

FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: IT'S GROUNDS, AIMS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to introduce the concept of first year experience, which is used to facilitate university students' adaptation to their schools. The study is a review study. As a requirement of this study, the studies carried out in national and international level are reviewed, some evaluations and recommendations are made. The basic function of education is to bring up good people and adaptation to the society contributes a lot to realize this function. University students' adaptation to their schools contributes them a lot in terms of a number of dimensions. First year experience or first year seminar is one of the most effective implementations that can be used to realize this aim. Universities in Turkey should assign importance to the adaptation of students to their universities and they should solve the problem of adaptation by using first year seminar.

Keywords: Adaptation, higher education, first year experience

Introduction

The most important mission expected from education for hundreds of years is raising "good" people (Karakas, 2015). For governments, the basic duty of education is to train good citizens. The most apparent indicator of being a "good" person or citizen is adapting to the society one lives in. It is not expected from an individual who has successfully adapted to the society to exhibit the behaviours not desired by the society or the government as the society generally leads people to good and positive traits. The concept of adaptation, which is the key construct for the well-being of the individual and the society has been explained in detail below.

What is adaptation?

Adaptation is, though being a dynamic process, the reactions of the individual to the changes taking place around him/her (Geçtan, 1995; LeVine, 2018). Rathus and Nevid (1989) explain adaptation as behavioural patterns that enable people to cope with the challenges of life. Santrock (2006) defines adaptation as a psychological process directed towards the problems and circumstances of daily life. Özgüven (1992), on the other hand, defines adaptation as the level of building and sustaining good relations with oneself and the people around. Yavuzer (1996) puts forth a similar definition and suggests that adaptation is the ability to build and sustain a balanced relation between individual's self and the environment he lives in.

Adaptation and Society

The biggest factor that launches the process of adaptation is the changes in human life (Özkan and Yılmaz, 2010). The presence of the society necessitates the need for adaptation. Individuals are expected to adapt to the society they live in. Individuals guarantee that they will comply with the unique patterns the society has formed for years while they are trying to adapt to the society with a common culture (Coştu, 2009). Unless the individual behave in line with the behavioural patterns determined by the society, it is highly possible that s/he will be isolated by that society and this is the option which is usually not preferred by individuals. Society regards education as the most important means to transmit its culture to individuals.

Adaptation and University

The period of puberty is undoubtedly the hardest and most troublesome time for adaptation. Especially entrance to university, which coincides with the last phase of puberty and the initial years of university are the periods, in which individuals reach the peak of their both social and biological development. In addition to the general chaos of puberty, a lot of factors such as leaving home, changes in friendship relations, feeling neither as an adolescent nor an adult, relations with the opposite sex, expectations of the society and academic adaptation process lead to the social and psychological maladjustment of individuals. What is expected from

the individual at this point is to overcome all these hardships and incur responsibility despite all the new developments (Mercan and Yıldız, 2011).

The students who start university in different cities find themselves in a different social context. Again, these students face great differences mainly in their social life, human relations and educational life as a result of switching to a new phase of life. At the same time, students have to bear the brunt of difficulties of this different environment that they experience for the first time and hardships of individual life completely alone. As a result of the sudden termination of family and friend support, students should try to adapt to this new situation by using their individual talents and potentials (Karahan et al., 2005).

The majority of students look forward to starting this new life hopefully and excitingly before they start university (Jackson et al., 2000). What students look forward to experiencing as they start university is a life away from family control, meeting new people and a world with interesting events. Also, students develop expectations from their universities to provide opportunities regarding these issues (Pancer et al., 2000). Some students, in the process of adapting to university, stated that, after a while, it was hard and stressful to cope with the ease of university life, and the combination of the ease and freedom with the hardships resulting from loss of family support and home was deemed responsible for this hard period (Wintre and Yaffe, 2000).

It is obvious that especially the first year of university is full of stress and difficulties. It is considered to influence adaptation to university in the short term and have a considerable role that may lead students to even drop out of school in the long term. The problems that were listed most frequently concerning university life were missing home and friends (Paul and Brier, 2001), depression and other psychological disorders (Fisher and Hood, 1987), the feeling of loneliness (Brooks and DuBois, 1995), and low marks or GPA (Levitz and Noel, 1989). These problems are more common among the students who leave home to attend university as not only the academic life but also social life change (Wintre et al., 2008; Buote et al., 2007). Adaptation to university, which also means overcoming most of the difficulties listed above, is correlated with coping with stress (Aspinwall and Van Roojen, 1986) and academic motivation and performance (Sharma, 2002).

It can be claimed that the students living in developed countries with high mobility rates are more successful in adaptation to university compared to those living in developing and underdeveloped countries. The underlying reason here is that the students who are used to getting in touch with people easily as a result of the high mobility rates in their countries don't have difficulty in integrating their new environment when they move to another city for university. In this context, the individuals living in developing or underdeveloped countries with relatively low mobility rates can't easily get in touch with people as they rarely meet new people in their everyday life.

