

# Retrospective Assessment and Proposals for the Adaptation of the First Year Students

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**Abstract**—The process of studying at the university requires a freshman to be independent and active, although many freshmen are not prepared for it. We consider several sets of problems associated with the adaptation of the first year students: learning difficulties, difficulties in communication, the starting level (school background), self-organization, fears, and personal adjustment. Based on the analysis of materials from an applied sociological study, the authors conclude that adaptation to the educational process at the university proceeds faster for students with following characteristics: satisfied with their student life, interested in studying, living an active life, informed about the university before entering it, guided by recommendations of relatives or friends, previously enrolled in this university. The original research is based on students' self-assessment. The students make an attempt to assess their own adaptation problems in the first year of study by the second and the third year students. The novelty of the study is to consider the attitudes of students as subjects of the educational process, who are able to independently comprehend the problems of adaptation to the educational process at the university in the first year of study, their own strategies for overcoming difficulties. Another goal of the study is to present an organizational model for helping the first year students to adapt to the university education process as well as to consider opportunities for positive reflection in the process of adaptation to the educational process in the university. The research materials can be useful to educators, administrative staff of universities, psychologists, and freshmen's parents.

**Keywords**—adaptation of the first year students, difficulties of adaptation, problems of communication, satisfaction with studying, adaptation strategies, organizational model of assistance in adaptation of the first year students

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years the problems of the first year students' adaptation to the educational process in the university have stepped on interdisciplinary international platform. The authors of research in various fields of studies managed to identify a

number of factors affecting the adaptation of the first year students.

The first group of factors is related to the pedagogical area. The researchers are looking for correlation between the level of school preparation and adaptation at the university, the influence of academic performance and certain personal competencies on adaptation

Terpstra-Tong, Jane Lai Yee, and Ahmad [1] identified the main problems of transition to higher education which the first year students in Malaysia face with and identified five skills that help them to cope with this transition such as the ability to learn independently, research, time-management skills, speaking English and critical thinking. At the same time, the results of this study do not reveal the social aspect as a serious problem of adaptation.

Gabdrakhmanova, Gamaeva and Nefediev [2] investigated the period of freshmen's adaptation. The authors conclude that student's adaptation can take up to two or even three semesters. School performance is one of the most influential factors of adaptation. Using the methods of correlation and structural analysis, the authors confirmed the relationship between the results of exams in secondary school and the performance of the first year students (during the adaptation period).

Solovyova, Pomortseva and Morozova [3] identified pedagogical factors that ensure the effectiveness of the academic tutors in adapting students to the university and the priorities for their integrative activities, which contains academic, research and educational elements. The technology developed by the authors contributes to the professional adaptation of students.

The psychological aspect of adaptation is considered by researchers in the context of the relationship with fear, optimism or depression, satisfaction with the process of studies.

Morton, Bergler and Boman [4] studied the effects of students' attitudes on their adjustment to university. The authors conclude that there is a strong correlation between such psychological characteristics as optimism, depression and anxiety and adaptation to university.

Shamionov [5] has found the connection between the capability for adaptation and student life satisfaction while fear for exams and some other factors resulted in adaptational problems.

Social psychologists made a great contribution to the investigation of adaptational problems.

The researchers in the work [6] emphasized the role of social integration for the academic success of freshmen during their first year at university. The authors suggest to create a friendly learning environment to mitigate the adaptation and to support less motivated students.

Buote et al [7] in their work stated that the quality of new friendships is closely related to the adaptation to university.

Peer monitoring is gaining greater significance in contemporary learning environment [8]. The researchers investigated the effects of mentoring on social integration and satisfaction with students' life of freshmen. According to their findings non-peer mentored students would leave university four times more often than non-peer mentored students. The authors come to the conclusion that peer mentoring facilitates the adjustment to university.

The problems of the first year students' adaptation have also been considered by medical sciences. Basols, Margareth, Bruna and Guilherme evaluated the stress levels of groups of the first year and sixth year students through a cross-sectional, observational study and the year of training was an important factor showing the stress symptoms for the first year students (49.1%) and sixth-year students (33.6%) [9].

Nightingale, Roberts and Tariq also studied the influence of self-efficacy on academic achievements. According to their findings the students with higher levels of emotional management and emotional self-efficacy showed the better adjustments in higher education [10].

The resemblance between high school education and higher education is of the utmost importance in relation to the first year academic achievements [11]. The fit between secondary education and university education implies social integration and student motivation [12].

