

STUDENTS' ADJUSTMENT TO UNIVERSITY LIFE DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: The aim of the study was to measure the level of adaptation of first-year students enrolled for the Psychology major at the "Tibiscus" University of Timisoara to the university environment during the Covid-19 pandemic. Data collection took place during the pandemic and the results of the study underline the fact that students reached average levels for academic adjustment and institutional attachment and obtained low scores for social and personal-emotional adjustment. Some intervention strategies to increase the level of the students' adjustment to university life were also discussed.

Keywords: academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, institutional attachment.

INTRODUCTION

Adjustment to university life is a multidimensional construct [1] which has been operationalized according to four dimensions. The first dimension of academic adjustment or adaptation reflects the degree to which the student has adapted to the academic demands, to the material studied and to the efforts demanded by individual study. Social adjustment illustrates the manner in which the student has integrated from a social point of view, by participating in campus activities, establishing friendships with new people and has been defined as being the opposite of feeling lonely and missing family and friends back home [2]. Institutional attachment refers to the students' identification with the university environment they belong to and their attachment to the university community. The students' successful interaction with the new academic environment, as reflected by positive interactions with faculty and other students, and the management of the learning material can determine whether or not students are satisfied during their first year of study and whether they will continue their activities during the second year of study [3, 4]. Being admitted to a university represents an important event in students' lives, and they may experience high levels of stress in attempting to manage academic demands [5].

The pandemic has produced massive changes in all students' lives and a number of studies show us that their mental health has been affected [6, 7], especially due to the increase of the number of cases of anxiety and depression.

Thus, the objectives set for this study were:

1. To measure the level of first-year Psychology students' adjustment to university life;
2. To draw up working directions implemented within the Counseling and Career Orientation Centre [CCOC].

METHODOLOGY

Participants and procedure

60 students majoring in Psychology at the "Tibiscus" University of Timisoara participated in this study for two months, November and December 2021. The collection of data was done online, and the students had to fill in the questionnaire that measures the subtypes of academic adjustment [Baker and Siryk, 1989]. A questionnaire was created in Google Forms where students could freely answer and write what suggestions they had for the improvement of their academic adjustment. The average age of students was 43.4 years, the sample consisting of 70% females and 30% males.

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Tools

1. Academic adaptation. Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire - SACQ [1] provides subscale scores on four aspects of students' adjustment to university and contains a number of 67 items on the Likert scale from 1 [not at all true to me] to 9 [very much true to me]. Academic Adjustment contains 24 items [e.g., I feel confident I will face future challenges], Social Adjustment contains 20 items [I have few friends in college with whom I can discuss any issue], Personal-emotional Adjustment contains 15 items [e.g., Lately I had better health] and Institutional Attachment contains 7 items [e.g., I will continue my courses to obtain a diploma].

2. Suggestions for Improving Adjustment to University life. With the help of Google Forms, students presented their suggestions for their faculty and for the Counseling and Career Orientation Centre [CCOC] in order to help them better adapt to the university environment. The questions included in the Google Form, which demanded free answers were the following: "What positive aspects does online teaching have for you?", "What negative aspects does online teaching have for you?", "How do you think that faculty can help you be more efficient?", "How could the Counseling and Career Orientation Centre [CCOC] help you adapt more easily to the university environment?"

The Academic Adjustment subscale measures the degree to which students can manage their academic tasks and the degree of engagement in the learning process. In this study, students achieved an average level of Academic Adjustment. Average students make an effort to adapt to the university environment, but their academic goals may change along the way, and early dissatisfaction with the academic environment may occur. Individuals who score low on the Academic Adjustment subscale obtained lower grades during the first year of study and are at risk of dropping out. High-scoring students can meet academic requirements, are engaged in learning, and have clear goals regarding the subjects studied. The social adjustment subscale measures the degree to which students can manage interpersonal interactions and needs, once they have started university classes.

Students scored low on the Social Adjustment subscale. Individuals who score low on this subscale are not involved in campus activities, have difficulty making friends and feel lonely. We can also link this score to the pandemic situation because students did not have the opportunity to see each other, to interact face to face, to physically participate in classes and tried to make friends online. The Personal/ Emotional Adjustment subscale emphasizes the students' emotional state and the somatic issues that may arise in the process of adapting to university life. The sample included in this study obtained a low level on this subscale, and this proves that students do not have enough resources to manage their emotions. The Institutional Attachment subscale measures students' level of attachment to their institution as its name states. An average score was obtained for the sample included in this study, which shows us that students are moderately involved in achieving educational goals.

