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Student Adaptation at a Higher Education Institution

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Abstract. The analysis of student adaptation at a higher education institution focuses on the problems students most often face when adapting to a new academic environment, social and emotional challenges and changes in living conditions. The study examines student adaptation at a higher education institution, focusing on the experience of Vilniaus Kolegija. It identifies the key factors that contribute to successful student adaptation, including social networks, academic support and individual characteristics. The study also highlights the challenges that students face during the transition period.

Keywords. Students, factors determining adaptation, higher education institution

Introduction

Discussions in educational institutions are dominated by the issue of student adaptation and the factors that facilitate it. The Dictionary of International Words (2025) defines the term "adaptation" as a person's adjustment to changing or new social, economic and natural living conditions, and the adaptation of organisms to their environment. The analysis of student adaptation at a higher education institution focuses on the problems that first-year students most often face when adapting to a new academic environment and the social and emotional challenges.

The problem of successful student adaptation at a higher education institution (HEI) is analysed by the HEI's administration and teaching staff and students themselves. Some HEIs have a student orientation week, during which students become familiar with the structure of the HEI, the study process, the lecturers and their new environment. The survey by Mičiulienė et al. (2015) on the evaluation of the adaptation week explores how first-year students perceive the benefits of the adaptation week. The majority of first-year students (92.37%) who took part in the survey say that the events of the induction week make it easier to adapt and provide a lot of useful information to first-year students.

When analysing students' adaptation, it is important to take into account their individual needs arising from disabilities, impairments or learning difficulties. The STRATA (2022) studies highlight the importance of special attention to under-represented groups of students and graduates in Lithuanian higher education: those from low-income families, those over 30 years of age and those with special needs. The question is whether these groups are given equal opportunities to enrol, study and graduate successfully and to use their education in the labour market.

Certainly, students who have a positive study experience are more likely to graduate successfully: they successfully adapt to their higher education institution. A study by Bulotaitė and co-authors (2024) has found that students with a positive study experience often have successful adaptation at a higher education institution, which leads to a higher probability of successful graduation. Students' intention to discontinue their studies is predicted by a variety of psychological and study environment factors. The regression analysis results have shown that the main drivers of the intention to discontinue studies are higher levels of stress ($\beta = 0.126$, $p = 0.006$) and lower levels of engagement in studies ($\beta = -0.473$, $p < 0.001$). Teacher support, feedback and academic autonomy have also shown a negative relationship with intention to discontinue studies ($\beta = -0.120$, $p = 0.021$). The study has also revealed that working students are more likely to consider discontinuing their studies ($M = 1.71$), compared to non-working students ($M = 1.53$; $p = 0.028$), and are less engaged in the study process. Interestingly, students in non-state-funded places have higher academic resilience ($M = 4.81$) compared to students in state-funded places ($M = 4.49$; $p = 0.046$). A complex set of interrelated factors has been identified as determining the intention to discontinue studies. Psychological resilience, the quality of the learning environment and student engagement are particularly important influences, while stress remains an independent, directly influencing factor.

The question is what factors can determine student adaptation at a higher education institution, especially at the beginning of their studies. In order to better understand this process, it is important to identify those variables that can predict successful adaptation. Such an understanding would allow for the targeted development or improvement of preventive measures to help students overcome difficulties and promote smoother integration into the academic environment. It is therefore crucial to analyse students' experiences, the process of their adaptation and the factors that influence it.

Literature review

Factors determining student adaptation

Student adaptation is a complex process that depends on a variety of factors. These factors can be divided into individual, social and contextual. Figure 1 shows the main factors influencing student adaptation in a HEI.



Figure 1. Factors determining student adaptation

Source: Based on Li and Pitkänen (2018), Gillen-O'Neel (2021) and Chen et al. (2022)

According to Li and Pitkänen (2018), student adaptation covers several key areas: academic, social, economic and cultural integration. The diagram is complemented by psychological factors such as self-esteem and resilience, as identified by Chen et al. (2022) highlighting their link to the sense of belonging and successful integration. The study by Gillen-O'Neel (2021) emphasises the importance of social relationships with lecturers and peers, as they increase engagement and reduce the risk of discontinuing studies. It also identifies individual and environmental factors that can enhance or hinder the adaptation process. The diagram allows us to see student adaptation as a multidimensional phenomenon, determined by interrelated internal and external factors.