The authors assume, that students who are aware of university requirements (informed by their relatives or friends who studied at the same university) can adjust to students' life more successfully and express greater confidence. De Waters et al compared the group of students who took a special introductory course and the control group by such parameters as self-confidence, sense of fit with their future profession, confidence of remaining in the chosen field. Their results emphasize the importance of the preliminary knowledge about the essence of the chosen vocation for the integration into the learning environment [13].

The effects of academic efficacy and optimism on students' adjustment to university education have been widely studied. The researchers efficiently prove the strong relationship between academic self-efficacy and optimism to performance and adaptation. Such factors as expectations, stress levels, satisfaction with the students' life and intention to continue studying in the chosen profession are extremely important [4, 10, 14].

Social integration also plays a very important role for the adjustment to university life [6, 12, 15]. The contacts with fellow students, senior students, and teachers as well as social media [15, 16], new friendships [6], peer-monitoring and the fit between secondary school and higher education are extremely relevant to the adjustment of the first year students. Another important factor is academic expectations [12, 17].

The works of authors from different fields of science present various factors of adaptation, techniques and methods that contribute to the adaptation of the first year students. Most of the adaptation techniques proposed by the authors can be attributed to assistance. The representation of adaptation problems by students and ways to overcome them require more profound research [18]. Here, the authors set the following tasks: to consider the difficulties students face in the process of studying at the university and building communication processes, to consider the representation of students' own difficulties, problems and strategies to overcome them, to identify the pattern of repetition of adaptation problems through analyzing opinions of the first, the second and the third year students, to analyze the possibilities of positive reflection in the adaptation of the first year students.

## II. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH METHODS

As a research methodology, the activity approach was used. Within the framework of this approach, the authors consider a student as a subject of cognition, capable of learning self-analysis, assessment of adaptation in the educational process and university environment. To assess the difficulties faced by the first year students and the strategies the authors choose to overcome these difficulties and adapt quickly to university environment, a questionnaire-based survey was selected. The questionnaire included the following blocks of parameters and indicators: students' awareness of university at the time of starting studying in there, a classifier of difficulties faced by the first year students, strategies for overcoming these difficulties, activity and satisfaction with the learning process, an organizational model for helping the first year students in adaptation. The study was conducted in February 2019. Students from three universities in Novosibirsk and Krasnoyarsk took part in the research: 285 of the first year students and 51 of the third-year students. One of the main tasks of the study was to highlight the common problems of adaptation of the the first year students, regardless of university. The second important task was to consider the representation of the adaptation problems of the first year students after gaining a certain experience in university studies. For this purpose, the second-year and the third –year students were involved in the study.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The problems faced by the first year students in the first months of studies depend on many factors: organizational, psychological, communicative, and informational preparedness of students. The choice of university plays an important role at the initial stage of the adaptation process at the university. 14.0% of the first year respondents received the primary information about their university from teachers; 34.4% of respondents were told about the university by friends, 23.2% of first year students received this information from media sources, less than a quarter of first year students (26.7%) attended the traditional university events as “Open Doors Day”. Thus, for ¾ first year students, the university and its life were opened only after the start of studies. The most active information source for the first year students is the closest environment, in particular, friends.

The factors that determine the choice of a university can be very different (Table 1). The most important factors when choosing a university were the following: “desire to get an interesting profession” for the second-year and the third-year students), “career prospects” (28.8% of first year students and 33.3% the second-year and the third-year students), “tuition fees” ( 27.7% of first year students and 5.9% the second-year and the third-year students), “the possibility of obtaining a quality education” (23.9% of first year students and 29.4% of the second-year and the third-year students) and the possibility of obtaining a well-paid job (23.2% first year students and 41.2% of the second-year and the third-year students)

The next information source in the rating of choice were: “advice from relatives, friends, acquaintances” (21.1% of first year students and 15.7% of the second-year and the third-year students), “prestige of the university” (19.3% of first year students and 35.3% of students 2 and 3 courses), “parents and relatives studied at the university” (11.9% of first year students and 7.8% of the second-year and the third year students), “university location near the house” (11.2% of first year students and 11.8% of the second-year and the third students), “it didn’t matter which university to study at” (11.2% of first year students and 2.0% of the second-year and the third students).

The survey data allows following the trend of choosing a university within the latest 3 years: applicants, first of all, are oriented towards the university, which will ensure an interesting job, career and decent salary.

