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**FIRST CYCLE STUDENTS' GOALS ORIENTATION AND**  
**ADJUSTMENT TO UNIVERSITY LIFE**

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***Abstract***

Students' high failure rate in early years of academic education is a problem that most universities face. Some research has shown that one of the factors affecting this issue is students' difficulty to develop a suited adjustment to their university life, mainly due to the inappropriate establishment of goals or motivations. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the relationship between students' orientation to the academic goals and motivations and, on the other side, the adjustment to their university life. The research was carried out under a quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional approach and its scope is of correlational nature. A sample of 1069 students of first and second semester from a Latin American University responded to a questionnaire about college life. There was a statistically significant positive relationship between goal orientation and adjustment with a correlation coefficient ( $r=0.524$  and a  $p<0.001$ ). We conclude that goal orientation is a determining factor for first and second semester students to succeed in adjusting to university life. Besides it will contribute later to better academic performance.

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**Keywords:** Adaptation, adjustment to university life, goal orientation, motivation, university students.



## 1. Introduction

The first years of college are characterized as a transition stage for young people, a transition that involves the transformation of their thinking, ideas and actions. This process of transformation can cause instability in certain people, which in many cases leads to dropout and/or academic failure (Parrino, 2010; Elvira-Valdés & Pujol, 2012), both situations being the main issues that higher education institutions are facing. Therefore, several investigations from different countries have been carried out in order to determine the most influential causes of dropout. In a study conducted in Colombia, it was concluded that the factors that influence university dropout rates can be classified into: 1) academic factors associated with low performance, such as national tests low scores and high repetition rates, and 2) non-academic factors such as individual, family, social and institutional environment factors and, above all, economic problems (Barragán & Patiño, 2013). Meanwhile, in Peru, university dropout factors would depend on the approach used to analyze them. So, the causes may be psychological, economic, sociological, organizational or interactional (Apaza & Huamán, 2012). For Gairin et al. (2014), there are three main factors that influence dropout, dissatisfaction with the student's experience, responsibilities at work and/or in the family, and finally, economic hardship.

An adequate adjustment to university life could prevent many studied factors causing university dropout. The definition of this adjustment has been structured from different approaches, thus making its study and approach more complex. Adjustment can be defined as the ability to adapt to the new conditions and experiences that are required by the transition from secondary to higher education. A group of authors state that adjustment will depend on high self-esteem, life satisfaction, physical and mental health, mood, ability to cope with daily activities, and feelings of acceptance with regard to the interaction group [Al-Sharideh & Goe, Guzman & Playford, Chirkov et al., Matsumoto, LeRoux, Bernhard, & Gray, Downing-Burnette, Heller, Binder, & Suntinger, Feinstein & Ward, Savick, Van Oudenhoven, & Van der Zee (as cited in Chavoshi, Wintre, Dentakos, & Wright, 2017)]. These studies have correlated the adjustment to university life with variables influencing its formation and they have determined its importance in the personal and academic development of students,

On the other hand, the Theory of Goal Orientation is one of the most significant theories to explain the development of students' motivational dynamic with respect to their academic objectives (Matos & Lens, 2006; Ames, 1992). This ability has also been studied as a determining factor in academic retention and achievement (Gul & Shehzad, 2012). There are two main types of goal orientation: 1) Knowledge goals (learning) and 2) Achievement goals (performance) (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). The performance goals are sub-classified into approximation and avoidance. The difference between both classifications being the following: Subjects with a tendency toward performance approximation goals will try to see themselves with better skills than the rest of their peers. However, those following performance avoidance goals will try to protect themselves from the group's criticism (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Barzegar, 2012). There is a proposal for a third type of goal orientation, called a task-oriented objective. It differs from the knowledge goals because it only focuses on completing the suggested tasks, regardless of whether or not there is an adequate level of learning. It also differs with the achievement goals, because people who follow these targets set their goals to obtain results demonstrating that their skills are better than other's (Shell, Soh, Flanigan, & Peteranetz, 2016).

The results of various researches have shown that students with professional preparation focusing on knowledge objectives are those who focus on learning regardless of the difficulties that arise. In fact, the search for potential solutions allows them to develop their knowledge. On the other hand, those preferring achievement goals tend to have avoidance attitudes when facing challenges, they prefer to carry out activities that guarantee possibilities of success early on (Gul & Shehzad, 2012; Aponte & Gómez, 2015; Subaşı & Tas, 2016). It has also been shown that when students are more autonomous in their teaching-learning process, they tend to focus on goals that allow for better personal performance and are less likely to develop avoidance goals (Carmichael, Muir, & Callingham, 2017). On the other hand, in terms of metacognitive strategies, it has been shown that both goals of knowledge and achievement have positive effects on the development of these strategies, and therefore they serve better academic achievement (Barzegar, 2012). Another area in which the importance of goal orientation has been studied is the cooperative work method. It is mentioned that there is an influence between these two aspects. Indeed, a context that favors learning through cooperative work helps students to reformulate their academic goals in a positive way. Similarly, those students with achievement goals can perform better in the activities requiring the cooperative work strategy (Kim, Kim, & Svinicki, 2012).

