

The mediating role of Neuroticism Personality on Correlates between Self Efficacy and Adjustment among University Students

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Abstract

This research study the relationship between self-efficacy, neuroticism personality and adjustment among first-year students in UPSI. This study aims to examine a) the level of self-efficacy among first-year students in UPSI, b) the relationship between self-efficacy and adjustment, c) the relationship between neuroticism personality and adjustment, and to d) determine if neuroticism personality is a mediating variable on the relationship between self-efficacy and adjustment. This study used quantitative method, cross-sectional survey towards a total of 130 first-year students from diploma and bachelor's degree through online platforms (students' email, Telegram and WhatsApp) and paper and pencil. The correlation result showed that there was a significant positive relationship between self-efficacy and adjustment. However, there was a significant negative relationship between neuroticism personality and adjustment. Regression analysis showed that there was a significant partial mediation by neuroticism personality towards self-efficacy and adjustment to university. Hence, these findings may contribute as basics to the researchers and university management in Malaysian contexts.

Keywords self-efficacy, neuroticism, adjustment, first-year student, mediating variable

INTRODUCTION

University or college life has been greatly viewed as something that is important and enjoyable for the students. This is because they can pursue their passion and interest in studying a certain program they wanted and invested in new experiences. Thus, this will need the students to be well adapted to the environments as they needed to learn how to function in the new social setting and getting oriented to the institution they will be attending, developed as an active member of the university community, accepting much new responsibilities such as managing own financial, handling emotional separation from friends and family and also be participate in choosing the best career decision throughout the study (Crede & Niehorster, 2011). By developing all of those skills, it will help the students to be better in adapting to the university or college life especially among the first-year students that opt for the changing after their secondary school.

In fact, transitioning from secondary school to university or college life can be stressful and nightmare for the first-year students as it requires the students to be more independent, having adaptable solving skills, making new friends and many more as some students cannot adjust or even function in the new environment and situations of it. One study in Malaysia cited in Esmael, Ebrahim and Misganew (2018) mentioned that it is reported that 26% of the students found out to be in the low categories of their overall adjustment in university or college as most of them having an adjustment problem where 42.8% of the students were found to be at the low level for Personal-Emotional Scale

which then indicates the students in the study were influenced by the psychological and somatic problems during adjusting themselves in university or college life.

In addition to that, among the first-year students in university or college, not all of the students were directly from secondary school. As we know in Malaysia, students finished their secondary school at the age of 17 years old and continue their study afterwards but some of them might be having some personal issues and delaying their study in higher education until a certain age and then they continue their study back. This might be an issue where their age can play a vital role in the way they adapt in university or college life also.

Moreover, this adjustment to university or college life also depending on the individual differences of the students in terms of their self-efficacy and personality itself. Self-efficacy refers as an individual belief on their own ability in overcoming any challenges (Yenti & Kusumah, 2020). High level of self-efficacy among the students will more likely to help them to be better in adjusting to the university or college life. This is because according to Yenti and Kusumah (2020), self-efficacy is related to an individual belief in their own ability in overcoming various situations. Thus, when the students believe in themselves, they can overcome any adjustment problems that they are facing during their university or college life over the time.

On personality, it is said that poorly adjusted students tend to be more anxious, more introverted, perceiving themselves as less socially supported and have an overall more unhappy with their current life (Halamandaris & Power, 1999). This situation will make the students that are unable to adjust to the university or college life up until their last year of studies. Therefore, students' self-efficacy, neuroticism personality and adjustment problem in university or college life need to be considered seriously especially among the first-year students in university or college.

Background

There were several studies that investigated the relationship of self-efficacy and adjustment among the first-year students (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Yusliza Mohd Yusoff, 2011 & Girelli, Alivernini, Lucidi, Cozzolino, Savarese, Sibilio & Salvatore, 2018) and the relationship of personality to adjustment (Halamandaris & Power, 1999). In addition, the changes throughout the years, what year did the students study and their individual differences of self-efficacy and personality have a great impact in their adjustment journey. While other students having their best time in university or college life, the first-year students are more likely to have a hard time as they are new to the environment, away from people they knew especially their good friends from the secondary school and parents whom they usually ask for references. This is much challenging for them as they need to adjust and some of the students might unable to do so as there are no familiar faces that can help as well as to comfort them during that hard time which put them into greater degrees of loneliness, which encourage inadequate coping mechanisms for transitioning to university and lead to dropouts (Kural & Ozyurt, 2021).

