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**FIRST YEAR STUDENTS' SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL  
ADAPTATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS  
FACTOR ANALYSIS**

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***Abstract***

Social-psychological adaptation of first year students to higher education institution and new social group has always been relevant, since it is known to be a complex process that takes social, mental and biological energy from a new-sprung student. A theoretical analysis of foreign studies in the field of socio-psychological adaptation allowed us to identify a number of trends: problems in adaptation to higher education institution requirements pertain to the most of students, 1/3 of them on the average. Maladjustment comes with such consequences such as anxiety, depression, stress vulnerability, anger, disposition, mental disorders. In order to successfully adapt to the higher education requirements first year students need to be supported by psychologists, tutors, family and a psychologically safe environment must be created. Such defense mechanisms like avoidant behavior and rationalization as well as coping strategies such as "Escape/Avoid" and "Social Support Search" are the reasons for adaptation difficulties. The girls are more vulnerable to stress and depressed mood hence it is harder for them to adapt. Our empirical study revealed the following results: 15% of the students faced difficulties in adaptation to higher education institution requirements with the major difficulty being "time management", while a significant part of the respondents (43.5%) expect support from teachers and psychologists. The study helped us to reveal organizational, social, didactical and material difficulties the students face in the process of adaptation to the higher education.

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**Keywords:** Social-psychological adaptation, first year students, adaptation factors.



## 1. Introduction

Social-psychological adaptation of first year students to higher education institution and new social group has always been relevant, since it is known to be a complex process that takes social, mental and biological energy from a new-sprung student.

Social-psychological adaptation of students as a social-professional group is, due to its characteristics, more susceptible to the influence of social-cultural dynamics. Social-psychological adaptation of an individual as a scientific category is not deprived of the attention of scientists. However, despite numerous theoretical and empirical studies, the problem is still relevant and demands further research, since social-psychological adaptation, unlike biological one, is largely associated with the processes of individual identification, comprehension and interiorization of the rapid social and other changes to face.

## 2. Problem Statement

We will now proceed to the analysis of the recent years' foreign studies on social-psychological adaptation of first year students to higher education institution requirements. The study by Wu, Garza, and Guzman (2015) focuses on adaptation of first year students in higher education institutions of the USA. According to the authors, the major problems students face are academic problems, social isolation and cultural adaptation, making it so students need help not only with academic subjects but with social and cultural problem solving as well. Upon studying the process of first year students adaptation to higher education institution requirements Aurel (2013) found out that by the second year of studies 25% students drop out because of the adapting difficulties. According to the author, negative adaptation leads to anxiety, depression, stress vulnerability, anger, disposition, mental disorders. On the contrary, positive adaptation leads to high academic achievements and high self-esteem, flexible behavior strategies, high communicative skills. The results of the empirical research revealed that girls are more vulnerable to adaptation problems, while young men over 20 years old are the most likely to adapt to higher education requirements.

Upon studying the problem of Ethiopian students adaptation to foreign higher education intuitions requirements, Esmael, Ebrahim, and Misganew (2018) found out that the major problems students face are emotional maladjustment and depression, poor academic performance, interpersonal conflicts. The researchers concluded that in order to successfully adapt to the higher education requirements first year students need to be supported by psychologists, tutors, and a psychologically safe environment must be created. Mutambara and Bhebe (2012) studied maladjustment factors among Zimbabwe higher education institution students, they found out that 60% of students have adaptation problems and emotionally they are not ready to move away from their family and are financially dependent on it, they are not able to make important decisions themselves, prone to stress and individual anxiety. The students who adapt to the higher education institution requirements easily are usually resistant to stress, have good mental well-being and high academic results. The scientists stated that girls are more vulnerable to adaptation problems, prone to stress and depressed mood, and the main reason for adaptation problems is financial

struggles. Psychological support from higher education institution teachers and staff is the key to help students.