The influence of the different types of goal orientation on students' social and academic adjustment is significant, especially the knowledge and learning orientations. People who have the ability to set learning-oriented goals have higher levels of self-efficacy and this allows for a more positive adjustment to college life than those who orient their goals to either performance or task, or those who prefer not to set clear goals (Gong & Fan, 2006). However, regardless of the type of goal-orientation the student is inclined to, the student's motivating strength to minimize the impact of factors such as a negative institutional climate, poor social integration, economic factors, and low academic performance among others will be paramount. Indeed, each of these factors can have an impact on academic performance and on the adaptation to college life. The ability to overcome these factors will later enable the student to achieve the objectives offered by his professional education (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013; Rodríguez-Gómez, Feixas, Gairín, & Muñoz, 2012; Vries, León Arenas, Romero Muñoz, & Hernández Saldaña, 2011).

When a goal is set, the motivation that will drive the achievement of the proposed goal is defined. When students enter university, they adopt different types of motivation that in the process of their professional education will allow them to cope with academic and social demands, to finally develop an adequate university adjustment (Pintrich, Schunk, & Luque, 2006). From the perspective of the theory of self-determination, there are the following types of motivation: autonomous motivation and controlled motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The autonomous motivation will be the most optimal and the one that has more relationships with the orientation given by the knowledge goals or the also called learning goals. The autonomous type consists of intrinsic regulation and identified regulation, while the controlled motivation is the sum of external regulation and introjected regulation (Vansteenkiste, Sierens, Soenens, Luyckx, & Lens, 2009).

Thus, this research studies these two phenomena: the adjustment to university life and the orientation to goals, with the aim of establishing a clearer vision of the thoughts, motivations and fears that students have in the first semesters of university studies in the Ecuadorian context.

## **2. Problem Statement**

In the last decades, the problem of university dropout in Latin America has gained importance in the various institutions in charge of the study and reflection of the development and the fulfillment of the educational context at different levels (primary, secondary and higher). Although it is true that since 2000 the number of students who have entered universities has increased by 40%, the number of students who have actually completed their professional training is another reality. Since 2010 only one in 10 young people between the ages of 25 and 29 completed five years of higher education (UNESCO, 2015). In Ecuador, this reality was reflected in 2012 with 50% dropout, and with a significant 26% of student dropout in the university first semesters in 2016 (El Comercio, 2016). In spite of these statistical facts, scarce research is found in Ecuador regarding the causes of this problem, and there are even less proposals to address the drop-out rates in the universities of this country.

Students' motivation is one of the main aspects constituting the set of requirements that are necessary to successfully obtain a university degree. Motivation is a psychological characteristic guiding people's actions. However, this phenomenon has no value without the belief that one is able to achieve its goals (Valle et al. 2015). For this reason, the study of this process is complex and the aim of this research is to visualize the students' capacity for motivation taking into account that their goals could be established by themselves or influenced by their work environment. The ability to establish goals influence the adjustment to university life up to a certain level. This level will allow the establishment of hypotheses of intervention in order to generate possible solutions to the problem of dropout and low academic performance of university students. However, one must be reminded that the most appropriate way to encourage young people to learn with the purpose of mastering and enriching their knowledge remains the intrinsic motivation, so future proposals should be focused on this area.

## **3. Research Questions**

The following research questions have been considered in this research:

- What is students' level of motivation when they enter university?
- Is there an adequate level of adjustment to University?
- Is there an incidence between the students' goals orientation and their adjustment to University?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research focused on demonstrating that students' goal orientation/motivation is a psychological factor that affects the adjustment to their university life and therefore it will allow a lower dropout rate.

## 5. Research Methods

The research was carried out with a non-experimental, cross-sectional design; its scope is descriptive and correlational, and it is intended to establish the predictive relationship that exists between goal orientation or motivation and the students' adjustment to university life.

### 5.1. Participants

For this study, an intentionally selected, non-probability sample of 1069 participants was used, of which 567 are women and 502 are men. The students belong to the 1st and 2nd semesters of the Universidad Técnica del Norte, Ecuador; their age is  $X=20.13$  and  $S.D.=3.44$ .

### 5.2. Process

Once the request was approved by the authorities of each faculty, information was collected in one month during class hours. Before being submitted to the questionnaire, the students were explained the objectives of the research and they were asked to sign a letter of informed consent. The data was stored into a database created with the SPSS 2.0 software where the descriptive and correlational statistical computations were performed, as well as the respective tables and graphs.

### 5.3. Instrument

The university life questionnaire was used for the research. It consists of 140 items and it is divided into 10 subscales, of which the A subscales were used. For the adjustment to university life, which consists of 44 questions, the G subscale was also used.

The reasons why the student decided to study his degree are assessed through the variable Orientation to academic goals. It is made up of 16 Likert-type response items. It is divided into 4 sub-dimensions (intrinsic motivation; identified regulation, introjected regulation and external regulation). Both intrinsic and regulated motivation make up a broader dimension that is the autonomous motivation, it gives an  $\alpha=.87$  which shows that the scale is reliable. The second dimension is the controlled motivation and it results from both introjected and external regulation, it gives an  $\alpha=.72$  which shows that it is also reliable.