Therefore, the adjustment problems that the first-year student tend to face when they just get into the university or college need to be clear. In general, it is often revealed that first-year students find it difficult to make new friends, adapt to the new learning structures and environment, having some sort of culture shock where they might or might not able to adapt to those culture in that university. In fact, the first-year students are also facing their fear about their future where they still do not know if they choose a good and suitable program with themselves and even, they did worry if ever they can land a good job after graduating from the university. Hammad (2016) indicates that when choosing a specialization, students are afraid because it's a big decision that will affect their future and employment options. After secondary school, this anxiety becomes especially important because it has an impact on students' academic achievement, sense of competence, and motivation. Making the proper specialization choice is essential for reaching particular objectives and adjusting to contemporary advances. Hence, with all these worries and adjustment problem, certain numbers of the students from the first-year will choose to drop out when they could not cope with those things.

The level of first-year students' self-efficacy is important to determine whether the students can adapt to university' environment. Abood, Alharbi, Mhaidat and Gazo (2020) indicates that self-efficacy is about an individual believes in their own ability to organize and carry out the practical plans needed to achieve the goals and control of situations. Having a high level of self-efficacy will have lower adjustment problems towards university. This might be due to high levels of self-efficacy foster the

growth of academic performance and motivation that closely related when adjusting to the university environments (Wilcox & Nordstokke, 2019). Still and all, students with low level of self-efficacy will find it difficult to adjust in university as they will have more adjustment problems. This happens when the first-year students do not believe with their own ability to be success and in what they chose to study in university. This type of student usually will start to just follow the flows without showing any efforts to improve themselves. For instance, students with low self-efficacy will give up in doing their assignment as they feel not confident if they understand or not about the assignment and as a matter of fact their thought were set that the lecturers do not care about it. This can be related with Wilcox and Nordstokke (2019) statement where students who believe that reading the assigned material is not a good technique are unlikely to read their assignments. Additionally, even if students believe that finishing the readings before class would be a wise move, they are less likely to actually read the assignments if they believe they won't have time to do so. This situation is such a concerning matter that needs to be improve in future.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier that personality can reflect how an individual face the adjustment problem in university, we usually see and thought that the most outgoing students will have better adjustment in their first-year of university. Meanwhile, personality traits such as neuroticism among the first-year students will make them more focused on the negative feelings only. For example, students with neuroticism personality will be most likely to have poor emotional stability which make them weak in adjusting to whatever they face in university. It was stated in Kural and Ozyurt (2021), those students in their first-year that unable to adjust well to university had higher level of neuroticism or negative valence. When they have poor emotional stability, those students will feel blues all the time where at the end putting them at situation where no one want to friend with them which can help them in adjusting to university or college better as they usually isolated themselves from other people. In addition, neuroticism students were unable to handle stress well especially with the transition of learning environment with advance course structures as they are easily stressed and irritated which also contribute to the students drop out.

While most studies focus on academic adjustment, it is important to examine the other adjustment problems that the first-year students are facing. Wilcox and Nordstokke (2019), found that academic satisfaction and school connectedness were predictors of students' life satisfaction, while conscientiousness was found to be a predictor of academic self-efficacy. Thus, college well-being and anxiety were predictive of self-reported academic achievement among the first-first year students. It is possible that those adjustment problems they are facing affect their life satisfaction. Self-efficacy and neuroticism personality are other variables that will be included under current study. Individual differences among the first-year students could result in how well they adjust with the adjustment problem as each of the students have different level of self-efficacy and have their own unique personality and strengths. As these differences continue, it is becoming challenging for the first-year students to adjust in their university or college life. Thus, this study aims to examine the relationship between self-efficacy and neuroticism personality towards the adjustment problem among the first-year students.

