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ŠVIETIMAS: POLITIKA, VADYBA, KOKYBĖ
EDUCATION POLICY, MANAGEMENT AND QUALITY

SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ADAPTATION OF STUDENTS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND SPECIFIC FEATURES UNDER MARTIAL LAW

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Abstract

This article provides a theoretical analysis of students' social and psychological adaptation to higher education as a dynamic process of entering and functioning within a new system of academic, social, and normative relations. The conceptual foundations and principal characteristics of social and psychological adaptation are examined, with particular attention to its interrelationships with socialization, academic functioning, interpersonal interaction, and professional development. The principal social and psychological, professional, and societal dimensions of student adaptation are outlined. Particular emphasis is placed on the initial period of university study as a critical stage characterized by the restructuring of established behavioral and activity patterns, the formation of new interpersonal relationships, the acquisition of institutional norms, and the development of student autonomy. Active and passive forms of adaptation are analyzed in terms of their psychological content and potential implications for subsequent social integration, personal development, and self-realization. A systemic perspective on adaptation is considered, according to which adaptive outcomes emerge from the interaction of environmental conditions, interpersonal relationships, and personal resources. Findings from Ukrainian and international studies are synthesized with respect to the roles of coping strategies, attachment patterns, academic and psychological support, characteristics of the social environment, and interactions with teachers and peers. Particular attention is given to the specific challenges of student adaptation under conditions of the full-scale war in Ukraine, including heightened social uncertainty, psychological strain, changes in living and learning conditions, disruption of established social networks, and a shift in life priorities toward safety and basic security. The analysis supports the development of an integrated framework of psychological, academic, and social support aimed at strengthening students' adaptive functioning and sustaining their educational engagement under conditions of prolonged instability.

Keywords: *social and psychological adaptation, university students, adaptation strategies, higher education, educational environment, psychological support, martial law, war-related stress*

Introduction

In contemporary society, education constitutes a fundamental social institution that contributes to the transmission and transformation of social experience, the development of socially significant personal characteristics, and individuals' integration into broader systems of social relations. Higher education provides structured conditions for the acquisition of knowledge, social norms and values, the development of patterns of activity, and the formation of communicative and professional competencies. Within this context, students' social and psychological adaptation to higher education has become an important area of psychological inquiry because the quality of adaptation is associated with academic functioning, interpersonal relationships, professional development, and broader processes of personal development.

Students' social and psychological adaptation to the university environment may be conceptualized as a dynamic process through which individuals adjust to a new configuration of social conditions, institutional requirements, interpersonal relationships, and patterns of activity. This process involves entering a new social environment, acquiring its normative and value-based expectations, establishing appropriate forms of interaction, and developing behavioral patterns that are functionally adequate to the new context. Adaptation reflects the capacity to achieve a workable correspondence between personal needs, resources, and goals and the demands imposed by the environment. Its effectiveness may therefore be considered in terms of the degree of congruence between intended goals, actual outcomes, and the individual's capacity to maintain effective functioning under changing social conditions. Social adaptation is inherently dynamic because changes in the surrounding environment require ongoing modification of behavior, activity patterns, and interpersonal strategies.

Accordingly, social and psychological adaptation within higher education should be understood as a process of reciprocal interaction between the individual and the social environment. Students are influenced by institutional and interpersonal contexts while simultaneously contributing to the development of these contexts through their activities, relationships, value orientations, and forms of social participation. The quality of this interaction affects students' integration into academic groups, their engagement with the educational process, and their responses to emerging academic and social demands.

Research Problem

A comprehensive assessment of students' adaptation to higher education requires consideration of several interrelated dimensions. The social and psychological dimension encompasses emotional functioning, patterns of interpersonal interaction, integration into the academic group, and perceptions of the social and psychological climate. The professional dimension concerns motivation for career choice, preparedness to perform professionally relevant tasks, attitudes toward future professional activity, and awareness of professional development prospects. The societal dimension reflects students' degree of involvement in the university as a social institution, their awareness of social roles and responsibilities, their level of social participation, and the motivational orientations underlying such participation.

The transition to higher education is particularly consequential during the initial period of university study. Entry into the university environment entails a transition to a new system of academic, social, and organizational expectations. Established patterns of activity are reorganized, new interpersonal relationships are formed, and patterns of interaction with teachers and peers are established. Students must also adapt to new academic routines, independent time management, and increased responsibility for their own performance. Successful adjustment during this period creates conditions for the subsequent stabilization of academic and social functioning. At the same time, the adaptation process varies considerably across individuals and is shaped by a combination of individual psychological and social factors, including previous educational and social experience, characteristics of nervous system functioning, behavioral activity, interpersonal orientations, and established patterns of coping with difficulties. From the perspective of the individual's position toward the new social environment, active and passive forms of adaptation can be distinguished.

