

EXPERIENCES OF WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS' ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to identify the problem areas with which working-class students struggle when entering higher education and how they cope with these problems from a financial, academic, emotional, and social standpoint. A qualitative research approach was used to obtain a deep insight into the students' experience. The research was conducted with qualitative methods using a semi-structured interview technique, and analyzed by thematic analysis with working-class people who enrolled in higher education institutions. The results indicated that the working-class students encountered numerous difficulties in paying the expenses of education, transportation, and living expenses. Academic difficulties encompassed dealing with coursework, keeping pace with academic demands, and juggling education with financial aspects. Other problems that the respondent had were problems in emotion, namely stress, anxiety, and self-doubt; problems in the social aspect, namely being excluded, not very active in campus life, and experiencing some barrier to developing good social relationships; and problems in cognition, namely difficulty in paying attention, remembering everything, and understanding and using spoken words. Overall, students demonstrated great resilience, with a range of coping strategies used (family and peer support, personal perseverance, and educational aspirations). The study highlights the interrelatedness and complexity in students' adjustment in higher education from a working-class background. The results suggest institutional strategies that include a wide variety of financial support, academic counseling, counseling services, and campus support to improve the chances of success. In response to these challenges, improvements can be made to student well-being, persistence, and achievement. In terms of explaining the experiences of working-class students, this research contributes to a broader literature on education equity and offers specific recommendations for establishing an environment that is more inclusive and supportive for working-class college students.

Keywords: *working-class students, financial challenges, coping strategies, emotional challenges, social challenges, adjustment*

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Introduction

Education beyond the K-12 level is a way to further the career and broaden the understanding and quality of life. For many students College or University is viewed as a means of social and economic mobility. But all students aren't equal at college. The working-class students do have to work in such jobs as labor work, small businesses etc. when they reach the University as they find their home income insufficient (Smith & Kumar, 2023). College may be the first experience these students have in the home of a college graduate. They typically have fewer academic resources, a lack of knowledge about universities, and more financial and family responsibilities. Therefore, it's difficult for them to adapt to the college life. Despite their ability, some may feel like they don't fit in or they are not good enough (Jones & Patel, 2022).

Student adjustment is the process a student goes through to adjust to the academic, social, institutional, and emotional demands of college life. Research in adjustment has shown that it is related to greater involvement in school, higher prospects of remaining in school, better psychological well-being, and better academic performance. But when there are issues with adjustment, there may be problems with study results, stress, and social isolation and withdrawal from higher education (Li & Lee, 2024).

Monys, one more thing that is a big challenge. Students are eligible for scholarships, they are required to cover their transportation, books, food, etc. Some students work part-time/full-time, which may limit their study time and/or University engagement (Lopez & Ahmed, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the financial concerns alongside other challenges of inflation and unemployment (Nguyen & Hall, 2023).

An important but underrepresented population of higher education is working-class students. Typically, the students are from low-income families, and many have to work and attend school simultaneously. More working-class pupils are now at university than ever before, yet there are numerous challenges to overcome to settle into university life. They also encounter learning barriers, emotional and social barriers that have been found to impact their adjustment and success in postsecondary education, as well as financial barriers (Lehmann, 2023; O'Shea, 2023).

Working-class students may experience emotional/psychological and/or academic difficulties

on transition to Higher Education. The move to a university setting that can have middle-class values and norms can cause uncertainty, feelings of being 'unworthy,' and self-doubt.

Although they have succeeded, students may wonder, "Am I deserving of this? Am I a doer?..." (Lehmann, 2023). This is referred to as impostor syndrome. Working Academic adjustments are one of the most salient problems of working-class students. Class students also experience greater levels of stress and anxiety due to concerns about the pandemic (Reay, 2022), money worries, and academic performance concerns, as well as the expectation to meet family and wider society expectations (Reay, 2022). It has been found that these emotional issues can impact students' self-esteem, drive, and general health, which in turn can impact their academic performance and educational results (O' Shear, 2023).

