

PECULIARITIES OF ADAPTATION OF FIRST – YEAR AND ERASMUS+ PROGRAM STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

When students start their studies both in their own country and upon arrival in another country, it is very important that students adapt as soon as possible to the changed living, learning conditions or even other cultural environment. This influences both the results of studies, but also their psychological well-being. The purpose of this study is to find out the peculiarities of the adaptation of first-year and Erasmus+ students in higher education. The study involved 8 full-time students and 6 Erasmus+ program students. Methods were a written survey and the content analysis. Students of both groups viewed their adaptation in higher education positively, emphasized the importance of social support as a factor facilitating adaptation.

Key words: *adaptation, social adaptation, first – year students, Erasmus+ exchange program students.*

Introduction

Adaptation is a challenging process to a changing environment. Social adaptation is directly related to human behaviour, when an attempt is made to reconcile motives and needs, environmental requirements, different circumstances, reactions in order to achieve positive actions that bring satisfaction and lead to greater social acceptance, and therefore the ability to adapt in various life situations (Alzboon, 2013). The course and duration of adaptation of each person is subjective. And the main task of higher education is to create a challenging educational environment for providing students with all possible opportunities to realize their abilities and skills (Bates, 2015). The success of studies, the quality of studies depends on adaptation in higher education (Marcinkevičienė, Morkūnienė, 2014; Topuzov, Shame, Malykhin, Aristova, Opaliuk, 2020).

After starting their studies in the first - year students have to go through many changes and adapt to the requirements of the new learning environment, the new status, changed living conditions, relationships with other people, etc. Having come to seek higher education and enter a different social, economic, educational and cultural environment, Erasmus+ program students also face ethnic, cultural, domestic, language barriers. Even living in the most favourable conditions of adaptation, for example, in metropolitan areas, where the population is large and adaptation to the environment should be easier, foreign students still face various challenges (Gapsalov, Gallyamova and other, 2016). For both Lithuanians and Erasmus+ exchange students the adaptation in a new environment can also be associated with emotional changes such as the appearance of mental conditions (depression, anxiety or changes in self-esteem).

Successful adaptation of students is important in order to achieve positive learning attitudes and good learning results, which are undoubtedly associated with well-being during studies. For many students, these changes in their life are overcome easily, do not cause difficulties or problems of various kinds. For others it can complicate the study process, worsens the quality of life (Marcinkevičienė, Morkūnienė, 2014; Mičiulienė, Pugevičius, Pugevičienė, 2015).

The students' adaptation in the studies process is analysed by many foreign researches. This theme became again popular after Covid-19 pandemic returning from distance learning to contact. Soroka (2022) analysed social adaptation of students in a multicultural environment during distance learning. And Birzina, Cedere and Petersone (2019) state that students' adaptation to studies in the first year is a complex process which is affected by institutional, personal and academic factors. By their research data students associate the adaptation to studies in the first term more with the "soft" transferable skills: personal well-feeling and integration in the university study environment. Then

Erzen, Ozabaci (2023) examined the relationship between personality traits, social support perceptions, academic self-efficacy and the adjustment to university. Also Valenti, Faraci (2021) found that students' beliefs in their own abilities to control life events, and the way they approach them, play a crucial role in predicting how well they adapt to university life.

There are some researches about students' adaptation in Lithuania. Bendžiūtė, Stanislavovienė (2021) reviewed, based on scientific sources, the psychosocial factors that high school students face and that may affect their academic achievement, health, and well-being. Mičiulienė, Pugevičius, Pugevičienė (2015) presented recommendations for improvement of adaptation programme by presenting and comparing student assessment results of the adaptation programme events; revealing advantages and disadvantages of the institutional and the academic adjustment. But the more widely research about first year and Erasmus+ program students adaptation there are no founded. Therefore, the following **problem questions** are raised: What are the features of the adaptation of first-year and Erasmus+ students? What difficulties do first-year students face after starting their studies? What challenges do students of the Erasmus+ programme face when they start their studies abroad? What help would be needed for first-year and Erasmus+ students to facilitate their adaptation to higher education?

The research object is the adaptation of first-year and Erasmus+ program students.

The purpose of the research is to analyse the peculiarities of adaptation of first-year and Erasmus+ students.

Research objectives: 1. To find out what facilitate the adaptation of Lithuanian first year and Erasmus+ program students. 2. To determine what aggravate first-year students face after starting their studies. 3. To identify what aggravate Erasmus+ program students who start their studies abroad. 4. To identify what kind of help got and would be needed for first-year and Erasmus+ program learners to make it easier for them to adapt to higher education.

