



Experiences of Foundation Year Students at Oman College of Health Sciences

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Abstract

Joining college for the first time might be a difficult experience for most students as the transitional stage from being a student of secondary school to one in a college can lead to problems in terms of adjusting to college life. There are multiple aspects that students need to adjust to in college life such as social, academic, lifestyle, institutional attachment, and personal-emotional aspects.

The aim of this project was to identify the common adjustment issues among first-year students enrolled in the foundation program at the Oman College of Health Sciences (OCHS). To achieve the purpose of the project, a survey comprising 26 points and subdivided into four parts was designed using a Likert-type scale. A sample of 200 first-year students (mean age=19yrs.) at OCHS were randomly selected to be surveyed from total of 374 students. However, only 188 students participated in the survey: 48 males (25.5%), and 140 females (74.5%). The gathered data were entered and analyzed through the google forms service. The results showed lack of entertainment to be the main issue with first-year students followed by concerning economic problems, social and wellbeing issues. The findings indicated that Extracurricular Activities (ECAs) within and outside the college play an important role in the students' academic performances and have positive effects on their lives. Such students will also be able to alter their behavior, improve their learning, develop their personality, and increase their teamwork and leadership skills.

Keywords: Extracurricular activities, First year Students, Academic performances.

Abbreviations: OCHS- Oman College of Health Sciences, ECAs- Extracurricular Activities, GPA-Grade Point Average.

Introduction

The transitional stage from being a student in secondary school to one in a college can lead to problems in adjusting to college life. Some students may even experience long-term emotional maladjustment and depression [1]. In addition, entering an unfamiliar environment with different responsibilities may cause some maladjustment problems during the first year of most students in certain aspects such as social, academic, lifestyle, institutional attachment and personal-emotional adjustments. Further, Extracurricular Activities (ECAs) may also be considered as an influencing factor that considerably affects the students' lives.

Maladjustment to the above-mentioned factors can significantly affect the academic performance, mental health, personal development, quality of life and other aspects in the life of a first-year college student. According to Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, children between 12 and 18 years of age are at a stage of identity vs. role confusion, and "The individual who receives proper encouragement and reinforcement through personal exploration will emerge from this stage with a strong sense of self and a feeling of

independence and control" [2]. If the individual fails to be independent or does not know what they want, this can lead to role confusion. Furthermore, it has been found by Sheng and Zhu that university learning is the key period for college students to transition from the role of a student to a good, socialized individual role [3]. Such a stage is considered to be of great importance in shaping the students' cognition, emotion, and will, which play a big role in the attainment of happiness for contemporary college students.

Nowadays, ECAs have become an important part in each university and college as it may affect the students' lives in college. Many colleges deal with ECAs as it is a source of joy for the students and also helps them to identify their talents. Moreover, ECAs increase their involvement in college and their productivity as well. Furthermore, ECAs play a significant role in developing the characters and personalities of the students. In the Oman College of Health Sciences (OCHS), no separate committee exists that is responsible for the ECAs on campus. The student affairs committee takes direct responsibilities for the ECAs, and there is a lack of an obvious role for ECAs in the college.

Objectives of the project

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This project aims to:

- Identify the adjustment problems that can be found among the first-year students at OCHS.
- Create and distribute a survey to identify the most common problems faced by first-year students.
- Recommend suggestions based on the study findings.

Significance of the Project: To evaluate whether the first-year students of OCHS are able to accommodate and adjust to the transitional problems and issues of being a college student.

Literature review: This project discusses some of the studies that support the statements related to ECAs at OCHS and their positive effects on the students' lives. Such effects may include improved mental status, time management, self-confidence, learning, personality development, teamwork cooperation and leadership, as well as positively altered behaviors and motivation to set goals. Such a comprehensive list of positive effects will in turn help them to achieve high academic performance. This health educational project is considered to be a supportive study for the fresher students, who are the primary target of the project.

