

*Academic Adaptation and Stress Associated With University Life:  
Insights From First-Year Students*

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**Abstract**

University attrition rate is increasing around the world and there is a consequence for the student who is dropping out, the university, and society as a whole including costs, psychological issues associated with the perceived feeling of failure, and issues around employability and job satisfaction (Sosu & Pheunpha, 2019). The university attrition rate is increasing in Mongolia too. About 80% of the students who study at the Teachers' School, Mongolian National University of Education (MNUE) are from the country of Mongolia and most of them come to the capital city to do their tertiary education. Due to the differences between rural and urban lifestyles, and expectations of tertiary education, the dropout rate is increasing especially at the beginning of the first semester. There is an urgent need to better understand the need to drop out of the university and find ways to support these students to adjust to university life and life outside the university. This study aims to explore the issues associated with adjusting to university studies and its relationship with attrition. It used the SPSS-20 program to collect data from 80 first-year students. The findings revealed that the students needed support in many aspects of their studies, including support with time management, stress management, and well-being. The study suggests policymakers and university managers to develop a plan to better support students to seamlessly transition into the university and life outside the university during the first half of the first semester.

Keywords: Academic Adaptation, Stress, University Life, First-Year Students, Attrition, Retention

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## **Introduction**

Transitioning into the first-year university life can be one of the most challenging times for many university students. To successfully navigate through university studies, it is important to become socially and academically integrated (Tinto, 1993). When students experience study and life-related challenges, some students drop out of the university, especially in the first half of the first semester (Sosu & Pheunpha, 2019). Research shows that dropouts usually spend about 8 years as low-income earners (Hällsten, 2017).

To find better ways to support students, several studies have investigated the reasons why students drop out of the university. The consensus of the studies was that the reasons are varied and complex and unique to individual circumstances and contexts (e.g., Stratton et al., 2008; Bernardo et al., 2016; Contini et al., 2018). However, it was identified that a student who experiences several risk factors are highly likely to drop out compared to a student who struggles with one or two issues.

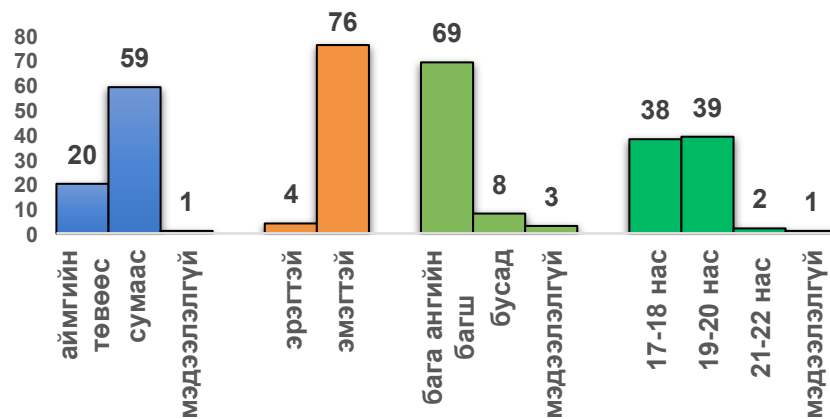
One of the common risk factors is students' intellectual capability (Voelkle & Sander, 2008). Voelkle and Sander (2008) point out that students who enter university with a lower grade from their previous educational institutions are a high indicator of a drop out. Students with limited intellectual capabilities not only experience academic challenges but also may experience an emotional distress (Bernardo et al., 2016). However, other research shows that if such students pass this period and remain studying, they achieve better academic results by the end of their degree (Hoare & Johnson, 2011).

Researchers highlight the importance of supporting these students on how to cope with emotions associated with the struggles around academic integration and help them integrate into the university life (Bernardo et al., 2016). It was also found that family support is essential to achieve optimal integration and psychological well-being (Romero et al., 2015).

