

## **Exploration of Adaptation Among First-Year Students at Teacher Education Institutes (IPG)**

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The first-year in institutes of higher education is a challenging phase for new students. They need to adapt to the academic and social environment that is different from school culture. This transition process requires them to have a high level of resilience to face the challenges of the campus world. This study aims to explore the adaptation problems among the students of the Bachelor of Education Preparatory Program (PPISMP) at Teacher Education Institutes (IPG). The respondents of this study consisted of four lecturers, four counselors and 30 PPISMP students. Semi structured interviews were conducted to lecturers and counselors while students underwent a Nominal Group Technique (NGT) session. The interviews and discussions of NGT were then transcribed and analyzed using content analysis to form appropriate categories or themes. The findings show that most participants have shown that the problem of adaptation is often faced by PPISMP students. The adaptation problems are related to academic, social, personal, emotional and institutional attachment. The findings of this study are expected to contribute towards the formation and development of appropriate intervention methods to assist the well-being of PPISMP students in IPG in adapting to new environments and increasing their resilience.

*Keywords:* Adaptation, transition, teacher education institute

Adaptation is a process where human beings try to maintain the balance between their desire and the environment. Adaptation is also associated with individual satisfaction towards the environment. The environment of institutes of higher education (IPT) provides adaptation challenges to students. The opportunity to go to IPT is the dream of every student but not all students are able to adapt to the environment in IPT. Individuals who capably handle challenges relating to academic assignments and the social environment of IPT, and at the same time also able to maintain their well-being and to have a close association as a whole to the IPT are said to be well adapted (Baker & Siryk, 1999; Ribbe, Cyrus, & Langan, 2016). According to Chickering (1969), the transition to IPT provides complex

challenges in terms of emotional, social and academic adaptation. Some students try to adapt but some students are adversely affected and cannot function well (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). This can be seen from students' attitude towards the courses they take, their involvement with the learning resources and the adequacy of their efforts at studying (Baker & Siryk, 1999). Students may feel depressed when they are unable to adapt to the changing environment. Therefore, students need to act or behave according to the changing environment. Their failure to adapt to the environmental changes will have an impact on their well-being and will reduce their resilience (Parameswaran & Beena, 2004).

Baker and Siryk (1999) define college adaptability as a multi-psychosocial process that exposes students to stress and

requires them to grow. Adaptation is identified as a predictor as to whether students will stay in college or not (Crede & Niehorster, 2012). Most students are able to experience positive adjustments and can adapt themselves and are happy with the environment at IPT (Rodriguez, Tinajero, Vacas, Guisande Counago, & Paramo Fernandez, 2015; Kenney, Lac, Hummer, Grimaldi, & LaBrie, 2015). However, the ability to adapt to college life and stay there is sometimes affected by academic, non-academic, emotional, social and logistical challenges. Among the challenges faced include dealing with relationships with significant others, managing relationships with family and friends, building relationships with the community of the college, overcoming isolation, handling stress, depression, and anxiety, dealing with financial and health-related challenges, building interpersonal skills, facing with difficulty in adapting to changes, developing personal autonomy, and making important decisions about career, as well as dealing with residential status (Melendez, 2016; Herzog, 2008; Melendez, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Schevaletta, 2000). Previous studies also report that students experience confusion due to their transition to college life (Crede & Niehorster, 2012; Feldt, Graham, & Dew, 2011). As a result, these students are found to face difficulty in academics (Wintre, Bowers, Gordner, & Lange, 2006), as well as suffering emotional problems such as isolation, loneliness, stress, and depression (Horgan, Sweeney, Behan, & McCarthy, 2016; Puff, Kolomeyer, McSwiggan, Peer, Lauer, & Renk, 2016; Quan, Zhen, Yao, & Zhou, 2014), and strained relationships with family members and classmates (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000), issues of substance abuse (LaBrie, Ehret, Hummer, & Prenovost, 2012) which ultimately cause them to get expelled from school or college (Crede & Neihorster, 2012).

