

Hidden Struggles in Higher Education: A Systematic Review of Adjustment Experiences of Minority

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Abstract

Student adjustment in higher education is a key determinant of academic success, psychological well-being, and study persistence. In the Indonesian context, minority students including those from different cultural, ethnic, religious backgrounds, students with disabilities, and other marginalized groups often face more complex adjustment challenges. This study aims to systematically review the literature on adjustment challenges, coping strategies, and supporting factors influencing minority students' adaptation in higher education. This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach by analyzing national and international peer reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025. Data were collected through Google Scholar, Scispace, and reputable journal platforms and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The findings reveal that minority students commonly experience academic pressure, acculturative stress, emotional difficulties, and social exclusion. Effective coping strategies such as emotion-focused coping, problem-focused coping, and social support seeking play an important role in overcoming these challenges. Furthermore, perceived social support, psychological capital, and inclusive institutional environments consistently support successful adjustment. These findings highlight the importance of inclusive policies and comprehensive support systems within Indonesian higher education to promote equitable student success and well being.

Keywords: College Adjustment, Minority Student, Higher Education

Abstrak

Penyesuaian mahasiswa di pendidikan tinggi merupakan penentu utama keberhasilan akademik, kesejahteraan psikologis, dan ketekunan studi. Dalam konteks Indonesia, mahasiswa minoritas termasuk mereka yang berasal dari latar belakang budaya, etnis, dan agama yang berbeda, mahasiswa penyandang disabilitas, dan kelompok marginal lainnya sering menghadapi tantangan penyesuaian yang lebih kompleks. Studi ini bertujuan untuk secara sistematis meninjau literatur tentang tantangan penyesuaian, strategi mengatasi masalah, dan faktor pendukung yang memengaruhi adaptasi mahasiswa minoritas di pendidikan tinggi. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan Tinjauan Literatur Sistematis (SLR) dengan menganalisis artikel jurnal nasional dan internasional yang diterbitkan antara tahun 2015 dan 2025. Data dikumpulkan melalui Google Scholar, Scispace, dan platform jurnal terkemuka dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis konten kualitatif. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa minoritas umumnya mengalami tekanan akademik, stres akulturasi, kesulitan emosional, dan pengucilan sosial. Strategi mengatasi masalah yang efektif seperti mengatasi masalah yang berfokus pada emosi, mengatasi masalah yang berfokus pada solusi, dan mencari dukungan sosial memainkan peran penting dalam mengatasi tantangan ini. Lebih lanjut, dukungan sosial yang dirasakan, modal psikologis, dan lingkungan institusional yang inklusif secara konsisten mendukung penyesuaian yang sukses. Temuan ini menyoroti pentingnya kebijakan inklusif dan sistem dukungan komprehensif dalam pendidikan tinggi Indonesia untuk mendorong keberhasilan dan kesejahteraan mahasiswa yang merata.

Kata Kunci: Penyesuaian di Perguruan Tinggi, Mahasiswa Minoritas, Pendidikan Tinggi

INTRODUCTION

College adjustment is a key factor influencing student success in pursuing and completing higher education. A student's ability to adjust not only determines academic achievement but also plays a crucial role in psychological well being, social engagement, and the continuation of their studies at college. Students who are able to adjust well tend to adapt more easily to complex academic demands, diverse social dynamics, and institutional norms and cultures that are often different from their previous environments. Conversely, failure to adjust can increase the risk of academic stress, social isolation, decreased motivation to learn, and even the decision to drop out of college. The concept of college student adjustment has been extensively studied in the educational and developmental psychology literature. According to Baker and Siryk (1984), college adjustment encompasses four main dimensions: academic adjustment, social adjustment, emotional adjustment, and institutional attachment. Academic adjustment relates to a student's ability to meet learning demands, manage time, and cope with academic evaluations. Social adjustment reflects a student's ability to establish positive interpersonal relationships with peers, faculty, and the broader campus environment. Emotional adjustment refers to a student's capacity to manage emotions, stress, and psychological distress that arise during the transition to higher education.