Self-esteem is an important psychological factor influencing student adaptation in a HEI. The study by Wu et al. (2024) has shown that self-esteem not only directly improves students' socio-cultural adaptation, but also indirectly affects it through social support and the sense of belonging. The study has revealed that social support and the sense of community act as chain mediators, enhancing the impact of self-esteem on student integration. These findings underline the importance of psychological support in promoting adaptation to a new environment.

Reitz (2022) has examined the development of self-esteem across the life course and found that self-esteem reflects life events, especially during transitions, such as from school to university. The author proposes an integrative model explaining how normative and non-normative changes influence self-esteem. The findings show that self-esteem is a dynamic state influenced by both internal and external factors. The specific dynamic long- and short-term processes underlying the development of self-esteem during life events is a key direction for future research.

The study by Holopainen et al. (2020) carried out on Finnish school students has found that higher self-esteem is associated with better school well-being and fewer learning difficulties. Students with higher self-esteem are more likely to have a positive view of their learning experience and to cope more easily with academic challenges. The results show that parental income has a greater impact on self-esteem, with boys having higher self-esteem than girls.

Both individual and environmental factors are important for student adaptation, and fostering community can be one of the strategies to strengthen the students' sense of belonging to the university. The study by Zhu and Han (2018) has found that students' family background, such as parental education, income and social status, has a direct and indirect impact on the students' sense of belonging. The study has used a multilevel mediation model to assess the role of social networks, i.e. a student's relationships with peers, lecturers and other members of the university community, as a mediating factor. The results have shown that students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to feel excluded from the academic community. Social networks help to compensate for the lack of social support in the family, strengthen the sense of belonging to an institution and contribute to better psychological adaptation.

The study by McLean et al. (2023) carried out on first-year students in Ireland has highlighted the importance of perceived social support in stress management. The results have shown that students who feel supported in a supportive environment experience lower stress levels, which directly contribute to a more successful adaptation. The study by Yildirim et al. (2021) with international students in Germany has found that the sense of belonging to a university has a direct impact not only on psychological well-being but also on academic adaptation. The sense of belonging acts as an important protective factor against stress and

cultural exclusion. Vargas-Madriz and Konishi (2021) have analysed the relationship between social support and academic engagement, identifying the sense of belonging to school as a mediating factor. Students who felt part of an academic community were more engaged in the learning process and achieved higher grades.

Social support, especially from teaching staff and peers, is an essential part of student adaptation. The study by Gillen-O'Neel (2021) has shown that a strong sense of belonging to the HEI is important for maintaining student engagement, and this is particularly significant for first-year students. The study by Chen et al. (2022) has found that students with higher self-esteem felt more integrated into the university community.

The survey carried out by Liepuonienė et al. (2024) has analysed the attitudes of Vilniaus Kolegija students towards the most important aspects of the psychosocial environment: relationships between students and lecturers, communication between students, support, academic adaptation and opportunities for self-expression at the institution. The psychosocial environment of a higher education institution has been identified as one of the most significant factors influencing students' learning outcomes, satisfaction, psychological well-being and health. The results of the survey have shown that the majority of students (71.7%) perceive their relationship with their lecturers as based on mutual respect, while 64.8% perceive their relationship with their lecturers as sufficient cooperation. More than half of the respondents (66.6%) have acknowledged that the first year of studies is a challenge, while 28.4% have stated that Vilniaus Kolegija does not pay enough attention to the adaptation process. Almost half of the students (46.7%) have indicated that they know where to go if they need help, but a third do not, while 41.5% gave agreed that the system needs improvement.

These studies underline that student adaptation at a higher education institution is a multifaceted process that depends on individual psychological characteristics, social support and cultural factors. In order to improve student adaptation, it is important to take these factors into account when designing support systems in higher education institutions.

