THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

The Experience of Transition from High School to University: A qualitative exploration of perceptions of first year female students at King Saud University

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the University of Hull

by

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October 2017

Abstract

Student retention has been one of the critical areas affecting university staff and students. Efforts to understand and remedy this problem have drawn research attention to the issue of transition. This study explored the problems faced by first year female students during transition to King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. Qualitative research was conducted, using an interpretive case study framework, over a longitudinal time-scale. The viewpoints of 21 participants from three faculties were captured through three phases of semi-structured interviews: one within the third week of the first semester, one at the end of the first semester, and one in the middle of the second semester. The purpose of doing so was to obtain insight into how students' perceptions of the academic, social, and institutional (for example, support) aspects of the university changed over time as they acquired new experiences in the university setting.

The findings indicate that first-year students often did not sufficiently understand the differences between high school and university in term of their responsibilities as independent learners. They were therefore unprepared for the academic and social changes they faced. Students often struggled to cope with the university's academic demands, as they lacked a prior realistic comprehension of the learning and teaching mode in university. Socially, students were somewhat isolated at university, as a result of not participating in extra-curriculum activities and having limited relationships with lecturers. Their university participation was mainly confined to academic work. Over time, many of the students recognized the limitations of the academic skills and strategies they brought to university. First semester examinations prompted a crisis, which encouraged students in the second semester, to devote more time to their studies, to enhance their skills and competence, and to seek help from inside and outside sources. The findings challenge some aspects of existing theory. For example, students did not show a clear linear progression through the transition stages, with a marked separation from their former life. They also adopted support strategies that potentially expand the notion of communities of practice.

Acknowledgements

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this doctoral thesis to my inspiring father, Mohammed, my lovely mother, Sharifah, my devoted husband Mohammed, my adorable son Ahmed, and my beautiful daughter Aleen. It would not have been possible to complete my work without your support.

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List of Abbreviations

CoP   Community of practice

FYE   First year experience

GPA   Grade Point Average

HE   Higher Education

KSU   King Saud University

MOHE   Ministry of Higher Education

OECD   Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

PY   Preparatory year

UNESCO   United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

Definition of Terms

In this thesis, the following concepts are used. Definitions are provided, to clarify how the terms are used in this study.

- **Transition**

In this study, this term is defined as a process of mental adjustment that first year students undergo in order to adapt to the academic, social and institutional demands of university.

- **Adaptation**

Students' adaptation refers to an individual student's ability to cope with the demands of university study. This adaptation encompasses several dimensions, including coping with academic work, forming social relationships, and adjusting to the university culture.

- **Social Adaptation**

This refers to the ability of the students to adapt to the social environment of the university (e.g. participation in extra-curricular activity, peer relationships).

- **Academic Adaptation**

This refers to the ability of the students to adapt to the volume, nature and standards of work imposed by their courses at the university (e.g. time management, independent learning).

- **Institutional Culture**

Institutional culture is defined as the extent to which students find the values, assumptions, and tangible aspects of the university supportive (e.g. facilities, tutorial, orientation).

- **Undergraduate Students**

This term is used to describe students who enrol immediately after high school and get admission in the university to attain a Bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001).

Chapter 1   Introduction

1.1   Introduction

As increasing numbers of students develop an interest in university level education, the issue of greater diversity arises. Different students have different background and different levels of readiness for higher education. An important factor in a successful university career is students' ability to adapt to the new challenges and environment in university, captured in the claim that the first-year experience is more influential on students' success than their family background or prior achievement (Kuh *et al.*, 2005). This also raises the question of how they can be helped to make this transition in order to reap the maximum benefit from the university experience. However, in reality the issue of transition has often been overlooked. McInnis (2001) drew attention to the lack of knowledge about student transition and warned that, without exploring the perspectives of students themselves, educationists may make mistakes in assumptions about the kind of support students need.

The issues students face during transition range from failure in coping with the demands of higher education to perplexity over making new friendships (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2008). For some students, the challenges of the new setting may find them unprepared. Among those who face difficulty adapting to the new circumstances, some might simply ignore the problem, proceed in their own particular manner and hope the situation will eventually get better. Others would try to check or improve their comprehension of the new environment and challenges, while some may make an effort to deal better with the new demands and challenges they face. Their ability to do so is likely to influence their adaptation to and retention in the university (Tinto, 1975). The aim of this study is to explore the social, academic and institutional factors that affect female students in their transition from school to the first year of university in Saudi Arabia.

According to Almannie (2002) up to 35% of students who enrol in Saudi universities do not finish their studies. The general university dropout rate in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was estimated at 30 % in 2010 (Ghafour, 2010). The increasingly high dropout rates reported by

Arab News (2010) depict this is a continuing issue that has not been sufficiently attended to, which opens the door for this research thesis. The adverse effect of this dropout rate appears in the graduation rate of youth in Saudi Arabia, observed to be lower than 25%, which is about half of the OECD member countries' average (OECD, 2012).

The number of students who are unable to make a successful transition to university is of national concern and demands examination to recognize the causes and propose effective remedies. As stated by Al-Saud (2006), the Ministry of Higher Education in 1999 introduced an extra test (the General Reasoning Test) with the aim of ensuring that students entering the universities are academically ready for the experience. Prior to this, the only criterion considered before admission was pass marks in secondary school. Despite the new policy, however, dropout remains a problem.

The search for studies conducted particularly on the experience of first year students in Saudi universities was not very fruitful. Therefore, this research aims to increase the comprehension of first year female students' experiences and the challenges they face during transition from high school to KSU. This study also aimed to explore how they integrate academically and socially into the university environment.

1.2 Rationale

The aim of this research is to increase understanding of the problems faced by first year female students during transition to KSU in Saudi Arabia. Previous literature and my own experience as a current university lecturer suggest that the transition from high school to university is a matter of concern to researchers, education practitioners and students globally, in Saudi Arabia in particular, and in KSU, the context of this study. Thus, the research is grounded on the following rationale.

1.2.1 Transition as a global issue

It was highlighted by Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) that moving to the first year at university changes the social and physical perspectives of students, since they are

confronted with challenges in adapting to the new social and cultural environment. When students leave home to go to university, they often face separation form their families. Also, they have to learn to get used to the new educational and social life. Students who fail to adapt to this environment frequently end up dropping out from their university.

Much research has been conducted on the topic of student transition and retention rates (Tinto, 1975; Smith & Hopkins, 2005). This research has generated a number of ideas and theories. Among the most popular is the 'theory of integration', proposed by Tinto (1975). This theory asserts that there is a strong association between students' continuation or attrition and the extent of their academic and social integration.

Student transition is a worldwide issue, since it influences all higher learning establishments over the world. The recent study on progression in Irish Higher Education conducted by the Higher Education Authority (2010), which used statistical data from 38,000 first year higher education students for the years 2007/2008 found that 15% of students who joined the first year of university did not advance to the second year. This high percentage underlines the seriousness of this issue. As indicated by Macintosh et al. (2006) this may reflect a failure by universities to connect effectively with students.

A significant part of the research on student retention and attrition tries to see how and why a few students make the transition effectively, while others drop out and leave the programme before they finish. However, such research has focused mainly on higher education institutions in the Western world such as Tinto (1993), Zepke and Leach (2006), McInnis (2001, 2003) and Krause and Coates (2008) with practically no investigation of developing countries and specifically segregated institutions in the Arab world. Whilst there are likely to be some common issues in all cases, for example, first time far from home, there are conditions specific to Muslim women, for instance, norms of social conduct, which may add a distinctive dimension to the challenges of transition in such contexts.

In general, there are two main types of reasons why students do not finish their courses. The main reason is that they leave university of their own will. This finding has been reported by Yorke (1999) and Nutt (2005). The second reason why students leave the university is academic failure. As indicated by Macintosh et al. (2006), when first year students fail their exams, they do not have the motivation to persist with their studies, and may decide not to continue. In this regard, Macintosh et al. (2006) report that some students, when asked why they dropped out of their studies, answered that they could not cope with the academic demands. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) further note that since a large number of universities require students to pass their exams to move to the following year, those unable to meet this criterion may have little choice but to drop out.

A typical reason for attrition given by educators is that the quality of students' preparation before university is unsatisfactory. They argue that today's students are unable to recall what they have learnt in class and cannot study independently (Macintosh et al., 2006). This makes it hard for them to adapt to the autonomy required at the university level, which adds to their inability to complete their university education.

According to Schlossberg (1984) and Tinto (1975), students come to university having different individual characteristics, backgrounds and past experiences such as individual attributes. These individual qualities may conflict with their new life at university, making it hard for them to effectively progress through the first year. For example, Tinto (1975) found that students develop specific learning abilities in secondary school, which they take with them to the university. Moreover, their past individual motivation, organization skills, study propensities and level of effort have a critical influence on their goals and commitment at university. According to Tinto (2002), the goals and commitments established by first year students have a strong impact on the transition to university.

According to Tinto (1975), for the student to adjust to the academic environment, the university has to give support, through clear guidance and regulatory frameworks, from which the student can comprehend the demands of the university. Also, the student must

be integrated into university culture, which helps him or her in understanding the norms, objectives, and educational practices of the university. In addition to adjusting to these factors, students need to integrate socially in order to become part of the existing social framework.

Students' academic and social adaptation is profoundly impacted by their commitments and goals. When these do not fit with the goals, values, mission and ethos of the university, the student may face difficulty with transition (Tinto, 2002). The complexity of interacting emotional and psychological factors highlights the need to look at how this transition happens for women in universities in Saudi Arabia.

1.2.2 Transition as an issue in Saudi Arabia

According to Al-Habib (2006), education in Saudi Arabia confronts various issues, for example, decrease in number of students entering university, inequality between male and female students, and high rate of student dropout from university. There is additionally a problem of effective planning by education policy-makers. Some of these issues may be factors in the high rate of dropout in Saudi Arabia. Al-Habib (2006) contends that an excessive focus on quantity of provision rather than quality, may well have added to the high levels of first year attrition in Saudi universities.

The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has made a number of changes to university admission policies in recent years; as well as encouraging universities to provide foundation year programmes. However, few studies, if any, have been done to research the impact of these developments or the current situation of transition. Moreover, attrition is a continuing problem (Ghafour, 2010). The general university dropout rate in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was estimated at 30 % in 2010 (Ghafour, 2010). In addition to the general rationale for the study given earlier, the issue of first year student transition in Saudi Arabia is a significant concern and few studies have been conducted on this issue.

Some transition issues and ways to ameliorate them may be possible to address at a general level, there may also be factors that are context-specific to a student group, an academic field or an institution. From International research on transition (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pittman & Richmond; 2008; Tinto 1993), continuation and academic performance, some general themes in relation to transition can be identified, but findings in other cultures may not be transferable to Saudi society, which is distinctive in a number of ways that may affect student experiences. For instance, gender segregation in Saudi education is a good example and this suggests other "Saudi" elements may likewise be highly influential. Such factors are linked to the Saudi religious, political, social and cultural setting (Al-Saggaf, 2004).

For this reason, understanding the issues involved in school to university transition in Saudi Arabia will fill a gap in information, as this matter has not been researched in the kingdom. This thesis is intended to shed light on factors affecting transition from high school to university, and to suggest to policy makers, strategies which may help students' transition in Saudi Arabia.

1.3 Researcher's Background

My motivation for conducting this study, and the way I conducted it, were inevitably influenced by my own prior experiences as a student and a lecturer, and it is important to acknowledge their possible impact on the research.

As a successful graduate, I have personal experience regarding the process of transition and the difficulties female students face during this phase. I mainly faced the difficulty of becoming independent. I missed the teacher support and guidance I had experienced at school. I felt that the demands and requirements of my chosen subject, computer science, were above my abilities. I was not sure if I would be able to succeed. I was very discouraged, to the extent that I thought seriously of dropping out, but my mother advised me to wait and defer my decision. I struggled throughout the first year with managing all the requirements and being responsible for managing my schedule and my time. I found it

difficult to meet deadlines because of my poor time management skills. When I reached the end of the first year, however, I felt more confident because I had become better at managing my learning and started enjoying my courses.

My student experiences were confirmed by my experience as a lecturer at King Saud University. I formed the impression that, like many universities, King Saud University faces transition problems among first year students on admission to the university. As a lecturer, I have seen many students who could not progress to the second year and there appear to be reasons for these dropouts. During my time teaching in the university, I have observed that taking part in extracurricular activities seems to enhance students' academic and social skills, which in turn can assist them in the transition stage. For this reason, I encourage students to join clubs and societies in the university in order to help them in developing their abilities and successfully making a transition. Many students, however, may be unwilling to do so, due to the pressure of academic commitments. The difficulties I experienced as a student, and my observations of the difficulties faced by students in the transition from high school to KSU, gave me a personal motivation for conducting this study, in order to understand more deeply how personal, academic, social and institutional factors may interact to influence students' successful transition and integration into the life of the university.

Whilst providing a motivation for the study, the above background also raises the question whether my personal experiences gave rise to assumptions that could have biased the way the research was formed and the data collected, selected and interpreted. This is discussed in the methodology chapter in section 4.10: 'Researcher's Positionality'.

1.4 Purpose of Study

The aim of this study is to explore the main problems facing female first year students in their transition in their first year at KSU, as perceived by students themselves. To gain understanding regarding the challenges facing first year female students it is important to investigate how they themselves make sense of their experiences. This study explores the

changes students experience in their first year at the university, and also attempts to identify factors that help students to adjust and develop the capability to engage successfully in the university experience.

This study may shed light on factors that facilitate or hinder female students' transition and whether lessons can be drawn from such experiences which can help other students as well.

1.5   Research Questions

Based on the above discussion, the main research question is:

How do female first year students perceive their transition to university in Saudi Arabia?

This question is addressed through three subsidiary questions, stated below:

- What are female first year students' perceptions of the academic demands of the university?
- What are the students' perceptions of the social experience of the university?
- What are the students' perceptions of the institutional culture of the university?

1.6   Significance of the Research

This study derives significance from its new substantive contributions to understanding of transition in a hitherto under-researched context, from its development of theory and from its practical implications for addressing an issue of current concern.

Firstly, the transition from school to university has been studied to identify the important factors in the transition process. The study aims to facilitate better understanding of the extent of the transition from school to university, and the nature and extent to which the experience can transform. More effective strategies to address transition issues can be taken up by higher education institutions, if they are better informed, from the available data on female experiences of transition.

A gap in previous literature, regarding first year students, and the experience of transition they undergo in Saudi Arabia, has been noticed. This is because there has been a general lack of information on first year students, and especially concerning the issues around transition. This gap needs to be immediately addressed, since in order to have a solid understanding of transition to a university for students, we must first have clarity on the student experience itself. While there has been significant focus on first year experience in research, most of it has focused on the countries of the Western world, like Australia and the USA. Countries like Saudi Arabia have been conspicuously absent in these studies. The current study is aimed at rectifying this imbalance by incorporating a Saudi perspective into the body of knowledge.

The current study examines this process of transition of first year students. It explores to how students themselves feel about and perceive the changes around them, and how they see the need to prepare themselves for the upcoming academic challenge, especially, the skills that they need to develop as they become university students. This understanding may inform future planning to address the challenges students and the university face. Higher educational institutions can develop their policies through a framework based on evidence. By looking at the students' perspective, their understanding and expectations of educational policies could be understood. This study presents crucial data on the experiences of students who are making or have already made their transition to higher education. It therefore goes some way towards filling the gap that exists on understanding the experience of women in the field of higher education in Saudi Arabia.

The understanding gained from this study may inform lecturers in planning their course delivery and interaction with students, and may suggest to universities possibilities for review and reform of policy, practices, and services for support.

Many public universities now feel the need to produce good quality graduates, who have good critical thinking abilities and a good attitude, alongside the ability to excel academically. How students experience high school becomes very important here, as it

shapes what they expect from university studies. University spaces have different autonomy and academic requirements from high school, which students navigate and adjust to, based on their high school experience. This study sheds new light on the ways in which high school education affects the transition from high school to higher education. The findings of the study may have implications for the curriculum in high schools. The Saudi education system is undergoing a process of reform, and the research could contribute significantly to this. This could include implications for the training of teachers, their teaching methods, the education curriculum, the school infrastructure, and management (Alkanem et al. 2005). It has been acknowledged by previous authors that the experience gained by students at the school level ultimately influences how they adapt to higher education (Arum 1998; Conley 2008a). In particular, Schilling and Schilling (1999) have suggested that patterns of behaviour, established by students in elementary and secondary schooling, will continue to be manifested throughout the years in university. This study, however, uniquely reveals the extent to which ways of working and thinking established in high school form a constant reference point for the whole transition experience.

In this study, the perspective of individual students is applied to the process of transition. We can trace the experience of students over time in both academic and social spheres through the study. This will provide us with an empirical foundation, based on which, preparatory programmes for first year students can be designed. Research is needed to improve higher education in Saudi Arabia, especially in connection to students in their preparatory year.

Additionally, the study can stimulate other researchers to carry out similar studies on the process of transition. The explicit mapping of such research may be able to provide solutions to problems of transitional students in higher education and improve their experience in the first year.

The research has potential relevance and interest, even outside of Saudi Arabia, as it is an exercise in a rather unexplored area, with a different cultural context from the ones where

first year experience is typically discussed. As a result, new insight is provided into the influence of micro and macro level phenomena in the social, cultural, and institutional sphere, among first year students. In future, debates or research surrounding which factors in education are transferable or have an impact can be studied. We can also analyse how different cultural contexts influence first year experience.

An important aspect of the significance of this research is its contribution to developing theory in relation to transition. This begins in the literature review chapter where a new model is proposed in the light of an extensive literature review, combining theories in a new way in an attempt to fill gaps in the theories when used individually and proposing extension to existing theory. Specifically, I synthesise Tinto's (1987) model of transition with elements from Schlossberg (1984) in an attempt to provide a more detailed picture of the factors involved in the transition process. Further, I draw on situated learning theory, specifically the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) to suggest strategies that may be involved in successful adaptation to university life. This model is discussed in the literature chapter in section 3.6. Subsequently, the model is revisited in the conclusion chapter, in section 7.4.2, where it is revised in the light of insights from the study's empirical findings, in order to capture more fully the nuances of the mechanisms by which first year students were found to negotiate their transition.

1.7   Research Methods

This research was conducted in a well-known university (KSU) in the centre of Saudi Arabia. The objective of this study was to explore female students' experience of transition from school to university. There is a lack of information at present regarding female students' first year experience in higher education institutions of Saudi Arabia. This research therefore adopted a qualitative research approach, in order to gain understanding and identify problems that are not often talked about, as viewed by the participants. The research was intended to generate a deep understanding about the experiences of the students, by empowering students to reflect on how they made sense of their transition

(Cresswell, 1998). This study featured longitudinal qualitative case elements to investigate female students' transitional experiences in their first year of KSU. This facilitated the exploration of the experiences students faced during the transition process, supported by data collected through a series of in-depth interviews. The use of the longitudinal approach in the interviews gave the study a practical platform that facilitated improved understanding of the transition process. This made it possible to observe development and change in the students' experience during the transition phase. Fifty-three interviews involving 21 students were conducted in the study. The study was carried out in three sequential stages. During phase one, semi-structured interviews concentrated on how students prepared for university and what they expected from it, as the baseline in the pre-liminal stage. In phase two, the same students were interviewed on their early experiences. The aim of the third phase was to discover ongoing adjustment and students' general interpretation of their experience. Again, semi-structured interviews were used as a way to explore specific issues and look more deeply at participants' perspectives (Robson, 2002). According to Roe (2005), carrying out qualitative study regarding students' experiences of transitions to university allows discovery of all kinds of factors that can affect the process. The data were then analysed manually using a thematic approach.

1.8   Structure of the Thesis

This thesis contains eight chapters, structured as follows:

Chapter Two sets the current study in its national cultural and institutional context. It provides a general idea about Saudi Arabia and the main cultural aspects that affect the way the people of Saudi Arabia view life events, then introduces the education system and specifically KSU.

Chapter Three reviews the literature relating to transition. It is divided into three sections. The first one defines transition as a concept and clarifies how is differs from similar concepts like change. The second one gives an insight into transition as a process, and ways in which it has been modelled. Later sections concentrate on the factors that affect the success of

the transition, identified by Schlossberg (1984): characteristics of the person, the environment where the transition occurs and the transition itself. After this, alternative outcomes of transition are considered: both social and academic adjustment, leading to successful incorporation into the university or, for those who are not able to adapt, alienation. A proposed conceptual model of the research is explained in the last section of the chapter.

Chapter Four gives details about the research design and justification for the methodology and the choice of methods used in this research. A rationale is provided for the adoption of an interpretive approach, in which rich qualitative data were obtained by means of three phases of semi-structured interviews at various points in the academic year. Issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations are also addressed.

Chapter Five reports thematically the results from each research phase, identifying factors that contribute to the first-year experience. The data shows how the students moved from an initial state of confusion and uncertainty, to an ability to reflect critically on their experiences, and eventually to the adoption of more effective coping strategies.

In Chapter Six the research findings are revisited in order to interpret them in the light of previous literature and to address the research questions. The Saudi students' experiences are shown in many ways to parallel those reported previously in other contexts. At the same time, they point to potential for modifying and expanding theory.

Lastly in Chapter Seven, a summary of the study is provided. It also identifies substantive theoretical and methodological contributions of the research, and discusses its limitations. Recommendations are made to enhance first year transition experience and suggestions are offered for future research directions.

Chapter 2   The Saudi Cultural and Educational Context

2.1   Introduction

The main aim of this chapter is to put the current research in its institutional, national and cultural background. The chapter commences with a brief summary of Saudi Arabia and the fundamental cultural aspects that affect the manner in which the Saudi Arabians approach life situations. The reason for discussing these matters is that they may shape the upbringing of the students and the experiences and values they bring to the university. The discussion carries on with an overview of the Saudi education and particularly higher education, before narrowing down the attention to King Saud University, where the research took place. In this manner, the chapter outlines a variety of institutional and social issues that shape the surroundings in which the students experience transition from school to Saudi Arabian universities.

2.2   Overview of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is situated in South Western Asia, at the intersections of Asia, Africa and Europe; it lies on the Tropic of Cancer, spanning both the Eastern and the Northern hemisphere. It is located in the Middle East, a known geographical area of Southwest Asia. The countries adjacent to Saudi Arabia are Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Jordan, Yemen, Iraq and Oman. It is also bordered by the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Gulf, the Gulf of Aqaba, Red Sea and Arabian Sea (World Atlas, 2006). Saudi Arabia is the largest among the Gulf States, with an area of 865,000 square miles, approximately four fifths of the Arabian Peninsula and it is split into a total of six provinces. Riyadh, situated in the Central province, is the capital city of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The inhabitants of Riyadh number more than 5.8 million and the city covers about 600 square miles, according to the Foreign Affairs ministry of Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia Information Resource, 2016).

The Kingdom's population in 1974 was only a little more than 7 million. Since that time, the population has grown rapidly (Saudi Arabia Information Resource, 2016). In 2016, census results showed that the overall population was 32,157,974 million, of which only around

half were Saudi nationals, the remainder being expatriate employees. 44.8 % of the population are female while 55.2 % are male. The population structure is young, with more than half of Saudi citizens under 20 years old (Saudi Arabia Information Resource, 2016).

Arabic is the language of the country. Not all of Saudi Arabia's residents are of Arab origin, even though almost all of them speak Arabic. This is due to the fact that Muslims have immigrated to the country, especially in the western province, which contains Islam's holy cities, Medina and Mecca. The country adheres strongly to its Islamic roots as the cradle of Islam, where the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), was born and spread the revelation of Islam. The Saudis uphold Islam as a complete way of life and tend to make no distinction between secular and spiritual dimensions (Saudi Arabia Information Resource, 2005).

In terms of economy, Saudi Arabia is the possessor of the world's second largest oil reserve; it accounts for a great portion of the worldwide oil production and crude oil trade (Fattouh & Sen, 2015). It is expected that the oil reserves will grow with the exploitation of a new well discovered in the Rub 'al-Khali desert, which has been carried out since the mid-1990s. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has begun a huge advancement agenda with the long-term goal of expanding the economy and developing a strong private sector (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2004).

2.2.1 Saudi Arabian culture and values

Across the world different cultures exist, with an extensive variety of differences and similarities. Culture shows how people behave and also displays their lives and attitudes. The chapter's outline of the culture of the Saudi residents will assist in avoiding misapprehensions and provide a foundation for later discussions, since it is necessary to view people's behaviour in terms of their background and culture. There are various descriptions of the term culture, which show various views of human activity. The United Nations agency, UNESCO, defined culture as the set of unique intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and material factors of the general public or a social group, which covers, as well

as literature and art, way of life, ways of living together, value systems, beliefs and traditions (UNESCO, 2002). Also, Dahl (2004) scrutinized and studied different descriptions of culture. He came to the conclusion that a 'culture' comprises various factors which are mutually shared by a particular group of people, and which provide a framework that guides their behaviour.

A popular way of understanding national cultures is with reference to the work of Geert Hofstede (2010) whose research in the 1980s showed how values in the workplace diverge among various cultures. His research provides insight into organizational and national culture. The values that Hofstede considers to differentiate countries from each other include Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism v. Collectivism, Power Distance, and Masculinity v. Femininity. Although Hofstede's original study contained composite data for the Arab world, not for Saudi Arabia specifically, subsequent researchers have used Hofstede's dimensions to measure and explain Saudi cultural characteristics. Hofstede's Dimensions are scored from 0 to 100 (100 is the highest). Hofstede published scores for more than 60 countries, which enable national cultural characteristics to be compared.

The first dimension is Power Distance, which is described as the degree to which members of organizations and institutions who are less powerful within a country accept and anticipate that power is shared unfairly (Hofstede et al., 2010). Butler (1998) reported that Saudi Arabia's Power Distance Score stood at 80, which is on the higher end of the spectrum. The implication of this finding is that Saudis expect those in authoritative positions to enjoy privilege, status and power (Butler, 1998). This may explain why commentators on Saudi education have noted a tendency towards a very teacher-centred, didactic style of teaching (Elyas & Picard, 2010), which might affect the relationship between teachers and students, and students' role in the teaching and learning process. This issue is discussed further in a later section.

The second dimension is Individualism Versus Collectivism. Collectivism denotes a tendency for people in a country to view themselves in relation to a larger group that confers security

in exchange for loyalty. Such cultures prioritize social cohesion and individual needs or interests are subordinated to those of the group (Bjerke & Al-Meer, 1993). In the past, collectivism was a way of dealing with a harsh and difficult environment. At the other extreme, Individualism denotes a society where people prioritize their own needs, welfare and fulfilment, and that of a much smaller group, typically the nuclear family. Saudi Arabia's individualism score of 38 identifies it as a Collectivist society whose members are tied into close long-term relationships to family, kin and tribe (Butler, 1998). This collectivism is reflected in common attitudes and values in relationships among family members, and between the family and the wider society. The family is considered as the primary basis of social cohesion and the foundation of members' identity and social standing, and loyalty to the family is paramount (Library of Congress, 2006). In this circumstance, Saudis are expected to maintain close relationships with those with whom they share blood bonds, for instance aunts, uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers, by giving them gifts and money if required, showing them respect, visiting them, and being concerned about them (Zakaria et al., 2003).

The next dimension, Uncertainty Avoidance, concerns the degree of tolerance of ambiguity and risk. Certain cultures are highly risk-averse compared to others. Risk-averse cultures tend to be expressive cultures. In countries with weak uncertainty avoidance, their anxiety is fairly low. Emotions and aggression are not supposed to be displayed (Hofstede, 2005). On the dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance Saudi Arabia scores 68; reflecting high intolerance of uncertainty and a desire to control the future (Butler, 1998). Hofstede (2005) notes that uncertainty brings anxiety and various cultures have taught themselves how to handle anxiety in various ways. The degree to which the individuals of a culture sense danger due to uncertainty or unclear situations and have formed beliefs and organizations that try to avoid these is reflected in the Uncertainty Avoidance score. Saudi Arabia's high score on this dimension reflects a preference to avoid ambiguity at all costs. The people handle anxiety through strict beliefs and rules. Situations that are new and unknown are perceived as very uncomfortable, and people seek comfort in their strong beliefs. In an

attempt to decrease the level of ambiguity, policies, laws, regulations and strict norms are embraced and applied. The aim is to manage everything so as to avoid or eliminate the unexpected. The community does not willingly accept change, and is extremely risk averse (Butler, 1998). Saudi Arabians uphold traditions, norms of behaviour, appearance, communication and religion very highly, as means of uncertainty avoidance.

The fourth of Hofstede's dimensions, the Masculinity-Femininity dimension of culture, relates to gender roles in communities and the expected behaviour of the two genders. Regarding Hofstede's (2005) view of Feminine and Masculine societies, a society is referred to as masculine when gender roles are plainly distinct: men are thought to be focused on material success, assertive and tough, whilst women are thought to be tender, concerned with the quality of life and more modest. In highly masculine cultures, cooperation between females and males is not accepted, while in low masculinity (feminine) cultures, females and males exchange information and cooperate. The score of Saudi Arabia is 52, compared to the score of 62 for the United States, hence signifying that Saudi Arabia has a culture which is more feminine (Butler, 1998). This reflects the fact that in Saudi Arabia, men as well as women place high value on personal relationships. Nevertheless, in other respects, Saudi Arabia does not conform to Hofstede's description of a "feminine" culture, since there is a strict division of gender roles, and the culture is in many respects male dominated.

This is reflected, for example in the moral code. Even though chastity is greatly esteemed in the Arab culture, this is mostly applied to women only, and is tied to both religious commitment and family honour. Another vital virtue that people should observe is modesty; this too is especially to be observed by women. In Saudi culture, modesty implies that people should not talk about things that humiliate others and they should not be overly outgoing. One of the significant aspects in Saudi Arabia that greatly influences social and public behaviour is gender segregation. The Islamic religion advocates segregation and it is upheld both socially and physically. This means women are not allowed to interact with unrelated men in places such as the workplace, libraries, in education, on public transport,

in banks and restaurants (Wheeler, 2000; Al-Saggaf, 2004). In certain unavoidable circumstances, in areas such as practical lectures in medicine, or nurses, pharmacists and doctors doing work in hospitals, exceptions are made concerning the segregation rule, as it is hard to separate the genders because of the nature of the work. In education policies and systems, however, there is at all times segregation between females and males in universities, schools, colleges or higher learning institutions; hence no official or unofficial discussions or meetings occur between them. As a result of the segregation policy, female and male students are enrolled in different universities or on different campuses. Most of the fields of study available to men are also available to women, but there are restrictions on those that might result in interaction with men (Hamdan, 2005). Saudi Arabia does not permit co-education. This particular female researcher benefited from the easy interaction with female undergraduates, who constitute around 60 % of the entire student body in universities in Saudi Arabia.

In another typology of culture by Hall (1959), two typical dimensions of culture are identified, known as low-context culture and high-context culture, which reflect different styles of communication. It was stated in *Beyond Culture* (Hall, 1976) that in high context cultures, communication is highly allusive, with understanding dependent on knowledge of context built up over close relationships of long standing. In low context cultures, relationships may be more short term and communication is less reliant on shared frames of reference, so communication must be more direct and explicit (Hall, 1976). The culture of the Saudi Arabian people is considered to be an extremely high context culture, which implies that messages transmitted by the people frequently depend greatly on other communication cues, for instance, eye contact and body language, instead of direct words. Moreover, several aspects of cultural behaviour, concerning what to do and think, are learned through a long interaction period. This sort of culture is centred on strong boundaries, intersecting networks, and long-term relationships (Beer, 2003).

There are similarities between Hall's idea of a high-context culture society and the features of Saudi Arabia as identified in Hofstede's framework. For example, strong boundaries can be seen as a means of Uncertainty Avoidance, as everybody has a prescribed place in the social order, which is reflected vertically in high Power Distance, and horizontally in distinct gender roles and segregation, while interconnecting networks and long-term relationships reflect Collectivism.

The next section discusses the Saudi education system, as the aspect of the Saudi context most directly connected with this study.

2.3   The Education System

In 1952, The Ministry of Education was formed and was originally known as the Ministry of Educational Discipline. The Ministry of Education's objectives are to develop, enhance and advance the education system and its outcome. It is in charge of general education, literacy, adult education and special education. In general education, there are six years of primary school, three years of intermediate and three of secondary (high) school. Formal education is a relatively new step for Saudi Arabia, compared to other Middle Eastern countries. Between the years 1920s and 1940s the country saw the commencement of elementary education and secondary education respectively (Al-Hougail, 1998).

Until 1960, there was no school offering education to girls. However, in 1960 King Saud, after consulting with religious scholars, decided to establish the first girls' school in the capital city. Societal concerns about educating girls were alleviated by setting up separate schools for them and to this day, boys and girls have different education institutions. The practice of gender segregation has been interpreted as an institutional mechanism perpetuating social constructions of gender, including the value attached to women and chastity and a way of safeguarding the family against threats to its honour (Almunajjed, 1997)

In recent years, there has been a rapid increase in admission of students to general education. The number of students in general education between 1967 and 2003 rose from 400,400 to 4.3 million students (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2004).

The education system in Saudi Arabia is based on the Islamic religion, since it is a comprehensive code of life. The document that holds all the key principles related to the educational policy is known as '*The Educational Policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia'*. According to the policy, it is the responsibility and right of a person to pursue learning, and it is the responsibility of the state to deliver education to its residents. Muslim women are similarly permitted to learn as their male counterparts. The state's General Development Plan deals with education provision in all the education stages. (Ministry of Education, 2004).

The state budget funds education, which is free for all people at all stages. Furthermore, every university student is given a monthly allowance. Education falls under three main authorities:

➢ The Ministry of Education
➢ The General Establishment of Technical Education and Vocational Training
➢ The Ministry of Higher Education

Teaching in schools relies heavily on rote-learning. It was noted by Smith and Abouammoh (2013) that there is dominance of a didactic teaching approach and heavy dependence on memorization. Elyas and Picard (2010) viewed the Islamic background of Saudi education as the origin of a traditional style of teaching that is Teacher-centred. Typically, the teacher reads a passage from a text, and provides a brief explanation of its content. This is followed by a question and answer session. Students learn by listening to the teacher, so are described as passive learners. Johnson (2003) made the same point, that the teacher is the ultimate authority, whose words cannot be challenged. Further, discussion in class is controlled by the teacher, who poses questions for students to answer in a way that prevents constructive engagement between the teacher and students. Elyas and Picard

(2010) found that teachers were reluctant to abandon the conventional style of teaching and adopt a more student-centred teaching style, as they did not wish to sacrifice the authority they command in the classroom.

The education in Saudi Arabia has been shaped not only by the Islamic religion, but also the centralization of control by the Ministry of Education. Since the year 1938, this has been an aspect of the education system, starting from the time the Directorate of Education assumed control of Educational matters in the Kingdom, apart from the military academy. The Directorate was upgraded to a ministry in 1953 (Rugh, 2002). Currently, educational control in the kingdom is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. Schools are required to follow the curricula set by the government, although they are allowed to supplement it with other courses. The national curriculum, which is contained in the textbooks provided by the Ministry, was criticized by Alaisa (2009). It is compulsory for teachers to teach exactly what is in these textbooks. In this system the teachers are presenters or rather carriers of the knowledge in the official textbook or curriculum. This type of system is said to limit creativity and may result in uniformity in the manner of delivering lessons (Alhodithy, 2009).

Recently, concerns have been raised both by academics and at government level concerning the shortcomings of the education system in Saudi Arabia. Specialists in education have urged reforms including enhanced techniques of teaching, improved teacher training, changes in assessment as well as improved curricula (Alhamd et al., 2004; Alaisa 2009; Albahiri 2010; Algarfi 2010).

Educational techniques, objectives, classroom management skills and teaching materials are influenced by the procedures of assessment and measurement of learning. They also impact a person's learning, which occurs due to the interaction between the students and teaching situation. It has been consequently agreed that assessment and evaluation are crucial parts of the teaching-learning programme. It was noted by Al-Saloom (1987) that the

objective of evaluation in Saudi Arabia is to measure knowledge of the educational curriculum, and the only means of assessment is the examination system.

Generally, for teaching and assessment purposes, the academic year is split into two terms. Students' overall assessment mark is divided between the two terms. Progression from one grade to another is decided by these marks. 30% of the overall mark is given to continuous assessment in the course of the term and 70% for examinations at the conclusion of every term. Examinations in all subjects are written, apart from the Holy Quran, which is oral. The minimum pass mark is 50% of the total available marks in every subject. The school sets the examination for each grade, up to the second term in the last year of secondary school, in which the Ministry of Education sets the examination, which is common to every school in Saudi Arabia (Al-Hakel, 1994).

No direction is given to the teachers on setting examinations, although the primary, intermediate and secondary schools in the entire country share the same methodology (Al-Hakel, 1994). The textbook publishers do not provide tools for examination; the teachers develop with their tests by themselves.

2.4 Higher Education

This section aims to explain the origin of the Ministry of Higher Education, the massification of higher education and the admission criteria of higher education institutions.

2.4.1 Origins

Up until 1975 many individuals travelled abroad for higher studies; hence, there was a need to establish a local higher education system (Almari, 2011). In that same year, the Ministry of Higher Education was formed and was in charge of implementing policies regarding higher education in Saudi Arabia. The aim of higher education is to focus on outlining the relationship between students and God in order to offer them a proper Islamic education (Abdul-Jauad, 1998; Al-Hougail, 1998; Ministry of Education, 2004). This aim is pursued through the following objectives:

- To teach individuals according to their capabilities in order for them to perform their responsibility in assisting their country towards development and prosperity under the Islamic beliefs.

- To offer special students chances to be conspicuous in every sector of education.

- To draw their attention to development in science and arts.

- To obtain solutions for technological problems facing society.

- To provide Arabic language translation in sciences and all other sectors.

- To assist students to prosper by offering training services.

- Observing the forbearing teachings of Islam, help and inspire students to write books that will assist science and permit the country to be prominent in developing human civilization.

- To assist and guide humanity towards the righteous path and save it from any misleading or material predisposition.

Among the first universities established, so as to offer the growing population of the country higher education, were (Almari, 2011):

- Islamic university in 1961

- King Fahd University for Petroleum and Minerals in 1963

- King Abdul-Aziz University in 1967

- Um Al-Qura University in 1967

- The Imam Muhammad Bin Saud Islamic University in 1974

- King Saud University in 1957

The number of male and female students admitted at the bachelor stage grew to 366,344 from 282, 433 between 1999 and 2003, with a mean annual growth rate of 6.7%. Meanwhile, the number of graduates at the bachelor stage rose from 38,000 to 53,000, an estimated mean annual growth rate of 9%.

2.4.2 The massification of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

In the past few years, massification has resulted in a key transformation in the higher education sector, from a system that was only beneficial to the privileged in society, to one that is widely available to all segments of society.

In Saudi Arabia the growing demand for higher education obligated the Ministry of Higher Education to give colleges, universities and establishments of higher education the authority to offer programmes as needed by the country. One of the declared aims of the MOHE are to encourage harmonization among universities by advocating collaborative research. Another aim is to set rules and other necessary guidelines in every Higher Education institution. An important role is to manage the interests and requirements of ministries of the government and Higher Education institutions. Additionally, MOHE is responsible to direct Higher Education development in every division (SACM, 2011).

The growth of Saudi Arabia's higher education has been consistent and there has been great development in the fields offered. Higher education institutions have been expanded to include an increasing number of universities (SACM, 2011).

Because of high demand, there is growing competition for university places, particularly in popular or prestigious disciplines, leading to the imposition of stricter selection criteria. This might be expected to influence the kind of students who obtain university places, and the attitudes and expectations with which they enter university, for example, imposing a sense of pressure to maintain a high academic standing. The evolution of admission criteria is discussed next.

2.4.3 Admission to Higher Education

The system of admission has been transformed with time. Up until 1999, the mark in the final examination at high school was the sole enrolment criterion on for both females and males. Furthermore, not many universities had their own system of interviews and examination for admission. In 1999, the National Assessment and Evaluation Centre was

established, to set and manage two examinations overseen by the state: The General Reasoning Test/Subject Tests.

From that time, university enrolment has been centred on a combined score on the high school test and the general reasoning test, weighted in the ratio 70/30 respectively. Subject tests are needed for enrolment in particular courses such as engineering and medicine (National Assessment and Evaluation Centre, 2003).

Students enrol to a university programme and are then placed according to their combined score, aptitude and availability of places. In certain programmes, eligibility may be determined regardless of availability so that every student can enjoy educational opportunity.

The reasons for implementing standardized examinations for higher education institute admission were because of (National Assessment and Evaluation Centre, 2003):

- the increasing number of students in high school intending to pursue higher education.
- an increase in the level of attrition in universities;
- the growing number of students who were unsuccessful and who therefore took more years to graduate;
- the growing number of students transferring and changing subjects within and between universities.

The reasons for implementing standardized examinations on a national level were (National Assessment and Evaluation Centre, 2003):

- to manage the system, content and objectives of enrolment standards and to reduce personal discretion and corrupt decisions by different universities.
- to remove the expense of enrolment examinations occurring separately in every university.

- to ensure equality and impartiality in selecting students to universities.
- to employ other types of enrolment criteria apart from high school results.

The General Reasoning examination is done in Arabic and takes three hours. It is set and invigilated by the National Assessment and Evaluation Centre. Throughout Saudi Arabia, a total of 38 institutes administer this examination twice per annum and students can take it more than once. However, the centres charge for every attempt.

The examination contains two parts, which also have sub-categories:

Part 1: Verbal reasoning

- Sentence completion to determine ability to comprehend logical relations among parts of a sentence
- Antonyms to determine vocabulary knowledge
- Analogies to determine reasoning skills and vocabulary knowledge
- Reading comprehension to determine interpretation, logical reasoning, and understanding of the central idea of the passage

Part 2: Quantitative reasoning

- Algebraic problems and equations
- Geometric problems

Basic knowledge about mathematics is needed to answer these questions and all data or formulae that may be needed are given in the examination booklet.

Higher Education in Saudi Arabia is encountering difficulties every day since the demands of the students are rising rapidly and the sector cannot meet them (Alkhazim, 2003). In 2003, approximately 223,703 students graduated from secondary schools. About 57% (126,752) of them were admitted to higher education institutions.

2.5   King Saud University (KSU)

KSU is the first and the oldest university in Saudi Arabia. It was formed in 1957 by royal decree and is situated in the capital city of Riyadh (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). The university's major objectives are to provide a suitable educational surrounding offering greater educational services and to enhance the educational programmes so that it can develop good relationships with international Arabic and Islamic institutions and promote their collaboration with the Saudi community. KSU is made up of fourteen colleges and one institute, which offer education in various disciplines. There are two more colleges situated at Al-Gaseem, which offer Economics and Administration and Agriculture (King Saud University, n.d). Additionally, the university awards Master's degrees in some disciplines, and in particular fields, it also offers doctorates. The overall number of first year students in 2014 was 11,993, while in the same year, the number of final year students who were awarded undergraduate degrees was 6510, the number of students of both genders in postgraduate programmes reached 3884. Table 2.1 displays the number of postgraduate students recorded in the year 2005/6 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007).

In KSU female education began in the academic year 1961/62. At that time, girls were only allowed to enter the Arts and Administration departments in Riyadh. In 1976, a women's campus was built. Female students are dispersed in various locations around Riyadh. A few of the faculties that have been instituted for them are Dental Medicine, Agriculture, Administration, Education, Pharmacy, Sciences and Arts (King Saud University, n.d). Not all disciplines are available to female students. In the women's campus, all management and administrative staff, library stuff, teaching staff and lecturers are women, although if a male lecturer is needed, he is normally allowed to deliver his lecture using CCTV. King Saud University was ranked 221 in the year 2010 in the Times Higher Education-Qs World University Rankings, making it the highest for any University in the Arab states (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013).

Table 2.1: KSU Postgraduate students 2005/6 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2006)

College	Gender (MS)	
	Female	Male
Arts	84	66
Education	103	118
Administrative Sciences	75	90
Architecture & Planning	*	35
Engineering	*	50
Food and Agriculture	10	55
Pharmacy	18	19
Dentistry	*	*
Medicine	1	*
Sciences	70	88
Applied Medical Sciences	8	*
Computer and Information Sciences	17	45
Total	386	584

2.5.1 Preparatory year (PY)

According to Smith and Abouammoh (2013), questions are increasingly being raised about the suitability of student preparation at the high school level, because of the significant expansion of places and opportunities offered for university level study. They claimed that this is typical of any country undertaking expansion. These authors commented on a common tendency for the teachers receiving learners at a given level to blame those at the preceding level for inadequate preparation of the learners, resulting in poor grasp of the set content. Students entering university are said to be ill prepared, including having low proficiency of the language utilized as the medium of instruction. Students' weakness is blamed on teaching that has drilled them to answer likely test questions in a particular subject, rather than acquiring real mastery of the set content.

As a means to address the gap between high school and university teaching, some universities in Saudi Arabia apply a preparatory year for students entering the university. The aim of this year is to provide students with academic skills such as note taking, and research. Moreover, it is expected to accomplish other goals linked to increasing the quality of university education such as offering students the specific skills required for their particular field of study.

In King Saud University, where this research was conducted, the preparatory year was introduced in 2012. The Mission of this year is to prepare students with the required academic skills to succeed in university. This year was designed to accomplish several goals (King Saud University, 2010), including to:

- Inculcate habits of punctuality and sense of responsibility;

- Develop students' leadership qualities and ability to exercise initiative;

- Improve skills in basic areas including English language, information technology, mathematics, communication skills and creative thinking;

- Encourage students' creativity and pursuit of self-improvement

- Prepare students for higher education and to obtain the maximum benefit from university life

- Improve standards of graduates so they can better compete for good jobs;

- Improve the health awareness and fitness of students;

- Acclimatize students to the academic environment and the culture of eLearning.

2.6   Summary

Throughout this chapter, I have provided information about aspects of the Saudi culture that might affect students' experience of transition. The aspects of the Saudi culture

explained in this chapter may facilitate or inhibit students' transition to higher education. These features may affect the way girls are socialized in the home and society, their view of authority figures, the kind of education they receive, social expectations of them, and what they expect of themselves. All of these, in turn, are expected to have implications for their experience of transition to university, which will be reported and discussed in later chapters. Following the account of Saudi culture, brief information was provided about higher education and King Saud University's preparatory year, which was the focus of this study. The next chapter will discuss transition theories, drawing on various bodies of literature in order to build the framework of this study.