Adaptation among students at institutes of higher education should also be given due

attention in Malaysia. The transition of students from school to university requires that they adapt to new circumstances and have a high level of resilience to meet the challenges of a new environment. Based on the Malaysia Education Statistics 2018, a total of 193 883 students enrolled in public institutes of higher education such as universities, teacher education institutes, polytechnics and matriculation colleges in the year 2018. Students are usually high school graduates who will face a different kind of learning system and environment. The process of transition between school and institute of higher education can affect students (Gueudet, 2008) since they will be facing new problems. According to Poduska (1980), intellectual adjustment and emotional adjustment are closely related. Individuals who can handle these adjustments well will be stable but those who cannot do so will face maladjustment.

Adaptation problems not only occur among university students but also among students at teacher education institutes (IPGs). The study by Nor Hashimah, Zulkifley and Siti Ilyana (2015) found that the problem of adaptation affected mathematics performance among the trainee teachers under the Bachelor of Education Preparatory Program (PPISMP) at IPG. Personal emotional condition is the main factor that can interfere with the process of academic adaptation among trainee teachers as well as their social adaptation during institutional transitions. In addition, statistics released by IPG Sarawak shows that the percentage of students who give up on their training is between 0.89 to 4.35

percent per session for the 2012-2014 admission at the IPG Sarawak (Table 1.1).

*Table 1.1*  
Number and Percentage of Students Quitting Studies At IPG Between The Year of 2012-2015

Type of Students	Year of Quitting	Number	Percent According to Cohort
Full-time			
PPISMP	August	3	0.89-4.35
PISMP	2013-	7	1.04-4.54
Overall total	August 2015	10	0.89-4.54
Part-time	January 2013-	13	-
Courses during	December 2015	13	-
Holidays	January 2013 -		
Overall total	December 2015		
	January 2012 -		
	December 2015		
	January 2012 -		
	December 2015		

Source: HEP IPGK on July 28, 2018 (Chiam, 2018)

This statistic is based only on IPG Sarawak. There is a total of 27 IPGs in Malaysia. Based on the statistics above, the percentage of students who quit IPG may be as high as 24 percent (Chiam, 2018) if all IPGs in Malaysia are included.

### Previous studies

The transition problem among students, especially from schools to higher education institutions (IPTs) is not a new issue; even now it is still getting attention at the international level (Feldt, Graham, & Dew, 2011; Klymchuk, Gruenwald, & Jovanoski, 2011; Melendez, 2016).

Previous studies show that first-year students face adjustment problems. For students, the first year is the transition period between secondary and tertiary institutions. A student's achievement at a higher education institution is affected by several factors such as the mastery of content taught, weight of course load, pressure of examination, obligations that call for autonomy in decision making and high commitment (Baker & Siryk, 1999). The study by Lee and Burkam (2003) found that students at higher learning institutes experienced adjustment problems such as financial, academic, health, social, and personal problems. Tinto (1996) has highlighted seven key causes that led students to withdraw from education institutes and they are academic problems, adaptation problems, unclear goals, lack of commitment, financial difficulties, incompatibilities between students and institutions, and isolation. Because of the various challenges faced, many first-year students in higher education institutes find themselves prone to suffering anxiety, stress, and other more serious psychological pressures (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). Furthermore, resilience and the factors that build intrapersonal resiliency are an element that contribute to the success of first-year students at adapting to stress-laden environments at higher education institutions (Hartley & Hartley, 2017); Leary & DeRosier, 2012). Individuals who are able to handle and overcome various demands and pressures in life are individuals who can adapt well (Lazarus, 1976).