Another important area of the higher education experience for working-class students is their social adjustment. A social role is one that universities could play, where students build a network, friendships, and activate the activities of the university. But socioeconomic disparity can lead to barriers for social integration and social belonging. Yet, the financial situation, lifestyle, language, and cultural experiences of students are disparate, and working-class students are often advised that they are excluded or "absent" from the dominant culture of the university (Rubin et al., 2022). There could be financial barriers to attending social activities, clubs, and other extracurricular activities. As a result, many pupils feel socially isolated and don't have many opportunities to network and build relationships (Gair & Mullins, 2023). The sense of belonging is known to be a factor for higher education student retention, engagement, and success (Thomas 2024). But working-class children are strong and have acquired a variety of strategies to manage the challenging demands of the school setting in terms of their academic, emotional, and social functioning. One of the better coping strategies is social support, a factor that is well-known. An emotional, practical, and sense of belonging, through family, friends, peers and faculty, can support students to successfully manage their life in a university or college setting, (Collier & Morgan, 2022). Peer support networks are especially important for socializing with other students and sharing information, experiences, and as well making connections with other community members of the university (O'Shea, 2023). Primary coping mechanisms are also identified as very crucial to help working-class pupils cope. A lot of students learn how to schedule their time to be able to perform activities of work, family, and studies at once. Through self-discipline, determination, and goal-oriented behavior, they are able to be focused on their learning goals even when lots of obstacles are in the way

(Thomas, 2024). Academic and psychological outcomes, such as problem-solving, academic support, and growth mindset, are associated with better academic and psychological outcomes for university students.

Objective

To explore the academic, emotional, and social challenges faced by working-class students in higher education and understand the coping strategies they employ to manage these experiences.

Research question

What are the academic, emotional, and social challenges faced by working-class students in higher education, and how do they cope with these challenges?

Statement of Problem

Higher education offers opportunities for personal, social, and professional development, but not for everybody equally. There are several learning, emotional, and social obstacles that working-class students often face when they go to college. While higher education is accessible to more students, working-class students' experiences have been little explored, especially in relation to how they negotiate and deal with the difficulties they encounter. To create supportive institutional policies and practices, it is important to understand the challenges students face and how students cope with them. This study aims, therefore, to examine the academic, emotional and social difficulties experienced by working-class students in higher education, and how coping strategies might be used to adjust and overcome these difficulties in their educational experiences.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the academic, emotional, and social difficulties encountered by working-class students in higher education and coping strategies to manage academic, emotional, and social difficulties. The qualitative approach was suitable as it enabled to get a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings of their educational journeys.

Research Design

This study was qualitative in nature. The following design was suitable for exploring how working-class students experienced and interpreted the challenges of adjusting to higher education and how they cope with these experiences.

Sampling and participant detail

The participants were selected by a purposive sampling technique, where participants could give rich and relevant data about the research topic. In qualitative research, researchers typically employ purposive sampling because individuals who can be purposefully sampled have direct experiences with the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015). The study's participants were chosen due to their experience of being working-class students at higher education institutions. 10-15 participants were chosen for semi-structured interviews. All relevant participants (those from a working-class background and with higher education experience) were included in the study. The participants were asked to share their personal experiences of academic, emotional, and social difficulties, and their coping strategies.

Ethical Consideration

The study was ethically approved by the University's institutional review board. Participants were recruited via personal contacts and networks at universities. They were told about the purpose of the study, and if they felt like participating, they were selected and informed consent was obtained before the data was collected. Informed consent was obtained from all participants who were informed of the purpose of the study, its voluntary nature, and their rights to withdraw at any time. To ensure confidentiality, personal data was deleted.

Qualitative Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is one widely used technique in qualitative research to identify, analyze, and report patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interview data were transcribed, coded, and sorted into themes in a careful manner in this study. The themes represented the typical academic, emotional, and social pressures and problems experienced by working-class students and their strategies for dealing with these. Manual coding was done by using the MS Word software, and significant text was identified. From the analysis, five major themes emerged that captured participants' experiences with academic, emotional, and social difficulties and coping strategies.

Theme 1: Financial constraint and Economic pressures

The theme of financial difficulties was the most prevalent one in the narratives of respondents. Nearly all students mentioned financial problems with tuition, transportation, internet packages and academic resources. Several respondents reported that financial constraints directly harmed their performance in academic studies and in University activities. A large number of participants said they had some type of part-time job to help offset college costs. Employment gave financial support, but took time for studying and socializing. Respondents 3,7 and 10 gave the same answers:

“At times the decision for me was between buying study materials and paying the fares for the university.” The results are consistent with existing studies that show that students' academic engagement and persistence are greatly affected by financial difficulty (Tinto, 2017).