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Active adaptation is characterized by a proactive orientation toward the new social situation. The individual purposefully seeks ways of managing difficulties, interprets environmental demands, modifies behavior, and mobilizes available resources to achieve personally meaningful goals. Such students retain a capacity to influence their social environment through initiative, communicative involvement, patterns of interpersonal interaction, and participation in collective activities. Active adaptation is therefore associated with autonomy, personal responsibility, and a strong sense of agency.

Passive or conformist adaptation, by contrast, involves predominant acceptance of existing norms, rules, and behavioral expectations within the new social environment. Students orient their behavior toward established group standards and adjust their conduct to prevailing expectations. This form of adaptation may facilitate initial social inclusion and reduce immediate interpersonal difficulties. However, persistent reliance on conformity may constrain initiative, autonomy, and opportunities for self-realization. When adaptation is dominated by compliance with external expectations, the individual may have fewer opportunities to exercise agency and actively shape the social environment.

The adaptive position adopted by students has implications for subsequent socialization. Socialization within the university environment involves the acquisition, interpretation, and integration of social norms, values, and behavioral patterns into the individual's developing system of life orientations. Through engagement with a new social environment, students establish new modes of activity and interpersonal interaction, define current goals, and gradually construct trajectories of personal and professional development. An active adaptive position can create favorable conditions for autonomous goal setting, personal responsibility, and the realization of individual agency (Kuzykova, 2020).

Passive adaptation is predominantly based on the acceptance of established norms and values without substantial involvement in their reinterpretation or modification. Its psychological expression may involve a strong orientation toward conformity according to the principle of "being like everyone else." Under such conditions, students may restrict their own activity, avoid demanding tasks, and favor familiar patterns of behavior. Over time, this orientation may constrain social initiative, autonomy, and opportunities for personal self-realization. Consequently, the relative predominance of active or passive adaptation can shape the nature of students' integration into university life and influence their subsequent personal and professional development.

An analysis of existing theoretical approaches supports the conceptualization of student adaptation to higher education as a complex, dynamic, and multidimensional process of integration into a new system of social, academic, and normative relations. This process encompasses entry into academic groups and student communities, the establishment of interpersonal relationships, acquisition of institutional norms and values, restructuring of academic activity, and development of contextually appropriate patterns of social behavior. Student social and psychological adaptation should therefore be understood as an ongoing process of person–environment interaction through which a relative congruence is established between individual needs, capacities, values, and the demands of higher education.

This interaction involves multiple actors, including university administrators, teachers, academic advisors, parents, peers, and students themselves. Their coordinated involvement in shaping the social environment and supporting adaptation represents an important condition for favorable adaptive outcomes. A multi-level perspective makes it possible to account for the complexity of student adaptation and to identify the interaction between individual, interpersonal, and institutional determinants.

V. A. Semychenko developed a systemic perspective on adaptation grounded in the proposition that adaptive effectiveness is associated with the integrative characteristics of the individual. Within this conceptual framework, adaptation is understood as a complex phenomenon comprising multiple interconnected processes. Each process is linked to a particular system of relationships established between the individual and the relevant environment and, together with its associated interactions and connections, constitutes a distinct structural component of adaptation (Semichenko & Zdanevych, 2002).

According to this approach, each structural component of adaptation can be conceptualized as a system comprising three interrelated elements: (a) an objective phenomenon and the conditions surrounding it, including external environmental conditions; (b) the relationships established by the adapting individual with the relevant environment; and (c) the individual's personal characteristics, which may correspond to, or diverge from, environmental requirements and therefore function as internal conditions or personal resources.

Effective support for first-year students should take these socio-pedagogical factors into account and involve systematic monitoring of adaptation outcomes together with timely modification of support strategies. Such an approach can facilitate the development of more autonomous and socially active forms of student behavior, while creating conditions for the expression of initiative, responsibility, and personal agency.

Adaptation support should combine structured institutional measures with sustained interpersonal engagement. Its objectives include the development of relevant skills and competencies, promotion of a constructive sense of self, and assistance in addressing academic, interpersonal, and personal difficulties emerging during the transition to higher education. Individualized forms of support may strengthen students' sense of psychological security and increase their capacity to remain engaged with educational goals under conditions of increased demands.

