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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Adaptation Of First-Year Students And Possibilities For Ensuring It**

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**| ABSTRACT**

The article analyses the factors influencing adaptation in the study process from a theoretical point of view and justifies the prerequisites for ensuring successful adaptation. The aim of the research is to investigate the problem areas of adaptation of first-year students in the study process and to provide ways of solving them. Analytical descriptive, quantitative and statistical research methods were applied. Using a quantitative research strategy (questionnaire survey), the researcher found out the factors influencing the adaptation of the first-year students of Lithuanian higher education institutions (n=144) in the study process, identified the causes of adaptation difficulties and, on the basis of the research participants' assessments, envisaged the possibilities of management of the processes of ensuring the successful adaptation of first-year students. As the results of the study showed, almost a third of the participants had difficulties adapting to the study arrangements at the beginning of their studies. The highest mean scores indicate that the lack of precise instructions for assignments, the large number of assignments, studying too intensively in a modular system, and the excessive study load in lectures and preparation for exams are some of the external difficulties that first-year students encountered at the beginning of their studies. Meanwhile, the lack of the ability to rationalise the allocation of time for lectures, homework and leisure, as well as the inability to concentrate during lectures and the lack of motivation to study, were identified as some of the most important personal difficulties that first-year students encountered at the start of their higher education studies. According to the research participants, providing precise and clear instructions and consistent requirements for tasks, implementing and ensuring feedback on the tasks completed, organising reports with precise deadlines and proper workload distribution are some of the possible ways to ensure the successful adaptation of first year students to the study process. The results of the study will have a lasting value in the scientific debate in providing guidelines for the management of the successful adaptation of students in the first year of study at higher education institutions.

**| KEYWORDS**

Adaptation in the study process, first year students, higher education institution

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### **1. Introduction**

The discussion on the importance of higher education in preparing young people for professional activities in today's society has initiated research on student adaptation and its determinants. The preparation of society for professional activities is an indicator of the successful development of the society itself, which is why more and more attention is being paid to the adaptation of students in higher education institutions (Yu & Downing, 2012; Wu, Occhipinti & B. Watson, 2023; Rossato, Veloso Morotti & Scorsolini-Comin, 2024). The phenomenon of adaptation is not new but it has to be accepted that the development of societies is highly susceptible to change, and that individuals' experiences of entering new environments, including learning environments, a new community, or other factors, also encourage timely research focusing on the adaptation of the first-year students.

Therefore, considering the successful adaptation of the first-year students to the study process as an important factor for an effective study process, there is no doubt that when examining the peculiarities of the adaptation of the first-year students to the study process, the focus should be on both the student's own personal adaptation and the conditions provided by the higher

education institution, as adaptation is not only related to the students' adaptation to the environment, but also to the adaptation of the learning environment to the students' needs. The adaptation of the first-year students will determine their academic performance, their motivation to study, and their success in their future careers. Meanwhile, difficulties in the adaptation of students (especially first-year students) can have negative consequences for their successful engagement in their studies in preparation for their professional career, making it more difficult for them to understand the demands of the educational environment and leading to frustration with their professional choices.

Based on the above, it can be argued that students' successful adaptation to the study process is one of the factors that contribute to students' active involvement in the study process, their motivation for learning, their satisfaction with their studies, and their successful preparation for professional activities, as well as to their well-being and emotional state during their studies. Therefore, in today's context, the topic of the first-year students' adaptation to the study process is still relevant and encourages higher education institutions to look for more effective means and ways and to create the environmental conditions that would ensure the successful adaptation of students to the academic community. On the other hand, despite the fact that the research on the topic of the first-year is gaining increasing importance in the modern higher education sector, when examining the scientific literature, there is a lack of research on the possibilities of ensuring the adaptation of first-year students in higher education.

Summing up, it is clear that higher education institutions need to assess the peculiarities of the adaptation of the first-year students to the study process, to identify the factors determining it, to identify the problematic areas and to provide ways and means to ensure the success of the adaptation process. The identified reasons and factors that may cause difficulties in the adaptation of students to the study process would enable to provide directions for improvement of the situation in order to achieve successful adaptation of students to higher education institutions. This type of research has a residual value in the scientific discussion of the possibilities of ensuring the successful adaptation of the first year students to higher education. Considering the relevance of the topic and the practical significance of the research, this article reveals the indicators of the first-year students' attitudes towards the factors determining their adaptation to higher education and, based on the research data, presents possible ways of ensuring the successful adaptation of the first-year students to higher education.

The identified reasons and factors that may cause difficulties in the adaptation of students to the study process would enable to provide directions for improvement of the situation in order to achieve successful adaptation of students to higher education institutions. Taking into consideration the topicality, *the following problematic questions are raised*: what factors determine the adaptation of the first-year students to the study process? How do we ensure the adaptation of the first-year students to the study process?

*The object of the research*: first-year students' attitudes towards the factors determining adaptation in the study process and the possibilities of ensuring it.

*The aim of the research* is to investigate the problematic areas of the first-year students' adaptation to the study process and to identify ways to solve them.

*Objectives of the research*:

- 1.To describe the factors determining adaptation in the study process from the theoretical point of view and to assess the possibilities of ensuring it.
- 2.To identify the difficulties of adaptation in the study process for the first-year students.
- 3.To find out the respondents' attitudes towards the possibilities of ensuring adaptation of the first-year students in the study process.

*Limitations of the study*. A limitation of the study is that the research was carried out by sending questionnaires to students by e-mail, which resulted in a relatively low return rate. This may have influenced the results of the study and limited the possibility of carrying out comparative analysis of the data according to different socio-demographic indicators (e.g. gender, different forms of study in student groups, etc.). For this reason, in order to increase the reliability of the data, it would be advisable to repeat the study in the future by expanding the sample and, applying different research methodologies and supplementing the results with other methods of collecting information (interviews, focus groups) and collecting information from different sources (students, lecturers, administrative staff).

*Originality/relevance of the research*. The study identified problematic areas in the field of adaptation of first year students to the study process. Based on the participants' evaluation, the research revealed the factors influencing the adaptation of the first-year students to higher education studies and identified the difficulties faced by the first-year students when they start studying at a higher education institution. The results of this research will have practical implications for planning ways to ensure the successful adaptation of the first-year students to the study process.

## **2. Theoretical insights**

Adaptation is a complex process that affects a person's psychological and, at the same time, physiological processes, where the body adapts to the environmental conditions, and it is in the process of adaptation that the aim is to cope with the difficulties or stresses that arise (Nevid, Rathus & Greene 2008).

