

## Psychological and pedagogical factors of international students' adaptation in the higher education system

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### Abstract

International integration of the educational space in the 21st century contributes to the formation of a significant learning diaspora of foreign students in universities of different countries and different specialties. At the same time, there are significant risks of such students adapting to the mentality and specific learning processes of different nationalities, which can cause barriers to the rational academic performance of individuals. This study aimed to assess the adaptability and anxiety of international students of the first and fourth years to study in Karaganda Buketov University, Kazakhstan. The study relied on questionnaires for assessing adaptability (SACQ questionnaire) and anxiety (based on the technique developed by Spielberger and Khanin). The results show a correlation between anxiety and adaptability. Most first-year students have anxiety and adaptability at average and below-average levels. Fourth-year students have high adaptability scores and low anxiety scores. The results show that programs for international students at Karaganda Buketov University positively impact students, and there are essential in the university's work. The anxiety and adaptability levels of the fourth-year students are expected and can be explained by natural habituation after time and the influence of programs for overcoming various adaptation barriers.

Keywords: Adaptation, anxiety, international, students, study

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## 1. Introduction

Studying abroad has always been and will always be prestigious. An individual gains invaluable experience while living in another country, mastering the knowledge, and experiencing the peculiarities of another culture. For universities, international students' education is a politically significant factor and an indicator of academic prestige. Researchers (Wihlborg & Robson, 2018) suggest that internationalization in higher education needs to be rethought, namely intercultural understanding (Aralbayeva et al., 2019). Familiarity with the pedagogical experience of other countries performs an evaluation role, overcoming the limitations of personal pedagogical experience and mechanical duplication of innovation (Jabbarov, 2020). The level of teaching and the level of student's knowledge in a country can be determined only compared to the context of world culture (Jabbarov, 2020).

The intercultural adaptation of international students strongly influences their ability to complete their studies (Zhong et al., 2020). Intercultural education enhances both youth and adults' cross-cultural awareness, competencies, and skills (Medarić, et al., 2021). Students' intercultural adaptation is mainly determined by four factors: academic conditions, interpersonal relationships, environmental factors, and psychological adjustment (Zhong et al., 2020). High interpersonal relationships and psychological adjustment increase students' life satisfaction while studying (Zhong et al., 2020).

For a systemic change in the internationalization of higher education, teaching, learning, and grading strategies need to match students' different ways of knowing to ensure that people from different countries understand the content of the curriculum and how it is taught (Wihlborg & Robson, 2018). International students are part of the migration industry (Beech, 2018), an important indicator of academic mobility, which is an internationalization factor contributing to the institution's development. The presence of international students motivates students of their home country to learn more deeply and improves attendance (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016). Learning and participating in community activities impact the community's social interactions where individuals live and learn (Norton & De Costa, 2018). In other words, students study and socialize in a particular society.

Besides adjusting to the specifics of the education system, international students also need to adapt to the new language, professional, and cultural environment (Krutova-Soliman et al., 2021). Such factors as being motivated to improve their social status in the future, get an education, and ensure a promising future for their children help in the adaptation process (Krutova-Soliman et al., 2021). Self-motivation to study abroad is also a decisive factor in overcoming the difficulties of adapting to another country (Yang et al., 2018).

The process of adaptation is twofold, involving both cultural and psychological changes (Baranov et al., 2018). Many students remember adaptation as a challenging but positive experience (Yuerong et al., 2017). Adaptation is hardest for first-year students, native to their home country, and international students (Osamika et al., 2021). Studies show that 59.9% of international students have high stress levels in their first year at Russian universities, but by the fourth year, students already feel almost at home (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016). Other researchers have studied that first-year students are prone to anxiety and depression (Hachemi et al., 2020).

Successful education of international students requires an individualized approach, determining the initial knowledge of the host country's language (Krutova-Soliman et al., 2021). In order to improve students' knowledge, Krutova-Soliman et al. (2021) suggest creating a process of internal differentiation within the group to uncover each student's skills, abilities, and interests.

## 2. Literature review

Studies found that adaptation assessment includes evaluating one's global competence (openness, tolerance for cultural differences, knowledge of other cultures, communication skills) (Tymbalyuk et al., 2021). It is crucial for the administration of the host university, international staff, and advisors to support openness and communicative competence development (Meng et al., 2018).