Research methods: analysis of scientific information sources, written questioning, structured content analysis.

Research methodology and organisation. The qualitative research was employed to implement the purpose and objectives of the research. To achieve the objectives of the research, the data collection method – a written questioning– was used. The selected form of research data collection was sending questionnaire by e-mails and getting them the same way. The data processing method applied in the research is the structured content analysis.

The research instrument is a structured interview questionnaire. During the structured questions, first year and Erasmus+ program students answered 6 questions. The questionnaire has questions about a general experience of the beginning studies in the higher education institutions, the positive experience, the challenges which appear with start of studies in the higher education institution, the reasons of these difficulties and about help which they got in the institutions or out of it and what kind of help they or future students would need to make the adaptation process successful.

The procedure for conducting the research. The research was in October - November of 2023. Conducting the study, four principles of research ethics were followed. These were: the principle of anonymity – research participants were informed that the questionnaire was completely anonymous, no personal information that could identify informants would be mentioned and their answers would be coded, which would make it impossible to identify the person; in addition, no specific questions were asked in the questionnaire, according to which it would be possible to identify the subjects; the principle of confidentiality – research participants were notified that the obtained data would be provided in a coded form and only in academic activities, which guaranteed the confidentiality of subjects; the principle of benevolence – the informants' participation in filling questionnaire was voluntary; the principle of justice – the research data were not falsified and the research was conducted honestly (Gaižauskaitė, Valavičienė, 2016).

The research sample. The study involved 8 first year students and 6 Erasmus+ program students. To analyse the subjects' statements, informants were coded with the following abbreviations: AV1- AV14. The informants were selected using a probability sample – all first year and Erasmus+ program students have probability to participate in this research because they got letters with invitation take part in the research in their institutional e-mail. The questionnaire was sent for 14 informants who agreed to take part in the research and got back filled questionnaires.

Research results

The study analysis the peculiarities of adaptation of first-year and Erasmus+ students. At first students evaluated their experiences of the beginning studies in the higher education institution (see Table 1).

Table 1. **Studies of Lithuanian first-year students in the first months in higher education**

Category	Subcategory	Number of statements
The experiences of the start of study/learning	Positive situation assessment	11
	More complicated situations in studies	2

Lithuanian students evaluated their first month studies process as successful. According informants their studies in the higher education started well and gave positive situation assessment: <...thought it would be still difficult after graduating from school and entering university, but that's definitely not the case.> (A7) and that they can say <I'm doing pretty well.> (A12), < Everything is fine >(A11) or <... it's okay now. > (A13). Some informants said that the beginning of studies is a little complicated: < only a few months of science have passed, but it seems like a whole eternity >(A11), <The beginning was difficult ,...> (A13). Changes not for all are easy, but usually the the biggest part of students adapt easier and faster. As noticed Marcinkevičienė, Morkūnienė (2014) quick and relatively easy adaptation in higher education makes it easier to achieve better studies results. It can say that positive situation assessment shows easy first-year students adaptation going from school teaching to studies in higher education.

Erasmus + program students also assessed their studies in Lithuania positive (seeTable2). As they noticed their learning experiences in the first is evaluated well: <They are going very well...>(A5), <Actually its going good> (A6). And Erasmus+ program students highlighted good

Table 2. **Erasmus+ program students' studies/learning in the first months of the school year**

Category	Subcategory	Number of statements
The experiences of the start of study/learning	Positive situation assessment	7
	Positive self-esteem	2
	More lethal progress in studies	1

well-being and enjoyed their learning experiences: <I am very happy with my studies>(A1), <The most positive and useful experience> (A5).

Foreign students' talking about studies also emphasized positive self-esteem as a part of studies experiences. In studies abroad they enjoy themselves in the process of studies: < I am enjoying myself very well> (A1), < I am really enjoying myself> (A5). As mentioned Birzina, Cedere and Petersone (2019) personal factors – self-confident, positive experience in learning activities influence adaptation process. If students are self-confident, emphasized positive experience from the beginning of studies – their adjustment is better.

In this studies it appeared that students compared their learning experience in the new institution and home institution and named that have more lethal progress in studies (<My academic experience at the university is progressing much slower> (A2)). Güneş, Aydar (2019) emphasized that different education system, different culture, inability to speak foreign language enough and economic problems make the adaptation of foreign students to the university and environment difficult and affect their academic success. But this study showed that both Lithuanian and Erasmus+ program informants emphasized good studies experiences and found more positive experiences that negative.

