The Adaptation of Students to the Academic Environment in University

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Abstract: The aim of this research is related to the issue of the adaptation of the students to academic life and the analysis of the difficulties faced by students when adapting to their new status. Considering these, we initiated a study that addressed the adaptation process in relation to the reasons and the ability to resist stress.

This study had 146 participants, students from the Polytechnic University of Bucharest, who were asked a set of questions on the subject.

The research has shown that many students face problems related to integration and adaptation to the new context of life. As a result, many of them considered dropping out of university. Also, one-third of interviewees believe that teachers did not contribute in accommodating students to the academic life. Only 10% of students have sought help from a psychotherapist, although many of them have considered this option.

In the conclusions of this paper, solutions have been proposed to help the development and the maintenance of skills meant to help those involved in the process of adaptation. These solutions have been based on the development of relational-psychological and neuro-physiological abilities. With respect to relational-psychological solutions, we relied on the stimulation of creative capacity and, indirectly, supporting the manifestation of intellectual potential. When discussing the development of neuro-physiological abilities, we mainly referred to the development of the capacity to relax.

We believe that this research can be a valuable information source, the results of which can be integrated into the administrative and educational endeavours of several categories of beneficiaries or decision-makers.

Keywords: *Adaptation; student; university; accommodation; integration; stress.*

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1. Introduction

The issue of the adaptation of the personality occupies an important place in psychological and pedagogical research. Under conditions of social and statutory instability, this theme becomes interesting from the perspective of the relationship between the adaptation of the personality and its resistance to stress.

There is a wide diversity in defining and ascertaining the content of the concept of adaptation in psychology. Adaptation, as a process, involves an interaction between several psychological components that work together, having a common purpose, namely, to avoid imbalances, inconsistencies and conflicts.

Here we see a paradox that consists in the existence of a dynamic development that must provide stability and functionality in the development of the personality.

In the current period, full of social changes, challenges and instabilities, there is a growth in psycho-emotional requirements towards the development and functionality of the personality, which, on the one hand, have to comply with these changes and, on the other hand, preserve its own beliefs, values and intra-psychic settings.

The instability of psychosocial factors is acutely felt, especially during adolescence. This age segment was chosen for the research approached in the paper, the object of the study being the way students adapt to academic life.

The transition from lyceum to university life is a stage that requires some adaptation from students, both at personal and academic level. The effort to make the transition to the status of a student depends, firstly, on the student and, secondly, on the support given by teachers, relatives, friends, etc.

As students pursue higher education, they face different standards than lyceum students. They must adapt to the specifics of new disciplines and more advanced teaching methods, all of which represent major changes in their academic and everyday life. These changes require psychological adaptations to the new learning and teaching environment. They demand a constant psycho-emotional effort from students, as well as from teachers.

2. Problem statement

The issue of student adaptation to higher education has been investigated in several countries, each cultural context having a certain research path. Research on this topic addresses the causes of student

adaptation difficulties, the effects of some models implemented by educational institutions and observations on possible methods of improvement. Many papers are currently being written on this subject. Research into adapting students to academic life has been done in many countries around the world. Certain aspects of this theme have been studied in the USA (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001), in Spain (Garcia-Perales & Almeida, 2019), in Belgium (Beyers & Goossens, 2002), in Malaysia (Terpstra-Tong & Ahmad, 2018), in Japan (Fryer, 2017) etc.

In recent research, student adaptation is studied as a way of identifying students' major transition problems and identifying skills (independent learning, research, time management, critical thinking, etc.) which are essential for fast adaptation to higher education (Terpstra-Tong & Ahmad, 2018).

In addition, in order to improve the process of adaptation to academic life, this theme was analysed from the following four perspectives: students who are part of a risk group, first year curriculum, learning resources, staff development (Nelson, Smith, & Clarke, 2012).

The analysis of the adaptation was done in some cases by examining the quantitative variable, while in other cases based on the qualitative aspect. Longitudinal person-centred research has enabled the possibility to understand the specific of certain subgroups within the first-year student population.

Some studies have investigated aspects of the student's personality, the adaptation being conventionally divided into four categories: motivational, communicational, cognitive and regulatory (Orlov, Pazukhina, Yakushin, & Ponomareva, 2018).

In other cases, the research looked at the medical aspects of adaptation, the stress and illnesses that arose as a result of adaptive deficits (e.g. Stress and Heart Rate Variability during University Final Examination among Students).

Studies have been conducted to discover the role of social support networks in the adaptation process (Hays & Oxley, 1986) and other coping methods associated with a successful adaptation (Enes, Ilhan, & Tahsin, 2016).

In Romania, the issue of student adaptation has been researched, in particular, from the perspective of the students' attitude towards how they have adapted and how they have been supported in their integration process (Bunoiu, Malita, & Isvoran, 2014; Pleşca, 2017) Previous research has highlighted the fact that in order to adapt to academia, students need a range of skills: self-regulation, motivation management, emotional control and

other skills that students need to have and develop. Their adaptation to new requirements and their academic success depends on these skills.