## **Context and the study**

In 2020 it was identified that the teaching profession was listed second in the high-demand professions list in Mongolia. About 80% of the students who study at the Teacher's School, Mongolian National University of Education are from the country of Mongolia and most of them come to the capital city to do their tertiary education. Due to the high demand of teachers, it is paramount for the university to decrease attrition and help students to study successfully.

Of the 80 students who participated in this study, 25% come from central province regions and 73.8% were from small villages. The majority or 95% of the students were female and only 5% were male. On average the participants were between 17-18 (48.7%) years of age and the rest of the students were in their early or mid-twenties. 86.3% of the students were studying primary education and the rest were studying various subjects in school. See Figure 1.



Graph 1. Student population

The MNUE has a support system in place to assist first-year students to transition into university life and life outside the university. For example, the Students' Association of the university provides various support services such as financial support, academic support, and housing support, and organizes sporting, well-being, and fun activities to help students network, connect with peers, talk to guest teachers and experts, and form friendships. Teachers also provide outside-classroom academic support. All teachers give their timetables to their students. Students then can book a face-to-face or an online appointment to talk to the teacher. However, more needs to be done to find ways to better support first-year students to adjust to university life and life outside the university. This study aims to explore the issues associated with adjusting to university studies and its relationship with attrition.

## Methodology

A Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS-20) program was used to collect data. The SPSS is one of the best data collection tools as it is easy to use and has in-depth statistical analysis including frequencies and cross-tabulations statistics. Its text analytics helps researchers to uncover insights from responses to survey questions (IMB n.d). A total of 80 students completed the SPSS-20.

## Results

At the time of completing the survey, the 80 student participants studied at the Teachers' School, Mongolian National University of Education.

### *Knowledge about the capital city prior to university*

25% of the participants, prior to becoming university students have visited the capital city where the university is located several times already. 53.8% of the students have visited the city only a few times whereas 21.3% reported that they have never been to the city prior to their study in the city. In response to a question 'how well did you know the capital city prior to your study?', 51.2% answered that they knew very little. 93.7% of the students reported that they are adjusting to city life relatively easily. It was identified that those students who knew very little about the city also reported that they struggled to adjust to city life. 62.8% of the students faced some form of difficulties during the early adjustment phase whereas 36.3% of the students reported that they almost never experienced any difficulties.

Students were also asked about their prior knowledge of the university before enrolment. 67.5% of the students had some basic understanding of the university and expectations of university studies. 32.5% of the students however reported that they knew nothing of the university and the expectations associated with the university study.

### ***Issues with studying and living in a big city***

When students started their life and studies at the university, they started experiencing a range of issues associated with life and their studies including 43.8% said that they experienced financial difficulties, 21.3% study-related issues, 13.8% hardships around their living conditions, and 12.5% reported that they were lonely and needed a friendship. A large number of students or 81.3% of the students reported that they felt stressed with 18.7% saying that they experienced very little stress. Of the things that they were stressed the most about were financial hardships (43.8%), health issues (31.3%), extracurricular activities (7.5%), and 1.3% reported stresses around family, friendship and relationships.

### ***The issues and their impact on behaviour and well-being***

It was identified that these issues mentioned above had a negative impact on students' behaviours and well-being. 22.5% of the students experienced difficulties in simple communications, another 22.5% could not relax, 13.8% reported that the issues made them feel angry, 11.3% experienced disrupted sleep, 10% increased feeling emotional and cried regularly, 8.8% noticed unwanted changes in eating habits, and 7.5% felt anxious. These issues made 21.3% of the students to consider dropping out of the university altogether.

There was a flow-on effect from these issues including limited leisure time, lack of concentration on studies, thoughts about the wrong choice of profession, inability to manage time, increases in study load, and inability to pay rent, even some of the students reported feelings of pressure from some of the teachers that they may potentially fail the unit.

### ***Study load***

77.6% of the students reported that they stress due to a study load. This included requirements such as attending classes (70%), 12.5% self-independent study, 7.5% spent on extra-curricular activity organized by the school, 2.5% of the students reported that they had to work part-time, and only 1.3% was able to spend quality time with friends.

