

Taking Care of student Careful Transition to University (A Case-Study of Linguistics Major at Kazan Federal University)

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ABSTRACT

First-year students face the challenges of campus life right at the university entrance. The issue of transition of first-year students to the academic environment is crucial to determine their further development as individuals and future specialists. The paper aims at analyzing the expectations of freshmen and examining the degree of students' satisfaction with the multicultural academic environment at Kazan Federal University, Russia. The findings will contribute to facilitating a timely transition into campus life and personal development of freshmen. The leading approach is observation and classification as well as interviewing, collecting, analyzing and synthesizing the data, received via interviews and survey. The authors conclude that three out of ten first-year students majoring in Linguists whose academic adaptation is assessed as extremely low should be paid special attention. Adaptation must be differentiated considering different student categories: gender, age, social and economic background, level of basic foreign and Russian language knowledge and skills. The materials of the research may be useful for applicants and university students as well as university staff and researchers who are willing to help students make the most of their academic years and become successful individuals and efficient specialists with a university degree.

KEYWORDS

Student transition to university; adaptation;
university entrants; tutor; academic environment

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 March 2016
Revised 30 June 2016
Accepted 13 July 2016

Introduction

Student life begins immediately at the university entrance. Naturally, a successful, effective transition of first-year students to academic life is the key to their further development as an individual and a future specialist.

Analysis of external and internal factors affecting the process of student transition to university allowed Fedorova (2007) to specify the concept under study, which we regard as a process of active involvement of students in the educational environment of the university (*situation of transition*), followed by encouraging the

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need to acquire professional knowledge and skills, organization of life on the basis of the university rules, morale and professional values (*need for adaptation*), and crowned by satisfaction with the new status, focus on self-development as a future professional (*adaptedness*).

The initial period of university study is determined by social change, shift from old to new stereotypes, stressful situations, and so on. With some students, it can lead to the substitution of a real sense of independence and maturity with such options as freedom of class attendance and other external forms of self-realization (Kuzmishkin, 2014). A. Briggs, J. Clark & I. Hall (2012) identify achieving the balance between academic activities and family life as the biggest challenge for young students. This is true, because adult life is all about time management; and to achieve success in studies students are to be time flexible. However, the majority of undergraduates haven't confronted this trouble before due to the support of their institutions and family members. S. Cottrell (2013) believes that the most noticeable issue for the new entrants is about the difference in study approaches and teaching methodology. As all of us have studied in school, we remember being encouraged to do the tasks by our teachers, but from new academic year students will feel greater responsibility and will get more freedom in their studies. That could be shocking for some people and hinder their performance at the beginning. G.R. Shagivaleeva & V.R. Bildanova (2015) push forward psychological factors, in particular, maladjustment caused by novelty of the student status, lack of proper reference group, increased demands on the part of university staff.

Materials and Methods

Research Objectives and Methods

The relevance of the students' adaptation issue is crucial because modern society is interested to maintain and improve physical and mental health of individual, carefully exploit and encourage their intellectual potential. Therefore, the study of human adaptation mechanisms and patterns in a variety of academic conditions becomes of fundamental importance. As motivation, self-management and well-founded self-confidence are so essential to succeed as a student (Cottrell, 2013) it is especially helpful to find out the expectations of commencing students and the degree of their satisfaction with the academic environment, so that the timely corrections could be made in the organization of their life and studies.

It is important to consider more specifically the degree of satisfaction with the different sides of this new life: the learning process (the set and contents of academic disciplines, the organization of the learning process, the quality of teaching, personal results of the first (winter) exams); social issues and relationships with peer group and university staff; conditions for educational activities (provision of learning and methodical sources, technical equipment of classrooms), living and working conditions (in university, dormitory, catering), the conditions for complete recreation, sports, artistic creativity. To provide well-grounded conclusions on the status of the problem at Kazan Federal University, the following theoretical and practical methods were applied to achieve the solution of the research problem:

- descriptive method for observation and classification of the investigated material;
- system oriented analysis of literature on the problem;
- observation, interviewing, collecting, analyzing and synthesizing data.

Participants and Instruments

250 students, 225 females and 25 males, from nine first year academic groups Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Kazan, Russian Federation, participated in the study. The students' major is Linguistics; their speciality is Translation and Interpretation Studies. All of the respondents study English as a second Language and two other European or Oriental languages. The average age was 18.23 years ranging from 17 to 22 years old. All the participants finished secondary school, the majority - in the year of university entrance.

The instrument used in this study was the survey, according to K. Battey (2015) "a list of questions aimed at extracting specific data from a particular group of people". The students were asked to answer a few open-ended questions on the challenges of their transition to university. The questions were as follows: What challenges did you meet during the transition to university? How did the university staff (including the dean, heads of departments, teachers, tutors, administration) support you in the transition? What recommendations could you give to the administration to facilitate student transition to university?

The data were analyzed via counting the amount of answers that go under a particular category. As the students were not limited in the number of options they might find relevant the interviewers made an effort to arrange the similar answers together and classify them accordingly.