Studies indicate that participation in ECAs can help adolescents to develop themselves and set goals during their transition from adolescence to adulthood while at a university. This will help them to achieve high outcomes in their academic performance and will also help them to adjust with their emotional status [4]. Hence, higher educational agencies should support and direct their students to participate in these activities in order to adjust with their problems.

When first-year students participate in ECAs in the college campus, it encourages them to explore their hobbies and capabilities during the second year of college life in a way that increases their self-confidence and relieves them from the pressure and stress of only focusing on studies. Researchers indicate that the personality traits and happiness of college students help them to better understand themselves by recognizing the factors that affect their personality [3].

This health educational project discusses the existence of ECAs inside the campus amongst freshmen. Due to the hardships of their transition from high school to college, new college students need more activities to explore their emotions and use their energy to be productive and creative. Also, as mentioned previously, for freshmen to perform well in their academic activities, it is important for them to be exposed to an entertaining environment and to be provided with good support from the college council by encouraging them to participate in ECAs and simultaneously supporting them in their studies. They should be reassured and guided that with proper time management, participation in ECAs inside and outside the campus will not affect their academic performance. Additionally, it is important to bring to their attention that participating in and organizing these activities will help them to develop relationships with various people.

Sheng and Zhu found that ECAs do not only help the students to relax but also help them to exercise their management ability, organizational ability, communication ability and other abilities, which add to the students' knowledge and enhance their personal skills [3]. For example, a case study shows that participation in extracurricular sporting activities had a positive impact on the students' academic performance in higher education as it was found to be associated with higher grades among students at the university level [5]. It was also found by Zaman those ECAs such sports, student councils, and music, art, and drama clubs can improve the self-esteem and alter the attitude and behavior of a person [6].

It could also be argued that if students participate in ECAs, it will increase their collaborative and cooperative attitude whenever there is a teamwork activity. They will also learn to possess leadership skills, which will increase their self-esteem and confidence. The results of a cross-sectional study highlighted the students who had participated in ECAs such as college clubs generally scored better in their

examinations and learned new skills such as working in a team and leadership, while decreasing the likelihood of different problem behaviors [7].

Music was found to inspire the students to learn by uplifting their moods. It was stated in a study that music was considered to be a fun activity that the students enjoyed and helped to make them more motivated [8]. This study proved that music can change students' moods and make them happier and less stressed. Moreover, the study found out that the students who listened to music while studying was had better academic performances.

Chan also asserted that there is a positive relationship among ECAs, the learning approach and academic performance [9]. Moreover, Bakoban and Aljarallah found out in their statistical study that participation in ECAs affected the students' Grade Point Average (GPAs) in a positive way as those who participated in ECAs had higher GPAs than those who did not [10]. They also found that the time spent on participating in ECAs did not affect the time that students usually spend on studying.

Billingsley and Hurd state that non-participating students have lower GPAs and feel bad when compared to students who participate in ECAs and get higher GPAs and who feel more confident about their achievement [11]. In another study, Arranz et al., highlighted the more positive effects of ECAs beside enjoyment such as an increase in the students' awareness, especially when exposed to college trips and campaigns at different places [12]. It was mentioned in the study that extracurricular and curricular activities are equally important in a student's life. ECAs help refresh the students' minds and prepare them to focus better on their study besides improving their knowledge; for example, participating in trips to various places increases the student's knowledge about those places. It also improves their style of learning and communicating with others. This will help them to be more mentally prepared to attend other college activities.

Research design: This study is conducted using a quantitative descriptive research design to elicit the information from first-year students at OCHS regarding adjustment issues with college life.

Setting of the study: The study is conducted in the OCHS main campus in Muscat. The registry of first-year students is accessed through the OCHS registration and acceptance section.

Population: There are 374 students registered at the OCHS foundation program in Muscat (academic year 2018/19).

Sample: First year students who are fulfilling the inclusion criteria after reviewing through the foundation program registry with the help of the program head are approached for the study. Sample size calculation=190, total population (374), acceptable error margin (5%). Confidence level=95%

Sampling technique: Convenient sampling is used. Number of samples from OCHS first-year students is calculated based on the proportionate number of foundation students who is admitted during data collection period.