Meanwhile, attachment to the institution describes the extent to which students feel a sense of belonging, commitment, and integration with the institution where they are studying. These four dimensions demonstrate that student adjustment is a multidimensional process influenced by the interaction between individual factors and the educational context. In the context of minority students, the adjustment process is often further complicated by differences in cultural, social, religious, ethnic, or other identities that potentially pose additional challenges. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of student adjustment, particularly among minority students, is crucial as a foundation for formulating policies and interventions that support student success and well-being in higher education. Good adjustment is a crucial factor influencing student success in completing their studies. Students who are able to adapt well are more easily able to adjust to the academic, social, and cultural demands of the campus. This contributes to higher learning satisfaction, better academic achievement, and more harmonious social relationships with peers and faculty (Bastien et al., 2018). On the other hand, the inability to adapt can lead to various negative consequences. Bastien et al., (2018) showed that students who fail to adapt tend to experience decreased learning satisfaction, low academic achievement, and poor social relationships. The findings of Bunrosy et al., (2024) reinforce this by finding that difficulties in academic adjustment have an impact on increased stress, difficulty socializing, decreased motivation to learn, and even the risk of leading to dropping out of college. Furthermore, Janjua et al., (2011) also revealed that obstacles in academic adjustment can disrupt students' psychological well-being and hinder the continuation of studies in higher education.

Based on this explanation, this article was written to address the need for a more comprehensive and integrated understanding of minority students' adjustment in higher education, particularly in the Indonesian context. Although various studies have addressed the issue of student adjustment, these studies remain fragmented and tend to highlight certain aspects separately, such as adaptation difficulties, coping strategies, or factors supporting adjustment. Therefore, this article aims to systematically synthesize previous research findings to identify the types of adjustment difficulties experienced by minority students, the methods used to overcome these difficulties, and the factors that support successful adaptation in higher education. Through a Systematic Literature Review approach, this article is expected to provide a comprehensive overview of the dynamics of minority students' adjustment, while also providing an empirical basis for developing higher education policies and practices that are more inclusive and sensitive to diversity.

METHOD

This research employs a library research approach, a research method focused on searching, reviewing, and critically analyzing various literature sources relevant to the study's focus. This approach was chosen because it aligns with the research objective, which is to examine and integrate scientific findings discussing the importance of parental openness in relationships with children. Research data was obtained from various written sources, including national and

international scientific journals, academic books, and research reports published within the last ten years (2015–2025). Literature selection was carried out selectively, considering the relevance of the topic and the quality of the scientific publications supporting the discussion (Zed, 2014).

The literature search was conducted through several online databases, particularly Google Scholar and Scispace. The identified literature was then carefully selected to ensure its alignment with the research focus. Each selected source was systematically analyzed to identify patterns of findings, the theoretical framework used, and recommendations proposed by previous researchers (Krippendorff, 2019).

The data analysis in this literature review employed content analysis techniques, which involved a thorough examination of the substance of each literature to uncover key themes related to adjustment of minority. The analytical approach was qualitatively descriptive, presenting the study results in narrative form without the use of statistical calculations. Data validity was maintained through the selection of credible and up to date sources and by comparing the literature to minimize bias and increase objectivity in drawing conclusions (Miles et al (2014)

RESULT

The results of this study are described by examining how previous research was conducted and then comparing the results from the journals analyzed. Fifteen journals were analyzed, classified into three different categories:

Student Adaptation Difficulties

Table 1. Article Search Results

No.	Journal Identity	Research Method	Main Findings
1	Arjanggih, R., & Kusumaningsih, L. P. S. (2023). <i>Academic adaptation and performance: The mediating role of student engagement</i> . Sustainability, 17(24), 11256.	Quantitative correlational study using mediation analysis (SEM). University student sample.	Academic adaptation has a significant effect on students' academic performance. Student engagement acts as a mediator that strengthens the relationship between academic adaptation and academic achievement.
2	Fauzi, M., & Suryani, L. (2023). <i>Academic and adaptation difficulties of medical students with low academic achievement</i> . Jurnal Pendidikan Kedokteran Indonesia, 12(2), 85–94.	Quantitative descriptive study using survey methods among medical students with low academic performance.	Students with low academic achievement experience substantial academic and emotional adjustment difficulties, particularly related to time management, academic workload, and academic stress.
3	López, M. C., & Johnson, K. A. (2021). <i>Factors impacting minority student college adjustment</i> . Graduate Student Journal of Psychology, 18(1), 45–60.	Qualitative and literature-based conceptual analysis.	Minority students' college adjustment is influenced by perceived discrimination, limited social support, and cultural barriers. Institutional climate and support systems play a crucial role in facilitating successful adjustment.
4	Rahman, A., & Sari, D. P. (2022). <i>Challenges of academic adjustment of first-year college students: A systematic review of causative factors and consequences</i> . International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 6(3), 231–238.	Systematic Literature Review (SLR).	Academic adjustment difficulties among first-year students are caused by educational transition, increased academic demands, and inadequate learning readiness, leading to academic stress and decreased learning motivation.
5	Tonsing, K. N., & Vungkhanching, M. (2023). <i>Adjustment challenges and coping strategies of Arab female international university students</i> . BMC Psychology, 11(1), 1–12.	Qualitative study using in-depth interviews.	Arab female international students face social, cultural, and emotional adjustment challenges. Coping strategies include social support, religiosity, and emotional regulation.

Table 1 synthesizes empirical and review studies addressing student adjustment in higher education, with particular attention to minority and vulnerable student groups. The findings consistently demonstrate that student adjustment is a multidimensional process encompassing

academic, social, emotional, and institutional domains (Arjanggi & Kusumaningsih, 2023; Rahman & Sari, 2022). Quantitative evidence indicates that successful academic adaptation significantly predicts academic performance, particularly when supported by high levels of student engagement (Arjanggi & Kusumaningsih, 2023). In contrast, students with lower academic achievement experience pronounced difficulties in managing academic demands and emotional stress, which hinder their overall adjustment process (Fauzi & Suryani, 2023). Qualitative studies further reveal that minority and international students face additional challenges related to cultural differences, perceived discrimination, and limited social support, requiring adaptive coping strategies to sustain their academic and psychological well being (López & Johnson, 2021; Tonsing & Vungkhanching, 2023). Collectively, these findings underscore the need for inclusive institutional support systems to facilitate effective adjustment among minority students in higher education.

Strategies for Facing / Combating Adaptation Difficulties

There are several sources of literature that discuss strategies for dealing with/overcoming adaptation difficulties, namely as follows.

Table 2. Article Search Results

No.	Journal Identity	Research Method	Main Findings
1	Deng, J., Yang, S., & Chen, Y. (2021). <i>Dilemmas and coping strategies related to mental health problems among Chinese international students</i> . Journal of International Students, 11(3), 660–678.	Qualitative study using in-depth interviews with Chinese international students.	Students experience mental health challenges related to academic pressure, cultural differences, and social isolation. Coping strategies include seeking peer support, self-regulation, avoidance coping, and selective help-seeking behaviors.
2	Fauzan, A., & Hidayat, R. (2024). <i>Bridging cultures: Adaptation strategies of Indonesian students studying abroad</i> . EduLite: Journal of English Education, Literature, and Culture, 9(1), 112–124.	Qualitative phenomenological approach using interviews.	Indonesian students employ cultural adaptation strategies such as developing intercultural communication skills, maintaining cultural identity, building social networks, and practicing cognitive flexibility to adapt to the host academic environment.
3	Misra, R., McKean, M., West, S., & Russo, T. (2022). <i>Academic integration, coping strategies, and well-being among university students</i> . Journal of International Students, 12(2), 415–432.	Quantitative cross-sectional study using survey methods.	Adaptive coping strategies, including problem-focused coping and academic integration, are positively associated with student well-being, while maladaptive coping is linked to higher stress levels and poorer adjustment.
4	Rizky, A. A., & Pratama, M. D. (2021). <i>Student adaptation to college life and coping strategies during COVID-19 pandemic</i> . PLOS ONE, 16(12), e0279711.	Quantitative study using online surveys during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Students used coping strategies such as emotional regulation, time management, social support, and technology-assisted learning to manage academic and psychological challenges during the transition to online education.
5	Tonsing, K. N., & Vungkhanching, M. (2023). <i>Adjustment challenges and coping strategies of Arab female international university students</i> . BMC Psychology, 11(1), 1–12.	Qualitative study using semi-structured interviews.	Coping strategies include reliance on social and family support, religiosity, positive reframing, and emotional coping to manage academic, cultural, and emotional adjustment challenges.