Both Lithuanian and foreign authors (Mičiulienė, Pugevičius, Pugevičienė, 2015, Ferencz, Hrehová, Seňová, 2020) noticed that living in a new environment (city, culture) brings many changes in students' lives including separation from family and friends, meeting new friends and developing networks, learning new social norms, states and behaviours, experiencing a different climate and different types of meals and give a range of incentives to all at the university as to reflect on how to improve adaptation. In this case informants talked about factors that facilitated and aggravated their adaptation in the higher education on the first month of studies (see Table 3 and 4). The first-year Lithuanian students emphasized the importance of relations with fellow students as the one of factor that facilitate their adaptation in the higher education institution for the first month of studies. Informants talked that adaptation was easier because the connection with studies co-students: <The study co-students accepting>(A9), <Connect with my study colleagues.>(A12), <Friendliness of the co-students.> (A14) and so on. Also, it is important in adaptation process to understand teaching and learning activities and engage in the studies process. Informants said that it is easier when <The teaching staffs <...> involved in the subjects they teach (A11) or when students started to understand principles of teaching, tasks (<I'm starting to get used to the principle of teaching...> A14), <to <... > understand the tasks of the lecturers <...> A14), collaborate in the tasks (<Command classes.> (A13)). As noticed researchers (Bendžiūtė, Stanislavovienė, 2021; Durón-Ramos, García Vázquez, Lagares, 2019) relationships with their fellow students have a direct impact on adaptation to the university environment and academic achievement. If the relationship with fellow students is collegiate, the student feels accepted, involved in group classes, the learning environment becomes pleasant, attractive.

Table 3. Expression of adaptation of first-year Lithuanian students

Category	Subcategory	Number of statements
Factors that facilitate adaptation	Relations with fellow students	10
	Understanding teaching and learning activities and engaging in the process	5
	Becoming a part of the higher education institution community	5
	Adapting to the changed situation	5
	Relationships with lecturers and their help	4
Factors aggravating adaptation	Complicated personal adaptation to change	9
	Intermediate settlement in studies	3
	Finding out the organization of studies	3

Birzina, Cedere, Petersone (2019) emphasized institutional factor for students' adaptation. Institutional cultures practices support students to succeed is very important too. The results of this research show that informants named this factor too. Students talked that their adaptation is easier because they became as a part of institution community (<Surrounding of institutions are cozy.> (A9), <I feel at home.> (A10)) and have good relations with lectures whom helps as they need it (<Relations with lecturers. > (A8), < All tutors help when needed.> (A9), <The teaching staffs <...> whom is very involved in the subjects they teach (A11).

Personal factor was mentioned as aggravating adaptations. Lithuanian first year students named complicated personal adaptation to changes that disturbed to their adaptation in the studies. Informants noticed that it is difficult to adapt to new environment, people (< It was difficult to adapt to the new environment <...> to new people.> (A13). It is difficult to leave the comfortable zone which they had before (<We are pushed out of our comfort zone.> (A14)). These aspects emphasized and other researchers (Bendžiūtė, Stanislavovienė, 2021; Birzina, Cedere, Petersone, 2019; Durón-Ramos, García Vázquez, Lagares, 2019).

As the others factor aggravating adaptation was named intermediate settlements in higher education. They need to plan their time because have to prepare them soon (<The approaching works of writing are quickly written>. (A11), < Upcoming Deliveries.> (A11), <... sooner or later it will be necessary to start working> (A11)). Also, participants noticed that to understand the organization of studies was a little bit difficult for them (<Small ambiguities about schedules.> (A7), <...> on credits.> (A7). These results comply with results of other researches (Bendžiūtė, Stanislavovienė

2021; Birzina, Cedere, Petersone, 2019; Mičiulienė, Pugevičius, Pugevičienė, 2015) whom confirmed that institutional, personal and academic factors influence student's adaptation.

Erasmus+ program students singled out institutional factor – supportive staff – as facilitate their adaptation in the higher education (see Table 4). Students named that professors pay attention to them (<All our teachers are very understanding> (A3)), helps in study and other situation (<...amazed by the availability of ours professors in helping us during the lessons (A5), <(Professors) Help me when I have difficulties> (A3). So relatives and friends support is also very meaningful in adaptation for Erasmus+ program students. As Erzen and Ozabaci (2023) noticed that the support received from family and friends caused an increase in university adjustment levels. They founded that general adjustment levels to university are positively correlated with social support.