In the first months of university studies, students have to overcome a number of difficulties (Fig. 1)

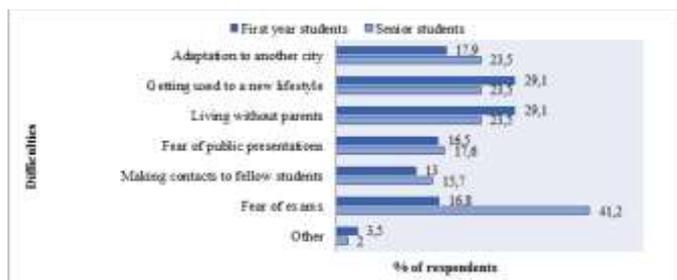


Fig. 1. What difficulties have you succeeded to overcome within the first months of studying?

For the first year students the main difficulty in studying is getting used to a new lifestyle without parents. In this case, universities should develop special programs to help the first year students in adaptation, both in the educational process and their everyday life.

The process of adaptation to university life for each individual student may vary by the time frame. At the time of the survey (February 2019), 31.2% of the first year students noted that they had learning difficulties, 11.9% of students who had difficulties in communicating with fellow students (classmates), 53.7% of students noted that did not experience any difficulties.

Students' learning activities are also different (Fig. 2)

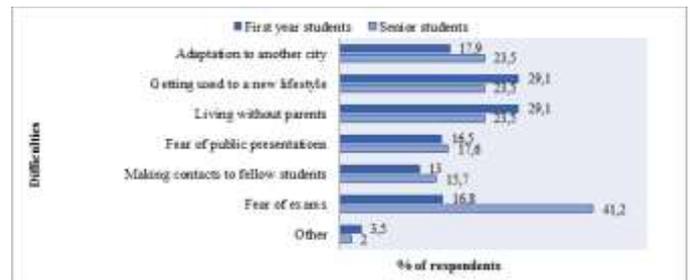


Fig. 2. How do you master the academic program?

36.5% of the first year students do not always successfully cope with the program, more than half of students believe that they cope with the curriculum successfully, but 26.4% indicated that they have certain difficulties in mastering the curriculum.

Success in learning depends largely on the interest in the subjects (Fig. 3), the motivation to learn, the satisfaction with student life. Most students are interested in studying which is a significant support factor in overcoming difficulties in studies.

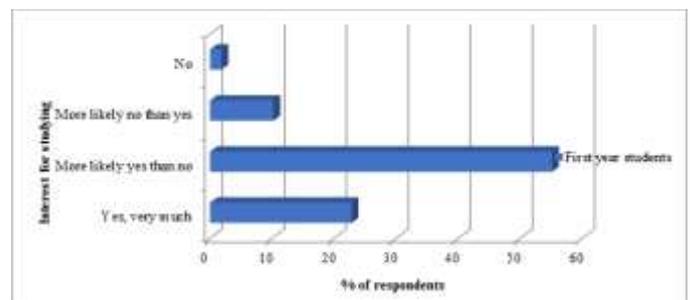


Fig. 3. Are you interested in studying?

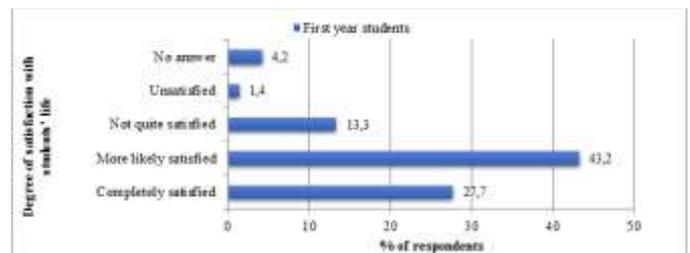


Fig. 4. Are you satisfied with your student life?

Most students are satisfied with their student life, which also helps them to adapt more quickly to university environment and educational process. The degree of dissatisfaction with student life can be a consequence of the slow pace of adaptation, as well as the cause of a low level of adaptation, and requires further study. Students who are dissatisfied with their student life face more difficulties in learning and communicating with their fellow students (Fig. 5).