In higher education, adaptation is also an inevitable phenomenon that is commonly encountered by students, who experience academic success, develop long-term performance and professional opportunities, and promote personal well-being as a result

of successful adaptation (Yu & Downing, 2012; Fraide, Ganotice, Downing, Chan & Yip, 2022). However, successful adaptation in HE often becomes a challenging or aspirational process, and in the case of unsuccessful adaptation, students may physically withdraw from HE or simply withdraw psychologically (Pei, Liu, & Zhao, 2009). Other authors (Kehm, Larsen, Sommersel, 2019; Jokštaitė, Pociūtė, 2014) also identify personal maladjustment as a reason for dropping out. Thus, when examining the phenomenon of adaptation in higher education studies, it is possible to see a problem where adaptation difficulties and personal maladjustment are identified as one of the possible reasons for discontinuation of studies. Unfortunately, this phenomenon of high drop-out rates is found in all higher education institutions worldwide. At the same time, considering the impact of this phenomenon at both the economic and societal levels, as well as at the personal level of students who leave higher education, this fact only further justifies the relevance of ensuring the adaptation of the first-year students. Therefore, when analysing the phenomenon of the adaptation of the first-year students at the level of the higher education institution, the question of how to ensure the successful adaptation of first-year students is legitimately raised.

A number of scholars studying the adaptation of the first-year students in higher education relate this phenomenon to the level of the higher education institution as an institution. For example, research (Pei, Liu & Zhao, 2009; Yu & Downing, 2012) examines the adaptation of first-year students in order to assess and address adaptation problems and to identify those factors that can facilitate the adaptation process and reduce or eliminate the difficulties encountered in the process. Pei, Liu & Zhao (2009), analysing the adaptation of the first-year students enrolled in higher education, found that one of the possible reasons for the difficulty of adaptation was the lack of adaptation to the rhythm of study. Whereas in secondary education, the focus was on knowledge and exam results, in higher education it becomes a challenge to adapt to the liberal education paradigm. Other authors, based on the research results, also draw attention to the organisation of the study process, highlighting the study load as one of the factors influencing not only the formation of students' attitudes towards their studies, but also their well-being and successful adaptation. According to Bumbacco & Scharfe (2020), a heavy study load can even lead to student burnout, which is likely to be a particularly common phenomenon in the first-year student groups, where, after coming from school to university, there are difficulties in adjusting to the rhythm of study, increased hours of independent study, etc. Other authors (Mouton, Zhang & Ertl, 2020, Behr, Giese, Kamdjou, & Theune, 2020) have identified the burden of excessive study requirements that do not match the skills and competences of students as a factor related to the formation of attitudes towards studying, and presumably also related to the process of adaptation (especially during the first months of study). This is also supported by other authors (Mostert & Pienaar, 2020), whose study shows a stronger correlation between burnout and lower satisfaction with studies, which could certainly be one of the factors contributing to the difficulties of adaptation to the study process. Thus, a heavy workload at the start of higher education may not only be associated with difficulties in adaptation to higher education, but may also have other negative consequences, such as a stronger tendency to drop out (Samašonok, Kamienas, & Juškevičienė, 2023). The analysis of the first-year students' difficulties in adapting to higher education also focuses on the aspect of personal reasons, highlighting one of the factors - the anxiety of being separated from relatives after a change in living conditions (e.g. moving to another city to study). Thus, the second reason could be the complete lack of adaptation or the slightly longer adaptation to the new environment of first-year students, as separation from parents and the introduction to a more relaxed environment again complicates the successful adaptation process at the higher education institution (e.g. missing lectures), which has an impact on the students' behavioural changes. Moreover, changes in living conditions can have a negative impact on the social relationships of young people entering higher education, e.g. with their partner, other family members, which can lead to a stronger level of anxiety, which can certainly be a cause of difficulties in adapting to higher education.

The phenomenon of adaptation in higher education and its determinants is discussed differently by other authors, whose research results suggest that the prevailing social relations in higher education with teachers, fellow students and administration, and the quality of these relations, are one of the factors that can determine the successful adaptation of first-year students. For example, Fourie (2017, 2020), Guščinskienė & Kaminskaitė (2019) in their studies emphasise the relevance of academic support, which is undoubtedly particularly important in the first months of studies, while other authors (Richard & Joseph, 2008, Allan & Pileičikienė, 2010, Žibėnienė, 2014) also associate students' well-being in HE and their successful involvement in the study process with the academic support provided by the professors in matters related to their studies. At the same time, the importance of support from members of the HEI community for student satisfaction and well-being is also highlighted by other researchers (Larmuseau, Desmet & Depaepe, 2019; Mostert & Pienaar, 2020), and Pukelis (2007), Guščinskienė, Čiburienė (2018) identify the importance of maximising the amount of additional services provided by HEIs in terms of career counselling and career guidance. Thus, a major reason for the difficult adaptation of the first-year students to higher education can be considered to be maladjustment to human relationships, where it becomes difficult to establish a positive relationship with other first-year students due to differences in values, worldview, inferiority or other personal reasons. These latter reasons can lead to both psychological and physical withdrawal from higher education, which is why, according to Pei, Liu & Zhao (2009), it is necessary to help first-year students to integrate into university life as quickly and effectively as possible. The approach and findings of these authors (Pei, Liu & Zhao, 2009) suggest the importance of an effective and not delayed adaptation. In a study conducted by Conejeros-Solar & Gomez-Arizaga (2015), they also highlighted the difficulties related to the adaptation process. At the same time, the latter authors also identify the importance of personal difficulties in the adaptation process, i.e. lack of organisational and time management skills, emotional instability, lack of moral support and lack of support at the beginning of studies. Crede, Niehorster (2012) point out that first-year

students have to adapt to a new social environment, to understand themselves as a member of a new community, to adjust to new duties and responsibilities, and to face many other difficulties and challenges. At the same time, social relations with members of the higher education community (lecturers, students, administration) and the quality of these relations, as well as the support received during the study period (especially during the first months of study) in matters related to studies, are not only a factor determining the well-being of the students during the study period, but also a factor ensuring a better adaptation of students to higher education institutions.

It is important to note that the adaptation of first-year students to higher education is also closely linked to the success they experience in the first months of their studies. According to Nemtcun, Sæle, Gamst-Klaussen, and Svartdal (2020), high academic performance and success during the course of studies can be one of the factors that lead to a high level of engagement, while Casanova, Cervero, Núñez, and Almeida (2009), Bernardo (2018) also showed a relationship between high academic performance and study success and higher levels of student engagement, motivation and, consequently, successful adaptation. Based on this fact, it is therefore, natural that study success (especially in the first months of study) and high academic achievement may be among the factors contributing to successful adaptation of first-year students.

