



## NOT BY THEIR OWN CHOICES: COPING STRATEGIES OF STUDENTS IN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

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**Abstract:** This research examines the adaptation process of students in higher education, focusing on those enrolled in programs that were not their first choice. Using a descriptive quantitative approach, data were collected from 149 students across three semesters in the English Education Department at UIN Imam Bonjol. The findings reveal that reliance on peer support, lecturer assistance, and academic services peaks in the third semester but declines in the fifth semester, indicating a shift toward self-reliance. Students heavily utilize coping strategies, such as seeking peer support and additional learning resources, to navigate challenges. However, satisfaction with academic services and engagement in extracurricular activities remained modest, highlighting areas for institutional improvement. The study underscores the importance of tailored support, consistent faculty engagement, and inclusive programs to enhance student resilience, motivation, and overall academic success.

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**Keywords:** *Coping Strategies, peer support, lecturer assistance, and academic services*

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

The adaptation process of students in higher education is a critical factor influencing their academic success and retention. Research indicates that students who enroll in universities or programs that were not their first choice often face distinct challenges. These challenges include initial dissatisfaction, which can impact their motivation, campus engagement, and academic performance (Tinto, 1993; Bean & Eaton, 2000). Such circumstances warrant attention, as they have significant implications for students' academic achievements, retention rates, and overall well-being.

Adaptation is not universally negative. Many students succeed in overcoming their initial reluctance and manage to thrive in their new environment. Understanding these adaptation processes is crucial for identifying the factors that contribute to resilience and success. According to Tinto (1993), student integration and adaptation are vital components of academic success and retention. Likewise, Astin (1984) emphasizes that student involvement plays a pivotal role in academic achievement and overall satisfaction. These perspectives underline the importance of creating conditions that facilitate effective adaptation.

Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (2000) further highlights the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in shaping student engagement and adaptation. Their framework underscores the importance of psychological needs, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, in fostering student resilience and persistence. Similarly, Bean and Eaton (2001) point out that psychological processes like self-efficacy and coping mechanisms significantly influence a student's ability to adapt to an academic environment that was not their initial preference. These processes help students navigate feelings of reluctance and discomfort, allowing them to adjust and succeed.

Schlossberg (1981) highlights that an individual's ability to adapt to transitions depends on three key factors: a. Perception of the Situation: How the individual interprets the change, including its significance and challenges, b. Support Systems: Availability of emotional, informational, and instrumental support from family, friends, peers, and institutions, c. Coping Strategies: Techniques employed by individuals to manage stress, which can be problem-focused (addressing the source of stress) or emotion-focused (managing emotional responses). Schlossberg's model emphasizes that successful adaptation occurs when individuals balance these three factors effectively. When one area is lacking, students may struggle with transition and experience heightened stress, negatively impacting their academic and social integration.

Astin (1999) posits that the extent of a student's involvement in academic and extracurricular activities is directly proportional to their academic success and

personal development. Involvement refers to the physical and psychological energy that students devote to their college experience. The theory highlights key dimensions; a. Input: Students' background characteristics (e.g., demographics, skills, and initial preferences), b. Environment: The various programs, policies, and faculty interactions within the institution, c. Outcome: The results of the interaction between the student and the institution, such as academic performance, satisfaction, and retention. Astin emphasizes that highly involved students—those who actively participate in academic and campus life—are more likely to adapt successfully, overcome dissatisfaction, and achieve positive outcomes.

Tinto's (1993) theory of student retention emphasizes that both social and academic integration significantly influence students' decisions to persist in higher education. According to Tinto, students progress through three stages; a. Separation: Students detach from their pre-college environments and adapt to the new collegiate culture, b. Transition: Students begin navigating the academic and social structures of their institution, c. Incorporation: Students integrate into their university's social and academic communities. Feeling connected to their peers, faculty, and the academic environment can counteract initial dissatisfaction. Tinto argues that students who fail to integrate into the academic or social fabric of the institution are at greater risk of leaving. Institutions play a crucial role by fostering opportunities for meaningful interactions and creating a supportive environment.

