

## **An Analysis of Student Transition to University: Full-Time vs. Part-Time Students**

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**Abstract:** Both full-time and part-time students come across transition problems during their first year in university. Past studies show that there are three adjustments the freshmen encountered when they have just entered the university. They are academic, social and psychological adjustments. The purpose of this study is to investigate the difference between full-time and part-time students in adjusting to universities. The survey methodology was employed and totally 265 first year students from 5 Hong Kong universities have returned the questionnaire. The findings show that the full-time students can transit better to university than part-time students in the academic, social and psychological adjustments.

**Keywords:** Adjustment, Full-time, Part-time, Transition

### **1. Introduction**

Education is a fundamental and essential stage in our first twenty years lifetime. Some students, however, may find it difficult in their financial situations and may turn to study in the part-time degree programmes. Working adult students who return to the university part-time for advanced professional degrees come with the expectations that what they learn can enhance the knowledge in their specific work field, the practices they see at their workplace, and their perspectives towards the society and the work they have chosen to do. Sometimes, they return because they must have a credential or degree to retain their present job or obtain the job they want. However, even with this external motivation, they are also intrinsically motivated to learn (O'Connor & Cordova, 2010). Whoever the students study their degree programmes in full-time or part-time modes, they must face the transition problems to the universities during their first year study. Wintre *et al.* (2009) indicated that there are three types of adjustments (academic, social and psychological) to university. However, it appears that no studies have investigated the difference between full-time and part-time students in adjusting to universities. The purpose of this study is to fill this research gap. The research questions include:

1. Do full-time students adjust academically to the university structures better than part-time students?
2. Do full-time students adjust socially to the university structures better than part-time students?

3. Do full-time students adjust psychologically to the university structures better than part-time students

## 2. Literature Review

Full-time students do encounter a number of adjustment problems, the same difficulties may also find in some part-time students. Most part-time students are usually full-time employees and they are required to balance and reconcile the demands of their work, studies, families, culture and finance while full-time students may need to cope with some of these demands, but very few of them confront all simultaneously (Terenzini, 1993). This makes part-time students experience more difficulties than full-time students in adjusting to the university environment. Furthermore, the issue of time management also affects all students entering universities, especially for part-time students (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). Since part-time students always have to work full-time, it is difficult for them to balance the two and it's hard to find time to go on campus. Being not involved in the campus, part-time students find more difficulties in the adjustments. One study showed that students' satisfaction exerts a stronger influence on GPA than GPA does on satisfaction (Pike, 1991). In addition, academic performance is one of the most important variables underlying student satisfaction (Aitken, 1982). Umbach and Porter (2002) and Thomas and Galambos (2004) found that students reported a higher degree of satisfaction when faculty professors focused on research. In contrast, Grunwald and Peterson (2003) student evaluations, administrative support and teaching-related issues are significant predictors of student's satisfaction.

Moro-Egido and Panades (2010) indicate that part-time students are more likely to express less satisfaction with their college experience. Those with strong social and family support reported that they felt less stressful than their counterpart (O'Connor & Cordova, 2010). Moreover, part-time students often feel isolated, as they are small minority in the universities, where they seem to receive less peer support than full-time students. In addition, part-time students experience time constraints (Mckenzie & Gow, 2004; Wong & Kwok, 1997). Thomas and Jones (2002) suggested that without peer support, social contacts and networks in the institutions, part-time students would find transition to higher colleges more problematic. This reinforced the tendency of the part-time students' feeling that university as "not for them" (Bowl, 2003). In contrast, full-time students contribute a large portion in the universities while they can make friends easily than part-time students, therefore, they should have better social adjustment.

In addition, according to Student Retention Team at the University of Teesside (2005), self-confidence is a key issue for part-time students in study, while feedbacks do help to guide students through their course and maintain their self-confidence. Many part-time students feel insecure about their abilities of handling the academic works owing to the lacking of self-confidences, in addition that they always juggle work, family and study responsibilities. Furthermore, Student Retention Team at the University of Teesside (2005) also pointed out that part-time students usually perceive university staffs as being not aware of their needs and do not communicate with them appropriately. Therefore, when compare with full-time students, part-time students encounter more problem in the new university environment.