Looking further into the determinants of student adaptation to higher education and the possibilities for achieving it, research shows that the adaptation process is indeed very often examined from the perspective of first-year students, but that research is dominated by studies that look at each student as an authentic individual bringing with him or her an individual experience, and that it is increasingly recognised that only certain specific groups of students (e.g. war refugees, students with special needs, etc.) may also experience adaptation difficulties. In this context, it is becoming increasingly relevant and important to focus on students' experiences as a factor in the quality of their adaptation to HE. Returning to the idea of the unique needs of students as different groups in society, Yu & Downing (2012), a study examining the adaptation of foreign students studying in the Chinese language in China, which found that integrative motivation, which is considered as a complex of attitudes, goals and motives, and attributes, was the only significant factor of academic adaptation. It also noted that integrative motivation is related to a positive affective attitude towards the community and that it contributes to the development of a sense of belonging to the community. The situation of the adaptation of foreign students from the perspective of motivation as a determinant of successful adaptation is also examined by Fraide, Ganotice, Downing, Chan & Yip (2022), which explores the adaptation of Chinese residents who come to Hong Kong to attend different courses in higher education. This study is important in that it reveals that students' adaptation depends on autonomous motivation, which is closely related to self-development and linked to self-determination theory. These findings suggest that contributing to the enhancement or correction of motivation in higher education, and promoting self-development, can also contribute to positive adaptation outcomes. Another study (Wu, Occhipinti & Watson, 2023), focusing on Mainland Chinese students studying in Hong Kong universities, showed that the language of the host country and the perception of intergroup communication with the local population have an impact on the psychological adjustment of these students in Hong Kong. Besides, some researches (Kayhan, Sen, & Akcamete, 2015) examine the adaptation of students with disabilities in higher education and the challenges associated with this. Administrative staff in HEIs have been found to be much more helpful and open to interacting with students with disabilities than academic staff. It was also found that support for students with disabilities is important in relation to their academic, research and accommodation needs. When discussing the successful adaptation of certain specific groups of students (e.g. students with disabilities), a different trend emerges, where much more emphasis is no longer placed on the student himself/herself, who is responsible for his/her own successful adaptation, but on another member of the HE community (e.g. the lecturer) a study by Kayhan, Sen & Akcamete (2015), related to the problems of adaptation of students with disabilities, found that it is crucial to encourage academic staff to participate in workshops to raise awareness of disabilities and their limitations. It is essential to train HEI staff to work with students with disabilities. The involvement of academic staff, i.e. teaching staff, in promoting successful adaptation is highlighted in Glass, Gesing, Hales & Cong (2017) study, where interaction with lecturers during informal activities is crucial for students. Such informal academic community initiatives, of course, need to be regulated by the HEI administration, but they also need to be based on the initiative and positive attitudes of the lecturers themselves.

Mention should also be made of Clothey & McCommons (2022), which examines the adaptation of migrant and refugee students enrolled in US higher education institutions. The latter study highlights the limited understanding of the needs of migrant and refugee students by the higher education community. This further highlights the need for HEIs to be prepared to provide appropriate support to their students in response to their unique needs. This study shows that it is crucial to look into students' transition to HE and the barriers that arise before they have time to develop adverse experiences that could lead to difficulties in adaptation. This is crucial in order for HEI staff to be able to promote a high quality student experience.

It should be noted that the field of research on adaptation also includes the adaptation of first-generation international students, defined as students whose parents have not completed their undergraduate studies (Glass, Gesing, Hales & Cong, 2017). This article has placed particular emphasis on the importance of communicating with the lecturer outside the classroom. The authors note that such communication helps to foster a sense of community and contributes to increased student engagement in informal activities, which have a positive impact on student adaptation.

Since the adaptation process is complex and can have negative consequences not only for studies, but also for students' health and further professional success, it is very important to find ways to ensure adaptation that help improve the adaptation of students

with diverse experiences in higher education. It has been observed that complex adaptation is associated with stress experienced by students (Cabras & Mondo, 2018). Therefore, scientific research is also investigating the factors that cause stress and, at the same time their prevention. For example, Rossato, Veloso Morotti & Scorsolini-Comin (2024) aimed to identify the main stress factors for nursing students during the transition period that affect their adaptation. The main stress factors were identified as excessive workload related to the courses studied, psychological pressure and lack of financial resources. According to Cabras & Mondo (2018), coping strategies include both promoting optimism and personal qualities that determine students' life satisfaction in the first year of higher education. At the same time, delving into the rather diverse factors that facilitate adaptation identified in the scientific literature, according to Conejeros-Solar & Gomez-Arizaga (2015), the involvement of first-year students themselves in understanding the problem situation and solving the difficulties that have arisen is again emphasized. Also, according to Conejeros-Solar & Gomez-Arizaga (2015), it is extremely important to encourage students to share experiences that can be useful in the study process. Rossato, Veloso Morotti & Scorsolini-Comin (2024) present a much wider number of preventive factors identified by the study that can improve students' adaptation. It was found that it is important to monitor students, especially in the first year. Also significant are the experiences of students in activities intended for initial admission, during which students could reveal their feelings. Pei, Liu & Zhao (2009) mention educational methods that can facilitate the adaptation of first-year students in higher education.

It is relevant to note that the aforementioned authors emphasize the importance of a) developing entrance education to higher education, which would aim to familiarize first-year students with school rules, university life, studies and aspects of their development. For the aforementioned reason, *entrance* education would help them adapt to higher education life and help form the school spirit. At the same time, *entrance* education could be based on knowledge of the specifics of higher education, thus aiming to minimize the gap between the expectations brought by first-year students and the formed ideal and reality. Pei, Liu & Zhao (2009) note that first-year students tend to believe that studies are related to a carefree life, therefore, it is important to increase students' awareness and understanding of higher education. In strengthening the adaptation of first-year students, it is important to develop students' mentality, which would include the perception of the students' own role, help them actively integrate into the new environment and set their own life goals. The development of student mentality helps to overcome inferiority when dealing with other students, and helps to overcome the exaggerated feeling of superiority over others. Education focused on self-knowledge helps one evaluate oneself objectively and comprehensively, recognizing both one's strengths and weaknesses. It is believed that such an educational strategy would help to maintain a positive psychological attitude while adapting to life in higher education. The second educational method identified by Pei, Liu & Zhao (2009) to help facilitate the adaptation of first-year students in higher education is b) the use of available higher education resources (for example, consultants, lecturers, experts and academic specialists, professors, specialized equipment, libraries, etc.). Also among the available resources of a higher education institution are an advisor and a group leader, since these specialists contribute both to students' interpersonal relationships and to academic achievements. At the same time, it is important to focus efforts and promote communication with senior students, involving first-year students in various initiatives in higher education. It is important to note that the issue of integration into campus life is also important for the adaptation of the first-year students, when students participate in the activities of student organizations (sports competitions, debates, speech competitions, etc.). Such activities are important because they allow them to discover their talents and strengthen self-confidence. Further developing the idea of using the resources available at a higher education institution to help first-year students adapt to higher education, it is important to mention the strengthening of education about psychological health. As is known, the pace of life in society is intensifying, competition between people is increasing, and relationships are often becoming more complicated, which can also lead to psychological problems for students. For this reason, it would be appropriate to provide psychological consultations at a higher education institution and organize conversations for students on relevant topics. It is noted that it would be important to focus students on a community construct, which would be based largely on collective activities. Community mobilization and promotion of communication as a factor facilitating adaptation is also recognized by the study of Wu, Occhipinti & Watson (2023), where the aforementioned authors note that in order to strengthen the adaptation of interethnic students in higher education institutions, it is important to organize language courses of the host country or integrate this language into the subjects studied, as well as to promote communication with local individuals through various formal and informal activities. The focus on communication in higher education institutions, delving into the possibilities of improving the adaptation process, continues to prevail in other studies. For example, according to Conejeros-Solar & Gómez-Arízaga (2015), communication with the administration of the higher education institution and timely and efficient assistance help students adapt to the new environment more easily. Also mentioned researchers emphasized that students' adaptation is facilitated by cooperation with teachers, the creation of close relationships through participation in joint activities, for example, sports, educational and cognitive activities together with the entire higher education community, as well as the search for compromises when solving problem situations.

