first year seminars delivered by advisors, faculty, seniors and counselors and are structured around compelling topics related to academic life. These introductory seminars are an excellent introduction to academic life as they equip freshmen with the necessary strategies and skills to deal with different challenges and improve students' engagement and success.

Unfortunately, such preparation is not offered to Moroccan students which makes it difficult for them to handle that abundance of challenges of different types at the university environment. They are left alone face to this bunch of challenges devoid of the necessary skills and strategies to overcome these difficulties which most of the time drive a considerable percentage of freshmen to look for less demanding options or withdrawal from university life. The transition period remains the most critical period of students' academic journey which affects the wellbeing of students' corp in different ways. Hence, stakeholders, faculty and academics should cater for the needs of freshmen during the transition period to help them adjust to academic life in the most effective ways possible.

Conclusion

The transition from high school to university is a key turning point in students' life characterized by a shift from a structured learning environment of high school to a more independent, self-directed, and demanding environment which may judge the whole academic course of freshmen. The transition period is pregnant with various challenges which vary between increased study workload, change of environment, new assessment methods, and greater autonomy which remain as the most challenging factors of the transition period.

With regard to the increased study workload, students need to be prepared beforehand to deal with the pace of study workload which intensifies along the academic journey and requires students to learn how to manage a heavier workload by organizing themselves independently and developing convenient skills such as research and

analysis skills. As to the change of environment, students need to be adequately equipped with skills to face and deal with a bigger and less acquainted environment than high school one where it can be hard for freshmen to find their way around, make new friends and adjust to new campus culture and codes. New higher education assessment methods, on the other hand, differ from those deployed in high school requiring students to invest more individual and collective efforts in various forms of evaluation including teamwork projects, papers, attendance and classroom participation, quizzes, and finals. Greater autonomy remains a defining characteristic of the transition period which requires freshmen to act as independent learners in the academic sphere assuming the responsibility of the bigger part of the learning process.

Highlighting the challenges of the transition period and its critical effects on freshmen` academic success and wellbeing in higher education context, it is highly required from Moroccan higher education stake holders, policymakers and academics to provide higher education institutions with the necessary resources and assistance to make the transition period as successful as possible. During the transition period, freshmen need to make concurrent adjustments to new teaching and learning environments, social and physical environments and financial management. Obviously, freshmen cannot cope for these adjustments by their own. They rather need effective intervention from higher education institutions to ease freshmen integration in the new academic environment through various programs including first year seminars to help new students understand the academic and campus requirements and prepare them to be able to handle these challenges in the best possible.

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