Table 2 summarizes empirical studies that explore strategies used by students to cope with and overcome adjustment difficulties in higher education. Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that coping with adjustment challenges involves a combination of individual, social, and

contextual strategies. Qualitative studies show that minority and international students often rely on social support, emotional regulation, religiosity, and positive reframing to manage academic pressure, cultural differences, and psychological distress (Deng et al., 2021; Tonsing & Vungkhanching, 2023). In addition, cultural adaptation strategies such as developing intercultural communication skills, maintaining cultural identity, and building supportive social networks are identified as essential mechanisms for successful adjustment among students studying abroad (Fauzan & Hidayat, 2024). Quantitative findings further demonstrate that adaptive coping strategies and academic integration are positively associated with students' well-being, whereas maladaptive coping is linked to higher stress and poorer adjustment outcomes (Misra et al., 2022). During crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, students employed flexible coping strategies, including time management, emotional coping, and technology-mediated learning, to sustain their academic and psychological adjustment (Rizky & Pratama, 2021). Collectively, these findings highlight that effective adaptation requires both personal coping resources and supportive academic and social environments.

Factors that Support Student Adaptation

The literature that discusses factors that support student adaptation is as follows:

Table 3. Article Search Results

No.	Journal Identity	Research Method	Main Findings
1	Chen, H., Wang, L., & Li, Y. (2022). <i>An analysis of psychological adaptation of minority college students and its influencing factors</i> . <i>Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research</i> , 648, 245–251.	Quantitative study using survey methods among minority college students.	Psychological adaptation is significantly influenced by social support, self-efficacy, and campus environment. Minority students with higher perceived support show better emotional and social adjustment.
2	Gao, X., & Zhang, J. (2025). <i>Acculturative stress and university adjustment: The moderating role of perceived social support</i> . <i>Frontiers in Psychology</i> , 16, 1690645.	Quantitative study using moderation analysis.	Acculturative stress negatively affects university adjustment, while perceived social support moderates this relationship by buffering the negative impact of stress on academic and psychological adjustment.
3	Putri, N. A., & Widodo, A. (2023). <i>Navigating higher education challenges: Strategies for students with disabilities in Indonesia</i> . <i>Social Sciences</i> , 4(3), 42.	Qualitative descriptive study using interviews and document analysis.	Institutional accessibility, peer support, inclusive policies, and lecturer understanding are key factors supporting academic and social adjustment among students with disabilities in Indonesia.
4	Sari, R. P., & Yusuf, A. M. (2023). <i>Impact of perceived social support and psychological capital on academic adjustment among university students</i> . <i>BMC Psychology</i> , 11(1), 385.	Quantitative correlational study using regression analysis.	Perceived social support and psychological capital (hope, resilience, optimism) significantly predict academic adjustment and students' ability to cope with academic demands.
5	Zhang, Y., & Goodson, P. (2024). <i>Revisiting social support and academic adjustment among international students: A systematic review and meta-analysis</i> . <i>Journal of International Students</i> , 14(1), 1–20.	Systematic Literature Review and meta-analysis.	Social support consistently demonstrates a strong positive effect on academic adjustment, psychological well-being, and retention among international students across diverse contexts.