Slovin's formula for sample size calculation, $n=N/(1+Ne^2)$. Where: n =no of samples, N =total population (374), e =acceptable error margin / margin of error (0.05).

Hence $n=374/1+374 \times 0.0025=187$

Inclusion criteria:

- Students in the age group of 18 years and above
- Students admitted in the academic year 2018/19.

Exclusion criteria: Students who are repeating the foundation program.

Data collection instrument: The survey constituted of 26 points that were subdivided into four parts, which were designed and measured by



a 5-point likert-type scale. The four parts were economic issues, social issues, wellbeing related issues and entertainment issues. Such themes were carefully selected to help assess the most common issues first-year students may encounter during their college time. A pilot study was conducted to check the feasibility of the application of the survey. The survey was distributed among a small sample of students (25 first-year students) and was found to be a reliable tool. The survey questions were found to be ideal for the language and knowledge levels of the OCHS students. Therefore, the survey was used as the main tool for gathering data for the project.

Date Collection

The survey was conducted by randomly selecting 200 freshmen students (males/females) to answer the survey after being asked for their consent. Subsequently, the survey was subjected to a descriptive statistical analysis. The target population sample of the survey was 200 students (mean age=19yrs.) of the OCHS foundation program, but the actual number of participants who responded and contributed to the survey was 188 students: 48 males (25.5%), and 140 females (74.5%).

Data Analysis

The survey data were entered using the Google Forms service and then using the Excel application for analysis. All the points that were included in each part of the survey were analyzed in detail. The results are presented according to the percentage of responses for each part. In terms of the entertainment issues part, which highlighted the main concerns of the survey participants, the results show that 79.3% of the participants strongly agree that there are no recreational services in OCHS, and there is no interest in conducting sporting activities at the college **Figure 1**.

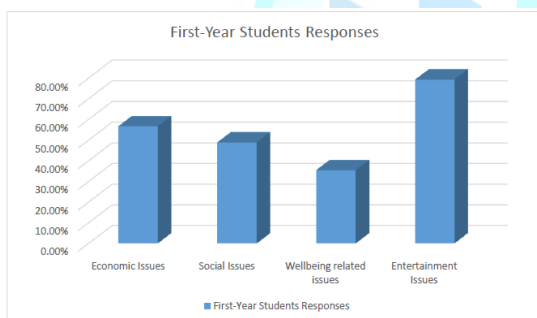


Figure: 1 First year student's response.

In the economic issues part, 56.7% of the participants strongly agree that the high cost for transportation and meals with the lack of allocation of monthly expenses to the students, which pose serious economic problems that, require attention. In the social issues, 48.9% of the participants strongly disagreed with the availability social support services. In the wellbeing issues part, 35.5% of the participants agreed that they had poor sleep habits and they were sleepy in the classroom. Also, the meals provided in the canteen were unhealthy, the canteen environment was unclean, and the timing of the lectures was not convenient for them.

Discussion of Findings

The lack of entertainment and recreational services in the OCHS, as reflected in the results, is considered to be the main issue concerning freshmen. As reflected earlier in the literature, participating in ECAs, whether inside or outside the college, is considered to be of prime importance for freshmen to help them relieve the various stresses they encounter in their first year of higher studies. Guilmette et al, Muñoz-Bullón et al, and Ahmad et al, linked participation in ECAs to higher outcomes in academic performance [4,5,7]. On the contrary, Billingsley and Hurd stated that the non-participating students had lower GPAs [11].

This indicates the importance of the abundance of such activities in colleges in the foundation year and beyond. Zaman listed several ECAs that freshmen students could participate in and which would have positive effects on their personalities [6]. Such activities included sports, administration activities, and music, art, and drama clubs. The other problems that had been stated by the participants also intervened with their academic performance, whether it was in terms of economic aspects, social and wellbeing aspects. All of these issues had negative impacts in one way or another on the students' academic performance, and they definitely interacted with the lack of ECAs in impacting academic performance negatively.