Freshmen have to build new communication processes. More than half of students describe relationships between fellow students as friendly (61.7%) or normal (32.2%); one third of students estimate relationships between students and faculty supervisors as friendly (38.1%) or normal (32.7%). In the description of the relationships “a teacher – a student”, the assessment of “official relationships” appears (22.1%). Negative attitude in relationships was noted only by 2% of the respondents. This is due to the formalization of communications in the educational process, when a freshman gets into the situation of regulations, responsibility, business interactions they are not used to yet. Teacher’s insistence on high standards is sometimes taken by the first year students very personally. A teacher “does not take the individual approach,” a student perceives such interaction negatively.

If the first year students face any difficulties, they should create their own strategy to overcome these difficulties and decide who they can ask for help (Fig. 5).

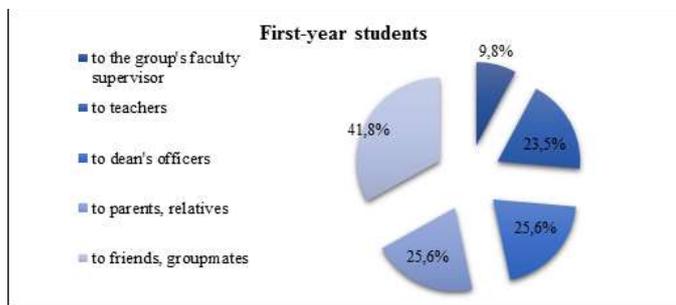


Fig. 5. Who do you ask for help when you face difficulties?

The first year students actively use all channels of communication to get advice or support. Parental support is still of great importance (stereotypes of problem solving during the period of schooling remain). The support of “student-group supervisor” channel is less actively used.

The second and the third year students were also asked to remember who they had to contact with their problems in the first year of study (Fig. 6). Students also used all the communication channels to solve their problems, but to a lesser extent than modern first year students, ‘a student – a teacher’ and ‘a student – a dean’s office’ channels of communication were used. Parental support was also widely demanded.

When discussing the results of the survey, students commented on this fact by changing, in general, the structure of communication in the educational process related to the capabilities of the electronic environment of university, interaction on the issues of educational process in social media.

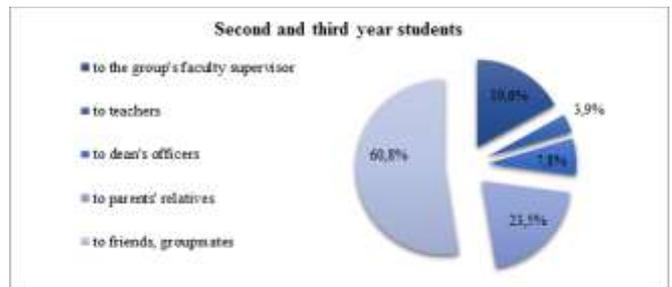


Fig. 6. Who did you ask for help when you had difficulties during your first year of studies?

Most of all in the process of studying at university first year students like the opportunity to learn something new and communicate with groupmates, to a lesser extent they enjoy communication with teachers and independent work (Fig. 7).

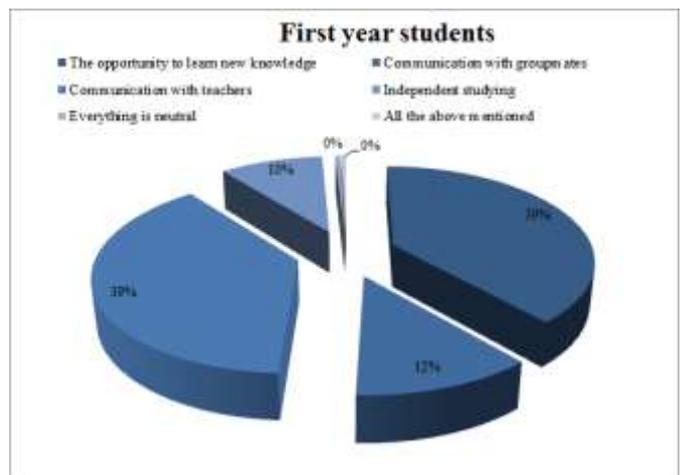


Fig. 7. What do you like the most in the process of studying at university? (First year students)

Extracurricular activities play greater importance in adjustment to university life of students. The activity of the first year students took the following forms (Fig. 8)

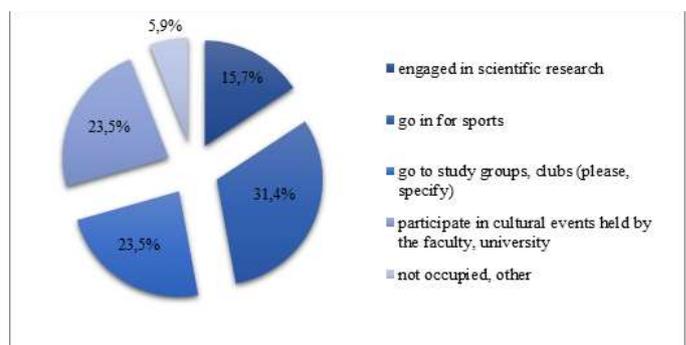


Fig. 8. What extracurricular activities are you engaged in?