Summarizing the above, it can be seen that the first-year adaptation in higher education is a complex phenomenon, which is determined by a combination of academic, social, emotional and personal factors that students have to overcome. Such insights are formed by summarizing the data of the previously mentioned studies, which show that students experience various difficulties related to their studies during the adaptation process (missing or being late for lectures, increased workload, mastering the assessment system, etc.). Also, adaptation challenges depend very much on social factors, when students encounter many

communication barriers when communicating with other classmates, even teachers, and, as studies show, creating a culture of cooperation and communication in higher education helps to achieve successful adaptation. At the same time, many challenges arise in the process of student adaptation due to the emotional and personal aspects of students, when the lack of such qualities that would allow them to feel satisfaction in the first year of studies leads to negative adaptation experiences. Therefore, when analyzing the phenomenon of adaptation of first-year students in higher education, the question arises of how to ensure the successful adaptation of first-year students. Based on the results of the discussed studies, it can be stated that successful adaptation in higher education is ensured not only by the support provided to students during the study process and the provision of necessary tools, but also by organizing stress management training for students and creating opportunities for them to experience success as often as possible during their studies (especially in the first months of studies) which may be one of the prerequisites for ensuring successful adaptation of the first-year students. Therefore, ensuring the adaptation of first-year students in higher education studies should be based not only on various initiatives of the higher education institution as an institution - ensuring various tools, training of academic staff, encouraging teachers to engage in informal activities with students, etc.), but also on innovative approaches and tools, linking this with the active involvement of the students themselves, working with themselves, in order to develop their own personality, which can help overcome adaptation challenges or even avoid certain adaptation difficulties.

### **3. Research methodology**

*Research organization and sample.* The sample was convenient, so the participants were first-year students ( $n = 144$ ) from a Lithuanian higher education institution, 85 (59.0%) were female and 58 (40.83%) were male. The survey was carried out three months after the beginning of the study year. The timing was expedient, as it is likely that the first-year students are already accustomed to the new environment and are beginning to understand the new rules and requirements, and are able to identify the factors influencing their adaptation to their studies and the difficulties they have encountered since they started their higher education studies. The method of dissemination of the questionnaire was an online survey, which is likely to have led to a more passive involvement of the first-year students and a relatively low return rate of completed questionnaires. The small volume of this research can therefore be seen as a limitation, as the relatively small number of respondents limited the possibility of conducting a comparative analysis of the data according to various socio-demographic indicators (e.g. gender, different forms of study in student groups, etc.). Therefore, in order to increase the representativeness and reliability of the data, as well as to formulate statistically significant conclusions, it would be appropriate to repeat the research in the future by expanding the sample and applying different research methodologies and supplementing the results of the study with other methods of collecting information (e.g., interviews, focus groups, etc.), and to collect information from different sources (students, lecturers, administrative staff). The survey was conducted anonymously and in accordance with the ethical principle of free choice to participate. The results obtained have been processed and presented in a summarised form and confidentiality of data has been ensured. The name of the higher education institution where the survey was carried out is withheld at the request of the higher education institution.

*Research methods.* The analytical descriptive method (analysis, systematisation, generalisation, comparison of scientific literature) was applied in the theoretical aspect to discuss the factors determining adaptation in the study process and to justify the prerequisites for successful adaptation of the first-year students in higher education institutions. Quantitative research method. A questionnaire survey was used to investigate what factors lead to difficulties in adaptation in the first months of higher education and to find out what are the possibilities of ensuring successful adaptation of the first-year students. The questionnaire was constructed on the basis of theoretical insights, criteria identified in the scientific literature, which were used to reveal the attitude of the research participants towards their studies in the first months, to identify personal and external causes of difficulties in adaptation to higher education and to identify possible ways and means of managing the process of successful adaptation. The validity of the questionnaire was established by calculating Cronbach's alpha values. The results of the statistical analysis of the data show that the overall internal consistency of the questionnaire statements (number of variables = 78) is quite high (Cronbach's alpha = 0.8926) and ranges from 0.8893 to 0.8960. The internal consistency of the variables was also checked for each group of questionnaires separately. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the group of 9 statements was calculated for the information received by first-year students at the beginning of the academic year, Cronbach's alpha = 0.8587 and varies between 0.8319 and 0.8631. When defining the main reasons for the adaptation difficulties of the first-year students in the study process, several constructs were distinguished in the questionnaire: *Intrinsic* (personal) reasons, which include aspects such as learning motivation, personality traits, time planning skills, etc., and *Extrinsic* reasons, which are related to the organization of the study process, etc. aspects. The calculated internal consistency degree of the statements of the Internal (personal) reasons group (number of variables = 19) is Cronbach's alpha = 0.8874 and varies from 0.8743 to 0.9075, and the calculated Cronbach's alpha of the statements of the External reasons group, which include the difficulties that first-year students encountered at the beginning of their studies (number of variables = 20) is Cronbach's alpha = 0.912 and varies from 0.9027 to 0.9151. After calculating the Cronbach's alpha coefficient values for the *Factors ensuring successful adaptation of the first-year students in the study process group*, which consists of 20 statements, Cronbach's alpha = 0.9603 and varies from 0.9573 to 0.9598, and after evaluating the group of questions *Ways of seeking help in solving difficulties arising during studies in the first months of studies* (number of variables = 10), Cronbach's alpha

= 0.7623 and varies from 0.7161 to 0.8116. Based on the fact that internal consistency should be from 0 to 1, and the value of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient reaching 0.60 is considered appropriate for research (Pakalniškienė, 2012), the Cronbach's alphas calculated during this study indicate mutually coordinated groups of questions and the fact that the variables included in the questionnaire reflect the research part and are oriented towards the study of the same subject. *Statistical research method*. Descriptive statistics (statistical averages) were used to process the collected data. Percentage distribution (frequency) was also calculated. Statistical analysis of the data was performed using SPSS software version 17 and Microsoft Excel.

#### 4. Analysis of the research results

An empirical research was conducted to find out what factors determine the process of adaptation of the first-year students to higher education institutions, what difficulties first-year students face at the beginning of their academic year and what would help to ensure their successful adaptation to the study process.

The scientific literature emphasises that the initial stage of the adaptation process is familiarisation with the organisation, where the timely provision of the necessary information creates the preconditions for the formation of a sense of personal security and positive attitudes towards the organisation, and for the successful engagement in work activities. It is clear that the information provided and its quality is also relevant to the educational institution, where the involvement of first-year students in the first months of their studies by providing them with information on the organisation of the study process can be one of the prerequisites for a successful adaptation.