Students' extracurricular activities represent another potentially important component of an adaptive university environment. When systematically organized, extracurricular activities can contribute to the development of interpersonal relationships, the establishment of a positive group climate, the acquisition of social competencies, and increased tolerance toward differences in perspectives and individual characteristics. Such activities may also strengthen group cohesion, create opportunities for cooperation and mutual assistance, facilitate access to information relevant to students' interests and needs, and provide conditions for creative self-determination and self-realization. In this respect, extracurricular engagement can function as an additional institutional resource supporting social integration and personal development.

First-year students must adapt to the academic expectations, social roles, and organizational demands characteristic of higher education while integrating these requirements with their individual characteristics and existing social experience. The adaptation process may involve objective and subjective difficulties associated with physiological, psychological, and social development as well as with the structural characteristics of the educational institution.

Although adaptation begins for all first-year students, its temporal course varies considerably across individuals. According to V. Kondrashova, the adaptation process can be differentiated into several stages. The first stage, occurring approximately by the end of

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the first semester, represents an initial adjustment phase during which students respond to the new environmental conditions. The second stage, extending into the middle of the second semester, involves a restructuring of adaptive mechanisms and psychological processes. The third stage, generally occurring by the end of the first academic year, is characterized by the emergence of relatively stable adaptation. These stages should not, however, be treated as universal developmental sequences because students may differ substantially in the duration and quality of their adjustment. Difficulties may persist beyond the first year and, in some cases, continue throughout university education.

Several approaches can be identified for optimizing students' social and psychological adaptation: increasing university staff awareness of the significance of adaptation processes; developing a supportive social environment involving teachers and senior students; responding to students' needs for interpersonal communication; and establishing productive subject–subject relationships between students and teachers.

International research provides additional evidence concerning the complexity of students' adaptation to higher education. Wu, Garza, and Guzman (2015) examined the challenges experienced by international students in higher education in the United States. Their findings indicate that academic difficulties, social isolation, and cultural adjustment constitute major domains of challenge. Accordingly, student support should encompass academic assistance together with interventions addressing interpersonal and cultural dimensions of adjustment.

Clinciu (2013) emphasizes the critical nature of the first year of university study for adjustment to the higher education environment. The author associates maladaptive adjustment with anxiety, depression, vulnerability to stress, anger, and psychological difficulties, whereas more favorable adjustment is associated with psychological well-being, more effective coping strategies, self-efficacy, and self-esteem.

Esmael et al. (2018), examining adjustment problems among first-year university students in Ethiopia, found that difficulties in adapting to the university environment were associated with separation from family and friends, changes in living arrangements, difficulties in socialization, time management and study skills, and adjustment to university classes and academic workloads. The authors emphasize the relevance of psychological and academic counseling as sources of support during the adaptation process. Their findings further indicate that students experiencing fewer adjustment difficulties tend to demonstrate better psychological functioning and academic outcomes. The study also identified greater vulnerability to adjustment difficulties among female students and highlighted financial difficulties as an important factor associated with adjustment problems. These findings underscore the importance of accessible institutional support during the transition to higher education.

Buyukiscan (2018) examined psychological adjustment among university students in Turkey, focusing on the role of attachment patterns and coping strategies. The results indicated associations between psychological adjustment, interpersonal attachment characteristics, and coping behavior. Secure attachment was positively associated with psychological adjustment, whereas anxious attachment was associated with lower levels of adjustment. These findings suggest that interpersonal security and the quality of relational expectations may contribute to students' ability to function effectively within a new social environment.

Among the coping strategies examined, active planning was positively associated with psychological adjustment. This strategy reflects a deliberate orientation toward analyzing problematic situations, identifying courses of action, and pursuing practical solutions. Such an approach may facilitate more effective regulation of behavior in response to academic and social demands. By contrast, biochemical avoidance/disengagement was negatively associated with psychological adjustment, indicating an association between this form of avoidant coping and less favorable adjustment outcomes. Regression analysis showed that secure attachment, anxious attachment, active planning, and biochemical avoidance/disengagement were statistically significant predictors of psychological adjustment. Collectively, these variables accounted for approximately 57% of the variance in psychological adjustment. The findings therefore support the view that student adjustment is associated with both interpersonal orientations and coping processes and should be examined through an integrated person–environment perspective.