Deci and Ryan (1985) introduced the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which underscores the importance of intrinsic motivation—driven by personal interest and enjoyment—in fostering academic success. SDT identifies three basic psychological needs that must be satisfied to foster intrinsic motivation; a. Autonomy: The need to feel a sense of control over one's actions and decisions, b. Competence: The need to feel capable and effective in one's pursuits, and c. Relatedness: The need to feel connected to others and to belong to a community. Students who experience dissatisfaction with their university may initially operate under extrinsic motivation, driven by external pressures such as societal expectations or limited options. However, institutions can enhance these students' intrinsic motivation by creating environments that fulfill these psychological needs.

Astin (1999) also emphasized that the campus environment, including involvement in extracurricular activities and supportive faculty relationships, is critical in promoting a sense of belonging. For students who initially feel isolated due to dissatisfaction, targeted programs that foster inclusivity and engagement can enhance their adaptation process. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress and Coping Theory provides insight into how individuals manage challenges. Coping strategies are categorized into; a. Problem-Focused Strategies: Addressing the root cause of stress (e.g., seeking resources or solutions), b. Emotion-Focused Strategies: Managing emotional responses (e.g., seeking peer support or reframing the situation). Effective coping strategies are critical in helping students navigate the

pressures associated with transitioning to a less-preferred institution. Research by Kuh et al. (2006) indicates that students who successfully adapt tend to show higher engagement levels, which positively correlate with academic performance and retention. Conversely, maladaptation often leads to disengagement and dropout risks. Understanding these dynamics can help institutions implement interventions to improve outcomes for at-risk students.

This research is particularly significant because it aims to provide valuable insights into how students adapt to situations where their initial preferences were not met. By exploring their motivations, challenges, and coping strategies, this study seeks to inform the development of more supportive and inclusive learning environments. Such insights could help academic programs enhance their curricula and student support services, ultimately improving student well-being and academic outcomes. Building on previous studies, such as Astin's (1999) work on student engagement and its impact on academic performance, this research focuses on a unique subset of students—those placed in programs that were not their first choice—to extend the understanding of student adaptation in higher education.

At UIN Imam Bonjol, the English Education Department enrolls students with diverse motivations and backgrounds. Some students join the program due to outcomes of admission processes that did not align with their preferences, leaving them feeling “compelled” to attend. This phenomenon raises questions about how these students navigate their adaptation process, overcome dissatisfaction, and ultimately thrive academically. Investigating these experiences is essential to developing strategies that can better support students facing similar circumstances.

In light, this research was to seek how the students adapted with the current condition in running their learning activities at the Tadris Department of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training and Education UIN Imam Bonjol Padang.

## **B. RESEARCH METHOD**

The research employed a descriptive quantitative approach to explore the adaptation experiences of students enrolled in the English Education program at UIN Imam Bonjol Padang. The primary focus was to identify trends, patterns, and factors influencing student adaptation, with particular attention to variations across different academic stages (semesters).

The study targeted students in the first, third, and fifth semesters, representing different phases of the academic journey. A stratified sampling technique ensured proportional representation of students at various stages, resulting in a total sample of 149 students distributed as Semester 1 (46 students), 3 (84 students), 5 (19 students). This sampling approach allowed for a comparative analysis of adaptation trends across early, mid, and later stages of academic progression.

The primary data collection instrument was a questionnaire, designed to measure student perceptions and experiences across several adaptation-related factors. The questionnaire included four key aspects, each with five questions, covering: Peer support, Lecturer assistance, Extracurricular activities, Academic services and material comprehension. Responses were recorded using a Likert scale, enabling the quantification of subjective perceptions (e.g., levels of agreement, satisfaction).

Data analysis relied on descriptive statistics to summarize trends and highlight patterns. Key metrics included percentages, means, and standard deviations, providing insights into, the prevalence of positive or neutral responses across categories, shifts in reliance on different support systems over time, variations in satisfaction with institutional support and engagement.