Based on the above review, we hypothesis in the following:

- H1:** First year full-time students can adjust academically better than first year part-time students
- H2:** First year full-time students can adjust socially better than first year part-time students
- H3:** First year full-time students can adjust psychologically better than first year part-time students

### 3. Research Method

#### 3.1 Constructs Measure and Questionnaire Design

This study adopted quantitative survey from data of students to test the above three hypotheses due to the fact that quantitative survey data can work out bivariate analysis so as to test three hypotheses (Babbie, 1990).

**Table 1.** Items in the three constructs

Question	Items	
	<b>Academic adjustment (1 – 5 scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree)</b>	<b>Factor loading</b>
2	The degree and programme requirements in the university calendar are very clear.	0.429
4	Professors in classes make it clear what students are expected to do in order to get a good grade on assignments, papers and tests.	0.563
8	There are lots of confusing rules that make registration and course selection difficult.	0.414
10	If students are having difficulties with their academic coursework, they can easily talk to professors or their teaching assistants.	0.587
11	Professors at this school don't really try to make you think.	0.501
12	Professors get tests and assignments back to students in good time.	0.459
13	It is hard for students to get advice in selecting courses or deciding on a programme of study.	0.470
15	Academic policies on cheating and copying are made clear to students.	0.356
16	Professors and teaching assistants don't give very much feedback on tests, exams or papers.	0.378
19	Professors emphasise reasoned questions and critical appraisal of what they present in class.	0.490
	<b>Eigenvalues</b>	4.645
	<b>Percentage of variance explained</b>	46.452
	<b>Cronbach's alpha</b>	0.869
	<b>Social adjustment (1 – 5 scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree)</b>	<b>Factor loading</b>
3	It's easy to make friends.	0.669
17	There's very little opportunity for students to have direct, one-to-one contact with a professor.	0.344
18	Other students in my programme are supportive and friendly.	0.602
20	Faculty and teaching assistants post office hours and are available when they say they will be.	0.486
	<b>Eigenvalues</b>	2.101
	<b>Percentage of variance explained</b>	52.525
	<b>Cronbach's alpha</b>	0.704
	<b>Psychological adjustment (1 – 5 scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree)</b>	<b>Factor loading</b>
1	Students are informed during student orientation about help available to them if they are having any emotional or adjustment problems.	0.791
5	If a student needed help for an emotional problem, it would be easy to find a service on campus to help them.	0.738
6	Professors aren't really clear about what they expect of students.	0.745
7	A student can feel pretty anonymous in the programme.	0.677
9	The professors don't really care about their students.	0.735
14	Professors and teaching assistants in classes are helpful and encouraging.	0.730
21	School officials and advisers are approachable and open-minded when you have a question or problem.	0.613
	<b>Eigenvalues</b>	3.631
	<b>Percentage of variance explained</b>	51.871
	<b>Cronbach's alpha</b>	0.845

The questionnaire in this study used the scale of the Student Perception of University Support and Structure (SPUSS) (Wintre *et al.*, 2009). There were 21 items as shown in Table 1 for three dependent variables in the questionnaire: namely, academic (Q2, Q4, Q8, Q10, Q11, Q12, Q13, Q15, Q16 and Q19), social (Q3, Q17, Q18 and Q20) and psychological (Q1, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q9, Q14 and Q21). The questions are randomly placed to avoid common method variance (CMV). Five-point Likert-type scales were assigned to all items. These items were anchored at (5) strongly agree; (4) agree; (3) neutral; (2) disagree and (1) strongly disagree.