The anxieties of higher education students such as accommodation, nutrition, use of economic resources, cultural adaptation, safety and acceptance may cause intensive stress especially in the initial years of the university. How students perceive and interpret the problems ranging from simple difficulties to complicated conflicts, from trivial maladjustments to depression and what effects these problems have in cognitive, academic and social aspects were the subject of a number of researches (Mercan and Akyıldız, 2011).

What is First Year Experience?

The term "first year experience" denotes the collection of the experiences a student has in the first year of university. In academic aspect, however, the term denotes a programme that is specifically designed for the students in the first year of higher education to help them overcome all the potential problems in the process of adaptation to university and their new environment. It is widely employed in lots of colleges and universities in United States. The duration of the programme may range from one week to one year.

The History of First Year Experience

Although the origins of the programme aren't known clearly, lots of researchers state that South Carolina University is the first reference for the programme. The reason of this is a department founded at the university called "National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition". The main aim of the first year seminar at South Carolina University was to build up trust, understanding and open communication lines among students, faculty, personnel and administrators, introduce the institution to students and to change the teaching style of undergraduate students. In 1972, the president of the university,

Thomas Jones introduced a course named “University 101”, which was developed to improve the experiences of first year students. The University’s programme became a model for colleges and universities around US and representatives of 175 schools in the US came to South Carolina to get information about first year seminar in 1982. John N. Gardner, a professor at Carolina University, organised a conference about first year experience in the year 1983. In 1986, Carolina University started a partnership with Newcastle-upon-Tyne Polytechnic to organise the first “International Conference” on first year experience.

The Aims of First Year Experience

The general aims of first year experience can be summarised under six categories. These aims are as follows; academic excellence, integrity, inclusion, participation, empowerment and social responsibility (www.easternct.edu/firstyearexperience). What is targeted with academic excellence is a smooth transition of high school students from the academic studies at high school level to the ones at university level and to reach academic achievement eventually. Secondly, integrity is included to enable first year students to assign importance to model the good behaviour and to respect to both themselves and the society. Next, inclusion is included to provide opportunities for students to be sensitive to cultural diversity and to develop cultural competence. It is aimed with the title “participation” to establish interpersonal relations with university community and to sustain it in addition to informing students about the resources of campus and facilities available in the process of commitment to the university. The activities under the category of empowerment aim at helping students to develop effective personal leadership skills to develop their leadership skills to contribute to the society they live in. Finally, social responsibility is included to encourage students to take part in the social duties and social service practices at the campus and its vicinity and to be socially responsible.

Developing an Efficient First Year Experience Course

Higher education institutions have developed a range of first year intervention programmes. Some of them were called first year seminar while some were called first year experience. It was stated before that first year seminars contribute to the academic and social integration of students in the study carried out by Tinto in 1975. Tinto’s studies paved the way for the organisation of these courses (Kleain, 2013). Moreover, students’ experiences in the first year of university were analysed using scales (Baker and Siryk, 1986; Holmbeck and Wandrei, 1993; Petersen, Louw and Dumont, 2009) and the findings of these studies contributed significantly to the development of an efficient first year seminar. In the studies using these scales, adaptation was used both as a dependent and an independent variable and the other variables used were academic achievement, motivation, self-esteem, and attitude.

With the development of this course and following attention of universities in the last twenty years, the integration process of universities that started with short-term orientation programmes was spread to the whole academic year (Barefoot, 2000). Porter and Swing (2006) have observed in their study that first year experience courses also contribute to the institutions in many respects. These contributions can be summarised as follows; registering the students who pay the tuition fee, observing the prospective students and making use of the data obtained in increasing the quality of the university, following the annual college rankings and to operate accordingly to be included in the lists and to monitor the graduates and their careers.

The Contribution of First Year Experience to Students

With the help of University 101 programme, students were supported a lot in discovering their purposes, determining their strengths and adapting their academic plans. The activities, classroom discussions and homework assigned in this course have made great contributions on academic and social adaptation. In this context, one of the basic benefits of first year seminars is to enable students to constantly interact at campus. Thanks to these interactions, students will expand their social environment and take a step to suppress their longing for their home and family. A comprehensive curriculum assessment including the monitoring of academic results and evaluation of students’ attitudes and behaviour has demonstrated that the students who completed “University 101” course integrate to university and academic life more quickly. For instance, in a study carried out in 2006, the GPA of the students who took “University 101” was 2,72/4 whereas that of the ones who didn’t take this course was 2,49 (Hutson, B. L., and Atwood, J. A., 2006). Also, Weawer (2018) indicated that there were significantly higher rates of retention for those students who participated in a first-year seminar course than those students who did not.