Also personal factor was mentioned as facilitate adaptation. The attending classes (<I follow our lessons regularly> (A3), <Attending common classes contributed to my adaptation> (A3)), actively participating in classes (<...actively participating in classes> (A1), <...I'm just doing my tasks <...>(A6)) show students' ability to attend and successfully complete learning and it helps easier to adapt to study process. According Birzina, Cedere, Petersone (2019) it is the personal factor of adaptation.

Table 4. Expression of the adaptation of Erasmus+ program students

Category	Subcategory	Number of statements
Factors that facilitate adaptation	Relationships with lecturers, their help and support	14
	Incorporating/engaging to the learning process	7
	Support from relatives and friends	4
Factors aggravating adaptation	Language skills	7
	Adapting to challenges and changes	5
	Lack of organized activity	4
	Personal reasons, experiences	4

Erasmus+ program students name language skills as the factor aggravating their adaptation in the higher education institution. As noticed Güneş, Aydar (2019) One of the aspects of successful training in the foreign country is knowledge of the language of studying. Erasmus+ program language is English, so good English languages can be a factor of an easy adaptation. But informants said their English level was not good enough for them in study process (<My English level was not sufficient> (A3), <Deficiencies in professional English> (A4).

The other factor was personal adaptation to changes. Informants named these difficulties in adaptation: <I had to face common challenges> (A1), <My school life was <...> remote from interpersonal communication (A2). Changing countries and education system student can have some difficulties and need to resolve themselves or with social support. Also, adaptation process can be more complicated if there is a lack of communication skills.

As a factor aggravating adaptation Erasmus+ program students also named personal reasons and experiences: were not prepared in personal level (<I should have improved myself more before coming to Erasmus>(A4) or little experience traveling or living abroad (<It arose due to the little experience I had in my life of traveling and spending more time abroad (A5).

And one more was institution factor – foreign students would like to have more organized activity at free time in the education institution. The lack of them, by their opinion, affect aggravating adaptation.

As showed results both Lithuanian first year and Erasmus+ program students emphasized the social support (professors, family, friends, so-students) is the factor that facilitate and personals skills (adaptation to changes and challenges), introduce to studies are like a factor aggravating. So i

Both – Lithuanian first years and Erasmus+ program - students shared what kind of help they received that their adaptation would be easier (see Tables 5 and 6). Both group students named the social support which they get from friends and fellow students. It is very important form informants

to get support from close social environment in the adaptation process: <friends helped me when I had difficulties in social life> (A3), <Dormitory mates <...> helped me overcome the difficulties (A4), <Fellow students help> (A14) and etc. Then were emphasized teachers' support in the process of adaptation: <My professors helped me a lot in this regard and supported me in learning English> (A3), <...>university professors helped me overcome the difficulties>(A4), <Fellow students with

Table 5. First-year Lithuanian students received help that facilitated the adaptation period

Category	Subcategory	Number of statements
Social support	Support from friends and fellow students	4
	Teachers' support for students	2
	Relatives' support	2
Personal engagement and self-esteem	Student's personal qualities	4
	Initiative in finding information	2
	Self-care	1
No help required	No need for help	4

whom you can easily cooperate will help with everything> (A11). And the support from family and relatives: <My family> (A1), <The help of relatives> (A14). As mentioned Güneş, Aydar (2019) first years or Erasmus+ program students separate from their friends, families and their and can lose their support. But it is very important to keep this social support because it can help facilitate the current new situation, create more positive experiences and help to avoid negative consequences in the process of adaptation.

Also, informants named personal engagement and self-esteem as the way helped to facilitate the adaptation period (see Tables 5 and 6). Lithuanian first year students emphasized student's personal qualities (<Curiosity>(A7), <Will> (A12) and <Wish to move forward> (A13), initiative (<to ask administrative and teachers> (A7) and self-care (<Time with yourself> (A12).

Table 6. Received helped to Erasmus+ program students to facilitate the adaptation period

Category	Subcategory	Number of statements
Social support	Support from friends and fellow students	5
	Teacher's support for students	3
	Relatives support	1
Personal engagement and self-esteem	Time management	1
	Communication with others	1
	Challenges and overcoming them	1
No help required	No need for help	1

Erasmus+ program students named time management (<Learning to manage time effectively in a new environment> (A1)), communication (<Above all also listening, talking to all the people a little >(A5)) and the overcoming of challenges (<Common challenges> (A1)). It was noticed that personal well-feeling and integration in the university study environment help to pass the process of adaptation easier (Birzina, Cedere, Petersone, 2019).