Results

Overall Students' Opinions on Their Transition to University

The above mentioned questions were preceded by a multiple choice question asking the students to determine how difficult their transition to university was in general. The most informative is the ratio of the responses of those for whom transition to college life (they feel) is "hard and long", and for whom it is held, "easy and short." This ratio in the whole array is 1:2.5. Thus, the idea of a certain lightness and a relative speed of adaptation prevails. And this is one of the most important aspects of the study.

The results of the survey show that the main challenges could be arranged into the following categories. The answers are produced in the descending order with the most frequent at the top and the rarest at the bottom of the list.

Organization and Structure

These are challenges related to general organization of the learning process, availability and reliability of time table, manuals, Internet resources etc. The results are presented in the list below.

- Misbalanced inconvenient time-table (45)
- Complicated grade system (35)
- Difficulty to access electronic library (13)
- Lack of paper based manuals (13)
- Technical inconveniences with university web site (12)
- Lack of information on the university administration structure (7)

Evidently, the challenges are determined by a considerable difference between university and school education system. By the inconvenience of the class schedule the students mean that two classes on one day may be followed by five classes on

another, depending on availability of teachers and classrooms. Students may feel disorientated by free periods between classes, which are supposed to be used for independent study and recreation. Grade system at university is quite different from school-based assessment: the former operates within 100 points where maximum 50 scores can be gained during the semester and maximum 50 scores can be awarded during the exam. The latter allows to earn from 1 to maximum 5 scores for every assignment the teacher gives and has no influence on the final exam score.

Students' low basic computer skills and unavailability of internal on-line catalogues in Russian comprehensive schools makes it difficult for undergraduates to operate the university electronic library resources. To add, the fact that most of the paper based textbooks and manuals are provided to school students free leads them to think that undergraduates are also eligible to these benefits. This is especially true of those students who pay for their tuition (which make up 85% of the share) who stereotypically expect to receive the 'complete education pack'. However, formally only up to 50% of students are supposed to be provided with free learning materials, which are borrowed in the academic libraries.

This fact is generously compensated by numerous Distant Learning Resources (DLR) that have recently been introduced into the academic learning process. In particular, every course for the students of Linguistics major is supported with a profound, comprehensive DLR; the contents are able to cover up to 80% of the course; the DLRs are referred to in students' independent study time (Akimova et al., 2015).

Learning process. Contents and technology

The challenges are attributed to the main curriculum and basic peculiarities of the academic learning process, etc. The results are presented in the list below.

- Extensive homework and independent study (100)
- Vast amount of information (40)
- Different teaching methodology, including distant (35)
- Low individual basic level of knowledge and skills (25)

The list of answers suggests itself: when entering the university former school leavers have a vague idea of what student life is. The concept is proved by analysis of the questionnaires, observations and interviews with group tutors, university staff, students themselves and reveals basic learning challenges that hinder successful student transition to university. These are exacerbated low time-management and resilience; unpreparedness/unwillingness to fulfill the high requirements of university staff; lack of daily control and supervision on the part of family members, etc.

Besides, Linguistics major means studying most of the courses in a foreign language and requires high basic knowledge and skills, challenging for some freshmen (25 of the response total). Specialization in Translation/Interpretation presupposes translating from the foreign into the Russian language and vice versa, giving double challenge to foreign students.

Psychological and social factors

However, the most disturbing is the block of challenges related to the inner state of the individual who to adapt to new reality. These include:

- Fear of change (35)
- Life on their own (27)
- New people around (20)
- Big city life (18)
- Disintegration of students and professors (15)

It is clear that besides extensive workload freshmen face a problem of adapting to new ever-changing environment; building relationships with professors and fellow-students and, generally, life without family and teachers' guidance. All these problems cause a lot of stress and strain for a first-year student, which, consequently, has a negative impact on their studies. The research shows that the greatest influence on the first-year students transition has reluctance to come in contact with new people around them (classmates and academic staff), as well as distress, that is, a condition in which fear, tension or self-consciousness violate normal human activities. However, the sense of connectedness is meant to be the most important, as A. Lizzio (2006) believes that person with strong friendship relations is recognized to be more efficient, productive and happy as an individual.

Campus life, daily routine

- Broken routine, lack of sleep (110)
- Life in students' hostel (34)
- Travel to university buildings (far and long) (30)
- Maintaining their own household (24)
- Abundance of activities offered in the campus (distracting from studies) (8)
- Lack of knowledge and skills in Russian (esp., for foreign students) (6)
- Weather and change of seasons (esp., for foreign students) (3)

Meanwhile, the new entrants seem to be most dissatisfied with their new living conditions, especially those in the campus. The results of this part of the research are suggestive of the sort of social and psychological challenges the sophomores have to meet. Unfortunately, some of the adults (including teaching staff) manifest a kind of "study-centrism", and hence - they underestimate the importance of comfortable living conditions. To add, the wish of campus administration to maximum involve the newcomers into the student life leads to the fact that the majority of indecisive students willing to take part in as many events as possible physically have no time for study and recreation.

"Help! Help!" As if they need any...