Chapter 3 Transition to Higher Education

3.1 Introduction

Retention has been one of the critical areas affecting university staff and students. Retention refers to the proportion of learners who remain in the same university for the duration of around two years or the percentage of newcomers who go back to the same institution for an additional number of years (Nettles et al., 1999; Levitz et al., 1999). The number of learners preserved in the university is often a pressing issue to the institution's management, lecturers, paternities, learners as well as the administration. The proportion of newcomers who are retained in the university is vital in that it forecasts the proportion of learners who will remain in the subsequent periods. Similarly, a decrease in the number of the retained learners from the beginning indicates more reductions in the following periods (Levitz et al., 1999). Efforts to understand and remedy this problem have drawn research attention to the issue of transition. This chapter explores previous theoretical and empirical attempts to understand transition and the factors that affect it; the review is presented in sections 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6. The first considers definitions of transition and how it is distinguished from related concepts such as change. This is followed by consideration of transition as a process, and ways in which it has been modelled. Subsequent sections focus on the three components of transition success identified by Schlossberg (1984): the transition itself, the individual, and the environment in which the transition takes place. This is followed by consideration of alternative outcomes of transition: either social and academic adjustment leading to successful incorporation into the university, or for those who are unable to adapt, alienation. Lastly, a complete outline for examining the transition to university, presented as a model that emerged from the literature review on theories of transition, is considered in section 3.6.

3.2 The Concept of Transition

There are various meanings of the word transition; Cowan (1991) gives the meaning of the word transition as "periods of change, disequilibrium and internal conflict about gains and losses that occur between periods of stability, balance, and relative quiescence" (p. 7). From

this definition it can be comprehended that transition is a temporary period between states that is characterized by instability.

Generally, a great amount of anxiety characterizes times of transition. The transition to university is no exception, especially for those going through it (Parker et al., 2004).

According to literature, a variety of alternative terms are utilized to portray transition, for example, transition; settling; separation; adaptation; adjustment; and coping with change/ change process (Brostrom, 2002; Lam & Pollard, 2006; Peters, 2003). Transitional definitions differ depending on the discipline. However, the majority of authors tend to define transition as a process of change. A popular definition of transition cited in health disciplines is "a passage from one life phase, condition, or status to another… transition refers to both the process and the outcome of complex person-environment interactions" (Chick & Meleis, 1986: 239–240). Transition is not an event, but a process of "inner reorientation and self-redefinition" that people experience in order to integrate change into their life (Bridges, 2004: xii). In education discipline, according to Dunlop and Fabian's (2007: 6), transition is defined as "the process of moving from one setting to another, often accompanied by a move from one phase of education to another". In particular, entering higher education is a difficult transition for students.

In some cases, transition entails moving away from home and living independently and in most cases, it will involve adjustment to new institutional standards (Christie et al., 2013). According to Briggs et al. (2012: 12), "living independently, managing finances and relating to a new set of people is often seen as a bigger challenge than studying independently". According to Stephens et al. (2012), it entails students' belief that they will at long last have the capacity to separate and individualise themselves from their family, to build up their voices, to pursue their interests, and to make their mark on the world. Not all of these aspects are universal, however; Stephens et al. (2012) reflect a western perspective. In Saudi Arabian culture, for example, especially for girls, going to university does not entail living independently or separation from family. Nevertheless, it involves a change in

lifestyle, responsibilities, and setting, which may pose challenges for new university students.

Transition is perceived in this study as a process of mental and behavioural adjustment that first-year students undergo to be able to adapt to the academic, social and institutional demands of university. A number of authors have attempted to model this process, and some of the main frameworks in this respect are introduced in the next section.

3.3   The Transition Process

The predominant view of transition to university sees it as a process of adaptation by which the student modifies his/her thinking and behaviours to adjust to the demands of the new situation. This section introduces a number of theoretical perspectives that attempt to explain the dynamics of transition, often in terms of a sequence of stages, each with its own particular tasks, challenges and outcomes.

There are two hypothetical approaches to viewing student transition in higher education (Zepke & Leach, 2005). The first and more conventional is that of integration. This approach problematizes the students, accepting their lack of social adaptation to the institution, which then requires a process of integration (Tinto, 1975). The second and developing approach problematizes the institution, accepting that it is responsible for adjusting its practices to suit and value the differing qualities of students (Lawrence, 2001; Zepke & Leach, 2005).

Both approaches proceed from the observation that, when students graduate from secondary school and enrol in universities, they undergo a process of transition and adaptation, as the learning environment in school differs from that of university (Spencer, 2002). The process of transition to university is frequently expected to be undergone by default, yet the transition process often causes tension, stress and anxiety.

Certainly, there are many students who manage to adjust to universities very easily and they undergo the transition process positively, but many others have to face stress and

trouble, as they might be unable to fulfil the demands of their new roles satisfactorily. In many cases, students fail or leave universities, as they find undergoing the transition process very complex and challenging. For example, a study of students' first year experience in Australia revealed that 23% of the students surveyed had seriously considered deferring or discontinuing (James et al., 2010). Another Australian study by Pargetter (2000) identifies several factors that can contribute to difficult adaptation for first year students, including; inability to connect with the university or the subject resulting in failure or withdrawal (15%); lack of academic success (30–40%); underperforming compared with the institution's requirements (70–80%); or personal unhappiness. Even if students do not withdraw, failure to achieve adaptation to the academic environment at university may result in students feeling unhappy and dissatisfied (Yorke & Longden, 2008), isolated (Lawrence, 2001) and alienated (Mann, 2001). Difficulties leading to student withdrawal have been attributed to inadequate preparation for university learning and lack of understanding of what it entails (Wingate, 2007). A variety of authors agree that the extent of students' preparedness for university can affect the way they learn; participate, and form relationships (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pittman & Richmond; 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

To adapt to a new situation effectively, a person makes some changes, particularly by adopting new ideas and habits. Writers call this process 'adjustment' or 'adaptation' which have similar meaning. For example, Schlossberg (1984) used the term 'adaptation and Tinto (1987) used the term 'adjustment', although both appear to describe the same process. Both indicate a process whereby a person adapts him or herself to a different situation, particularly by altering behaviours and ideas, as he/she becomes accustomed to it. Adaptation or adjustment of university students is referred to in this study as the capability of a student to deal with the demands of life at university. The resultant changes encompass a number of areas, which include diverse areas in education advancement, interactions and relationships, expression and identify development, and sense of affection to the university.

In this research study, university student adaptation and university student adjustment will also be used as substitutable terms.

Transition is presented as a process involving a number of phases. An influential theory of student incorporation has been Tinto's theory of transition (1975, 1987). According to Tinto (1987), students are required to succeed in dealing with three phases effectively if they want to achieve proper integration. These phases are: separation, which refers to leaving the previous learning environment behind; transition, which refers to adapting to the new learning environment and incorporation, which refers to being completely incorporated into the new university life. Tinto (1988) suggested that when students leave their past community, it is then that their new experience starts. Students get used to the new learning environment with the passage of time. However, students must feel that they are linked on a social and academic level for the integration to take place properly (Tinto, 1988). The possibility of failure to transition increases if students fail to connect to their university.

In order to describe this process, Tinto (1988) depends on the idea of rites of passage. He borrowed this concept from Van Gennep (1960), a famous anthropologist. Van Gennep suggested that socio-cultural traditions characterize transition stages in human life. His research concentrated on the life crises encountered by people and groups throughout their lives and the development of societies and people. He defined transition as a period of leaving a community whose norms, values, cultures and behaviours were familiar and becoming a part of a new community whose norms, values, cultures and behaviours are unknown. He believed that life consists of a range of phases starting from birth and eventually leading to death, or from being a member of one community to joining another. Martin-McDonald and Biernoff (2002:347) asserted that

> rites of passage occur when there is a transition in cultural expectations, social roles, and status and/ or condition or position, interpersonal relations, and developmental or situational changes to being in the world.

The idea suggests that three phases are involved in the whole system of integration. These phases are: the pre-liminal; the liminal and the post-liminal. The pre-liminal phase (separation) refers to the period when individuals leave their previous communities, like their families, old school friends, old communities, etc. This disassociation can take place either physically, emotionally or figuratively. Tinto (1987) believes that disassociation from previous communities can be detaching and traumatic, particularly when the norms, values and behaviours of the past community differ greatly from the norms, values and cultures of the new community.

The liminal phase (transition) denotes the period when the past self is left behind, although the new one is not developed completely (Van Gennep, 1960). Turner (197: 95) defines people in the liminal phase as "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony". In this stage, students are caught between two different roles. Many difficulties occur in this phase, as it conveys cultural values and encourages new skills that students need to adopt in order to be able to integrate into the community (Turner & Bruner, 1986). This phase refers to students who have not adopted the social and academic life of the new community so far. Assimilation into a new community can be a challenging phase, especially for first-year students in Saudi Arabia, as their previous experience may not have prepared them for integrating into a new academic community. For example, teaching in schools relies heavily on rote-learning as opposed to the critical learning that is expected at university. Smith and Abouammoh (2013) noted that there is dominance of a didactic teaching approach and heavy dependence on memorization in schools in Saudi Arabia. According to Tinto (1987), problems in trying to achieve membership in the university may be encountered by students who belong to families, communities or high schools whose values, norms and behaviours differ greatly from the values and norms of the institution they have joined. The post-liminal phase (reincorporation) (familiarization with the new role and identity as a university student) demonstrates whether students have adapted effectively to the next

stage. As stated by Briggs et al. (2012: 2) "transition involves learners creating for themselves a new identity as higher education students".

Bridges (2004) similarly suggests three stages of transition. The first stage is the ending zone, which demands letting go of one's present status. Students must acknowledge that their role as a school student has ended before they can begin to accept the new role as a university student; therefore, they should not hold on to these previous self-images and must get ready for the new phase of education. The second phase is a neutral zone, which refers to a confusing process as students are bridging between the old and the new and therefore feel wrecked and desolate (Bridges, 2004). Bridges (2004) states that undergoing the neutral zone basically feels like experiencing a type of emptiness where the old image seems clear and nothing looks solid anymore. The third phase refers to a fresh start filled with fears and uncertainties but where adaptation and adjustment is finally attained. These three stages of transition signify what students go through when they experience change and disassociate themselves from their previous communities, then undergo a puzzling state and eventually adapt to the new environment. This is a typical process of getting lost and then orientated again, where individuals need to grow. Changes will take place in order to adjust to the new environment; the transition period helps an individual in coping with changes mentally (Bridges, 2004).

A linear pattern of three phases is observed by both the above theoretical models of transition. Moreover, both the models share the same characteristics concerning a start and an ending: the stage of separating from a familiar context, encountering a set of different circumstances coping with doubt, hesitation and complexities in order to become confident, and eventually adjust to the new environment (Bridges, 2004; Van Gennep, 1960). According to this theory, first year students in universities progress between two different statuses, involving a challenging process of adjustment to the new environment. Routines, relationships, expectations and roles in different settings are greatly affected by this process. They can either be clear or unclear; predictable or unpredictable. This turning

point in the lives of individuals depends on their idea of adjustment. By examining these three phases, the transition process encountered by first year students can be understood easily.

However, these models have faced criticism. For example, Kralik (2002) suggests that transition is also triggered by the different stages of life in addition to the developmental process. He does not agree with the idea that transition observes a linear pattern. Foubert et al. (2005) also defend the idea that transition is triggered by the different stages of life. They suggest that the developmental process does not require to be taken as a set of steps and may be conceptualized in a different way. This process shows flexibility in terms of individual frameworks and is not essentially stationary. Furthermore, suggestions regarding the levels of transition are not clearly stated, as Kralik (2002) and Foubert et al. (2005) do not explain clearly how the new status can be achieved by individuals.

Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed another theory of the transition process, i.e. Communities of Practice, which complements the linear model. The model intends to highlight how individuals can handle transition and gain effective results. A complete outline for examining the challenges of adjustment to change in university is presented by this theory, which is considered in the subsequent discussion.

3.3.1 Situated Learning Theory

The use of this theory provides an understanding of an individual's ability to interact with a new cultural group through sharing their ideologies (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It is imperative to note that the learning environment at the university is identified as social practice, whilst the learning community is represented in both formal and informal settings. As such, Wenger et al. (2002) elucidate that a community of practice is a group who share certain traits, for example, enthusiasm on a particular topic or shared problems, and are willing to widen their understanding through interaction on a daily basis. The community of practice (CoP) theory provides an outline that is used to evaluate a person's capacity to engage with

new communities of practice through successive interaction processes (Lave & Wenger, 1991; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007).

There are numerous and diverse groups that are found in the university setting. They include educational groups, disciplinary groups as well as subject groups. Similarly, learners who belong to groups residing away from the campus are subsequently affected by the events in the groups in one way or another. In addition, research indicates that learners exposed to campus life acquire skills and knowledge to cope with lifetime issues and they are able to identify their characteristics easily (Brennan & Teichler, 2008). Elkjaer (2003) also agrees that education in group settings enables individuals to acquire skills, get a chance to get involved in the group's activities, develop their personalities and understand that they have obligations to perform. Therefore, learners are able to develop better understanding through practicing what they learn.

Communities of practice can be defined as a process of social learning shared among the members interacting in the community. There are three features of CoPs, according to Wenger et al. (2002), that distinguish between what is a CoP and what is not.

• a shared domain of interest;

• a group of individuals who share an interest in this domain;

• the communal practice that these individuals pursue with an aim of becoming effective participants in that domain.

As such, it is vital to understand that a CoP operates within a particular sphere of knowledge and activity that bonds members and establishes the CoP's identity. The second component is a web of relationships that exist within the community itself. Relationships and associations with others are crucial to the success of transition. New recruits develop skills based on social interaction, which shapes the learning process (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Such associations occur, for example, when students solicit the help of people they perceive to

be much more experienced and knowledgeable. Such relationships provide the members with a favourable environment for learning. A favourable environment is depicted as one with the ability to provide members with a bond of togetherness, from which members draw their sense of belonging. The feeling also provides the basis for the learning processes amongst the diverse members in their respective environments. The resulting connection enables members to share their experiences and knowledge, which enables them to approach and resolve problems.

The third element is the community's ability to develop practice through members sharing their knowledge and resources. The components of practice comprise experiences, sets of stories and activities that are relevant and pertinent to the learning process. The inclusion and incorporation of the domain, practice and the community enable a smooth transition. CoPs manage knowledge more easily where the domain provides a uniform platform, the community forges relationships, and lastly, the practice reflects the comprehensive learning achieved by the individuals in the community. These insights into the nature of the learning process provided by the situated learning theory can be applied to help in understanding how first year students acquire the subject and culture-related knowledge and skills that enable them to become effective participants in the university environment. At the heart of this process is the notion of participation.

3.3.1.1 Participation

The core of situated learning theory is considered to be the idea of participation, as it is in group settings that students get an opportunity to develop their identity and actual performance. It gives community members opportunities of forming relationships with fellow members (Wenger, 1998). This involves not only participation in specific local activities but also wider involvement as dynamic and vigorous members in community life (Wenger, 1998).

Lave and Wenger (1991) describe the process whereby new recruits become experts as Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP); a phrase that clarifies how new members of a CoP

learn through gradually increasing and more competent participation in the group. LPP helps learners express their connections between themselves and the practices, characters and products of the skilled community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Therefore, it is important to note that participation is one of the main methods of learning in social learning theory, since the recruits acquire skills through communicating with other recruits as well as existing group members (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Applying this to the university context, enrolled learners start their university education as 'exterior students', who gradually advance to be group members at later stages (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Schlossberg, 1984).

According to Smith & Wertlieb (2005), in a CoP, students who spend more time on the university premises have a higher likelihood of interacting with many students regarding aspects of academic work than those who spend more time away from the setting. This in turn gives them a greater opportunity of forming a sense of connectedness to a particular academic community and they are also more likely to create a wider network of friends (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005). The term 'belonging' is often used to denote the sense of connection and to show the level of attachment felt by students and their happiness in being at university (Krause & Coates, 2008). Nevertheless, the participation concept faces a challenge with regard to the assumed dichotomy between peripheral and full participation, as some contexts do not allow novices to achieve full participation (Handley et al., 2006), if they are excluded by more powerful members.

3.4 Components of Transition

Schlossberg's theory provides a fundamental framework that explains comprehensively the experiences of university transition. As such, the tenets of the theory characterize the elements of the process, whether occasional events or regular patterns, including relationships, schedules, individual beliefs, work, family, well-being, and financial factors (Schlossberg, 1984).

Schlossberg's model gives a clear explanation of why people adjust to transition differently. The model comprises three sets of factors, related to the transition itself, the individual,

and the environment. Each factor has its own features, which may bring advantages and limitations. The balance between these advantages or limitations is what defines the transition (Schlossberg, 1984). An individual who faces numerous limitations has a hard time coping with the transition, but an individual with numerous advantages is better able to manage and go through the transition phase successfully (Schlossberg, 1984).

Factors connected with the nature of the transition itself include the following:

Table 3.1 Transition-related Factors

The factor	The definition
"Trigger"	describes what prompted the transition in the first place.
"Timing"	this identifies the transition by a social clock, what is right for the society connection to the transition.
"Control"	this explains the factors that control the transition.
"Role change"	refers to a phase in which new roles are embraced and old ones dropped.
"Duration"	describes the transition phase as spanning a certain period and not permanent.
"past experience"	individual's past experience with a comparative transition is included, since previous experience can enable an individual to cope with subsequent transitions.
"Concurrent stress"	reflects the fact that advantages and disadvantages are usually impacted by several physical and emotional stressors that are usually present in the transitions phases (Schlossberg, 1984).

It is not simply the objective qualities of a transition, but the way they are perceived by the individual that characterise and influence the course of the transition.

According to the model posed by Schlossberg (1984), the second factor is individual factors. These include individual and demographic characteristics, psychological assets, and adapting reactions. The subset of individual and demographic attributes includes the age of an individual, sexual orientation, and health. Psychological assets include ego development, personality, commitment, and values. Lastly, the adapting reactions are divided into two kinds, functions and strategies. "Functions" defines how an individual takes control of circumstances and perceives the situation, as well as the level of anxiety experienced in the whole process. "Strategies" are the tactics an individual adopts in order to manage the transition phases. These strategies may include looking for information, direct activity, and possibly refraining from some activities (Schlossberg, 1984). Information searching may include seeking counseling or searching for resources. Direct activity could include practices such as negotiation and anxiety management. Restraint activity may include denial (Schlossberg, 1984).

Schlossberg (1984) identified the "environment" as the third factor in the transition model. This factor concerns the environmental context and the relationship between individuals and their surroundings. As the individual goes through the transition, he or she may experience negative or positive impacts depending on the transition. There are two basic sub-categories in the environment factor. The first sub-category, social support, is further divided into type, function and measurement components. Transition is facilitated by the support of various types received from family members, friends, a close relationship with the institution, or society. Function describes how an individual gets support and whether the support received has a positive impact. Measurement provides an indication of the amount of support provided to an individual by those who are linked to the individual during the transition and can vary throughout the stages (Schlossberg, 1984). The second sub-sector of the environment is called options, and refers to the options available to an

individual and the risks and advantages they entail. These options indicate how individuals are affected and how they adjust and cope with a transition. The way an individual approaches and understands these elements plays a crucial role in impacting the transition, which means transition is a very individual experience (Schlossberg, 1984).

The framework provides insightful guidance in examining the process of transition of university students, as it draws attention to the way students manage as individuals and the role of the environment in influencing the transition process. Additionally, Schlossberg's framework focuses on how individuals perceive the whole experience of transition. As such, Schlossberg (1984) provides an explanation regarding the roles of perception in transitions, implying that transition does not exist only in the event, but in the way it is experienced and faced by an individual. Lived experience is understood to be linked with an individual's perception. Lastly, the model opens the door for further subjective study, given that transition is an area that encompasses a subjective process.

3.4.1 The transition itself

The elements (trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, previous experience, and concurrent stress) of this factor overlap in many ways with the individual and environmental factors so they are discussed below in the coming sections.

3.4.2 The individual

Students are required to cope with many different challenges that they may encounter while undergoing university transition. In order to adapt to the university environment and to deal effectively with personal and academic hurdles, students are required to build new strategies. Furthermore, they are required to change their understanding about what will be needed to succeed in university (Yazedijian et al., 2008). Baker and Comfort (2004) suggest that gender, academic performance, social class and ethnicity are some characteristics that are part of the personal factors of students that influence transition.

Since universities are very different from high schools, students develop new strategies. These strategies include trying to meet the expectations of teachers, having an adaptable timetable, and commuting. One of the main changes is from the way students used to study in high school to the way they study in universities. The diverse methods established by learners are mainly are based on the kinds of task with which they are presented (Roe Clark, 2005).

Defining and achieving goals in university involves entirely different techniques than those required in high school. In order to get good results, students adopt various strategies, ranging from using or paying attention to good grammar, to saying things that they believe teachers want to hear from them. Clark (2005), in his study, investigated the concept of strategies as a way of understanding how students cope with the transition to college. Qualitative data were collected from eight first-year students at an urban, commuter, public four-year college in the USA, to explore how students experienced challenges, perceived influences, and devised strategies during their first year. The findings revealed that challenges and influences could be negative or positive, and occurred both inside and outside the college. In Clark's study, students acknowledged that university requires new strategies, because what worked in high school might not work in university (Roe Clark, 2005).

3.4.3   The environment

The third component of the Schlossberg model (the environment) concerns the context in which transition takes place, including aspects of the institution and the support available to students. These are discussed below in terms of institutional culture and the first year experience, respectively.

3.4.3.1 Institutional culture

The interaction between the university's learning environment and the students is known as the institution culture. Students undergo a rite of passage when the transition from one environment to another takes place. There is a vast change from the beliefs and practices

of the past to the ones that are being adopted currently, based on the norms and the beliefs of the university community. This section explores institutional culture in five sub-sections: Definition and components of Institutional culture, Function and importance of culture, How culture is created and maintained, Socialization of newcomers into a culture and Students' personal culture and the mismatch with the institutional culture.

3.4.3.1.1 Definition and components of Institutional culture

Institutional culture is an ambiguous term. Culture has been defined as a concept that requires cultivation (Watson, 2006). There are various characteristics of the institutional culture, as it can be weak, strong, inconsistent or consistent.

The notion of culture has its origins in anthropology, but has been widely used in organizational studies since an article by Pettigrew (1979: 574), which defined culture as a "system of publicly and collectively accepted meanings operating for a given group at given time ". Since then, numerous authors have attempted to define culture (in general, or in organizations) in terms of its function and components.

For example, Chatman and Eunyoung (2003: 21) describe it as "a system of shared values (defining what is important) and norms (defining appropriate attitudes and behaviours)".

Hofstede (n.d), refers to organizational culture as "the way in which members of an organization relate to each other, their work and the outside world in comparison to other organizations. It can enable or hinder an organization's strategy".

Schein (1991) describes culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (p.17).

Cultures can exist at different levels, including national, institutional and group levels, but all share similar components (Hofstede, 2010). A common feature of the definitions is an

implication that the values of organizational culture are shared among members, and transmitted to newcomers, through various forms of communication.

The higher learning institutional culture, for instance the culture of universities and colleges, may maintain a central culture, which is based on the operations and history of the specific organization or brought forward by integrating various sub-cultures. There are several units present within an organization's structure that serve different purposes, which is why subcultures may arise (Middleton, 2013).

The higher education experience depends on the institution being attended (Henry, et al., 2005). All institutions have different cultures, including practices, physical setting, history, patterns and traditions, which provide guidance for individuals and groups (Kuh & Whitt, 1988).

After thoroughly observing the various definitions of institutional culture, it can be stated that there are many components of this concept, since it has a dynamic and complex nature. There are various research studies that have been conducted to analyse the elements of institutional culture, including understanding the staff, faculty, curriculum, historical roots, cultural artifacts, social environment, core values, distinctive themes and founders and leaders' charisma (Scott, 2008). The institutional culture comprises practices, which are context-specific, cultures, customs and institution rules along with complicated principles, values and norms. It is not only about simply understanding how things are done.

Authors describe a number of features by which culture is formed and manifested, although there is considerable overlap among the lists of components they suggest. For example, Institutional culture, according to Zhu and Engels (2014), is the deeply embedded pattern of institutional or organizational behaviour that is based on shared artefacts, values, beliefs, ideologies and assumptions present among the members. On the other hand, the culture of an organization or institution has been defined by Middleton (2013) as the beliefs, values and rituals that act as the binding force or glue in integrating members.

In an attempt to understand the elements of culture and the relations between them. Schein (2004, 2010) developed a model in which culture is viewed as a "log", made up of three layers: artefacts, espoused values and assumptions. Other authors express similar concepts in other terms; for example, assumptions are sometimes called values or beliefs.
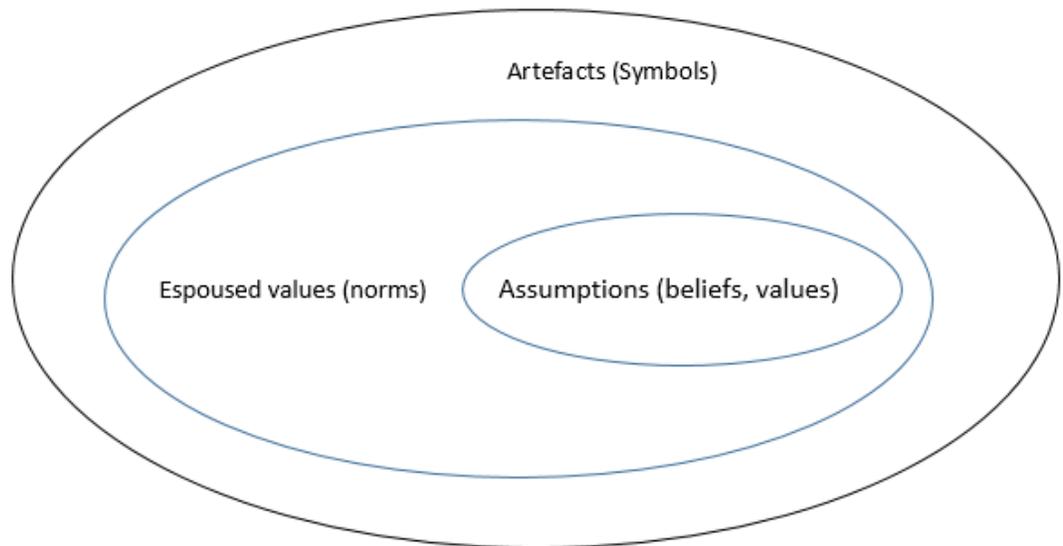
Figure 3-1: Three Levels of Organizational Culture as a log. Adapted from Schein (1991)

Assumptions include the organizations' deepest and most essential values, which are created over time. Schein (1985) in his account of the way organizational cultures evolve, observes that organizations are formed through the actions of a set of people, driven by strong assumptions about what they seek to do and how it should be done. These assumptions are expressed through the espoused values and, in turn, artefacts. These basic assumptions are manifested in automatic reactions and unconscious perceptions or beliefs. For an institution or organization culture, the assumptions held are critical since they are engrained within and are not questioned by the institution's authorities at any point of time. It is a difficult task to recognize these assumptions, as it is only the members of the culture

directly associated with the institution, who can appropriately understand them, even if they do not make them explicit (Whitt et al., 2013). For instance, there are institutional assumptions that some educational disciplines are superior to others.

Espoused values, the middle layer, are the philosophies, goals and strategies of the institution. They include tacit norms that members understand and adhere to consciously.

Artefacts are the visible and tangible manifestations of culture, that even outsiders recognize (Davey, 2013). Artefacts are the activities, processes and products that give expression to the underlying values and assumptions (Davey, 2013). Artefacts may include terminology and language, myths and stories, mission statements, events, ceremonies, crucial observable rituals, reward structure and the communication channels. Hence, artefacts show the values of an organization as well as what is actually occurring within the organization (Davey, 2013).

Thus, group assumptions, values and behaviours are responsible for the institutional culture of educational institutions. The individuals who are part of the organization are responsible for all aspects included within the organization. The institutional culture has a personal culture which is quite embedded and researchers need to understand the social constructions present by understanding the practices, interactions, policies and stories associated with the members. Institutional culture is also reflected by the mission of the organization, artefacts and symbols (Scott, 2008).

Carter et al. (2013) suggest that the adopted values and assumptions of the institution need to be compatible in order to make sure that the assumptions lead to a strong action base in terms of culture and attitude. For example, an international student may be given financial aid, which is an artefact that reflects the institution's espoused value of being globally oriented. The underlying assumption is that international students are important for global institutions, which are therefore interested in spending their valuable resources on them.

Expressing a similar view of culture, Sathe (1983) discusses shared understandings within a culture using the terms, beliefs and values. Beliefs are equivalent to Schein's (1991) assumptions, while values are beliefs with a normative component. Sathe (1983), like Schein, notes that culture can be reflected in explicit forms such as rules and implicit forms, including rituals, ceremonies, stories, metaphors, heroes, logs, decor, dress, and other symbolic forms of communication.

However, Hatch (1993) criticizes Schein's model, arguing that it does not sufficiently clarify the relationship and mutual interactions between the three layers. In her model, she attempts to rectify this limitation by introducing the concept of cultural dynamics. She also introduced symbols as a distinct element, separate from artefacts, by which assumptions are manifested. Her emphases were less on the elements of culture - assumptions, values, and artefacts and more on the dynamics of the relationship between these elements. Nevertheless, despite her critique, Hatch (1993) describes Schein's model as extremely relevant.

According to Rai and Panna (2010) culture has a number of distinctive characteristics. First, it is social, because it is created and developed through social interaction and shared among members of a community. Secondly, culture is systemic, which means its elements interact and need to be viewed in close relation to each other. Culture also has values attached; it shows what ideas and behaviours are accepted or neglected, encouraged or discouraged, in a particular community. Lastly, culture is shared and learnt. This means culture can be inherited and passed on from one generation to the next. In this dynamic process, culture can be changed as the community responds to the prevailing conditions. These characteristics make culture an important force in any society. It connects members, influences people's behaviour, and shapes their opinions and view of the world. It is a system of values which people create and preserve over the course of practical activities, through interaction with other members and with the environment.

3.4.3.1.2 Function and importance of culture

It is the institution's culture, which determines what is acceptable and important and how activities should be carried out. The cultural standards and norms must be followed for an organization to be successful in its operations (Davey, 2013). Culture affects the behaviours of members of a community. A strong culture has a binding effect by creating shared attitudes and norms of behaviour, it contributes to avoid conflict among members (Dawson, 2010, Schein, 2010, McKenna, 2012).

The identity of an institution is associated with the culture in terms of the values, norms, rituals and institution legends. It also decides on how activities would be carried out (Schein, 2004). Institutions have a climate and practices which are based on their culture, which help them to manage the beliefs, values and people of the organization as a whole (Schein, 2004).

In universities, the success of students is based on the level of integration, motivation, resilience, involvement and engagement within the social and academic context. It is the culture of the institution, amongst various other factors, that determines the transition experiences felt by the students from their high school to university level. The institution culture may facilitate the students' adaptation or cause hindrance in their development (Pascarell and Terenzini, 1991).

Students engage amongst themselves and it is the culture that determines how this takes place. Their behaviour and development is based on this culture. Personal development is facilitated and outcomes can be much more efficient if students focus on activities that are strictly related to education (Astin, 1993). Student engagement is dependent upon how they interact with the faculty members and their peers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Students have various expectations from the new university when they first join (Howard, 2005). These expectations are based on the understanding of the students based on past experiences. Many students know or assume what life would be like at the university

(Moneta & Kuh, 2005). However, reality and expectations may be quite different and students may struggle to adjust to the new university environment. In this case, the institutional culture of an education institution may prove to be helpful and facilitate transition by enabling first year students to understand the context of higher education, reconcile their expectations regarding the new university environment and embrace this new culture internally. This depends, however, on there being a positive and conducive environment present as part of the institutional culture to help carry out the process at a quicker pace (Moneta & Kuh, 2005).

Various academic research studies have analysed the importance of institutional culture (Hellriegel & Slocum, 1974; Peterson & Spencer, 1990; Cress, 2002; Woodard & Sims, 2000). They believe that it is an essential factor that helps facilitate the social and academic integration of a student within the higher education system, and hence it affects the retention and attrition of the students (Engstrom, 2008). Students who believe that the university climate is positive and able to accommodate their needs and requirements are much more likely to remain associated with the institution and complete their graduation. Various vulnerable categories of students have also been taken into account while observing the institutional culture concept. Some students may be vulnerable due to their gender or racial identity, as compared to the student norm at the university. At some institutions, these students may face discrimination and non-acceptance, whereas other institutions may provide them with a hospitable environment. The transition experience into higher education may prove to be highly positive or negative. For the present research study, this aspect is vital for consideration, as women in Saudi Arabia may be subjected to gender-specific issues when transitioning to university. This is mainly because higher education institutions usually and traditionally cater to the male gender.

According to Pascarella (1985) the formal characteristics of the institution have much to do with whether its programme, dimension, place and atmosphere give students the opportunity to succeed or not when in the institution. For example, the association between

the atmosphere of the institution and the official features create an ambiance that may or may not encourage friendly association and communication between the staff and students.

3.4.3.1.3 How culture is created and maintained

Culture management and creation is the most essential leadership activity and leaders need to be different from workers, as they must have the efficient ability to motivate people. They must also understand the culture, since they are responsible to make sure that the culture remains functional and is not ignored (Schein, 2004).

Organizational culture is created by institutionalizing and embedding aspects of an organization, which have been successful in the past (Schein, 2004). These aspects should be held in high esteem by the organization, without any questions whatsoever, as they would help enhance the culture and success of the organization as a whole (Schein, 2004).

Higher education institutions have their own methods and procedures of creating and maintaining culture, where they make use of specific language to celebrate or express the essential aspects, as part of ceremonies, programmes and events. The institutional culture needs to be adopted by the students involuntarily when they arrive at a specific institution. They need to internalize it to an extent and use it as guidance for their future decisions and behaviour. Also, by this adoption, the first year experience of the educational system is shaped (Engstrom, 2008).

The institutional culture is preserved and enriched by organization members sharing their assumptions and interpretations regarding the components of culture. They may use these interpretations as guidance to carry out the appropriate decisions and behaviour (Saunders, 2011). Moreover, over time, institutions build up myths and stories that reinforce the culture and convey its values to members and new entrants. In this way, myths play a vital role in perpetuating culture. Broms and Gahmberg (1983) highlight the power of myths and symbols to represent deeply-rooted and often unconsciously held values. Informed by

semioticians, they describe how culture is conveyed through signs and images, which may take a variety of forms, including words, pictures, and actions. Analysing the reasons for the power of myths, Broms and Gahmberg (1983) emphasize their potential to involve the entire personality by stimulating thoughts and feelings.

3.4.3.1.4 Socialization of newcomers into a culture

Over a period of time, symbols, legends and stories developed at the institution convey the culture and develop a community sense and loyalty among the students. Hence, when the students speak about their history, they refer to it as 'our history' (Birnbaum, 1988). The institutional culture comes to be understood by new students after they socialize with older students, who already have an idea regarding the culture. These students enter the university based on some norms and the new experience helps them realize the norms of the university, which they are able to adopt. Undergraduate socialization needs to be understood in the context of the background of these students, how they socialize, their focus, socioeconomic status, abilities, skills and the goals they desire to attain (Weidman, 1989). The outcomes of the students are affected by the socialization activities, which eventually influence their lifestyle, choices and aspirations (Weidman, 1989).

First year students are usually conscious about the skills used at university and the existing communities, which are structured to work differently. Through participation in CoP, learners get to know the rules, language and the norms of a particular community, and to behave according to the established standards (Lave &Wenger, 1991)

Cultures are essentially formed within organizations and develop as members exercise their preferences in ways that reflect their values and beliefs. This means that, when a newcomer enters an organization, his or her behavioural choices are constrained by the established norms communicated to him or her, directly or indirectly.

Student socialization is influenced by the nature of the institution. For instance, in the United States of America, Henry et al. (2005) report that students attending private

universities would be a part of the higher education environment and participate in the organization's activities, whereas public institution students have less opportunity to do so and may be overlooked or not engage, as the number of students in these universities is very high (Henry et al., 2005).

Moreover, the way students adapt to and engage with the culture of the institution they enter is influenced by characteristics like student background, parents' education level, years spent at the university, the course for which they have registered and the overall university environment (Kuh, et al., 2000).

Moos (1979) viewed university culture in terms of interaction among three different aspects that function in harmony. (i) the institution size with resources and officials (ii) the physical building and its arrangements (iii) the student body. Similarly Davis and Murrell (1993) view learning as a joint activity between students, the institution and academic staff. These authors note the importance of student participation within the institution, including the accessibility of staff to students. By understanding these aspects, the environment of the university is assessed and through the physical infrastructure reinforcements are made. During the transition, the students go through a social climate, which is made of these aspects. Davis and Murrell (1993) state that the university environment's structural makeup affects the university climate.

The university environment is a strong influence on the ability of students to adjust and manage the transition (Moos, 1979). Learning is facilitated not only by the efforts of the students to enhance their own learning process but also through environmental characteristics like the institutional context (Moos, 1979). Students need assurance that their needs and requirements are being fulfilled by the education system, and this involves not only learning but also social interactions with the administration, teachers and the peers (Moos, 1979). The institution culture should be one that promotes responsiveness to needs and provides the necessary resources for the new students to smoothly transition into the higher education system (Moos, 1979). Their problems should be handled promptly, the

responses must be constructive and the visual artifacts part of the institution culture must promote the positive development of the students during their transition process within the higher education system (Moos, 1979).

One of the essential aspects for the first-year transition is for the institution to be able to provide enough social resources. Students may face problems due to homesickness, self-esteem and individual achievement (Arefi & Jan, 2016). Individuals' and institutional requirements must be compatible in order for them to have a successful and supportive relationship in the long run. With the help of the above-mentioned aspects, individuals can successfully integrate within the institution system and attain success for all their post high school undertakings (Tinto, 1975).

Additionally, Brag (1994) said that learners who come from settings with fewer students in class noticed the difference when they reached university, as they were unused to learning in large classes, as is customary in university, and faced challenges with the level of the workload.

3.4.3.2 Students' culture and the mismatch with the institutional culture

The involvement rate of first-year students is affected by the cultural gap they experience in university. According to Stephens et al. (2012), the performance of students depends on whether they perceive their previous cultural norms and values as being similar or dissimilar to the cultures and norms of the new environment. In this setting, the significance of the person-culture match is highlighted by Fulmer et al. (2010). He believes that students will undergo physical development, get more involved in studies and give better performance if they are able to relate to a given setting.

The difference between the behaviour of the young learners and the standards set by the universities can be controlled by encouraging association amongst the learners and the university staff. Research has demonstrated that learners gladly accept the efforts of teachers and professors to encourage them to absorb the information, ideas and

experiences they encounter. Research conducted by Weissmann (2013) with joint honours students at a post-1992 university in the United Kingdom, concerning the experience of the institutional habitus, revealed that learners reacted to teachers' and professors' efforts, such as the self-picked study groups, classes and seminars better than other options, which included downloading podcasts and online delivery (Weissmann, 2013).

The implication is that university administrators and policy makers working in educational institutions that have students from diverse cultural backgrounds should focus on more effective ways of engaging with the students, especially the first years, who often find the university environment challenging. Doing so would provide students with improved information about the parameters and possibilities of decision making while still informing decision makers about how certain initiatives are likely to be perceived and received by students. This would help align students' expectations and beliefs about such initiatives (Lehmann, 2014).

The writings above regarding the culture of the educational institution identify factors related to the students, and the traits of the institution, which comprise elements such as staff and the management, which contribute to create the atmosphere of the university, which then influence the learner's ability to perform (Davis & Murrell, 1993).

The second perspective used in this study to investigate the transition environment is first year experience, as a distinct concept and approach which is attracting attention as a way to ease transition. This is discussed next.

3.4.3.3 First year experience

The first year experience in university can influence how effectively the transition from school to university is achieved (Mackenzie et al, 2011). The terms "transition to university" and "first year experience" have been linked together by many authors (McInnis, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). They note the importance of the first year for students'

adjustment and further success. They highlight the challenges facing first year students and they discuss ways in which universities can provide support to ease the transition period.

A few studies have underlined the issue of social and academic transition in first year students as an essential perspective that adds to the level of retention of first year students. Zepke and Leach (2005) observe that universities in New Zealand are currently creating procedures to address this problem, preferably by a blend of both social and educational activities. One such procedure proposed by Zepke and Leach (2005) is forming fellowship groups and associate gatherings, which provide unity in the university campus. This area of research analyses the social and academic changes made by first year students to the established culture of university.

This section discusses the importance of the first year experience, the challenges that first year students often face, and the forms of support the institutions can offer during this time, in order to ease the transition process.

3.4.3.3.1 Importance of First Year Experience

The idea of first year experience will be analysed in this section. Since the first year of university decides the termination of studies and dropout from university programmes, it is considered exceedingly crucial (Mackenzie, 2011). Students often lack necessary skills and have high expectations as they enter university life. When they enrol in universities, students are offered the opportunity of deciding and advancing their careers, chances and expectations. However, some students may find the new learning, physical and social environment of university disturbing and stressful (Wangeri et al., 2012). If students are unable to experience the advantages of higher education instantly, they are likely to withdraw from the university. Hence, effective completion of the degree and satisfaction with studying are highly dependent upon the quality of the first year experience (Higgins, 2006).

The rationale for the level of attention paid to the first year is that it is a time in which students form the attitudes, behaviours, skills and knowledge on which their overall adjustment to university education will depend. It is thus considered as a crucial time for students (Harvey et al., 2006; McInnis, 2001; Roe, 2005; Reason et al., 2006; Upcraft et al., 2005).

How first year students can be successfully incorporated into the new academic environment is an important issue. According to Tinto (2002), students attain the necessary skills, dispositions and customs required for successful learning at university if the first year is considered as a progressive year to help them.

The academic, social and cultural integration into a new environment are highly affected by the initial experiences of students (Krause & Coates, 2008; McInnis, 2001; Yorke & Longden, 2008). At the start of the semester, beginners are viewed as vulnerable; therefore, a lot of care is needed for their survivals (McInnis, 2001). In addition, literature stresses that beginners need to be motivated, empowered to establish their character, and to focus on their goals. Reason et al. (2006) asserted that students' first year at university determines their successful transition to the new academic environment and tenacity.

There is a widely held view in the literature that the intellectual growth of students in their first year of university changes momentum in terms of communication and inquiry-based learning (Chambers, 2008). There is data, which suggests that many students may withdraw from the university before graduating, and that academic success is very much influenced by their earlier or first year experiences. It is during this period that adjustment takes place and support from the university administration is vital (Upcraft et al., 2005). The students are subjected to experiences inside as well as outside of the classroom that impact all the student years and their university experiences.

Thus, it is agreed among various experts that the critical year for student success is the first year. The institutional departure model presented by Tinto (1987) suggests that in this

specific year, the students are transitioning and entering into the adult world, which is why they are faced with various challenges and need to adjust within the university, academically and socially. It is during this early stage that the incidence of withdrawal is at its highest (Tinto, 1987). Tinto argues the need for a strong interaction between the academic and social systems, since the student's academic learning, achievements and persistence are shaped by their experiences.

3.4.3.3.2 The Challenges

When students from different backgrounds become a part of a single university environment, they share their perceptions, experiences and motivations. Students with diverse traits, learning styles, backgrounds and characteristics come together when they join the university. It is essential that these aspects integrate appropriately based on the social order of the university and there are no hindrances (Choy, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983). The adjustment process may vary among students in terms of the effort and time needed, since they each have their own level of emotional and knowledge awareness (Black, 2013). Wangeri et al. (2012) believe that physical comfort, social security and ability to enjoy the activities are affected when a student transitions from high school to university.

Many surveys have explored first year experiences and challenges. For instance, in the UK, there have been various studies to analyse students' satisfaction with their first year experience (Yorke & Longden, 2008). Students who left the institution before completing their education were also taken into account. The findings revealed several challenges. Yorke and Longden (2008) suggest that many students were not able to find a programme that would match their abilities, expectations or financial status. These aspects caused hindrance in attaining their education. It is important to understand the expectations of the students, since, if there is a large gap between the expectations and the reality, university students may feel disappointed (Briggs et al., 2012; Knox & Wiper, 2008; Zukas & Malcolm, 2007). Individuals have diverse and contradictory expectations that need to be understood

in order to help reduce the number of student dropouts and help improve the first year experiences. Based on analysis of first year experience discussions, Wilson-Strydom (2015) concluded that researchers need to understand first year studies' nature and importance, experience enhancing measures and responses, student surveys and curriculum imperatives and enhancement measures (Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

The challenges faced during the first year experience have been discussed during academic conferences. The National Resource Center in the USA organized events like Students in Transition and First-Year Experience at the University of South Carolina. The European First-Year Experience also carried out events like these in Europe (Milsom et al., 2014). First year students in Saudi Arabia are faced with challenges; therefore, the First National Conference for the Preparatory Year was held in the University of Dammam in 2015 to address this issue with the aim of enhancing university organization and administration to help manage an easy transition for the first year students. The first year programme's academic aspects were discussed as part of the conference objectives, along with evaluating and reviewing international and local practices and managing a smooth transition from high school to university for Saudi students (University of Dammam, 2015). There was a debate on forming a combined global centre specifically for new university students. It was mainly to assist the Saudi universities and diverse institutions so as to advance education and assist in the change in learning from high school to university. In addition, there would be significant information and detailed evaluations of programmes and crucial analysis for establishing consultancies and seminars, together with publications in advanced periodicals.

3.4.3.3.3 Support

Since students are required to fulfil the expectations associated with the university's social and academic life, it is essential to support students in order to help them to achieve this goal (Upcraft et al., 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2008; Zepke & Leach, 2006).

Since students are expected to be most vulnerable and weak in the first year of university (McInnis, 2001), universities need to help and motivate students to achieve their aims and

objectives and create a sense of belonging among them. This is increasingly stressed in the literature.

As described by Baird and Gordon (2009) and Yorke and Longden (2008), 'student experience' is the term which is used to describe the complete process of creating an individual meaning from the interaction with the situation of the academic institution and the external environment i.e. the society. According to these researchers, student experiences are considered as the results or outcomes which are concerned with the relationship between students and the environment in which they are involved. The university's first year is shaped by the experience that students gain during the year, along with their feelings and anticipations (Barefoot et al., 2005). This is perceived by many as a transition that plays a significant role in supporting adaptation to the new academic environment and deciding students' persistence in university.

The idea of first-year experience is described by Greenfield et al. (2013) as a common approach among postsecondary educational institutions, whereby first-year experience is considered as a deliberate amalgamation of academic and extra-curricular efforts, rather than being a sole programme or initiative. It signifies a meaningful group of initiatives planned and applied for enhancing the standard of academic performance and satisfaction with the first year of university. From this perspective, the term first-year experience is used to describe the programmes developed to encourage the retention and success of first year students (Howard, 2013). There are various definitions of the term, depending on the country, university or author, but the aim of first-year experience programmes is to facilitate the students during their transition into the educational institution.