Most researchers who study cultural adaptation focus on barriers (linguistic, intercultural, interethnic) and differences in educational programs and grading systems (Gahwal et al., 2021; Valieva et al., 2019). It is widely accepted that international students need help adapting to cultural traditions, participating in university social life, communicating and interacting with fellow students (Gahwal et al., 2021; Hachemi et al., 2020; Valieva et al., 2019). Iyagina et al. (2019) indicate the importance of learning the country's language.

Krutova-Soliman et al. (2021) identified three essential structural components of the integration and adaptation of immigrants (in this study, immigrant students in Germany) into a new community, which are also applicable to international students in other countries. These components are:

1. Motivation to know and accept the environmental conditions in the country where one lives or studies and tolerance to these conditions.

2. Cognitive and perceptual components - the ability to perceive one's environment mentally, study traditions, culture, language, norms, and values of the country where one studies or plans to live.

3. Communicative component – the desire and ability to communicate in the country's language and establish social contacts in a new society (Krutova-Soliman et al., 2021).

Human qualities of teachers and fellow students such as responsiveness, empathy, reliability, tangibility, and teachers' confidence in students significantly influence students' satisfaction with university teaching, which is one of the most important things to maintain (Sitanggang et al., 2021). State policies regarding migrants and their education and adaptation are also important (Lages & Bulla, 2021).

High levels of anxiety and stress, conflicts and poor relationships with fellow students, and dissatisfaction with studies negatively affect first-year students' learning and ability to study another language (Wang & Zhang, 2021). Language proficiency is the most important factor in students' psychological endurance and adjustment (Hu et al., 2020). According to De Leersnyder et al. (2022), psychological safety and engagement are crucial to learning.

To overcome students' language adaptation barriers, Almazova et al. (2020) suggest using interactive technologies. De Leersnyder et al. (2022) argue that learning in groups with international students should be different from monocultural groups. Such separation would promote psychological safety and improve student performance. In other words, successful adaptation of international students requires collaborative work of the entire teaching team (Rerke et al., 2018). Fischer and Lahmann (2020) point out that teacher training for international students should be done while they are still studying (education programs for future teachers should include specifics of education for international students).

The organization of the education process plays an essential role in the adaptation of international students. Universities need to identify problems in advance and develop strategies to solve them. According to Baklashova and Kazakov (2016), international students need to be active members of

international student adaptation centers, student organizations, and associations. Such active engagement should help them to cope with stress and various problems.

International students' adaptation can be improved with the help of active teaching methods and independent work aimed not only at gaining knowledge but also at developing the individual's creative and communicative abilities. Independent work is both a learning method and a feedback regulator (Tsvetkova et al., 2021). Such factors as self-motivation to study abroad (Yang et al., 2018), proactivity (Eskisu, 2021), and other personal characteristics (diligence, openness to new experience, goodwill, malleability, conscientiousness) (Osamika et al., 2021) also aid the adaptation process. Thus, it is necessary to create conditions where international students can improve self-esteem, plan their careers and develop necessary personal characteristics (Kotova et al., 2021; Kuralay & Ardakh, 2021).

Kazakh universities have adaptation programs for both local freshmen and international students. These programs help students adjust by providing moral and psychological support and guidelines for creating productive learning conditions and cross-cultural adaptation (Kapanova, 2021). However, there is no recent research on how international students adapt in universities of Kazakhstan (the latest ones having been conducted before 2015). Therefore, this study aimed to measure the level of adaptation and anxiety international students (first and fourth years) have/feel, compare them, and measure their correlation.

The research objectives were

- To assess the adaptability of 1st and 4th-year students using the SACQ questionnaire;
- To measure the anxiety level of 1st and 4th-year students using Spielberger and Khanin's methodology;
- To compare and interpret their findings;
- To measure the correlation between the indicators of anxiety and adaptability.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1. Sample**

The study involved 88 international students of first and fourth years (46 and 42 participants from each year), 18 to 24 years old, 43 men and 45 women from Karaganda Buketov University, who studied at the bachelor's programs full-time. All students consent to participate in the experiment and publish the results.