Previous studies reveal the relationship between adjustment and responsive strategy ( Nasrudin, Lee Chui Pei, Salina, Norshaffika, Khadijah & Norulhuda , 2011; Cousins, Servaty-seib, & Lockman, 2015), parenting style (Darlow, Norvilitis, Schuetze, & Eduardo, 2008), stress (Ashwini & Barre, 2014), social media (Deandrea, Ellison, Larose, Stein, & Fiore, 2012), change of religious beliefs

(Edmondson & Park, 2009) and resilience (Banyard, Cantor, & Schuh, 2018; Galatzer-levy, Burton, & Bonanno, 2012; Haktanir et al., 2018; Rahat, 2016). Several studies relating to students' adaptation in university have been conducted in Malaysia. Noor Azniza's study (2005) on first-year students at university found that students had maladjustment problems along with low self-acceptance. This maladjustment problem affects students' academic achievement (Nasrudin, et.al, 2011). In addition, Maria Chong (2008) found that first-year students are not the only ones who suffered maladjustment problem, but second year students too might have the problems. This is in line with Tinto's (1996) view that the problem of adaptation is also experienced by mature student.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This study was conducted at four North Zone IPGs. Four lecturers and four counselors participated in the study, together with 30 PPISMP students. Participants were chosen by using purposive sampling method based on a few criteria that had been determined by the researchers (Merriam 1998). For lecturers and counselors, the selection was made based on their experience in handling counseling cases and teaching PPISMP students for over five years. The 30 PPISMP students who were first-year students in IPG were divided into three groups of ten for discussion using the Nominal Group Technique (NGT).

### **Instruments**

Interview as a protocol had been used as the instrument in this study, based on literature studies. Questions for the interview protocol for the study were constructed in the form of open ended and generic

questions where the interview respondents freely stated their opinions based on given questions, without any restrictions. Interview protocols were made up of an introduction, opening questions, key questions, questions related to key questions and closing questions (Noraini, 2010). The interview protocol helps answer research questions. According to Titchie and Lewis (2003), interviews can explain the pattern of a respondent's thinking. Data or sources of information obtained from interviews are richer and deeper.

### **Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, data analysis is a continuous process from the beginning of the study (Othman, 2009). The information obtained was analyzed according to six steps (Creswell, 2018). The first step was to analyze the data after the interview is held. Data was then collected and compiled through interview transcriptions. The second step, all the data from the interview (audio) and NGT discussion was translated into the text to produce a transcript before being analyzed. The third step, the whole text was read to get an overview of the ideas and opinions of the study participants. The fourth step was to examine each transcript of the participants of the study to see the similarities and differences of each transcript. This process was repeated many times to get the themes. All data have been initially coded and collated, and a list of the different codes identified across the data set has been developed. This step involves sorting and collating all the potentially relevant coded data extracts into themes. In this study, the process of coding and producing themes is done using Atlas.ti Version 8 software. The fifth step was the process of linking the themes produced to form an overview of the items studied. Finally, the report for the study was prepared.

## Results

The findings and discussion of the study was outlined according to the research questions that had been stated.

1) The issue of adjustment of first-year students in IPG

Through thematic analysis, five main themes and twelve sub themes relating to the issue of PPISMP students' adaptability in IPG have been identified as in Table 1.

### *Academic Adjustment Issues*

Transitioning from high school to IPG means students face new academic surroundings. Those who further study in IPG are academically-excellent students. However, because of their inability to adapt to the new surroundings, the students tend to obtain poor scores for the courses they take during the first-year. According to study participants, students' grade points show a decrease during the second semester. Students cannot catch up to the courses in IPG because they are not interested in them.

"...his study is suffering some setbacks... maybe it was fine in the first semester, but in the second semester his grades went down. So when we met with the client, he told us that he could not follow some of the subjects which he felt were not suited to his interest...."(R1)

This finding indirectly shows that there are students who still face maladjustment problem in the second semester. In addition, students also have trouble with managing time. For example, there are students who come to lectures late and also hand in their academic assignments late. This situation leads the students to face disciplinary action as well as getting warnings from the Department of Student Affairs and the IPG Examinations Unit.

*"He started waking up and going to class late, he started to turn in his assignments late, and time management became the biggest problem. Some faced disciplinary action or were given warning by the HEP and the Examination Unit."*  
(R2)

The results of NGT discussions with PPISMP students show that one of the major issues they are facing is difficulty in understanding a subject or course. The subjects and courses taken in IPG require them to study and discover things by themselves, which is different from what they are used to in high school. In addition, they also experience difficulties in doing the course works. Course works in IPG involve High Order Thinking Skill (HOTS) and require students to think and explore things individually or in groups.