The variable for adjustment to university life was measured with subscale A of the University Life Questionnaire. It assesses how students adjust to the university; it contains 44 questions with a Likert-type response scale. It is made of four subscales, (Academic Adjustment, Social Adjustment, Personal-emotional Adjustment, and Institutional Attachment). It gives  $\alpha=.72$  for academic adjustment,  $\alpha=.81$  for social adjustment,  $\alpha=.86$  for personal-emotional adjustment, and  $\alpha=.70$  for institutional adjustment, which means that the scales are statistically reliable.

## 6. Findings

The findings found in the study variables were the followings:

### 6.1. Descriptive Statistics

The data published in Table 1 refer to the average age of the student's part of the study and their standard deviation as well as the average of the overall scores of the study variables.

**Table 01.** Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard deviation
Age	1069	0	48	20,13	3,446
Adjustment to university life	1069	36,69	98,38	71,0855	9,96169
Goals orientation Motivation	1069	,00	100,00	73,4993	14,13975
Valid N (per list)	1069				

## 6.2. Correlation analysis

There is a statistically significant positive relationship between goal orientation and adjustment to university life ( $r(1069)=0.524$  and a  $p<0.001$ ), the correlation of the sample was calculated by reducing it in order not to lose the sample effectiveness.

**Table 02.** Correlation Goals Orientation and Adjustment to university life.

Sample size	r	P value
1069 <sup>a</sup>	.524**	<.01
543 <sup>b</sup>	.549**	<.01
310 <sup>c</sup>	.539**	<.01
118 <sup>d</sup>	.544**	<.01

Note: \*\*. Correlation is significant at <0,01 level (two tailed)

The dimensions of each of the variables (table 3) were also correlated. Academic adjustment, social adjustment, emotional adjustment and institutional adjustment were taken into account in the adjustment to university life. For goal orientation and motivation the study considered the Autonomous Motivation and Controlled Motivation. Academic adjustment is statistically and positively related to internal motivation ( $r=0.448$  and  $p<0.01$ ). Academic adjustment and motivation control report negative and statistically significant results ( $r=-0.265$  and  $p<0.01$ ). The social adjustment dimension is positively and statistically significant related to the internal motivation ( $r=0.453$  and a  $p<0.01$ ) while it is reported negatively and statistically significant with the controlled motivation ( $r=-0.184$  and a  $p<0.01$ ). Another dimension taken into account is the emotional adjustment, when related to the internal motivation, it shows a statistically significant positive relationship ( $r=0.230$  and a  $p<0.01$ ) and a statistically significant negative relationship ( $r=-0.225$  and a  $p<0.01$ ) with the controlled motivation. Finally, the institutional adjustment dimension is related in a positive and statistically significant way to the internal motivation ( $r=0.414$  and a  $p<0.01$ ) and it is related to the controlled motivation in a negative and statistically significant way ( $r=-0.319$  and a  $p<0.01$ ).

**Table 03.** Correlations of dimensions

Correlations		Autonomous or internal Motivation	Controlled or external Motivation
<b>Academic adjustment</b>	Pearson Correlations	,448**	-,265**
	Sig. (two tailed)	0	0
	N	1069	1069
<b>Social adjustment</b>	Pearson Correlations	,453**	-,184**
	Sig. (two tailed)	0	0
	N	1069	1069
<b>Emocional adjustment</b>	Pearson Correlations	,230**	-,225**
	Sig. (two tailed)	0	0
	N	1069	1069
<b>Institucional adjustment</b>	Pearson Correlations	,414**	-,319**
	Sig. (two tailed)	0	0
	N	1069	1069

Note: \*\* Correlation is significant at <0,01 level (two tailed)

## 7. Conclusion

After having analyzed the different variables, the importance of motivational processes is shown since they favor actions of retention and adaptability within the educational framework, in which there is a significant percentage of dropouts. This academic satisfaction witnessed by motivational variables predicts an adjustment to university life taking into account different aspects, among which the emotional, personal and social ones. Thus, the results show high significance between the application of the goals orientation or motivational processes and the adaptability to the university context, key requirements for the student to properly guide his process toward academic success.

Therefore, the autonomous motivation is the best asset for the student to have an adequate adjustment to university life in all its dimensions. The internal reasons for choosing a degree determine significantly the way in which the student adapts to the university environment, for example, if the reasons for studying have an internal significance for the individual, there will be a quick adaptation to the academic environment and the social adaptation will also benefit from it. These two aspects will have an impact on emotional adjustment by developing a faster and assertive balance in the student's emotions when facing the changes that adaptation to the university environment demands. When a student focuses his goals based on his internal motivation, these will be oriented towards personal and professional improvement, through knowledge and positive interpersonal relationships that will allow him to achieve the goals set by his university education.

Based on these results, it is important to mention the need to continue with similar research to describe and understand the situation of vulnerability that students may experience in case of poor adjustment to university life, as well as the urgency of establishing intervention programs to reduce dropout rates and academic failure.

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