Theme 2: Academic adjustment and learning challenges.

Several issues were identified by respondents with respect to their adaptation to the academic requirements at the university level. Several students shared problems with comprehending the English-medium instruction, assignments, and workloads. The problem of language is particularly pointed out in the context of language differences and teaching style differences among students from government schools. Respondent 5 shared:

The university environment was quite different from my school; I initially found it hard to understand lectures in English.

The results showed that new learning strategies and study skills are needed to achieve academic adjustment.

Theme 3: Social Integration and Sense of Belonging

Another problem that became evident was social adjustment. Respondent expressed feelings of isolation because of socio-economic differences between the respondent and peers. Students do not have the financial means, like other students made many of them feel uncomfortable participating in social activities. As respondent 2 explained:

Sometimes I feel different because many of the classmates come from wealthier families.” Respondent 11 stated: “When I first went to University, I felt like I was part of a family thanks to my friends.”

It was concluded that peer support was one of the key elements in creating a sense of belonging and enhancing students' social experiences.

Theme 4: Family Responsibilities

The issue of balancing education with family responsibilities was a common theme among respondents. Household duties, younger brother or sister care, and family business were taken up by many students. These duties tended to limit the time for academic work. Respondent 6 stated:

When I was at university, I assisted my parents and cared for my younger siblings. The results show that the working-class students are subjected to several competing demands that affect their educational experiences.

Theme 5: Institutional Support

Participants discussed the role of institutional assistance in the progress of academic achievement. Student support by teachers, scholarships, and academic advisors was found to be helpful. Some of the students, however, indicated a need for more counselling and financial support programs. When asked, respondents 4 and 12 said that: “My teachers helped me to understand difficult concepts and guided me academically.” The results in this study indicate that the universities are significant in supporting the disadvantaged students.

Table 1: *Showing a summary of themes.*

Themes	Description
Financial Constraints and Economic Pressure	Respondents experienced financial difficulties related to tuition fees, transportation, books, internet access, and other educational expenses. These pressures often caused stress and influenced academic performance.

Academic Adjustment and Learning Challenges	Students faced challenges in adapting to university-level learning, including language barriers, assignment requirements, academic expectations, and study skills development.
Social integration and sense of belonging	Respondents described difficulties in building social relationships, overcoming social exclusion, and adjusting to socio-economic differences within the university environment.
Family Responsibilities	Many students balanced academic responsibilities with household duties, sibling care, and family obligations, which reduced the time available for study and academic engagement.
Institutional support	Teacher guidance, scholarships, counseling services, and academic advising were identified as important resources that facilitated students' academic adjustment and success.