*Difficulty in understanding subjects taken.* (NGT discussion result)

*Difficulty in doing course works.* (NGT discussion result)

Through the NGT discussion, it has been discovered that students also face the trouble of having to turn in many course works at once. PPISMP students need to enroll in five to six courses in one semester which are made up of core courses, elective courses and co-curricular activities. Most of the courses are evaluated through course works. To make matter worse, each course work may involve a few assignments that need to be done by the students.

*There is too much work to be done at one time.* (NGT)

Additionally, PPISMP students also face adaptation problem because they lack confidence. There are students who feel that they are not doing as well as their colleagues and do not know what should be

done, therefore they decide to quit studying in IPG. Failure to adapt to the academic

environment causes students to decide to quit.

Table 1

Themes and sub themes, the result of thematic analysis on the PPISMP students' adaptability issues in IPG

Theme	Sub Theme
1. Academic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time management</li> <li>• Grade points decrease</li> <li>• Difficulty of academic assignments</li> <li>• Lack of confidence</li> <li>• Study skills</li> </ul>
2. Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship with others on campus</li> </ul>
3. Emotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling lonely and alone</li> <li>• Longing for parents</li> </ul>
4. Institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feelings towards the institution</li> <li>• Satisfaction with the institution</li> </ul>
5. Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not interested to become a teacher</li> <li>• Only following family's wishes</li> </ul>

The findings also reveal that the decision to stop learning not only involves the PPISMP students but also the PISMP students already in the seventh semester because they do not feel that they are suited to become teachers.

*"...he feels that he lacks knowledge. And when he feels he lacks knowledge, he becomes anxious about what should be done. He feels like he is being left behind and so on. So he makes the snap decision, 'I want to quit.'" (R2)*

*"He was interested in becoming a teacher but did not feel that it (being a teacher) suited him. On the seventh semester, he applied to quit and then quitted for real. Even though I had held many (counseling) sessions with him." (R3)*

The findings also show that students are unable to adapt to the learning style at IPG.

Most students in the transition phase still expect lecturers to act like teachers in schools who give them everything. IPG students, just like other IPT students, go through self-study which requires them to obtain information and knowledge on their own through scholarly materials like journal, proceedings, books and others. Through interview analysis, there are students who are too dependent and expect their lecturers to hand everything over to them, as explained by respondent 6 and respondent 2:

*"...hoping for lecturers to spoon feed them. They want everything to already be available in the text books." (R6)*

*"For example, back in school it was more teacher-oriented, so when he came here and realized that it was student-oriented instead, he felt that the lecturers' influence as not all-encompassing. 'Lecturers only give instructions and I have to do everything.'" (R2)*

### **Social Adjustment Issues**

The results of the analysis found that students at IPG faced issues related to relationships with others on campus such as roommates at residential colleges. Failure to adjust between roommates causes poor communication. Residential college administration receives many applications from students for switching rooms because of unsuitable roommates. Roommate adjustment problem is the most frequent issue among PPISMP students since they are randomly assigned to residential colleges during the registration of new students at IPG.

*"He said that the roommate could not get along with him." (R2)*

*There are a few cases where students are unable to adapt themselves, especially when it comes to adjusting to new roommates at residential college... This problem arises because they are assigned roommates randomly and not out of their personal preference." (R8)*

*"... the client I am meeting has problem relating to his roommate. Since the two of them have to share a room at the residential college, right? Some came from Perak, some came from the South, so when they met with the East Coast people, Sabahans, Sarawakians... it became a problem for them to adjust themselves." (R1)*

*Roommate. (NGT discussion result)*

Additionally, students are also experiencing issues in adapting with classmates. Due to students' inability to fit in with classmates, some want to switch classes. The results of NGT discussions with students also found that students

considered adjusting issues with classmates as a major adjustment issue.