An analysis of the perception of the first-year students who participated in the research of the information they received at the beginning of the academic year about their studies and the study process (see Figure) shows that it is moderately valued, with the average rating of all the information they received about the study process in different ways ranging from 3.38 to 5.62 (max=7). The highest average scores indicate that at the beginning of their studies, first-year students receive the most information about the lecture schedules (M=5.62) and the organization of the study process, when they are introduced to the modular system (M=5.31). Also, the sufficiently high average scores suggest that at the beginning of their studies, first-year students are introduced to the Erasmus+ exchange program and the opportunity to participate in it (M=5.35) and receive sufficient information about the study regulations (M=4.85). Meanwhile, based on the assessment of the first-year students who participated in the research, information about the support provided to students (M=3.38) and the traditions of the faculty (M=3.78) is not provided in detail at the beginning of the academic year.

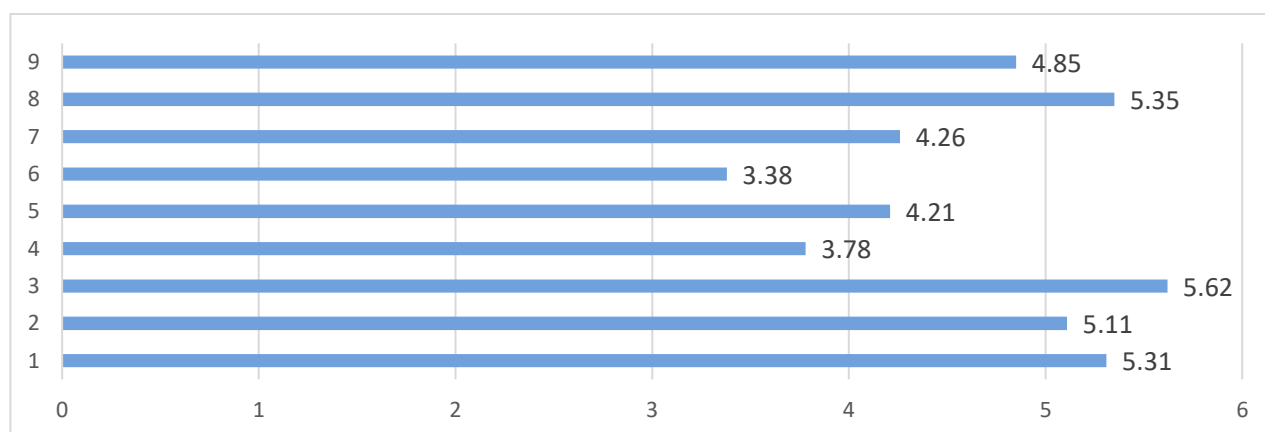


Figure 1. Evaluation of information at the beginning of the academic year (average scores (M), max=7; n=144)

Remark:

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|--|--|
| 1. Information about the study process (modular system)        | 5. Information about the activities after lectures |
| 2. Information about the study programme (objectives, content) | 6. Information about the student support           |
| 3. Information about lecture timetables                        | 7. Information about career opportunities          |
| 4. Information about the Faculty's traditions                  | 8. Information about Erasmus+ exchange programme   |
|  | 9. Information about study regulations             |

The analysis of the evaluations of the information about studies received at the beginning of the academic year shows that the HEI should pay attention to the provision of information at the beginning of the academic year, covering all the components related to the study process, not only information about lecture timetables and the introduction of students to the modular system. It is likely that providing information at the beginning of the academic year covering a wide range of areas related to the study process, giving first-year students more detailed and better quality information on student support, after-class activities, faculty traditions, etc., would contribute to a more successful adaptation of the first-year students.

When analysing the difficulties encountered by the participants at the beginning of the academic year (see figure and table), the highest average scores showed that the first-year students had the most difficulties in adapting smoothly to the study routines (lecture times, timetables) (M=2.6). A more detailed analysis of the data revealed that almost a third of the participants strongly agreed (8 (5.6%)) or agreed (32 (22.2%)) that they had difficulties adapting to the study routines at the beginning of the academic year. However, almost half of the first-year students disagree (36 (25%)) or strongly disagree (35 (24.3%)) with the statement that they had difficulties adapting smoothly to study regulations, lecture times, etc. The relatively smooth adaptation process of the first-year students is also reflected in the high average score (M=3.28) indicating that first-year students did not have any difficulties in adapting to the new regulations and conditions, with half of the participants either strongly agreeing (30 (20.8%)) or agreeing (43 (29.9%)) with this statement. In contrast, just over a quarter of the first-year students who participated in the research disagreed (22 (15.3%)) or strongly disagreed (20 (13.9%)). The fairly low average scores (see Figure) show that first-year students were less likely to have difficulties adjusting to new people (fellow students, lecturers) when they started their studies (M=2.27) and to new living conditions when they arrived from another city (M=2.13).

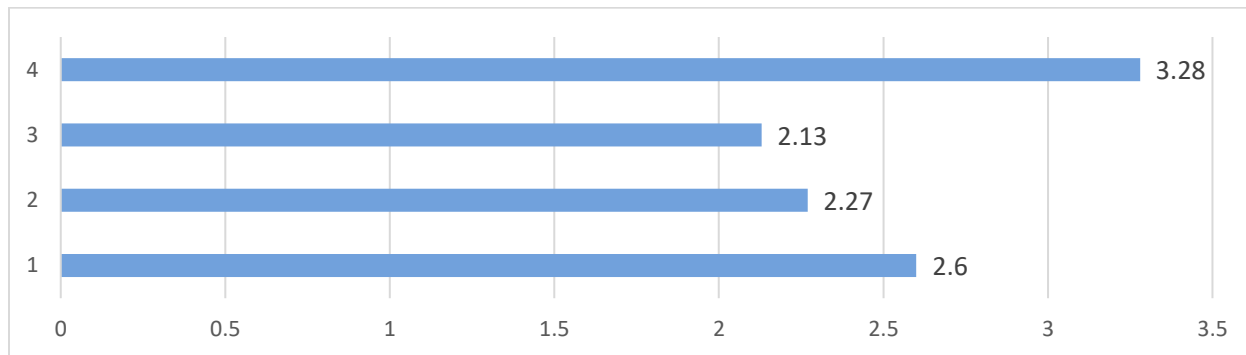


Figure 2. Assessment of difficulties in starting higher education (mean values (M), max=5; n=144)

Remark:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. You had difficulties adapting smoothly to the study regulations (e.g. lecture times, timetables, etc.) | 3. You had difficulties adapting to your new living conditions (you came from another city) |
| 2. You had difficulties adjusting to new people (fellow students, lecturers)                              | 4. You had no difficulties adapting to the new regulations and conditions.                  |

Table 1. Assessment of difficulties in starting higher education (%; n=144)