Related Studies

There are a lot of studies in Turkey and abroad which focus on higher education students' adaptation to school. The fact that this subject was studied so frequently demonstrates the importance assigned to this issue. Academic issues are generally focused on in the studies discussing adaptation in Turkey (Erdem and Tanrıoğen, 2002). Researchers such as Baymur (1960), Kışlalı (1974), Özdemir (1985) and Akbalık (1997) focused on the subjects regarding adaption levels of students. Some of the studies discussed the academic integration of students (Aypay, 2003), academic achievement (Akpınar and Üstüner, 1999; Keçeli-Kaysılı, 2000; Buyurgan, 1999), perceptions and attitudes towards learning (Ergür, 2000), attitudes towards the job of teaching (Çapa and Çil, 2000), and expectations from school (Kiraz 2001). Other studies discussed the subjects such as personal characteristics of students (Akta, 1997; Gümü, 2000), student profiles (Çitil et al., 2006), smoking habits (Çelik et al., 2004), depressive symptoms (Özdel et al., 2002), loneliness levels (Karaoğlu et al., 2009), trust in university (Özdoğan and Tüzün, 2007), and spending habits (Kaşlı and Serel).

Arı (1989) observed that the students having dominant adult self could easily adapt to their environment. Akay (1990) stated that academic situation affected adaptation. Balabanlı (1990), on the other hand, emphasized that gender didn't affect social adaptation significantly. Aslan (1991) indicated in the study, carried out on third year students, that individuals with androgen qualities had higher personal and social adaptation levels. It was concluded in Kalı Soyer's (1992) study that the general, personal and social adaptation levels of extrovert students were higher than introvert ones.

Students' adaptation to universities is one of the subjects intensively discussed in international literature, especially by developed countries. Baker and Siryk (1986) studied university adaptation scale on university first year students. In addition, Holmbeck and Wandrei (1993) discovered in their study on first year students that the separation-individuation, family relations, and personality variables were better predictors of adjustment than were the cognitive indicators or home-leaving status. Moreover, Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus and Deković (2001) studied adolescents' commitment to parents and sensitive adaptations and prediction of these qualities. Petersen, Louw and Dumont (2009) observed in their study that psycho-social factors such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, self-esteem, stress and internalisation affected adaptation. Furthermore, Kyalo and Chumba (2011) indicated that the critical factors that affect students' social and academic adaptation were interpersonal and academic adjustment. Finally, Yau, Sun and Cheng (2012) studied the effect of social adjustment on academic adaptation (Aslan, 2015).

Christensen and Johns (2018), studied on a theory that use a preclinical course to develop clinical reasoning skills of first-year medical students. They reached the conclusion that the students who took a preclinical course before the main year are more successful than the ones who didn't.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Students' adaptation to the life at university provides a number of advantages for both students and university. If students perceive their social life and school life holistically, they can both benefit from instructional activities at their best and develop their social skills through social activities. First year experience or first year seminar is a prominent model specially designed to realise this aim and it has been implemented at universities for a long time successfully.

Students' adaptation to universities is pretty important in many respects. Students who have adaptation problems in higher education can't achieve the educational outputs and they can't contribute to their country adequately as they fall short to make use of precious higher education properly. If students feel that they are alone in coping with the problems and challenges of their "new life", they will possibly have a negative attitude towards university and a low level of motivation, which may cause them to fail or drop out of school. Moreover, it is obvious that the students, who get professional help throughout primary and secondary education on adaptation to schools and problems they encounter, need more professional support at a time when they leave their family, relatives and environment. As students usually leave their hometown for university, the first one or two months of the university is the time when students are probably the most vulnerable in their lifetime. At this point, students should be provided with conscious, professional and deliberate help on adaptation to whatever is new for them. Although a new city and a new environment may excite some individuals, it may also bring with it some problems that the individual must overcome without

any external help. A lot of students may face serious troubles while coping with possible problems though some distinctive individuals with advanced problem-solving skills and resilience can resist.

Therefore, universities should take the required precautions for their students' adaptation and orientation. Taking the necessary precautions is essential for universities to realise the mission expected of them completely. Although the awareness on this issue is increasing day by day, it is hard to say that higher education institutions in Turkey try to help their students adapt to their new life except for some rare instances. The short span of orientation activities must be spread to the whole term or year in accordance with the demands of students. As the universities in Turkey have generally finished with the Bologna process, the main target of which is transparency and standardisation, and focused on quality and accreditation, the adaptation and orientation of students has gained much more importance. Having a professional adaptation process for all students is a prerequisite of competing with world universities and attracting more foreign students. First year seminar or university 101 seminar is an implementation that has the potential of contributing considerably to obtain the outcomes expected of higher education institutions. The countries like USA which have utilised this seminar efficiently have contributed to the well-being of university students, made greater use of higher education and made considerable progress in education. First year seminar has a lot to offer for the problems of students at universities in Turkey if it is examined thoroughly and adapted to Turkish context successfully.

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