Suggestions for improving adjustment from students were a topic of interest in this study because student-centered education shows us that it is important to be mindful of students' needs, and the faculty needs to take into consideration different ways to improve the way of teaching.

Suggestions for improving college adjustment among students were assessed through the following questions:

1. "What positive aspects does online teaching have for you?"

The students' answers included the ones presented in Table 1.

At the top of the student feedback we can notice a better time management when referring to the positive aspects of online teaching. Students mentioned that they have more time to learn and are flexible because the Internet allows them to attend classes and seminars regardless of geographic area.

2. "What negative aspects does online teaching have for you?"

Technical difficulties and the lack of face-to-face interaction were common statements among students, and this shows us that it is important to emphasize the use of specialized platforms in the educational domain in order to be able to provide quality education.

Table 1. SACQ students' averages

Subtypes of university adjustment		Average obtained	Score interpretation
1. Academic Adjustment	55.5		Medium score
2. Social Adjustment	38.3		Low score
3. Personal/ Emotional Adjustment	37.2		Low score
4. Institutional Attachment	51.3		Medium score

3. “How do you think that the faculty can help you be more efficient?”

Students need guidance and to receive materials from faculty, to adapt more easily to the academic environment during the pandemic.

4. “How could the Counseling and Career Orientation Centre [CCOC] help you adapt more easily to the university environment?”

The Psychology major includes subjects that address theoretical concepts within the bachelor degree, but it is important to also emphasize practical games to help students apply these concepts and what they learn during classes. Events with specialists in the field are another source of information for students when thinking about their future career, as they get a clearer idea of the field of activity.

DISCUSSION

The feedback offered by the students included in this study, referring to the increase of the level of academic adjustment, focuses on several directions, namely: the students’ need to be guided by the faculty,

to receive information from specialists and to socialize. Another aspect that the students emphasized is that workshops should be organized to better manage their emotions.

The first year of college is a challenge for many students, and Tinto’s [1996] [8] study shows that 40% of students do not graduate and another 57% drop out by their second year. The study described by Abdallah *et al.* [9] shows that students who score low and moderate on the subtypes of academic adjustment will drop out, and draw attention to Counseling and Career Orientation Centres, as they need to consider students with high dropout rates. Research shows that there is a relationship between mindfulness practice and students’ adjustment to college, and this can be a starting point for universities when preparing strategies to help students better control their emotions [10]. Another faculty strategy may be to test students during the first weeks of college and at the end of the first semester in order to better observe how student performance is influenced by academic adjustment, which is a predictor of student academic performance [11].

Table 2. Students’ answers for the first interview question

<i>Time economy</i>
<i>Gaining more time which is normally lost in transport means</i>
<i>I don’t lose time walking to the university</i>
<i>Greater attendance to classes, location flexibility</i>
<i>It allows participation from every corner of the country, in perfect health conditions</i>
<i>I can take part in classes, transportation time is reduced.</i>

* the table contains only a few of the students’ answers

Table 3. Students’ answers for the second interview question

<i>Communication difficulties between students and teachers, due to connection interruptions</i>
<i>Technical difficulties, poor internet network</i>
<i>We miss physical, face-to-face interaction with our colleagues</i>
<i>It is more difficult to synchronize when working in a team or in a group</i>
<i>The fact that we can’t interact as well. If the classes are in the room, we can raise our hand to answer, but in the online environment we cannot always intervene due to technical problems.</i>

Table 4. Students’ answers for the third interview question

<i>Through permanent guidance.</i>
<i>With recommendations of private readings, movies, documentaries to develop one’s knowledge</i>
<i>Interactive activities on the Zoom platform using Breakout Rooms</i>
<i>Understanding and support when we encounter difficulties</i>
<i>Discussing case studies from the office in the seminars to understand the knowledge</i>

Table 5. Students’ answers for the fourth interview question

<i>Meetings with specialists in the field to identify possible career directions.</i>
<i>Discussions about career opportunities and conditions necessary to achieve them.</i>
<i>Online seminars with professionals in the field would help me understand each branch of psychotherapy</i>
<i>Carrying out workshops on anxiety management, better time management</i>
<i>Mindfulness sessions when students get close to exams</i>

Conflict of interest

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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