Upon researching social-psychological adaptation of Turkish students to the higher education institution requirements predictions, by successful adaptation Buyukiscan (2018) means the state of a student's personality, characterized by independence, positive self-esteem and adequacy of experiences, stability of the emotional state, high emotional responsiveness, low level of hostility and aggression, positive outlook. The scientist concluded that positive adaptation is promoted by a positive attitude on the part of other students and teachers, emotional reciprocity, creation of a favorable environment, coping strategies "Problem Solving Planning" and "Self-control". Coping strategies "Escape/Avoid" and "Social Support Search", low level of self-control, orientation to external locus of control lead to maladjustment. Chinese scientists Tang and Dai (2018) revealed a correlation between negative adaptation in higher education institutions and signs of depression. Intropunitiveness, low self-esteem, day-dreaming, permanent usage of such defense mechanisms like avoidant behavior and rationalization are the things which lead students to adaptation difficulties. The scientists revealed that adaptation problems are more common among first year students of countryside origins, as for gender differences, maladjustment is more common among girls: they are prone to coping strategies of escape and social support search. Ukrainian psychologists Moiseenko and Suhobrus (2015) found the ways of student social-psychological adaptation optimization: 1) teacher and staff's awareness of the importance of adaptation process among first year students; 2) creation of favorable social environment with the help from teachers and senior students; 3) meeting the needs of first year students in communication; 4) subject-subject type of relationship between students and teachers. Indian scientists revealed a correlation between first year students' maladjustment and their further incapability to deal with stress (Waghachavare, Dhumale, Kadam, & Gore, 2015). American scientists believe that for most students adaptation in higher education institution is stressful experience, maladjustment is common among students with avoidant behavior and coping strategy (Dyson & Renk, 2006).

South-African scientists Daniels, Davids, and Roman (2018) believe that successful social-psychological adaptation is the basis for further successful education, mental health and students' well-being. According to the results of the study, family plays a leading role in helping students to adapt. Students from complete families adapt to higher education requirements much faster while students from incomplete families, on the contrary, are more vulnerable to maladjustment. Upon a four-year-research of psychological-social adaptation factors among college students, a group of American scientists, Conley, Shapiro, and Huguenel (2018), found out that for the first two years of studying a quarter of students remains adaptation problems which manifest in self-esteem decrease, anxiety, stress and depression, decrease in active emotional coping and lack of social support from the family. Subsequently most of the students get rid of these problems but for the girls this process takes much longer. According to the authors, preventative work, psychological consulting and tutor support are means of fighting maladjustment.

A number of scientists point to gender differences in adaptation process: they all agree that the adaptation process is harder for girls since they are more prone to stresses and depressed mood, which ties

with their need for approval, search for external social support and lack of independence (Clinciu, 2013; Mudhovozi, 2012; Zhang, Cui, Zhou, Cai, & Liu, 2018).

Main trends in student social-psychological adaptation foreign studies highlighted:

problems in adaptation to higher education institution requirements pertain to the most of students, 1/3 of them on the average;

maladjustment comes with such consequences as anxiety, depression, stress vulnerability, anger, disposition, mental disorders;

in order to successfully adapt to the higher education requirements first year students need to be supported by psychologists, tutors, family and a psychologically safe environment must be created;

such defense mechanisms like avoidant behavior and rationalization as well as coping strategies such as “Escape/Avoid” and “Social Support Search” are the reasons for adaptation difficulties;

the girls are more vulnerable to stress and depressed mood hence it is harder for them to adapt.

This phenomenon of individual social-psychological adaptation was studied by the Russian science and represented in research works by Yu.A. Aleksnadrovskiy, D.A. Andereeva, S.D. Artemov, A.A. Bogdanov, A.A. Zhuravlev, B.F. Lomov, A.N. Rozenberg and others. A.A. Nalchadzhyan thoroughly studied problems of individual social adaptation classification in his works. He presented the main types of individual social adaptation. The theoretical model of social adaptation of the individual in the framework of the system-activity approach was proposed in the works of M.V. Romm. Procedural aspects of social adaptation of the person are presented in the works of F.Z. Meyerson, L.D. Stolyarenko and others. A number of scientists – F.B. Berezin, O.I. Zotova, L.V. Korel, I.K. Kryazheva, V.A. Labunskaya, T.A. Nemchin made thorough research of the factors and criteria for the effectiveness of the individual social adaptation researches.

Social-psychological level of adaptation is usually considered as adaptations to social environment conditions, formation of adequate relationships with social setting, individual integration into a social group, formation of social attitude and worldview, acceptance of group’s values and norms (Bol’shoj ehntsiklopedicheskij slovar’, 2002).