By comparing the findings across semesters, the study was able to examine temporal changes in adaptation dynamics and identify critical *phases where students face heightened challenges or reduced institutional support*.

### C. FINDING

This research involved 149 students from the English Education Department across semesters 1, 3, and 5, with the distribution as follows: 46 students in semester 1, 84 in semester 3, and 19 in semester 5. The data collection instrument was a questionnaire, consisting of four aspects, each with five questions. The following are the results of the study.

#### *The adaptation experiences*

| Category                   | Semester 1                                                | Semester 3                      | Semester 5                     |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Friends' Support           | 25% agreed, 12% strongly agreed, 8% neutral, 1% disagreed | 35% agreed, 38% strongly agreed | 10% agreed, 7% strongly agreed |
| Lecturer Assistance        | 21% agreed, 18% strongly agreed                           | 35% agreed, 26% strongly agreed | 9% agreed, 7% strongly agreed  |
| Extracurricular Activities | 22% agreed, 5% strongly agreed, 18% neutral               | 27% agreed, 12% strongly agreed | 6% strongly agreed, 7% neutral |
| Understandable Material    | 22% agreed, 17% strongly agreed, 7% neutral               | 38% agreed, 26% strongly agreed | 7% agreed, 10% strongly agreed |
| Academic Services          | 25% agreed                                                | 42% agreed, 14% strongly agreed | 10% agreed, 3% strongly agreed |

The table above highlights key trends in how students adapt academically across three semesters, focusing on five factors: peer support, lecturer assistance, extracurricular activities, understandable material, and academic services. The Perceptions of peer support improved from Semester 1 (25% agreed, 12% strongly

agreed) to Semester 3 (35% agreed, 38% strongly agreed). However, they declined sharply in Semester 5 (10% agreed, 7% strongly agreed), likely reflecting a shift toward individual priorities.

Students valued lecturer support most in Semester 3 (35% agreed, 26% strongly agreed), after an initial reliance in Semester 1 (21% agreed, 18% strongly agreed). This dropped in Semester 5 (9% agreed, 7% strongly agreed), suggesting reduced lecturer interaction as students became more independent. Engagement grew in Semester 3 (27% agreed, 12% strongly agreed) compared to Semester 1 (22% agreed, 5% strongly agreed). However, by Semester 5, interest waned (6% strongly agreed), with many remaining neutral (7%). Clarity peaked in Semester 3 (38% agreed, 26% strongly agreed) after a strong start in Semester 1 (22% agreed, 17% strongly agreed). By Semester 5, perceptions declined, with only 7% agreeing and 10% strongly agreeing, reflecting challenges with advanced materials.

Positive perceptions rose in Semester 3 (42% agreed, 14% strongly agreed) from Semester 1 (25% agreed). A sharp drop in Semester 5 (10% agreed, 3% strongly agreed) indicates unmet needs for senior students. Students' adaptation peaks in Semester 3 but declines in Semester 5, pointing to evolving challenges and a need for tailored support during later academic stages.

#### *The Factors influencing students' adaptation and comfort*

| <b>Factor</b>                         | <b>Agree</b> | <b>Strongly Agree</b> | <b>Neutral</b> | <b>Disagree</b> |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Parental and Family Influence         | 58%          | 60%                   | 0%             | 3%              |
| Peer and Living Environment Influence | 68%          | 58%                   | 0%             | 0%              |
| Motivation and Advice from Lecturers  | 72%          | 54%                   | 23%            | 0%              |
| Religious Teachings and Beliefs       | 56%          | 62%                   | 30%            | 0%              |
| Administrative Services Impact        | 67%          | 30%                   | 45%            | 7%              |

The data shows that family and peer support play a crucial role in students' adaptation, with the majority of students agreeing or strongly agreeing that both family and peers significantly influence their comfort levels. Specifically, 58% of students agree and 60% strongly agree about the role of family, while 68% agree and 58% strongly agree that peers and living environments are key factors. In terms of lecturer support, 72% of students agree and 54% strongly agree that motivation and advice from lecturers are highly impactful, though 23% were neutral, suggesting not all students engage with their lecturers in this way. Religious

teachings and beliefs also play a significant role for many students, with 56% agreeing and 62% strongly agreeing, though 30% remained neutral. Administrative services received a more mixed response, with 67% agreeing and 30% strongly agreeing, but the 45% neutral responses and 7% disagreeing indicate room for improvement in these services to better support students' comfort.