	Totally agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Totally disagree
You had difficulties adapting smoothly to the study regulations (e.g. lecture times, timetables, etc.).	8 (5.6)	32 (22.2)	33 (22.9)	36 (25.0)	35 (24.3)
You had difficulties adapting to new people (peers, teachers)	9 (6.3)	16 (11.1)	28 (19.4)	43 (29.9)	48 (33.3)
You had difficulties adapting to new people (peers, teachers)	15 (10.4)	12 (8.3)	24 (16.7)	18 (12.5)	75 (52.1)
You had no difficulties adapting to the new regulations and conditions.	30 (20.8)	43 (29.9)	29 (20.1)	22 (15.3)	20 (13.9)

Assessment of the difficulties encountered by first-year students when they started their studies. In order to ensure the successful adaptation of first-year students, it is essential to assess how often students encounter difficulties and to find out the reasons for the difficulties encountered in the adaptation process. The results of the study showed that more than two thirds (99 (68.8%) of the 144 students surveyed) rarely encountered difficulties when they started their studies. However, almost a third of the participants (39 (27.1%)) had often encountered difficulties, while only 6 (4.2%) of the first-year students in the study had not encountered any difficulties at all when starting their studies. It is therefore important to look into the causes of adaptation difficulties in order to find more effective ways of ensuring the successful adaptation of first-year students to the study process.

Difficulties in adaptation to the study process can be caused by personal (intrinsic) factors related to the student’s skills, abilities, motivation and interests, as well as by external (extrinsic) factors related to the organisation of the study process at the higher



education institution and the conditions it creates, including the specifics of the organisation of the study process, the workload, the content of the studies, the specifics of the teaching, the dissemination of information, the curricula, the timing of the lectures, and other aspects.

Statistical analysis of the data revealed the highest average scores (see Figure), indicating that the lack of precise instructions for tasks (M=3.12), the big number of tasks to be completed simultaneously for different subjects (M=3.0) are among the external difficulties identified as a challenge for the first-year students when they started their studies. Also, according to the first-year students' assessment, too intensive studies using a modular system (M=2.89), too much studying in lectures and preparing for exams (M=2.76) and the complexity of the lectures without examples and practical exercises to master and consolidate the topic (M=2.73) are the difficulties first-year students encountered at the beginning of their studies. Meanwhile, the lowest average scores suggest that too many students during lectures (M=1.43), lack of support from lecturers (M=1.66), lectures starting too late (M=1.69) and too many lectures per day (M=1.84) are not identified by the first-year students as external difficulties they encountered when they first started their higher education studies.

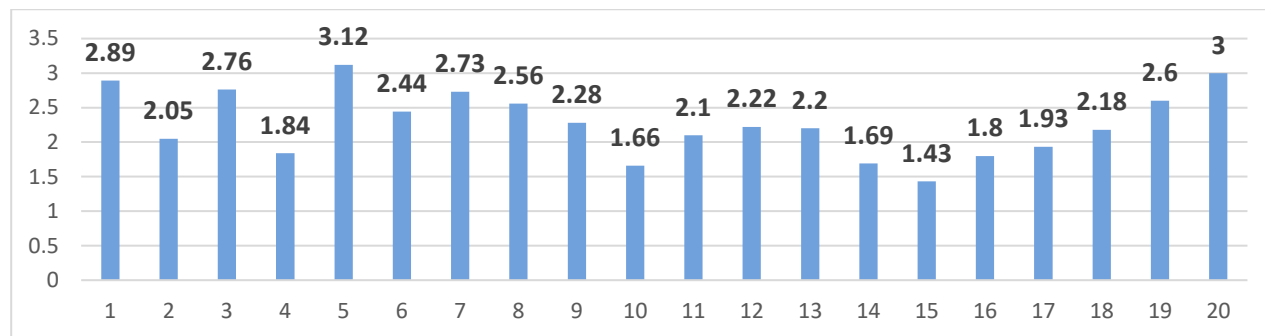


Figure 3. Assessment of the external difficulties encountered by first-year students at the beginning of their studies (average (M), max=5; n=144)

Remark:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Too intensive studies (modular system)</li> <li>2. Lots of writing, lecture notes;</li> <li>3. Too much studying (lectures, preparation for exams, etc.);</li> <li>4. Too many lectures per day;</li> <li>5. Lack of precise instructions on how to complete assignments;</li> <li>6. Unclear information during lectures;</li> <li>7. Lecture content is conveyed in a complex manner (e.g. theoretical lectures, many scientific terms, theories are analysed, lack of examples, lack of practical exercises to master and consolidate the topic)</li> <li>8. Unclear requirements of lecturers;</li> <li>9. Unclear assessment criteria;</li> <li>10. I do not get help from tutors</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. No feedback from the lecturer on completed assignments, no comments on assignments</li> <li>12. Uncertainty regarding contact, distance or blended learning</li> <li>13. Lectures start too early;</li> <li>14. Lectures start too late (from lunchtime);</li> <li>15. Too many students during lectures;</li> <li>16. Lack of help from fellow students</li> <li>17. Lack of necessary tools, teaching materials, literature for assignments</li> <li>18. Lack of guidance, clear instructions for assignments</li> <li>19. High number of tasks to be completed independently</li> <li>20. High number of assignments to be completed simultaneously for different subjects</li> </ol> |
|---|---|

To summarise the results of the research, the lack of precise instructions on how to complete assignments, the abundance of assignments to be completed simultaneously for different subjects and the over-intensive organisation of studies are some of the difficulties that first-year students have encountered at the beginning of their studies. On the other hand, the results of the research suggest that the excessive learning load in lectures and in preparing for exams and the complexity of the lectures without examples and practical exercises to master and consolidate the subject matter were identified as some of the difficulties first-year students encountered at the beginning of their studies, which may be one of the factors hindering the first-year students' successful adaptation to the study process. Therefore, in order to provide management methods for ensuring successful adaptation of first-year students to higher education institutions, it is important to organise the study process, rationally distribute the study workload, as well as to convey the content of lectures on the basis of the principle of theory-practice interface, linking the material conveyed in the course of the lectures to professional activities, supplementing the theoretical knowledge with examples from the

contemporary labour market, and placing greater emphasis on the development of practical skills, where the tasks with practical application are more effective in terms of mastering a topic and consolidating theoretical knowledge.

The complexity of adaptation can be influenced not only by external factors linked to the organisation of the study process at the higher education institution, but also by factors linked to personal characteristics. The results of the research (see Figure 4) show that the inability to rationally allocate time for lectures, homework and leisure (M=2.95), to concentrate during lectures (M=2.86), as well as the lack of motivation to study (M=2.72) are identified as the most common personal difficulties encountered by the first-year students when they started their studies at HEIs. The high average scores also indicate that students had difficulties in remembering information despite studying a lot (M=2.72). Meanwhile, the lowest average scores suggest that the first-year students had the least difficulty in getting in touch with fellow students (M=1.48) and getting along with lecturers (M=1.33).