Conceptual Framework

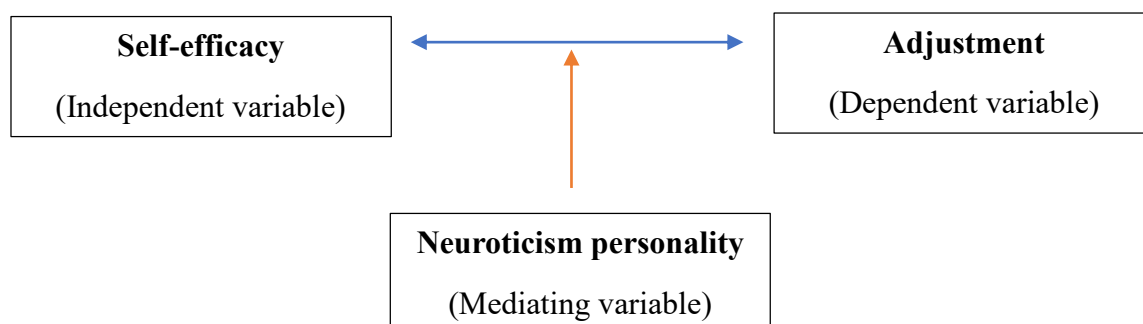


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

Based on the proposed conceptual framework, the current study aims to examine the mediating effect of neuroticism personality on the relationship between self-efficacy and adjustment. Also, the current study hypothesized that there is a significant correlation between self-efficacy and adjustment, while there will be no significant correlation between neuroticism personality and adjustment. Moreover, it is also hypothesized that neuroticism personality will mediate the correlates between self-efficacy and adjustment.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

For the research design, quantitative method was used to examine the relationship between the variables. According to Creswell (2014), quantitative research is an approach for testing objectives theories by examining the relationship among variables that can be measured typically by instruments. The data can then be analyzed using statistical procedures and writings from the results of the study. In simple words, quantitative method is a procedure in collecting and analyzing the data in numerical way where the variables can be counts. This research study used the cross-sectional survey to collect the data from the participants and examined their self-efficacy, neuroticism personality and adjustment in university.

Population and Sampling techniques

The population of this study is the university students where the sampling frame consists of diploma and bachelor's degree students who are in their first-year of study. The study was conducted in University Pendidikan Sultan Idris, UPSI, Tanjung Malim, Perak. This is because UPSI is one of the universities that become the center of the education among the students who want to continue their study in higher education. Therefore, it is a good opportunity to take research study here.

The sample size for this study was calculated using G*Power software version 3.1.9.4. By using F test for multiple regression with medium effect size, $f^2=.15$, significant level, $\alpha=.05$ and sampling power value at .80, the G*Power software suggest sample size to create a significant result is 68 participants. To avoid or reduce insignificant errors and inadequate sampling, a total of 130 participants were gathered for this study. Hence, the sample of this research was selected through a non-probability sampling which is purposive sampling.

Staller (2021) stated that purposive sampling refers to choosing the most comprehensive, informative, timely, wide-ranging, and abundant data that is available to get insight and thorough understanding by logically solving problems with substantial evidence. Researchers must exercise their best judgement when conducting it by choosing such people, places, papers, or artefacts as to be included or excluded. Therefore, in this study the inclusion criteria are that the participants must be first-year students in UPSI either in semester 1 or 2 currently, able to read and understand English, both gender male and female can be participated and pursuing diploma or bachelor's degree in UPSI. The exclusion criteria are other than mentioned.

Instruments

For the survey questionnaire, there was four sections which are Section A (demographic question), Section B (General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE)), Section C (Big Five-Inventory (BFI-NEU)) and Section D (Inventory of New College Adaptation (INCA)). The questionnaires were in English language as the instrument were accessible in English.

Self-efficacy

The General Self-Efficacy (GSE) by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995) consists of 10-items that are self-administered. Items were rated with four-point Likert scale as 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree and 4=Strongly agree. Scoring the items is based on the total scores from all items which can be ranging from 10 to 40 with no reverse coded item. Higher scores indicate that the students having

higher self-efficacy. The reliability was at Cronbach's Alpha ranging from .76 to .90 which is high. Meanwhile, its validity has a correlation of .25, .28, .14 and .28 between GSE and social cognitive variables, wellbeing, health behavior and coping respectively (Luszczynska, Scholz & Schwarzer, 2015).