#### *Trends in Positive Coping Behaviors of Students*

| Category                            | Strongly Agree (%) | Neutral (%) | Disagree/Strongly Disagree (%) |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|
| Seeking Help from Friends           | 65% (39)           | 35% (21)    | 0% (0)                         |
| Building Good Relationships         | 87% (68)           | 13% (10)    | 0% (0)                         |
| Using Additional Learning Resources | 77% (63)           | 23% (19)    | 0% (0)                         |
| Thinking Positively About Program   | 43% (35)           | 52% (42)    | 1% (1)                         |
| Participating in Extracurriculars   | 19% (17 + 27)*     | 80% (90)    | 1% (1)                         |

The majority (65%) of students strongly agreed that they seek help from friends when facing academic challenges. The remaining 35% remained neutral, with no one disagreeing. An overwhelming 87% of students strongly agreed they strive to build strong relationships with their lecturers and classmates. Only 13% were neutral, and no one disagreed. About 77% of students strongly agreed that they use additional learning resources such as books or videos. The remaining 23% were neutral, with no disagreements. While 43% of students strongly agreed they maintain a positive attitude toward their study program, a slightly higher 52% were neutral. A very small proportion (1%) strongly disagreed. Most students (80%) were neutral regarding participation in extracurricular activities, while 19% expressed positive responses (combining "Option 1" and "Option 2"). Only 1% strongly disagreed.

#### *Students' perceptions and adaptation levels across different stages of their academic journey*

| Category                   | Semester 1                                                | Semester 3                      | Semester 5                     |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Friends' Support           | 25% agreed, 12% strongly agreed, 8% neutral, 1% disagreed | 35% agreed, 38% strongly agreed | 10% agreed, 7% strongly agreed |
| Lecturer Assistance        | 21% agreed, 18% strongly agreed                           | 35% agreed, 26% strongly agreed | 9% agreed, 7% strongly agreed  |
| Extracurricular Activities | 22% agreed, 5% strongly agreed, 18% neutral               | 27% agreed, 12% strongly agreed | 6% strongly agreed, 7% neutral |

| Category                | Semester 1                                  | Semester 3                      | Semester 5                     |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Understandable Material | 22% agreed, 17% strongly agreed, 7% neutral | 38% agreed, 26% strongly agreed | 7% agreed, 10% strongly agreed |
| Academic Services       | 25% agreed                                  | 42% agreed, 14% strongly agreed | 10% agreed, 3% strongly agreed |

The role of friends in adaptation peaked in Semester 3 (35% agreed, 38% strongly agreed) but declined significantly in Semester 5 (10% agreed, 7% strongly agreed). This suggests a reduced reliance on peer support as students approach the final stages of their studies. Students' appreciated lecturer support, with the highest approval in Semester 3 (35% agreed, 26% strongly agreed). A drop in Semester 5 (9% agreed, 7% strongly agreed) reflects a shift toward self-directed learning. Engagement with extracurricular was modest, with the strongest response in Semester 3 (27% agreed, 12% strongly agreed). By Semester 5, interest waned, with only 6% strongly agreeing and 7% neutral. Students felt materials were most accessible in Semester 3 (38% agreed, 26% strongly agreed). In Semester 5, only 7% agreed and 10% strongly agreed, indicating challenges with advanced coursework. Satisfaction with academic services peaked in Semester 3 (42% agreed, 14% strongly agreed) but dropped in Semester 5 (10% agreed, 3% strongly agreed), signaling a need for better support for senior students.