### ***Living situations***

To better understand students' life, the researchers asked questions about their living situations. 16.3% of the students lived at home, 27.5% lived in a dormitory, 38.8% lived with their relatives, and 15% lived in a rental property. Most of the students spent on an average minimum of 10 minutes and a maximum of 2 hours traveling to and from the university. The students who lived in the dormitory spent the least amount of time in commute. 52.6% of the students reported that they experience stress due to not having an ideal living arrangement, however 47.4% experience little to no stress in their living situations. See Table 1.

Table 1. Commute time from home to the university

Living situations	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Home	9	75.56	44.190	41.59	109.52	20	120
Dormitory	18	20.83	25.394	8.21	33.46	10	120
With relatives	28	96.43	60.137	73.11	119.75	20	240
Rental	7	72.86	26.277	48.56	97.16	40	120

### ***Money***

In response to a question about finances, 86.3% of the students are funded by their parents and family members, 20% make money from part-time jobs, and only 3.8% of the students study on scholarships. Students spent 37.5% of their money on school fees, 23.8% on school-related supplies, 2.5% on accommodations, 18.8 on transportation, 3.8% on health, and 8.8% on leisure activities.

### ***Relationships and friendships***

In response to a question about being friendly with their classmates, 57.1% of the students reported that they have a friendly relationship, 39% average and 3.9% did not get on well with their classmates. It was good to see that almost half of the participants received a positive influence from their peers (44.9%) and 46.2% also received more or less positive influence from their peers. 89.7% reported that overall students' relationships and how to influence each other are positive with very little negativity. Also, 94.9% of the students reported no bullying occurred during the time they first joined the university and 2.5% experienced some time of bullying.

### ***Overall satisfaction with the university***

67.9% of the students were overall well satisfied with their choice of studying at the MNUE, 29.5% felt somewhat satisfied and 2.6% were dissatisfied.

The findings revealed that the students needed support in many aspects of their studies in the big city. Of the issues, there are 2 key areas that need a careful focus which include support with stress management associated with study load, and well-being.

### **Discussion**

As can be seen from the results, a small percentage of the students (2.6%) reported that they were dissatisfied with the university, reported stresses around family, friendship, and relationships (1.3%), and experienced some time of bullying (2.5%). Though the number is low, these are the students who are likely to drop out of the university.

It is worth noting research that shows that female students have a lower hazard of dropping out of university compared to male students (Ortiz & Dehon, 2013). A large student population of the MNUE is female students and it is assuring to think that with more targeted support, these students are likely to continue their studies at the university.

The main areas of concern are well-being and stress management associated with study load. It was found that students from disadvantaged family backgrounds or who live with unsupportive family members are more likely to have emotional distress that has risen from their study load (Zhang et al., 2021). This shows that though students may have support with their studies from the university if there is an issue in their households, their engagement may decrease and emotional distress may increase (Daniels et al., 2021). Research shows that coping strategies may potentially mediate the effects of emotional distress (Padron et al., 2021), and exercise along with stronger family and friends seem to be more helpful to become resilient (Killgore et al., 2020).

Research shows that the lack of time management skills and stress experienced by university students are the main contributors to academic failure (Ahmad et al., 2021). Research also shows that with the right intervention students improve and the failure rate decreases (Ahmad et al., 2021).

## **Conclusion**

There is a need to have a strategic plan in place to better support the students to seamlessly transition into university and city life during the first half of the first semester. There are two key areas that need to be addressed as a result of this study.

- Develop time and stress management skills to help students succeed in their studies
- Coping strategies with emotional distress and overall well-being

The ability to use time wisely in learning is an issue for many students. Many students study full-time, and have family commitments, and part-time jobs. This causes stress and emotional distress. Policymakers, university managers, teachers, and other support services staff need to take into consideration such research findings to develop a better intervention to help first-year students to seamlessly transition into their university studies.

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