Two characteristics of the first-year experience are that it is culture specific and time specific. This means that it may differ between institutions and time periods (Koch & Gardner, 2014). It has been observed that in the past, first year students were subjected to a forced enslavement by older classmates, hazing and disrespect (Dwyer, 1989). Also, in

terms of academic progress, first year students might be unable to carry out coursework, since they were not provided with textbooks and resources were scarce (Higgins, 2006).

It was the Americans who first realized the importance of simplifying the process of transition of a student from home to university. To facilitate the process, freshman advisors were chosen to help guide the students and accommodate them within the institution (Dwyer, 1989). Henry Dunster, the Harvard University President, started first-year experience programmes by introducing tutors to carry out counselling and befriend the younger students (as cited in Dwyer, 1989). In the past 25 years this concept has gained vital importance, especially after the seminar course University 101 established by the University of South Carolina, in 1972, initiated an international and national movement referred to as the first-year experience (Morris & Cutright, 2005). Through this development it was realized that first year students face problems in adjusting to the new educational environment, which is why they must be supported. It provided a basis for further improvements in first year experiences and reduced the problems of inexperienced students subjected to a transition.

Harvard University later presented a series of statements and introduced the Freshman Advisor (FA) board, which would help support and extend orientation towards the youngest students. Due to this activity, first year students have been the subject of research and debate. At present, the National Centre for the Study of the Freshman Year Experience has established seven categories of first-year experience programmes in the USA. They are Undergraduate Research, Early Warning/Academic Alert Systems, Service Learning, Preterm Orientation, Academic/Transition Seminars, Learning Communities and Summer Bridge Programs (Barefoot et al., 2005). Hence, it can be stated that the establishment of a conscious and well planned approach towards the development of the first-year experience took place in America and then spread throughout the world.

The programme, 'Action on Access' was created in 1999 in the UK with the objective of widening HE participation by developing, facilitating and promoting a focus, which is

strategically driven and nationally oriented. The student experience may be de-motivating in certain areas, which is why such a programme helped recognise the challenging areas that needed development (The Higher Education Academy, 2015, Yorke & Longden, 2008).

The government and educators of Australia realized the importance of the first year experience long ago. Within the nation, over 20 years, there have been comprehensive research studies to analyse the quality and character of the first year experience. In 1994, the first First Year Experience study was carried out by the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT). In 1999, the second study was carried out for the Evaluations and Investigations Programme of the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA). In 2004 and 2009, two more studies were conducted to analyse the student experience and possible trends which may affect practice and policies (James et al., 2010). Hence, it was observed that in 2009, first year students were much more motivated and organized as compared to the students of 2004. They also experienced an easier transition within the university academically. Universities and schools exerted strenuous efforts to extend support towards first year students (James et al., 2010).

As compared to the USA, UK, Australia and other developed nations, Saudi Arabia has conducted little research on first year experience. Over the past decade, however, the education sector has grown steadily, helped by government funding. Along with this trend, scholars have also begun to pay attention to this university experience and its development (Hanson, 2012).

Furthermore, it is expected that Saudi Arabia will further establish policies that will help enhance the experience of first year students. It is important, however, for policy makers to realize the religious and cultural background of these students and not just focus upon the first year challenges they face during the transition.

3.5   Transition Outcomes

The literature suggests there are two pathways of transition: On the one hand, there is a successful process of academic and social adjustment when the student is able to adjust, the result is successful incorporation into the institution. On the other hand, some students are unable to adapt, resulting in alienation. Each of these patterns is discussed in turn.

3.5.1   Adjustment

Students must familiarize themselves with a number of unknown challenges that they encounter in the new academic year. Almost every student has to deal with the different kinds of pressure and anxiety that are associated with a new environment. Although university staff become virtual experts at recognizing the challenges linked with a new environment, and are accustomed to these unfamiliar changes, for a student not to undergo the pressures of academic and social adjustment would be almost impossible.

According to Tinto (1975, 1986, 1993), students' persistence in university is affected by both academic and social integration. It is believed that the more the students are incorporated into the university's social and academic systems, the higher the probability of students' completion of their college studies. Accordingly, this sub-section looks in turn at academic and social adjustment.

3.5.1.1 Academic Adjustment

Research carried out by Bragg in 1994 aimed to determine how effectively first year students got used to university life in the initial semester. Bragg reported that the most frequently cited causes for difficulties in adjustment and leaving the institutions were linked to not being able to adjust to the academic life at university. These difficulties were associated with reading abilities, studying abilities and academic preparation. Transitions in the learning programmes, large reading and writing assignments, the increased discipline necessary for the accomplishment of learning at university and the large number of learners per class are other factors that make transition a challenge (Bragg, 1994).

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This section discusses the academic difficulties faced by first year students in their transition to university. These include: mismatch between previous and new learning and teaching methods, independent learning, active learning, time management, workload, readiness for academic writing, and mismatch of reality with expectations.

Students tend to refer to their previous learning experience to guide their learning at university. Two different perspectives aimed to describe the link between students' first-year learning experiences and entry-level education. Madigan (2006), and van Rooyen et al. (2006) believed that past academic experiences can successfully predict the academic performance of students in university, while academic qualification was considered by McKenzie and Gow (2004) and Lowe and Cook (2003) as a helpful factor to predict the academic achievements of students who leave school. On the other hand, research conducted by Houston et al. (2007) reveal that student performance can be predicted through entry qualification only when it is linked to characteristics like the workload and their subject specialism.

Cassidy (2011) believed that academic performance in university cannot be predicted by previous academic experiences. Research conducted by Bone and Reid (2011), for instance, reveals that students who scored good grades in Biology at high school were unable to get good results in Biology at university. Therefore, prior academic performance alone cannot predict academic performance of students in the university's first year. This is may be because of a change to new ways of learning. However, students who achieve good academic performance in the first year at university are more confident to maintain their performance into the second year, and start taking their studies more seriously (Gifford et al., 2006).

Problems concerning academic transition highlighted in previous literature emphasize that students need to adjust to new learning and teaching methods that differ from those of previous learning environments. Katanis (2000) considers the unfamiliarity of the new learning environment as one of the difficulties contributing to the significance of the first-

year experience. According to Lowe and Cook (2003), in the initial semester at university, students follow the same study style that they established in high school, which reflects a failure to adjust successfully to the new learning style at the university. According to Evans (2000) students might not have imagined or experienced being given the amount of work that they have to do in universities. Because of universities' different grading system, students might get lower grades than they have been used to. Furthermore, teachers expect the students to show a higher level of independence as they enter into the university life.

Harvey et al. (2006) reviewed research evidence showing that first year students undergo significant growth of learning behaviour and cognitive development. However, they suggested that concepts developed through previous learning style can obstruct such conceptual development among first year students. Therefore, they concluded, teachers should make sure that the teaching and learning techniques they employ make it easy for students to accomplish this growth. They also reported that university teachers' expectations that these students will develop and apply independent learning techniques are not reflected in a clear connection between the efficiency of surface learning techniques and the assessment results in the first year. They argued that adjustment is required in order for students to meet these expectations, to adapt to a new learning and teaching style, and a new culture and to engage in the academic discourse of university life.

Booth (1997) contributed to the understanding of students' transition to the university by analysing the experience of first year students studying a history course at at the University of Nottingham in the UK. He mentioned that students in high school may consider learning as about memorizing facts but at universities they encounter a new approach to learning which requires them to learn analytical and critical techniques (Booth, 1997). The findings of Booth (1997) are of interest, as many students will encounter difficulties in adapting to new academic discourses where new skills are needed. In his study, Booth (1997) suggests that since teachers are experts in knowledge, and are fervent and motivated, they can play an important role in motivating and helping students in adapting to the university's new

learning environment. He claims that university teachers think that first year students have not prepared themselves appropriately for university academic life with reference to their capabilities, study skills, thoughts and knowledge about the course. However, students who are genuinely interested in studying the courses that they selected may nevertheless be unfamiliar with the background of the course concerning discourse, responsibilities and expectations associated with the course. Hence, the teacher's role is significant.

Students who have been used to being observed and guided regularly by teachers and parents in high school, may be surprized and shaken when they find out that university does not provide the guidance that they used to get previously. Since some students are unable to relate to their new teachers and fellows in the way they did to the previous ones, they may end up feeling lonely and empty because they are required to discover their own ways to endure in the new place (Spencer, 2002).

In the secondary school culture of Saudi Arabia, teachers are the sources of knowledge. Students are responsible to memorize what they are taught and then recall it in the examination. Writers have criticized the level of student attainment and have argued the need for change in curriculum approaches and teachers' training (Alhamd et al., 2004; Alaisa, 2009; Albahiri, 2010; Algarfi, 2010), in order to move from a focus on examinations only to the development of skills independent study.

Through the transition to university, students need to manage their own learning and depend solely on themselves (Naumann et al., 2003; Stephens et al., 2012). However, when students have to study independently without getting help from teachers, they encounter a lot of problems (Brady & Allingham, 2007). Universities tend to expect students to adjust to their teaching and learning techniques in a short time so if students cannot do so, the process becomes increasingly stressful (Hagan & Macdonald, 2000). However, students think that their teachers do not know or understand the difficulties they face while undergoing the transition process to postsecondary education. Research conducted by McCarthy and Kuh (2006) on American high school students revealed that students' way of

learning in school was entirely different from the way they were expected to learn at university.

The research conducted by Childs and Spencer (2002) revealed that six types of problems were triggered following the change to the methods of learning in university. These problems included losing track; lack of motivation; uncertainty about whether they are doing sufficient work or performing the work as effectively as possible; losing self-confidence; and the need to make extensive and vital notes. Specifically, it was discovered that problems were encountered by a large number of students in dealing with the heavy workload. Students who come from an environment that focused extensively on teaching and examination may not have developed independent learning skills in secondary school, making such experiences stressful.

In Saudi Arabia, university demands that students adopt an independent way of learning. They also have to create a timetable and select their electives. Students are expected to make notes on their own, do research, carry out group projects, join class discussion, and give oral presentations in class. Therefore, when students go to university, where they need to be independent, they feel a huge difference, compared to the way of learning that they experienced in school. Since students' previous learning experience has not helped them prepare for this change in the learning process, students face many problems because of this sudden shift in control and responsibility. Students find this self-regulated learning approach very hard, as they are used to direct learning (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013).

The difference between the structured learning approach used in school and the independent learning approach used in the university can induce 'Learning shock', which refers to the pressure that an individual undergoes while adapting to the new teaching and learning environment (Griffiths et al., 2005; Christies et al., 2008). The skills and self-learning required at the university do not match the skills required to survive at secondary school. In the first year of university, students' success may be affected by the sudden shift with regard to academic strictness, academic adaptation and academic workload. In research

involving students at university, Christie et al. (2013) found that when students comprehend what independent learning and time management skills really mean, they are better able to adjust effectively to the new learning environment.

The importance of such skills was demonstrated in an Australian study of first year adjustment to university by McInnis and James (1995). Their study focused particularly on the initial experience of undergraduates and the extent and impact of diversity in student backgrounds. It was found that the most cited problem, out of all the problems regarding preliminary adjustment to university academic life, was managing learning. The challenge faced in adjusting, according to learners, was the rapid change to independent learning. As one student expressed, at university, doing assignments and work is entirely up to the student, but the case is different in schools where teachers supervise students' studies and persuade them to complete the work on time (McInnis & James, 1995).

According to Adriana (2006), students in Switzerland are accustomed to an educational system at primary and secondary level (Michaelowa, 2007), in which they are considered as passive subjects and are responsible for their success in obtaining a university place, but not for effectively adapting to the new learning environment where they need to be active learners. The learning strategies developed by the students and their idea of the learning environment are closely linked to their previous learning experience, so their experiences in higher education depend on those ideas (Ashwin & Trigwell, 2012). If they lack the skills required at the university, fail to adapt to the university learning and teaching techniques, feel doubtful in an unaccustomed academic environment, encounter difficulty with new kinds of assessments, and hesitate to ask for assistance or support from lecturers and fellow students, they are usually referred to as 'poorly prepared for higher studies'. Often, the gap between the school and university is not successfully bridged by the students (Lowe & Cook, 2003).

Since first-year students tend to find self-regulated learning difficult in order to accommodate this process into the new environment, a number of factors, according to

Naumann et al. (2003), require adjustment. They include finding help and support from others, managing time, expectations for success, beliefs, self-efficacy, approaches to study, setting objectives, control beliefs, task values and intrinsic goal orientation. Participants of research conducted by Byrd and MacDonald (2005) claimed that out of all these aspects, time management is the most significant factor required for success.

The workload is a contentious issue when it comes to university life and learning. Many students, particularly in the first year, express concerns about the magnitude of the work they face. A study conducted by McInnis and James (1995) in collaboration with the Monash University and the University of Melbourne, which investigated the workload of first-year students, reported that workload was not only a serious issue but also a stumbling block for first-year students. Participants reported that they were not happy with their first interactions at the university, as this problem affected their learning adversely. The authors point out that the transition period needs to be approached with care and ways of handling workloads effectively identified. Otherwise, students might go so far as to leave the university because they are unable to cope with the workload in a proper way.

A study was conducted by Clerehan and Walker (2003) at Monash University in Australia, which investigated how first year Marketing students perceived their readiness for writing assignments in university. Almost 1000 students were asked to answer questions on how easy or hard they found the task of researching and writing assignments; which sources they used and which ones proved to be the most useful, how well they understood what they needed to do in order to succeed in their assignments; and to what degree written assignments in the final year of high school had equipped them for writing university assignments (Clerehan & Walker, 2003). Almost half of the participants in the study believed that the written assignments given in high school had not prepared them fully for those given in university. Most significantly, it was discovered that some students showed unwillingness to start as they encountered difficulties with assignments.

Similar results were produced by the study conducted by McInnis and James (1998). When asked whether the final year of school appropriately prepared them for university assignments, very negative responses were given by students who were not satisfied; only 38% of students claimed that the final year of school had prepared them for university. When answering the questions as to what degree the university's first-year subjects were related to those studied in school, dissatisfied students provided far more negative answers than those who were satisfied with their courses.

An investigation was carried out of a three-year scheme named *"Autonomy and the Ability to Learn"* by Childs and Spencer (1999) in order to explore the opinions expressed by learners in the Faulty of Law in three universities in the United Kingdom on their education practice. Many of the learners who were involved in the study had expected a lot of input and high rate of attention to particular learners undertaking the law course. However, many learners found the degree course tougher than anticipated (Childs & Spencer, 2002). Students' opinion about transition to university depends on how appropriately they have been informed about the course they are studying and the evaluation techniques that will be used. Students need to effectively adapt to the new and different environment of university when they leave school, since school life is very different from university life. These differences are perceived in different areas like various ways of learning, discipline procedures, methods of assessment, and the teacher-student roles. It was recommended by McInnis and James (1995) that in order to effectively adapt to the new academic environment, having a clear idea about what is expected of students at university plays a significant role.

It was revealed through the research carried out by Evans and Peel (1998) that very often parents, friends, teachers and career counsellors mislead students regarding the selection of a course, university life, etc. A huge difference was observed by students between their expectations about university life and what they actually experienced as they entered university. Students are likely to leave the university because of a significant gap between school and university life.

3.5.1.2 Social Adjustment

There is a substantial body of research evidence suggesting that the social adjustment of students is as important to successful transition as academic factors (Child & Spencer, 2002; Peel & Evans, 1998; Tam, 2002). This was demonstrated by Kantanis (1997) in her study involving students of English at Monash University in Australia. She investigated transition problems generally and analysed the factors involved in the student transition. The study was conducted by means of a questionnaire for first year students of English, supplemented by informal discussion, which elicited subjective information. Kantanis discovered that many students endured a prolonged troubled period of adjustment before they became familiar with the site and the resources, facilities and services available at university. She pointed out that her findings highlighted the importance of a relatively neglected area, that is, socialization at and into the culture of university, which her study revealed to be a key determination of a positive transition. There are several factors that can have grave consequences for students in encountering the difficulties of transition. These factors include the university's impersonal nature as shown by the uninterested behaviour of many professors towards students and lack of skills in developing a friendship network at university, which constitute obstacles to transition (Kantanis, 1997).

Some examples from research that highlight how social transition affects the students' adaptation to the university life are given below:

Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) investigated the important factors influencing student adjustment in a longitudinal study where students' responses on two surveys concerning expected and actual adjustment were compared with their outcomes (persist or withdraw) six years later. The results showed that emotional and social adjustment were at least as important as academic in predicting attrition. The findings of the study provided recommendations to enhance the integration of students into the social community network, which they believed would play a critical role in their academic life and even foster retention (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994).

In other studies, conducted at two American universities (Martin et. al., 1999), data were collected using a questionnaire that investigated students' perceived level of adjustment to university, including academic, social, personal/emotional and institutional factors. It was established that non-academic factors tended to promote positive university adjustment more than the academic factors did. Positive attitudes towards the university and peer support were among the significant predictors of successful adaptation (Martin et. al., 1999).

Similarly, Tinto (1975) asserts that with other factors kept constant, social integration should enhance the chances of student perseverance while in college.

Social integration takes place in different ways, like participation in extra-curricular activities, student-teacher communication and peer group relationships. In order to become incorporated into the social setting of university and to achieve academic benefits, it is important for the students to engage in such activities.

A study conducted by Keup (2007), in a private coeducational Catholic high school located on the west side of Los Angeles, with college-bound students in their last year of instruction, revealed that there is a greater probability of having a positive transition experience if first year students' expectations about university are similar to the reality of university life. As they build new significant relationships in university, participants expected old high school relationships to disappear. Students expected to undergo personal development and become more independent in university life. Furthermore, they expected less liberty with regard to academic matters and more freedom in terms of personal choices and social relationships (Keup, 2007). Many experienced change in their relationship with family whereby the relationship with parents, which had once been authoritarian, became more egalitarian (Keup, 2007). Participants saw forming meaningful friendships in university as their biggest transition achievement (Keup, 2007). They moved away from their old high school friends as they developed new friendships. Generally, students found new significant friendships, although this could be a time-consuming process. The expectations of students

concerning personal development and becoming more independent were generally fulfilled. However, they recognized also that the authorised freedom given by the University imposed a greater obligation towards their studies than had been the case in high school. (Keup, 2007), posing the problem of how to balance between social life and studies. Students did not participate in extra-curricular activities as much as they used to do in high schools. Many students only participated in regular activities conducted in university, rather than joining particular clubs. Keup, (2007) took this as evidence that students wanted to focus on their studies more. Although some expectations of students are not fulfilled, the majority of the students become adapted to the university environment (Keup, 2007).

Evans and Peel (1998) explained the importance of giving students a clear idea about the social environment of university, particularly in the starting weeks, with the help of conducting various introduction activities. They suggested that in order to keep supporting and helping the students, they should be offered a variety of services even after initial introduction. All first year students should be informed about these activities and services and should be encouraged to benefit from them.

According to Evans and Peel, transition to the university social life is even more essential than academic transition. Commonly, students do not know anyone else in the university when they join their degree programmes. Therefore, there is a possibility that students may miss the close relationships they had with their previous teachers and school fellows. If students are unable to find new friends and create a social network, they may perceive postsecondary education as a detaching experience. Therefore, social support can be very valuable for students at that time.

3.5.2 Alienation

Not all students achieve successful incorporation into university life. When students are unable to adjust to the new setting, they might experience alienation. According to Marx, alienation signifies that an individual does not feel as if he/she fits into the world and that

the world (nature, the people surrounding one and even oneself) feels like a mystery. Individuals experiencing alienation feel as if things are out of their reach, although this may be only in their imagination (Marx, in Elster 1986). Alienation was defined by Mann (2001) as the condition or practice of being secluded from a group or an action which one should otherwise be a part of. This notion is further explained by Marx by adding that the individual does not only estrange himself on his own, but goes as far as isolating himself from the life he has and the people and things around him (Nettler, 1957). However, Marx employs this theory to explain the estrangement of the worker and suggests that labour workers might be the main example of people suffering from the process of alienation (Nettler, 1957). Alienation as explained by Marx consists of two main features: separation from one's environment and from one's own life. This view gave rise to numerous other explanations after Marx presented his theory. Some of these merely focused on separation of the individual from those surrounding him or her. However, it was Seeman (1959) who promoted the socio-psychological explanation that is widely known today.

Seeman (1959) produced an early explanation of alienation according to which he described those who are alienated as "the unattached", the "marginal", the "obsessive", the "normless", and the "isolated" (p. 783). Seeman put forward alternative definitions of alienation: (a) powerlessness, (b) meaninglessness, and (c) social isolation. Powerlessness corresponds to the original Marxian view, and is a person's feeling of inability to control outcomes through his or her own behaviour (Seeman, 1959). Meaninglessness was explained by Seeman (1959) as an individual's uncertainty as to what to believe, which occurs "when the individual's minimal standards for clarity in decision-making are not met" (p.786). Lastly, isolation applies to people who feel detached from the values and culture of their community (Seeman, 1959). Taking this notion further, Dean (1961) added the expression "social" to the isolation concept to illustrate the disconnectedness that the individual feels from the rest of society.

Alienation denotes a disconnection or detachedness between two or more individuals and includes a feeling of suffering or damage, which makes a learner observe his or her life and the university as patchy and imperfect (Dean, 1961; Galbo, 1980). Usually, alienated individuals feel that they are unable to meet the required standards that are demanded by their life and the university (Galbo, 1980).

The concept of alienation has been applied to explain the hostility amongst young learners in university (Brown et al., 2003). Four important attributes of the alienation confronted by young learners, as specified by Newmann (1981) include powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation. The lack of control over the study behaviour of the student is referred to as powerlessness. Normlessness, on the other hand, is demonstrated by the lack of a suitable attitude according to the standards set by the university (e.g., academic corruption). The perception of the students that the programme they are taking is unnecessary and useless is an example of meaninglessness. Social isolation denotes disconnection and isolation from friends and tutors. The concept of alienation helps in recognizing the processes that lead to undesirable results from the student, and can inform plans to avoid such happenings (Redden, 2002; Thorpe, 2003).

Mann (2001) outlines various conceptual viewpoints, which provide explanations of the process of alienation. One of the conceptual viewpoints that she mentioned is exile from the self — loss of ownership of education. She maintained that the theory proposed by Marx regarding the alienation of the labour class can also be applied to the educational process and the students inside the atmosphere emitted by educational institutions. The actions performed by the students are not for their own benefit or for the benefit of others around them, or for the society that they are part of; they do what they have to do to meet the demands of the lecturer and the standards set by the university and to attain good grades. Hence, the work done by students may be viewed as following orders and only a trade. Marx expressed that this is done with an intention that is completely selfish. The "work" crafted by students, such as assignments, is not owned by the student, and is instead

part of a trade, which makes the student the possession of the university. 'The only intelligible language in which we converse with one another consists of our objects in their relation to each other' (Marx, in Elster 1986: 33) (Mann, 2001).

The alienation of learners can result from numerous factors, which include curricular, institutional, and socio-cultural aspects (Brown et al., 2003; Redden, 2002). Students suffering from alienation feel that they cannot relate to the environment they are studying in and the programme that they are studying, which makes them shy away from trying to interact with each other. These types of detachment give rise to boredom in the university (Parish & Parish, 2000). Mann (2001) explained that alienation is the result of a teaching-learning process that demands obedience and represses originality. In the university, students are alienated from the material that they are supposed to study, their feelings are not considered and the confidence in the insight of the individual is undermined, due to being considered as irrational. It was contended by Frosh (1991) that the culture of universities and educational institutions estranges learners by laying too much emphasis to utilitarianism, instrumentalism, measurable functioning guides, and standardized capabilities. Barnett (1994: 178) warned that to diminish the engagement of the individual to a group of terms like "performance," "competence," "doing" and "skill" is not just to resort to a hopelessly crude language with which to describe serious human endeavours. In the end, it is to obliterate the humanness in human action.

As opposed to the complexity of the reasons behind young learners experiencing alienation, the results of being detached from the studies are apparent. Students who drop out of universities before their courses are ended are the perfect example of students suffering from alienation (Cadieux, 2002; Muse, 2003). Slater (2003) acknowledged the hostility found amongst students in a variety of forms, as the outcome of experiencing alienation. A variety of psychological and emotional issues are recognized in such students, which detach them from their studies as well as the atmosphere of the university (Redden, 2002). Gang activity, aggression, sabotage, absence, non-attendance, and similar behaviours are the

effects of student alienation, as stated by Brown and her colleagues (2003). Such learners are known to undergo the shame of not being able to handle the university life and its standards. Alienation was viewed by Mann (2001) as an approach that individuals choose as a way to protect themselves from challenges to their self-perception. When students reject the university's social life, educational activities, process of acquiring knowledge and interaction with others, they are in fact trying to defend themselves, as in this way the perception of self is not endangered, welfare is preserved and harmony is maintained. The ultimate effects are the lack of energy and the rejection of knowledge in the student.

Social alienation is an important factor experienced by some students when embarking on university life and this is demonstrated in the study by Pounds (1987). Pounds discovered that students suffering from social alienation were not very social, had few friends, were usually isolated, and did not take part in any other activities.

Personal and academic encouragement contributes to more positive views of the university environment, according to the theory presented by Fleming (1984). Tinto (1975) argued that social encouragement aids the young learners to be more involved socially and also to engage in their studies.

A complete outline for examining the transition to university, presented as a model that emerged from the literature review on theories of transition, is considered in the subsequent discussion.

3.6 A proposed Conceptual Model

In this section, I explain the process of development of a new model to understand first year students' experiences of transition at university. I believe this conceptualization is a new development, which is useful because it combines the different academic social and institutional elements, drawing on the literature discussed earlier, in understanding the experiences of university first year students.

Initially, this study draws on the three stages proposed by Tinto (1987) to understand the degree of complexity in the transition as well as to understand the movement, flow and direction of students' psychological state as they progress. Central to this theory is the idea that each individual has to pass through a number of stages and that each stage is signified by a specific developmental process, as well as a conflict. Separation, transition and incorporation are the three types of ritual that are presented as separate phases in a person's transition from one community to another.

Tinto (1987) used this three-stage model to explain the processes students pass through in their first university year. The transition to university, to say nothing of students' decisions either to remain or to drop out, is as seen by this theory as consequent on their passage through the following ritual stages.

| Phase One: Separation (Pre-liminal) | → | Phase Two: Transition (Liminal) | → | Phase Three: Incorporation (Post-liminal) |
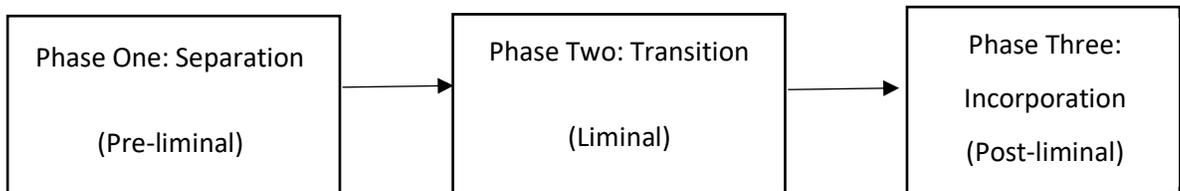
Figure 3-2 Tinto's Theory: Stages of Transition

Separation – in this first stage, the students disconnect themselves from the community of which they have previously been members and become separate. Either before the university experience begins, or close to it start, disassociation takes place; the student leaves behind friends and the community of the previous school and seeks connection with the University community. When this stage is complete, they will move to the transition phase. Different people experience the separation stage in different ways, but the focus of this study was on the second stage – the transition.

Transition – In this second stage, students are between the community they have left and the one they wish to join, being full members of neither. They begin the process of social and academic interaction with members of the new group. This process will involve

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challenges to their relationships and values because, while no longer bound to their group, they have as yet no fixed ties with the new one. They are in transition; they have separated from their previous life but not as yet completely connected with their new university life. If they successfully form such ties, they are deemed to have achieved incorporation into the new community.

Tinto's transition model is considered relevant for describing student transitions in this research, as it was developed to address student transitions in higher education and first-year experiences. Although this model lacks details, it offers a useful framework for understanding the broad trajectory of the changes experienced by students during their transitions into higher education.

Tinto's theory, however, does not appear to provide sufficient explanation of students' experience of the transition process to capture the complexity of the transition to university and how students adjust to it and cope with it. To fill some of these gaps, therefore, I supplemented Tinto's model with insights from Schlossberg (1984) to give a more complete understanding of what happens in the transition stage and to obtain rich data that would provide a more detailed picture of how students experience transition.
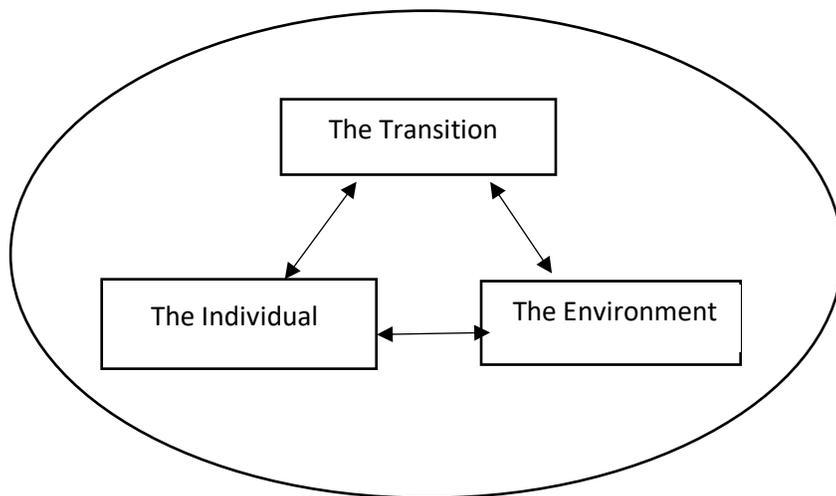
Figure 3-3 Schlossberg's theory

Schlossberg theory considers what impact the transition has at any particular time, where impact is measured by the extent to which the transition changes an individual's roles, routines, relationships, and daily life. It reminds us that transition is a process, the effects of which become visible over time. It is not necessarily simple and it does not necessarily end quickly (Anderson et al., 2009).

Schlossberg (1984) describes the process of transition in a way that is useful in understanding various factors that interact to shape the experiences of students at university. According to Schlossberg, factors influencing how well someone will cope with transition fall into three categories: the transition itself; factors relating to the individual; and factors relating to the environment. How someone perceives transition is no less important than the type of transition, its context, and the impact it has in understanding the effect the transition will have. In order to support students, it is necessary to know their perceptions of their situation.

Schlossberg's framework provides insightful guidance in examining the process of transition of university students, as it draws attention to the way students manage as individuals and the role of the environment in influencing the transition process. Additionally, the framework focuses on how individuals perceive the whole experience of transition. As such, Schlossberg (1984) provides an explanation regarding the role of perception in transitions, implying that transition does not exist only in the event, but also in the way it is experienced and faced by an individual. Lived experience is understood to be linked with an individual's perception. Lastly, the model opens the door for further subjective study, given that transition is an area that encompasses a subjective process.

Going back to Tinto's theory, the third stage is 'incorporation', at which point the individual has achieved complete integration into the new community. Students reaching the incorporation stage develop new ways of interacting and new skills. In the opinion of Tinto (1987, 1993, 2007), what makes possible the developmental changes that mark successful adaptation to life at university is successful social and academic integration. It is critical that

the student adapts to the new social and academic environment. However, Tinto's model is lacking in specific information as to how this adaptation process take place. In my view, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of social learning in a community of practice offers a possible way of understanding the mechanism of adaptation.

According to CoP theory, participation in a community of practice is transformative and is the result of a web of interactions between a variety of elements, including academics and peers. The implication is that successful development results from student engagement in the CoPs (for example, in courses taken, academic tasks and classroom activities) as well as in extramural activities. This view is based on concern with the relationship that the individual has with society; it sees students as part of the social world and not separate from it. From this perspective, adaptation results from the involvement of participants with a number of communities: how they interact with their peers; how they interact with the academic staff; and how they interact with the university structure.

According to this perspective, a first-year student begins the university trajectory as a peripheral member, where "peripheral" suggests a route that students must follow, from the periphery to the centre, to become connected with the established members of the community. Collier and Morgan (2008) see peripheral students as having two tasks: first to understand what their role as student is; and second to master it. First-year students and other newcomers cannot be expected to take a full part in the learning process until they have familiarised themselves with it. The student must leave behind existing norms and behaviour patterns in order to acquire the skills and knowledge related to their chosen subject. For many, this stage may be one of disruption (Schlossberg, 1984) where their past identity no longer influences them but they are not yet aligned with the new culture. Participation brings connection, and mastering the skills and knowledge required allows students to move in the direction of total participation in community practices. This mirrors Tinto's theory that students begin as external and, in time and with participation, become part of university life.

This process, however, is not the same, or equally successful, for all students. According to Tinto (1987: 99), "not all students come to be incorporated into the life of the institution". In his view, students who do not become or stay incorporated in the university's intellectual and social life leave it (Kuh et al., 2006). According to Tinto (1987), those lacking external support with both academic and social integration and connection will leave the community because of their failure to achieve incorporation. This alternative outcome, however, is not explicitly reflected in Tinto's model, which illustrates only successful transition.

In my model, I propose 'Alienation' as an alternative outcome, where students are not incorporated into the university. Students suffering from alienation feel that they cannot relate to the environment in which they are studying and the programme that they are studying. The concept of alienation helps in recognizing the processes that lead to undesirable outcomes for the student, and can inform plans to prevent them (Redden, 2002; Thorpe, 2003). The results of students being detached from the studies are manifested in various ways; however, students who drop out of universities before their courses end are the perfect example of students suffering from alienation (Cadieux, 2002; Muse, 2003). Hence, drop out might be seen as a result of being alienated. Thus, as shown in Figure 3.4, I assume the transition process to have two possible outcomes: alienation or (facilitated by a CoP) adaptation leading to incorporation.
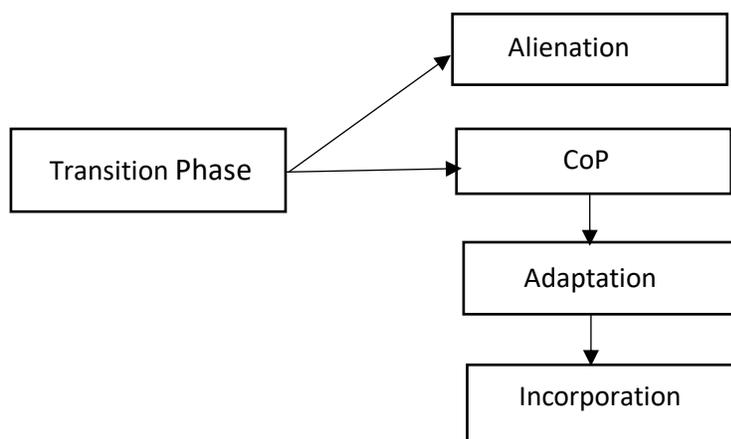
Figure 3-4 Transition Outcomes (either Incorporation or Alienation)

By synthesising these hitherto separate streams of literature and the insights they provide, I argue, it is possible to develop a more detailed and nuanced understanding of student transition including influencing factors, coping mechanisms, and alternative outcomes.

The proposed model in Figure 3.5 below illustrates the connection between these elements and shows more clearly the multi-dimensional nature of the first-year student's experience of transition. This model was taken as a preliminary guide to understanding the first-year transition process for students at King Saud University, and helped to guide the development of the methodology discussed in the next chapter. In Chapter 7 of this thesis, I revisit this model in the light of the research findings, in order to assess how well the model captures the experiences of this group of Saudi female students.
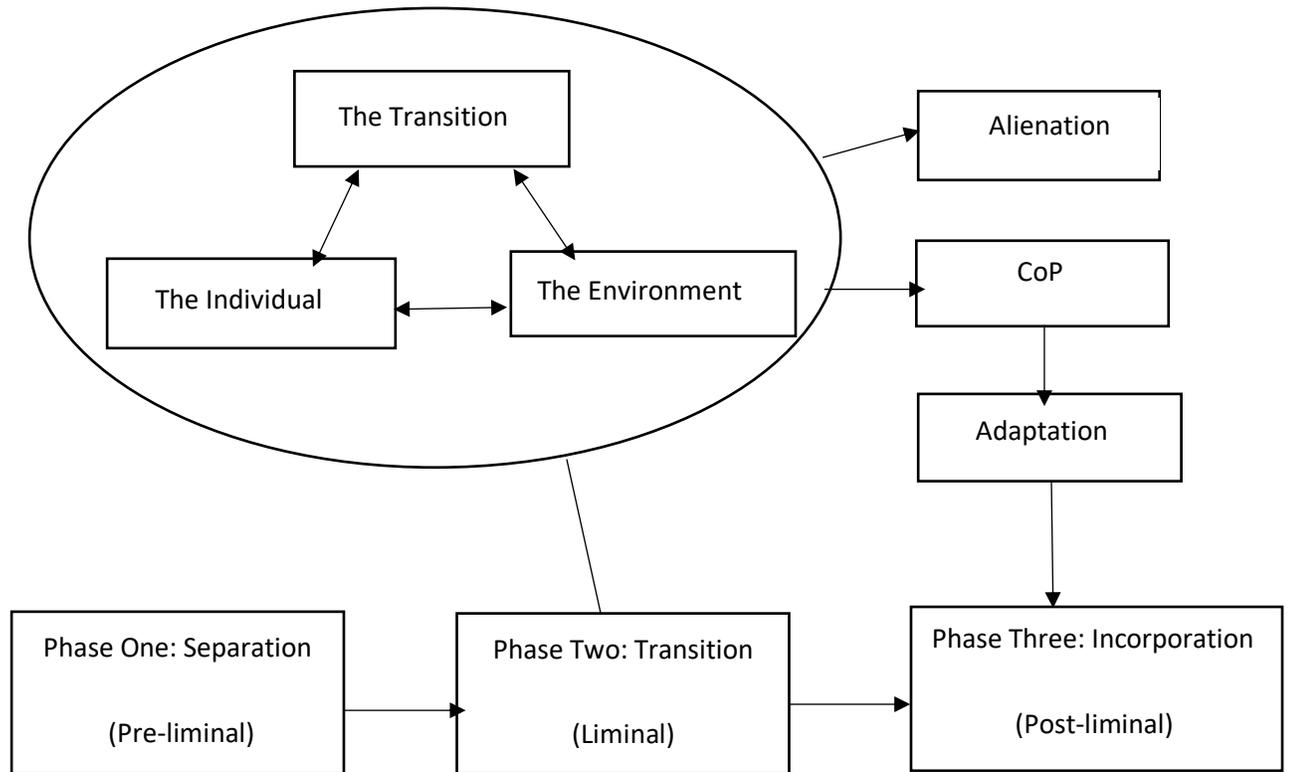
Figure 3-5: The Process of Transition Model

3.7 Summary

It is apparent from the literature review that most previous research has been conducted in Western countries, such as America and Australia. Thus, most of the assumptions they make and the experiences they described reflect Western experiences. Therefore, they might not be applicable in a different academic, social and cultural context such as Saudi Arabia. The possibility of differences in various cultures suggests that, while research in the field concurs on transition issues and ways of addressing them that may be generalized to some degree, there might be problems regarding a particular issue for specific students, a discipline or an institution. Information regarding this issue in Saudi Arabia is limited, as this subject has rarely been studied deliberately; this thesis aims to look at the perceptions of transition process from secondary school to university in Saudi Arabia.

The literature shows that transition is a process, which suggests that it is longitudinal. This implies that it would be helpful to see how the first-year students' perceptions develop over time. The literature also shows that there are separate components of transition, related to the transition, individual factors, and environmental factors.

It also shows that some universities provide various support mechanisms for first year students and that these can be helpful for successful transition. The literature also identifies some of the challenges that students face, which are academic and social.

Based on this literature, it was possible to conceptualize the process of transition as in **Figure 3.5**. As suggested by authors such as Tinto (1987) and Bridges (2004), the transition process begins with a separation from the previous environment, which in the case of this study would be secondary school. Students then undergo a period of transition characterized by stress and anxiety as they adjust to the demands of a new environment. Following from Schlossberg (1984) and subsequent authors, it is suggested that this process is influenced by students' perceptions of the transition itself, the institution and their own demographic, psychological and adaptive characteristics. Students who are able to adjust successfully, academically and socially, through participation in CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991)

eventually become incorporated into the life of the university. However, a proportion of students fail to cope with the challenges of transition and may suffer alienation. It is these students who are at risk of failure or dropout.

Based on all of the information reviewed and the framework developed, I have identified topics that are important to address in the research questions. The methods used to address these questions will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 Research Design and Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The research design and methodology that were employed in the research are explained in this chapter. The aim behind the study was to ascertain students' perceptions of the academic, social, and cultural demands of the transition to university. My research objectives in the study were: (a) to elicit students' perceptions of the academic demands of the university, (b) to elicit students' perceptions of the social experience of the university, (c) to elicit students' perceptions of the institutional culture of the university. This chapter will discuss the strategy used to address these objectives.

The chosen research methodology was aligned to the study objectives with regard to the students' subjective experiences as they participated in transitional contexts. This was addressed through the adoption of a qualitative technique that allowed for the transitional experiences of the students to be adequately described. The discussion is structured in ten main sections. First, justifications are given for choosing the interpretivist paradigm. In the following section, the choice of qualitative method is explained in details, as well as the reasons for choosing a case study framework to attain the study's objectives. The complexities associated with the case study are discussed and explained and the section details the use of semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. An account is given of the development and piloting of interview schedules. Subsequently, access issues, sampling and the interviewing procedures are discussed, as well as the analysis techniques. Consideration is given to the quality criteria by which the research can be evaluated, and the ethical considerations observed in the case study are discussed.

4.2 Research Paradigm

A paradigm is characterized as a vital set of principles or assumptions that drives research (Creswell, 1998). A paradigm influences each step of the research from determining the research problems to understanding and analysing the data. Hence, paradigm selection

should be done before choosing the suitable research methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Mertens, 2005).

Social sciences have a wide range of paradigms that are different in regard to their fundamental philosophical assumptions. Therefore, it is essential to have an understanding of the basic assumptions of every paradigm before selecting the appropriate one, related to approaches to ontology, epistemology and methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Neuman, 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007)

Ontology is a view about the nature of the social world or "reality". The two main positions identified are objectivist and subjectivist (sometimes referred to as constructionist). In the former position, it is assumed that there is a single, absolute and value-free reality (Cresswell, 2007) that exists independent of the observer (Cohen et al, 2007). It has been described in the phrase, "what you see is what you get" (Neuman, 2003). In contrast, the interpretivist ontological position considers reality as subjective and different for each individual (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In the present research, the concern is with change and transition, in which the mental and physical aspects of moving from one education system to another were explored. The information collected on these issues should reflect the subjective experience of the participants. This would enable investigation of their previous student experiences and how these related to their new role. In the present research, the participants were first year students who came from different backgrounds, which were expected to shape to the way they experienced the phenomenon of university transition. This study adopts a subjectivist standpoint, assuming that the social phenomenon of transition to university is not single and absolute, but multiple and dynamic, shaped through participants' individual experiences. The varied perspectives on what constitutes reality lead to other questions, such as how it is possible to understand "reality". This question is answered through examining the epistemology of the study.

Epistemology alludes to the kind of relationship a researcher has with the research and how valid knowledge about the world can be obtained. One way of looking at knowledge is from the positivist approach, which assumes that knowledge of the world is fixed, can be obtained through logical discovery and only what can be measured and observed counts as knowledge (Collis & Hussey, 2003). On the other hand, the interpretivist approach assumes that reality is societally constructed and aims to understand the world through the subjective experiences of people. Hence, to thoroughly understand social processes, the researcher must become part of the world of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Crotty (1998) states that dialogue is necessary in order to capture the attitudes, perceptions and feelings of others, and to interpret their intent and meaning. This means that the role of the researcher is important since he or she uncovers the phenomenon through interpretation of the research participants' meanings. Since in this study I adopted a subjectivist ontology, I adopted an interpretive epistemology. I assumed it would be necessary to get close to and interact with individual students who were undergoing that transition in order to gain insights into their experiences as they themselves perceived and interpreted them.

In the light of the above considerations, the following sub-section will discuss the interpretive paradigm adopted in this research, and the methods selected for collecting data.

4.2.1 Interpretive paradigm

An interpretive researcher accepts reality as a societally constructed phenomenon that is based on people's external world experiences. Willis (2007) describes interpretivists as anti-foundationlists who accept no single route to gaining knowledge as a whole. Walsham (1993) also proposes that interpretivism has, by its nature, no correct or incorrect theories; rather, theories should be tested based on how impressive and appealing they appear in the eyes of the researcher as well as other professionals in that field. Interpretivists try to reach a conclusion by the use of data collected in the field through cross-checking the aspect of interest. According to Gephart (1999), interpretivists assume knowledge is a matter of

interpretation and, as a result, knowledge is dependent on how human reasoning describes it. Myers (2009) also reasons that the line of argument of an interpretivist researcher is an understanding of the factual, as determined by social experience and practices for instance language and the meaning people attached to these practices. The interpretivist paradigm is associated with what is observed and the meaning that is derived from it; therefore, observation represents data gathering on the occurrence of an event, while interpretation is the process of deriving a meaning from the information collected. Interpretivist researchers try to understand situations from the meaning people attach to them (Aikenhead, 1997). In this study, for example, every participant constructs her own reality of transition through her perceptions and experiences. Qualitative techniques are typically employed by interpretivists to inductively and comprehensively recognise human involvement in context-specific situations.

The interpretivist paradigm is mainly concerned with an understanding of the world from the experiences of people using meaning-oriented mechanisms, such as interviews and observations. It does not predefine independent and dependent variables, but looks instead at the complex sense of human beings that arises from different situations (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994) and hence explains the reasons behind social actions. According to Creswell (1998), an interpretive study gives a sense of meaning to the life experiences of different individuals in different scenarios. This usually leads to accumulations of deep data, views and influences. The use of qualitative research methods, for instance, observations and interviews, leads to a representation of information and findings from the point of view of the participants (Aspers, 2004). According to Lester (1999), phenomenological techniques are useful in contributing to perceived events, the meaning individuals attach to these events and hence to questioning structural assumptions.

The nature of my study led to the adoption of an interpretivist, naturalistic methodology, which seemed to be appropriate since university transition is a complex social and human issue with multiple dimensions (academic, social, and institutional), which should be

profoundly investigated. It was not possible to maintain independence from the situation or participants. According to the ontological viewpoint of the interpretivist approach, the researcher cannot be isolated from the reality, because the researcher belongs to the researched world and cannot be independent of it. In this study, I, as a Saudi woman who has passed through the transition from school to university and is now a member of the university staff, have my own perceptions and experiences which were inevitably brought into the research setting and influenced my interpretations of participants' experiences.