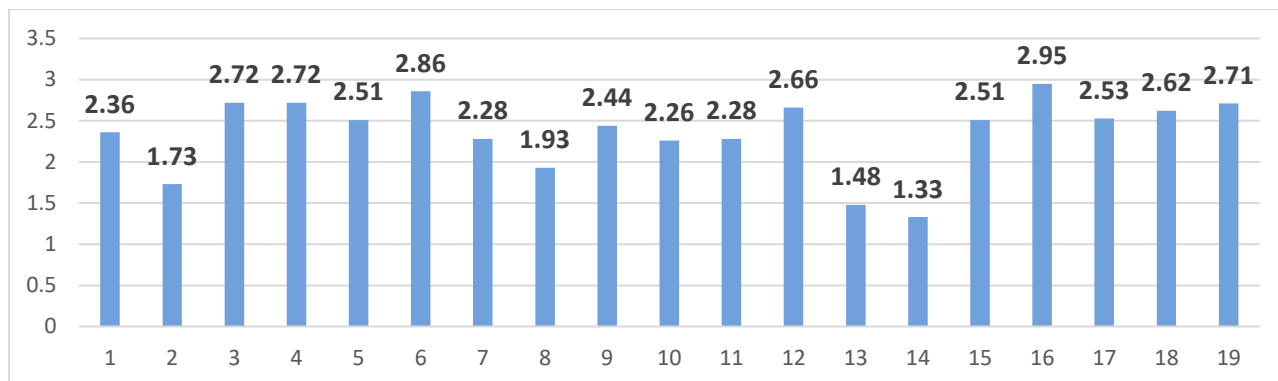


Figure 4. Assessment of the internal (personal) difficulties encountered by first-year students at the beginning of their studies (average values (M), max=5; n=144)

Remark:	10. I don't understand the instructions for completing tasks
1. Difficult to adapt to lecture times	11. Difficult to complete tasks in groups
2. Difficult to comply with the regulations, rules, requirements of the institution	12. I get overtired while studying
3. Lack of motivation to study	13. I don't get along with fellow students
4. Difficult to remember information, even though I study a lot	14. I disagree with lecturers
5. It is difficult to understand the study material and it is very difficult to communicate	15. I find it difficult to combine studies and work
6. I can't concentrate in lectures	16. Difficult to allocate time between lectures, homework and leisure time
7. I am unable to plan my time and activities	17. Difficult to understand new lecture material
8. I am unable to complete assignments on time	18. My activity level during my studies has decreased compared to when I was at school (rarely participating in discussions, not answering questions, etc.)
9. I find it difficult to learn independently	19. I don't face any difficulties in my studies

The overall results of the research show that the inability to concentrate during lectures and the lack of motivation to study are identified as the main personal difficulties encountered by first-year students at the beginning of their studies. Thus, the complexity of the adaptation to the study process may be due to the difficulties that students face when they start their higher education studies. On the other hand, a lack of motivation to learn can be one of the risk factors that can even influence drop-out (Samašonok, Kamienas & Juškevičienė, 2021). The latter results point to the need to increase students' motivation to learn and to promote active engagement in their studies from the first months of study. Interesting and attractive information, emphasising the value and usefulness of studies, as well as the content of the educational material related to the interests of the students, increasing the active involvement of first-year students in the study process from the first months of study and providing opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in practical situations would not only increase the motivation of students to learn, but also encourage them

to concentrate on the activities they are doing, which is likely to ensure a more active involvement of first-year students and a more successful adaptation to the study process.

*Ways to get help with adaptation difficulties during your studies.* When you are having difficulties adapting to your studies, it is important to get help from those around you. When analysing how the participants deal with problems and who they turn to for help (see Figure 5), the highest score indicates that the first-year students are more likely to deal with problems and difficulties they encounter at the beginning of their studies on their own ( $M=3.98$ ). The high mean scores also indicate that first-year students tend to turn to their fellow students ( $M=3.74$ ) and course lecturers ( $M=2.9$ ) for help when they encounter difficulties during their studies. Meanwhile, the statistical analysis of the data revealed that the first-year students who encountered difficulties at the beginning of their studies were less likely to turn to the university psychologist ( $M=1.22$ ), the students' union ( $M=1.39$ ) and the head of the department ( $M=1.42$ ). This result may be due to the fact that the first-year students may feel uncomfortable in the first months of their studies in a new environment and do not dare to ask for help from higher education professionals if they encounter difficulties. On the other hand, it can be assumed that some first-year students do not have information about how to seek help from professionals working in HEIs. The latter result points to the need to provide first-year students at the beginning of their studies with detailed information about the staff of the HEI and the roles/responsibilities they perform. This is likely to enable students to receive more comprehensive and professional support when they encounter difficulties in their studies.

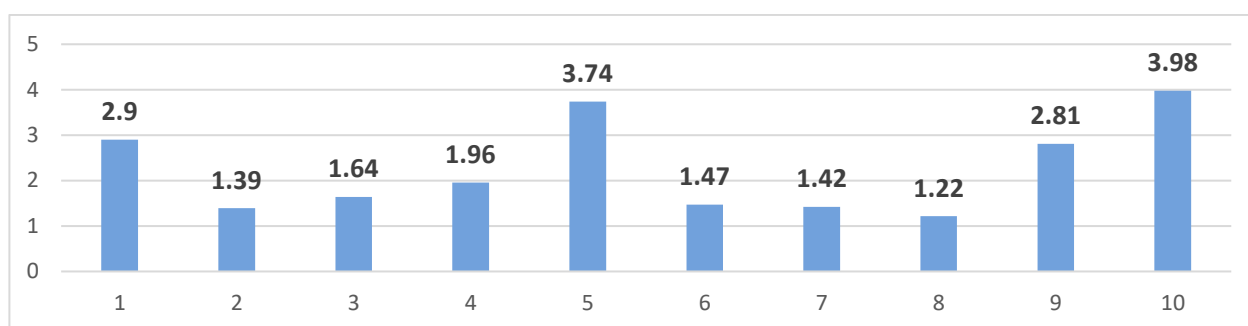


Figure 5. Evaluation of the ways of getting help with difficulties encountered at the beginning of studies (average values ( $M$ ),  $\max=5$ ;  $n=144$ )

Remark:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. I seek help from the course teacher  | 6. I'm contacting the Study Manager for help |
| 2. I contact the student union for help | 7. I seek help from the Head of Department   |
| 3. Seek help from the administration    | 8. I seek help from a psychologist           |
| 4. Contact the students for help        | 9. Seek help from others/relatives           |
| 5. Seek help from fellow students       | 10. I solve problems independently           |

*Assessment of factors that ensure successful adaptation of the first-year students to the study process.* When analysing the possibilities of ensuring the successful adaptation of the first-year students to the study process, it is important not only to continuously investigate the current situation, identify the difficulties that students face at the beginning of their studies, but also, after studying the problematic areas of the adaptation of the first-year students to the study process, to provide ways of solving them. The analysis of the management options for ensuring the successful adaptation of the first-year students to the study process, based on the opinions of first-year students themselves, revealed the following trends (see Fig. 6).