#### **3.2. Research design**

The study had three stages: preparation, conducting the experiment and forming the conclusion. The students' anxiety was measured using the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory developed by Spielberger and Khanin. Students' adaptation was assessed with the help of the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire - SACQ (Holliman et al., 2018).

#### **3.3. Anxiety assessment using based on Spielberger and Khanin's questionnaire**

The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory consisted of 20 statements about anxiety as a condition and 20 statements about anxiety as a personality trait. The answers were collected in written form, preserving the anonymity of respondents. Students were asked to read each statement carefully and their attitude toward it on a scale. A sample questionnaire is provided in Appendix 1 (Peskiadmin,

2021; Shagivaleeva et al., 2020). The questionnaire results were transferred to the MS EXCEL program and analyzed for the presence of significant differences using the Student's t-test.

### 3.4. Adaptation assessment based on SACQ

Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire had 67 statements about the experience of studying at the university divided into four subtopics: adaptation to study (24 questions), social adaptation (20 questions), individual and emotional adaptation (15 questions), commitment to a purpose (15 questions). The questionnaire was presented in a Google Table form with a linear rating scale. Students assessed each statement according to the following rating scale: 1 – the statement does not apply to me; 2 - the statement barely applies to me; 3 - the statement probably applies to me; 4 - the statement is about me; 5 - the statement applies very closely to me. A list of questions is provided in Appendix 2 (Dahmus et al., 1992; Pdfcoffee, 2021). The results were processed using MS Excel software to calculate Student's T-test values for the two groups of students (1st and 4th year), the statistical mean, and the standard deviation.

## 4. Results

The results of anxiety assessment among first- and fourth-year students are shown in Figure 1.

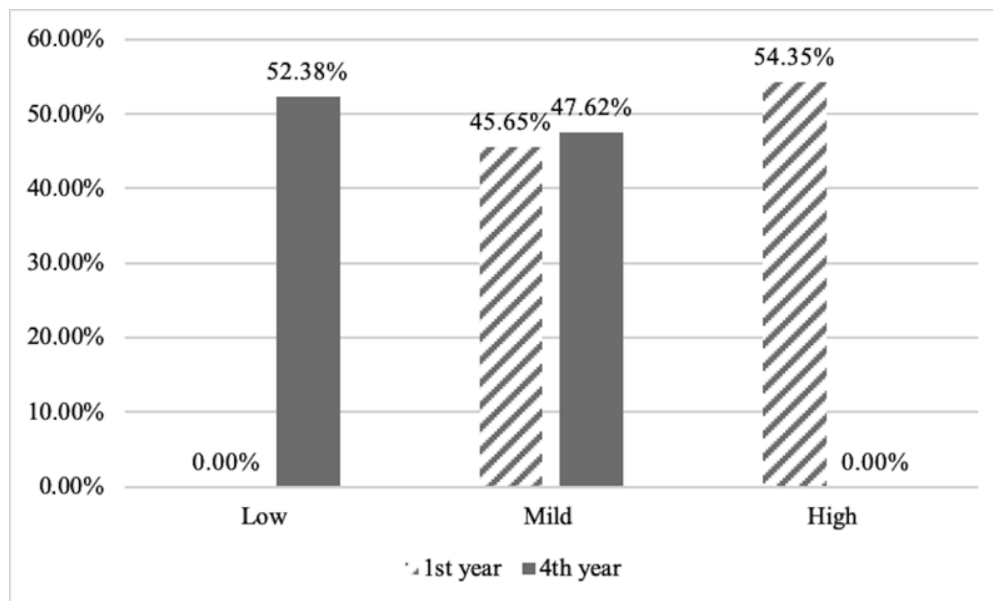


Figure 1. Students' anxiety levels as measured by Spielberger and Khanin's method

The assessment showed that 45.65% of the 1st-year students had mild anxiety, and 54.35% had high anxiety. No low levels of anxiety were recorded. The 4th-year students had significantly better results: 52.38% of students had low anxiety, 47.62% of participants demonstrated mild anxiety, and none of the 4th-year students had high anxiety levels. The level of anxiety among fourth-year students is significantly lower than that of first-year students ( $t= 7.75, p>0.05$ ). This indicates that the improvement of students' adaptive factors comes at the expense of sharp communication with classmates and spending time in the academic environment of the current university.