Neuroticism personality.

This part of the questionnaire used the Big Five Inventory originally by John, Dinahue and Kentle (1991). It has 44-items that are self-report that measure personality traits such as Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism as domains. Since in this research study is going to measure the neuroticism personality, items under Neuroticism only will be used. Neuroticism has eight items that are five-point Likert scale with 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither agree nor disagree, 4=Agree and 5=Strongly Agree. All items then calculated in average with some item (item 2, 5 and 7) was reversed coded to get scale score ranging from 1 to 5 where higher scores indicate high neuroticism. In Mudayat, Mohd Jaladin and Md Khalid (2022), among the Malaysian population, the construct validation for neuroticism domain is at Cronbach's alpha .920 while its reliability is at .957.

Adjustment.

The Inventory of New College Student Adjustment (INCA) by Watson and Lenz (2018) consists of two factors which are the Supportive Network (six items) and Belief in Self (eight items) which concluded as 14-items that are self-administered. Item responses were rated with four-point Likert scale, 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree and 4=Strongly agree. It is scored directly range from 14 to 56 with higher scores shows better adjustment to university life. Watson and Lenz (2018) did correlation factor analysis and found the alpha coefficient were .83 and .77 for Supportive Network and Belief in Self respectively. The standard conventions where at .70 which INCA can be considerably accepted where it can offer a degree of consistency and precision in justifying the use of the instrument in research and clinical application with the first-year university students. Its convergent validity has significant positive relationship at $r=.62$, $p<.01$ (large effect size) and $r=.48$, $p<.01$ (medium effect size) respectively (Watson & Lenz, 2018).

Procedures

The questionnaire was provided in a google form that were constructed in English and given out through the online platforms which are the students' email siswa of UPSI, Whatsapp and Telegram and via paper and pencil. The inform consent and a brief explanation about the research were presented in the first page before the participants agreed to participate in this research study. The researcher's details such as phone number and email were also included in the form if the participants had any questions regarding the research.

After the consent to participate in this study, they completed all four sections of the questionnaires and submitted it. The collected data was automatically saved in the Google drive for online platform while for paper and pencil it was kept in a physical file where the researcher can access it easily. Plus, all the participants' data was kept safe and confidential. All the data was then compiled and processed to obtain completed data for the data analysis.

Participants

A total of 30 paper and pencil questionnaires and 100 online google form questionnaires were distributed and answered giving an overall total 130 participants. Out of 130 participants, 48 (36.90%) were male and 82 (63.10%) were female, age range between 18 to 26 years old with mean age at 20.95 and standard deviation at 1.71. Most of the participants were bachelor's degree students (74.60%) and some from diploma students (25.40%) with equal number of semester 1 (65 participants) and semester 2 (65 participants).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

SPSS Statistics 28.0.0.0 were used for the data analysis. Descriptive statistics were done to find the level of self-efficacy among the participants. Its mean score was 30.18 and a standard deviation of 4.14 while minimum score was 18 and maximum score was 40.

Correlations

Pearson correlation coefficient was computed between the self-efficacy, neuroticism personality and adjustment among the first-year students in UPSI for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. Firstly, the results indicate a significant medium positive correlation between self-efficacy and adjustment, $r(130) = .47$, $p = <.001$. Plus, there was also a significant medium negative correlation between neuroticism personality and adjustment, $r(130) = -.31$, $p = <.001$ (see Table 1).

Table 1 Summary of correlation between variables of interest

	n	M	SD	1	2	3
1 Self-efficacy	130	30.18	4.14	-		
2 Neuroticism personality	130	24.49	5.55	-.39**	-	
3 Adjustment	130	43.26	5.35	.47**	-.31**	-

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the $p < .001$ level (2-tailed)

Multiple Regression

Table 1 shows the relationship between self-efficacy and neuroticism personality on adjustment. Multiple regression analysis was conducted for this purpose. In Step 1, the R^2 value of .22 revealed that the self-efficacy explained 22% variance in the adjustment with $F(1, 128) = 36.60$, $p < .001$. The findings revealed that self-efficacy positively predicted adjustment ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$).