Ontological and epistemological assumptions in turn have implications for methodology, which is concerned with the reasoning underlying the selection of specific methods for data collection. For example, in this study, since it was assumed that there are multiple perceptions of university transition, which can only be understood through interaction with participants, the method used had to be one that would capture the subjective meanings of the participants. The next section considers the implications of any paradigmatic stance for the research methodology.

4.3   Research Methodology

A research methodology can be characterized as a model which involves theoretical standards and in addition a structure that gives directives concerning the completion of the research with regards to a specific paradigm (Sarantakos, 1998). Crotty (1998) opines that methodology entails the manner in which a piece of research is conducted. Thus, there is a need for an action plan, strategy, process and design. Blaikie (2008) accentuates that methodology entails enquiring regarding logic and questioning the manner in which new knowledge is produced and justified. There are three methodologies that describe data collection in research projects, which are the quantitative approach, the qualitative approach, and the mixed methods approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

A quantitative approach can be characterized as an investigation into a social or human issue, by means of testing a theory constituted of variables, measured numerically, and

examined with statistical techniques, keeping in mind the end goal of determining if the prescient speculations of the theory remain constant (Creswell, 1994). The main objectives of the quantitative approach are to accurately quantify social behaviour and settings, to test hypotheses and to predict and control the ways humans behave. Creswell (2002) indicates that a quantitative methodology is used while testing a hypothesis or to clarify or recognize factors that affect the results. Yin (2003) has pointed out that it deals with questions like how much? How many? How often? To what extent? Typically, quantitative methods include experiments, quasi-experiments and surveys.

The advantages of such approaches lie in their ability to produce data that is accurate and reliable and can be generalized to a larger population (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002). In this study, however, the aim was not hypothesis testing; nor was generalization a primary concern, since the study is context-specific. For these reasons, a quantitative approach would be of limited value. Its primary disadvantage is that the outcomes give less detail on human behaviour, dispositions and motivation (Gorard, 2003). This would be a serious limitation for the present study, since the research questions are concerned with how individual students perceive and experience the academic, social, and institutional aspects of the transition to university. It is thus concerned with mental and emotional states that cannot be measured and described quantitatively. Since it is concerned with gaining deep insights into participants' perceptions, a qualitative approach was more appropriate for fulfilling this aim, and this was my chosen stance, as explained below.

Unlike the quantitative approach, which is underpinned by the positivist research paradigm and is concerned with the measurement of variables and the testing of hypotheses, for the purpose of understanding cause and effect, qualitative research seeks understanding of social actors' perceptions (Cresswell, 1998; Marshall & Rosman, 1999; Patton, 2002). The rationale for this approach is to enter into the participants' experiences of the social world and understand how they make sense of their experiences (Corti & Thompson, 2004). Recent decades have seen widespread recognition of the benefits of qualitative methods in

research on students' experiences (Jehangir, 2010; Roe, 2005; Thompson, 2008). Such an approach facilitates understanding of phenomena, interpretation of situations and observation of processes (Meriam, 2000). This is achieved through the researcher's interpretations of the meanings conveyed in participants' stories (Bolle et al., 2007). The focus is to understand how people make sense of their experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Thus, the researcher plays the role of the main data collection instrument, who forms interpretations based on engagement with the participants (Cresswell, 1998; Meriam, 1998). This requires the researcher to make meaning out of the experiences, feelings, emotions or opinions conveyed by the participants.

Creswell's (1998) concise portrayal is that qualitative research is an investigative procedure making use of methodological conventions of analysis that investigate and aim to understand a social or human issue. The researcher constructs an intricate, comprehensive picture of words, stating in-depth perspectives of witnesses, which take place in a natural setting. In this study, the "natural setting" is King Saud University, and the "witnesses" are female first-year students who are undergoing the transition from high school to the setting.

Qualitative research is an all-encompassing idea that includes numerous types of analyses including case study, ethnography, and grounded theory. Therefore, it includes research in which the researcher actually interacts with general population, or place. If one needs to study individuals, in actuality, it is necessary to understand their natural way of living and their behaviour (Gillham, 2000). Applied to this study, this means that I interacted directly with the King Saud University setting and with selected students, in order to learn about the students' experiences in the setting.

Yin (2003) has pointed out that the qualitative approach deals with questions like why? How? In what way? Examples of qualitative methods are one-to-one interviews, focus groups, direct observation, action research, and case studies (Hancock, 1998).

The advantage of a qualitative approach is that it provides a productive and more profound knowledge of the phenomena under examination. It also has a tendency to be more flexible, as it offers scope to modify questions as data collection proceeds, and can draw in more readers because of it is more informal and does not demand statistical understanding (Hancock, 1998). However, it suffers from the limitation of lack of generalizability due to the small size and unrepresentative nature of the sample. Moreover, it is also very demanding in terms of time consumption and complexity of the data collection methods. (Fellows & Liu, 1997).

The basis of qualitative research relies on the philosophical assumption that people construct reality when they come in contact with their social domain and that there are various realities which are to be understood and perceived by the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Creswell, 1998). As noted earlier, the implication is that among the first year students entering King Saud University, each perceived and interacted with the setting in her own way, according to her background, personality, expectations and so on. Consequently, each would have her own "reality". All these "realities" are valid and can shed light on the complex phenomenon of transition to university, and so need to be accessed in the research process. For this purpose, the researcher should be in contact with the setting to gather as much data as possible. This methodology was vital for my study since it called for techniques that would allow me to have a more profound comprehension of the research participants' experiences. I planned to attain knowledge of the past, present and possible future of various students; a basic necessity for recognising their changes, rather than a one-dimensional snapshot. I aimed to understand the intricacy of the diverse changes that occur over time in students' perceptions of the academic, social, and institutional aspects of their first year in university by employing a longitudinal approach. Also, from daily interaction, for example, in interviews and informal conversations, I could build a relationship with participants and become familiar in and with the setting, and so not be considered as an outsider.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the main tool for data collection and analysis, as the qualitative researcher develops a closer connection with the participants, to have a better understanding of their viewpoints (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and is sensitive towards the progress of the study, in which strategies may be modified in accordance with new or changing circumstances. Having this adaptability can enhance the opportunity for gathering and delivering significant data (Merriam, 1998).

Finally, the characteristic of qualitative research is that it has an investigative and enlightening focus and creates a comprehensive perspective of the subject. Since words are analysed instead of numbers, this expressive emphasis is a specific characteristic of case study description, leading Stake (1995) to comment that the reader will be given the chance of a "vicarious" experience. In this case, for example, readers will experience the academic, social and institutional aspects of King Saud University, and the feelings of first year female students entering that environment, through the stories of the participants.

There are insufficient studies precisely detailing the experiences of first-year students in Saudi higher education. To fill the gap, this study sought a qualitative description of this under-researched phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). This approach was suitable as it allowed me to understand the transition experiences of the students.

From the discussion above, it can be seen that qualitative methods have the potential to contribute in different ways to the study, resulting in the decision to take a qualitative approach.

An alternative would have been a mixed-methods approach, an exploration in which qualitative and quantitative methodologies are integrated. The approach is also termed convergent methodology, multi-method/multi-trait, convergent validation, triangulation, integration and synthesis of quantitative and qualitative methods, although mixed methods is more common (Creswell, 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Triangulation of data for this qualitative research is addressed in section 4.10: 'Ways to verify Trustworthiness'.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) in their general definition characterize this methodology as a research design with its own philosophical assumptions and strategies for analysis. It entails gathering, examining, and integrating both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or sequence of studies, on the rationale that the utilization of quantitative and qualitative approaches together allows research problems to be understood in a much better way than using either approach alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The objective of employing such a methodology is to exploit the advantages and to minimize the shortcomings of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

However, carrying out the mixed method approach requires investment of time and resources to gather and examine both quantitative and qualitative data. It is also important that the researcher is acquainted with data collection and analysis according to both quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). In this study, moreover, the phenomenon under investigation could not be apprehended quantitatively and needed in-depth, longitudinal qualitative exploration. As Crotty (1998: 73) stated, 'Only through dialog can one become aware of the perceptions, feelings and attitudes of others and interpret their meanings and intent'. Since this research aims to 'capture lived experiences of the social world and the meanings people give these experiences from their own perspective' (Corti & Thompson, 2004: 326), the possibility of using mixed methods was rejected in favour of a wholly qualitative approach.

4.4   Choice of Strategies and Methods

This section provides an explanation of the choice of case study as the research framework, followed by a detailed outline of the choice of semi structured interview and the rationale for it as a data collection method, moreover, it explains the process of developing a guide for the interview questions.

4.4.1 The Case Study Framework

In an evaluation of misinterpretations regarding case study research, Flyvbjerg (2006) indicated that although our understanding of circumstances will be supported by the accomplishment of several case studies, there appears to be no general agreement with respect to what constitutes a case study. In like manner, in methodology literature I was unable to find one general definition of case study. The term is applied in various ways by various analysts, according to their different points of view. In the following tables some examples are provided to show different definitions and terminologies.

Table 4.1 Definitions of Case Study

Author/s	Case Study definition
Ray (1993)	a case study is the history of an individual, according to some researchers, mainly psychologists.
Fraenkel and Wallen (2001)	from an academic perspective, they characterized case study as a qualitative research on one or more persons.
Creswell (2003)	defined a case study as a way in which the researcher investigates a detailed setting, an occurrence, an activity, a practice, or one or more individuals.
Yin (1994)	characterized a case study as a detailed analysis that examines a current phenomenon within an actual context.
Merriam (1988)	alludes to a case study as accomplishing a comprehensive understanding of a situation, which may also involve data collected from a survey.
Feagin et al. (1991)	argued that the fundamental feature of a case study is that it accomplishes a comprehensive understanding of the inter-related practices of people involved in a social setting.

Taking these perspectives into account, for the purpose of this study, a case study is regarded as a qualitative research framework that aims to gain a deep understanding of a phenomenon involving the perceptions and experiences of a number of individuals within a bounded social context. This study takes an interpretive perspective and thus is in line with Creswell's (2007) and Yin's (2007) definitions. This further concurs with Merriam's (1988) explanation, given that the study aims to investigate and realize the experiences of first-year students at a university. From this vantage point, the study's context was a particular university, while the boundaries of the research were the population of first-year undergraduates at the university. Given that the study is heavily exploratory in nature, a case study design was deemed to be the most appropriate for identifying the experiences of first-year students at the university. Patton (1990) maintains that the case study methodology is primarily utilized when a researcher seeks to gain in-depth understanding of a research phenomenon and involves a relatively small study population, situation or problem. The study sought to understand the realities perceived by first-year students, based on the experiences they undergo in their academic environment. The utilization of a case study in this research helped in determining the unit of analysis in addition to providing an explanatory framework that could be used to examine the interconnected components in the case. Some of the interconnected components are the experiences of students prior to joining university, as well as the experiences of students upon joining the university. The focus of the study is transition and, in this regard, the aspects of continuity and change among first-year students are scrutinized from cultural, social and academic perspectives. To capture the entire picture of the process of transition, I adopted a longitudinal perspective to better comprehend the dynamic interrelations between process and context, in addition to the association between strategy, learning and change. The longitudinal approach dictates that a single case should be scrutinized two or more times at varied points in time. This is deemed necessary for showing in depth how specified conditions can become transformed over a period of time. From this viewpoint, a case study design was the most appropriate for this research (Yin, 2003).

According to Yin (2003), the case study design is an appropriate choice if the study focuses upon why and how questions, the behaviour of participants in the research cannot be manipulated, there is a need to investigate contextual conditions which are assumed to be relevant to the research phenomenon or boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are blurred. Yin's criteria are applicable to my study because I was concerned with how students experience transition and why they experienced it in that way in terms of surrounding factors that influence their feeling. Also, I wanted to look at naturally occurring behaviours. Moreover, I assumed the participants' experiences and perceptions are influenced by their individual background characteristics, institutional characteristics and the wider society.

An essential consideration in case study is to decide which kind of case is to be explored (Stake, 1995, 2000). Within an Intrinsic case study research, one specific case is observed and the results are not expected to have implications for other cases. In an Instrumental case study, a single case is studied in order to obtain information regarding a specific phenomenon, and there is an explicit expectation that this information can be generalized or used to generate theory. In such studies, a predetermined criterion, theory or question is likely to be explored and tested through the case study. An instrumental case study is one where not only the specific case is of interest but it helps in understanding a broader situation. A theory may be refined or insight upon an issue attained. The role of the case itself is in facilitating and supporting understanding. The investigation of the case is carried out in detail; scrutiny of the context takes place and everyday activities documented, in order to achieve the interests of this research. This case may or may not be considered as representative of other cases (Stake, 1995). A collective case study is when several instrumental case studies are integrated in order to carry out comparisons regarding a specific phenomenon or issue.

An instrumental case study was appropriate to the goals of this research, as the research aimed to explore the experience of transition to university in an authentic setting, taking

account of social context. This research was performed at King Saud University (KSU), a huge public university situated in Riyadh, which is the capital of Saudi Arabia. Initially, the choice of KSU as the research site was made owing to the fact that this is where I work and so have the advantage of access to data and resources. Also, as an 'insider' I am familiar with the culture and procedures of the university, which facilitated interpretation. Background knowledge helped me to interpret what people said and what I observed. Moreover, there were time and resource constraints, such as travel, and accommodation. Another factor in site selection was that King Saud University can provide insight into the transition of female students because it has a large women's section taking in around five thousand students each academic year. There is no reason to assume the university is unique in relation to the issue of transition, partly because it is a government-owned university subject to the same policies and controls as other public universities in the kingdom, and because a plethora of literature (see Chapter Two) suggests the existence of common transition related issues in universities generally.

This section explained the logic for the application of a qualitative case study framework, based on the key philosophy that underpins this research. I will now explain the rationale for choosing semi structured interviews, as my data collection technique.

4.4.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews are the most widely applied technique to acquire information in qualitative methods (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Interviews are explained by Cannel and Kahn (1968) as a two-way exchange, which the interviewer uses to gather information pertinent to the research, the content of the conversation being determined by the research objectives whether these be to describe, predict or explain a phenomenon (Cohen & Manion, 1994).

Interview is a common technique in research in higher education (Tight, 2003) and is widely used in small educational studies (Drever, 1995). Interview is normally applied as a chief procedure to accumulate information in the pilot study and actual research as it offers the most straightforward method to elicit the experiences of the students and to ultimately

answer the research questions. As indicated by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), one of the best ways of finding out how people understand their world is to talk to them because this is a fundamental means of interaction among people. Conversations provide insight into the participants, and enable the researcher to explore their experiences, feelings and attitudes and the setting in which they live. There are three kinds of interviews in general: structured, unstructured and semi-structured (Patton, 2002). In a structured interview, the researcher defines a set of questions and possible responses in advance and ask them in the same words and the same order to each participant (Fontana & Frey, 2000). This diminishes the bias from the researcher and can be especially helpful in eliminating inconsistencies in designs including numerous researchers, several means or information accumulation at various times. However, researchers cannot follow up subjects or problems that were not predicted by them at the time when the interviews were being planned (Bryman, 2004). Unstructured interview offers complete flexibility for the researcher to follow the data in the context that seems suitable (Patton, 2002). The goal is for the participants to express their concerns easily in their own way through communication and everything else that might come along with it (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). This kind of interaction is beneficial in inductive study that aims to comprehend complicated attitudes without inflicting prior assumptions that may restrict the scope of the investigation (Fontana & Frey, 2000), but it is vulnerable to the bias of the researcher (Patton, 2002) and it is harder to examine the diverse information accumulated from every interview due to the elasticity of the subject concerned (Robson, 2002).In this research, bias is discussed in section 4.10: 'Ways to verify Trustworthiness'.

Semi structured interviews, also known as guided interviews, are widely used in social studies (Flick, 2002). They depend on set of prearranged questions but the arrangement and phrasing of the questions can be adapted depending on the researcher's judgment of what seems most suitable (Robson, 2002). This kind of interview has the advantage of providing comparability through consistency in the topics discussed, while also allowing flexibility to follow up unexpected or distinctive viewpoints (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Creswell

(2002) asserts the advantage of open-ended questioning in giving participants the chance to express their individual views and experiences, without being constrained by pre-determined options. At the same time, closed questions can capture other types of information which may be linked to theories or concepts of interest to the researcher.

As the actual goal of the interviews in this study was to offer the students the opportunity to converse comprehensively regarding their experiences, I resolved that the interviews should be semi structured. This would enable full description of students' perceptions, experiences while also giving me a degree of control over the interview direction to ensure the relevance of the data and accomplishment of the interview purposes. It was therefore necessary to plan in advance the actual arrangement of the interview and form the main questions that needed to be posed. Within this framework, the students would be offered opportunity to respond at length and to express themselves in their own way in answering pre-planned open-ended questions. I would then react by employing prompts, to extend the range of the query and investigate the participants' replies from a wider angle (Drever, 1995). In these interviews, I planned to take on Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) two metaphoric roles of interviewers, a 'miner' and a 'traveller'. Initially, the miner interviewer pries out pieces of information from the experiences encountered and explained by the participant. This is done by applying probing questions, avoiding leading questions. The second role is that of the traveller on a journey to a distant area, who poses open-ended questions that allow an undiscovered region to be examined, where the interviewees are supported to discuss their actual experiences. The traveller then comes back with a story to share with others.

This research study sought to provide adequate comprehension of the lived experiences of first-year students at KSU. To facilitate understanding of the experiences of first-year students, semi-structured interviews allowed the recording of first-person accounts, detailed descriptions thus was consistent with my Interpretive stance, which focuses on naturalistic enquiry to assist in the generation of meaning and the comprehension of the

phenomenon being studied. Cohen et al. (2006) assert that interpretivists assume that human experience can be subjectively understood. For the purpose of understanding the phenomenon under study, there has to be a conscious effort to access individuals' experience and thus comprehend it from within, which was made possible by the selection of the semi structured technique.

The interviews with the students were intended to explore their perceptions on their social, academic and cultural experiences, and the extent to which they achieved adjustment to those aspects of university life. In this research, I define academic adjustment as the ability of the students to adapt to the volume, nature and standards of work imposed by their courses at the university (e.g. time management, independent learning). I also define social adjustment as the ability of the students to adapt to the social environment of the university (e.g. participation in extra-curricular activity, peer relationships). Lastly, I define institutional culture as the extent to which students find the values, assumptions, and tangible aspects of the university supportive (e.g. facilities, tutorials, orientation).

Since adjustment is a long-term process, I decided to conduct three sets of interviews with selected students (one within the third week of the first semester, one at the end of the first semester, and one in the middle of the second semester). The purpose of doing so was to obtain insight into how students' perception of the academic, social, and institutional (for example, support) aspects of the university changed over time as they acquired new experiences in the university setting.

Each phase was planned with its own aims and rationale (see table 4.1). To understand students' experiences, I interviewed students at various points in time, to capture 'change' including the extent to which they made progress towards achieving desired goals in their first year. The timing of the three phases is shown in **Figure 4.1**.

Phase one was planned to take place approximately three weeks into the first semester, on the assumption that, by then, students would have completed their registration and

arranged their timetable for the semester. These interviews would provide an opportunity to establish contact with the participants, and to explore participants' expectations of university while they were still fresh.

The purpose of the second phase of interviews was to understand students' initial experiences in university. This phase was schedule for the eighth week of the first semester. This was because literature suggests that the first six to eight weeks are considered important because at this time students usually decide if they belong to the university and make their perceptions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2006).

The third and final interviews were planned for the middle of participants' second semester. I expected that by this time students would be able to reflect on their earlier experiences and discuss any changes they had undergone during their first year at university. This would facilitate exploration of the changes in students' perspectives as they become more familiar with the learning process, formed social relationships and adapted to the university culture.

Table 4.2: Interview Phases Rationale

Interview phase	The main goal
Phase One	to establish students' expectations and preparation for university, as the baseline in the pre-liminal stage
Phase Two	to understand students' initial experience

Phase Three	to explore ongoing adjustment, overall perceptions of experience so far, the changes experienced
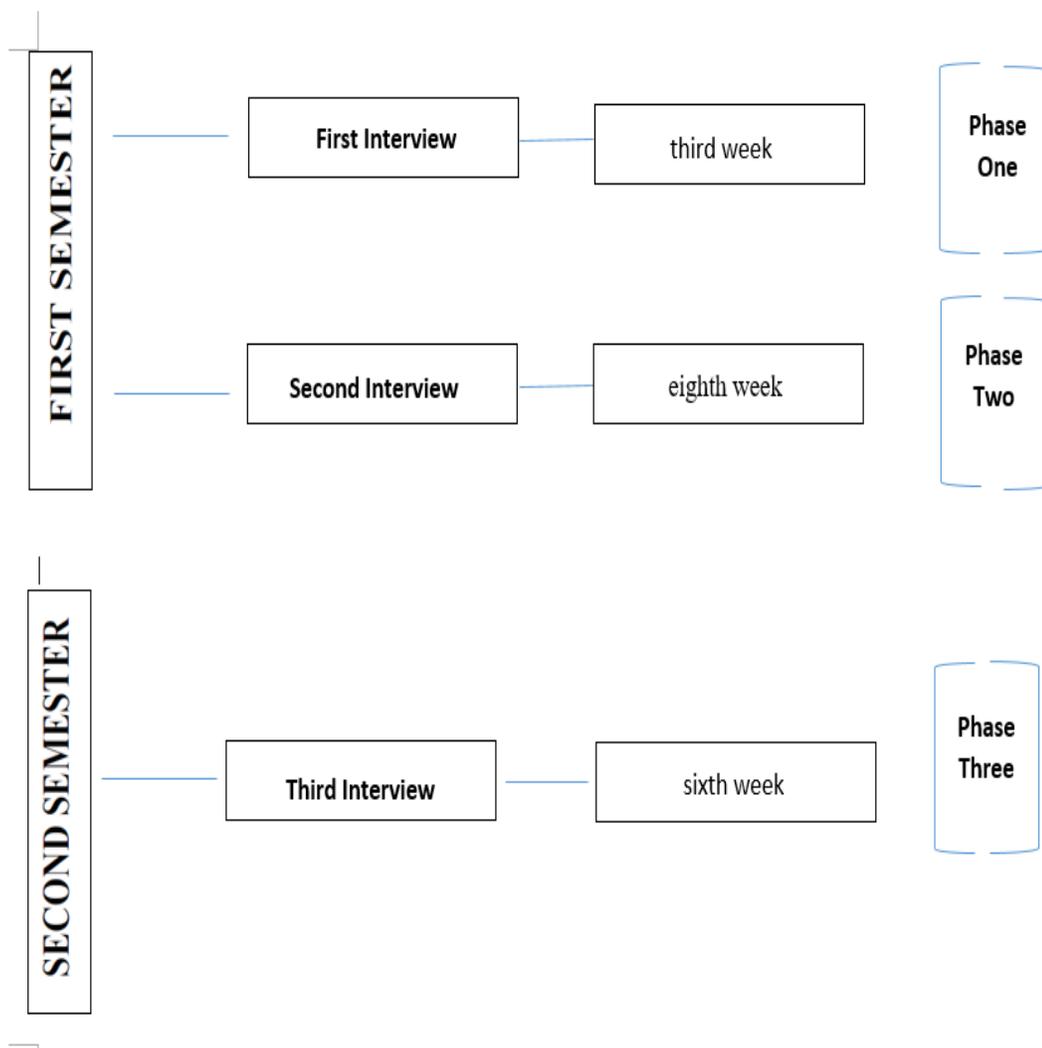
Figure 4-1: Interview Phases

4.4.2.1 The Interview Schedule

The questions in the interview can be formulated on the light of consideration of theory and prior research, exploratory investigations, and personal and professional experiences (King, 1994). In the case of present research, all the interview questions were developed in the light of the transition literature. The three semi-structured interviews were developed as follows:

4.4.2.1.1 Interview phase one

My aim was to elicit information about students' past learning experiences. By starting with relatively simple questions, I aimed to ease participants into the interview process (Robson, 2002), and encourage them to feel comfortable and able to express themselves freely. The first phase of the study was also designed to enable me to explore particular factors that the literature suggests influence the transition process.

The themes for the first interview were as follows:

   I.   Obtain information about their high school experience

   II.   Explore their first impression and experience at university

   III.   Obtaining participants' expectations.

The questions are shown in Appendix F.

4.4.2.1.2 Interview phase two

My aim was to obtain the students' perceptions about their experiences so far. The participants were interviewed at the end of the first semester.

The themes for the second interviews were as follows:

   I.   Students' academic experiences

   II.   Students' social experiences.

   III.   Students' institutional experiences.

   IV.   Comparison with earlier expectation.

The questions are shown in Appendix G.

4.4.2.1.3 Interview phase three

The participants were interviewed in the middle of the second semester. My aim was to obtain more information about students' experiences since the first and second interviews. By this time, I thought that the students could reflect on their experience of the first semester and on their examination performance, as well as any changes they had made to cope with the university. One purpose of this interview was to follow up and shed more light on the themes arising from the first and second interview phases.

The themes for the third interviews were as follows:

I.   Students' perspectives on the academic, social and institutional aspects of the university experience.

II.   The changes they undergo to adapt to university.

III. The challenges.

IV. Incorporation or Alienation.

The questions are shown in Appendix H.

An initial draft of the interview questions was produced in English. In reference to the context under study, that of Saudi Arabia, the interview questions were translated into Arabic. A number of translation techniques exist, including multiple-forward translation, back-translation, translation review by bilingual judges, and statistical review (Maxwell, 1999). In this study, the type of translation adopted was back-translation. Brislin (1970) articulates that the back-translation technique is most suited to cross-cultural contexts. It is also a method that has been widely used in PhD studies conducted by Arab researchers (Al-Motrab, 2010). Back-translation follows the following procedure: a) translation of the original transcript into the language of choice; b) checking the grammar of the target script; c) retranslation of the target transcript back into the original language and comparison with the original script; and d) piloting the target script before using it in the main study (Brislin,

1970). In Maxwell's (1996) view the first consideration is to decide traits for translating, which demands good command of both the original language and the target language; in the present study, English and Arabic, respectively. For this purpose, three bilingual experts in Arabic-English translation also were familiar with translating research instruments were recruited, the first of these was assigned the task of checking my translation of the interview questions from English into Arabic. The findings of this exercise were forwarded to a different judge to review. Consequently, the third expert conducted the back-translation, that is, from Arabic to English, and then checked this translation against the original script. The findings of the exercise indicated that the process of translation had been flawless, as the meanings in the English and Arabic versions were comparable.

4.5 Piloting

A pilot study was first conducted among first-year students at KSU in November 2015 with a view to enhancing the aim of the study with regard to comprehending the reality of first-year university students.

After translation was done, I conducted a pilot test, the objective of which was to examine how understandable the questions were, in order to remove any unclear wording and other unforeseen difficulties. This phase was also utilized to approximate the time needed to complete the interviews (Cohen et al., 2000). The pilot test further explored if the interview schedule could cover the most noteworthy topics of discussion. Last but not least, it helped in determining if any modifications to the interview schedule were needed.

The main purpose was to examine the research methods with a view to identifying and addressing any restrictions. The value of the pilot study cannot be overstated (Blaxter et aL, 1996) as a study may not go as expected, despite detailed planning. Janesick (1994) and Yin (2003) urge researchers to conduct a pilot study when adopting qualitative methods. In Janesick's (1994) view, this is important in order to identify any unclear areas, for further attention. Pilot interviews can also be used to test specific questions. Thus, although it requires an investment of time, piloting is worthwhile to enhance later phases in the study.

The pilot study shows whether the questions formulated are acceptable. It also offered a chance to practise performing interviews.

The pilot study was conducted face to face at KSU with six first-year students in their first semester, who were asked for their views on the clarity of the questions. My aim in selecting participants for the pilot study was to include a variety of students. The respondents to the exercise were randomly chosen through a convenience sampling technique. Two students from each of the science, medicine and arts faculties were included. The sampling technique was chosen because it is swift, simple and readily available. The strategy utilized to select the respondents was to display signs in each faculty, which requested those who were willing to volunteer for the pilot study to contact me via email. The first two students in each faculty who were willing to volunteer in the pilot study were chosen. As a matter of ethics, I explained to these volunteers that I would need to collect personal information about them. Consequently, the participants were requested to sign a consent form prior to participating in the interview. The interviews were digitally audio-recorded, then transcribed. This was an opportunity to check that the recording procedures worked satisfactorily, as well as enabling me to listen to the interviews retrospectively, rather than rely on my imperfect recall of what took place.

The interviews were conducted face to face with the students and recorded in a quiet room at KSU. Pilot interviews lasted between thirty and forty-two minutes and I took notes during the interview sessions. At the end of the exercise, each participant was asked to comment and criticize the interview questions in a bid to correct any unintended ambiguities. There were no comments in regard to the clarity of the interview questions.

4.6   Gaining Access

The process of conducting the main study started after getting ethical approval from the University of Hull. I then submitted a request to the Saudi Cultural Bureau to have their permission to travel to Saudi to conduct the research. After I had their permission, a written request was submitted to KSU, which was the place where I conducted the research (see

Appendix B). KSU were willing to be identified in this research and agreed when asked for their permission.

4.7 Sampling

Sampling is the procedure of choosing the participants of the study (Cohen et al., 2000). In the research strategy, it is essential to choose participants who can provide the researcher with the most appropriate chance to acquire information and comprehend the phenomena investigated (Stake, 2000). It is declared by Cohen et al. (2000) that meaning, instead of number of participants, is a characteristic of case studies research, providing the researcher with the opportunity to understand the complexity of social interaction.

4.7.1 Sample size

The sample in qualitative research usually is smaller than that in quantitative research as the focus in qualitative research depends on the phenomenon to be studied. The issues of concern are the insights obtained, reliability, and what can be done with the resources that are available (Patton, 2002). A small sample enables the connection of the researcher to the participants and improves the validity, and enables deep analysis regarding the natural situation (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

This study aimed to comprise a total of 21 students, with seven students selected from each of three faculties, Arts, Science or Medicine, to be interviewed in three stages. In King Saud University, students must complete a preparatory year in one of three areas: Arts, Science or Medicine, before specializing in a narrower field of study. Seven students from each faculty, each interviewed three times (once in each of three phases) meant that there should be 63 interviews to analyse. This number allowed for the possibility of dropout with the aim of having at least five students in each faculty interviewed in three stages. During data collection, some students dropped out, so the total number of interviews was 54, which is still a large volume.

4.7.2 Initial contact and screening

A pool of prospective participants was first selected by using stratified random sampling. Stratified random sampling is a technique of sampling that includes the partition of a population into smaller segments, which are referred to as strata. In stratified random sampling, the strata are created depending on the combined qualities and characteristics of the participants. A random sample from every stratum is chosen in a numerical ratio to the size of the stratum in relation to the population. These subdivisions of the strata are then combined to create a random sample.

The three faculties, Arts, Science and Medicine, formed the basis for stratification. The rationale for this is that different faculties may have different cultures, make different demands, attract different students, and offer different facilities and support. Therefore, for an understanding of students' transition experience, it is important that all three faculties are fairly represented.

Initially, I attempted to obtain information on first-year students from the Student Service at KSU, but such data was unavailable. Therefore, I employed a survey to select the participants (see Appendix A). The survey was provided to the students who had been awarded a place at the university, before they were registered. This was made possible by reference to the university's admission list. I sent questionnaires randomly to 200 students in each stratum. The primary reason for doing a survey was to obtain preliminary information about the university's coming year intake, in order to identify their characteristics as a basis for selecting a varied sample for a more detailed qualitative investigation. For example, it enabled the identification of the students coming from different high schools (public and private), different neighbourhoods, and of different family backgrounds (e.g. socio economic status and parental education levels).

The criteria that were elicited from the survey and used to choose the participants in the case study include, (i) age of the student, (ii) parents' education, (iii) social class, (iv) type of schooling, (v) grades of the students, on the basis that these demographic features may

impact the experiences encountered by the students. The rationale for collecting such data was that, according to Schlossberg (1984), there is no single explanation of the transition process and individuals will experience it differently based on a variety of factors. In this respect, I assumed that demographic factors like the qualification of the parents and the socio-economic status may have a vital effect on the students in their first-year as indicated by Pascarella et al. (2004).

The socio-economic status of the parents is usually evaluated by qualification and professional class. Bodovski (2010), Lareau (2003) and Nisbett (2009) maintain that the qualification of the parents and their professional activity is commonly linked with the academic accomplishment of their children. Students born in specific advantageous neighbourhoods or benefiting from a home environment that supports reasoning and social ability do better because of better parental participation. Parents of high socio-economic status can provide better opportunities for attainment and studying.

Some researchers argue that the education of the parents is an essential component in the educational achievements of the students (Thomas & Quinn, 2006). On this matter, Saunders (2002) argues that the children of such better-educated families will usually accomplish similar attainment to the parents.

The participants were diverse, depending upon the above-mentioned criteria. The purpose in applying these criteria was to reflect as wide a range of experiences and viewpoints as possible, and thereby to overcome, to some extent, the limitation of sample size. However, in the analyses, I did not intend to treat these criteria as variables or to draw conclusions depending on them but to examine the factors in general. This study was mainly concerned with exploring the experiences of the students and did not seek to examine the relationships between variables.

4.7.3 Sample selection

After obtaining and analysing the replies of the survey, I purposefully selected a variety of students based on the demographic data obtained from the questionnaire, to contribute to the three stages of interviews. Seven students from each faculty were contacted by email and telephone to invite them to participate.

Therefore, the choice of the students for the main research was by a purposive technique (See Merriam, 1998; Cohen et al, 2000; Bryman, 2004), which is applied by numerous qualitative researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The participants in this kind of sampling are chosen depending on some specific criteria (Patton, 2002). Cohen et al. (2000) stated that frequently in research, purposive sampling is utilized because it focuses on participants' possession of relevant knowledge and experience rather than the size of the sample. Purposeful sampling was considered as suitable due to the students being chosen for a particular reason. Purposeful sampling hence, was used to choose the students in the first year who differed in the characteristics discussed above, as explained below.

4.8 Data Collection Procedures

In this research, students were interviewed at three different point in time. Data were obtained from three in-depth semi-structured interviews. In this section I will explain the implementation of the case study.

4.8.1 Organizing the interviews

A concern of the study was to affect the students' studies as little as possible by conducting interviews at the university, keeping in view their lecture schedule. It has been identified by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) that interviewees might show resistance to imparting personal information to an outsider. Therefore, the likelihood of students' discomfort with the interview process was also taken into account. In order to address this issue, I formally presented myself to the students in a preliminary email, and before the interviews, I personally met the students and talked to them, while keeping in view their availability. This helped to minimize the discomfort of students during my presence. Moreover, students

were informed that the completion of interviews would require 60 to 90 minutes, so that they could arrange their time accordingly. Before every interview, I had an informal conversation with the students, in which they were allowed to ask anything about myself.

The same sample of participants was questioned in each phase, in order to keep track of their experiences from the stage they entered the educational institute until the middle of the second semester. It was planned that at least two interviews would be conducted with every participant, bearing in mind resource and time constraints.

Prior to the interview session, students were given a draft of the key questions they would be asked and also the students were asked to inform me if they were unable to comprehend a question or did not want to respond to a question.

4.8.2 Conducting the interview sessions

Every interview was performed in a conducive atmosphere at the place selected by the participant. In the first interview, I clarified the reason behind the research, the methods, the goals and time period, and participants were promised discretion. Each student was provided with an agreement form. The students were offered the chance to raise any questions and concerns about the study.

To ensure the accuracy of the data, students were requested to allow recording of their interviews; since 'we cannot rely on our notes or recollections of conversations' (Silverman, 2005: 161). Since recorded interviews can provide in-depth information and can be replayed whenever desired, this approach is considered very useful.

The interview was performed in the language that was favoured by the applicant. In qualitative study, the aim is to acquire the most accurate information possible, and for this purpose, the participants were offered the option to choose the language that they were most comfortable with, English or Arabic. However, all participants chose to be interviewed in Arabic.

Interviews were structured in such a manner that the soft questions were asked in the beginning so as to establish a feeling of comfort amongst the students. Before asking more specific questions, I generally preferred to ask soft questions like 'How are you doing?' Students became more accustomed to the interview process as it proceeded, and started sharing personal information more comfortably.

Every participant was given a time duration between 60 to 90 minutes, according to the participants' will. Students were allowed to take a break if they wished during the interview session.

In the interviews, I avoided questions with double context, double-negatives, complicated ones or with an intimidating quality, and vague or controlling expressions that might influence the interview. I avoided forming decisions on the answers provided by the participants. Every interview was conducted with the theoretical framework kept in mind. Also, data obtained from the first two interview phases was used to inform my questions in the second and third phases, respectively. Although the progression from phase one to phase two was linear, the activities within phase two were more iterative. Data collection and analysis to some extent proceeded simultaneously so that findings from earlier interviews, for example, informed the choice of questions in later interviews; in turn, data collected later in the process invited re-assessment and interpretation of earlier findings. Thus, I adapted my questions to the developing themes observed in the data in the previous phases. For example, one student in the first phase expressed difficulty in making friends, so in the second phase, I asked her if she still found it difficult to make friends.

Before the meeting ended, the participants were asked if they wanted to ask anything or wanted to add to the research. Finally, the participants were thanked for their cooperation.

4.9   Data Analysis
The analysis of the interview data is described in this section. The choice of method took into account the interpretivist stance of the study. **Section 4.2.1** of this chapter described

the theoretical approach of interpretivisim, which holds that interactions of individual agents within the systems are likely to shape their perspectives. An active agent in this scenario is the researcher, who creates the implications conveyed to him / her, and afterwards a sense of the data is developed and an interpretation of the matter is explained, without distorting the definition and meaning of the situation, as perceived by participants

The analysis in a qualitative study usually begins after the data collection and its interpretation and translation (Creswell, 2007). As regards translation, although conducting the interview in Arabic had advantages for myself and the participants, it also posed some drawbacks, specifically when being translated. Seidman (2006) asserts that when researchers use the language of the participants when conducting the interview are likely to have problems when translating the data later. According to Khalifa (2015) the differences between the language families to which Arabic and English belong to give rise to many issues in translation. Nolan (2005:3) says "No translation is ever "perfect" because cultures and languages differ". Thus, the analysis was done in Arabic. According to Glesne (1999), data analysis entails the researcher's understanding, observations and insights on the facts and most importantly the composition of these data / facts, so that he/she can support his/her claims with logic and explanation. Moreover, it entails a number of actions, such as creating explanations and propositions, developing theories, and establishing links between the researcher's narrative and others. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggest that analysing the data in qualitative research involves working with it, its consolidation, dividing it into manageable units, coding/programming the data, besides synthesizing it and searching for patterns.

Yin (2003) and Creswell (2007) explain the data analysis method as a process by which to thematically and chronologically organize the data. In a case study, according to Creswell (2007) and Yin (2003), data analysis is concerned with disclosing the patterns through which the description and interpretations of the case are generated.

Qualitative studies usually rely on inductive reasoning processes to interpret the meanings of the data. In inductive reasoning, generally the data is used to generate ideas while in deductive reasoning, the data is used to test ideas. The analytical strategy depends on the context. Whereas for data analysis in a quantitative study, social science has proposed a number of specific techniques, there is no fixed strategy for analysing qualitative data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Patton, 2002). In qualitative data analysis, the process is usually triggered initially by the data acquisition. The researcher would then be able to continuously refine the data collection methods as a result of emergent insights from the analysis process and this would assist in directing the data collection towards beneficial sources through which answers to the research questions can be easily acquired (Miles & Huberman, 1994). According to Cresswell (2003), there are several steps involved in analysing data in qualitative research starting by organizing the data and preparing it for analysis then reading through the data and making notes. After that the coding process starts, then the researcher generates themes from the coding process. The themes may then be represented in narratives or tables and finally, the researcher interprets the meaning of the data. In this study, thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interview data.

4.9.1 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is used in qualitative analysis, as stated by Braun and Clarke (2006:79), for

> identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic.

This type of analysis can be applied throughout the research process (Boyatzis, 1998) and can also be used within a number of theoretical frameworks (Clarke, 2006) in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding (Hardy & Bryman, 2004). This technique is popular owing to its flexibility and the fact that it is straightforward enough for inexperienced researchers to learn (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As far as thematic analysis is concerned, the research framework basically results in the creation of themes (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). There are several approaches to coding. In a 'top down' coding scheme, themes are established on the basis of the literature and the coding proceeds with these themes in mind. In contrast, codes can be inductively derived from the data in a 'bottom up' coding scheme. There is also an 'iterative coding' scheme, in which both the 'top down' and 'bottom-up' approaches are used to develop codes (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Themes can be labelled at the latent level and 'semantic' or manifest level (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The former is based on meaning underlying the data and the latter is 'directly observable in the information' (Boyatzis, 1998: 4).

Data analysis procedure

Braun and Clark (2006) proposed steps for thematic analysis, which were considered when analysing the interviews. These steps are: getting familiar with the data, creating codes, looking for and revising themes, and writing the results.

Stage 1: Getting familiar with the data

The preparation and organization stages begin the process, whereby raw data is converted for analysis and for this purpose, all audio records were typed into computer files. I transcribed the audio recordings once the interview session was over.

I listened to the recordings and at the same time, typed everything exactly. Afterwards, the accuracy of the transcription was ensured by reviewing the data a number of times. The participants were sent the transcripts for validation and amendment purposes (if they wished). However, none of the participants asked for any alterations.

In order to gain familiarity, repeated reading of the transcripts was carried out. By doing so, I gained a good understanding, as a result of being deeply involved in the process. I was

enabled to understand participants' views after this step and the important themes in each interview session were highlighted.

Stage 2: Creating Codes

After getting familiar with the data, the process of generating codes starts. This process starts after the researcher has thorough understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). "A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, silent, essence-capturing and/or evocative attributes for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldana, 2013: 3). Coding is not just the process of identifying themes (Saldana, 2013) but it also connects "from the data to the idea, and from the idea to all the data pertaining to that idea" (Richards & Morse, 2007:137). 'Open coding' is usually the first step in qualitative analysis in which words or short phrases are assigned to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Basically, codes are referred to as the tags that are used to assign implication to the inferential or descriptive information collected in the course of study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In order to be useful, a code should reflect the qualitative richness of the issue under investigation (Boyatzis, 1998). Moreover, according to Miles and Huberman (1994) there are two types of codes: descriptive codes, and inferential or pattern codes.

In this study, I adopted an inductive approach, where themes were generated from the data. In the inductive approach, data gives rise to the themes, patterns and categories of investigation, instead of their being imposed before data collection and analysis (Patton, 1990). Entities, such as themes, patterns and categories, do not occur themselves, but depend purely on the researcher and how he/she interprets the data for its onward dissemination. This in turn is influenced by his/her subjective perspectives, adopted theoretical frameworks, epistemological and ontological views. In the analysis categories are developed from the relevant empirical material. In a quest for meaningful patterns, the analyst moves side to side between the actual data and the logical construction (Patton, 1990). According to Lodico et al (2010:10), "inductive reasoning is often referred to as a

"bottom-up" approach to knowing, in which the researcher uses observations to build an abstraction or to describe a picture of the phenomenon that is being studied."

Manual coding was carried out for this study. Using Microsoft Word, a preliminary analysis was conducted for each interview. Computer software such as Atlas-I and NVivo can be utilized to commence thematic analysis. However, I preferred manual investigations so my understanding of the research data could be deepened, as ultimately this would assist in developing / enhancing my insight into the subject matter. Careful attention was paid to each of the interviews and every line, and every detail within the transcripts examined. I highlighted key words, based on the research question. Notes were written, and comments made by inserting an extra column into the transcript. Moreover, random thoughts were noted throughout the process of thematic analysis. Afterwards, a name was assigned to each code.

Stage 3: Looking for and revising themes

Once the coding process was over, the search for common themes began. Relevant data are arranged, split or combined to make meaningful themes and categories. Creswell (1998) is of the view that theories and hypotheses are developed during research, and these are derived from classified themes. In doing this, I carefully grouped the data into meaningful themes and categories.

A logical chain of evidence was built by linking these categories from interviews. I was thus enabled to capture the general patterns and themes as a result of this relationship, particularly in showing the change in the transition process over the time.

Stage four: Writing the results

The findings are presented by illustrating the patterns and themes revealed in the data, in a way that represents all the participants. This is how the analysis process came to an end. This is explained in **Table 4.2**:

Table 4.3: Phases, Themes and Categories.

Phase	Theme	Categories
Phase One	High school experience	Academic work Social relationships
	Expectations	Academic factors Social factors Institutional factors
	Induction week	Satisfied Dissatisfied Did not attend
	Early impressions	Positive feelings Negative feelings Mixed feelings
Phase Two	Initial experience	Academic aspects Social relationships Institutional aspects
	Sources of support	University support Supportive relationships
	Students' ongoing experience	Inside classroom experience

Phase Three		Out of classroom experience Social relationships
	Dealing with challenges	Change in study skills Change in attitudes Seeking help
	Students' suggestions	

4.10 Researcher's Positionality

Researchers must, according to the activity or situation, take up a position of insider, outsider, or some in-between point (Kerstetter, 2012; Trowler, 2011). Wherever the researcher positions herself or himself on the insider/outsider continuum, they must consider the position and how it may affect both the process and the outcomes of the research (Serrant-Green, 2002).

This research was performed at King Saud University (KSU), a huge public university situated in Riyadh, which is the capital of Saudi Arabia. Initially, the choice of KSU as the research site was made owing to the fact that this is where I work and so have the advantage of access to data and resources and in this sense, I can be considered as an insider. Also, this study's nature, and my interpretivist paradigm, required me to adopt the position of insider as befitting my position as actor in a local situation, in which contextually embedded knowledge grew out of experience (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). The subject under study was students' perceptions of their first year studying at university and being able to see through the students' eyes required a close working relationship with them (Bryman, 1984). Guba and Lincoln (1989) see the researcher's position as insider as inevitable and say that researchers cannot separate themselves from the researched, even if they should want to. Nevertheless, my position was not solely that of an insider. Although I work as a lecturer at

KSU, I left the university five years ago to complete my studies. For this reason, I was more like an outsider for the students, who had probably not seen me before the data collection. I introduced myself as a lecturer and a researcher and explained that the data collected would be used just for the purpose of the research.

It was important to consider the possible effect of my insider positioning on how the research should be designed, implemented and analysed. Hellawell (2006) has pointed to both the advantages and the drawbacks of research as an insider and how researchers can make use of their position on the insider/outsider continuum to write reflexively and identify their position in relation with the participants and, more critically, to understand the way participants see the research relationship. The insider researcher has a unique perspective that must inevitably alter the research (Costley et al., 2010). Being an insider, carrying with it both negative and positive associations, is a double-edged sword (Mercer, 2007) that must be taken into consideration.

