

From the Gate to Graduation: A Biopsychosocial First Year Experience for Conscious Transition from high school to university life

Alizwa Boco

Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University, Medunsa, South Africa

Abstract:

Until we make university a conscious transition from childhood to adulthood, South African universities will keep producing graduates unable to adapt to our socioeconomic reality of high unemployment, corruption, and inequality. We will not produce pioneers who serve their communities and thrive with limited resources – we will produce a workforce that breaks under pressure.

I am a fourth-year medical student at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University in Pretoria, but I am from Mthatha in the Eastern Cape. I arrived at SMU in 2023 as the Eastern Cape's top achiever, with the Premier funding my degree. I had never been to Gauteng. I had never travelled alone outside my province. My childhood was a strict routine: home to school, school to home. I had ambitions in art, but my parents disapproved because it meant staying after school or travelling without supervision. Anything that took time away from academics was not supported. My only source of joy was academic validation. I was a child depending on my parents. Now imagine that child, 1000km from home for the first time, surrounded by people speaking languages she does not understand.

I was lucky. My welcome was different. The Vice-Chancellor and Dean of Medicine personally welcomed me to ease my transition. I had lunch with the Director of Student Affairs. The university allocated a friend to show me around SMU and help me settle in. I never felt alone. I never doubted I could manage this journey. I remained a top student – until I had two episodes of cerebral oedema, an ICU admission, and surgery in my first six months. I refused a leave of absence. Too many people would be disappointed, but most importantly, I would be disappointed in myself. My dreams were too precious. So, I pushed through pain, insomnia, migraines, and anorexia to finish first year on record time – with five distinctions. I did it because of the community I formed at the gates of SMU during orientation. Those people are still my best friends. We navigate life together.

Life was good until a classmate was accused of sexual assault. Just like that, his journey ended. We had so much in common: Xhosa, rural, same mindset, and etiquette. I understood immediately – he did not do it to destroy or cause pain. He did not know. He was never taught how to engage, how to ask for consent, or even what consent is. He did not know. That is where this began. I started designing a programme to help university students navigate life by first arming them with essential skills and tools – an intervention strategy before life takes its course and we are left dealing with consequences, saying only, "I didn't know." Imagine how far he could have gone if only he knew?