As the results of the research showed, the students were convinced that the information about the organisation of studies, where first-year students would be familiarised with the modular system, timetables, etc. on the first days of studies ( $M=4.26$ ), the organisation of examinations by setting their deadlines, coordinating the number of examinations in different subjects and rational distribution of the examination load ( $M=4.13$ ) would ensure a more successful adaptation of the first-year students to the process of studies. On the other hand, the relatively high average scores indicate that better adaptation of first-year students would be ensured by providing them with more detailed information on career opportunities ( $M=4.13$ ), clear assessment of study results, where grades are discussed with students through feedback on the tasks ( $M=4.07$ ) and clear instructions for completing the tasks ( $M=4.03$ ). Thus, in order to ensure the successful adaptation of the first-year students to higher education, it is necessary to familiarise students with the organisation of the study process at the beginning of their studies, to provide them with detailed information about the course of studies and career opportunities after graduation. Meanwhile, the lowest average scores indicate that the participants of the research associate the possibility of receiving help from a virtual psychologist at any time of the day ( $M=3.24$ ), organised meetings with senior students ( $M=3.35$ ) and dissemination of information about the faculty's traditions ( $M=3.35$ ) with the possibility of ensuring the successful adaptation of first-year students to the study process, the least.

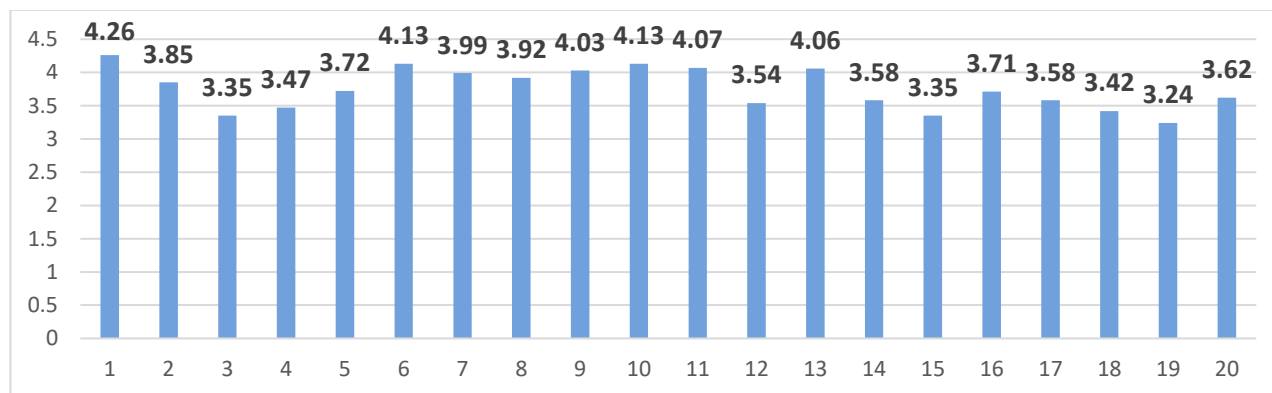


Figure 6. Evaluation of factors that ensure successful adaptation of first-year students to the study process (mean values (M), max=5; n=144)

**Remark:**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Information on the organisation of the study process (e.g. clear and precise information in the first days of the course on modules, timetables, etc.)</li> <li>2. Meetings with the Head of Department to provide information about the study programme (objectives, content)</li> <li>3. Information about the traditions of the Faculty;</li> <li>4. Information about activities after lectures;</li> <li>5. Information about student support;</li> <li>6. Information on career opportunities;</li> <li>7. Information on the Erasmus+ exchange programme.</li> <li>8. Quality assurance of communication with first year students (e.g. improvement of communication platforms; individual counselling; feedback, etc.).</li> <li>9. Tasks (e.g. clear instructions for tasks, etc.)</li> <li>10. Organisation of assessments (e.g. setting and meeting deadlines of assessments, coordinating the number of assessment to be done at the same time for different subjects, appropriate workload for assessments, etc.)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. Assessment of learning outcomes (e.g. discussing assessments with students, providing feedback on assignments, etc.)</li> <li>12. Variety of informal activities for students to get to know the community better</li> <li>13. Targeted support from the tutor on assignments</li> <li>14. Support from the study tutor</li> <li>15. Meetings with senior students</li> <li>16. Systematic consultation with the teachers of each subject</li> <li>17. Classes aimed at strengthening students' mutual knowledge and cooperation skills</li> <li>18. Access to free psychological counselling</li> <li>19. Access to a virtual psychologist at any time of the day</li> <li>20. Virtual tutor-counsellor for study-related support</li> </ul> |
|---|--|

Summarising the results of the research, it can be seen that the respondents highlight the improvement of the dissemination of information about the organisation of the study process during the first days of studies and the smooth provision of settlements by setting deadlines, coordinating the number of assessments in different subjects and rationally distributing their workload as some of the main ways to ensure the successful adaptation of first-year students to the study process. On the other hand, the relatively high average scores indicate that the possibilities of ensuring successful adaptation of first-year students to the study process are linked to the clear instructions given to first-year students to complete the tasks, the provision of more detailed information on career opportunities, as well as the use of clear assessment of learning outcomes where students are provided with feedback on the completed tasks.

**5. Conclusions**

1. The challenges posed by academic, social, emotional or personal factors during the adaptation process of first-year students in higher education institutions point to the need for higher education institutions to take preventive measures to promote a successful adaptation process for first-year students. Theoretical insights suggest that the support provided to students (especially

in the first months of their studies) in matters related to their studies (study procedures, assessment system, etc.), the involvement of the lecturer both in the formal study process (professional knowledge of students' needs, etc.) and in the formal learning process (professional knowledge of students' needs, etc.) are important factors in the adaptation process. Both in the formal and informal activities with students, as well as the use of measures aimed at the purposeful development of students' personalities to help them cope with stress, and the encouragement of students to become actively involved in the activities of the higher education institution and in communication with other fellow students or teachers can be one of the prerequisites for the successful adaptation of first-year students to higher education institutions.

2. This exploratory research investigates the adaptation difficulties encountered by the first-year students when they start their studies in higher education:

2.1 The results showed that although more than two-thirds of first-year students rarely encountered adaptation difficulties at the start of their studies, almost one-third of the research participants had experienced difficulties adapting to the study regulations at the beginning of their studies.

2.2 The highest mean scores recorded indicate that the lack of precise instructions for assignments, the large number of assignments to be completed simultaneously for different subjects, the over-intensive studying in a modular system, the excessive learning load in lectures and in preparing for exams, and the complexity of lecture content without examples and practical exercises to master and consolidate the topic are some of the difficulties first-year students encountered in the beginning of their studies.

2.3 The lack of the ability to rationalise the allocation of time for lectures, homework and leisure time, as well as the inability to concentrate during lectures and the lack of motivation to study are among the personal difficulties first-year students have faced since they started their studies at higher education institutions.

3. The research data showed that providing precise and clear instructions and consistent requirements for completing assignments, implementing and ensuring feedback on completed assignments, organising reports with precise deadlines, coordinating reports for different subjects and distributing the workload appropriately, as well as improving the evaluation of the learning outcomes would ensure a more successful adaptation of the first-year students to the study process.

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