Thus, it should be stated that the social-psychological adaptation of the individual as a scientific category is not deprived of the attention of scientists. However, despite numerous theoretical and empirical studies, the problem is still relevant and demands further research, since social-psychological adaptation, unlike biological one, is largely associated with the processes of individual identification, comprehension and interiorization of the rapid social and other changes to face (Gertsog, Danilova, Korneev, Savchenkov, & Uvarina, 2017; Gnatyshina, Uvarina, Salamatov, Savchenkov, & Pakhtusova, 2018).

### **3. Research Questions**

Separation of young students group as an object of adaptation processes research is dictated by a number of circumstances. First of all, as stated above, it is the social group that reacts to the changes in social norms, demands and rules more dynamically which leads to a necessity in developing adequate acquisition device and social environment norms interiorization in which the process of adaptation takes place. Secondly, young students group is the very guide to critically comprehend outdated social

experiences and dynamically update it. Therefore, the process of socialization must contain a status quo of preserving the positive experience previously accumulated by mankind and the impending technological revolution, which rejects this experience. An important factor in the choice of this group as an object of study was the fact that in modern conditions of globalization the number of contacts between representatives of different cultures is constantly increasing. These contacts cover wide areas of public life - from contacts at the household level to political, economic, cultural, professional and etc.

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

The research of social-psychological adaptation of first year students on the initial education stage in a pedagogical higher education institution, identify factors affecting adaptation processes, consider the conditions for successful adaptation of students by means of educational, educational and creative activities.

#### **5. Research Methods**

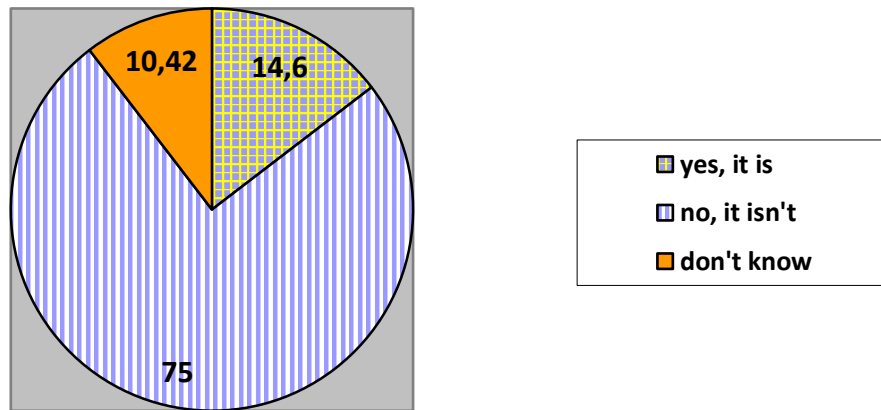
For the last twelve years (2007 – 2019) a longitudinal study of first year bachelor students adaptation processes has been held as a framework of monitoring activity at the Professional Pedagogical Institute of the Federal State-Financed Educational Institution of Higher Education “South Ural State Humanitarian Pedagogical University” (SUSHPU’S PPI thereafter), with the aim to provide informational support of education quality management. One of the important tasks of the professional education quality management is the creation of conditions for adaptation of higher education institution applicants. The study is conducted on a sample of first year full-time students in all areas of training (100 percent continuous sampling). This article will present the results of the study over the past 3 years.

#### **6. Findings**

Let us turn to the analysis of the results of our survey. An analysis of the questionnaire data revealed the main difficulties experienced by first year students and the problems that they face during the first month of study at the university. One of the questions in the questionnaire was “Is it hard for you to get used to the student’s life?” These self-assessments of student difficulties are presented in figure one.