*"He said he wanted to switch group. His study groups. He took mathematics as an option, so we placed him in Mathematics 2 group, but he saw Mathematics 3 group as a good group. When we tried to argue and discuss with him, 'You are in Mathematics 2, the same option as Mathematics 3. So why do you want to switch to that group?' He said, 'My group is not supportive.'"*

*Classmates. (NGT discussion result)*

### **Emotional Adjustment Issues**

The interview findings also found that students faced emotional adjustment issues. Separation from parents and family cause them to suffer homesickness. Students who are living away from home for the first time face problem in adjusting themselves at campus. They miss their family and always want to go back home.

*"There are those who keep thinking about their parents. Whenever there are holidays, they will want to go back to their hometown. They never parted with their parents. It was the first time. They cry. Basically, it is homesickness." (R6)*

*Homesickness. (NGT discussion result)*

*Unable to see parents. (NGT discussion result)*

Among the social adjustment issues faced by PPISMP students at IPG are solitude and loneliness. Students experience loneliness and solitude when they are not together with their significant individuals.

Significant individuals such as parents, family members, close friends, and teachers who were around with them before the phase of transition are now no longer around and far from them while they are at the IPG. This requires them to make adjustments to the individuals in their new surroundings such as roommates, classmates, lecturers, mentors, staffs and administrators. If they fail to adjust themselves, they will feel lonely and isolated. In addition, they may also have irrational thoughts such as their roommates and classmates not wanting to befriend them and lecturers viewing them negatively. Failure to make emotional adjustments also causes students to decide to quit their studies.

*"He feels that his friends do not get along with him. He feels that the lecturers are judging him badly. He's a lone ranger. He said that he even went to eat by himself. As for assignments, he asked for the lecturers to assign him groups."*

*"He said, 'No one wants to be my friend... What's the point of staying here?' He applied to quit and did indeed quit." (R3)*

### ***Institutional Adjustment Issues***

Based on the analysis, institutional adjustment issues are among the adjustment issues faced by students at IPG. IPG is an institution that educates future primary school teachers. Hence, the curriculum that is designed aims to nurture future educators. The curriculum at IPG does not differ much from university but the lectures at IPG start at 8.00 am and end at 5.00 pm. Unlike in university where the lecture timetable is flexible, and students can choose the time they want. Hence, there are students who compare themselves with friends who are studying in university. IPG focus on nurturing teachers and the rules in IPG are also oriented towards teaching. Students at IPG are subject to Act 174

(Educational Institutions (Discipline) Act 1976).

*"Most students assume that enrolling in IPG, they can wake up and go to class late. Some compare it to university." (R1)*

*"Some say IPG is like school. Not like university. The rules are like school." (R6)*

*"From the beginning of the year until now, there are five cases of students postponing their studies and four cases of students quitting. There are some who say they cannot stand studying in IPG."*

The findings also show students faced with adaptability issues relating to residential colleges. They think the residential college is uncomfortable. This situation occurs in the transition phase from home to a residential college, which requires students to make adjustments.

*Residential college is uncomfortable.* (NGT discussion result)

### ***Personal Adjustment Issues***

Analysis of the findings also found students at IPG faced personal adjustment issues. There are students who study at IPG because their parents tell them to. Students who successfully adapt will try to bit by bit foster the interest in becoming a teacher. Unlike students who fail adjust, who tend to have negative attitude and blame their parents for urging them to pursue study in IPG. There are PISMP students who are already in the sixth semester and still unable to make personal adjustment to become teachers. Students who cannot adapt will be stressed out and feel that studying in IPG is a burden.

*"Because sometimes they enter IPG not out of their own volition but because their family tells them to."*

*So, adjusting became something of a struggle for them when they face that kind of situation." (R1)*

*"Because this client of mine said he was not interested in becoming a teacher. He came here just to follow his parents' wish." (R3)*

*"This is a student in his sixth semester. The reason for not wanting to become a teacher. He wants to be an accountant. He's a mommy's boy, doesn't want to go against his mother's words. As we know, the teaching system in IPG is rather strict compared to in university. In university, if you do attend classes, nobody will make a fuss. But in IPG, if you do not go to class, you will face disciplinary action. He feels that being in IPG is something burdensome." (R4)*

### **Discussion**

Overall, the analysis of interviews and results of NGT discussions show that the adjustment issues faced by PPISMP's first-year students at IPG are made up of five domains namely 1) academic, 2) social, 3) emotions, 4) institutions and 5) personal.