The transition to higher education involves a substantial transformation of students' social developmental context. Students enter new academic, interpersonal, and organizational systems, encounter unfamiliar normative expectations, reorganize their patterns of academic activity, and assume greater responsibility for their own decisions. These changes frequently extend to everyday life, the structure of social networks, and access to familiar sources of support. For many first-year students, university entry is accompanied by separation from family, relocation, independent management of everyday affairs, and the formation of new interpersonal relationships. The resulting restructuring of established behavioral and self-regulatory patterns makes the initial period of university study particularly important for subsequent functioning in the educational environment.

Under conditions of full-scale war, the challenges associated with student adaptation become substantially more complex. Armed conflict transforms the social, educational, and living conditions in which students study and develop, while increasing uncertainty and psychological burden. In addition to meeting new academic requirements, students may have to respond to security threats, displacement, relocation, disruption of social ties, and interruptions or transformations in educational delivery. Under these circumstances, social and psychological adaptation becomes an ongoing process of functioning within a continuously changing environment. Effective adaptation requires behavioral flexibility, self-regulation, and the capacity to maintain meaningful activity under conditions of uncertainty.

Personal resources that support adaptive functioning consequently acquire particular importance. These include the capacity for autonomous decision-making, activity planning, emotional regulation, constructive coping with difficulties, maintenance of interpersonal relationships, and effective use of available social support. In this context, successful adaptation should be understood in terms of the ability to sustain academic engagement, psychological functioning, and personal and professional development despite adverse external conditions.

Wartime conditions may also alter the hierarchy of students' priorities. Under persistent threats to safety, educational and professional goals may temporarily become secondary to immediate needs related to physical security, stabilization of everyday life, and preservation of meaningful social relationships. Particular attention should be given to students who have experienced occupation, forced displacement, loss of housing,

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or prolonged separation from close relatives. Such experiences may interfere with concentration, reduce academic motivation, increase emotional strain, and complicate the establishment of new social relationships. The university environment therefore acquires an important stabilizing function by providing opportunities for psychological support, social integration, and continuity of education.

Effective support for student adaptation requires a systemic and multi-level framework. Psychological counseling, academic advising, constructive teacher–student interaction, the development of supportive academic-group climates, and students' participation in collective activities can be conceptualized as interconnected components of institutional adaptation support. Extracurricular forms of engagement, including cultural, sporting, creative, and social activities, may further strengthen opportunities for interpersonal interaction, belonging, and the development of social resources.

Adaptation support should also focus on the development of long-term psychological resources. These include self-regulation, psychological flexibility, planning capacity, communicative competence, critical thinking, and constructive strategies for coping with stress. Under wartime conditions characterized by intense information exposure, the capacity to critically evaluate information, identify disinformation, and regulate emotional responses to threatening or emotionally charged messages becomes particularly relevant. These competencies contribute to students' ability to preserve psychological stability and make informed decisions within an unstable social environment.

Summing-up

The social and psychological adaptation of students to higher education during wartime should therefore be conceptualized as a multidimensional process encompassing academic adjustment, social integration, psychological self-regulation, and professional self-determination. Its course is shaped by the interaction between students' personal resources, the characteristics of the educational environment, and broader social circumstances. In the contemporary Ukrainian context, higher education institutions represent significant spaces for sustaining social inclusion, psychological stability, educational continuity, and future professional development. This context creates a strong rationale for further investigation of the psychological mechanisms underlying student adaptation, the factors associated with adaptive success, and evidence-based forms of targeted psychological support under conditions of prolonged wartime instability.

The adaptive capacities of individuals and communities, including resilience, psychological flexibility, and collective efficacy, are particularly relevant in this context. Developing theoretical and methodological foundations for studying social and psychological adaptation at the individual and community levels may contribute to the design of evidence-informed adaptation strategies. Such approaches may support individual and collective capacity to respond to prolonged adversity and reduce the social and psychological consequences of armed conflict. In the Ukrainian context, understanding different models of adaptation and identifying effective psychological strategies for responding to the consequences of military aggression represent important directions for psychological research and educational practice.

Student adaptation within higher education is consequently a complex phenomenon involving adjustment to changing academic and everyday conditions, integration into new social groups, and the development of effective self-regulatory and coping strategies. Its successful course requires flexibility, the capacity to navigate changing social and academic environments, and the preservation of psychological well-being. From this perspective, the study of student adaptation extends beyond the analysis of individual difficulties and encompasses the broader interaction between personal resources, institutional conditions, interpersonal relationships, and the sociocultural context in which higher education is experienced.

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