### 3.2 Survey and Student Profile

The actual survey was conducted by distributing of questionnaires to the respondents during the lectures. The students used about 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire. 400 questionnaires were distributed to five universities and 265 questionnaires were received with a return rate of 66.25%. The usability rate was 100% as no incomplete questionnaires were found.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the demographic data on respondents. Table 2 displays the demographic data on respondents in which 142 males and 123 females were selected for the study. Of respondents, 54.3% were studying in engineering, 21.9% in business, 8.7% in social science, 1.1% in creative media, and the rest of them in other programmes. 71.7% of respondents were studying in full-time, 26.4% in part-time and 1.9% in exchange scheme. 55.8% of respondents have completed the matriculation while the rest of them have completed associate degree or higher diploma.

**Table 2.** Statistics of the personal data of respondents

Personal Details	No. of respondents	Percentage of respondents (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	142	53.6
Female	123	46.4
<b>Major</b>		
Business	58	21.9
Creative media	3	1.1
Engineering	144	54.3
Social Science	23	8.7
Others	37	14.0
<b>Study mode</b>		
Full-time	190	71.7
Part-time	70	26.4
Exchange	5	1.9
<b>Transition channel</b>		
Form 7	148	55.8
Community college	96	36.2
Others	21	7.9

### 3.3 Validity and Reliability Tests

The data was subject to analysis using SPSS Version 15. Univariate analysis including frequency distribution was used to analyze the personal data of respondents. Following this, bivariate analysis including t-test was used to test the three hypotheses.

Prior to bivariate analysis, data was examined to ensure that it was amenable to the use of these techniques. This involved examining the responses to each question for invalid responses and missing values. Then reliability analysis including Cronbach alpha, were used to test the reliability of the variables. The Cronbach alpha values of academic, social and psychological adjustments were 0.869, 0.704, and 0.845 respectively. Normally, the alpha value should be greater than 0.7 for well established measures (Nunnally, 1978). As no alpha value in this survey study was less than 0.7, the results were considered to be consistent and reliable.

In addition to Cronbach alpha, a factor analysis using varimax rotation was also performed as it typically produced an orthogonal set of interpretable dimensions (Kaiser & Coffrey, 1965; McDermeit, Funk, Foss, & Dennis, 2000). The factors with eigenvalues larger than 1 should be retained because an eigenvalue less than 1 implies the scores on the component would have negative reliability (Cliff, 1988; Kaiser, 1960; Zwick & Velicer, 1986). Factor loadings less than 0.3 were omitted as it is accepted that only factor loadings on the attributes greater than 0.3 were suitable for interpretation (Comrey, 1973; Li & Ford, 2007).

The factor analysis was conducted for the three constructs (academic adjustment, social adjustment and psychological adjustment). The results were shown in Table 1. For the 10 items of academic adjustment, all factor loadings were greater than 0.3 and only one factor had an eigenvalue greater than 1. This single factor accounted for 46.452% of total variance; factor loadings ranged from 0.356 to 0.587. For the social adjustment, all factor loadings were greater than 0.3 and only one factor had an eigenvalue greater than 1. This single factor accounted for 52.525% of total variance; factor loadings ranged from 0.344 to 0.669. For the psychological adjustment, all factor loadings were greater than 0.3 and only one factor had an eigenvalue greater than 1. This single factor accounted for 51.871% of total variance; factor loadings ranged from 0.613 to 0.791.

#### 4. Results

Bivariate analysis including t-test was then used to compare the differences between full-time students and part-time college students in adjusting to universities. The figures of means, standard deviations and t-test were shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Mean, Standard deviation and t-test figures of three dependent variables

Items	Mean (Standard Deviation)						Mean difference	t	df	Sig.
	Full-time students (N = 190)		Part-time students (N = 75)		Overall (N=265)					
<b>Academic</b>	3.387	0.522	2.688	0.626	3.065	0.586	0.699	9.264***	263	0.000
<b>Social</b>	3.540	0.647	2.857	0.650	3.246	0.648	0.683	7.726***	263	0.000
<b>Psychological</b>	3.208	0.662	2.570	0.555	2.956	0.606	0.639	7.386***	263	0.000
t-test is significant at *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001 level (2-tailed)										

**Hypothesis 1:** First year full-time students can adjust academically better than first year part-time students

This hypothesis was supported because there was significant difference between full-time and part-time students ( $t = 9.264$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). From table 3, the two mean scores (Full-time = 3.3874, part-time = 2.6880) suggested that both full-time and part-time students could adjust properly to the

university academically. However, full-time students could adjust academically to university better than that of part-time students.