The answers to the second question provided more positive feedback. Though about 13% of the students mentioned that they received no help in transition to the university on the part of the administration. This includes 6% of those who are convinced that newcomers are to face hardships themselves as a part of preparation to the independent life which is generally "full of care" (Davis, 1911). Others, however, required help and voted unanimously in favour of their tutors, who provided universal support concerning different spheres of freshmen's life. The information suggests certain changes for the better: recently there has been a common opinion on the most inherent indifference of teaching staff to students. The

first-year students themselves in their responses and estimates prove the idea pointing out the increasing attentive, respectful attitude in terms of "teacher - student" relationship (Boronina et al., 2001).

The tutors at KFU are provided to the students of the first up to fourth year every year. Among other duties they are to develop students' civic and patriotic position, spiritual culture, social and professional competence and raise a healthy lifestyle, to assist in the organization of the cognitive process, to promote self-student's personality, enhance intellectual and spiritual potentials. The tutor introduces freshmen to education legislation, University Statutes, Internal Rules, Rules of accommodation in the hostel, rights and responsibilities of the student, library working hours and rules, health post, organization of cultural, sporting and recreational activities; history and traditions of the University. They are to foster respect for the values, norms, laws, moral principles and traditions of university life; control the current semester and academic performance and extracurricular time; participate in the development of different forms of student government; assist in the cultural and physical improvement of the students; promote the involvement of students in research work and various forms of extra-curricular activities, and so on (of Tutorship at Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, 2016).

Thus, the importance of the human factor, desire and effort for personification of relationships in working environment, typical for Russian professional groups is hard to overestimate. The new entrants expect and the teachers take pains to get closer to their 'dependents' playing a most important role in their careful transition to the academic life.

Students' Recommendations on Transition Facilitation

Answering the final question, the students suggested some improvements to eliminate or lessen the above mentioned challenges.

They feel the website of the university might be more sensitive. This resource has links to the essential information, which students require in the first academic year. But they expect sections for the new entrants, which can help with first settling, module choice decision, answer some non-academic FAQs. In case the information is not found the new entrants could contact directly to the member of staff via e-mail. At the first tutor sessions students might be provided with the student handbook, made up of answers to the FAQs. Others offered video-conferencing as means of preliminary and ongoing informing students of what they might expect of university structure, learning process, assessment, etc. and discussing the issues that might rise in the first year.

Naturally, the transition to university will be smooth if undergraduates do not rely only on the support of their institutions. They might also act as a conscious and motivated individual. Therefore, recognition of this challenge at the first instance and planned actions will help to outweigh the possible detrimental effect.

Discussions

Regardless many challenges, fortunately, universities provide the support to all their students during the first academic year. The approach mentioned by R. Whittaker (2013) is called "social integration scheme", which enables students to be engaged in task completion process.

Another sensible way of supporting the transition process is longitudinal induction, explained by M. Busseri (2011), who believes that the “involvement in organized activities”, such as sports clubs, student’s communities, promotes fast academic adjustment. J. Johnson (2002) identifies the smartest way of university settling as setting academic goals and self-assessing the progress of meeting these targets to overwhelm the challenges, due to higher productivity and better time management.

Many of the Russian researchers (Sedin, 2009; Shagivaleeva & Bildanova, 2015) focus on the role of psychological guidance. Others (Boronina et al., 2001) relate social stability and student’s economic background to their fast and easy transition to university. Various papers specify students’ adaptation issues in terms their major and future career expectations (Fedorova, 2007). However, peculiarities of the transition of students majoring in Linguistics (Foreign Languages), as well as their own recommendations backed by the authors’ teaching experience have not been publicized yet.

Conclusion

Adaptation of former school students to the new learning environment is a complex, long and sometimes painful process.

In the reference group a particular attention should be paid to three out of ten first-year students who appreciated their social well-being as ‘extremely low’. Adaptation of freshmen majoring in Linguistics must be differentiated (taking into account different categories of students): gender, age, social and economic background, level of foreign and Russian language knowledge and skills.

When working with freshmen special attention should be paid to:

- students’ knowledge about the academic and administration structure of the university, knowledge of their rights and responsibilities;
- changes in the learning environment, increase of the share of practice classes;
- advice, psychological guidance and administrative support;
- increased role of tutors in building the academic group and organization of their life and study;
- involvement of professors, senior undergraduates in planning new students’ educational, social and scientific-research work.

Thus, the indicators of social adaptation might be the following:

At the group level: entry into the group; certain social status and role; adoption of the rules and norms of corporate culture (group, department, university);

At the university level: knowledge of infrastructure (buildings, dormitories, libraries, trade union, resource centers, museums and others); knowledge of faculty, departments’ management.

Indicators of training adaptation are as follows:

- orientation in the curriculum, classrooms, buildings;

- ability to use the library, electronic catalogue, information educational resources, DLRs;
- independent study skills, self-management (selection of information sources, analysis, ability to manage time, etc.);
- basic language knowledge and skills sufficient to communicate within the academic environment and specialize in Translation/Interpretation from the foreign into the target language regardless of the fact if the latter is native/first to the student or not.

Taken together, these factors will mean the students have developed an ability to adapt, overcome difficulties, find their place in the living space which is a critical issue in the successful development of a young man, and in the future - a specialist with a university degree.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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