Research Method

In order to facilitate the adaptation of students at the Faculty of Arts and Creative Technologies of Vilniaus Kolegija, a qualitative survey was conducted. The aim of the survey was to investigate the attitude of the students of Cultural Activity Management at Vilniaus Kolegija towards adaptation and to identify the factors and barriers to positive adaptation.

A qualitative survey allows delving deeper into social phenomena and uncovering students' experiences and the challenges they face during their adaptation period. Targeted sampling is where the researcher deliberately selects participants who best meet the research objectives and can provide meaningful insights (Žydzīūnaitė & Sabaliauskas, 2017).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between December and February 2024. A questionnaire was drawn up based on the factors affecting student adaptation discussed in the literature.

The survey used criterion sampling to ensure that participants met the basic requirements of the survey and were able to provide detailed information. The survey was conducted among 7 students of the Cultural Activity Management study programme in years 1-3: 4 females and 3 males aged between 19 and 22. To ensure anonymity, the informants were assigned the code A1-A7.

The ethical principles followed in this survey included confidentiality and anonymity, respect for personal privacy, and respectful and kind communication. Fairness, equivalence and choice were ensured in the survey and interviews with the informants

Result and Discussion

Factors influencing successful student adaptation

The first question was aimed at finding out the factors influencing students' social adaptation in the HEI. The informants who participated in the survey first noted that communication with peers and teaching staff and support from relatives helped them to adapt (Table 1).

Table 1. Social adaptation of students

Category	Subcategories	Illustrative statements
Social adaptation of students	Communication with peers	<i><...it was difficult to make friends at first, but as time has gone on I have made friends with colleagues, but the communication is not as close as I would like...> (A1); <...the group assignments during the lectures helped me to get along with the course group. It is very good that there was group work in the first year. In my second year, I met students from other programmes, and we held events organised by the Students' Association...> (A2); <...the interaction with my fellow students helped me to adapt, the contacts I made at the freshmen summer camp, the group work helped me to get to know my fellow students and their attitudes...> (A3); <...I felt good about making new friends...> (A4); <...course mates made it easier, freshmen camp helped...> (A5); <...I found a friend from my first year who I'm still in touch with now (third year)...> (A6); <...I felt good because I met a few students at the freshmen camp...> (A7)</i>
	Good relations with teaching staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i><...the relationship with the lecturers is excellent, the lecturers are very kind, supportive, caring, open...> (A1); <...the lecturers seem friendly, but we mostly interact at lectures only...> (A7); <...I like that we can go to the lecturers for advice, they help us to adapt to our studies...> (A3); <...the nice communication with the lecturers made it easier to adapt...> (A4)</i> • <i><...I was helped by open, creative lecturers, and I felt I was in an environment of like-minded people...> (A6)</i>
	Support from relatives	<i><...my partner supports me and encourages me to be closer to my fellow students...> (A1); <...it helps a lot to communicate with my friends – we share information and help each other...> (A7); <...my family supports me from a distance, we call each other every day...> (A2); <...I can talk about my challenges in my dorm with my friends...> (A6)</i>

Most of the students in the survey mentioned that making new friends and getting in touch with their lecturers made their social adaptation easier. Students who attended the

freshmen camp said it was a great opportunity to get to know the course before starting their studies, but the timing was not convenient for everyone as the camp was organised in summer when students were on a holiday or working. The informants mentioned that common activities, group work during lectures and participation in student organisations helped them to get to know their course mates. The students mentioned what activities would facilitate social adaptation: "In the first month, we should have more activities where we could meet our course mates, informal socialising" (A2), "organised trips would help us to get to know and explore Vilnius" (A4). Cultural and social differences made it difficult to communicate with course mates: "Most of my course mates are from small towns and villages, so it's harder to spend more time with them because they go to visit their relatives" (A1); "I'm from a smaller town, so it was a challenge to get used to the pace of the capital and the diversity of people" (A6).

Good relations with lecturers are a factor for successful adaptation, with most students stressing the importance of lecturers' support, and some students mentioning that they would like to interact more with lecturers, not only at lectures but also during informal activities.

We asked the informants about students' emotional and psychological adaptation and out the question "How did you feel in the first weeks of your studies?". Table 2 summarises the students' responses.