The positive point is that the first year students after six months of training began to engage in research work (15.7%), a third of the first year students are involved in sports. However, there is some inertia in participating in the life of faculty. It is this activity that contributes to the quickest adaptation to learning at university, the intense networking.

The first year students belong to the age group, which is already over 16-17 years old, but younger than 23. It is in this age range that self-awareness processes are actualized. If a person can use these processes positively, they would have at their disposal a tool for building constructive relationships with the world as a whole. Positive reflection is very important in the process of adaptation to the educational process at university. It contributes to the change in the ways of activity, communication, attitude to situational events and problems. With the help of positive reflection, the first year student gradually finds out the causes of their problems and difficulties and builds a strategy to eliminate or overcome them.

The first stage of positive reflection is the awareness of problems. Freshmen were asked to highlight in which areas they face the most problems (Fig. 9)

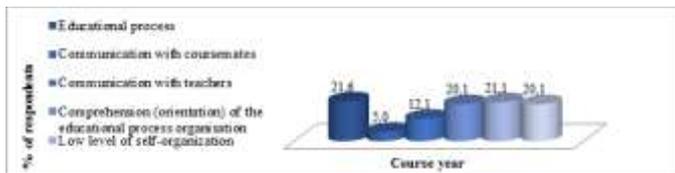


Fig. 9. In what areas do the first year students face most problems?

The main problems of the first year students are directly related to the learning process. Freshmen interpret weak school background as the lack of the fit between school and university knowledge. For this this reason the learning materials are not so easily studied. The first year students lack autonomy in decision making, the organization of the educational process, which is incomprehensible for them because it differs from the school one.

The second stage of positive reflection involves finding options for help in difficulties and problems. Students were asked to evaluate how effective new projects of the university could be and could help them in adapting (Fig. 10).

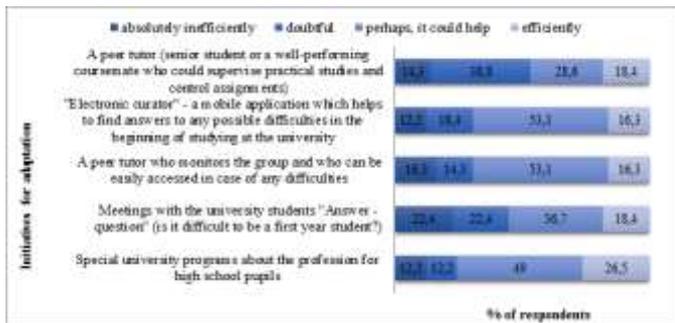


Fig. 10. How successful could be university initiatives for the adaptation of first year students?

The students considered specialized programs about the professional sphere designed for high school students to be most effective, and they also doubted (38.8%) concerning the effectiveness of teamwork with a peer tutor, although this practice is widely used in some foreign universities. Based on the data obtained, the next stage of the study of positive reflection is planned, allowing students to form their own strategies for overcoming problems and difficulties when adapting to the educational process at university.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The analysis of scientific literature showed that despite the fact that the problem of the adaptation of the first year students received wide interdisciplinary support from researchers, such issues as the role of positive reflection in the adaptation of first year students, their self-organization were not studied enough.

Universities have great potential in helping freshmen to adapt, which is also associated with the use of new information technologies (for example, the Electronic Curator mobile application), expanding communication with applicants, including the peer assistance.

The issue of transition from school to university educational programs in specific disciplines requires further studying, as well as organizational support of first year students in their extracurricular time.

It is necessary to develop projects that would help freshmen to realize immediately that they are subjects of the educational process, they should be autonomous and active. Positive reflection should be part of such projects.

The comparison of the opinions of the first year students on the adaptation process and the opinions of the second and the third year students allow finding certain trends in the adaptation process, which can become the basis of future research and positive innovations at university.

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