The studies summarized in Table 3 highlight key factors that support successful adjustment among minority and vulnerable student populations in higher education. Across empirical and review-based research, perceived social support consistently emerges as a central predictor of academic, social, and psychological adjustment (Chen et al., 2022; Zhang & Goodson, 2024). Quantitative evidence further indicates that social support plays a moderating role by buffering the negative effects of acculturative stress on students' university adjustment (Gao & Zhang, 2025). In addition to external support, individual psychological resources such as psychological capital, resilience, optimism, and self efficacy significantly enhance students' ability

to cope with academic demands and emotional challenges (Chen et al., 2022; Sari & Yusuf, 2023). Contextual and institutional factors are also crucial, particularly for students with disabilities, where inclusive policies, accessibility, and supportive academic environments facilitate better adjustment outcomes (Putri & Widodo, 2023). Overall, these findings suggest that student adjustment is best understood as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of individual strengths, social support systems, and inclusive institutional practices.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic literature review demonstrate that student adjustment in higher education is a complex and multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of individual, social, and institutional factors. Across the reviewed studies, adjustment difficulties commonly emerge in academic, social, emotional, and cultural domains, particularly among minority and vulnerable student groups. These findings support the view that college adjustment is not limited to academic achievement but also involves psychological well being and social integration (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Credé & Niehorster, 2012).

Adjustment Challenges Among Minority Students

The reviewed literature consistently indicates that minority students experience greater adjustment difficulties compared to majority students. Academic challenges such as workload management, learning pressure, and unfamiliar instructional styles frequently arise during the transition to higher education (Tinto, 2017). In addition, minority students often face social and cultural barriers, including perceived discrimination, lack of belonging, and cultural incongruence within the academic environment (Hurtado et al., 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). These stressors contribute to emotional distress and can negatively affect students' academic engagement and persistence (Arnett, 2000; Williams et al., 2018).

Strategies for Coping With Adjustment Difficulties

In response to these challenges, students adopt various coping strategies to manage adjustment demands. Emotion-focused coping strategies, such as emotional regulation, acceptance, and positive reframing, are commonly used by minority and international students to reduce psychological distress during the adjustment process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Skinner et al., 2003). Social support seeking behaviors particularly from peers, family, and cultural communities also play a crucial role in helping students cope with adjustment stressors and develop a sense of belonging (Friedlander et al., 2007; Wilcox et al., 2005). Quantitative evidence further shows that problem-focused coping strategies, including time management, academic help-seeking, and active engagement with learning resources, are positively associated with academic adjustment and psychological well-being (Credé & Niehorster, 2012). During periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, students relied on adaptive coping strategies combining emotional flexibility and learning-related adjustments to maintain academic functioning (Son et al., 2020).

Supporting Factors for Successful Adjustmen

Beyond individual coping efforts, several supporting factors significantly enhance student adjustment. Social support consistently emerges as one of the strongest predictors of successful academic and psychological adjustment, acting as a protective buffer against stress and acculturative difficulties (Wilcox et al., 2005; Yeh & Inose, 2003). For minority students, perceived social support reduces feelings of isolation and strengthens emotional resilience (Hurtado et al., 2015). Additionally, internal psychological resources such as resilience, optimism, self-efficacy, and psychological capital are found to facilitate adaptive adjustment by enhancing students' confidence in managing academic and social demands (Luthans et al., 2007; Hartmann et al., 2021). At the institutional level, inclusive learning environments, accessible academic services, and supportive policies are particularly important for students with disabilities and other marginalized groups, enabling equitable participation and academic success (Shaw, 2009; Tinto, 2017).