Informants also named measures which can help future first year and Erasmus+ program to pass successful the adaptation period in the beginning of studies (see Tables 7 and 8). Lithuanian students named general and formal information (<More information> (A7), <More information about written works would be needed (because we usually come after school and do not know how and what to do in it)> (A14)) that would be clear from the first day of studies. Also, informants emphasised the introduction of physical environment of the institution (<More introduction to the

institution>(A7), <in September to give the plan of the building where first year students will study.> (A8)). Besides participants talked about the group formation in the first month: <Common tasks in a group> (would allow everyone to get together faster) (A12) and <More trying to bring the group

Table 7. Measures to facilitate the adaptation period of first-year Lithuanian students in higher education

Category	Subcategory	Number of statements
Ways to facilitate adaptation	Providing general and formal information to first year students	4
	Detailed introduction to the physical environment of institution	4
	Formation of the positive climate and focus of the group in the first months	4
	Organisation of teaching and learning	4
	Introductory familiarization events	2
	Financial support	1
	Measures not needed	1

closer together> (A14). As the one more measure was excluded the organisation of the teaching/learning process. It seems that adaptation would be easier if students have <Meaningful lectures>(A13), <meaningful activities>(A13) and <More practice> (A8). All these measures would increase the institutional factor in the adaptation process – institutional cultural and practices support students to succeed (Birzina, Cedere, Petersone, 2019).

Erasmus+ program students more emphasized personal measures such like perception of experiences and losses gained (<To understand with greater clarity not only the obvious aspects like the cold weather...>(A2), <...> this experience can not weigh on them and they can remember it

Table 8. Measures to facilitate the adaptation period of Erasmus+ students in higher education

Category	Subcategory	Number of statements
Ways to facilitate adaptation	Perception of experiences and losses gained	4
	Organisation of teaching and learning	3
	Self-confidence	3
	Activity and events	2
	Improving language skills	2
	Support from relatives and friends	2
	Sharing experiences about studies	2
	Attentiveness of employees of the international relations department	1
	Knowing the city and the environment	1
	Provision of general and formal information	
	Measures not needed	1

for life (A5)) or self – confidence (<I am confident that I can handle my studies without any need for additional assistance> (A1), <should be confident in themselves> (A3). Also, foreign students pointed out to organisation of teaching/learning process: <I would like to have a library in the dormitory> (A4), <The thing that makes me feel better about studying is the presence of the slides which helps me a lot and speeds up my studying a lot> (A5)).

By the opinion of both Lithuania first-year and Erasmus+ program students both institution and personal measures can help pass the process of adaptation more successfully. They confirm Birzina, Cedere, Petersone (2019) theory that institutional, personal and academic factors

influencing the studies and adaptation process in the beginning of the first year or studies abroad.

Summarising the research results, it can be concluded that it is important to support students in the beginning of their studies in both cases: if it is just start of the first year in the higher education institution or it is the beginning of Erasmus+ program abroad. Social support helps adapt more successful and faster. This support can be not only from relatives but from teachers or study mates. According theory (Birzina, Cedere, Petersone 2019) and empirical results successful adaptation belongs from three factors: institutional (supportive staffs who respect students differences, good assessment practice, curricula and pedagogies, the resources which needed for learning, accessible buildings and facilities), personal (students self-confident, their attitudes about the benefits and of training/learning, personal development goals, experiences in the training/learning process, feeling of a part of community, stress management) and academic (knowledges, skills, abilities).

Conclusions

1. The results showed that Lithuanian first year students as facilitators for their adaptation named these factors: relations with fellow students, understanding teaching and learning activities and engaging in the process, becoming a part of the higher education institution community adapting to the changed situation and relationships with lecturers and their help. And Erasmus+ program students emphasized relationships with lecturers, their help and support, incorporating/engaging to the learning process and support from relatives and friends.

2. It was identified that Lithuanian first-year students emphasized complicated personal adaptation to change, intermediate settlement in studies and finding out the organization of studies as aggravated factors of adaptation.

3. It was identified that Erasmus+ program students who start their studies abroad named these factors of aggravated adaptation: languages skills, adapting to challenges and changes, lack of organized activity and personal reasons, experiences.

4. The results showed that both Lithuanian first year and Erasmus+ program students named social support and personal engagement and self-esteem as help who made easier their adaptation in studies. Lithuanian first year students as possible help in adaptation process named providing general and formal information, detailed introduction to the physical environment of institution, formation of the positive climate and organisation of teaching and learning process. And Erasmus+ program students emphasized personal perception of experiences and losses gained, organisation of teaching and learning process and self-confidence.

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