Access to potential participants and the knowledge they have is an advantage to the insider. In addition, insiders will have certain insights into participants' lived experiences which they can use during interviews to enrich the data. Insiders understand the language, the jargon, and the organisation – its hierarchy and structure. All those things may confer advantage (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007).

At the same time, however, there is a potential danger that such familiarity may encourage reliance on assumptions and pre-conceptions, which could bias the research outcomes. Real objectivity is quite difficult to ensure, and in instruments which have been designed by humans (such as the interview schedules used in this study), it is not possible to avoid the presence of bias. In this research, in developing the research and interview questions, however, I made efforts to avoid bias arising from my personal background by drawing on the literature review, so that my questions and interpretations did not solely reflect assumptions arising from my past experiences. Objectivity was also accomplished through providing examples of data and results. Additionally, detailed methodological description

enables the reader to judge to what extent the data and constructs emerging from it can be accepted.

As result of being a lecturer at KSU and a researcher, I acknowledge the unequal power relationship between myself and the participants. Writers on qualitative research draw attention to the researcher's power over the individuals whose experiences are being researched (Fontes, 1998). This can give rise to biases with regard to access to knowledge (Grant et al. 1987) and in terms of decisions on which ideas, opinions and experiences are selected and which ones are excluded. In order to reduce the risk of response bias arising from power differentials, I informed the participants that their participation was optional and that they had the right to leave the study at any time. The respondents were also guaranteed that information collected from them would remain highly confidential by the use of pseudonyms. The participants were informed that the process presented no danger to them and the data collected would not cause any harassment or anxiety for them. They were provided with the contact details of KSU and Hull University in case they wished to ask any questions. Before signing the consent form, participants were given a chance to ask for any clarification or further explanation. The participants were informed that the interview would be recorded and that this was for research purposes only.

Apart from considerations of relative power, nevertheless, there is still a possibility that a researcher's perceived insider position can influence the information provided. Participants who see the researcher as an insider may assume that there is no need to tell parts of their story because the researcher already understands them (Breen, 2007; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). This shared understanding has a negative implication that respondents may not provide enough details assuming that the researcher knows the situation, using phrases such as "as you may know" or "you know". A researcher who finishes a participant's sentences or does not ask for them to be completed may exacerbate this problem (Kanuha, 2000). In this study, this was less of a problem since, as noted above, I was unknown to this cohort of students. Nevertheless, there remained a possibility that they may have formed

some impression of me, or assumptions about my experience, from others who had known me in my time teaching at the university, or simply from the fact that I was known to have been a lecturer there. I dealt with this by reminding participants at the start of the semi-structured interviews that the study was concerned with the individual and unique stories of each participant and that a successful outcome required that the story be told in detail; also, by using problem techniques to encourage them to provide further details on the experiences they described.

While data collection was perhaps dominated by my positioning as an insider, I had to move towards the outsider position in order to analyse the data. This was my decision to address possible biases stemming from the insider position. According to Unluer (2012), the insider position may lead to familiarity reducing objectivity. Serrant-Green (2002) stresses the importance of separating the researcher's and the participants' personal experiences. I chose to use an inductive approach where themes arose from data instead of being set *a priori* in order to analyse the data with maximum objectivity. Although it is not possible to eliminate the influence of the researcher on the data completely in this case, it was not a matter of the complete elimination of influence, but rather the understanding and effective use of the data collected (Maxwell, 1992).

4.11 Ways to Verify Trustworthiness

It is believed that the value of a quantitative study can be measured through its reliability and validity. There has been an on-going debate over the evaluation of a qualitative research by using these two factors. Some scholars (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 2000) have discouraged using the same standards to measure the quality of a qualitative study as used for a quantitative one. The above authors suggest that the quality of a qualitative research can be evaluated in terms of "credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 289-331). Nevertheless, there are authors (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Kirk & Miller, 1986; Mason, 2002) who adhere to the criteria of reliability and validity, albeit modified in some respects when applied to a qualitative study.

The extent to which the research report reflects what interviews actually meant to say is called credibility. Credibility is similar to internal validity in quantitative research. Peer debriefing and triangulation techniques were suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to measure credibility. Therefore, these techniques were used in this research to verify the credibility of the study. Peer debriefing is defined as a method where peers are used in order to make sure that the researcher recognizes the effects of personal viewpoints on the study (Whitt, 1991). The method of peer debriefing involved a fellow PhD student who was asked to give an opinion on the conclusions drawn.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000) triangulation refers to the integration of multifaceted methods and sources in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. Both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies can be employed to conduct Time Triangulation. Cohen and Manion (1997) argue that cross sectional information is gathered on processes related to time from various groups at one instance in time, whereas longitudinal studies gather information on the same group at various points in time. In cross-sectional studies, comparison is made between measurements for people in various samples at one instance of time, whereas longitudinal studies make an analysis of the points of interest in the same people, comparing outcomes of the sample again and again.

Triangulation is not only about validating information but also regarding broadening a person's thoughts. It can be utilized to develop new thinking. It can result in multi-perspective meta-interpretations. Triangulation is an effort to discover and describe in a detailed manner the complexity of people's behaviour through observing it from more than one standpoint (Cohen & Manion, 1997).

Through the data collection and comparison, the quality of data is enhanced, based on the idea of convergence and confirmation of findings (Knafl & Breitmayer, 1989). To ensure credibility in this research, description was detailed, since it shows the actual scenario that took place along with the surrounding contexts. In this study, one vital provision which

helped enhance the credibility of a research was member checks. These checks are done on the spot, or at the end of the data collection. Transcripts of dialogues may be read by the informants to check if the words match the actual idea they intended to convey and if a tape recorder is used, they should listen and make sure the conversation matches their intentions.

The extent to which the results of a study can be generalized to other populations is called transferability. The researcher is not accountable for determining whether or not the results can be generalized to other populations; instead the onus falls on the reader (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). 'Thick description' is the key method used in transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which is accomplished through in-depth explanation of the features of the study background, results and methodology, to let the reader decide whether the results can be applied to other populations. Transferability is similar to external validity in quantitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that the researcher should provide the relevant contextual information regarding the fieldwork sites to help satisfy the reader as to whether it is appropriate to conduct the transfer. The researcher would only refer to the original context and make no claim to generalisability. This kind of stance has become popular with various qualitative researchers. When they have explored the research context, they should state how willing and confident they are in providing information regarding the situation. The conclusions and results would be stated based on this reliable information. There must be enough information regarding the phenomenon and how the analysis was conducted to make sure that the readers have a clear understanding. The readers are then able to compare the situation presented in the research study with their own experience. In this research, although I believe that each case may be unique, they may be part of a broader group which has transferable characteristics. However, detailed description of the contextual factors has been provided, to allow readers to make informed judgements.

The advantages of qualitative research have been discussed, but it is also essential to acknowledge its limitation. The main issue when conducting qualitative research,

particularly a single case, is that of external validity or generalizability (Silverman, 2005; Bryman, 2004; Bassey, 1999). This concerns the degree to which a conclusion regarding a matter of concern can be applied more generally. Arber (1993) signifies that when performing a quantitative study, the main reason behind sample selection is normally to select a representative sample subset of a population, in order to extend findings from that sample to the entire population. However, the problem is how to be sure that all the discoveries made by the observer apply to all the members of the population from which the research sample was chosen (Bryman, 2004). This has led many critics to consider generality as a dispensable outcome of the research (Bassey, 1999). For instance, Stake (1995) acknowledged that qualitative techniques cannot ensure generalizability from a situation, but he also contends that it is possible to apply a procedure he established with Deborah Trubull, called 'naturalistic generalisation'. This comprises understanding regarding the situation which could involve transfer from the observer to the reader facilitated by an expansive and explanatory descriptive account. Hence, it is the reader that decides whether the results of the research can be applied to a comparable setting. Thus, the stress is laid on the flexibility of the understanding, as opposed to generality. Additionally, using 'fuzzy generalisations' was proposed by Bassey (1999), as a substitute to the ones extracted from the data. Fuzzy generalizations depend on the concept of inferences derived from the practical conclusions which assume that something may result from the research finding, but without an evaluation of likelihood. Hence, fuzzy generalizations contain the concept of probability without the conviction (ibid). Thus, this research does not assert that its practical conclusions will be capable of being generalized in the same way as numerical or scientific customs, because of the small sample involved. However, it is proposed that the conclusions of this research may nevertheless be valuable for tutors and managers outside of KSU. The logic supporting this view is that the study inquiries here may be relevant to others who are working in a similar situation somewhere else. For example, by drawing attention to the experiences of students in King Saud University, the research may help highlight particular challenges of transition, which policy

makers and staff in other universities may wish to investigate and, if appropriate, act on in their own settings.

The degree to which a study produces the same results if it is conducted again under the same setting using the same participants is called reliability. However, in qualitative research we cannot expect the same results even from the same participants because subsequent experiences might change their perceptions. Dependability in qualitative research is more about demonstrating integrity in the way the study was carried out. Dependability and credibility have a strong relation, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), they believe that in practical situations, if credibility is present, then it is certain that dependability will also be achieved. Overlapping methods can facilitate this, for example, individual interviews or focus groups. Dependability can be verified by reporting in detail each step in the research process. Dependability is also established through an 'inquiry audit' the retention in retrievable form of all the resources and data used in arriving at the research conclusions such as documents and recording. Hence, the research design is referred to as the prototype model. By conducting a thorough analysis, the reader is able to analyse whether the research was carried out in an appropriate manner. In this study, providing an explanation of the data collection techniques, interpretation of data, analysing the data and triangulation of different data sources are the ways in which dependability is attained. Dependability is similar to reliability in quantitative research.

Usually, a case study is an exhaustive, comprehensive and complete analysis of a particular process (Creswell, 1998). To attain that goal, information is collected over a lengthy time duration, which normally assumes a longitudinal technique (Bryman, 2004). A main benefit of this technique is its role in triangulation (Stake, 1995). By applying this technique, the data can be verified. This enhances the dependability of the research (Creswell, 1998; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Cohen et al., 2000). Hence, I intended time triangulation to be a feature in the study.

The degree to which the results of a study can be supported or confirmed by another researcher is called confirmability. Confirmability is similar to objectivity in quantitative research. In science, objectivity has been associated with using instruments that are independent of human perception and skills (Patton, 2002). Real objectivity is quite difficult to ensure, and in instrument which have been designed by humans (such as the interview schedules used in this study), it is not possible to avoid the presence of bias. The confirmability concept, as part of the evaluation of qualitative research, addresses objectivity. It is necessary to make sure the findings and results are based on the participants' experiences and perceptions and not the preferences or characteristics of the researcher. In this research, in developing the research and interview questions, however, I made efforts to avoid bias arising from my personal background by drawing on the literature review. Objectivity was also accomplished through providing examples of data and results. Also, triangulation plays an important role in promoting confirmability by reducing the effect of investigator bias. Additionally, detailed methodological description enables the reader to judge to what extent the data and constructs emerging from it can be accepted.

4.12 Ethical Issues

Cooper and Schindler (2008) define ethics as the standards or norms of behaviour that direct the choices made in regard to association with others, as well as how individuals act or behave. Matthews and Ross (2010) further define ethics as a set of regulations that guide and sustain the moral standards of individuals and society at large. It is not possible to conduct research that has impacts on other people and the setting, without raising ethical concerns. In the research context, as noted by the Economic and Social Research Council (2009), ethics is about the principles on which the research is conducted at all stages, from planning to completion and publication of the findings. The principles further guide matters such as data curation, as well as physical samples upon publication of the research.

Plowright (2011) indicates that research ethics cater for both general and specific principles, depending on the discipline or the phenomenon under study. Creswell (2014) states that specific ethical considerations emerge in each stage of the research process. For example, in the planning stage, ethical issues emerge in regard to the selection of the site and the challenge involved in obtaining the necessary permissions. Furthermore, the reporting stage raises ethical issues on matters such as honesty, transparency, avoidance of plagiarism and unbiased reporting.

Hammersley and Traianou (2012) provide the following as examples of ethical considerations in education research:

- Harm: the researcher should identify if study participants can be harmed in the course of the research.
- Autonomy: it is important to know if the respondents can independently decide to take part or reject taking part in the study.
- Privacy: what will constitute public information?
- Reciprocity: should the participants in the study expect anything exchange their participation?
- Equity: all participants in the research should be equally treated with none being privileged or disadvantaged compared to others.

Creswell (1998) states that, due the nature of qualitative studies, researchers need to pay attention to ethical issues which may arise during data collection and analysis and the presentation of a qualitative report. In all the steps of the research, from data collection to the findings reporting stage, researchers have to consider research ethics. Researchers (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002) have noted some of the ethical principles that guide an individual who wants to conduct a piece of research. These principles include:

- Participants' anonymity: this requires that the identification of respondents not be revealed in the presentation of the findings.

- Informed consent: this requires the participants to agree voluntarily to respond to the study, following sufficient explanation of the research purpose and implications.
- Anonymity: this requires the researcher to guarantee that the respondents' privacy is safeguarded.
- Risk assessment: this requires the researcher to inform respondents openly of any impending hazards of the research.

The purpose of this research was to find out the experiences of students during their first year in the university and, because the research was dealing with people, it was necessary to take ethical considerations into account. I was fully aware of the need for the human subjects' protection during all stages of the study. The process of undertaking the research commenced after approval was issued by the University of Hull, (see Appendix E). The 'Ethical Procedures for Research and Teaching in the Faculty of Education' (September 2012) sets out the ethical principles for education research as issued by the University of Hull. These principles were followed while conducting this research study. I also obtained authorization for the study from the relevant authorities at all levels of the Saudi education system, from the Saudi Cultural Bureau and from King Saud University.

Following are some important issues that were taken into account for the study to be carried out in an ethical way.

➢ **Before the data collection**

Prospective respondents to the study were provided with an information sheet in preparing this, I followed Matthews and Ross's (2010) advice to provide sufficient and clear details regarding the following (shown in Appendix C):

‗ the research value of the study;
‗ the reasons informing the significance of the study;
‗ information about what would be required on the part of participants;
‗ assurance that there was compulsion to take part and they could withdraw at any point if they wished;

- the uses of the data gathered, including assurance that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained; and

- my "authority" to carry out the research.

This gave students an opportunity to ask any question about the research. The respondents were informed that the process was lengthy and it was intended that they would each be interviewed three times, but it was explained that they were free to leave the study at the point.

Obtaining permission from the participants of the research is considered important in most social studies (Cohen et al., 2000). Students were provided with a consent form if they agreed to participate in the research. They were asked to provide their signature on the form. This form confirmed that students had been informed fully about the study, as indicated above. It also showed that they had been asked for their interviews to be recorded prior to the recording and had been informed that all files and recordings would be deleted when the study concluded. A copy of this form can be found in Appendix D.

Moreover, it was stated in the consent form that participation was optional and that participants had the right to leave the research at any time. The respondents were also guaranteed that information collected from them would remain highly confidential by the use of pseudonyms. The participants were informed that the process presented no danger to them and the data collected would not cause any harassment or anxiety for them. The students were provided with the contact details of KSU and Hull University in case they wished to ask any questions. Before signing the consent form, participants were given an opportunity to ask for clarification or further explanation.

➢ Data collection stage

I read the information sheet to the respondents before starting the interview. The participants were informed that the interview would be recorded and the data collected

would be used just for the purpose of the research. All the participants agreed to be recorded.

In addition to adherence to the formal requirements, I was also considerate towards the research respondents and ensured that they were comfortable with the research process and that they could feel free to respond to the research study.

Qualitative interviewing has a moral dimension, since the researcher has the potential to influence human well-being, as well as to add to the stock of scientific knowledge (Creswell, 2014). This highlights the importance of awareness of the power inequality between the researcher and the respondents and the effects this creates for the interview questioning for the research. For this study, it was necessary for me to clarify to the participants that I did not have any authority to influence their experiences and that their opinions would be used entirely to draw conclusions.

According to Creswell (2014), the researcher should treat the study site and participants with consideration, and avoid causing disruption, which is a risk in qualitative studies, especially those involving extensive interviews and observations. Bearing this in mind, I deferred to the participants regarding an appropriate time and venue for the interviews, in order to avoid ethical issues that may result from students missing their classes.

> **Reporting the findings**

Respect for the participants is another important ethical issue here. The identities of the students must not be revealed so that they will not hesitate to share personal information. Confidentiality was ensured to the students who participated in the preliminary study; however, subjects' privacy was observed with even greater care in the main study, where each participant shared her personal experiences. To ensure the confidentially of the participants in this study, false names have been used in the thesis, instead of revealing their real names, so the identity of the respondents remained confidential (Matthews & Ross, 2010) and, given the small sample size, this was easily achievable. Students were given

the chance to choose a pseudonym if they decided to take part in this research. This was done to ensure that I had tried my best to secure the confidentiality of the participants.

During the reporting of the findings, a list with the different names of the interviewees and their coding was created and the list with the real names of the respondents was kept in a separate file. This ensured that the final published paper had none of the real names of the participants. In understanding that the research was qualitative, I identified biases and established ways of dealing with them. According to Maxwell (1996), it is not possible to eradicate the researcher's theories, preconceptions or values. As a lecturer at the university, this enabled me to use the data collected more effectively with the perceptions of an insider in this scenario. Although it is not possible to eliminate the influence of the researcher on the data completely in this case, it was not a matter of the complete elimination of influence, but rather the understanding and effective use of the data collected (Maxwell, 1992).

4.13 Summary

In the present chapter, the theoretical framework of the research has been presented. Interptivism influenced all aspects of the research, including the objectives. The main aim was to thoroughly understand the viewpoint of 21 participants regarding the transition process of female first year university students. An interpretive case study framework was used, in order to capture the meaning of the transition process as experienced and understood by the students.

To begin with, the philosophical assumptions of the research were presented. These include the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying the research design. A qualitative research approach was selected, using an interpretive case study framework. By adopting a longitudinal time-scale for interviewing students, it was possible to capture their changing experiences and perceptions over time, regarding the institutional, social and academic aspects of university life and so understand the first year student transition experience. Themes were analysed using inductive approach. Consideration was given to

the quality of the research process, to make sure that the conclusions drawn are trustworthy.

In the following chapter, the data analysis will be presented, which includes the experiences of the students regarding their institutional, socialization and academic changes.

Chapter 5 Identification of Themes

5.1 Introduction

Qualitative data acquired from interviews with first year students is presented in this chapter, which demonstrates the results of thematic analysis (see section 4.9.1). The analysis was conducted manually to allow close involvement with the data. Through a process of repetitive reading and continuous comparison, transcripts from interviews and field notes were separated into sections of text marked using data-driven "codes" that reflected my interpretations of different components of meaning. The codes were identified into categories and subsequently grouped into key themes. Thus, the main themes, categories, and codes arose from the data. Participants articulated their subjective opinions, practices and experiences during the entire research procedure. After that, I, subsequently, interpreted them into themes, categories, and codes. The number of responses for some of the codes is indicated in some places to illustrate the strength of opinions or the commonality of particular issues.

The chapter is presented in three parts (see figure 5.1). The first section contains analysis of qualitative data obtained from the first interviews with students. The purpose of this phase was to establish students' expectations and preparation for university as the base line in the pre-liminal stage. Part Two contains an analysis of the second phase of interviews. The intention of this stage was to understand students' initial experience of university. Part Three contains an analysis of the third phase of interviews. The objective of this phase was to explore ongoing adjustment, students' overall perceptions of their experience so far and the changes they had experienced. Students were given pseudonyms to sustain the confidentiality of participants.

Phase One	Phase Two	Phase Three
Theme 1 High School Experience	**Theme 1** Initial Experience	**Theme 1** Students' Ongoing Experience
Theme 2 Expectations	**Theme 2** Sources of Support	**Theme 2** Dealing with Challenges
Theme 3 Induction Week		**Theme 3** Students' Suggestions for Improving their experience
Theme 4 Early Impressions		
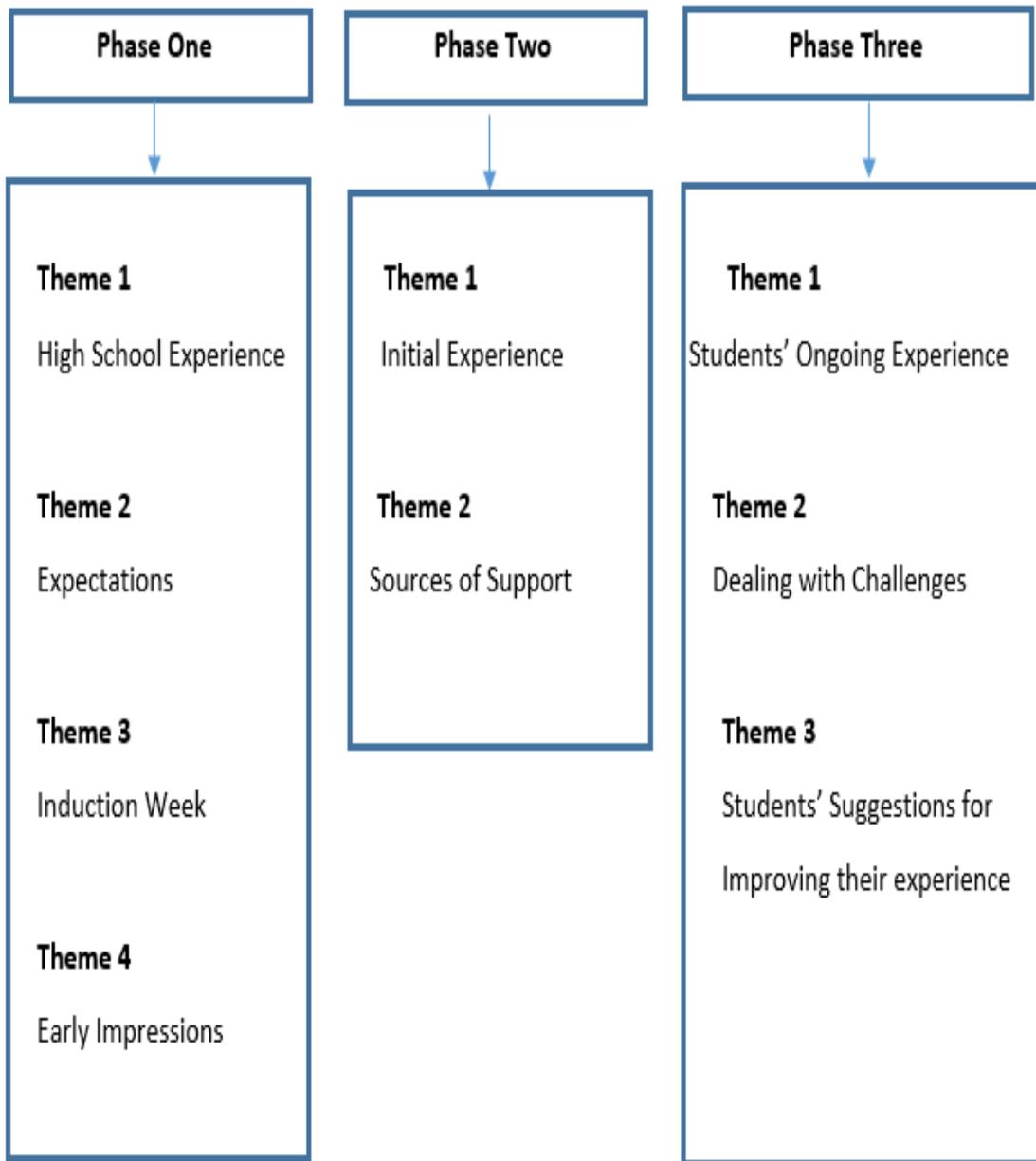
Figure 5-1: Interview Phases

5.2 Part One: The First Phase of Interviews

The first interview with the students was conducted in the third week after students started their first semester at university. This is because by this time, induction week, registration, timetable and other procedures had already been completed. The purpose of this phase was to establish students' expectations and preparation for university as the base line in the pre-liminal stage. Interpreting the data included four major themes: **High school experience, Expectations, Induction week, and Early impressions**.

5.2.1 High school experience

In interviews, students described their learning experiences in high school, which refers to participants' memories and perceptions of academic work and social relationships during their high school years. In order to better comprehend their transition to university, these are significant since their previous school experience might not have adequately prepared them for the nature and environment of learning at university. Therefore, some students experience challenges during their transition when experiencing new learning processes and contexts. The theme of high school experience is divided into two categories: **Academic work** and **Social relationships.**

5.2.1.1 Academic work

This category reflects participants' perceptions of the kind of academic work they had been used to at high school, including the role of teachers, the teaching methods, activities students had experienced and the way they were assessed. The category of academic work contained seven codes, namely: ***teachers as authoritative figures***, ***examinations, presentation, research, group discussion, working in groups, and assignments.***

Students in high school were used to the culture where they depended on teachers to tell them what to learn. They saw teachers as a reliable source of knowledge, so not to be

challenged. They memorized what the teacher gave them and recalled it during examination.

In interviews, almost all the participants described **teachers as authoritative figures,** whom they considered to be the source of information. Their remarks demonstrate the way these students had been accustomed to a spoon-feeding method of learning, therefore lacking opportunities to develop the abilities needed to learn on their own. They said that they did not need to search for information, as they relied on what teachers taught in class and the notes they had from the teacher. For instance, Amal stated:

"In high school, I always studied from the notes I had from the teacher. I did not need to search for information because the exam would be similar to these notes."

Haifa also noted:

"I cannot imagine studying the whole book from cover to cover in university… In high school, before the exam my teacher would choose from the book what was important for us to study."

Students also referred to the type of **examination** they had in high school. A number of participants indicated that examinations in high school were easy, as they just needed to memorize what teachers taught them and recall it during examinations.

"Before the exam, teachers gave us notes and model answers so when we had quizzes we just put similar answers to what we already had."
*(*Sarah*)*

"In high school, in exams I relied on memorizing things and copying my notes… even if I did not understand a particular thing in the subject I memorized it without thinking about it and I always get high marks."
*(*Enas*)*

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The analysis suggested that students were accustomed to a culture where the focus was on teaching and examinations. However, doing research, working in groups, participating in discussion, and giving presentations were mentioned by a few students.

For example, some participants commented on giving ***presentations***, although these were optional; they had to choose between giving a presentation or submitting a paper. Laila expressed:

> *"Sometimes in high school we did have presentations but not a lot because it was optional in my class and a lot of students chose to submit a paper, rather than to do a presentation in front of the students… I feel shy so I always avoided giving presentations but I have given one presentation and I remember I was shaking and sweating even though I did fine but I hate standing in front of others where they all look at me …"*

The same point was also mentioned by another student, but the student's reaction was different because this student liked giving presentations. She was a member of a club called 'the mosque club'. Students in this club talked and gave presentations about topics related to Islam, such as reminding people about their purpose in life and discussing some Islamic matters, Sarah explained:

> *"Many teachers used Power Point slides to teach us but we as students were not required to do one… I mean it was up to you if you wanted… it was optional but some students do like to give presentations… myself I like to do it… I am used to that because I was a member in the mosque club in the school and I gave presentations frequently with my friends."*

Doing ***research*** in high school was only mentioned by one student. She said:

> *"In addition to the assignments we sometimes had to submit a small research [project]…" (*Sema*)*

The fact that only one student mentioned this activity suggests that, in general, students in high school were not expected to search for information independently.

Having **group discussion** was mentioned by one student and in one particular subject so it indicates that group discussion was not a common practice in her school. Laila said*:*

> *" One of my teachers used to divide us in groups where we discuss*
> *different topics …"*

Working in groups was mentioned by four students. For example, Amal said*:*

> *" The teachers sometimes divided us to work in groups… I enjoyed that."*

Abrar explained,

> *"My English teacher in high school always let us work in groups… we*
> *helped each other in the group. We did assignments together and*
> *sometimes we played and one group would win. I always liked her way*
> *of teaching us. We did not feel bored like in other classes…"*

From the analysis, although group work was only mentioned by a few students, they seemed to like it.

With regard to **assignments**, 14 students reported having easy assignments, which were similar to the exercises given in the textbook, so they required little effort and there was no need to search for information. As Lama expressed:

> *"The assignments we had were very easy… sometimes I did them in the*
> *car on my way to school. I just read the exercise in the textbook and did*
> *my assignment. It was very similar to it."*

Abeer also stated:

*"We had to do many assignments but they did not take me a lot of time…
they were easy. Teachers gave us assignments that looked like what we
had in our textbook. I literally copied some of them from the textbook."*

Not only did students report coping easily with academic work at high school, but they described a comfortable and happy social experience, as the next sub-section illustrates.

5.2.1.2 Social relationships

In addition to the academic factors mentioned above by the participants when describing their experience in high school, the findings also show that social relationships in high school with both teachers and peers, were important to them. This category generated four codes: ***relationships with teacher, support from teacher, help from friends*** and ***closeness with friends.***

It seemed from the findings that students' ***relationships with teachers*** were very close. Having a close relationship with teachers in high school was identified by 16 students. For example, Amal said,

*"I will really miss my teachers in high school, we were like friends …… I
did not feel shy if I did not understand something or faced difficulty in
anything because um… they were so nice and always welcomed us."*

Another student, Nora, said,

*"My experience with teachers in high school was great… they were all
friendly except my physics teacher, she was very strict… I hope my
teachers here will be as nice."*

Students pointed out that they looked for ***support from teachers*** when experiencing learning or study difficulties. Relying on teachers to get support was mentioned by the majority of students (13 students in total). For example, Afnan pointed out that,

"My teachers were all available to explain if we did not understand…
they always said, 'Please tell me if you do not understand something in
the subject'…. I could always go to them to further explain and solve my
problems."

On the other hand, findings also show that students also tended to seek **help from friends.**
Ameera supported this view. She said,

"My friends helped me when I did my assignments… sometimes I was
absent and missed some classes so they helped me, also when I was
sick… I also helped them… we helped each other."

A strong emphasis was placed by participants on **closeness with friends** in high school. For
example, Amal stated:

"My friends in high school were very great... I really enjoyed sitting with
them... I had them since I was in primary school, we moved together but
unfortunately just one of them was admitted to the same university and
we have different schedules so we will not be able to meet except on
Friday because we take the same course… I will really miss them."

The importance of friends was further asserted by Sema, who recalled,

"I did not like my high school because it was an old school and was not
close to my home but I chose to move there to stay with my friends from
Intermediate school who moved there… They always made me happy
and feel comfortable when I sat with them… we laughed and did
everything together. We even did our homework together."

From the analysis of the interviews, the majority of the students seemed to be satisfied with
their learning experience in high school. For example, Rana said,

"My experience was great… I liked everything in my high school."

*"I loved my high school teachers, friends… "(*Laila*)*

"I had excellent teachers in my high school… teachers were very
supportive… friends were very good and supportive… I enjoyed my time
there." (Ameera)

There is no agreement in previous research on transition concerning aspects or sets of aspects in high school that can dependably forecast transition problems and issues. Nevertheless, students' experiences in high school could play a role in enabling or hindering their adjustment to the university, depending on the similarities or the dissimilarities between the settings of high school and university in both social and academic aspects. For this reason, students' expectations were discussed in the interviews and emerged as a distinct theme in the analysis. This is discussed next.

5.2.2 Expectations

In interviews, students were asked about their initial expectations of university. The literature demonstrates that when students' prior expectations conflict with their experiences at university, this can be a significant reason for students not adjusting to university and might cause students to choose to withdraw from the university (Evans & Peel, 1998). This theme was classified into three categories: **Academic, Social** and **Institutional factors**.

5.2.2.1 Academic factors

This category represents students' expectations with regard to the volume and difficulty of work imposed by courses at university, as well as their expectations regarding teachers. The category of academic factors contained two codes, namely*: **workload**, and **university teachers.**

One of the most widespread concerns students anticipated to have within university was the ***workload.*** They anticipated the workload at university to be heavier compared to that in high school. For instance, one student clarified,

"I expect to have a heavier workload because I have my sister studying at

the university and she told me that... she always complains about the

*amount of workload she has..." (*Nada*)*

Similarly, Banan said,

"I am sure we will have more assignments and work to do at university...

I heard that from senior students."

Abrar also said,

"I am sure the assignments will be more complicated... they will be at

university level so more difficult than the high school ones."

However, a very different picture was presented by three students. For example, Arwa stated, *"I think we will have less workload at university and we will be more relaxed."* When asked why she thought that, she explained,

"I know from my brother's experience, I always see him going out and

having more free time than me. I rarely see him doing assignments. He is

now in his fourth year at university."

Even though there are two different views, mentioned above, with regard to workload, participants' expectations seem to have been affected by their relatives, who had experienced going to the university. Some students can be affected by the experience of their kin, in either a negative or positive way.

Having unhelpful, unfriendly **teachers** was mentioned by 13 participants. For example, Afnan said,

"At university, I expect to have teachers who do not care if we

understand the lesson or not."

A similar view was also asserted by Eman who stated,

"I always hear that the teachers here are unfriendly, so I expected them

to be like that or at least some of them will be like that…"

Having a negative picture of university teachers was a dominant expectation. However, a few participants expressed a positive view of teachers. Abrar said,

"I think we will have good, experienced teachers at university… they

teach at university level so I think they are very knowledgeable."

5.2.2.2 Social factors

Social factors refer to social aspects related to people, interaction, relationships and communication. This category generated two codes: ***friends*** and ***relationships with teaching staff.***

Some of the respondents (8 participants) expected to have more ***friends*** at university than at school. For example, this was articulated by Lama who said,

"I believe I will have more friends at university because of course there

will be a lot of students here."

The expectation of having supportive, friendly classmates in university was noted by a large number of participants. For example, Ameera said*,*

"I think friends at university will be supportive and helpful…"

Another participant asserted,

" I expected my mates to be friendly and helpful, as in high school."

(Reem)

A number of participants additionally commented on their ***relationships with teaching staff***. The majority of them did not expect to have good relationships with their teachers. This view was emphasized by Arwa who said,

"I do not think we will have strong relations with our lecturers because they will be busy. They teach a lot of students so they cannot be near us."

Amal also supported this view:

"I believe my relations with teachers here will not be as close as during high school because the teachers here are different in each course, whereas in high school we had been together for three years."

The results demonstrate that participants seemed to think they would have excellent relationships with peers at university. However, their expectations of their relationships with teachers were not optimistic.

5.2.2.3 Institutional factors

The term 'institutional factors' is used here to refer to the physical and cultural environment of the university. The category of institutional factors contained three codes, namely: ***freedom, large class size***, and ***facilities.***

Eleven students said that they expected university life would offer them extra ***freedom.*** Their idea of liberty simply denoted the absence of limitations regarding school uniform. One of the participants explained this view, stating,

*"At school we had to be in uniform with a particular colour daily regardless of what, but in university I am at liberty to dress in what I love, having the colour I select." (*Lama*)*

Having large ***class sizes*** were common expectations among students. For example, Eman said,

"I knew we will be studying in bigger classes because there will be a lot more students than in high school."

The expectation to have more *facilities*, such as a bigger library, was noted by two participants. For example, Nora stated,

"I expected it to have...a bigger library."

Whilst students formed expectations of university while still in high school, in most cases, their first encounter with the reality of university life was the induction week. This is the subject of the next theme.

5.2.3 Induction week

Induction week is a programme held at the beginning of the year, intended to orient new students to the university environments. In interviews, students were asked if they had attended the induction week because, from the literature, it is believed that attending these programmes might help students to adjust to the university (Tinto, 1993). Participants varied in their responses. The data is presented in three categories: **Satisfied, Dissatisfied** and **Did not attend**.

5.2.3.1 Satisfied

This category includes students who were satisfied because they found the induction week helpful. The category contains three codes: *positive impact, chance to make friends, and university regulations*.

A small number of students (4 students) reported their satisfaction with the induction week. Words such as good, helpful and great were used to describe the *positive impact* of the induction programme by these students, who also noted what they had found particularly useful. Arwa commented,

"It was helpful… they talked about the university system, the regulations and where to find things… I really benefit from it."

Another student, Abrar, who supported this view said,

"The induction week was great and helpful. I got a chance to make

friends there. I also got to know about the university regulations."

5.2.3.2 Dissatisfied

This category includes students who were critical of the induction week because they perceived that it brought no benefits. This category contains three codes: ***lack of organization***, ***unhelpfulness,*** and ***lack of information***.

The majority of students complained that the induction week did not meet their needs, either because of the ***lack of organization*** or the ***unhelpfulness*** of the induction week. One student stated,

"The induction week was not organized so I did not benefit because I

*could not hear anything." (*Abrar*)*

Eman also said*,*

"I got lost in the place…. It is so big and I am not familiar with it… by the

time I arrived, they were almost finishing … it should be more organized

and there should be more guidance"

Some participants had found the induction week was not as helpful as they thought it would be and therefore highlighted ***the lack of information*** they received in the induction programme. For example, Asma stated,

"I am a first year student at this university and so I need to learn a lot

concerning the university and concerning my course…. I thought I would

learn all of that in the induction programme but they did not explain as

much."

5.2.3.3 Did not attend

This category includes students who did not go to the induction week. The category of did not attend contains two codes: ***did not know*** and ***other sources of information.***

Five students said that they missed the induction because they either ***did not know*** about it or they had ***other sources of information,*** such as family members at university, from whom they could obtain knowledge about university. For example, Sema stated,

"I did not hear about it; that is why I did not come."

Another student said,

"I did not need to attend because I already have my sister studying at
this university so she is going to be my source of information." (Enas)

Based on the analysis of the induction week theme, it suggests that students need more information about the timing of induction week activities and what is included so they are aware what to expect and can benefit from the programme. Also, changes may need to be made to the content of the induction week, such as giving new students more information about the regulations and the courses. In the next section, the fourth theme, students' early impressions of university life, is discussed.

5.2.4 Early impressions

In interviews, students expressed their feelings during the first two weeks at university. Those feelings are divided into three categories: **Positive feelings, Negative feelings,** and **Mixed feelings.**

5.2.4.1 Positive feelings

The category of positive feelings includes students who expressed wholly favourable responses to their first impressions of university. This category generated two codes: ***excitement*** and ***happiness***.

A few students expressed ***happiness*** at having succeeded in obtaining a university place. For example, Laila mentioned,

> *"I am really happy to be here. I met my parents' wish to be a student at*
> *this university."*

Another feeling was ***excitement*** at the prospect of embarking on a new experience, as expressed by Banan,

> *"I am excited to start my first semester here …"*

5.2.4.2 Mixed feelings

Interestingly, while the above participants expressed either positive or negative feelings, some students reported having both types of feelings at the same time. This category consisted of a single code, termed ***conflicting emotions***. For example, Haifa was excited to have achieved her goal of a university place, but also daunted at the challenges ahead of her.

> *"I am excited. I thought I would not get accepted to this university… but I*
> *feel a bit scared that I will not be able to get the GPA I am looking for."*

Another participant's pleasure at entering the university was tinged with sadness at the loss of former friends:

> *"I am happy to be at university but I miss my high school friends*
> *although I have one friend with me from high school." (*Enas*)*

5.3   Part Two: The Second Phase of Interviews

The analysis from the second set of interviews is presented in this section. These interviews were conducted towards the end of the first semester, because by this time the students have already formed their impression about the new setting they have entered (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2006). The number of participants in this phase was 18 out of 21. Two students refused to be interviewed, saying they did not have time. I was not able to find the other

student. Interpreting the data in this phase shows two major themes: **Initial Experience,** and **Sources of Support**.

5.3.1 Initial experience

Participants described their experience in the academic, social and environmental contexts during their first semester of their first year so far and the adjustment process. The codes produced relative to this theme were grouped into three categories: **Academic aspects, Social relationships** and **Institutional aspects.**

5.3.1.1 Academic aspects

The analysis here considers the students' experience of learning tasks. Students noted the differences between high school and university education and explained the learning challenges they experienced. This category was made up of six codes: ***academic writing, time and effort, active learning, passive learning, independent study,*** and ***time management.***

Academic writing: students found difficulty writing essays because in high school they had not had the experience of proper academic writing. In high school, students admitted being dependent on their teachers to provide them with the material they need. Thus, it was difficult for them to write assignments where they needed to find the sources by themselves. As Manar stated:

> *"The tasks that we had in high school were very easy, my teacher always*
>
> *helped me and provided me with the references I needed."*

During high school, the tasks students had to accomplish were easier and different from the ones required at university. Greater complexity of university tasks was shown in Afnan's comment:

> *"When I was in high school we had no complex task like this, all were just*
>
> *easy assignments... you cannot simply duplicate from the textbook but*

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have to comprehend, have to do study, have to concentrate...it is a

complete change for me."

In this extract, Afnan blamed high schools for not preparing students for the writing expected from university students.

Students discovered that they need to be critical in their writing and support their arguments using reliable resources. This type of writing was not introduced to the students in high school as they used to copy from the internet or use the material provided by their teachers.

Also, students seemed to lack skills in searching for resources to use in their writing. For instance, Asma admitted that her educational references were inadequate for academic writing. Students found that at university they required high level cognitive skills to locate pertinent resources, synthesise and comprehend the information and apply the resources to the task. Such expectations were hard to meet, as students were not armed with these abilities before or on starting university. Thus, they struggled to meet the expectations of university teachers. As Enas remarked:

"At university they did not make it very clear in terms of how we should

write, they simply asked us to write in an academic way.... "

The previous remarks suggested that the students needed help and clarification on how to write at university level.

Other difficulties of writing tasks included the ***time and effort expended***; a number of students (11 in total) complained of the additional work needed to complete a task, such as researching and visiting the library to borrow books. This left no time for other activities like studying for exams, sitting with their families and engaging in their favourite hobbies. Nevertheless, although writing tasks were among the most difficult for students, they were recognized as a type of learning. Through probing and reading additional materials, students found they gained understanding of their subject. As Nada remarked,

"I like researching and finding other resources because it help me to understand the lecture and be more knowledgeable."

Because their earlier education experience was inadequate and did not prepare them for the requirements of university, several participants complained of exhaustion because of the large volume of academic tasks and exams. They tried to cope by studying harder to meet requirements and deadlines. For the majority of them, working harder implied devoting additional time to studying. Since the participants deemed they had a lot of academic requirements, they were prevented from participating in out of classroom activities. One respondent reported that her time was mostly taken up with academic tasks and she was not able to spend as much time with her family as she did when she was in high school. Respondents stated that they found the **workload** excessively heavy.

As forms of ***active learning***, students were engaged in discussion and presentation. Engaging in debate, when the teacher posed a query, gave them chance to improve their comprehension of the lesson. Some students admitted liking being in groups and presenting in front of their classmates, as this helped them to get to know their friends and gave them the opportunity to communicate with them more. Nevertheless, some students found it difficult, since they were not accustomed to it.

The interviewees generally distinguished between the active style of learning encountered in university and passive learning in high school. The following quotations are examples:

*"University needs students to think and comprehend. Students have to study actively." (*Abrar*)*

*"University is such a change. Teachers encourage us to think." (*Haifa*)*

In university, the students' role completely changes. They are expected to take responsibility for managing their own learning, including taking their own notes, searching for information, and working in groups. Not all students were able to get used to this role change in a short time. Students also found that university learning favours critical thinking.

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The participants noted that studying at university required them to do logical thinking on their own. Almost all the participants stated that they favoured this learning style. Even those signifying that their thinking abilities may not be refined enough for them to deal with the demands of university favoured the university approach.

"Within high school, my educator always encourage me to work more

seriously. At present, I am by my own and it is up to me if I want to work

hard or not …. I favour the new way of education here since I do not like

*to memorize." (*Nada*)*

Within high school, students said, they had experienced ***passive learning*** as teachers guided students. Teachers provided model responses, and monitored student progress through quizzes and tests. Students simply needed to commit to memory facts and main points for tests. The following quotations are examples:

"When I was in high school, I was not bothered to think a lot about the

information we took because at the end teacher gives us notes and we

*just had to study the note." (*Abrar*)*

"During high school, students at all times commit the notes to memory

*to pass the test." (*Nora*)*

Generally, students agreed they had previously been 'spoon fed', by teachers who offered help and made expectations explicit. Learning materials came directly from the teacher, and the exam-oriented system was focused on pushing students to get the marks needed for university admission. This approach prevented students from being independent. For instance, as Haifa explained:

"At school the education approach was very exam-oriented. The teachers

taught students how to attain good marks."

The supposition and expectation of their new responsibility as an ***independent student*** was apparent during each student interview; however, in general they had not been intentionally prepared for such a role. Whereas in high school they were dependent on their teachers, the university culture required them to be autonomous learners. These students agreed that it was difficult to deal with the complex requirements at the new education setting and with the new students and academic staff. For example, Lama stated:

> *"Before I enrolled to the university, I understood it would be different*
> *from school… but it was much different than what I expected…."*

The conflict between willingness and expectation to undertake new responsibilities and the reality encountered is apparent. The students expressed the challenges they faced with their new role as independent and responsible learners.

The majority of the students admitted that their prior academic experience was different from what they found at university. They recognized a need to improve their skills to meet the expectations of their university teachers. However, the interviews showed that in this early phase, they still continued with the same study techniques they had used at high school. As Arwa commented:

> *"Talking about myself, I admit that one of the demanding parts is how to*
> *alter your learning method."*

The majority of the students said that they did not know what learning approach would be the best to choose. Although a few students admitted some exposure to independent learning at high school, through presentations and teamwork, but the teacher was there to help at any time.

On entering university, students needed to alter their learning approach. This was not easy. For example, Haifa, when she was at school, would do her assignments at the weekend and usually at the last minute. This was no longer feasible at university, which she found stressful. Every student at university has to find an appropriate learning style and manage

their time and learning in a way that suits them, which might be different from others, as every student is unique. As Abrar stated,

"Here at university, we need more skills to get used to the new learning,

in contrast to school where we had guidance and direction from the

teacher."

Several of the approaches cited by participants were found to be not applicable at university. For example, students found that the habits of memorization and studying from teachers' notes were not suitable at university. They blamed their high schools for not introducing them to the ways of learning expected at university.

Along with adapting learning styles and developing fresh methods, ***management of time*** and being well organized were reported to be difficult for most of the participants. They did not know how to balance their time and divide it among their university requirements. In this respect, two major problems were expressed by Manar during the interview, which represent how many of the students felt concerning handling their time*:*

"I found it difficult to balance my time. I have many assignments and

demands that all needed to be submitted nearly at the same time; I am

struggling to fit them all together in my timetable."