The participants indicated that excessive academic commitments proved to be stressful. Furthermore, the stressful college environment and lack of social support were all harmful to their health, which was ultimately reflected by poor academic performance. Guilmette et al clarified that freshmen students achieve better outcomes when they adjust emotionally [4]. Sheng and Zhu also indicated that the personality traits of college students helped them to better understand themselves by recognizing the factors that affected their happiness [3]. Hence, by pinpointing the strengths and weaknesses in their personalities, the freshmen will be able to adjust emotionally, alter their behavior, and organize themselves better, which will eventually improve their academic performance. Such positive effects on their personalities and behaviors are a direct result of participating in ECAs, as stated by Sheng and Zhu and Zaman, and other researchers [3,6]. The other social and personal skills that will be gained from participating in ECAs are teamwork and leadership skills which will benefit them throughout their academic life [7].

Furthermore, it could be argued that the lack of academic support from the college administration, as claimed by the students, is due to the poor communication and relationship between the students and their tutors. Many students have stated that some tutors are biased to particular students, due to which they provide limited support to some students. This makes them feel disappointed and thus affects their academic performance. Also, their inability to convey their needs in an efficient manner to their tutors because of language barriers makes it difficult for them to express the shortages in their academic skills. Hence, a good student-tutor relationship is essential for improving the students' academic performance to ensure a smooth transition from the first year to the following academic years.

From the above argument, it is obvious that ECAs are considered to be prerequisites for improving the academic performance of all students. Therefore, it is advised that OCHS consider improving the support services provided to freshmen as it has been proved that they are vital for better outcomes in the students' academic performances and for smooth transition from the first-year to the subsequent academic years.

Recommendations and implications

According to the survey results, ECAs are a major issue at the Oman College of Health Sciences. Therefore, to resolve this issue, it was important to hold a workshop jointly with the student affairs assistant deanship at the college to discuss the ECA matters. Another important part is to create a booklet which would help first-year students. Suggestions include the following:

- Provide a corner in the library with various genres other than the medical and health fields.
- Provide special halls for various events like cultural, sports, artistic, and literary activities.
- Allocate a cinema hall to screen cultural or entertaining movies every month.
- Organize a day for student entrepreneurs to showcase their products and projects.
- Hold periodical talent competitions to select the best talents such as the best photographic, best actor, best chef, best singer, etc.
- Have an open day for students-a recreational day-to break their monotonous routines, which will motivate them to get back to their studies with enthusiasm.



A workshop was conducted to discuss the suggestions that had been raised with the student affairs section and the students' council well. The contents of a booklet were also discussed during this workshop and found to be satisfactory. The student affairs section agreed about the importance of ECAs in the college. Furthermore, the contents of the booklet focused on the students' needs, especially of those residing in hostels. Some examples of the contents of the booklet are contacts of the nearest restaurants, shopping malls, gyms, and gardens, in addition to other entertaining activities such as camping. The booklet was designed based on the locations in which the students reside in Muscat. The considered places that will be included in the booklet are Al-Aamirat, Bawsher, Al-Athaiba, Al-Khuwair, Ruwi, Al-Wattaya, and Al-Qurum.

Summary of the Findings

This project clearly highlighted that 79.3% of first-year students who participated in the survey agreed that there was a lack of entertainment and ECAs inside and outside the college campus, which demanded the attention of the college administration. In response to such an alarming fact, a step by step approach was followed to provide the college administration with the most appropriate solutions. Consequently, an orientation booklet was created to help the students to be aware of the ECAs inside and outside the college. In addition, a workshop was conducted in the college to discuss the matter with the student affairs sections and the students' council to come up with most appropriate solutions which will be implemented by next academic year.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this project discussed the issues faced by the first-year students during their foundation program at the Oman College of Health Sciences (OCHS). The participants emphasized the lack of ECAs as the main issue faced by the students. Awareness of the benefits of ECAs was raised in a joint workshop with the student affairs section within the college.

Limitations

The student participation was less as the survey was conducted during the end of the semester (final exams).

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