Table 2. Emotional and psychological adaptation

Category	Subcategories	Illustrative statements
Emotional and psychological adaptation	Stress and anxiety management	<...I felt stressed because everything was new and unfamiliar, it was hard to get used to the changed environment and system...> <...I was worried about exams and student life, but I made friends and the problems were solved...> (A1); <...there was a lot of stress because I'm from a smaller town, changed living conditions, unknown city. Life with friends, conversations, parental support helped me to cope with the stress...> (A2); <...there was anxiety because it's always uncomfortable to go to a new place, to get used to a new environment...> (A6); <... it was difficult to get used to more independence, but with time it became easier...> <... it was worrying about balancing work and studies...> (A5); <...I didn't feel bad because I had support from friends and family...> (A3)
	• Self-esteem and personal identity formation	<...I've gained more confidence, I've become a bit more independent...>" (A1) ; "<...I was the most creative and ambitious person in my city, but when I came to Vilnius, I realised that everybody around me was like that and I didn't trust myself. In my second year, I got a job, which boosted my self-esteem and confidence...>" (A6); <...College helped me rediscover myself – I tried things I had never imagined doing before...> (A7); <...every day I feel that I am becoming more independent and less dependent on the opinions of others...> (A3); <...I felt good, I felt confident, participating in events and activities of the Student Association increased my self-esteem...> (A4)

Most students were anxious at the start of their first year, due to the change of environment, new accommodation, greater independence and academic expectations. The students emphasised that the most important factors supporting emotional well-being were the support of friends, family and relatives. Social support and the opportunity to talk to relatives helped to ease the tension. A number of the informants mentioned anxiety related to the changes in the system and the challenges of combining study and work, but this was offset by support from friends. Bendžiūtė, S., & Stanislavovienė, J. (2021) also state that a positive psychosocial environment can have a favourable effect on students' self-esteem, self-efficacy and motivation. Conversely, an unfavourable psychosocial learning environment, unfriendly relationships with peers, conflicts with and lack of support from lecturers, high academic workload, etc. can increase stress

The students also mentioned the positive changes they had experienced since the beginning of their studies, such as increased self-confidence, self-esteem and personal identity. Opportunities for self-expression, work experience and involvement in student activities helped them to feel more confident. One informant referred to the availability of psychological support: *"There was no need to go to a psychologist, but I am glad that Vilniaus Kolegija has such an opportunity, if I had problems with coping I would go"* (A1).

The third question enquired about the impact of the change in the students' living environment on their adaptation. The majority of students highlighted the change of the living environment and self-management as one of the most important adaptation factors (Table 3).

Table 3. Living environment and finances

Category	Subcategories	Illustrative statements
Living environment and finances	Accommodation in another city or dormitory	<i><...it was difficult to live apart from the parents, and it was worrying because all the responsibility falls on yourself...> (A2); <...I lived in a dormitory with a friend from my town, which helped a lot. If going to college was uncomfortable for the first few months, coming home was very nice...> (A6); <...in the first months it was difficult to get used to the pace of the city and the congestion, the traffic, it was difficult to plan time...> (A3); <...good infrastructure, dormitory close to the College, bus routes are convenient, student discount, EUR 6 per month...> (A7)</i>
	Financial stability and self-sufficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i><...I live with my parents, my parents pay for my needs (food, phone bills, bus tickets, etc.), but I am trying to become more independent, to pay for my own personal expenses...> (A1); <...I was worried that I didn't know how to do my taxes, no one taught me how to do that at school, and I found it difficult to plan for expenses...> (A2); <...having financial literacy skills helped me to live independently...> (A3)</i>
	Combining work and study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i><...if you have support from work, it's not difficult to combine...> (A5); <...it has not been difficult to combine lectures and work – I work part-time and my employer is</i>

		<i>supportive and flexible...> A3; <...a flexible timetable has helped, it is possible to combine studies and work...> (A4)</i>
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The transition from living with parents to living independently in a new city, especially in a dormitory, was challenging for many students. However, students who lived with acquaintances or friends said that it helped them to settle in more quickly and reduced anxiety. Based on the survey conducted on the adaptation of students at Kauno Kolegija Higher Education Institution, it can be stated that the trends do not change, a part of students who live in a dormitory face difficulties (20%) and have difficulties adapting (13%) to the study environment, while students living with parents (72%) or in their own home (85%) adapt more easily to their studies (Baranauskas & Marcinkevičienė, 2013).