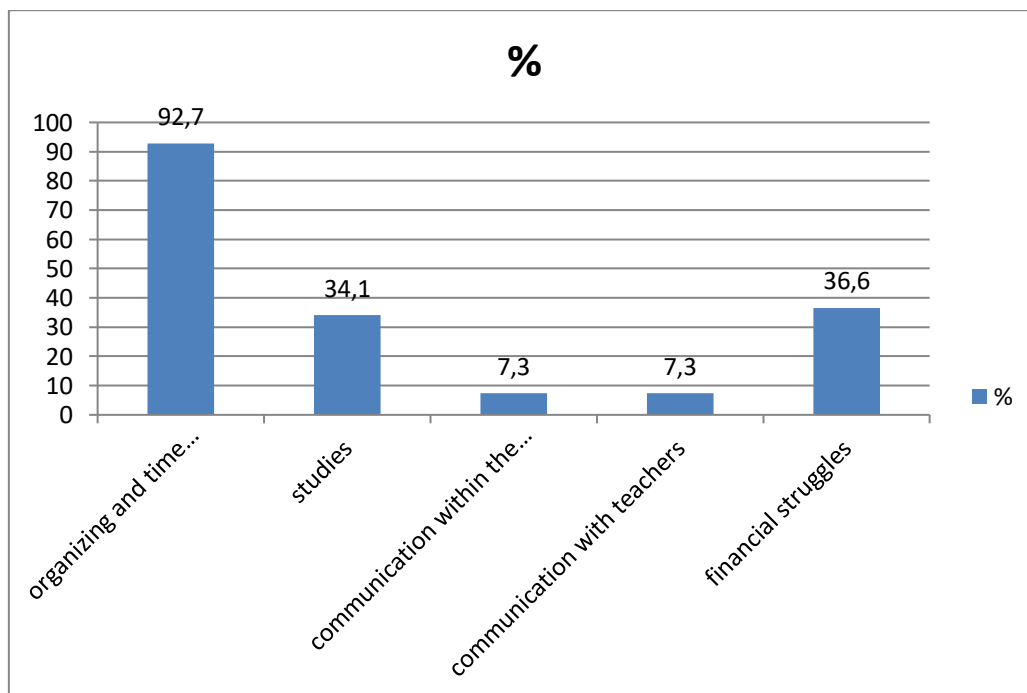
As can be seen on the Figure 01, every ninth students finds it impossible to self-assess their own achievements and possibilities. This indicates that a certain part of first-year students is not ready for self-reflection and correlation of their educational potential with the expected results of education.

Moreover, many first year students believe in a certain idea of adaptation process being easy. This suggests that both those who find it difficult to unambiguously isolate personal educational problems, and those who have identified them in some combination, do not quite clearly represent the difficulties of educational and creative activities in a higher education institution. The inadequacy of assessing one’s own potential and requirements for training activities can entail a host of adaptive problems. Special attention must be paid to this circumstance



**Figure 01.** Students' perceptions on the difficulties of getting used to student life (in %)

However, behind a relatively prosperous picture, facts appear that indicate that first-year students are experiencing various kinds of difficulties in the process of adaptation to new requirements. The questionnaire revealed the difficulties students face, they are presented in Figure 02.



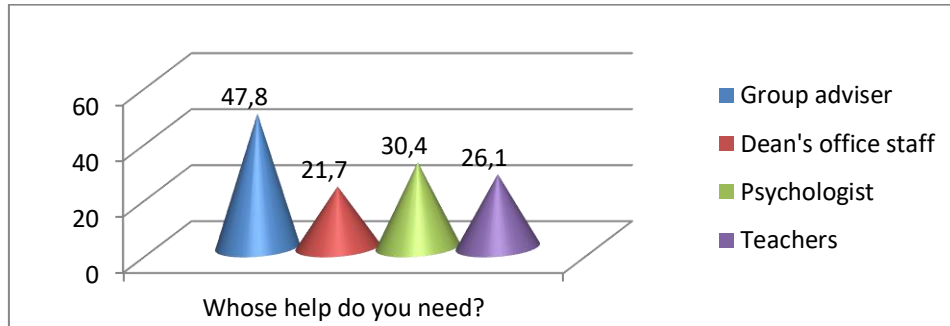
**Figure 02.** Difficulties first-year students faced at the time of the study (in %)

It should be noted that the main difficulty for students is «organizing and time management». This difficulty undoubtedly affects the adaptation of first year students, since studying at a higher education institution implies a rather tight time schedule.

The study revealed that a significant part of first year students need help and support from a higher education institution, group advisors, dean's office staff, psychologists and teachers to be precise. Figure

03 shows the students' answers to the question “In order to deal with difficulties whose support to do you need?”

A major part of the respondents (43,5%) expect assistance from teachers and psychologists.



**Figure 03.** Students’ needs for support in order to deal with difficulties in adaptation to higher education institution requirements

The students also noted a few problems:

- Institution location distance;
- Difficulties in adapting to dormitory accommodation;
- City life adaptation;
- Difficulties in communication with roommates.

The number of students who pointed at the necessity of receiving psychological help now is 18.8%, while 37.6% told that they would rather consult a psychologist only if necessary. One of the most important factors in first year students’ adaptation process is psychological readiness to higher education, new lifestyle and activities. Changes in the living environment require young people to activate adaptation mechanisms, which often leads to a state of psychological stress. Among other needs for first year students support was noted the following: support from friends (2.1%) and from parents (8.3%).