It should be noted that a significant score on the situational anxiety definition had a probable correlation with the statements "I didn't perform well during exams" ( $R=0.48, p=0.00005$ ) and "I have several close social connections in college" ( $R=0.49, p=0.00001$ ). For personal anxiety, the highest

correlation of total scores was with the judgments "I feel that I am very different from other college students in ways that I don't like" ( $R=0.59$ ,  $p=0.000001$ ), "I have difficulty coping with the stress in college" ( $R=0.5$ ,  $p=0.000005$ ), "I feel I have enough social skills to get along well in college" ( $R=0.66$ ,  $p=0.000001$ ), "being alone and taking responsibility for myself were not easy" ( $R=0.65$ ,  $p=0.000001$ ).

High anxiety of first-year students is explained by low adaptation to the studying conditions and life in another country in general (see Figure 2).

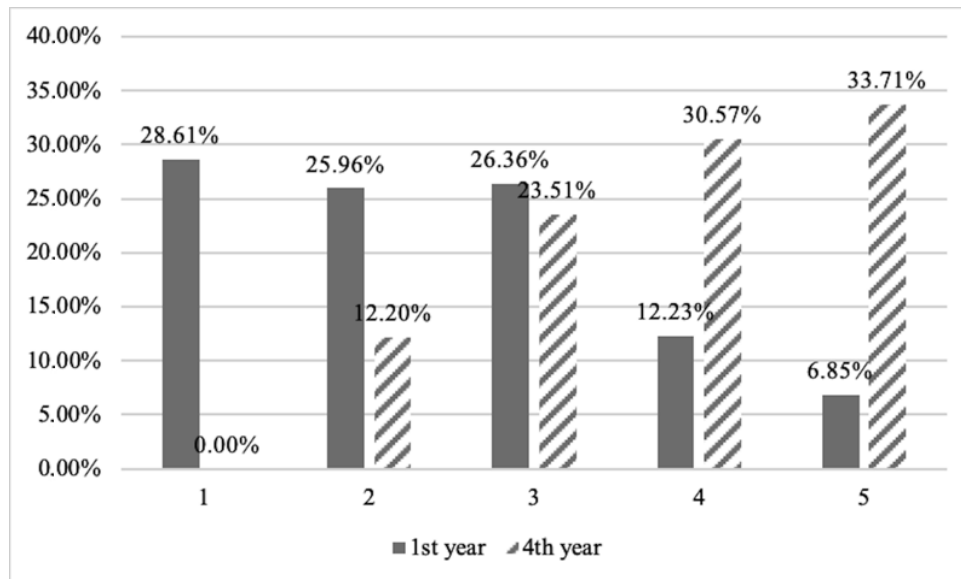


Figure 2. International students' adaptation rates to studying at Karaganda Buketov University, Kazakhstan (based on self-assessment survey)

The fourth-year students are much better adapted to studying than the first-year students. They assessed their adaptation level at 3.52 points, while first-year students gave themselves an average of 2.43 points. The level of anxiety among male students is significantly higher compared to female students, which indicates their greater emotional overload, and they probably have more frequent feelings of inner stiffness, frustration, and anxiety during the educational process at university. Thus, about 43% of the guys rated their level of adaptation as below average, while most female students (66%) had positive indicators. The healthy adaptation rates of 1st-year students can be explained by implementing several measures and tools to help them in this process. These measures include conversations and instructions with senior students, work in specialized student communities, individual counselling, teaching and learning materials in English and the student's native languages. All this have contributed to a better adaptation of the first-year students.

## 5. Discussion

The results confirm the validity of numerous practical recommendations on the adaptation of international students to university education, including those provided by the authors (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016; Bisseneva, 2018; Yuerong et al., 2017). The possibility of getting learning material in Kazakh and English and students' native languages greatly improves the perception of the material (Gahwal et al., 2021; Ivygina et al., 2019; Meng et al., 2018; Valieva et al., 2019). Special Kazakh and English courses for international students are necessary, but the opportunity to read what is being studied in the native language enhances the perception and understanding of the material (Ivygina et al., 2019). This helps to overcome one of the most significant barriers in adaptation - language

(Almazova et al., 2020; Gahwal et al., 2021; Ivygina et al., 2019; Valieva et al., 2019). Plenty of translators and grammar correction programs make it easier for teachers to develop foreign language materials for international students. In addition, translation inaccuracies are often corrected by students themselves.