**Hypothesis 2:** First year full-time students can adjust socially better than first year part-time students

This hypothesis was supported because there was significant difference between full-time and part-time students ( $t = 7.726, p < 0.001$ ). From table 3, the two mean scores (Full-time = 3.5395, part-time = 2.8567) suggested that both full-time and part-time students could adjust properly to the university socially. However, full-time students could adjust socially better than that of part-time students.

**Hypothesis 3:** First year full-time students can adjust psychologically better than first year part-time students

This hypothesis was supported because there was significant difference between full-time and part-time students ( $t = 7.386, p < 0.001$ ). From table 3, the two mean scores (full-time students = 3.2083, part-time students = 2.5695) suggested that both full-time and part-time students could adjust properly to the university psychologically. However, full-time students could adjust psychologically better than that of part-time students.

## 5. Discussion

The findings showed that the full-time students could adjust academically, socially and psychologically better than that of part-time students.

The most difficult academic transition issue that part-time students encountered was to balance their academic studies with their heavy full-time job workload (Urquhart, & Pooley, 2007). On the other hand, full-time students do not encounter this problem because they only focus on their full-time studies. Urquhart and Pooley (2007) also pointed out that part-time students felt that they overwhelmed by the heavy workload both on their jobs and studies. Therefore, they had difficulty in engaging to the studies in universities than full-time students. Therefore, full-time students could adjust academically better than part-time students.

Moreover, the above finding was also consistent with the previous research that examined the experiences of first year students (Mckenzie & Gow 2004; Wong & Kwok 1997). The research indicated that part-time students experience extreme time constraints because of the several responsibilities and commitments in their lives, for example, they got married and they were required to take care of their families as well. Therefore, part-time students were affected by the time constraint than that of full-time students.

In addition, part-time students also had difficulty in involving to the university social network as they have strong feeling of isolation due to their small minority in the university (Thomas & Jones 2003). Thomas and Jones (2003) also indicated that part-time students felt less peer support, social contacts and networks in the institutions compared with that of full-time students. This finding was reinforced by the research of Bowl (2003) that part-time students always feel university as “not for them”. On the other hand, full-time students can spend and contribute a lot of time on university social networks; they would make friends and form their network there more easily, and hence therefore, full-time students can have better social adjustment.

Additionally, part-time students also encountered more psychological problem than full-time students. When transiting to the universities, part-time students felt more insecure than full-time students as they had more doubt in their ability in handling the academic works (University of Teesside Retention Team 2005), and thus they developed more anxiety compared with that of full-

time students. Urquhart and Pooley (2007) also supported that during the transition period, part-time students always doubted whether they had their own academic ability, while full-time students had less doubt about their ability. As a result part-time students had stronger nervousness than full-time students.

Moreover, Student Retention Team at the University of Teesside (2005) found out that part-time students always perceived that the university staffs were not aware of their needs and did not communicate with them appropriately. As a result, they could not integrate into the social environment easily than full-time students. Besides part-time students also felt stress and more nervous with their academic performances. Hence, full-time students could adjust themselves to the universities psychologically better than part-time students.

## 6. Conclusions

It is concluded that (i) full-time students can adjust better academically than part-time students; (ii) full-time students can adjust better socially than part-time students; and (iii) full-time students can adjust better psychologically than part-time students.

The major limitations of this study were the small sample size and only the survey technique was used. In the future study, qualitative technique such as interview should be used to explore the reasons why full-time students could adjust better than part-time students academically, socially and psychologically.

The implication of this study is that the top managers of the university should know the significance of the difference between full-time and part-time students among three adjustments. Then those managers should know how to revise their university strategies to help part-time students improve their academic, social and psychological adjustments.

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