As the process of adapting to academic life is based on the development of a range of personal and professional abilities (each year being more advanced), we have approached the issue of students adapting to the academic environment from the perspective of stress resistance abilities and the students' motivation to overcome problems.

To this end, we have analysed the adaptation process from the students' perspective, taking into consideration that this adaptation has a variable difficulty from one person to another.

The following issues were considered in the research: the adaptation of the students to the new study programme, the risk of dropping out, the student's state of mind, what the students think about the contribution of the teachers when helping in the adaptation process, the need for a psychologist in the student's life.

3. Methodology of research

The research was conducted in March-June 2019 on a sample of 148 students from the Polytechnic University of Bucharest. The participants were recruited on a voluntary basis, the research having included the opinions of students in the first year (62.84%) and second year (37.16%), their ages ranging from 18 to 21 years.

As a data collection tool, the "Student Adaptation to Academic Life Questionnaire" was used, which included questions about student adaptation to their new academic status, namely: Do you consider you have accommodated to your university programme?; If you have not managed to accommodate to your university programme so far, which are the reasons?; What was the contribution of the teaching staff in accommodating you to the academic life?; Do you consider that the university has helped you to improve your adaptation skills?; Did you have any situations where you thought about dropping out?; If so, what was the cause?; Did you request help from your peers when it was difficult?; Have you ever seen a psychologist?; Have you ever thought of talking to a psychologist to help you accommodate to university?; Do you consider that you have managed to accommodate enough in order to get fully involved in curricular and extracurricular academic activities?; If not, why?; How do you feel when you are at the university?; How strong is your motivation to learn?; How do you deal with stressful situations?; Following the completion of the information gathering process, responses were analysed in terms of quantity and quality.

3.1. Analysis of the results

From the questionnaire it has resulted that 69.59% of the students were able to accommodate with the university programme, while 30.41% still did not adapt.

Students with difficulty in adaptation argue that their programme is full of various coursers and that breaks between them do not help better manage their activities.

Another time-related issue is shaped by the difference in the schedule between even and odd weeks. Being for them a new method to organise classes, it presents a difficulty in managing time.

The reasons for the failure to adapt to academic life, accused by 105 students who answered this question, were included in Table 1.

Table 1. Causes of difficulty for students when adapting to university programme

The reason students face difficulties in adapting to university programme	Percentage
Too many classes	36,56%
Schedule is too busy	28,84%
Schedule is not constant	23,07%
Breaks between the courses are not advantageous	11,53%

The results show that one third of students think they are overworked by the number of hours allocated to the subjects. Their answers reflect concerns about their academic success. Discussions with these students revealed that they are no longer sure that they will be able to pass all the exams, the confidence in themselves being affected by this uncertainty.

From the students' answers, we also find out about their difficulties regarding the rhythm of teaching, learning and managing the volume of information, which are completely different from those in the lyceum.

From the reasons given by the students, it appears that in the early years of study they are not accustomed to managing their time and organizing their activities to accommodate the new teaching strategies and content. Moreover, half of the students (52% of students in the first year of study) have been in a situation in which they have considered the interruption of their higher education as a mean to solve the problem of poor adaptation.

When asked about the causes that could lead to drop out, the students listed the following reasons: make-up exams, I do not see myself working in the field, I feel / believe that I will not be able to finish my studies, I have failed to integrate (table 2).

Table 2. Reasons for dropping out of university

Reason	Percentage
I feel / believe that I will not be able to finish my studies	47 %
Make-up exams	32 %
I do not see myself working in the field	18 %
I have failed to integrate	3 %

All the reasons stated by the students indicate that they have problems with adaptation and only a third of them manage to find the necessary resources to solve their academic problems.

To the question “Do you think that the university has helped you to improve your adaptation skills?”, most students stated that they learned to better manage their time but did not learn to manage their financial resources.

Regarding student responses to teachers’ contributions in helping students adapt to the academic life, 70% of students responded that they did not receive any help from teachers, while 30% of students were helped by them. From the students’ responses, it can be inferred that for many who decide to pursue higher education it is important for teachers to intervene in order to identify the difficulties faced by students and encourage learning. It may be useful for a teacher, if necessary, to direct young people to a specialist such as a counsellor, psychologist or psychotherapist.

The results of the questionnaire showed that 87% of students have never seen a psychologist / psychotherapist, while 13% have. The number of students who have considered this opportunity as a solution to deal with the problems, but have not yet enacted, is higher, exceeding 20% of the interviewees.

To the question “How do you deal with stressful situations?” we have obtained results which have been included in the table below (Table 3).

Table 3. How students deal with stressful situations

Coping strategy	Percentage
Listen to music	65 %
Seek help from the family	41 %
Do sport	37 %
Friends	30 %
Internet	21%
Smoke, drink alcohol, eat	21%
Prayers	14%
Read books, watch movies	2%
Study a field that interests oneself	2%

These results indicate that students find strategies to manage their stressful situations but do not show that they are resolving their adaptation problems. Only a small percentage of them are looking for answers to the problems they face, most of them managing their mood in order to anesthetise the problem.