The variety of freshman adjustment activities positively impacts overcoming intercultural and social barriers, as supported by data and recommendations from multiple researchers (De Leersnyder et al., 2022; Medarić et al., 2021). Engaging with international undergraduates increases first-year students' confidence to overcome adaptation barriers and decreases stress levels. The good adaptation rates and low anxiety levels of international students at the Karaganda Buketov University can be explained by proper university policies and programs regarding international students' adaptation, which are based on scientific recommendations and students' high awareness levels.

## **6. Conclusions**

The research showed that different measures to help international students adapt greatly reduce their anxiety and improve adaptation scores. However, the study found high anxiety levels (25 out of 46 students) and low adaptability rates among first-year students (28.6% of students evaluated their adaptability by 1 point, and 25.96% gave themselves 2 points). The results can be explained by individual factors related to the stress of moving to a foreign country, the language barrier, or low social adaptability. These are normal phenomena that require monitoring and consideration by curators of study groups and providing personal social support. High adaptation rates of the fourth-year students are explained by the fact that they had more time to get used to the new social and educational environment, lower their language barrier and improve their social adaptability. The article can be used in the methodological development of academic plans for foreign applicants and students. At the same time, the results of the current study indicate gender differentiation of anxiety level, which prevails in male students as evidence of specific factors of adaptation to the new educational process.

### **6.1. Limitations**

This study was conducted at Karaganda Buketov University, Kazakhstan, in a specific sample of students. The first-year students assessed their anxiety level after three months of study at the university, while the fourth-year students had been studying for three years and three months by the time of assessment. The results can be partially due to the introduction of several measures and tools introduced in Kazakhstan to optimize the adaptation of international students.

### **6.2. Recommendations**

Future researchers may pay attention to the aspect of deteriorating physical and mental health of international students (especially first-year students) in their move to metropolitan areas of another country. At the same time, it is advisable to consider the effectiveness of using digital technologies in the context of supporting optimal international learning in today's changing environment.

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## Appendix 1

Questions for identifying students' anxiety level based on Spielberger and Khanin's method

No	How do you feel at the moment	No, not that 1	it's like 2	I guess so 3	Correct 4	Absolutely right 5
1	I feel calm					
2	I feel secure					
3	I am tense					
4	I feel regret					
5	I feel at ease					
6	I feel upset					
7	I am worried about possible failures					
8	I feel rested					
9	I am worried					
10	I feel satisfied with myself					
11	I feel confident					
12	I am nervous					
13	I am restless					
14	I am agitated					
15	I do not feel constrained					
16	I am satisfied					
17	I worry too much					
18	I feel too worked up and I am uncomfortable					
19	I feel happy					
20	I feel good					
21	I feel enjoyment					
22	I tend to get tired quickly					
23	I can cry easily					
24	I wish I could be as happy as others					
25	Often lose because of slow decision making					
26	I usually feel awake					
27	I am calm, cool, and collected					
28	The expected difficulties make me anxious					
29	I get overly worked up over nothing					
30	I am quite happy					
31	I take things personally					
32	I am lack self-confidence					
33	I usually feel safe					
34	I try to avoid critical situations and difficulties					
35	I sometimes mope					
36	I am content					
37	Little things distract me and excite me					
38	I experience disappointments intensely and cannot forget them					

39	I am a balanced person				
40	I get restless when I think of my own affairs and cares				

Questions 1 - 20 assess reactive anxiety (anxiety as a state). Questions 3,4,6,7,9,12,13,14,17,18 are direct, while questions Nos. 1,2,5,8,10,11,15,16,19,20 are reverse. Reactive anxiety is measured according to the following formula: the number of points received for the direct questions - the number of points for the inverse questions + 50 points.

Questions Nos. 21 – 40 assess trait anxiety (anxiety as a property of personality). Questions 22,23,24,25,28,29,31,32,34,35,37,38,40 are direct, while questions Nos. 21,26,27,30,33,36,39 are reverse. Trait anxiety is assessed according to the following formula: number of points for answers to direct questions - number of points for reverse questions + 35 points.