In general, the classification of the academic issues stated is in line with Baker and Siryk (1999) where students with adjustment problems tend to get low grade grades in the first-year, are on alert status, feel that they lack control over their academic efforts, are unstable and have goals that do not match their age as well as having unrealistic self-assessment. Past studies also found that students with adjustment problems faced difficulty in academics (Wintre, Bowers, Gordner, & Lange, 2006). Academic adaptation is an important aspect for a student. Students need to be prepared and get involved in academic activities (Hoffman & Julie, 2012) to enable good adaptation to occur.

Social adjustment is also seen as a challenge facing first-year students at IPG. Engagement and social relationships are an important part of adjustment (Enochs & Roland, 2006) at IPG. PPISMP students at IPG are experiencing social adjustment challenges involving relationships with other people such as classmates and roommates. Social adjustment shows the level of students' success in dealing with social demands in the environment of tertiary institutions (Baker & Siryk, 1999). This means that more and more students are able to adapt to social demands in IPG such as relationships with friends, lecturers, and staff, so students are said to be successful in making social adjustments. This finding is in line with previous studies that students will experience adjustment problems if they tend to isolate themselves and have difficulty making friends (Tinto, 1993).

Apart from that, homesickness is also one form of emotional adjustment problem faced by first-year students in IPG. This is in line with past studies which stated that adjustment crises happening to first-year students involved difficulty in longing for family and loneliness (Houston, 1971; Lokitz & Sprandel, 1976; Rich & Scovel, 1987). Past studies have found that most university students struggle to adapt at universities. They face feelings of loneliness, anxiety and a lack of positive relationships (Larose & Boivin, 1998; Stallman, 2010). Transition to a new environment creates challenges and stress for students. Students will face new learning environments and need to manage their time effectively. Additionally, students are also forced to part with their close friends and family members. They need to build new relationships with friends and lecturers. They also experience loneliness, homesickness, conflict and pressure in interpersonal relationships (Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Mack C. Shelley II, & Whalen, 2010). Students are therefore required to deal with interpersonal

challenges such as building new relationships with friends, developing learning skills and adjusting existing relationships with parents and families (Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, 2004; Tinto, 1996).

Among the interesting findings of this study is relating to personal adjustment and that is students' interest. First-year students who face personal adjustment challenge are students who have no interest in becoming teachers. Students continue their education at IPG because their parents request that they do so. Gerdes & Mallinckrodt (1994) found that there were students who could adapt well but there were students who were affected by the transition phase. Lack of interest causes students to be unmotivated. Halimah's study (2006) found that trainee teachers who chose the field of education because of others' influence performed poorly during teaching process, compared to those who were interested, and they even showed negative attitudes and lack of motivation in teaching. Baker's study (2004) shows that under-motivated students are unable to adapt well in universities.

The transition phase to IPG is a phase for students to adapt to the new surroundings in campus and residential college. High level of adaptability among students refer to students' level of satisfaction towards the institution and the goal of the institution (Baker & Siryk, 1999). Transition from home to IPG requires students to adapt to the campus and residential college environments at IPG. Students with adjustment problems tend to compare the differences between the conditions of IPG and their home.

In summary, first-year PPISMP students in IPG face adaptability challenges in their transitional phase from school to IPG. If they cannot adapt to the new environment and cannot bounce back from the difficulties they faced, they will suffer from

stress and other psychological problems. This study is expected to assist in the dissemination of information regarding the problem of adaptation faced by students in IPG. The findings of this study are also expected to assist counselors, lecturers, mentors and administrators at IPG in providing intervention methods or programs to help PPISMP students successfully go through adaptation process as well as increase students' resiliency level. Adaptation and resilience issues need to be addressed early to prevent prolonged consequences leading to maladjustment and other psychological problems.

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