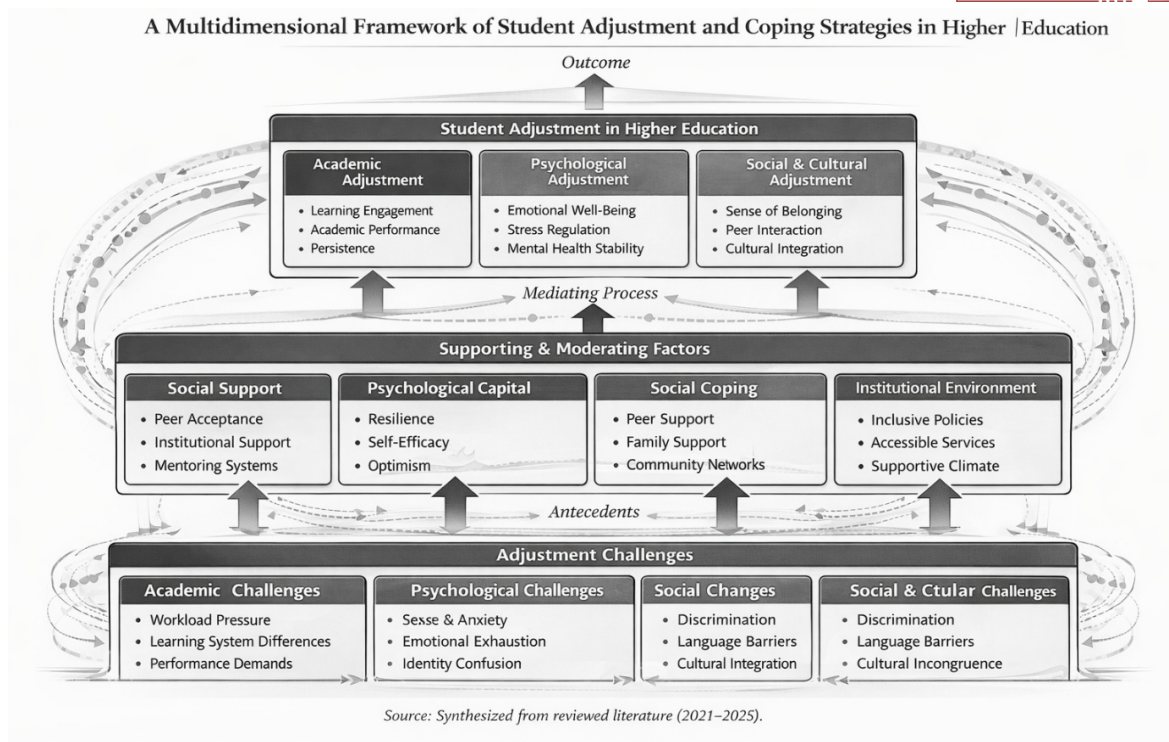


Figure 1. Findings chart

Overall, the findings of this systematic literature review indicate that student adjustment in higher education is a complex and multidimensional process shaped by the interaction between adjustment challenges, coping strategies, and supporting factors. Minority students tend to experience greater academic, psychological, and socio-cultural challenges; however, effective coping strategies supported by social support, psychological capital, and inclusive institutional environments play a crucial role in facilitating successful adjustment. These findings emphasize that student adjustment should not be viewed solely as an individual responsibility, but as a shared outcome influenced by personal resources and institutional support systems. Consequently, universities are encouraged to develop comprehensive and inclusive policies and interventions that strengthen coping capacities and promote equitable adjustment opportunities for diverse student populations..

SIMPULAN

This systematic literature review aimed to synthesize empirical evidence on the challenges, coping strategies, and supporting factors related to the adjustment of minority students in higher education. The findings indicate that student adjustment is a multidimensional process encompassing academic, psychological, social, and cultural domains. Minority students frequently experience heightened adjustment challenges, including academic pressure, acculturative stress, emotional difficulties, and limited social integration. These challenges are shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by broader institutional and sociocultural contexts.

Despite these difficulties, the reviewed studies demonstrate that effective coping strategies such as emotional regulation, problem-focused coping, and social support-seeking play a critical role in mitigating adjustment challenges. Furthermore, supporting factors including perceived social support, psychological capital, and inclusive institutional environments consistently enhance students' ability to adapt and sustain academic engagement and psychological well being. Overall, the findings underscore that successful adjustment among minority students is most likely achieved through the interaction of individual coping resources and supportive academic and social systems.

SARAN

Based on the findings of this review, several recommendations are proposed. First, higher education institutions are encouraged to develop comprehensive support programs that address

both academic and psychosocial aspects of student adjustment, particularly for minority students. These may include mentoring initiatives, culturally responsive counseling services, peer support programs, and inclusive teaching practices. Second, universities should strengthen institutional policies that promote accessibility, equity, and inclusion to ensure that diverse student populations can fully participate in academic and social life. Third, future research is recommended to employ longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to capture the dynamic nature of student adjustment over time and to explore contextual factors specific to different minority groups, particularly within the Indonesian higher education context. Such efforts are expected to contribute to the development of more targeted and evidence-based interventions to support student success and well being.

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