Time management is an important skill for students to master, especially at university, where tasks are more complex than the ones they were used to. The lack of time management skill caused students to struggle and feel under pressure as they had many tasks to accomplish at the same time. The stress level is shown in Abeer's remarks:

"When it was near to the mid-term examination, I felt very strained

because I have difficulty managing my time. I finish university at three.

After that, I spend one hour on my way home. It is not near to the

university. I also have to complete my tasks. I feel frustrated and

stressed."

The difficulty mentioned by Abeer is familiar. Students were normally under strain, especially when they needed to obtain a high GPA to get into their desired specialization. Incapability to handle their time methodically had effects such as not getting time to take part in extracurricular activities. Nearly all respondents stated they would like to take part but they could not, since they had no time. Amal admitted that she failed to submit some assignments because she lacked time management skills:

"I cannot do more than one task at one time… It is difficult to handle all of them together. They are not easy assignments and they all need a lot of time to be done"

The same worry was shared by Banan, who had to finish one assignment within one day because she had forgotten the deadline and started working on it late. Students admitted feeling strained, hopeless and irritable, especially, due to their heavy workload and lack of skills to manage their time effectively.

Some students (6 in total) reported feeling frustrated because they got lower marks than they had expected. For example, Ameera said,

"I am not satisfied by my grades. They are not what I expected to get. I thought I would get much higher marks. I feel disappointed…"

From the analysis of this phase, it is apparent that the students came to university lacking time management and organization skills. They did not know how to handle the heavy workload and thus felt strained and disappointed, especially when they got unexpectedly low marks in exams or were unable to submit assignments on time. Not being able to manage their time and handling the university workload affected the students emotionally.

5.3.1.2 Social relationships

Social relationships are discussed in two sub-categories: **Relationships with staff** and **Relationships with friends.**

5.3.1.2.1 Relationships with staff

This sub-category is made up of three codes: *emotional distance, time,* and *communication problems.*

Students described their teachers in high schools as being close to them, helpful, devoted and sociable. By contrast, some students perceived an emotional *distance* between university lecturers and students as the following remarks indicate.

> *"I do not have any relation with any lecturers. I simply attend classes and listen to the teacher. "(*Eman*)*

> *"The lecturers are not supportive as in high school. They do not collaborate with students."(*Nada*)*

> *"Well, some of the lecturers are supportive and sociable but most of them are uncooperative. It is hard to interact with them." (*Abrar*)*

> *"I think the teacher is hard to approach, I feel so distant from my teachers here… "(*Rana*)*

Students complained about the lecturers not being close to them and not spending *time* with them after class. This view is expressed in the following extracts:

> *"Time is restricted to what we spend at the lecture; the teacher is not extremely close. We do not meet after class. They seem busy." (*sarah*)*

> *"Students need assistance from the lecturers, but they did not take the time to talk to students." (*Asma*)*

> *"They do not spend time with students after classes." (*Abrar*)*

It appears that students had *communication problems* with their lecturers, especially as normally, lecturers would not spend time with the students after the lectures ended. They said that some lectures did not even respond promptly to emails requesting an

appointment. Every lecturer had her own office and the student needed to know where it was but this was difficult in such a large place. This was different from high school where teachers were easy to find, as they all shared the same office. In the following remark, Banan describes her difficulty in finding the lecturer:

"In fact I do not know how to get in touch with the teacher, I have the email details …. I emailed several of the teachers… mainly they did not respond… It is difficult to locate them."

A tutor at university has an important role in helping students to adjust to the university during their transition, although the results demonstrate that students did not think lecturers were supporting their early transition, as they felt detached from them.

From the analysis, it appears that students felt a distance in their relationship with their teachers. Amongst the participants, eleven stated that they did not often talk to their teachers, while others deemed their relations to be merely "okay". Their reactions disclose that it was only during class time that students talked to their teachers. These responses indicate the perceived need for institutions to provide a supportive educational atmosphere after class.

5.3.1.2.2 Relationship with friends

This sub-category is made up of three codes: ***difficulty, prior acquaintance,*** and ***diversity.***

Meeting the right people and developing good relations was an important factor that helped students to adjust to the new social environment. ***Difficulty*** forming relationships within the university was experienced by many students, as students were more diverse than they were used to in high school. For instance, Lama stated:

"When I came here, I did not know any person, none of my schoolmates are in KSU, thus it is hard to make new relationships…"

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Not personally knowing each other led to some students having negative experiences. Asma described a disappointing experience that contradicted her expectation about friendship at university. She described the students as being unhelpful because when she asked a classmate for assistance with a task, she refused. In another instance, a classmate had ignored her when she asked her about how to find content on the website. As a result of these disappointing encounters, she had chosen not to form any friendship within the university. Likewise, during her interview, Marwa explained how she had expected to have several friends at university and that they would be extremely supportive and sociable; however, she found it difficult to achieve such companionship.

In view of the issues cited above, students appeared to gravitate towards students from the previous high school and to build stronger relations with them, because of their ***prior acquaintance.***

> *"I like my new classmates but when we have a break I always sit with my friends from high school… we are in different paths so sometimes it is difficult to meet them"* (Abrar)

> *"I prefer to be with my friends from high school whenever we work in groups but sometimes the teacher puts us in different groups to work with other students… "(*Amal)

A number of students did not like the ***diversity*** at the new setting as they found it difficult to make new friends and to trust them.

> *"I usually stay alone. Students here are diverse, coming from different schools and different cities. I feel strange. It is difficult to make friends here."* (Haifa)

These quotations illustrate that students were more are at ease with someone familiar, such as the associates they knew prior to entering the university. This was not what they had

anticipated, but because of student diversity, they experienced anxiety when attempting to develop new social relations.

5.3.1.3 Institutional aspects

This category comprised four codes, namely: ***large classes, feeling ignored, academic advice and guidance,*** and ***rules and system.***

Students remarked on noticeable dissimilarities from school, they found studying in ***large classes*** at university difficult because they were not used to such conditions. Being in a big class made it difficult for the teacher to pay attention to each student. They did not like being far from the lecturer and sometimes not able to hear clearly what the teacher said. For instance, Abeer stated,

> *"In such a big class, I feel less attentiveness and at times I do not feel comfortable."*

Students expressed a sense of being overlooked and ***feeling 'ignored'*** by their lecturers. They found it different from what they had experienced in high school, where teachers paid attention to each student and knew each one because of the small number and the small class. They found it hard to cope with being just "one of the crowd."

> *"I personally found it difficult to get the teacher's attention in class if I have a question or need help in exercise because of the number of the students… the teacher cannot manage to answer all of our questions…"*
>
> *(Arwa)*

A significant number of students (8 in total) mentioned that they did not know where to find some services, such as ***academic advice***. They also felt the institution should provide more ***guidance*** on how to locate services, such as academic advisors and the library:

> *"There is no guidance to help us find the services here… I could not find the library when I wanted to borrow a book. "(Haifa)*

They also needed more information about the university ***rules and system***. For example, Rana stated,

> *"I still search to find about some rules like the attendance rule. I did not*
> *know how many unexcused absences we are allowed to have per*
> *semester… we need more and clearer information about such rules."*

5.3.2 Sources of support

In Tinto's (2006) view, there is a need for universities to ensure adequate human, physical, and financial resources are devoted to student support. During their first semester, students identified two categories of support that generated this theme: **University support** and **Supportive relationships.**

5.3.2.1 University support

Frequently, students described amenities and resources available at university as helpful to their study, for instance internet availability, computer facilities, and the lectures and workshops available on the university website. Almost all students commented on how useful and helpful they found the content on the website. They stated that they could get their exam results, attendance record, lecture content and assignments from the website. As Eman stated,

> *"It is a very useful website. I can easily check my attendance and*
> *download materials. I can download the assignments from there and the*
> *lecture content. It is really helpful."*

5.3.2.2 Supportive relationships

The support students received from connections (peers, lecturers, family and private tutors*)* inside and outside the university included practical support, emotional support, and information support. This category generated four codes, namely, ***peers, lecturers, family*** and ***private tutors.***

All participants agreed that obtaining support was of deep significance and having people around them who were supportive was important. They appeared to perceive the growth of positive relationships with **peers** both in and outside the classroom as vital to their transition.

Students found their peers at university supportive emotionally. In Eman's case, she was more at ease when she had somebody to talk to, as they encouraged each other,

"I feel safer when I have my friend with me."

In this phase, students needed someone intimate to share their experiences. This also emerged in Manar's remark. As she asserted,

'When you feel discouraged, they will give you inspiration... they will support you."

Abrar's view concerning friends had altered and she noted that it is difficult to survive by yourself at university. She stated:

"When I got here, I thought I would not need to have friends who can assist me but I was mistaken, they help a lot."

Peers are a source of realistic support and material help, and offer some of the most significant kinds of support students want, such as sharing resources and materials like notes and books. For instance, Nada viewed the support of her class-mates as a vital resource, particularly when she was worried about her capability to comprehend subjects that she found difficult:

"I have a 'What's App' group on my phone with several students within my class, where we assist each other. The students there assisted me a lot; they assisted me to comprehend assignments and to describe what I missed within class… I cannot express how supportive it is."

Students often reported how they shared resources when they were completing tasks. For example, Arwa stated:

"I got a book from my friend to assist me doing my research. She gave it to me and it was actually supportive. I would not have understood if she had not told me about it."

Amal supported this opinion; she stated:

"I support my friends like those who did not get to the lecture… I offer them my notes...we feel appreciative to assist each other"

In general, students agreed that developing good friendships is important, and Manar clarified several supportive factors, like common interests, supportiveness and friendliness. She said that being friendly towards everyone helped her in building relationships.

Students' accounts of their experiences clearly revealed that building relationships with their peers helped them practically and emotionally to adjust to the university. From the analysis, it seemed that peers were very important in the students' transition process.

The roles of *lecturers* appeared to be perceived as less evidently helpful in the students' learning change, depending on the ease or difficulty of access to lecturers. Students appreciated the help received from their lecturers in accomplishing tasks or giving them feedback on performance. For example, Haifa was happy about the help she received from the teacher in an assignment:

"I got the help I needed from my teacher when I was doing the assignment and now I feel great, since it solves my assignment issue."

Also, another student, Nora, described the help received from her teacher after getting a bad result in her exam. The lecturer offered her tips concerning the changes she needed to make to improve her performance.

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"You should not memorize but if you want to get good results you need

to comprehend and synthesize."

This assisted Nora to use the type of learning that was expected of her at university level.

The support received from teachers helped the students to adjust to the academic demands at university. For instance, Sarah described how the feedback from the teacher assisted her to adopt a new style of learning:

"I am happy about the comments I had from my teacher, it assisted me,

for instance for one of my tasks, the teacher informed me to employ

additional material from the library such as books and since then I have

visited the library more frequently."

This feedback assisted Sarah to understand that she needed to improve her writing skills. She learnt how to support her arguments using reliable sources, which she believed would benefit her not only in university but also in the future. Students perceived guidance given by their teachers as helpful in their transition to the new academic environment. Not every student made this attempt but, for those who did, it was helpful.

In addition to sources within the university, students also admitted obtaining support from non-university sources, such as their parents and families, or private tutors.

In the case of Ameera, for instance, her **parents** had a significant influence on her experience. They assisted her emotionally which helped her to feel better about her study.

"I always go to my parents whenever I feel down or struggle to do my

assignments. Even though they cannot help me with my academic work

but they always help me by giving me advice that pushes me and keeps

me going."

Within Saudi culture, students have close relationships with their **families**. In this research, interviewees said their parents, especially, provided inspiration and support. This links to

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the Arab culture, where children and parents are intimately bonded (Mourad et al., 2010). The participants in this study admitted feeling valued and experiencing relief that someone was paying attention to them. As Lama clarified during the interview:

"I tend to tell them what I experience even though sometimes they might not fully comprehend what I am referring to."

Moreover, Abrar remarked,

"I like to talk with my sister about my day. She is the best to advise me and give me motivation."

For Abrar and others, the closeness with their families at home persisted and had a positive effect on them. Several students stated that their family, especially parents, demonstrated concern concerning their academic accomplishment and give them encouragement. For instance, Afnan stated:

"My family were concerned about me passing the exams. They always ask me about my results".

They also motivated and encouraged students if they did not do well in an exam. As Rana stated:

"My parents at all times are willing to help me… when I had poor results in my examination, I informed my mother to give me advice. Her advice really helped me to forget about the previous results and study hard for the coming ones…"

The results from the study established that parents' support and encouragement were basic to students' emotional well-being.

Students also admitted taking additional ***private classes,*** where an outside teacher explained to them what they did not comprehend in class. This suggests that the

relationship with university staff was weak, since students did not go to them for help but turned to an outsider.

For example, Haifa requested assistance from a private tutor when she sensed she would fail the mathematics examination if she did not look for assistance. The private tutor helped her to comprehend the subject. She stated:

"I paid for a private mathematics tutor to ask her each time I don't comprehend… Our mathematics teacher does not explain well and every time students ask her, she says, 'You should have learned that before joining the university', so I chose not to ask her anymore."

In a different case, Eman chose to go for a private class to help her with tasks that she found complex. She stated:

"On any problem linking to academic work, I request my private tutor to support me."

5.3.2.3 Negative feelings

The category of negative feelings includes students who were finding the early weeks at university difficult and expressed only unfavourable responses. This category generated three codes: ***social aspects, academic worries*** and ***institutional factors***.

Lonely, lost, worried, scared, uncertain, strange, unhappy were among the negative feelings mentioned by 11 students in the first semester.

The code '***social aspects***' refers to the feelings of being isolated, separated from friends, and not knowing anyone. The following quotations represent those feelings:

"I feel a bit frightened by the surroundings since I do not know any of my classmates… my friends from high school were accepted to different universities" (Nora*)*

"My friends have got a different schedule to mine. I am unhappy; I feel alone. I do not know any of my classmates here." (Abrar)

"I feel strange in my classes. There are a big number of students… I am unfamiliar with them." (Ameera)

The code '***academic worries***' represents the students' feelings of fear of failure and not being able to cope with the level of work. The following quotations represent those feelings:

"I am concerned about the courses… I feel they are complex, particularly the English course… I am not good at English." (Manar)

"I am not actually certain if I can thrive and enter my desired discipline… I feel that students here are extremely competitive." (Abeer)

The code *'**Institutional factors**'* represents the feelings of being tired and confused by environmental factors such as the sheer size of the university, the complexity of the layout and a demanding timetable. The following quotations represent those feelings:

"The site here is very large. I cannot trace my way to the lecture theatre; I lost my way a number of times… I had to contact my friends to direct me." (Marwa)

"KSU is an extremely large university... students feel lost. I found it complicated to locate lecture classes...I do not know where to ask for help... They should assists new students like me about directions and how to find their classes." (Eman)

"This is my second week but I feel exhausted. I come here at 7 in the morning and finish at 3 afternoons. It is a very long day." (Abrar)

From the previous quotations, it appears that students had negative feelings about the university and uncertainty about their ability to adjust to it.

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5.4 Part Three: The Third Phase of Interviews

The analysis from the third interviews with the students is presented in this section. These were conducted in the middle of the second semester, because by this time the students could reflect on their experience of the first semester and on their examination performance, as well as any changes they had made to cope with the university. A total of 15 students were interviewed in this phase. I was able to find out about one student, through a friend of hers, that she had left the university, for a reason that had nothing to do with the university. She left because she moved with her family to another city. Interpreting the data in this phase shows three major themes: **Students' Ongoing Experience, Dealing with Challenges,** and **Suggestions for Improvements**.

5.4.1 Students' ongoing experience

This section describes the changes students experienced as the year progressed, as a result of their participation in class activities and engagement with their fellow-students. This theme is divided into two categories: **Inside classroom experience** and **Out of classroom experience**.

5.4.1.1 Inside classroom experience

This category addresses the students' experience of learning tasks inside the classroom, such as group work and discussion. This category was made up of three codes: ***student engagement, teacher support,*** and ***group work.***

Student engagement was considered vital by the majority of the participants. Their communication skills were improved and they comprehended the lectures more. They realized the benefits of engaging in groups and being involved in other class activities such as discussion. In relation to the classroom experience, students discussed the effectiveness of the knowledge and practice of teaching and learning experienced in class. They described how the lecturer's qualities inspired their involvement in class. They also agreed that they understood the lectures better if the lecturer was knowledgeable and if the information given was not abstract, and was contextualized. For example, Afnan stated:

"In my communication skill class, the teacher will ensure we comprehend the topics…I enjoy and love being inside her class... she always gives us examples from real world."

Moreover, students stated that they liked teachers who were sociable and cared about them and their feelings. Students also stated they preferred creative delivery methods. For example, Abrar liked the games that her English teacher used as a teaching technique. As she explained:

"The teacher asked us to play games.... I prefer this way of teaching technique. I do not like attending lectures and taking notes, but as well becoming active during the class."

A comparable view was shared by Arwa and Rana, who also discovered that learning became more appealing when they had to be active in the class using art, such as drawing.

Students found participation in class a significant part of their learning, particularly because of the constructive comments received from their teachers. They liked being engaged in class instead of being passive, as they had been used to in high school. They felt that engagement helped them to comprehend the topics as it encouraged them to reflect on the queries posed by the lecturers or raised by other students and this aroused their thinking abilities. Such activities helped them to assess their understanding of course content, especially, as they received instantly feedback from the teacher.

Students also remarked on teachers' organization and planning. Students liked teachers who they seemed to care about the lessons and tried to deliver it in different ways such as employing graphics. They felt it was more interesting than the traditional method where teachers talk and students listen.

Teachers' support was perceived to be helpful in improving students' performance, for example by providing suitable guidance and comments on their performance. For example, Nora talked with her teacher about her poor results in English assignments and how she

could prepare for the next assignments. This made the teacher pay more attention to her and ask her whether she comprehended or not. This support assisted her to get ready for the class and to improve her comprehension of the lesson. As she clarified:

"After I discussed my performance with my teacher she always make sure that she ask me a question to test my understanding… so I became more engaged and attended all her classes now."

Possibly if Nora had not sought the teacher's support, she might have had difficulty in academic adjustment. The support of her teacher encouraged her to engage more in class so the class became more enjoyable for her. Teacher support fostered a positive change in the student and made the classroom environment more conducive. Haifa and Amal had similar experiences. For instance, Amal was overcome when the teacher noticed her increased participation, and it felt good to be recognized by the tutor. Moreover, Haifa attributed her encouragement to become a more active student to the complete support of the tutor:

"In my mathematics class sometimes I did not participate since it was difficult for me to comprehend the subject. I felt bored… I did not participate but when the teacher tried to engage me in the class and asked me questions I had more confidence to participate and I started to comprehend much better than before when I was quite."

Participants had previously (phase two) underlined numerous factors which they felt formed an obstacle in their relationship with their teachers However, once they had got in touch with their teachers, they found them very supportive and encouraging. They felt had more trust in the teacher's support because they believed they have more knowledge than their peers and so their help would always be beneficial. From the analysis, students seemed to hope that their teachers would give them guidance and help because of their knowledge and understanding of university.

Opportunities for ***group work*** in the class assisted students to comprehend the subject and the norms of the class and to be more involved. All the participants expressed appreciation of the help offered by their friends and peers, through sharing, in group interaction and conversation. Seven students agreed that their peers were a constant source of reference. As Lama stated, she appreciated having friends who helped her to comprehend. Students also discovered that by assisting others, they became more confident and understood their subjects better. For instance, Ameera stated:

"I have some knowledge in English so I get the chance to explain and
assist my classmates. So that helped me to become more confident and
to understand the topics more."

Moreover, students discussed the influence of group, where activities required students to collaborate on assignments. It is stated in the literature that active experiences have a profound result on student learning and involvement. Lambert et al. (2007) found active, collaborative experiences to be strongly supportive of students' in their learning experience. Some students, however, found it difficult to work with others as they were diverse in term of prior learning and topic knowledge, although they were on the same course. It was demanding when students had to work as a group, despite their differences.

Students had different feeling with regards to group work, based on their experience. Some students found it to be a chance to share materials and views and this contributed to a joint decision and helped them to improve their problem-solving skills. Having effective group members is, in addition, significant since it affects the group's evaluation on their task. According to Marwa, the working approaches and dedication of every member of the team are the key to achievement. This was confirmed by her group presentation task, where each member in the team gave wholehearted commitment to the assignment. Marwa always liked taking responsibility so she enjoyed leading her group and allocating tasks among the members. She felt she succeeded in managing the group because of the fruitful outcome:

"My experience with my team was successful … we were pretty prepared

and we collaborated amazingly…."

However, some students did not have a positive experience with groups, particularly when they felt some members were not working seriously. The participants felt that some students did not want to share their resources and knowledge with the group. This might lead to difficulties or even disagreement. For example, Abrar found that some members of her group did not care to contribute their thoughts, which annoyed her. In this situation Abrar did not feel comfortable to work in a group.

Even in what was supposed to be team work, on several occasions the final work was in fact just one individual's effort. In this situation, some students felt that colleagues took advantage of their work. As Banan stated:

"I do not like being in group because I always worry about submitting the

final work. Sometimes I had to do extra work than others because they

did not complete their task properly and I had to do it because in the end

the marks were the same for everyone."

Another negative experience was described by Lama, where her involvement in a task was denied by team members; consequently, she was given no marks for that task. Problems related to teamwork, like unenthusiastic members, arranging meetings, and unfair work distribution were brought up at the interviews. Nonetheless, the majority of participants thought that group work was extremely helpful, and reported that in high school there were no such opportunities available. Nevertheless, the participants found teamwork could be difficult, due to the need to negotiate practical and social aspects involved. Nine students brought up the issue of teamwork, and five of them recalled having unpleasant experiences while working in groups. The issues repeated often included careless group members, time needed for negotiating with team mates, inadequate guidelines from teachers, and challenges in logistics, like planning meetings.

One student, Lama, stated that she always had to complete the task because the group members did not have the required skills to deal with the project. A different student remarked as follows:

*"I favour personal papers since I do not have time to meet other students. I feel I can do my work better by myself because I put a lot of effort when I do my assignment… I research and read a lot… some members do not bother about the score we get. I also find it difficult to decide on the time that we all agree is suitable so I prefer to work alone." (*Rana*)*

From the analysis, it seemed that some students need to learn the required skills to work effectively in groups in order to reap the advantages of this learning approach.

5.4.1.2 Out-of-classroom experience

The category of out-of-classroom experience refers to the collaborative learning process experienced by students, including group study for examinations, sharing lecture notes, and involvement in extra-curricular events. This category has two codes: ***collaboration,*** and ***extra-curricular activities.***

Students highlighted the benefits of working with other students. They felt that their communication skills were greatly improved and that they became noticeably more confident in presenting and offering their opinions, compared to the time when they started, when some did not want to participate and were shy to present. Their ***collaboration*** helped them to adapt during their transition and to learn better. For example, Amal said that this type of learning activity assisted her and her friends to grasp more of the topic, as she clarified:

"If I do not comprehend something in the course, I ask my friends. I found them very helpful. I like to discuss with them what I found difficult and I always understand when they explain to me. They are great."

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This was further explained by Ameera, who always liked to confirm what she understood by discussing with friends:

"I like to discuss what learnt with my friends because I feel more
confident when they confirm my understanding and sometimes they
clarify something I did not know about."

In Ameera's case, the aim of the discussion she had with her friends and peers was to improve her communication skills.

Moreover, all the students commented repeatedly on the effectiveness of forming electronic groups on their phones, to swap information and exchange knowledge. Nora viewed this as a great opportunity for her to expand her knowledge and to communicate more with her classmates outside university. She said,

"It is great. I can discuss in the group whenever I want as I am not restricted in time to be
at university to discuss..."

Moreover, Sarah detailed how she looked for aid from her friends to comprehend mathematics when it was not well explained in lectures. Sarah thought friends played a significant role in assisting her comprehension. Students appeared to be more comfortable to approach their peers when having difficulty understanding or doing their assignments. As Sarah said, *"I like working with my peers."*

As demonstrated through the above analysis, students' collaboration was beneficial and helped them to adjust to the university academic environment. Students agreed they learned better by interacting with other students. They believed learning was not attained solely within the classroom, but happened in a range of settings as they interacted in daily life.

Students were able to comprehend and were more confident when they collaborated with other students. Their comments showed that that when they become proactive, they

formed different views of the learning environment and the tasks they had to perform, illustrating the connection between their personal engagement and the university setting.

Extra-curricular activities can potentially play an important role in learning. Participating in extra-curricular events gives students the opportunity to socialize with students from diverse study fields and to learn precious soft skills that are extremely helpful to them (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

However, the participants were not much involved in university activities because of the heavy workload. They viewed activities beyond the academic tasks in class as extras. Of the fifteen participants, thirteen said they did not attend any extra-curricular events at all. Seven interviewees expressed the opinion that extra-curricular events would interrupt their learning. They stated they did not have sufficient time to take part in such activities because they had so many academic assignments and examinations to complete. They commented that admission to their preferred specialism depended on achieving a high GPA, especially for some specialisms such as computing, law and actuarial and financial mathematics. Students said that they have to obtain a GPA of at least 4.87 out of 5 in order to be accepted in highly competitive fields such as actuarial and financial mathematics. For these reasons, they decided to forego these activities in order to focus on their learning.

> *"I do not have time for such activities. I barely could find time to do my*
> *assignments and study." (*Sarah*)*

> *"How can I participate in these activities if I do not have time? I am*
> *focused on my study to get a high GPA to be accepted in actuarial and*
> *financial mathematics. This is my goal now" (*Arwa*)*

Only two students reported that they took part in various extra-curricular activities, and both said they enjoyed them. However, participation came at a cost:

> *"I like to take part in non-academic activities but because of the time*
> *constraints I had to miss some deadlines." (*Rana*)*

5.4.1.3 Social relationships

Social relationships refer to students' ongoing progress in forming productive and helpful relationships with others within the university. Tinto (1975, 1986, 1993), highlighted the importance of such relationships for student retention. This category has two codes: *relationships with teachers* and *relationships with peers*.

In the first phase of interviews, a large number of the interviewees had expressed pessimistic views of the lecturers at the university and spoke of distance in their relationships with their teachers. In this phase too, ten stated that they did not often talk to their tutors. Students commented that their *relationships with teachers* only happened during class time, suggesting a need for the institution to provide a helpful learning setting after class.

> *"The teachers here are very busy. We can only ask her in class if we have a chance because she leaves right after the lecture ended." (*Eman*)*

> *"My relationships with teachers here are okay. They give lecture and leave." (*Rana*)*

The interviewees appeared to be contented with their *relationships with peers*. Most of the participants deemed their relations with their peers "good". Only two of them appeared discontented with their relations with the other students.

> *"In the induction week, I had a good chance to make friends." (*Nora*)*

> *"I have made many friends here since I came. They are nice and very helpful." (*Abrar*)*

The two pointed out that they were shy and did not actively seek to make new friends. Since the majority of students decided not to engage in any activities beyond their learning in the class, their interaction with other students only happened in small groups.

"My experience with friends here is not good. They seem to be selfish

and not helpful. They are not willing to share information with others"

*(*Marwa*)*

"I could not make new friends… I feel shy to ask to be in their group"

*(*Haifa*)*

5.4.2 Dealing with challenges

In the first year, university students need to recognize their responsibilities as students. As clarified by Bennett (2007), students in their first year need to adjust to the different aspects of university to peer, staff, learning and teaching environment. Nevertheless, not all students felt comfortable to make the required changes. On the negative side, several participants reported facing challenges in handling the large volume of information they collected.

"It was difficult for me to manage the amount of information I collected

*from the different books I read to do my assignments." (*Enas*)*

Over half of the interviewees decided to forego extra-curricular activities. They thought that they needed to spend their time on studying and doing their academic tasks to achieve a high GPA and face the challenges.

This theme investigates the position of individual self-efficacy in conquering the difficulties and negotiating with the educational process, and the strategies participants used to overcome academic challenges. Adjustment began when they re-evaluated their academic skills to fit in the new academic environment. This theme is divided into three categories, namely: **Change in study skills, Change in attitudes** and **Seeking help.**

5.4.2.1 Change in study skills

The section analyses how participants responded to the challenge of university by adjusting their study skills. This category has eight codes: ***comprehend, analyse, study frequently***,

early involvement, finding extra materials, preparation, no procrastination, and **additional reading.**

Through the experience of students in their initial semester, they were able to evaluate and criticize their academic skills and their adjustment. They became better at studying and-adjusting their studying skills, generally when their outcomes were beneath their expectations, or when they got disappointing results in exams. They also benefited from discussing with other students and observing what learning skills other students used. The majority of students expressed worries concerning their academic performance and the pressure they faced to get a high GPA, as these comments demonstrate:

"I have to progress in my academic work and make more effort

*compared to now" (*Enas*),*

*"In fact I have learned revising after studying is beneficial" (*Eman*),*

"I decided to prepare in advance for exams and give myself enough time

*to study and avoid rushing" (*Ameera*),*

*"I realized that I need to allocate more time for studying" (*Arwa*),*

*"My university performance is still low; I need to study more" (*Haifa*).*

The majority of these responses were after students got unanticipated results in their exams. When students were not content with their results, they decided to make changes.

The results in this section demonstrate that students at this point in their second semester were able to think more critically about the difference between high school and university in terms of study skills and better understood the adjustment they needed to make. For instance, Amal stated,

"From my experience in the previous semester. I got unanticipated results. My marks were bad. I worked hard but it was not enough, since I did not understand how to study but, now I have learned how."

When I enquired how, she clarified,

"I spent much time committing information to memory but it did not work that way. I have to comprehend, analyse and sum up so in the examination I can answer the questions easily."

Amal's extract shows a significant adjustment she decided to make in order to improve her performance. Students felt more positive once they discovered which study skills would help them in university. The atmosphere at university encouraged students to be independent and decide how to study and which skills they needed. Thus, students needed their own approach to learning. They recognized that it was up to them if they wanted to improve; no one pushed them. According to Amal, adjustment to the new type of education meant moving beyond her previous techniques to develop new abilities. Therefore, students tried to find ways in which they could improve and become better at learning.

Time management was considered by the participants as an important skill that they needed to master to become better learners. They found it important to **study frequently**, and that **early involvement** was needed. This was amongst the aspects that assisted Haifa to attain good marks in her first semester examinations. As she stated:

"I will begin with the revision as soon as I go home. I will not delay studying. I will try my best to find supportive materials to comprehend the subject."

Haifa also favoured **finding extra materials** from the library or from the university website to comprehend what she found to be difficult. She preferred to do that instead of asking her friends or asking the teacher. Locating extra material enabled her to study at home, which was more flexible than having to stay at university and wait for the teacher to explain.

University students have more freedom than in high school and are expected to be independent to be able to manage their time to what best suits them.

When students became more active and engaged in class, they felt that the subjects became more interesting. Many of the students admitted being able to understand the material better through their participation in groups and presentation or class discussion. Even though participation was difficult for some of them at the beginning, once they become accustomed to these activities, they seemed to like them and find them helpful. For instance, Asma declared that education is 'enjoyable' when the student comprehends something. She described the adjustments she had made to her learning approach; for example, she commented on her **preparation** for the lecture ahead of class:

> *"When I started to prepare ahead and read the book before the lecture, I found that I understand better than before. I now have more time to comprehend and write my questions ahead to ask the teacher in class what I found difficult while I was preparing for the lecture."*

Asma felt happy with her new way of learning, and more mature and independent as she had more control of her learning. After her experience of being late with her work in the initial semester, she decided that now there would be **no procrastination;** she began promptly so she had more time to correct errors and more opportunity to talk about the work with the teacher or her colleagues. A similar experience was articulated by Marwa, who was not discouraged when her expectations differed from reality; but planned to overcome her worries:

> *"In my first semester, I was frightened and worried when I stand facing the class… I then realized that I have to be confident and now I have changed and overcome my fears."*

Some students discussed changing their education approach, for example, doing **additional reading** and looking for extra resources on the internet.

The majority of the interviewees appear to have adopted proactive means to deal with the new needs. Among the 15 interviewees, 10 pointed out that they had altered their study methods to manage university learning, often by doing additional reading and searching online for information. One participant stated that her academic skills in research had improved.

> *"When I came here, I was not sure how to research on my own. I did not know how to evaluate the work of others and sum up their arguments. I feel now more confident to research without my teacher supervision."*
>
> *(*Enas*)*

The next remark elaborates how a student explained her transformations to adjust to the university learning.

> *"We were not used to working in groups in my high school. Every student would do her work individually. Now I work in groups very often. Now we need to talk about our work, give standpoints, and subsequently note down our resolutions…. We need to analyze, think, and conclude the task."* (Sarah)

5.4.2.2 Change in attitudes

Some participants stated that they had adjusted their attitudes. They had to strive for a high GPA so as to be admitted to the programme they desired, so they became more industrious. This category has four codes: ***hard work, more serious, responsibility,*** and ***active participation.***

One change of attitude was reflected in Arwa's recognition of the importance of ***hard work*** to adapt quickly; in order to avoid being left behind. She stated:

"Every person who gets in here has high merit, so to be the finest among the best is quite difficult... I want to get into the computer science program so I have to work very hard to get a high GPA. "

Overall, students recounted how they underwent these changes by the conclusion of the initial semester. Unanticipated results in examinations made some become determined to approach their academic difficulties optimistically.

Eleven students reported that their grades were unexpected, particularly if they got low grades. Amal felt very frustrated with her outcomes so she decided to change her attitude by studying harder, as she stated:

"Very frustrated, I never got outcomes like that previously, but I am not astonished since it was extremely difficult to comprehend this course, particularly as the teacher did not explain well. So I decided to study harder this semester and try my best."

Students recognized that in order to be able to overcome the challenges experienced in the first semester, they needed to be ***responsible*** for their learning, as Haifa stated,

"When I am in class, while the teacher is teaching I started to write down the points that I need to search about when I go home... so I can catch up with the things that need time to understand."

Many of the participants noticed the positive changes they experienced when they became more responsible. To overcome the early anxiety of academic demands needed an optimistic and goal-oriented approach. As Abrar stated,

"It depends on how much time and effort you put into your study..."

The necessity to conquer weaknesses and discovers ways of adjusting to the learning requirements at university were realized by various students. For instance, Amal recognized her weakness in not being able to speak or present in front of people and decided to be

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active and participate in these activities to enjoy the learning. Therefore, rather than feeling disappointed, she resolved as follows:

"I had anxiety, and panic when I stand before the class... in future I decided to overcome my fear and challenge myself because I want to enjoy learning instead of being quiet and bored."

5.4.2.3 Seeking help

Some of the respondents admitted seeking help for their learning from others, to manage the academic and individual demands of university. This category has three codes: ***teacher's help, friends,*** and ***private classes.***

Nearly all the participants regarded the ***teacher's help*** as the last option.

*"When I have difficulty doing my work, I always ask my friends for help and if they are also struggling, I would ask the teacher." (*Banan*)*

Just one respondent stated that she would talk to her teacher first. She said,

*"If I struggle with something, I would go to my teacher because she is knowledgeable." (*Abrar*)*

 The majority of the interviewees stated that they preferred to talk to their ***friends*** when having difficulties. A few respondents stated that they would resolve the issue themselves first or take ***private classes***.

*"After I finish from the university, I go to my private teacher to help me with the assignments and explain for me." (*Enas*)*

5.4.3 Students' suggestions for improving their experience

This theme was developed when students were asked about any suggestions for improving the transition experience. Codes generated were: ***orientation programme, transportation*** and ***fixed GPA.***

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During the final interview, a total of nine students agreed that the university should be responsible for easing first-year students' transition by offering an effective **orientation programme**. As Nora stated,

> *"It is something obligatory and an essential thing that the university should improve… it has to be more organized and offer students information concerning rules, courses and assistance like where to find student services."*

Three students recommended that the university should give them information regarding managing time and the study methods necessary at university level. For instance, Enas stated,

> *"Like how to be extra prepared, how to handle the time, thus the students will learn how to manage the pressure of the tasks and examinations."*

One student, Eman, stated,

> *"Although now I know how to survive my life at university, I struggled a lot in first semester to reach this stage."*

Based on her experience, she did not want other students to encounter the same difficulty she had experienced; hence she stated,

> *"I do not want the new students to feel lost, so in future there should be extra guidance on how to learn and navigate in the university setting... I do not want them to go through the difficult process I went through myself."*

Eman's opinion was shared by students, who thought the university should asset students especially in first semester, when many things are new to them. University support is very

crucial in easing the transition process and helping students to overcome challenges especially in early stages where they probably feel lost.

A number of students (six in total) raised the subject of **transportation**. They recommended that the university have a more flexible schedule for the buses provided to transport students between their homes and the university. For example, Haifa said,

"I get really tired on the days my lecture starts at 10:00 am because I
come by the bus at 7:00 am and finish at 3:00 pm but also have to wait
for the bus until 4 pm to drive me. I wish they had more flexible times for
picking up students…"

The transportation in KSU depends on using buses that operate to a specific schedule. Women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to drive. Thus, students who do not have a relative or private driver to transport them, use the free buses provided by KSU. However, the students complained about the inflexible timetable of these buses. They have a fixed timetable for picking up the students to arrive at the university at 7:00 am, so even if a student's timetable starts at 10 am, she has to come early and wait for her class to start.

Five students thought that the university should set a **fixed GPA** for entering each specialization after the preparatory year, instead of the prevailing competitive environment. For each specialization, the GPA is defined depending on the highest GPA among the students who applied to a specific major obtain and this is taken as the standard for accepting other students, so it changes each year depending on the performance of students in that year. Participants said that this kind of competitive environment made them very stressed and caused them to focus on how to attain the highest GPA, instead of learning. For instance, Ameera said,

"I feel strained. I have to get very high GPA because my classmates all
seem to be competitive. I want to enter the computer science

programme but I am scared that if I do not get full marks I will not be

able to enter it."

5.5 Summary

The female first year students' experiences of transition were analysed in this chapter. The interviews showed that many students admitted that they had difficulties adjusting to the university setting. Most of the difficulties students cited were academic.

The first phase of data analysis focused on the students' prior experience, expectations, the initial encounter with the induction week, and early impressions. The overall picture emerging from the first (pre-liminal phase) was that students entered the university with expectations shaped by their previous high school experiences and, in some cases, relatives who were already at university. For most, induction week had played little or no part in their early adjustment, either because they did not attend, or found the programme disappointing. While some were happy and optimistic, there were also reports of social isolation, academic anxiety, and difficulty adjusting to the new environment.

The results emphasize the difficulty of the transition from high school and university. It is apparent that some students were not adequately prepared in high school for the type of learning at university. The big gap between the exam-oriented method of learning in high school and the independent learning methods at university caused challenges to many university students in their first year. They presented themselves as lacking in some skills such as research, note taking, and working in groups, needed for autonomous learning.

Interviews in the second phase revealed the challenges students faced in the first semester. There was a clear disparity between their experience in first semester and their expectation. They were unsure about their new role because in high school learning was structured and teacher-directed. At university, students needed to be independent and have control of their own learning. Their academic skills were also insufficient and needed to be improved. An additional problem was the workload. Over half of the respondents claimed to be

overcome by the immense volume of work, to the extent that they decided to concentrate on academic tasks and forego other student activities.

By the third interviews, participants were beginning to overcome the challenges they had faced and were adjusting to university life. They started to revise and re-evaluate the way they learned, felt, participated and thought, in response to the university's demands. Students started to comprehend their position as undergraduates and attempt to meet university expectations. Three main aspects that assisted students to engage effectively in university were strong determination, a helpful setting and social relations. To overcome academic challenges, several participants adjusted their learning methods. The main problems they recognized included time management and workload. Most respondents agreed that they still found the workload heavy, although their time managing abilities had improved. The respondents appeared to be content with the university's social setting, and were able to make friends. Nevertheless, they did not appear to integrate fully into the university setting, in the sense that the majority of them rarely took part in student activities. Students' focus was just on class activities, while extra-curricular activities received less attention because participants did not view university as a place for socialization, but perceived it as mainly for academic activities. Given that they were in the preparatory year, they were extremely keen to achieve a high GPA, since that would increase their opportunity to enter their preferred programme.

In the next chapter, these findings will be further discussed and interpreted, in the light of the theories and empirical studies presented in Chapter Three.

Chapter 6 Discussion

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the experience of transition of female first year students in KSU was investigated. The results of the research based on interviews with students were presented. In this discussion chapter, my core objective is to interpret the results in relation to the objectives of the research study and to previous literature, with the aim of answering the three sub-research questions as follows:

1. What are the students' perceptions of the academic demands of the university?
2. What are the students' perceptions of the social experience of the university?
3. What are the students' perceptions of the institutional culture of the university?

This study explored the problems faced by first year female students during transition from high school to KSU and what helped them to adapt to the university environment. This may in turn point to ways in which we can improve transition from high school to universities. The information retrieved from this thesis will provide academic insight, which will aid students in transition.

When students transition from high school to university, they experience extensive changes including their role, their relationships, their thinking and their way of living (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The transition to university requires students to make adaptation in order to integrate in the university life. In this study, transition was perceived as a process of mental adjustment that first year students undergo in order to adapt to the academic, social and institutional demands of university. The adaptation students made range from changing their academic practice to changing their relationships. This chapters aims to address the critical academic, social and institutional issues students experienced during their transition and which most of them perceived to be challenging. This chapter aims to integrate these challenging factors and present them in the most appropriate way.

Each sub-research question will be discussed in terms of the different themes, which will be identified and interpreted in the light of relevant literature and discussed in the light of the three phases of interview, in order to provide a sense of how students' perceptions changed over time as they adjusted to the university.

6.2 Q1: What are the students' perceptions of the academic demands of the university?

This section begins by discussing the students' previous learning experience in high school, in order to show how students' previous schooling experience had an influence on their transition to university. Then, I highlight the students' academic preparedness. After that, disparities between the prior learning and the current experience of students at university are discussed. Lastly, I discuss how some students overcame these challenges to engage successfully with communities of practice and adapt to the academic demands of the university.

This section includes four themes: **The prior academic experience in high school, Academic preparedness, Mismatch between the previous learning experience and the current academic practice at university,** and **Positive development in the second semester.**

6.2.1 The prior academic experience in high school

This section discusses students' experience of learning in high school, because the research findings showed that these had an effect on their adaptation to university. This is consistent with Schilling and Schilling's (1999) claim that university students usually continue to have the behavioural patterns developed in previous learning settings.

In this study, participants identified two main characteristics of their academic experience in high school. The first one is passive learning, which was described as the main mode of learning in high school. Respondents reported having been reliant on teachers who led the learning. In this study, all students admitted that they were dependent on their teachers for support and guidance throughout their high school years. Students were passive and only needed to memorize for exams. Most of the first-years who joined KSU had not been

previously exposed to self-regulated learning approaches. In their previous settings, most learning skills were assisted by the teachers. Learning proved more complex in the university due to the need to complete most tasks individually, without teachers' support.

The other characteristic identified by participants was that in high school, the focus was on rote learning as opposed to critical thinking, required at university. Recall of memorized information was required to pass exams in high school. Students were used to a memorization technique where they did not have to think much about the material and instead recalled what they had been fed and put it in the exam.

The relative dependence of students in high school is not a uniquely Saudi phenomenon but one that has been reported in different contexts. Porter and Polikoff (2012) stated that many American students transitioning from high school to university need to take remedial courses because they were not adequately prepared for college level work. Rothman (2012) made a similar point, citing statistics from the National Centre of Education, which showed that the proportion of students having to take remedial courses was as high as 40%. Such difficulties may be related to the distinction made by Conley (2008a) and Barnes et al. (2010) between eligibility and readiness for university; the latter requires adoption of new learning strategies and coping skills.

The issue of student dependence, however, may be particularly problematic in Saudi Arabia for cultural reasons. Saudis expect those in authoritative positions to enjoy privilege, status and power (Alamri et al, 2014; Butler, 1998). This may explain why commentators on Saudi education have noted a tendency towards a very teacher-centred, didactic style of teaching (Elyas & Picard, 2010), which might affect the relationship between teachers and students, and students' role in the teaching and learning process. This also aligns with Alaisa's (2009) criticism about the Saudi education system, where teachers teach exactly what is in the textbooks and students follow. Thus, the teachers are presenters or rather carriers of the knowledge in the official textbook or curriculum. This approach is said to limit creativity and may result in uniformity in the manner of delivering lessons (Alhodithy, 2009). Such

experiences may explain why students in this study found independent learning at university to be difficult. This result is congruous with the results of Viadero's study (2005), in the USA, which observed the challenges faced in becoming an independent learner, as a result of high-school experiences that were predominantly examination-based and highly structured.

Referring to Schlossberg's (1984) model of transition, presented in Chapter 3, high school experience can be interpreted as one of the factors (past experience) she includes under the transition-related factors that influence how transition is experienced. From this perspective, it can be argued that particularly in the early phase of their first year at university, students were limited in their ability to adjust because their past experience at high school had not prepared them with realistic expectations or the necessary skills for university-level work (this is discussed further in the next section, on academic preparedness).

The major contributing factor that hinders the students' smooth transition is their relying on past experiences from their schools to cope with the challenges posed by the new environment. The practices students used at university were evidently impacted by their previous learning experience. They frequently commented on the way they used to learn in high school, which provides evidence they had not adjusted to the new setting at university. They seemed to feel secure in their past experiences and identified with them. This, therefore, indicates that there was no real separation occurring and thus students felt more comfortable and secure with their previous sets of beliefs. For students to adjust to university life, it is crucial that they detach themselves from previous relations (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1994). In terms of Tinto's (1987) three-phase model of the transition process, the high schools students had attended represented old communities, relationships and roles. Tinto suggests that it would be necessary for students to detach themselves from their high school experience, in order to prepare themselves for participation in the new community

of university, and adjustment to the new roles this entailed. Whether, to what extent, and how such separation was achieved will be discussed further in later sections of this chapter.

6.2.2   Academic preparedness

In this study, it is shown that students, when they moved from high school to KSU, experienced a culture shock. This is consistent with a survey conducted in Australia in 2004 which revealed that about 60% of first year students did not feel adequately prepared for university and experienced reality shock when they had their first semester marks (Krause et al., 2005). Many students in this study expressed feelings of unpreparedness and uncertainty because their previous high school experience had not equipped them to survive at university. Uncertainty has adverse effects, since it hinders students' ability to explore the university and make efficient use of opportunities offered in the institution (Johnson et al., 2011). Students are prone to experience 'culture shock' when moving from a familiar culture to new and unknown environment. Therefore, changes in relationships, roles, values and responsibilities needed to be made in order to adjust to the new environment.