It may be that those students who face problems when adapting to academic life (69.59%) and those who, due to adaptation problems, have thought about dropping out, are motivated enough to learn and overcome the situation in their desire for knowledge and affirmation. The questionnaire data reflects that the students motivated to learn are in majority, 11.6% of them claiming to have a maximum motivation to learn.

4. Intervention techniques meant to increase adaptability

Following the research, it has been found that students in the early years of studies have a lower level of adaptability, which creates problems at the academic level. Diminishing the adaptive capacity produces effects on the behavioural and decisional level. The shortage of students' ability to adapt is closely related to the narrowing of the sphere of awareness, implicitly of psychophysiological states. Consequently, there is a blockage in the manifestation of creative and intellectual potential. To improve this, we need to offer the students practical ways to develop their creative potential and to stimulate the adjustment of psychophysiological condition.

4.1. Developing creative and intellectual potential

Maintaining and developing an optimal adaptive capacity implies the identification, awareness and use of individual psychological personality resources, i.e. the manifestation and development of creative potential and, implicitly, the increase of the intellectual capacity of the student.

In order to increase adaptability and creative potential, some authors (Rean, Kudashev, & Baranov, 2007) consider it important to decentralise attention from one's own person to the outside, to a process, an object or an activity. Through decentralisation, an awareness of the emotional state's prowess is gained, so that the individual can experience the position of an observer on their own emotional state.

The authors propose a technique called "*the tree*". The exercise is applied individually and helps form an intra-psychic stability and maintain emotional balance. At the same time, this exercise stimulates the increase of the resistance of the Self and the ability to tolerate stress.

In this exercise, the person is offered to imagine that they are like a tree. They must develop this image in their consciousness. It is important that the person experiencing the exercise thinks of all the details of this tree: its strong and flexible stem, the branches and leaves which move with the wind, the opening of the crown towards accepting the sun's rays and the coolness that comes with the rain, the circulation of different fluids within the stem and the branches. The person has to imagine how the tree manages to extract from the earth all the mineral resources that help it grow and develop.

In this exercise, earth represents the resource of life, the roots represent the symbol of stability and inner balance, expressing the tree's connection with reality. In this exercise, the roots of the tree help establish relationships and access to personal resources that are extremely important to the person's mental health.

4.2. Adjustment of psychophysiological states. The "muscle control" exercise

The second important aspect, which stimulates the development of adaptive capacity, refers to the development of psychophysiological abilities. Following a personal lack of adaption, manifested as a clinical adaptation, various psychophysiological reactions and clinical symptoms may occur. In this situation, it is appropriate to orient and develop neurophysiological skills, such as relaxation.

In psychological practice, various techniques are known to help with psycho-emotional regulation, having neurophysiological effects. These exercises aim at reducing strain that occurs in breathing, muscles and the whole body.

One of these exercises is the “muscle control” exercise. To execute it, the person receives the following instructions: “Take a comfortable seat on a chair and, while sitting on the chair, tighten and strongly bend the index finger of your right hand. Check and see how muscle energy is distributed, where muscle strain spreads? To adjacent fingers. And also where? To the wrist. And where does it further go? Afterwards? To the elbow, shoulder and to the neck. At the same time, the left hand is also strained. Check, notice and feel this muscular strain, tension.

Now, remove the tension. Keep your index finger of your right hand bent, but release muscle tension from your neck. Release the tension from the shoulders and then the elbow. It is important for your hand to move freely (the finger remains tense and bent, as before). Release your thumb from the muscular tension, the little finger (while the index finger remains tense and bent). And now release the muscles and the index finger from tension and loosen it.

Clench your left foot as if you were pushing a nail in the ground with it. Check and observe muscle strain in your body. Why did your right foot strain? Notice that there is no extra tension in the back muscles. Stand up. Lean. Clench your back, as if a very heavy weight was put on it, like a very heavy iron crate. To do this, remember similar situations in the past, in which you have experienced the same state. Observe and check your entire body’s muscle strain. How do your knees feel? Do you feel eye strain?” (Rean et al., 2007: 422-423).

In the opinion of the authors, this exercise develops and trains the ability to pay attention to the muscular condition and control muscle tension. It contributes to the ability to accurately and quickly target muscle control.

5. Conclusions

As a result of the research, we can conclude that most students faced problems of integration and adaptation to the new curriculum in their early years at university. In order for their problems to be diminished or resolved, more implication from the teachers and a better structuring of the programme are recommended in the future. We believe that this transition

must be institutionally supported, reducing the number of students with difficulties in adaptation.

To this end, we propose that students should be given practical interventions in order to develop adaptation skills. Namely, we recommend training on creativity development issues and a relaxation training programme.

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