#### **D. DISCUSSION**

The findings of this research underscore the multifaceted nature of student adaptation and align closely with several established theories and previous studies. This section integrates the results with theoretical frameworks such as Tinto's (1993) theory of student retention, Astin's (1999) model of student involvement, and Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT), while highlighting implications for academic practice.

The results indicate that students' reliance on friends, lecturers, and academic services for adaptation peaks during the third semester but declines in the fifth semester. This trend mirrors Tinto's (1993) theory of academic and social integration, which posits that initial stages of adaptation rely heavily on external support systems as students transition into a new academic culture. In this study, third-semester students demonstrated the highest engagement levels across most categories, suggesting that mid-program stages are pivotal for solidifying adaptation and academic integration. However, the decline observed in the fifth semester reflects a shift toward self-directed learning, which, while natural, raises concerns about the adequacy of support systems for senior students as they face advanced coursework and prepare for graduation.



This decline may also reflect Astin's (1999) perspective on student involvement, which emphasizes the interplay of input (students' initial characteristics), environment (institutional support), and outcomes (retention and satisfaction). The diminishing role of institutional support, as evidenced by reduced satisfaction with academic services, suggests that institutions may not adequately address the evolving needs of senior students. Enhancing engagement through targeted interventions, such as mentoring programs and advanced academic resources, could mitigate this decline.

The data reveals that peer support plays a critical role in early adaptation but diminishes over time. Schlossberg's (1981) model of transitions highlights that social support systems are key to successful adaptation. Early reliance on peers aligns with this framework, as students navigate the uncertainties of their new environment. By the fifth semester, the reduced dependence on friends may indicate a shift toward individual priorities and a growing emphasis on personal resilience, consistent with Bean and Eaton's (2001) emphasis on self-efficacy in long-term adaptation.

Lecturer assistance peaked in the third semester, further underscoring the importance of institutional support during this critical phase. Deci and Ryan's (2000) SDT highlights the role of relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation. The decline in lecturer involvement by the fifth semester may suggest that students perceive a lack of connectedness, which could affect their overall satisfaction and academic performance. Institutions could address this gap by fostering consistent faculty-student interactions throughout the academic journey.

Satisfaction with academic services peaked in the third semester but declined significantly by the fifth semester. This aligns with Kuh et al.'s (2006) findings that institutional support is a key determinant of academic success. The drop in satisfaction among senior students points to unmet needs, such as inadequate resources for advanced coursework or insufficient guidance on career preparation. Addressing these gaps could enhance the overall student experience and retention rates.

Engagement with extracurricular activities remained modest throughout the study, with only 19% of students expressing positive responses. Astin (1999) emphasizes that extracurricular involvement fosters a sense of belonging and improves overall satisfaction. The low engagement levels suggest that institutions may need to implement more inclusive and appealing programs to encourage participation.

The study found that students rely heavily on coping strategies such as seeking help from friends and using additional learning resources. This aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress and Coping Theory, which categorizes coping mechanisms into problem-focused (e.g., utilizing learning resources) and emotion-

focused (e.g., seeking peer support). The prominence of these strategies among students highlights their resilience and capacity to navigate academic challenges.

Deci and Ryan's (1985) SDT provides further insight into the role of psychological needs in adaptation. The findings suggest that students who actively engage with learning resources and build relationships with lecturers and classmates demonstrate higher levels of intrinsic motivation. However, the neutrality observed in attitudes toward the study program (52%) indicates a potential reliance on extrinsic motivation, such as societal or familial expectations, among some students. Institutions could foster intrinsic motivation by creating environments that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as outlined in SDT.

## E. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research highlights the dynamic and multifaceted nature of student adaptation throughout their academic journey. While reliance on peer support, lecturer assistance, and academic services peaks in the middle stages of study, these factors diminish in later semesters, indicating a shift towards self-reliance and advanced academic challenges. The findings also emphasize the importance of tailored institutional support, including consistent faculty engagement, enhanced academic services, and inclusive extracurricular opportunities, to address the evolving needs of students and ensure their continued engagement, satisfaction, and success.

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