Among the factors that contribute to the adaptation or maladjustment of students to the educational process the impressions of the first classes are of great importance. The respondents were to share them with Table 1 presenting most typical of them.

**Table 01.** Distribution of respondents’ opinions on their first classes (in % on the whole set of answers)

Opinions	2017-2018 academic year		2016-2017 academic year		2015-2016 academic year	
	%	Answer’s rank	%	Answer’s rank	%	Answer’s rank
First lectures were interesting to attend	58.7	1	35.9	1	71.2	1
I realized that I lack certain background knowledge to master some disciplines	17.4	5	11.7	4	22.0	4
I faced difficulties in lectures content digestion in the first classes	26.1	3	6.2	5	13.6	5

Lecture's content was given in a language I don't know	6.5	7	0.8	7	3.4	6
Lectures are given in a clear and understandable way with vivid examples and facts. This will help me in studies	34.8	2	25.8	2	44.1	2
I like that lecturers explain and discuss the achievements of everyone	21.7	4	16.4	3	32.2	3
I didn't get any knowledge from the first classes	13.0	6	2.3	6	1.7	7
I believe that my studies will not be easy or interesting	6.5	7	0.8	7	1.7	7

According to the table data we may conclude that first classes were well received and there were not many difficulties. Half of the students were interested in the first lectures. The respondents precise that the lectures were given in a clear and understandable way with the usage of vivid examples and facts (as stated by 34.8% of the respondents).

The above stated information concludes that the first impressions of the classes not only gave the students a positive direction in their educational activities, but also sprung the desire for improvement. We consider it important to note that at the first stage of adaptation group adviser's work, who helps students in mastering academic work skills, solves their psychological problems, teaches them institution's traditions and norms, is very crucial. Group advisor's aim is to make adaptation process for new-sprung students more rapid and effective.

Advisor's activities involve the creation and support of a favorable psychological atmosphere in the supervised student group; structuring of intragroup relations; direct participation in the life of the group as a formal leader; mediation with teachers, staff, and educational institution services. Students' attendance and academic results, abidance by internal rules of conduct, group activity functioning are under control. It should be noted that at this stage of initial adaptation, control is carried out not only for the purposes of verification or supervision, but mainly for the purpose of timely identification of students' difficulties.

Our study allowed us to identify the difficulties that students face in the process of adaptation to learning in higher education institutions. We have divided stated difficulties in roughly 4 groups:

- 1) organizational difficulties associated with the new organization of the educational process in higher education institution and concerning the self-organization planning of cognitive and informational adaptation to the new environment, its structure, the peculiarities of the content of education in it;
- 2) social difficulties in communication and socializing for non-resident students;
- 3) didactic difficulties arising from the active development of new forms of employment, types of work, necessary skills, techniques, methods of solutions that are different from school. In this case the difficulty of adaptation depends on the level of basic educational knowledge, its breadth and contents, diversity of activities and interest to it;
- 4) financial difficulties due to the problems associated with the modest financial situation in the families of first-year students.



## 7. Conclusion

A theoretical analysis of foreign studies in the field of socio-psychological adaptation allowed us to identify a number of trends: problems in adaptation to higher education institution requirements pertain to the most of students, 1/3 of them on the average. Maladjustment comes with such consequences such as anxiety, depression, stress vulnerability, anger, disposition, mental disorders. In order to successfully adapt to the higher education requirements first year students need to be supported by psychologists, tutors, family and a psychologically safe environment must be created. Such defense mechanisms like avoidant behavior and rationalization as well as coping strategies such as “Escape/Avoid” and “Social Support Search” are the reasons for adaptation difficulties. The girls are more vulnerable to stress and depressed mood hence it is harder for them to adapt.

For the past 20 years the problems of adaptation to higher education institution requirements have been highly prioritized in Russian science. According to scientists, social-psychological adaptation is largely associated with the processes of individual identification, comprehension and interiorization of the rapid social and other changes to face.

Our empirical study revealed the following results: 15% of the students faced difficulties in adaptation to higher education institution requirements with the major difficulty being “time management”, while a significant part of the respondents (43.5%) expect support from teachers and psychologists. The study helped us to reveal organizational, social, didactical and material difficulties the students face in the process of adaptation to the higher education.

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