In terms of financial situation, students stressed the importance of independence: many were already working and financially independent from their parents. At the same time, the need for better financial literacy became apparent: some informants mentioned difficulties in planning expenditure due to a lack of practical knowledge of budget management. Those who had basic financial planning skills felt more confident. Informant A4 mentioned that "*For financial stability, it would help a lot if all students received scholarships*". Unfortunately, only the best-performing students receive a scholarship at Kolegija, according to current legislation.

Reconciling study and work was identified as a common but surmountable challenge. Flexible study timetables and support from employers were mentioned as important factors for successfully combining work and study. It was also mentioned that government discounts for students (e.g. on public transport) helped to maintain financial stability.

Table 4 shows students' answers to the question on academic adaptation.

Table 4. Academic adaptation

Category	Subcategory	Illustrative statements
Academic adaptation	Changes in learning styles and methods	<i><...group projects helped to understand the tasks...>(A2); <...it was necessary to learn to analyse, not just to remember...>(A4); <...reading the articles was difficult at the beginning, but necessary...> (A6)</i>
	Developing independence	<i><...you have to study on your own...>; <...I still do my work at the last minute...> (A1); <...nobody reminds you about the assignments – you have to follow them yourself...> <...timetables are published and you have to plan your time...>; <...the requirements of the gymnasium helped me to prepare, because there was an order to it...> (A2)</i>
	Academic information and system	<i><...it was difficult to find classrooms and timetables, but I quickly found out...> (A1); <...the information seminars were very helpful...> (A2); <...the administrative staff were very kind and provided the information I needed...> (A3); <...you can contact the Department and the lecturers, you always get an answer and help...> (A6); <...the introduction to the studies helped to understand the system...> (A7)</i>

	Lecturer-consultants	<...the lecturers communicate like adults...>(A5); <...I could check by email or in person...> (A3); <...it's nice to have young lecturers – a closer connection...> (A6)
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Academic adaptation involves both the transformation of learning skills and the growth of the sense of personal responsibility. Students face the need for independence and information challenges, but these are overcome by a clear study structure and supportive lecturers.

Students are faced with changes in learning styles and methods when they enter a higher education institution: "*In Kolegija, I had to learn how to think critically – it's no longer enough just to remember information, you have to analyse it, you have to plan your time, because last-minute learning is not good (A4).*" According to informant A2, "*it's hard to search for scientific articles, to understand their structure, but then you realise that you can't write your final thesis without it, and it motivates you to go deeper*".

Many students mentioned an increase in their independence, having to adapt to a new educational institution, familiarise themselves with the rules and plan their time. The majority of respondents said that the information provided helped them to adapt: information seminars, meetings with administrative staff, and the Introduction to Studies course unit. "*Training, conferences, information seminars, such as citation training, allow planning, advance knowledge and preparation*" (A3).

All of the above are interlinked: the more a student feels supported and ready for change, the easier it is for him/her to adapt to the new environment.

Conclusions

The majority of students in the survey mentioned that making new friends, getting involved in new activities and getting in touch with lecturers made their social adaptation easier. The students emphasised that the most important factors supporting emotional well-being were the support of friends, family and relatives. It is important to mention the importance of sharing information with students in various ways, and most students said that the information they received about the study procedures and student life helped them to adapt.

For some students, cultural and social differences made it difficult to communicate with course mates. The transition from living with parents to living independently in a new city, especially in a dormitory, was challenging for many students. However, students who lived with acquaintances or friends said that it helped them to settle in more quickly and reduced anxiety.

Reconciling study and work was identified as a common but surmountable challenge. Flexible study timetables and support from employers were mentioned as important factors for successfully combining work and study. Regarding the financial situation, students stressed the importance of self-sufficiency and the need for better financial literacy: some respondents mentioned difficulties in planning their spending due to a lack of practical knowledge about budget management.

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