Anxiety level up to 30 points is considered low, 35 - 45 points - moderate, 46 and above - high. The minimum score is 20 points, the maximum score is 80 points.

## Appendix 2

Adaptation assessment according to SACQ

Questions	Response options				
	1 It does not apply to me	2 It barely applies to me	3 It probably applies to me	4 It applies to me	5 It applies very closely to me
1. I feel that I fit in well as part of the college environment.					
2. I have been feeling tense or nervous lately.					
3. I have been keeping up to date on my academic work.					
4. I am meeting as many people, and making as many friends as I would like at college.					
5. I know why I'm in college and what I want out of it.					
6. I am finding academic work at college difficult.					
7. Lately, I have been feeling blue and moody a lot.					
8. I am very involved with social activities in college.					
9. I am adjusting well to college.					
10. I have not been functioning well during examinations.					
11. I have felt tired much of the time lately.					
12. Being on my own, taking responsibility for myself, has not been easy.					
13. I am satisfied with the level at which I am performing academically.					
14. I have had informal, personal contacts with college professors.					
15. I am pleased now about my decision to go to college.					

16. I am pleased now about my decision to attend this college in particular.					
17. I'm not working as hard as I should at my course work.					
18. I have several close social ties at college.					
19. My academic goals and purposes are well defined.					
20. I haven't been able to control my emotions very well lately.					
21. I'm not really smart enough for academic work I am expected to be doing now.					
22. Lonesomeness for home is a source of difficulty for me now.					
23. Getting a college degree is very important for me.					
24. My appetite has been good lately.					
25. I haven't been very efficient in the use of study time lately.					
26. I enjoy living in a college dormitory. (or in a place where I currently live)					
27. I enjoy writing papers for courses.					
28. I have been having a lot of headaches lately.					
29. I really haven't had much motivation for studying lately.					
30. I am satisfied with the extracurricular activities available at college.					
31. I've given a lot of thought lately to whether I should ask for help from the Psychological/Counseling Services Center or from a psychotherapist outside of college.					
32. Lately, I have been having doubts regarding the value of a college education.					
33. I am getting along very well with my roommates(s) at college. (Please omit if you do not have a roommate.)					
34. I wish I were at another college or university.					
35. I've put on (or lost) too much weight recently.					
36. I am satisfied with the number and variety of courses available at college.					
37. I feel that I have enough social skills to get along well in the college setting.					
38. I have been getting angry too easily lately.					
39. Recently I have had trouble concentrating when I try to study.					
40. I haven't been sleeping very well.					
41. I'm not doing well enough academically for the amount of work I put in.					
42. I am having difficulty feeling at ease with other people at college.					
43. I am satisfied with the quality or the caliber of courses available at college.					
44. I am attending classes regularly.					
45. Sometimes my thinking gets muddled up too easily.					
46. I am satisfied with the extent to which I am participating in social activities at college.					
47. I expect to stay at this college for a bachelor's degree.					
48. I haven't been mixing too well with the opposite sex lately.					
49. I worry a lot about my college expenses.					
50. I am enjoying my academic work at college.					
51. I have been feeling lonely a lot at college lately.					
52. I am having a lot of trouble getting started on homework assignments.					
53. I feel I have good control over my life situation at college.					
54. I am satisfied with my program of courses for this semester/quarter.					
55. I have been feeling in good health lately.					
56. I feel I am very different from other students at college in ways that I don't like.					

57. On balance, I would rather be home than here.					
58. Most of the things I am interested in are not related to any of my course work at college.					
59. Lately I have been giving a lot of thought to transferring to another college.					
60. Lately I have been giving a lot of thought to dropping out of college altogether and for good.					
61. I find myself giving considerable thought to taking time off from college and finishing later.					
62. I am very satisfied with the professors I have now in my courses.					
63. I have some good friends or acquaintances at college with whom I can talk about any problems I may have.					
64. I am experiencing a lot of difficulty coping with the stresses imposed upon me in college.					
65. I am quite satisfied with my social life at college.					
66. I'm quite satisfied with my academic situation at college.					
67. am confident that I can satisfactorily cope with future challenges here at the university.					

The assessment is performed by counting answers to questions and calculating the average score of adaptability.