In Step 2, the R^2 value .24 revealed that the self-efficacy and neuroticism personality explained 24% variance in the adjustment with $F(2, 127) = 20.20$, $p < .001$. The findings also revealed that self-efficacy ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$) positively predict adjustment while neuroticism personality ($\beta = -.15$, $p = .077$) negatively predict the adjustment but there is no significant finding to prove it. The ΔR^2 value of .02 revealed 2% change in the variance of model 1 and model 2 with $\Delta F(1, 127) = 3.18$, $p = .077$. The regression weights for self-efficacy subsequently reduced from Model 1 to Model 2 (.47 to .41) but remained significant which confirmed the partial mediation. More specifically, self-efficacy has a direct as well as indirect effect on adjustment.

Table 2 Regression Analysis of Self-efficacy, Neuroticism Personality and Adjustment in University

Variable	B	95%CI	SE B	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1					.22	.22
Constant	24.87*	[18.80, 30.94]	3.07			
Self-efficacy	.61*	[.41, .81]	.10	.47*		
Step 2					.24	.02
Constant	30.65*	[21.86, 39.44]	4.44			

continued

Self-efficacy	.54*	[.32, .75]	.11	.41*
Neuroticism personality	-1.15*	[-2.43, .13]	.65	-.15

Note. CI = confidence interval; DV = Adjustment

*p < .001

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between self-efficacy, neuroticism personality and adjustment among the first-year students in UPSI. Results of this study showed that the first-year students in UPSI have a high level of self-efficacy. This is in line with past study (Conefrey, 2018) where she mentioned that students' perception of their self-efficacy was influenced by a variety of factors, including comparisons of their own performance to that of others, peer and mentor observation, teacher and family persuasion, and emotion regulation, such as managing anxiety. As they evaluated their skills, made goals, examined their study habits, and learned more effective learning techniques, students' self-efficacy grew. In fact, Fokkens-Bruinsma, Vermue, Deinum and van Rooij (2021) indicate that academic self-efficacy scores that were significantly higher than the scale's midpoint may have been the result of student's exceptional optimism on their knowledge and capabilities based on prior experiences. Yet another possibility is that when students believe that those tests have a high stake, they present themselves in a positive representation.

Findings in this study also show a positive relationship between self-efficacy and adjustment that prove Hypothesis 1 where self-efficacy did positively predicted adjustment to university. Conefrey (2018) stated that students' self-efficacy and self-regulation is crucial because it allows students to take control of their own study habits and time management as they adjust to the change from high school to college. Thus, self-efficacy and adjustment may be closely related due to the support that the students get from their peers and family where it helps them in increase their self-efficacy which then guides them to adjust to university environments. Park and Hong (2021) found positive correlation between adjustment to college life and social support among first-year nursing students which can support the statement. Erzen and Ozabaci (2023) cited that students with strong academic self-efficacy perceived themselves as a resource that other friends might use, and this impression played a significant effect in peer-sourced adjustment skills. This circumstance may result in a direct proportional association between gains in self-efficacy and increases in academic adjustment. In addition, it was found that the general adjustment levels to university are positively correlated with social support and self-efficacy (Erzen & Ozabaci, 2023).

Furthermore, the study found a negative relationship between neuroticism and adjustment that confirmed the Hypothesis 2, also partial mediation of neuroticism personality between self-efficacy and adjustment (Hypothesis 3) but somehow it is a lack of evidence to support it which surprisingly same with Kural and Ozyurt (2021) research's results. This might be due to the floor effect experienced by the first-year university students where those who have significant neuroticism personality had a lower mood at baseline (Rettew, McGinnis, Copeland, Nardone, Rettew, Davedenam & Hudziak, 2021). In fact, these first-year students finish their secondary school during COVID-19 pandemic which affecting how they adjusted to the learning environment already. This situation might leave an impact on their perception in adjusting to university life since they might have experienced worse scenario than it. Such they thought adjustment in university might be similar as adjusting to COVID-19 learning environment.