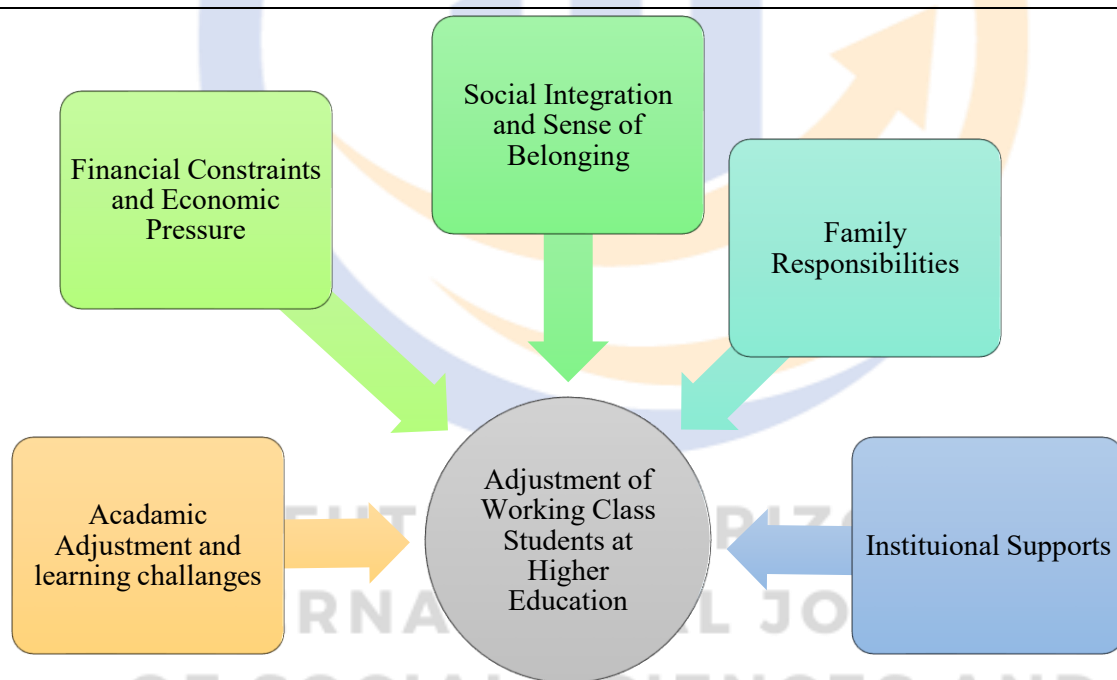


Figure 1: *Thematic Map of Adjustment of Working-Class Students at Higher Education*

Discussion

This study revealed that working class students have different academic, emotional and social problems in higher education. The challenge of balancing school work and money matters was mentioned by the participants, often. Some pupils have mentioned the word 'pressure' in

relation to workload, exams and time planning, particularly where there are work or family responsibilities. These results corroborate earlier research that also found financial limitations and academic pressures to be important factors that hinder working-class students from achieving success in college (Aries & Seider, 2005; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010). The study also pointed to a number of emotional issues affecting working-class students. Participants stated that they felt stressed, anxious, uncertain about their future in school, and doubted their abilities. These emotional moments frequently arose from financial concerns, academic aspirations, and social acceptance in the context of the university. Such results have been found elsewhere in the literature and indicate that students from working-class backgrounds often suffer from psychological strain as a result of the expectations and requirements of higher education and the demands of their socio-economic context (Lehmann, 2014).

Another major theme was social issues. The participants highlighted social relationship development challenges, campus activities involvement, and a sense of belonging in Higher Education Institutions. Some pupils felt that there were social differences between themselves and other pupils from more privileged backgrounds, and this sometimes led to pupils feeling excluded or lonely. The results of these studies align with previous studies that have found that working-class students are less likely to feel socially integrated and successful in their sense of belonging to institutions (Jack, 2016; Reay et al., 2010). These difficulties were not the end of the world, however, and the results showed that working-class students used a range of coping mechanisms to adjust and stay on in higher education. Focusing on family support, peer networks, and personal resiliency, as well as good time management and high aspirations for education. The strategies helped students to overcome the obstacles and to focus on their studies. The results indicated that the process of adjustment of students studying in higher education was complex, including the academic, emotional, and social aspects.

All of these students have been challenged in many ways and have shown resilience and adaptability in various ways through a variety of coping strategies. It emphasizes the importance of providing an institutional support system that caters to both academic and psychosocial issues as a way of ensuring successful adaptation and retention of working-class students in higher education.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research illustrates that working-class people have problems when they study in higher education, such as academic, financial, and social. Such challenges can make university life stressful for them. A lot of students would like to be involved in life on campus. They can't because they don't have enough time or money. Working-class students are determined and resilient because of their motivation, time management, and encouragement from their family and peers in tackling these challenges. The study reveals that the universities can take part in supporting the success of the students by providing financial aid, counseling, mentoring, and inclusive practices.

Universities need to create an environment that helps students learn, enroll, and adjust to their work. Based on this research, here are some recommendations for working-class students' adjustment and success in education:

1. Financial support measures, including emergency funding, fee waivers, and scholarships, should be strengthened in universities to ease the financial burden on working-class students.
2. The university offers support facilities like tutoring programs, academic advising, study skills training, etc., to solve the academic problems of the working-class, and to alleviate their academic concerns
3. Universities need to establish mentoring schemes to connect with working-class students and with faculty, senior students, or graduates who can guide, encourage, and support them.
4. Universities need to ensure that their policies and practices are in line with the needs and situations of working-class students and are equitable in the provision of education and resources.

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