Tinto's theory of transition (1987) proposed that the first stage of transition is 'separation', where students detach themselves from their previous communities. Students at this stage left behind their previous relationships and environment and begin trying to connect with the new setting at university. From the analysis in this study, it was very clear how students were still connected to their previous experience. They frequently made comparisons and references to what they were used to in their previous learning environment. This theory of transition neglects how students' past experience still has an impact on their practice and performance at university. Students' future achievements are impacted by their prior learning experience (Rich & Schachter, 2012). Students come to university with established academic and social skills, which they were not ready or able to leave behind. Thus, the data in this study suggest that transition is a series of interactions where "the diversity and complexity of transition needs to be valued and understood" (Margetts, 2002; 113).

I observed that these students frequently felt unready for university-level work and obligations, consistent with Byrd and MacDonald (2005). They also often doubted their capabilities, a response similarly observed by Oldfield (2007). It was observed that the students were anxious about their ability and capacity to handle the syllabus, the lecturers' expectations, and the work in the university. It was also noted that some of the first-year students had little comprehension of how to cope upon joining the university. Some of the challenges faced by newly admitted students were time management, poor or no learning skills, and challenging courses.

In the early phases of the study, students were not sure how to adapt to the new environment and what academic skills they should use. Such feelings of uncertainty are expected at this stage as stated by Cassidy and Trew (2004), because of the different nature of the social and academic environment at university. They realized the need to change their academic practice to the ones expected at university, which were different than what they were used to in their previous experience. Many of the students described this change as a big change for them. Consistent with Tierney (2000) this mismatch between the two environments caused participants to feel very stressed or lost and sad, as what they were currently experiencing at university did not match their expectations.

Students were not prepared for the new role and academic requirements at university and the new relationships with students and lecturers, which caused them to feel stressed and alienated in their first few weeks. The experiences reported are consistent with accounts in the literature of 'disequilibrium' (Scanlon et al., 2007). For example, the current study revealed that students felt they had not been introduced into the new system and were still influenced by the work habits they had acquired in their previous settings. This is consistent with Devlin's (2011) view that students who move from high school to university may experience transitional challenges due to feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and inadequacy. These feelings were mainly caused by lack of confidence and support, as well as unpreparedness.

Students need to be prepared for their transition from high school to university, as recommended by some researchers such as York et al. (1999). It is important that both institutions, high school and university, make preparations to help students to adapt easily to the new environment. The difficulties reported by the first-year university students suggest they were in the separation and transition stages. The difficulties encountered by students due to their perceptions of lack of academic preparedness again support the importance attached to past experience by Schlossberg (1984) in her model of factors influencing the transition process. This in turn implies that there would potentially be benefit in adjusting students' high school experience to help them form realistic expectations of university and begin to develop some of the cognitive skills they will need. Conley (2008b) identifies student readiness as a key factor in successful transition to higher education. This concept of readiness refers to the extent to which students' academic and personal experiences before entering university have prepared them for what will be required of them in university. He proposes four dimensions of 'student readiness', namely, cognitive aspects; content knowledge; academic behaviours; and contextual skills and awareness. In Conley's (2008b) view, these matter more than the qualifications that are taken as criteria of eligibility for university or their course. If strategies to support such skills were adopted in high schools, the implication is that when they enter university, students would find their past experience to be a factor that facilitates, rather than impedes the transition. Such disconnection between the school and university settings, Engberg and Wolniak (2009) suggest, can be alleviated through the introduction in high school of activities that prepare students with necessary knowledge and skills.

Whilst the study revealed common high school experiences and their impacts, there were, nevertheless, some differences in academic preparedness among students, some of whom had had slightly different school experiences. Most high schools focused heavily on content knowledge, but a few occasionally adopted approaches that supported or were similar to the prevailing practice in the university realm. For example, whereas some students admitted to facing difficulties in offering class presentations, due to fear of standing in front

of other students, because they were not used to it, a few were more confident, since they had already experienced giving presentations in high school. Such experiences validate Engberg and Wolniak's (2009) assertions of the value of having activities in high schools that facilitate the transition to university.

6.2.3 Mismatch between previous learning experience and current academic practice at university

This theme identified some of the challenges students experienced in their first few weeks at the university. The findings in this study show that becoming a university student posed a major challenge to students, mainly due to the mismatch of academic cultural practices and their previous educational experience. It appeared that the students in this study experienced disjuncture in the first semester as a result of negotiating external changes (moving between different education systems).

The findings of this research indicate that new university students, during their first semester, started by continuing to study according to the habits formed through their prior experiences. Most of these experiences did not help them to cope easily, due to unmet expectations, leading to frustration and stress. The students, after joining the university, found a gap between what they had been used to in school and what they experienced in university, which made their transition between the two systems more difficult. The indication that there is a considerable disparity between what students expected and what they experience in reality at university concurs with previous studies on first year students, such as the research done by Smith and Wertlieb (2005), involving 15,000 students at a community college in central Texas. They explored responses to a "Student Development Course" that focused on both life skills and study skills for the college setting. In their study, they found that what students experienced in their first year was different from their expectation of the academic environment. Other researchers have blamed high schools for not preparing students for this transition, which therefore caused a mismatch in expectations (Cook, 2009). From the findings of the present study, students seemed mainly to struggle to be self-regulated and to be responsible for their own learning. This shift in

their role left them struggling and facing challenges while transitioning. This study's findings provide strong support for the argument that high school experience has a strong impact on university students in their first year, as they tend to apply the old learning habits that they acquired in high school (Schilling & Schilling, 1999). Such habits include memorizing and studying from lecture notes. During the first semester, the students noted that continuing their high school approaches/habits had varied effects on the transition from assisted-student to independent learner at university.

The findings suggested that in the first semester, the students were still connected to their previous environment, which prevented their integration into the new environment. They had not fully completed the separation phase and moved into the transitioning stage (Tinto, 1987). In terms of Tinto's (1987) and Bridges' (2003) models, they had not yet undergone separation from the roles they had held in their former high school communities, where they were dependent and relatively passive, as indicated in section 6.2.1. For example, they admitted using their previous learning methods, such as memorizing material for exams. When students started at university, they began by trying to cope according to their entry experiences. They had anticipated some of these experiences, but still found them difficult. In other cases, they experienced surprises due to unfulfilled expectations, which for some students caused anxiety and frustration. Having left a familiar learning context caused students to feel they lost their continuity, as suggested by Scanlon et al (2007). In the pre-liminal phase (Van Gennep, 1960), individuals leave their previous communities like their families, old school friends, and former roles. The findings are consistent with Tinto's (1994) contention that this can be detaching and traumatic, particularly when the norms, values and behaviours of the past community differ greatly from those of the new community.

The students soon found that the approaches and strategies they were used to applying in school were not working at university, where they needed to master independent learning and time management to cope with a heavy workload. They faced difficulty in knowing their role, as a result of the disparity between their expectation and their experience of reality at

university. They noticed that the learning skills they had acquired at high school were not sufficient to meet the university academic requirements. Some strategies, such as memorizing the teacher's notes, that they were used to in their previous schooling, were not effective at the university level. Students, reflecting on their high school experience, recognized that it had failed to prepare them for the university's academic requirements and for the skills university students should use. They lacked important skills such as researching and finding resources by themselves. For instance, they struggled with academic writing, where students were expected to take an analytical approach combined with critical thinking, to develop an argument. To achieve this, the students needed to have skills in research, such as how to develop and support their arguments.

The findings regarding the problems caused by mismatched expectations are consistent with Longen (2006) who stated that higher education institutions should consider student expectations and their experience during their first semester, since it has a strong impact on their engagement and their retention.

The interviews resulted in the identification of a number of challenges that posed difficulties for students. The main issues students faced were independent learning, workload and time management, which are presented as three sub themes.

6.2.3.1 Independent learning

On entering the university, students were faced with the need for a role change, the need to be independent learners, which is one of the factors related to the transition itself, highlighted in Schlossberg's model (1984).

The learning experience at university was very different from the high school one, as students had individual courses, and handled their university affairs as individuals rather than group members. In this study, participants found independent learning to be difficult since they came from a structured learning environment in high school where almost everything was provided by their teachers. They then realized the need to be independent

learners at university. Many researchers tend to criticize high schools for not equipping students with independent learning skills (Kazis et al., 2003; Venezia et al., 2003). Becoming independent learners, where students had greater responsibility for their own learning, made them feel lost because they were used to relying on their teachers and had less control of their learning. This concurs with Viadero's (2005) research in the USA, which showed that students who came from a structured learning environment usually struggled, at the beginning, to be independent at university. In the first semester, especially, students were struggling to be independent and responsible. They seemed to have difficulty adjusting to the new role with less guidance available at university compared to high school. It is apparent from the analysis that students were uncertain how to change to be independent and responsible for their own learning. This finding is consistent with researchers such as Hossler et al. (1999); Hultberg et al. (2008) and McInnis (2001) who said that it is difficult for students coming from a controlled learning environment to make the change to being independent, where they have to take control of their learning and make decisions for themselves.

Students perceived what was expected of them was difficult to understand. They were trying to strive individually while identifying their new roles. Being young adults, they were expected to become fully responsible for their actions, contrary to their high school responsibilities. This is consistent with literature in which it is widely reported that students experience unhappiness due to lack of support and guidance. The existing literature has underscored the significance of support and guidance on student retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

On reflection, the students stated that self-study alone was not sufficient for effective independent learning. They needed to understand new concepts, which required time for research at the library and on the internet. However, students perceived that lecturers did not give sufficient attention to assisting students to go through this development process. The students who participated said that lecturers at university expected them to have skills

in independent learning which is different from their previous learning experience, where they were dependent on their teachers. In this study, the mismatches were evident in the students' role and the roles of lecturers among others. What students expected about the academic demands in university is considered important in easing their transition in higher education systems (McInnis & James, 1995).

What students found was that higher education is different from high school education since students at university are expected to be more independent in the learning process as opposed to what they were used to in high school. They found that students at university level are expected to have their own notes, participate in group projects, and perform oral presentations as well as to participate in the learning process. All of these were new skills for most of them, practised for the first time at university. Therefore, students expressed anxiety and panic when doing such tasks.

6.2.3.2 Workload

From the data analysis, students reported difficulty due to the unexpected workload, not being certain if their work was compatible with the university level, and dismayed by the time required to accomplish it. The students reported being consistently and continually exhausted by their commitment to academic work. They were astonished by the magnitude of tasks that they had to complete within a short period. In academic work, they noted that different study subjects required different levels of commitment. The students were unfamiliar with some topics, so they allocated them relatively higher levels of commitment.

Over half of the respondents pointed out that they were overcome by the immense volume of work. These results are consistent with Childs and Spencer's (2002) finding that most students encountered challenges with handling the university workload. Upon joining, students expected that doing a degree would be hard work, but found it was much harder and more work was required than they expected (Childs & Spencer, 2002).

Similarly, McInnis and James (1995) asserted the importance of coping with the workload as an important factor in successful transition, since they report that inability to handle the workload can cause students to drop out. Participants' experiences in this study highlighted that learning to cope with the workload, through effective time management, is a crucial task in the liminal or transition stage of the university experience. It was difficult to cope with the workload because of lack of skills in time management.

6.2.3.3 Time management

Time management was one of the main challenges students experienced in this study. For example, students felt stressed because of not being able to balance their time between the different tasks to be accomplished. The stress level is shown in Manar's remarks:

"I found it difficult to balance my time. I have many assignments and demands that all needed to be submitted nearly at the same time; I am struggling to fit them all together in my timetable."

Balancing time and allocating it effectively between educational and non-educational tasks is crucial.

Some students were unsuccessful in attaining self-discipline. As a result, some of them missed task deadlines and some finished their assignments at the last minute. This significantly affected the quality of their work, and was reflected in disappointing results. They realized that the last-minute memorizing strategy they had used in high school was no longer suitable for the university. The findings support the findings of earlier researchers, such as Naumann et al. (2003), who found that managing time was one of several aspects of work that need adjustment in university. Similarly, participants of research conducted by Byrd and MacDonald (2005) claimed that out of all the academic challenges they faced, time management was the most significant factor required for success.

When students came to university they lacked this important skill. Not being able to manage and balance their time effectively with the many demands required affected their

performance negatively, for example, missing the deadlines for assignments and not having enough time to revise for the exam which resulted in getting lower grades than expected.

Students' difficulty in time management can be associated with Schlossberg's (1984) model, where control is one of the factors affecting individuals' experience of transition. It can be suggested that lack of time management skills hindered students' ability to exercise control over an important aspect of their university experience, making the experience more uncertain and stressful.

Whilst students reported specific difficulties related to independent learning and time management, they also felt that the mismatch between school and university was made worse because they did not know how their achievement could be enhanced, which led them to feel frustrated. Students perceived that their experience of difficulties in academic work was because lecturers did not clearly explain what they expected from them at this level. A significant number of students expressed the contrast between university and their high school life, where they were clearly informed about institutional activities and provided with clear targets, such as obtaining excellent public examination results and securing a place in a sought-after degree programme at a prominent university. These experiences support Evans and Peels' (1998) argument regarding the responsibility of adapting to the new learning environment, given that first-year dropout and loss of interest are linked to unmet expectations and low grades in assessments.

As a result, students consequently felt that they might not be able to meet the level of the university requirements, which is consistent with Shobrook's (2005) claim that first year students' academic adaptation is more difficult than the other aspects. Such feelings reflect the "concurrent stress" (Schlossberg, 1984) associated with the experience of transition. It can also be suggested that the feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and disappointment experienced by students were factors that contributed to the sense of crisis that Tinto (1987) suggests typically trigger the second phase (transition, or liminal) of the transition process in his model. Students' experience of challenge, and especially the disappointment

of their mid-year examination results, led them to reflect more critically on their high school experience and to recognise the inadequacy of the skills and strategies they had been using so far. This realization marked a partial separation from the past, and triggered the search for new strategies more appropriate to their developing understanding of their roles, as discussed in the next section.

6.2.4 Positive development in second semester

From the findings, it appears that the initial semester was a decisive period during which students gradually learned to understand the adjustments they needed to make. Students relied on their previous learning skills in the first semester, but came to realize that these were not adequate to survive at university level. This is in line with previous studies such as Lowe and Cook (2003) who state that students come to university with unrealistic expectation and lacking the required study skills needed to succeed at this level. Students expressed huge worries concerning their academic work and the majority had become aware of a need to improve their academic performance.

The findings in the second semester suggest that the students were moving into the reincorporation stage, during which, having attained a degree of stability, they were able to behave in accordance with the expectations of the KSU environment. The students at this stage recognized the positive improvement they had made compared to when they started the first semester.

Based on the interviews, the recognition of the difference between the school and university settings led students to change their study skills and attitudes. The majority of these responses were reflections after getting unexpected results in examinations in the first semester. The majority were not contented with poor assessment outcomes. After adverse comment on their performance on mid-term examinations, or when their outcomes were beneath their expectations, they realized their weakness and recognized the need to improve. Students thus began to consider how to adapt their ways of learning to university norms.

Prior experiences in the first semester played a key role in students understanding the new learning demands, evaluating their learning skills and thinking of ways to improve performance. Their growing understanding of their responsibilities as university students helped them to improve and change. They recognized the characteristics they needed to change, such as being passive inside the classroom. By re-evaluating their weaknesses they were able to improve. To achieve their desired goals, they needed to be independent; thus they had to alter their learning skills and became autonomous, more responsible for their learning. Students made a transition to this new way of learning after their lecturers' comments and through their experiences in the first semester.

The formation of identity as a learner depends on the interaction of student related factors and the learning activities. This was very much the case for the first-year students, who found that their engagement in class activities helped them a lot to be more confident and to comprehend their subjects. Peers' help was crucial for students, as most of them preferred to seek help from each other instead of lecturers' support. Students' social relationships with peers, such as informal 'What's App' groups, had a positive effect on their learning experience. Peer support was highly valued by the students. As students became actively engaged in the university learning environment, learning become more enjoyable.

Students' experiences at this stage can be interpreted in terms of Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice theory, which asserts that learning only occurs through collaboration and participation. Through engaging and participating in communities of practice such as through class discussion, students learn through these social processes. Through this participation, they developed new perceptions about university learning because they saw it in a new or different light than their previous experience. Students' learning was continuously shaped by their experience through their participation and communication with others (Beijaard et al., 2000). This change in perceptions resulted from the constant interact of students with their settings shaped by integrating academically and socially (Tinto, 1993). When students' experiences were not in conflict with the culture of

the university their accomplishment improved and their involvement in the academic environment increased (Fulmer et al*.,* 2010; Henderson et al., 2006). This is consistent with Naumann et al.'s (2003) finding that students who thought they had the ability to do their academic tasks were more prone to participate actively in learning activities, which resulted in improving their achievement.

Communities of Practice learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) is useful to understand how students participated and interacted in learning communities and adapted to fit in these communities. Students' learning improved as a result of their experience in the first semester, either by watching their friends' learning skills or by adopting new skills in an attempt to enhance their examination results. They started as peripheral participants where they were actively participating in class activities which helped them to improve their learning skills and understanding of the practice. Students were determined to learn the communities' practices, which helped them to fit in the new context. As Wingate (2007, 395) said, it is a "complex development process involving the change in perceptions, learning habits, and epistemological beliefs". Participants' experiences demonstrated that being in a new, different environment led them to adopt creative strategies to adjust to the university, consistent with Reay et al. (2009).

Although this study asserts the value of communities of practice theory, it also suggests that the concept should be considered from a wider perspective than relations between students and academics or more experienced community members. As this study's findings indicated, the first-year students undoubtedly created their own informal community of experiences and practices that served their needs. The students revealed that their interactions with their peers in their department and through social media applications eased their social adjustment. Through this interaction they were able to talk about their educational challenges and provide support for each other. Collaborative work and mutual learning played an important role. The role of formal and informal CoPs in students' coping strategies will be discussed further in the section on sources of social support.

Students in the second semester realized that, in order to become competent learners, they needed to change their learning skills. For instance, they recognized the need to be equipped with specific knowledge in order to do their work successfully, such as how to do the task, the kind of resources to apply, when to use them, and the standards and the requirements of that particular task. In this respect, the data collected in the current study differ from previous literature. Previous research stated that if university first year student were not able to meet the requirements of their programme, or obtained lower results than expected in examination, they withdrew or become unmotivated in the programme (Higgins 2006; Wengeri et al., 2012). In contrast, this research found that students were trying to get better results than the previous unexpected one they had attained in the first semester examinations. Students acknowledged the importance of operating independently. They were determined and continued trying to be better learners, to be accountable of their learning and to improve their skills in order to meet the expectations of the university. The determination to overcome weaknesses raised students' self-esteem and self-efficacy, that is, their belief in their own capabilities to achieve certain goals.

Despite the transitional challenges faced by the students in the first semester, they reported gradual positive development in their second semester. Through familiarization with the environment, interactions, experiences, and academic tasks in their first semester, the students began to adopt new study skills and change their attitudes and be independent, self-regulated, and self-driven learners, as the university expected. This is shown in Asma's remark,

> *"When I started to prepare ahead and read the book before the lecture, I found that I understand better than before. I now have more time to comprehend and write my questions ahead to ask the teacher in class what I found difficult while I was preparing for the lecture."*

By the second semester, participants were able to embrace the significance of learning individually. Their dedication in enhancing their individual learning and increased

commitment towards their development is considered as a key learning requirement at the university level. In accordance with literature on constructive and agentic learning (Ainley, 2008; Schuetz, 2008) dedication has been considered a key factor in determining whether students engage or not. In this study, the students in the first year reported making considerable progress academically, between their first and second semesters.

The changes students experienced were related to feeling stronger and more confident, in controlling their learning when they actively participated in class activities, as asserted by Speirs-Neumeister and Rinker (2006). As a result of becoming active participants, they were more engaged in the learning communities. Students developed resilience, which, consistent with Saleebey (2002), was based on their capabilities, assets and positive attributes. This suggests that supportive and nurturing learning communities, especially for first year students, lead to positive attitudes, personalities and learning skills (Pascarell & Terenzini, 1991).

The development achieved by participants in the second semester reflects aspects of the individual-related category of Schlossberg's (1984) transition model. Specifically, Schlossberg suggested that influential factors in the experience of transition are individual factors including personality and commitment. Schlossberg (1984) also highlighted the importance of the individual's adaptive capabilities, meaning their ability to select and employ appropriate strategies that enable them to cope with the demands of the new situation. The relevance of these factors was reflected by students in their second semester (phase 3) interviews, where they indicated that their developing adjustment to the demands of the university was driven by their determination, positive outlook, and commitment to self-improvement, which led them to adopt new learning strategies.

6.3 Q2: What are the students' perceptions of the social experience of the university?

Consistent with other studies (Phinney & Haas, 2003), the evidence from this study indicated that students' academic and adjustment problems were alleviated if they could

obtain help from others, which they did through social networks. Social support is an environmental factor highlighted by Sclossberg (1984), who notes that forms of social support can be understood in terms of their types (sources), function (role) and amount. This study revealed that first year students' social support came from three sources: university staff, peers and family, which provided different kinds and degrees of support.

Most researchers have agreed that social adjustment is more important than academic factors in students' early experience of university transition (Child & Spencer, 2002; Peel & Evans, 1998; Tam, 2002). If students are socially integrated, they will be more likely to persist and complete the university (Tinto, 1975). Therefore, students should actively dedicate time for activities that help them to become socially integrated with university life and by doing so they will reap some academic benefits.

Social integration may happen in various forms. The discussion in this section includes three themes: **Students' relationship with lecturers, Peer-group relations,** and **Student-family relationship.**

6.3.1 Students' relationship with lecturers

In this study, a critical theme that arose throughout the research was students' perception of the need for a stronger relationship between them and the lecturers as a source of support. The findings showed difficulty, in the early phase, in adjusting to the withdrawal of the strong support they had previously had from teachers during high school learning. Almost all students in this study said that their teachers in high school were always available for support when they faced learning or study difficulty. They described their teachers in high school as approachable, willing to help, and friendly whereas in university they were seen as not approachable. This was apparent in this remark by Nada,

"The lecturers are not supportive as in high school. They do not

collaborate with students."

This was a significant shock for the students and tended to weaken the subsequent relationship between students and lecturers. Thus, most students admitted obtaining support mainly from their friends and sometimes from non-university sources, such as their parents and families, or private tutors, in preference to approaching university staff.

The findings showed a perception of a critical gap between the lecturers and their students, in contrast to that in high school. Students were used to relying on teachers as the source of knowledge and thus experienced difficult times, since they had not learned to be independent in their past experiences. Lack of a close relationship between lecturers and students was one of the major difficulties that students perceived on joining the institution.

However, a few students eventually succeeded in developing positive relationships with lecturers, with significant outcomes. A few students revealed how individual attention from the lecturer improved their determination to learn (see section 5.4.1.1). Students became actively engaged in learning with the help provided by their teacher, either by giving students comments on their work and progress or helping them to understand what they found to be difficult. It seems that close relationships with their lecturers had positive impacts on the students' self-confidence, engagement in learning and feeling self-assured. This finding is consistent with Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) observation that positive relationships with lecturers are highly significant in enhancing the personal and social progress of students at the university.

In terms of Schlossberg's (1984) model, the "functions" performed by this form of support were to nurture specific skills and develop students' confidence. However, the "amount" of support differed from one lecturer to another. Moreover, it was not measurable in objective terms, but was perceived differently as students developed the willingness and ability to access this source of support, as an adaptive strategy.

6.3.2 Peer-group relations

In this study, students found that the separation and distance from their previous source of social support, such as friends, made some of them feel lonely and unhappy, especially at the beginning of the first semester. It was revealed that adjusting and situating themselves within the institution's context and setting was not easy for the students, especially in the beginning of their first year, as also reported by Johnson et al. (2011) and Pascarella et al. (2004). They depended on themselves to adjust to their new role and to become familiar with the new environment and new relationships. University students experienced a more diverse set of colleagues in comparison to their high school experiences. As a result, there was a sense of strangeness to one another, lack of trust, and caution about making new relationships, particularly in the beginning of the first semester. For instance, they seemed to form groups with colleagues of whom they had previous knowledge. A number of students considered the university experience to be isolating, since they were unable to create new friendships and social networks. A few of these students had enrolled at the university without knowing anyone else on the entire campus. They missed the bonds established between them and their high school colleagues and teachers. Feeling isolated in the classroom was a common feeling, especially with students who preferred to accompany established associates with whom they shared a common background because they shared the same feelings (Levin et al., 2003). For instance, students during engagement in class activity tended to prefer to work with friends they already knew, or who came from the same high school. These experiences demonstrated the importance of any available social support. According to Evans and Peel (1998), the significance of social transition is highly evident at the start of university life and perhaps more important compared to academic transition. Social integration is critical and plays a part in student persistence in university (Tinto 1993). The more students are socially integrated, the greater the likelihood of completing university education.

In this study, it was found that gradually, as students formed new relationships, peers emerged as an important source of help. This study demonstrated that the help obtained

from peers was crucial for students' academic adjustment and for the growth of their skills, as attested by Fass and Tubman (2002) and Swencon et al. (2008). The learners were able to appreciate the role of their peers in assisting them with the process of transition. Peers were able to help one another in prevailing over most of the predicted difficulties in academic and social life, by means of guidance, counsel, and practical assistance, for example, offering notes and books. Academic achievement was affected by the communication and connection that first year students formed with workmates, which enabled them to feel closer and devoted. Lack of friendships deprives students of resources that could help them to overcome the difficulties in the first year and deprives them of the emotional help they get from each other. This was demonstrated in this research, consistent with findings of other researchers (Lisa et al., 2008; Peat et al., 2001; Pittman & Richmond, 2008) that advantage of having peers is that they enable students to feel more helped and safe. Students in this study were more contented with other people who belonged to the same department or whom they had known previously. Peers had an important role in overcoming educational challenges. This was apparent from the students' frequent comments on preferring to get support primarily from their friends, not the lecturers, when they had a query regarding educational issues, for instance, forming groups on 'What's App' in order to assist one another. Social studying as mutual involvement with others, like cooperation in a research group, motived students to talk about their educational issues or share information regarding practical aspects of lessons or tasks.

A major outcome resulting from recourse to out-of-classroom expertise is associated with the recognition that social involvement with peers was highly important in the lives of the learners. Peer support was highly significant at the start of the initial year, particularly concerning transition facilitation, as this was the time when the learners were handling the most difficult learning curve concerning social and academic expectations. All of this was highly significant in enabling the new students to comprehend the university's academic activities, besides acquiring skills and preparing for fresh challenges. Through friendship, the students were able to minimize stress and uncertainty, besides establishing a sense of

what it meant to be a university student and to belong in the university. The outcome of this study shows the importance of this type of support. Opportunities for sharing and learning via interacting with peers are significant for individual and academic progress (Lundberg, 2003; Swencon et al., 2008). The confidence of students in having an excellent supportive setting and support from peers appeared as a key factor in the progress of their academic adjustment.

Students' use of 'What's App' to form support groups can be considered as representing the formation of informal communities of practice. Whereas the formal CoPs headed by academic staff served to nurture students' academic skills, the informal CoPs created by groups of peers provided not only shared resources, but also moral support arising from their communal participation in the same struggle. Recognition of the role of peers in negotiating the move from the periphery to the centre together (as opposed to learning from expert members of the community) is a development of social learning theory that represents a theoretical contribution of this study.

6.3.3   Student- family relationship

In this study, it is shown that the role of parents in student support was perceived as important to student success. Parents have close relationships with their children in Saudi. This might be because the culture of the Saudi Arabian people is highly collectivist, as described in Chapter Two. Saudi Arabia's individualism score of 38 identifies it as a Collectivist society whose members are tied into close, long-term relationships to family, kin and tribe (Butler, 1998). This collectivism is reflected in common attitudes and values in relationships among family members, and between the family and the wider society. This encouragement was principally apparent in inspiration and guidance while the leaner experienced the transition. Parents might not have the knowledge to help their children with academic work but they were able to help them emotionally. The following remark by Ameera shows the evidence for that,

"I always go to my parents whenever I feel down or struggle to do my
assignments. Even though they cannot help me with my academic work
but they always help me by giving me advice that pushes me and keeps
me going."

In this sense, while the level of support might be seen as small in objective terms, in terms of its subjective impact and importance, it was very high.

6.4 Q3: What are the students' perceptions of the institutional culture of the university?

Beasley (1997) notes that students enter university with their own cultural values and must adapt to the culture of the university. It is important for students to be incorporated, socially and academically into the culture and expectations of the university (Tinto, 1993). At the same time, it is also important that students perceive the university culture as a supportive one that meets their needs. Institutional culture is, however, a very complex phenomenon and it was difficult to explore this directly in the interviews, especially as I thought it unlikely that students would be familiar with the concept. Instead, in the interviews, I asked broad questions, such as how do you find the atmosphere of the university? In addition, I inferred students' perceptions about aspects of the institutional culture from their comments about elements that the literature links with institutional culture, such as social provisions (for example, trips, clubs and social campaigns) support (for example, transportation and induction week) and the meaning attached to artefacts. This section includes three themes: **University structure, Forms of support,** and **Extra-curricular activities.**

6.4.1 University structure

At the early stage, students' position in the university was very peripheral, in Lave and Wenger's (1991) terms. They needed to learn how to negotiate the university structure, such as class arrangements, academic programmes and the support system as part of becoming effective participants in that CoP. A number of students in this study mentioned

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that being in such large classes at university, with more students compared to high school, made it difficult for them to concentrate on the teacher. Similarly, in a study about first year students' adaptation by Brag (1994), the large number of students per class was mentioned as a factor in adjustment. His research also found that during transition, students who come from high schools where class size is quite small are more likely to find it difficult to keep up with the huge classes at university and find it hard to cope with the amount of study. Additionally, the students in this study found that the structure of the university's support system was quite different from that of school. In high schools, the 'class' is considered the basic unit grouping the students. A class teacher manages each class, and is the sole source of support and help to the class members. On the contrary, the idea of a 'class', whose members study the same subjects and adhere to a common timetable, does not apply at university. This is consistent with Evan and Peel's (1998) suggestion that structural provisions have an important role in facilitating student integration into university.

An aspect of the university's structural arrangements that particularly affected students' transition was the programme structure, whereby students undertook a preparatory year, their performance in which would determine their study options in future years. Perhaps unintentionally, the university in this way created a competitive, highly pressured environment, in which students' anxiety about their future added to the "concurrent stress" (Schlossberg, 1984) experienced in the first year. They were worried about not being able to enter their preferred specialism if they did not get a good GPA, as the following quotation illustrates:

> *"I feel strained. I have to get very high GPA because my classmates all*
> *seem to be competitive. I want to enter the computer science*
> *programme but I am scared that if I do not get full marks I will not be*
> *able to enter it." (*Ameera*)*

Students seemed to favour some specialisms such as law, computer science, dentistry and actuarial and financial mathematics, both reflecting and creating assumptions in the

university culture about the relative value of different specialisms. Whilst students enter and must conform to a given institutional culture, it is also interesting to observe how, as members, they contribute to shaping that culture, consistent with Rai and Panna (2010), Saunders (2011) and Scott (2008). This can be seen in the way the high demand for admission to certain specialisms such as computing or law, forced the university to impose strict selection criteria, thereby creating the competitive environment that the students in this study experienced. This situation can be seen as a demonstration of the process pointed out by Schein (1985) in his account of the way organizational cultures evolve, whereby organizational cultures are formed through the actions of a set of people, driven by strong assumptions about what they seek to do and how it should be done. These assumptions about the value of certain subjects (perhaps related to job prospects and social prestige, although these were not explicitly explored in the study) contributed to the creation of particular programme arrangements and to a competitive ethos within the university. In turn, students responded through their choice of strategies for success, which in turn affected them not only academically, but also socially, as well be seen in the later section on extra-curricular activities (section 6.4.3)

6.4.2 Forms of support

The university offered a number of provisions that were intended to support students. Indeed, the preparatory year itself was intended as a form of support, offering students an opportunity to acquire necessary skills and knowledge before selecting and embarking on their specialist degree programmes. The university also offered practical support with transportation (often a real source of difficulty for women in Saudi Arabia, in view of the lack of public transport and the prohibition on women driving). Advice on university regulations, academic issues, and sources of support, as well as social opportunities, were offered in the induction week. However, in practice, the forms of support available seemed to be not accessed by students, or perceived negatively.

An interesting point emerging from the findings concerned the university transport provision, which can be viewed as an example of a cultural artefact. Artefacts are the activities, processes and products that give expression to the underlying values and assumptions (Davey, 2013). Students reported the inflexibility of a system that required them to travel on the bus provided at a specific time, regardless of their lecture schedule. It can be seen as conflicting with the assumption that university students should be independent adults (which was the assumption in the academic domain), since it gave them no opportunity to exercise choice or control. Although in itself perhaps a small matter, the transport issue can be seen as an example of an area in which some students perceived the university culture as not able to accommodate their needs and requirements, which might contribute to a feeling of discomfort and dissatisfaction.

Academically and socially, too, there were areas in which the students seemed unaware of the availability of support, or perceived it negatively. Even though the university attempted to support the students by introducing a preparatory year, to allow them to adjust to university life before starting their degree programmes, the students, at least initially, did not perceive the university culture as supportive. The institutional culture of an education institution may prove to be helpful and facilitate transition by enabling first year students to understand the context of higher education, reconcile their expectations regarding the new university environment and embrace this new culture internally. This depends, however, on there being a positive and conducive environment present as part of the institutional culture to help carry out the process at a quicker pace (Moneta & Kuh, 2005). In the first semester, students perceived a distance in their relationships with their lecturers and did not know how to access help. The fact that some students reported more supportive interactions with their lecturers later in the year suggests that help was potentially always available. The problem was that the new students were not aware of it. This suggests a possible limitation of the induction programme, in that even students who had attended the induction week still had very limited understanding of the university culture and the resources available.

According to the data, five of the interviewed students had not attended the induction week and therefore lacked information on the university, as well as the manner in which to obtain help and support. Most attending students complained of dissatisfaction with the induction week. This implies the need for induction to be carefully considered while making preparations for the initial semester, and that the value of induction activities might usefully be promoted more strongly to students so as to increase their attendance rate. According to Levitz and Noel (1990), Tinto (1993), and Townsend and Wilson (2006), effective orientation programmes set clear institutional expectations for learners. They can be formulated to assist new students in acclimatizing to university life and preparing for success by providing important information concerning academic programmes and requirements, student organizations, services and activities, as well as both academic and non-academic services accessible to the students.

In terms of Tinto's model, it can be suggested that one function of the induction week could be to mark or even initiate the start of the "separation" stage, by helping students to understand that they are in a new culture that will involve new roles and relationships.

Induction programmes can also offer opportunities to access social support, both direct, through providing an opportunity to make friends, and indirect by providing information on and encouragement to access the institutional support system. This is in turn could increase the adaptive strategies (Schlossberg, 1984) available to students.

Some students were able to form friends in induction week as stated by Abrar,

> *"The induction week was great and helpful. I got a **chance to make***
>
> ***friends** there. I also got to know about the **university regulations**."*

Orientation programmes enable students to interact with their future colleagues and establish relationships that will act as an informal support network for their achievements. Besides being a system for offering a curriculum, a university is equally an institution facilitating opportunities for students to interact socially. According to Evans and Peel

(1998) an important role of induction programmes is to familiarize students with the university social setting, particularly during their initial weeks of university admission.

The students also advocated the need for student services after induction week to provide continuing help, consistent with Briggs' et al. (2012) view of induction as an ongoing activity. First year students need to be familiarized with such activities and amenities, thereby being motivated to make the best use of them.

6.4.3 Extra-curricular activities

The literature suggests that provision of social resources is an important aspect of institutional culture by which new members can be helped and encouraged to engage and develop a sense of institutional belonging (Tinto, 1975). In KSU, such facilities took the form of various entertainment clubs, trips to a book museum and disease awareness campaigns (for example, breast cancer). However, it seems that this provision did not fulfil its purpose, either because students were not aware of its availability or because the competing pressures of the academic environment deterred students from taking part.

Participants in this study gave participating in the university's extracurricular activities little or no priority. However, the literature suggests that non-curricular activities like language, performance arts, and academic clubs are additional factors positively influencing the achievements of students (Grolnick et al*.,* 2007; Shulruf et al*.,* 2008). The study outcomes revealed how participation in student activities was nonetheless impeded by the burden of obligatory university activities, as these students said:

> *"I like to take part in non-academic activities but because of the time constraints I had to miss some deadlines." (*Rana*)*

> *"How can I participate in these activities if I do not have time? I am focused on my study to get a high GPA to be accepted in actuarial and financial mathematics. This is my goal now" (*Arwa*)*

This caused the learners to lose interest in participating in social activities.

In this study, the learners admitted that they felt compelled to use most of their time studying. They endeavoured to attain good grades and a good degree in order eventually to get a good job when they leave the university. For this reason, they were currently less socially active than they had been used to previously. A lot of the students admitted studying took most of their time. The effort they made and the time they spent in studying can be viewed to some extent in terms of Marx's idea of the way capitalism imposes roles and behaviours that can be alienating, causing people to become isolated from others. The competitive atmosphere made the learners strive to do their best. This can separate them from peers, who are potential rivals.

Mann (2001) summarizes various theoretical standpoints that seek to explain the process of alienation. One of these standpoints is the situation of being "exiled from the self — loss of the ownership of the learning". She invokes Marx, who argued that under capitalism workers become alienated because they do not own their work.

Mann argued that the hypothesis offered by Marx concerning separation, which he linked to the labour class, may also be applicable to education and the learners inside the environment produced by the learning institutions. The tasks performed by the learners are not for their own advantage or for the advantage of others close to them, or for the community of which they are members, but to satisfy the demands of the professor and the principles set by the university and to achieve good marks. Therefore, the work created by the learner can simply be seen as her observing commands and just a trade. Marx articulated that such work is completed with a goal that is totally selfish. The work created by the learners, such as the essay, is not owned by the learner, but is rather an element of trade that makes the learner the possession of the institution of higher education. "The only intelligible language in which we converse with one another consists of our objects in their relation to each other" (Marx, in Elster 1986, p. 33; Mann, 2001).

The present study, however, reveals that students did not become alienated from learning. Rather, they focused entirely on the academic aspect of university and neglected the social

aspects. They found this new journey challenging, since they now had to compete with other students who desired to enrol in the same programme. As a result, the students were subjected to intense pressure and were unsure about their future.

Students' pursuit of good grades and desire to be the finest at everything made the ambiance of the university highly competitive. Their reports, and my own observations as a researcher, suggest that this competitive atmosphere separated learners from their social selves and connections. Albeit an unintended effect, the "preparatory year" is the one that institutes this aggressive ambiance. The number of students who, at the end of the year, can join the specialist degree programme they wish is limited. Only the learners that attain the highest marks will be able to register in the courses they desire. This is the ambiance that makes the learners turn their backs on others and not be social.

This is an unfortunate outcome of the way participants experienced the university's programme structure, since literature suggest that participation in social activities could help students to access social support, both from peers and through more informal relationships with university staff. In this way, it might help students move towards the third transition phase, incorporation (Tinto, 1994).

It can be seen that university transition faced students with a variety of options, each with its risks and advantages, as suggested in Schlossberg's (1984) model. In this case, the options were to prioritize academic work, with the risk of losing potential sources of social support, or to participate in extra-curricular activities, thereby gaining such support, but at the risk of failing to keep up with academic work. It was noticeable that almost all students took the first option, demonstrating how the university's competitive culture shaped students' perceptions of the options available, and the choices they made.

6.5 Summary

The findings of this study have asserted that first year students faced difficulties in adjusting to the new learning approaches at university, especially to becoming independent learners. They were unprepared for the changes they were expected to undergo.

The findings from the present research reveal a situation whereby the majority of students struggled to cope with the university's academic demands, as they entered without a realistic comprehension of the learning and teaching mode in university. Socially, students were somewhat isolated in the university environment as a result of not participating in extra-curriculum activities and with limited relationships with lecturers at university. Their university participation was mainly confined to the academic aspect.

A number of students appeared to be not ready to become university students. Many of the students recognized that the academic skills and strategies they brought to university did not produce satisfactory outcomes. These transition issues are in fact not specific to the Saudi context but many of them are widely reported. These are common problems facing first year students. Nevertheless, students faced a hard transitional time in the beginning of year but they slowly improved in their next semester. The students were eager to work more and devote more time for their studies, to enhance their skills and competence, and to seek help from inside and outside sources. The majority of students were incorporated in the university life but were alienated from participating in non-academic activities.

The students in this study found that the educational domain at university significantly differs from the high school system of structured classroom instructional delivery. One of the most critical challenges facing first-year students at university is the comprehension of their responsibilities and the expectations of them as independent students. They experienced an immediate shift from an assisted -learning system in high school to an independent learning system at university, which was described by most students as challenging, mainly because students' previous learning environments placed relatively

little emphasis on independent learning, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-administration (McInnis, 2001).

These students found it difficult to be independent and to manage their academic demands especially in the first semester. This prevented them from engaging in university extra-curricular activities. This study demonstrated that first-year students at KSU were pressurized to get high results in order to get a high GPA. They were also emotionally stressed because if they did not achieve a high GPA, they would not be able to enter their favoured specialism.

As this study has shown, the experiences of the Saudi first year students interviewed supported to a considerable extent the ideas of transition theorists such as Tinto (1978) and Schlossberg (1984). However, the findings also revealed ways in which students' experience challenged some aspects of existing theory. For example, they did not show a clear linear progression through the transition stages, with a marked separation from their former life. They also adopted support strategies that potentially expand the notion of communities of practice. These contributions of the study, along with its implications and limitations, will be highlighted in the Conclusion chapter, which follows.

Chapter 7 Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This research examines the transition process and adjustment undertaken by Saudi female first-year students during their transition to the university environment. Its core objective was to examine the transition process from the perspective of female students in their first year in KSU. This chapter summaries the research findings and the contribution of this research to knowledge of first-year students' experiences. Furthermore, this research provides recommendations as to how the transition of first-year students can be facilitated by university practices and high-school programmes. It concludes by highlighting the research limitations and presenting possible directions for further research.

7.2 Overview of the Study

This research adds to the on-going discussion of transition experiences by exploring the issue in a distinctive all-female environment beyond the western sphere. The research design applied qualitative methods for their suitability in contexts involving social study. It featured a longitudinal qualitative design, employed to explore the journey undertaken by twenty-one female students in their first-year at KSU with seven students selected from each of three faculties, Arts, Science and Medicine, interviewed in three phases. During data collection, some students withdrew, so the total number of interviews was 54. Data were obtained from the participants using semi-structured interviews, between the time of their enrolment and the conclusion of the first half of their second semester. Phase one took place approximately three weeks into the first semester. These early interviews provided an opportunity to form a relationship with the participants, and to explore their expectations of university while they were still fresh. This data also helped to identify the changes students experienced through their transition. The purpose of the second phase of interviews was to understand students' initial experiences in university. This phase was scheduled for the eighth week of the first semester because by this time the students have already formed their impression about the new setting they have entered and decided if they fit in the environment (Upcraft et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The third

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and final interviews were conducted in the middle of participants' second semester. I expected that at this stage, participants would be able to evaluate their earlier experiences and discuss any changes they had undergone during their first year at university. This would facilitate exploration of the changes in students' perspectives as they became more familiar with the learning process, formed social relationships and adapted to the university culture.

This research design addressed a sensitive issue by providing a platform where female first-year students could express their experiences without coercion. This is why semi-structured interviews were used to capture and explore the experiences of students in their transition to becoming university students. The study examined their early experiences and expectations regarding higher education and how these shaped their understanding and assumptions about the new learning environment. The data collected revealed that most of the women initially lacked sufficient knowledge regarding the learning environment in higher education. Nevertheless, most of the participants reported positive adjustment to embrace independent learning in their second semester. They explained the progress they had made in terms of developed levels of self-discovery and new expanded expectations. This was consistent with Brennan and Teichler's (2008) study, in which they found that the transition period shaped and changed the lives of university students.

7.3 Main Research Results

This section features a summary of the major findings obtained in this thesis regarding the three research questions listed earlier in Chapter One. It starts by reviewing the students' perceptions of university academic work, summarizing the transition challenges that students experienced and changes they assumed in their adjustment to the university learning environment. The students' focus was more on the academic side of university life. The second sub-section discusses critical factors that influenced the students' perceptions of university social life. The last sub-section summarizes the students' perceptions of the university environment.

7.3.1 Students' perceptions of university academic work

The first phase of interviews revealed that the students initially felt disconnected from the institution, when they started their first semester at university. This feeling that the students experienced was mainly because of the mismatch between the practice in their prior learning experience at high school and the current experience at university. Some students had unrealistic expectations about university related to their previous educational experience. The students had limited understanding about or preparation for university.

The system in high school differs greatly from the system in university, which resulted in the students' experiences being different from their unrealistic expectations. It was clear that the students were not prepared to meet the university expectations and they blamed their high school for not equipping them for the way of working needed for university. This study shows that the students' previous learning experience and expectations had a great impact on their university learning experience.

Not having sufficient knowledge about being at university affected students negatively from the start (Shields, 2002). Therefore, these students found it difficult to change their role at university and be more responsible for their own learning, and manage their academic tasks. Students' expectations about university were formed and impacted by others. Due to these false expectations, students felt unsure and stressed when the reality did not match their expectations and they faced new demands. However, students' experiences varied somewhat, depending on the nature of their high school learning, which did not prepare them for the skills and role expected from university students. Students' reports indicated that some aspects of high school affected them in their current environment.

The second phase of the interviews, in this study, found that the students perceived their learning skills and expectations as inappropriate to the dictates and demands of successful higher education study. The findings of this research add credence to Lowe and Cook (2003), who suggested that students form assumptions about university life in the light of their past experience of life and learning. Students struggled to be independent learners. They

admitted that they had had little exposure to independent learning in high school. In their previous learning experience, their teachers were there to help them. Participants found academic tasks at university difficult, since they lacked self-regulation and independence skills. The mismatch in expectations led the students to struggle in managing their time and doing their work on their own, as these academic tasks were more complex than those experienced at high school. Therefore, the majority of the participants found their initial experience challenging. These students identified many challenges related to academic work. Having an increased workload was cited as the major concern, among other academic challenges cited by the students. Nearly all the students reported that university learning overwhelmed them, as indicated in section 5.3.1.1. Meeting course requirements was demanding due to the heavy workload. Students' perceptions of the workload supported McInnis and Jame's (1995) argument that having an overloaded curriculum hinders independent learning. A similar reflection was offered by Kember (2004), who found evidence of a reciprocal relationship between students' perceptions of the workload and the use of a surface study approach. He found several factors influencing the perceptions of the students, including course difficulty, nature of assessment, peer relationships and teacher-student relationships. The emergence of the workload issue brought an interesting aspect necessitating further investigation of the effect on the quality of the entire university education and the influence on students' approaches and attitudes towards academic study generally.