Another reason for the lack of the evidence would be that those students with neuroticism personality might have high resistance to change as mentioned in Chriss and Elmarie Papageorgiou (2019). In this term, those first-year students with neuroticism personality might be more reluctant to change the way they cooperate with secondary school to university life as they are more comfortable in that way. Thus, many students also acknowledged that they frequently experience emotional overload (Komolo, Aloka & Raburu, 2021) that later they feel it is normal to involved in that cases. Meanwhile, the overly prevalent conceptualization of neuroticism personality has minimized its predictive value for first-year students' adjustment to university life (Valenti & Faraci, 2021).

Implications of the study

The findings of this study are important to the researchers, university administrators, counseling, teachers, and lecturers especially in Malaysian context. The researchers might be able to use this study as their basic in trying to investigate the relationship between self-efficacy, neuroticism personality and adjustment among the first-year university students around Malaysia. In fact, counselors, teachers in secondary education and lecturers in university are able to identify those who are lack of self-efficacy, significant neuroticism personality and poor adjustment to university life to provide the help they needed in order to boost their perception in adjusting to university. Hence, this will improve students' retention and drop out cases among first-year students in university.

On the other hand, results obtained from this study help us in understanding the changes that the first-year students experience during their adaptation to university life. It was found that neuroticism personality might have partial mediation to adjustment in university, but this study suggesting that having higher self-efficacy will improve adjustment towards university regardless of the personality. To be sure, social support and believing in oneself is also a major factor to have a better adjustment in university and increase the self-efficacy of the first-year students.

Limitation of the study

There are some limitations to this research. To begin, the participants were university students from various faculties and from one university only. It is incorrect to generalize the obtained results to all university students and other populations (Erzen & Ozabaci, 2023; Rettew et. al., 2021). In fact, this study was done despite the students either in first semester or second semester which it is unable to make some comparison to the students in order to identify any pattern throughout the year. Other than that, the time taken for the researcher to fulfilled required amounts of participant was longer than expected which might be due to lots of studies seen in the platforms confusing them or even being uninterested on it.

Recommendations for future study

There is growing interest in this field on the relationship between self-efficacy, neuroticism personality and adjustment in university among first-year students but less that specifically focusing on neuroticism. Therefore, having an understanding of self-efficacy and personality traits is important as it could promote a positive adjustment to them. So, several recommendations for future study can be implemented. First of all, future study needs to consider a longitudinal study as it able to give a clearer understanding of the directional of the relationship between the variables in their first-year of study including from semester one to semester two. Secondly, researchers should also include the gender differences between the variables since in this study there was unfair distribution of the gender.

Next, future researchers might need to have a larger target sample and population of these first-year students in Malaysia perhaps to ensure that results got from the study can be generalized across different aspects of demographics background. In addition to that, studies should also indicate the level of neuroticism and adjustment in university among the first-year students as it might be helpful to get a better result and understanding. Plus, by using a mixed methods approach could possibly be more effective in this study. Researchers can use both qualitative and quantitative measures to gather the data where qualitative measures able to analyze self-efficacy, personality and adjustment variables while quantitative measures suitable in collecting the first-year students' experiences and perceptions related to those variables.

Hence, since technologies is expanding along with the emergence of online study and learning, future researchers may be interested in investigating through this area as to explore how first-year students' self-efficacy, neuroticism personality and adjustment differ from those who attend physical classes. This is due to the different learning environment between those learning mediums which can create different effects to an individual.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, first-year students experience a substantial period of adjustment as they become used to the new academic and social environment of the university. Hence, self-efficacy can be quite helpful in promoting successful transitions at that time. Students who have higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to persevere in the face of difficulties, approach problems with a positive attitude, and see failures as teaching opportunities. They frequently have more faith in their capacity to maneuver the campus environment, handle academic obligations, and form social connections. Meanwhile, students that have significant neuroticism personality tend have negative experiences during the adjustment period.

It is also crucial to remember that a person's unique characteristics and additional elements, such as social support, internal motivation, and past experiences, can also affect how they adjust. In short, self-efficacy, neuroticism personality and adjustment in university are related to each other. This is which enhancing a good self-efficacy and controlling the neuroticism traits could promote positive adjustment in university and overall student wellbeing. Supporting students' growth in university setting is able to give them resources to address the issues they faced and help them to be able to adjust better in university.

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