Difficulties in coping academically showed a close relationship with further barriers to effective learning. The respondents cited inadequate time management and insufficiently developed study skills as impeding their learning. Further exploration of the respondents' perceptions on learning barriers revealed concerns about learner independence, group tasks and information management. They emphasized that they lacked adequate training on such skills during their high-school years, which they saw as a factor in their struggle in university education. They confessed a sense of the inadequacy of their information management skills for the autonomous learning required in handling group projects,

synthesizing data obtained from multiple sources and selecting relevant information from the library of reading materials. In addition, they explained the difficulty of the transition by contrasting the demands of university learning with their previous structured and closely supervised high school environment. This differed from the unstructured and loosely supervised learning environment at the university, which required independent management by learners. However, most students reported poor self-management skills, which made learning independence difficult to accomplish.

The data collected indicated that students found group work an effective learning approach. However, many students lacked the necessary group work skills. This revealed the need for adequate support for enhancing their group work skills, since the university made extensive use of the group work method. Many respondents admitted consulting their peers to navigate learning hurdles, with only few seeking structurally provided assistance from their tutors.

Becoming an effective learner involves a complex interplay between the learning activities and the students' disposition. According to Wenger (1998), it is of the utmost importance that learners recognize their competence in social and academic contexts. Such competence comprises the ability to engage with others, for instance, peers and other students to facilitate sharing of resources and information. It is thus necessary for students to understand the social context they are in, as this improves their ability to perform academic tasks as well as their adaptation to the university setting. It should be noted that classroom experiences are critical in the understanding of the subjects and topics of study. Therefore, it is important for a student to get involved in these classroom activities. In this study, it appeared that the students improved by their own efforts and to a large extent by positive interactions with other peers and other education stakeholders like lecturers and learning materials. Consequently, this study advocates that guidance and support should be given to new students in order for them to overcome these challenges.

The interviews in the third phase revealed that students' experiences in the first semester were important in motivating students to improve their performance, change their previous learning skills and better understand the change in their new role at university. Students started to reflect critically on their prior experiences in the light of their new academic roles. These interviews provided a platform to explore adjustments made by the students to survive during the transition process from high school to university. For students to meet the university expectations, they had to change their learning skills, to be independent and be more responsible for their learning. They learnt these new skills via trial and error, after reflecting on the mistakes they made. The majority of the interviewees readily distinguished the high school learning environment from the university learning environment. A considerable number of students admitted adjusting their studying approach after getting disappointing examination results, in order to handle their respective studies.

Students' struggle to fit the learning environment, as mentioned earlier, was blamed on the difference between the two learning environments; the high school and the university. The students also blamed lack of preparedness and skills to deal with these changes. Therefore, the students acknowledged that they had to adjust and adopt new learning strategies, such as wide reading, working hard and active search for academic resources. However, this study also revealed that there were some students who did not proactively think of taking steps to improve areas where improvements were needed.

Generally, the experiences at the beginning of university reinforced students' determination to become self-regulated learners. The students sampled in this study were strongly motivated to succeed in their respective courses. A factor in this was that obtaining a high GPA in the preparatory year was necessary to secure acceptance in their preferred programmes.

7.3.2 Students' perceptions of university social life

The data confirmed that nearly all the students were contented with the nature of the social contact in the university. Most of them acknowledged their ability to build new

relationships with their counterparts, whom they considered to be friendly. According to students sampled in this study, successful learning and social development depends on the ability of the students to network with their peers. A key finding on the importance of students' relationships with peers concerned out-of-classroom experience. Peer assistance was essential in the first year, particularly for the facilitation of transition, since at this stage, students were struggling to adjust to the university social and academic aspects. Support from peers was seen to be vital at this point. Students recognized the role of peers in facilitating their transition process. From their remarks, it was evident that the students preferred interacting with peers from the same high school, possibly due to a sense of comfort and similarity. The students helped one another to overcome some of the apparent obstacles in transition by means of offering books and notes, guidance, and advice, which would guide the new students into understanding activities at university and help them to get ready for new challenges. The surest way to handle uncertainty and stress and to develop a sense of being among university students is to build friendships. Moreover, students learned through interaction with peers, particularly through social media such as 'What's App', where they created groups which enabled them to share useful materials and advice. This agrees with the theories of 'communities of practice' and 'situated learning' (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) which define learning as an exceptional kind of social activity through a process of moves from the periphery of a community to its centre so the students become more active and engaged within the culture and eventually become experts. The students in this research participated in two CoPs: an out of classroom community and a classroom community, both of which impacted their sense of belonging. The findings revealed that the level of students' interaction with the structural context is influential in building their perceptions of learning at university.

In particular, there was, reportedly, infrequent student-teacher interaction. In this study, participants perceived a critical gulf between the lecturers and their students, in contrast to the relationship in high school, where teachers were approachable, willing to help, and friendly. Students were used to relying on teachers as the source of knowledge and thus

experienced difficulty on entering university, since they had not learned to be independent students in their past experiences. Lack of a close relationship between lecturers and students was one of the major difficulties that students perceived in joining KSU.

This study has also revealed that parents played a key role in student support and were important to student success. This could be because parents have close relationships with their children in Saudi. This might be because the culture of the Saudi Arabian people is highly collectivist, as described in Chapter Two. Parental encouragement was principally apparent in inspiration and guidance while the leaner experienced the transition.

The study findings failed to indicate whether the students achieved integration into the university social life, since the data from the interviews showed that there was minimal participation in extra-curricular activities. This implies a need for first year students to be encouraged and helped to participate in extra-curricular activities, as doing so can help them with the transition process.

7.3.3 Students' perceptions of university culture

As noted previously, an aspect of the transition period that was of interest in the research was the institutional culture. However, in view of the difficulties of this concept, it was addressed indirectly through broad questions about the university atmosphere, and students' perceptions of specific features and artefacts. In practice, students had less to say about this than the academic aspect of university life, which was their main concern. However, they discussed a few aspects related to the extent to which they did or did not find the university environment supportive.

In this respect, an interesting observation was that, although the university made a number of provisions that were intended to be supportive, they were often perceived otherwise by the students, or had unintended negative consequences. For example, the transport provided to assist students in accessing the university (given that there is no public transport and women are not allowed to drive) was actually perceived as a source of strain

and exhaustion, because it imposed a timetable on students that did not suit their lecture schedules, unnecessarily prolonging their time on campus. Students also, at least initially, had negative perceptions of the academic and pastoral support available from teaching staff, because they did not know how to access it.

One reason for the difficulties students experienced in relation to the university environment may have been connected with the limitations of the induction programme, which seemed to be confined to a single week at the beginning of the year. Students' first real exposure to the university environment was through the induction week, with which most students were not satisfied. They said they were not given enough information on the university, as well as the manner in which to obtain help and support. It may be, however, (bearing in mind the findings of Briggs et al. (2012) on English university induction programmes) that students simply could not take in so much information, provided over a very short period. Moreover, there were some who missed the induction altogether for various reasons.

A number of students in this study found the university size and structure overwhelming. They mentioned the difficulty of concentrating in large classes and with a lot of students in the same class.

An aspect of the university environment that particularly affected students' transition was the programme structure, whereby students undertook a preparatory year, their performance in which would determine their study options in future years. Exceptionally high demand for some specialisms forced the university to set very high entry criteria for these programmes. Perhaps unintentionally, the university in this way created a competition, highly pressured environment, in which students' anxiety about their future added to the "concurrent stress" (Schlossberg, 1984) experienced in the first year. A further consequence was that, in order to cope with this competition, students made a conscious decision to focus on academic matters, at the expense of availing themselves of the social resources provided by the university. Thus, the potentially beneficial effect of the

university's attempts to encourage student integration by offering clubs and trips, or inviting participation in social campaigns, was not realized because of the countervailing impact of competitive academic pressures.

7.4   Contributions

The results of this study make contributions on the theoretical and practical levels that can be considered additions to current knowledge. The results will contribute towards providing additional understanding of the experiences female students face as they undergo transition in their first year at KSU, and to the transition process more generally. This section consists of three sub-sections as follows: Empirical contributions, Theoretical contributions and Methodological contributions.

7.4.1   Empirical contributions

A number of international initiatives have been designed in recent years, seeking to facilitate the transition of first-year students. Nevertheless, the initiatives have not comprehensively addressed the specific experiences that students in Saudi Arabia face. The insights provided in this research highlight the challenges faced by the first-year female students in KSU. This would provide invaluable input to the university policy makers, helping them to formulate policies, practices and actions that would provide forms of support that may facilitate students' transition to the university environment.

This study may also be useful in improving the academic practice implemented in high school education. The data collected show that students had experienced little previous exposure to independent learning. The research argues for the introduction of independent learning in high school study programmes, including academic writing, problem-solving skills alongside creative and critical thinking skills. The evidence obtained from the interview sessions shows a mismatch between the learning environments at the secondary school and university levels, leading to delay in first-year students becoming autonomous learners.

This study provides indications that inaccurate knowledge of university amongst students completing high school leads to shock upon enrolling in the university. This results in students feeling unprepared to become competent university students. The study illustrates that participants nevertheless became proactive in shaping their learning. Some respondents, although initially feeling somewhat discouraged, chose proactive actions and behaviour to adapt to the new environment. They worked hard to achieve their desired goals, having reflected on their previous shortcomings.

A key issue emerging in this study concerned the impact of student achievement in the first semester on the improvement of students' learning and achievements in the second semester. Students used their achievement in the first semester as a basis to decide if they needed to improve their learning. This shows that the examination results and coursework grades in the first semester were crucial for the resulting evaluation of the student's performance and revealed how appropriate or otherwise was the learning approach used by the student. Allied to this, the study provides detailed evidence of how students handled challenging situations by citing strategies they adopted to enhance their capacity as successful learners.

The research findings show that positive participation in classroom activities including group tasks, presentations and assignments created social networks amongst peers. The peer networks provided both emotional and academic support to assist the students in managing their studies and jointly resolving the common challenges that hindered their learning.

It was found, in contrast, that there was very little involvement in extracurricular activities, which led to weak participation of students in social activities at university. Therefore, this study would suggest that institutions could help to fit students into their existing cultures by encouraging students to participate in extra-curricular activities. The main issue found to prevent students' participation was the heavy workload. They sacrificed social

opportunities in the belief that allocating more time to their private studies would provide them with better chances of accomplishing improved results and the required GPA.

This study shows that students adopted different methods to adjust to the university academic environment. The study offers illustrations of how students embraced strategies to accomplish their academic expectations and satisfy the set requirements. These included assistance from peer support, private tutors and external resources from family members. All these methods helped the students to adjust to the new environment.

This research design facilitated the identification and exploration of different changes witnessed in first-year students as they became competent university students. This provides crucial information to high school and university policy makers to embrace factors that would ease the adjustment process for first-year students in a new learning setting.

This study contributes to the existing literature on high school to university transition and exploration of experiences faced by female first-year students in a Saudi educational and cultural context. The female experience in this study might not be the same as other experience in different parts of the world, so this research adds to the literature with regard to first year transition experience.

7.4.2 Theoretical contributions

The study fills a knowledge gap regarding the experience of students as they transition from high school. First year experience of transition is an under-researched area in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, no published literature targets the transition process for either male or female students in the Saudi context. The absence of published research on this domain implies that transition policies are formulated using assumptions made from conclusions derived from foreign initiatives. This research utilizes context-specific data obtained from participants within a particular time and place distinct from the assumed evidence captured in existing literature. This study provides a theoretical interpretation supported by empirical findings.

This study creatively combined three theories in order to better understand the first-year students' experience of transition. Firstly, Tinto's transition theory was adopted as an initial framework. This theory outlines the three stages that students go through as they transition from high school to the university. These stages are the separation stage, transition stage and incorporation stage. In order to holistically understand the students' experience, there must be an investigation and interrogation of the dynamic interplay among all the stages. Tinto's model was supplemented with the insights from Schlossberg (1984) to give a more complete understanding of what happens in the transition stage and to obtain rich data that would provide a more detailed picture of how students experience transition. Additionally, the CoP theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) was used to support and complement the transition theory by providing useful insights into the role played by social learning development and interactions during the learning process, in facilitating adaptation and, hence, successful transition. All of these theories are useful in understanding Saudi Arabian first-year transitional experiences, and the initial model proposed in Chapter Three (section 3.6) demonstrated the value of such a creative synthesis in encouraging thinking about existing theory in new ways. Nevertheless, the findings also suggest a need to modify and expand the theories, and hence, the model to take account of the knowledge derived from this new educational setting, and in this way, the research contributes to theory development. Therefore, in light of the data collected in this research, the model proposed in chapter 3 is revised and an explanation of how I arrived at the new version is provided in this section as shown in figure 7.1 below.
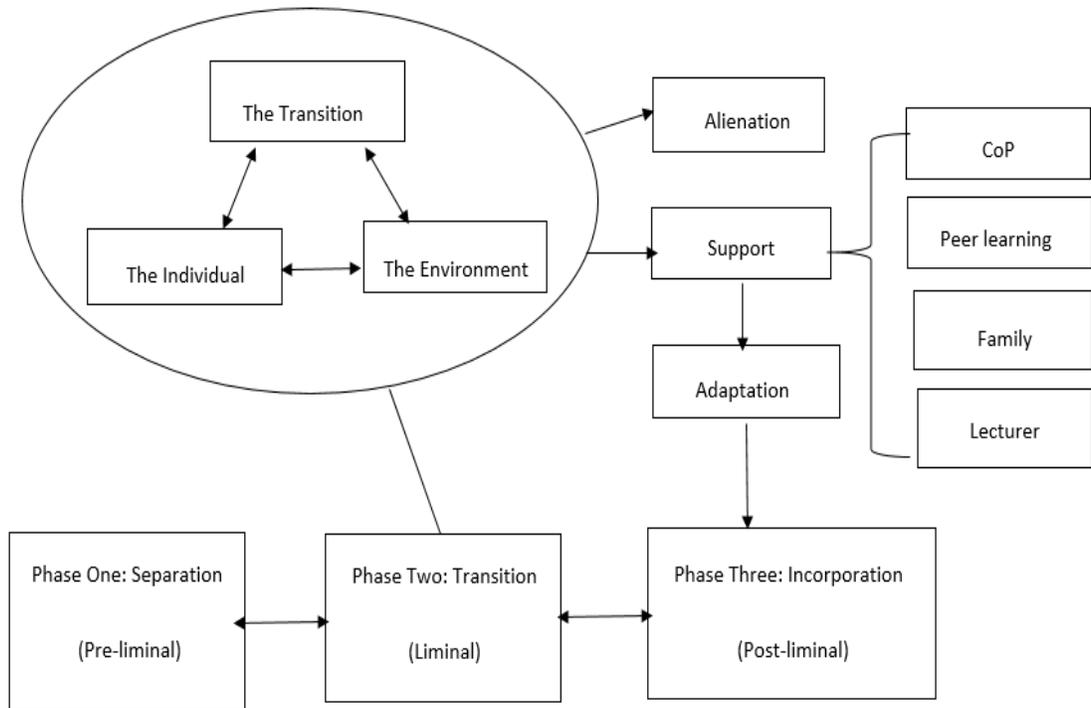
Figure 7-1 The Revised Model

As mentioned earlier, Tinto's transition theory (1987) proposes three stages in the transition process, the first being the separation or disengagement stage, which describes the condition where the students leave their safe and trusted relationships and roles and move into a new environment and cultural context. However, I argue that this theory fails to take into account the profound and lasting influence of the many years schooling and learning on the development of a student. The practices in the school help in promoting the students' developmental realms. Life, even as the student enters the university, is not an empty slate but filled with past experiences and thus when students enter the university, they carry with them a set of skills, including academic, personal and social. This argument is supported by the frequent remarks made by several students in this study, in which they commented on their earlier schooling and life experiences, attitudes and knowledge, which constituted a constant source of reference. Therefore, it is impossible to think of transition as a sequence of clearly differentiated phases in a disjointed and linear process, in which

one phase ends and a new phase starts, or a series of shifts; rather it is a continuous process. For this reason, the arrows showing movement between phases are shown in the revised model as bi-directional, reflecting the way in which students frequently revert to or reflect on previous stages as a reference point, rather than progressing linearly from one phase to the next.

This study further discovered that the major contributing factor that hindered the students' smooth transition was their reliance on past experiences from school to cope with the challenges posed by the new environment. It is evident from these findings that the academic learning that resulted from schooling was strongly and firmly linked with students' learning experiences at the university. The fact that the students, especially in the first-year, relied on their past experiences further supports the view that the students were not yet fully incorporated into the new university system, because they felt secure in their past experiences and identified with them. This, therefore, indicates that there was no real separation occurring and thus students did not fully detach themselves from the comfort and security of their previous sets of beliefs. This calls into question Astin (1984) and Tinto's (1993) insistence on the importance of students separating from their past relationships for them to effectively integrate into university life.

The research also found that poor preparation and lack of contemplation of the new environment made the separation process harder and resulted in a poor start for the first-year students in integrating into the university context. This is consistent with Evans and Kersh's (2003) argument that learners carry along their prior knowledge, skills, and understanding, which can affect their future learning. The findings of this study suggest that there must be a sense of continuity from the high school life to the university setting if the students are to deal effectively with university academic challenges. However, it must be accepted that students may take a while to successfully manoeuvre the transition stage and thus they require support and adequate preparation.

The research clearly explores and reveals how the students experienced the process of transition from high school to the university, which changed their status and their reactions to the new academic culture, people, roles, places and responsibilities. According to transition theory, the second phase of transition sets in when people encounter a crisis or event that challenges their earlier beliefs and views of learning (Christie et al., 2008; Griffiths et al., 2005; Kariuki, 2006). However, the students in this study appeared to experience two distinct crises, to which they responded in different ways. The first crisis appeared, when they first encountered the new environment of the university and realized how unprepared they were for their new roles. They encountered the second after the first semester examinations, when they were forced to reassess the strategies they had been adopting. This study discovered that students reacted to the first crisis that challenged their earlier experiences with stress, confusion and lack of confidence. This clearly shows that many of them were ill-prepared for university life, environment and expectations. This argument is exemplified in this study by the revelation that students felt inadequate and unprepared to handle the university complexities such as doing assignments, social interactions and expectations, which made them feel disoriented and caused a lack of confidence. Faced with this first crisis, they sought refuge in the familiar established associates and ways of working. In this sense, the first crisis prompted avoidance, rather than adaptation.

Regarding the third stage of the transition process, also referred to as the incorporation stage, the results of the research have shown that although many first-year students were initially not equipped with the skills to be at university and felt incompetent, they developed and thrived in the second semester. They improved their learning by reflecting on their experience and performance in first semester. Therefore, this study agrees with the constructivists who claim that individuals construct their own understanding and knowledge by experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. The adaptation achieved by students at this stage appeared to be in many ways a response to the second crisis, precipitated by the shock and disappointment of their first-semester examination

results, which forced them to re-think their strategies and attitudes. By reflection on the experience and difficulties in first semester, students said that they could recognize and identify what they needed to change in order to improve. Barnett (2007) used the term, 'becoming oneself' to express this developmental change and, moreover, describes it as a 'leap into newness' on the student's part.

Another area in which this study contributes to theory is through an extension of Lave and Wenger's (1991) idea of communities of practice. Wenger et al. (2002) elucidate that a community of practice is a group who share certain traits, for example, interest in a particular topic or shared problems, and are willing to widen their understanding through interaction on a daily basis. In this study, the students did not only learn from existing communities of practice but also created their own informal community of experiences and practices that served their needs. For example, they learned through interaction with peers, particularly through social media such as 'What's App', where they created groups which enabled them to share useful materials and advice. There were several benefits of being part of such a social network, which included getting academic and social help as well as having the latitude to freely discuss their transition challenges and problems. In fact, this coming together, working and learning from each other was an important issue for the students. Thus, this research's findings indicated that the concept of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) should be more comprehensive than simply connecting it with students' academic context. It also includes the social context. Another contribution of this study is the finding that students did not learn only from more experienced community members, as suggested by Lave and Wenger, but also from peers who shared the same peripheral status.

Students' use of 'What's App' to form support groups can be considered as representing the formation of informal communities of practice. Whereas the formal CoPs headed by academic staff served to nurture students' academic skills, the informal CoPs created by groups of peers provided not only shared resources, but also moral support arising from

their communal participation in the same struggle. Recognition of the role of peers in negotiating the move from the periphery to the centre together (as opposed to learning from expert members of the community) is a development of social learning theory that represents a theoretical contribution of this study.

The formation of such communities illustrates how gradually, as students formed new relationships, peers emerged as an important source of help. This study demonstrated that the help obtained from peers was crucial for students' academic adjustment and for the growth of their skills, as attested by Fass and Tubman (2002) and Swencon et al. (2008). The learners were able to appreciate the role of their peers in assisting them with the process of transition. Peers were able to help one another in prevailing over most of the predicted difficulties in academic and social life, by means of guidance, counsel, and practical assistance, for example, offering notes and books. Academic achievement was affected by the communication and connection that first year students formed with workmates, which enabled them to feel closer and devoted. Lack of friendships deprives students of resources that could help them to overcome the difficulties in the first year and deprives them of the emotional help they get from each other. This was demonstrated in this research, consistent with findings of other researchers (Lisa et al., 2008; Peat et al., 2001; Pittman & Richmond, 2008) that an advantage of having peers is that they enable students to feel more helped and safe. Students in this study were more contented with other people who belonged to the same department or whom they had known previously. Peers had an important role in overcoming educational challenges. This was apparent from the students' frequent comments on preferring to get support primarily from their friends, not the lecturers, when they had a query regarding educational issues, for instance, forming groups on 'What's App' in order to assist one another. Social studying as mutual involvement with others, like cooperation in a research group, motived students to talk about their educational issues or share information regarding practical aspects of lessons or tasks.

Peer support was highly significant at the start of the initial year, particularly concerning transition facilitation, as this was the time when the learners were handling the most difficult learning curve concerning social and academic expectations. All of this was highly significant in enabling the new students to comprehend the university's academic activities, besides acquiring skills and preparing for fresh challenges. Through friendship, the students were able to minimize stress and uncertainty, besides establishing a sense of what it meant to be a university student and to belong in the university. The outcome of this study shows the importance of this type of support. Opportunities for sharing and learning via interacting with peers are significant for individual and academic progress (Lundberg, 2003; Swencon et al., 2008). The confidence of students in having an excellent supportive setting and support from peers appeared as a key factor in the progress of their academic adjustment.

The data collected also shows the importance of various other sources of support in facilitating the process of adaptation in the transition phase, which is a necessary precursor to incorporation. In particular, it revealed the active role played by family support in facilitating the integration of the students in the Saudi context. Consistent with the findings of Wintre and Yaffe (2000), this research emphasizes the critical role of parents in enabling students to share and discuss university-related issues and challenges. Wintre and Yaffe (2009) later found this beneficial to the development of the emotional well-being of the students. This was consistent with Helsen et al.,'s (2000) earlier conclusion, cited by Paul and Brier (2001) that parents played an active role in assisting their children's lives. The research findings indicated that involvement of parents in the education of their children enabled them to assume positive attitudes.

As another source of support, a few students eventually succeeded in developing positive relationships with lecturers, with significant outcomes. Such students revealed how individual attention from the lecturer improved their determination to learn (see section 5.4.1.1). Students became actively engaged in learning with the help provided by their

teacher, either by giving students comments on their work and progress or helping them to understand what they found to be difficult. It seems that close relationships with their lecturers had positive impacts on the students' self-confidence, engagement in learning and feeling self-assured. This finding is consistent with Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) observation that positive relationships with lecturers are highly significant in enhancing the personal and social progress of students at the university.

In terms of Schlossberg's (1984) model, the "functions" performed by this form of support were to nurture specific skills and develop students' confidence. However, the "amount" of support differed from one lecturer to another. Moreover, it was not measurable in objective terms, but was perceived differently as students developed the willingness and ability to access this source of support, as an adaptive strategy.

Together, the various forms of support received from communities of practice, peers, family and lecturers facilitated students in avoiding alienation and making the adaptations necessary to foster their incorporation into university life, as shown in figure 7.1. Taken as a whole, this model, with its synthesis of three hitherto distinct theories, enriched by the findings from the empirical work, constitutes an original contribution to theory which provides new richness and detail in the understanding of transition to university.

7.4.3 Methodological contribution

Methodologically, this study was unusual in adopting a longitudinal qualitative design. An extensive literature review revealed few studies that have taken such an approach. The design of this research supports the existing thinking about the benefits derived from qualitative research for providing in-depth details of the phenomenon studied. This study featured longitudinal qualitative case elements to investigate female students' transitional experiences in their first year of KSU. This facilitated the exploration of the experiences students faced during the transition process, supported by data collected through a series of in-depth interviews. The use of the longitudinal approach in the interviews gave the study a practical platform that facilitated improved understanding of the transition process.

Incorporating the story-telling element during the three interview phases allowed the researcher to frame and illustrate students' educational journey, from before they enrolled in the university. Besides, conducting a series of interviews allowed me to establish a rapport with the students, based on which consistent results were obtained.

The longitudinal approach was suitable to the core objective of the research, involving the exploration and complex illustration of the adjustment process students face from enrolment to the first half of the second semester. The series of interviews was useful in obtaining the thoughts of the students about the experiences in the first year, which gave the study first-hand information. This longitudinal approach created an active role for the students in reflecting on their experiences and sharing the personal and insightful perspectives they held of their own transition. This constitutes a key contribution of this study.

7.5 Recommendations

Relying on the fuzzy generalization concept (see section 4.10), this research does not assert that its practical conclusions will be capable of being generalized in the same way as numerical or scientific outcomes, because of the small sample involved. However, it is proposed that the conclusions of this research may nevertheless be valuable for tutors and education managers outside of KSU. The awareness of the experiences faced by female students in the first-year of the transition to university can help to inform actions and decisions regarding institutional practices. This section highlights the implications of the study findings for high schools, first-year students and the university. It features recommendations based on the findings obtained from this study to make the transition process supportive to the academic development and social adaptation of students into the new university setting. It provides insightful perspectives critical to understand the experiences of first-year students obtained in one of the leading institutions of higher education in Saudi Arabia.

7.5.1 Recommendations for schools

According to the findings in this study, it is shown that becoming a university student posed a major challenge to students, mainly due to the mismatch of academic cultural practices at university with their previous educational experience. This suggests a need for the curriculum and teaching framework used in high school to align to the likely educational mediums and practices embraced at the university. Having a similar teaching approach to the one the students will meet at the university would reduce the shock first-year students face upon joining university education. The evidence as to the skills set and knowledge in first-year students implies that the high school stage is a critical stage to orient the students towards the university academic and social life. The results reveal the existence of positive attitudes and interpersonal skills, making a case for the educators to nurture them by devoting full attention to their development.

This research has several practical implications for first year experience. The results revealed that the majority of the first-year students suffered from inadequate knowledge of the type of learning required at university. This meant they had difficulty structuring their learning approach and assuming independent learning when they first enrolled. Obtaining information regarding the university environment in terms of academic and social changes would improve students' preparation for the changes they will face, hence raising their chances of success. Starting this before they enrol in the university would avoid the context shock affecting most students. This suggests that educators should initiate a systematic transition during high school, and this should continue during the first year of university life. This would need universities and high schools to enter into improved collaboration, to create a focused interface orienting students towards the changes they can expect and strategies to address them. This would require universities to form links capable of conveying information accurately. These would involve high school teachers and counsellors with influence over the young generation, delivering appropriate and accurate information about university. This would assist students to develop appropriate expectations about university education. Moreover, this would involve actively helping

students overcome the anticipation stage by furnishing them with accurate information about their preferred courses. A special programme could be initiated, involving having visits where students would gain first-hand experience of university life.

7.5.2 Recommendations for universities

In this study, most of the participants were not satisfied with the induction week and some did not attend; thus, it is proposed that induction should be carefully considered during preparations for the initial semester, while the value of induction activities ought to be promoted more strongly to students so as to increase their attendance rate. On this rationale, it is advisable for KSU to offer additional support and guidance to students, particularly first year learners, in their initial two weeks of admission. According to Levitz and Noel (1989), Tinto (1993), and Townsend and Wilson (2006), efficient orientation programmes set clear institutional expectations for learners. They can be formulated to assist new students in acclimatizing to university life and preparing for success by providing important information concerning academic programmes and requirements, student organizations, services and activities, as well as both academic and non-academic services available to the students. In induction week, universities should address learning and teaching issues that are likely to emerge within the university, in order to ensure that students possess knowledge and a skill set applicable in the new environment. This would provide a platform to give the students an accurate picture of university life, thereby eliminating false assumptions and resulting tensions in the transition period. This study provides informative input to educators to consider student issues, such as gradually shifting the students from their previous experiences. The study findings imply a need for educators to provide clear course explanations and additional instructions on grading and examinations to ensure preparedness in the students. The inability to meet these challenges during the initial phases of the transition affects the students' engagement ability and ultimate performance in their university education.

According to the findings of this study, it is shown that students had unrealistic expectations about university life and the academic requirements and skills required at university. Thus, the universities should initiate collaboration channels with schools to provide them with the appropriate knowledge concerning the learning they will experience in the university environment, such as arranging trips to university and involvement in activities at university. An example of a programme by a UK university is the Newcastle University Partners programme, designed to ease transition by working with students from primary school onwards, in order to encourage the formation of realistic perceptions and expectations of university life. This programme includes activities such as campus visits for primary-age children and their parents, and residential experience for pre transition students (Briggs et al., 2012).

7.5.3 Recommendations to enhance students' academic adaptation

According to the findings in this study, it is shown that first year university students are challenged by the sudden change, demanding adjustment from a supervised environment in high school to a very different one. The latter requires them to assume control over their own studies, including time management, group formation and adjustment to the workload. Most respondents in this research felt they lacked proper preparation to handle these responsibilities, mainly due to not being exposed to the kinds of learning approaches they would face in the new environment. They appeared to lack direction and suffered inadequate strategies in adjusting their lives. The research showed the apparent challenges faced by students who were not ready to begin higher education. This emerged in most interview sessions, as the students admitted lacking sufficient readiness to embrace an independent role in learning. For this reason, the first and foremost requirement for easing the adjustment of students is to nurture their learning autonomy. This can be attained through modifying the school curriculum, delivery mediums and pedagogic activities. A major problem for students in adapting their academics strategies was the feeling that tutors relied heavily on assumption, with little stated openly. The students had left a highly supportive school environment and needed to adapt to autonomous learning

automatically; but were left to navigate against the tide or sink. Participants in this study commonly reported difficulty becoming independent learners. Therefore, institutions of higher education could focus on enhancing autonomous learning skills, such as self-management and reflection. This would involve encouraging the students to embrace regular self-reflection in their studies, to ease the identification of their progress and their next course of action. In addition, encouraging the students to analyse their learning styles would enable them to embrace a suitable study approach. The suggestions discussed here would facilitate raising the awareness of the students' responsibilities and roles during the learning process.

7.5.4 Recommendations to enhance students' social adaptation

The findings obtained in this study indicate that most students were disengaged from the university social life. Only a small number of students reported active participation in social activities. Similarly, students reported having limited relationships with their teachers. This makes a case for establishing more structured opportunities to promote the social integration of the students. Tam (2002) identified the key role of teachers and peers in the socialization of students, suggesting their key contribution to supporting learning and development. The first-hand information collected in this study showed that students preferred seeking support from peers to resolve learning and studying challenges. They rarely interacted with the teachers, beyond the class engagements, although when they did, they found it beneficial. Astin (1999) claimed having student-teacher interactions frequently led to strong satisfaction. Thus, this kind of interaction needs to be emphasized, for example, by encouraging university teachers to be involved in running extra-curricular activities, or by holding department cultural and social activities at which students and staff could mingle informally.

Supporting social integration is another strategy that could be adopted, given the negative view that the interviewees had toward participating in co-curricular activities. The primary reason was having a heavy workload and poor time management skills to balance academic

demands with other activities. It was evident that the students had not realized the potentially valuable contribution of co-curricular activities in their learning experiences. Astin (1999) showed that involvement in such activities facilitated the integration of students into the social system, which in turn translated into enhanced integration into the academic system within the institution. The institution should organize relevant extra-curricular activities that would benefit the students and stimulate their active participation, alongside the formal curriculum. The institution should ensure proper documentation of incentives used to encourage students' participation, such as awards, within the official achievement records.

A significant number of students cited group work as an effective learning approach, although they reported difficulties related to group work skills. Several interviewees raised concerns over handling group tasks, with some reporting negative experiences of group work. The idea of Tinto (2006) on learning communities presents a practical approach in implementing group work amongst students. The core objective of having learning communities is the provision of advantages derived from small cohesive groups embracing the educational journey together as cohorts (Tinto, 2006). Different forms of learning communities may be formed, usually using subject themes.

This study shows that most first-year students face several challenges as they transition to the university. Such challenges include insufficient academic skills, inadequate studying skills, unawareness of the university learning environment, unpreparedness for higher education and insufficient exposure in autonomous learning. The research suggests that addressing such challenges at the institutional level would ease the transition process.

7.6   Limitations of the Study

While this research showed key strengths in its completion, there were also a number of limitations that provide scope for further research. The findings of this research focused on a specific institution and particular subject areas, so may not be applicable to other

universities. Limitations arise from sample sizes, timing, culture and the specific educational system and practices explored.

- Limited time and resources affected the amount of data that could be collected. Interesting findings may have emerged if the research had spanned the whole year. Having that time would enable closer monitoring of students' personal and academic development process.

- The use of a longitudinal case approach brought advantages and disadvantages in equal measure. Although it enabled me to understand the participating students well, other students were unwilling to participate because of the time commitment involved, or missed their interview sessions. This arose from their demanding academic tasks and need to meet their deadlines.

- This study targeted female students pursuing transition in KSU, so reflected the perspective of only one gender. Male students may have different expectations and experiences, which were not accessible to a female researcher. It would also be interesting to explore the differences between female and male students in their transition experiences. Male and female students might have different social and cultural perceptions and prior learning experiences, which might make their transition experience different.

- This research captures experiences at a specific time, at a particular institution. The findings of this study are derived from a single university, thereby weakening their generalizability.

7.7 Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should include more institutions, to generate a more diverse sample of participants. This could offer varying findings and the potential for inter-university comparisons. Comparative study might shed light on the different ways in which

educational systems or institutions satisfy students' requirements and provide support for their transition process.

It is also important to consider the perspectives of the faculty members on the transition performance of the first-year students. Having this understanding would provide a meaningful input towards creating a comprehensive approach reflecting the perspectives of individuals participating in the learning and teaching environment.

Obtaining in-depth understanding of the academic performance in specific areas such as writing, examinations, presentation and class discussion would provide additional insights into students' key strengths and weaknesses, to see how these relate to the transition experience. This would again contribute towards enhancing the learning and teaching environment, structuring courses and redesigning assessments at the university level along with improving those in high school.

Since students in this study took little or no part in co-curricular activities, it would be interesting to explore whether participation of the students in such activities facilitates the adjustment to university, since social activities can contribute to the development of a sense of belonging and growth.

Future research should consider obtaining information from private universities, since this study focused on a large public university in Saudi Arabia.

Since this study did not aim to compare between the students' experience of transition from the three departments, Science, Art and Medicine, it would be interesting for future studies to compare between the students' experiences of transition from the different departments by conducting quantitative study including a large number of students to see if there are differences between the different departments.

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APPENDIX A: Participants' Selection Survey

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!

Take part in School to University transition research.

I am recruiting potential First Year students to participate in a research study, to learn about first year university experiences.

To be eligible for the study you must:

a. have passed your secondary school certificate.

b. have been offered a place at King Saud University for the academic year 2016-2017.

c. be willing to be interviewed (in confidence) about your experiences at various points in the first year (three interviews altogether)

If you are interested in taking part, please spare a few minutes to answer the questions below. Any data you give will be confidential. The purpose of collecting it is to get an idea of the profile of students about to enter King Saud University, in order to include people from a variety of backgrounds in the interviews. You do not have to fill in this questionnaire, or be involved in interviews, if you do not want to, but your views and experiences are important, because they will help in identifying ways to provide better support for students in their first year at university. To answer the questions, circle the number of your chosen answer (only one per question) or write your answer in the space provided. If you want to change an answer, cross out the incorrect answer and circle the number for your new answer.

Your ID number:……………………..   Age:……………

What is your mother's formal education?

1. Primary School Graduate or Less 2. Secondary School Graduate 3. High

School Graduate 4. Bachelor's Degree 5. Master's Degree or Above

What is your father's formal education?

1. Primary School Graduate or Less 2. Secondary School Graduate 3. High

School Graduate 4. Bachelor's Degree 5. Master's Degree or Above

What type was your secondary school?

1. Public   2. Private

What district do you live in?

……………….

What is your mother job?

……………..

What is your father job?

 ……………………..

What is your high school percentage?

…………….

I would like to talk to a small number of students at intervals throughout the 1st and 2nd semesters to explore how people adjust to university life. This would involve three meetings (early in the first semester, towards the end of the first semester, in the middle of second semester). If you would be willing to help in this way, please provide your contact details below

Phone Number:

 Email:

THANK YOU!

ORGANIZATION CONSENT LETTER

Dear University Head

PERMISSION FOR DOING INTERVIEW WITH YOUR STUDENTS IN YOUR UNIVERSITY

I am a Doctoral student in the Centre for Education Studies at the University of Hull, in the UK. I am a Lecturer in the department of Curriculum Studies at King Saud University, Riyadh Saudi Arabia. I have been working there for three years. My topic is

First year female students' experience of transition from school to university in Saudi Arabia.

I am writing to seek your permission to interview some female first year students in your university.

Throughout the data collection exercise, anonymity of the participants will be maintained. In addition, the data collection instruments have been designed in accordance with the guidelines of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, University of Hull. A copy of which is available upon request.

The results of the study, which will, I hope, add to the knowledge of this important issue, will be made available to you.

If you would like confirmation of the legitimacy of my research, my supervisor is Dr. Catherine Montgomery, and you can reach her at the following address:

Dr. Catherine Montgomery

Centre for Educational Studies

The University of Hull

Cottingham Road

Hull, HU6 7RX

UK

C.montgomery@hull.ac.uk

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the secretary to the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee, Mrs J. Lison, Centre for Educational Studies, University of Hull, Cottingham Road,

Hull, HU6 7RX, UK

Email: J.Lison@hull.ac.uk

Tel. - +441482-465988.

In anticipation, I look forward very much to hearing from you.

With thanks.

Yours Sincerely,

Lubna Alshamrani (Mrs)

PhD Student

Postgraduate Office

Centre for Educational Studies

The University of Hull

Cottingham Road

Hull HU6 7RX, UK.

L.M.Alshamrani@2013.hull.co.uk

APPENDIX C: Information Sheet

Information Sheet: (*INTERVIEWS*)

Dear Students/

Permission to Undertake Research from First Year Female Students

I am a Doctoral student in the Centre for Education Studies at the University of Hull, in the UK. I am a Lecturer in the department of Curriculum Studies at King Saud University, Riyadh Saudi Arabia. I have been working there for three years. My topic is

First year female students' experience of transition from school to university in Saudi Arabia.

I am writing to seek your permission to undertake my research. I would like to interview you personally three times (early in the first semester, towards the end of the first semester, in the middle of second semester) to obtain your experience of transition.

There is no compulsion to take part and you can withdraw at any point if you wish. Throughout the data collection exercise, anonymity of the participants will be maintained. In addition, the data collection instruments have been designed in accordance with the guidelines of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, University of Hull. A copy of which is available upon request.

I will contact you by email in the next few days, to confirm that you can help me with my research and arrange for interview at your convenience. I would like to record the interview and hope you will be happy for me to do this.

The results of the study, which will, I hope, add to the knowledge of this important issue, will be made available to you.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the secretary to the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee, Mrs J. Lison, Centre for Educational Studies, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull, HU6 7RX, UK

Email: J.Lison@hull.ac.uk Tel. - +441482-465988.

If you would like confirmation of the legitimacy of my research, my supervisor is Dr. Catherine Montgomery, and you can reach her at the following address:

Centre for Educational Studies
The University of Hull
Cottingham Road
Hull, HU6 7RX
UK
c.montgomery@hull.ac.uk

In anticipation, I look forward very much to hearing from you.

With thanks.

Yours Sincerely,

Lubna Alshamrani

PhD Student

Postgraduate Office
Centre for Educational Studies
The University of Hull
Cottingham Road
Hull HU6 7RX, UK.

L.M.Alshamrani@2013.hull.co.uk

APPENDIX D: Student Permission Form

Permission to take part in a research study

(First year female students' experience of transition from school to university in Saudi Arabia)

Your signature on this form gives your consent to participate in this study. This study will serve several purposes: (a) to explore the experience of female Saudi students in their transition from school to first Year University; (b) to research and analyse these experiences to identify the key issues; (c) to add to the knowledge base on this topic in a Saudi Arabian context.

This interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes. This interview will be recorded and will be deleted when the study concluded.

No personal identifying information about you as a participant will be published in any analysis of data resulting from this study. In addition, no personal information about you will be shared with other persons without consent from you.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw consent and terminate participation by notifying the researcher at any time without consequence.

If you have any questions about this research or concerning your right, call me at 0503737611

I have been fully informed on the above-described procedure and I give my permission for participation in this study.

Name of Student ------------------------------------

Signature ---------------------------------------   **Date** ---------------

APPENDIX E: Ethical Approval

University of Hull Ethics Approval

Centre for Educational Studies
T 01482 465031
E c.m.mckinlay@hull.ac.uk

**ETHICAL PROCEDURES FOR RESEARCH AND TEACHING
IN THE
FACULTY OF EDUCATION**

FORMAL NOTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

Reference Number:	**PGR** 14/15-1
Name:	**Lubna Alshamrani**
Programme of Study:	**PhD Education**
Research Area/Title:	**First year female students' experience of transition from school to university in Saudi Arabia**
Image Permission Form	not applicable
Name of Supervisor:	**Dr Catherine Montgomery**
Date Approved by Supervisor:	**01/10/14**
Date Approved by Ethics Committee:	**22/10/14**
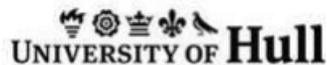
UNIVERSITY OF **Hull**

Faculty of Education Ethics Committee 14-15/1

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APPENDIX F: Interview Guide for First Phase

First Interview at the third week of 1st semester (goal: to establish students' expectations and preparation for university, as the baseline in the pre-liminal stage)

Themes	Questions
High School Experience	Can you tell me about your experience in high school? How does being at university compare with being at high school?
Students' experience	How do you find the atmosphere of the university? Did you attend the induction week and if so what do you think about it? Probes: (If not) Why did you not attend? (If yes) Can you tell me about anything you particularly liked/disliked? How useful was it in familiarizing you with the university? (Either yes or no) how do you think your decision to attend (or not attend) affected/ will affect you in adjusting to the university?
Expectation	Tell me what you were expecting when you started university? Hopes and fears for your time at university? prompts How confident do you feel that you will be able to cope with academic work at university? What makes you think that way? How do you feel about the social prospects at the university? Do you think you will need help to adjust at the university? If so why and in what way? What do you expect about the classes? What do you expect about the university academic work? What do you expect from the faculty? What do you expect from peers? What led you to form these expectations?

APPENDIX G: Interview Guide for Second Phase

Second Interview at the end of 1st semester (goal: to understand students' initial experience)

Theme	Questions
Initial experience	Tell me about your experience at university since we last met? What do you think about the academic work? Prompts: - Your view on lectures - Your view on tutorials - Your view on assignments - Your view on learning. - How do you become familiar with the academic process? - Your relation with the academic staff Have your friendships or social activities changed since leaving secondary school? In what way? How do you find the social life at the university? Prompts: - How do you find your friendship? - Have they helped you in the academic process? Is there anything about the university that helps you to cope with university life? Explain? (probes) - When we last met we spoke about…. How do you feel about that now?

	Have your views about the university environment changed in any way since we last met?
Comparison with Expectation	Has it been as you expected? If so, in what way? If not, what do you find different? Are things turning out the way you expected?
Student experience	Is there anything you are finding difficult or challenging? Explain?

APPENDIX H: Interview Guide for Third Phase

Third Interview at the middle of 2ⁿᵈ semester (goal: to explore ongoing adjustment, overall perceptions of experience so far, the changes experienced)

Theme	Questions
Student experience	Now you have reached the end of your first semester, how would you describe your experience so far? Prompts: academic, social, How do you feel now about the university environment? Last time we talked, you mentioned a problem with ……. Is this still a problem for you or have things improved? Do you participate in university activities?
First year challenges	What has been the most challenging part of your experience?
Adaptation	What differences are there between the way you felt when you first started at the university, and the way you feel now? Prompts: academic, social, institutional experience Probes: What do you think has caused the change? Or what is it that has confirmed those feelings?
Adaptation, Incorporation or alienation	How do you feel about your future at this university?

First year experience	Do you find the university environment supportive? Are there any ways in which your experience could be improved?

APPENDIX I: Back Translation Examples

Original Question	Can you tell me about your experience in high school?
English-to-Arabic translation	هل من الممكن أن تتحدثين عن تجربتك في المرحلة الثانوية؟
Arabic-to-English back translation	Can you describe your high school experience?

Original Question	Is there anything you are finding difficult or challenging? Explain?
English-to-Arabic translation	هل تواجهين حالياً أي تحديات أو صعوبات؟ ماهي؟
Arabic-to-English back translation	Do you face any challenges or problems at university? What are they?

Original Question	Tell me what you were expecting when you started university?
English-to-Arabic translation	ماذا كانت توقعاتك عندما بدأتي دراستك الجامعية؟ ماهي مخاوفك وآمالك بالنسبة للمرحلة الجامعية؟
Arabic-to-English back translation	What were your expectations when you first came to university?

APPENDIX J: Examples of Thematic Analysis

Research Question	Quotes	Codes	Sub-categories	Categories	themes
Tell me about your experience at university since we last met?	"University needs students to *think* and *comprehend*. Students have to *study actively*." "University is such a change. Teachers encourage us to *think*."	active learning		Academic aspects	Initial Experience
	"I cannot do more than one task at one *time*... It is *difficult to handle* all of them together. They are not easy assignments and they all need a lot of time to be done." "I found it *difficult to balance my time*. I have many assignments and demands that all needed to be submitted nearly at the same time; I am *struggling to fit* them all together *in my timetable*." "When it was near to the mid-term examination, I felt very strained because I have *difficulty managing my time*..."	time management			
	"I *do not have any relation with any lecturers*. I simply attend classes and listen to the teacher." "The *lecturers are not supportive* as in high school. They do *not collaborate* with students." "Well, some of the *lecturers* are supportive and sociable but most of them are *uncooperative*. It is *hard to interact* with them." "I think *the teacher is hard to approach*, I feel so *distant* from my teachers here..."	emotional distance	Relationship with lecturers	Social aspects	