UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGES THAT STUDENTS EXPERIENCE DURING THEIR FIRST YEAR AT NAZARBAYEV UNIVERSITY

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Introduction. Students face challenges during the first year at university. Some students find it difficult to adapt to the new environment, while others have a smoother transition to university life. Master program students at Graduate School of Education conducted a mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) research to explore academic and non-academic challenges that Nazarbayev University students experience. We assumed that students" previous academic backgrounds as well as social life at university have impact on students" academic achievements in their first year of study.

Methods. The qualitative approach was used to explore students" perspectives on academic and non-academic challenges they experienced during the first year of their study and to identify students" proposed solutions to overcome these problems. The quantitative approach helped to assess the impact of school curriculum and living in the dormitory on the students" academic performance in their first year. Surveys and interviews were conducted among 240 students of Nazarbayev University. Thus, 160 students took part in the survey and 80 students were interviewed. The sample group was mostly made up of foundation and first year students.

Results and discussion. Firstly, language difficulties were the biggest challenge due to different backgrounds of their peers, different accents of instructors and different attitudes to the course content. Secondly, students reported that poor time management skills led to troubles with meeting deadlines. Moreover, adapting to the new environment and sharing rooms with strangers was not easy. To overcome these challenges students began to keep diaries, notes and stickers. Students emphasized on the great support from their peers in the dormitory and of the university in adapting to learning environment. Precisely, availability of various learning facilities, work of managers and instructors, and extracurricular activities were noted.

Conclusions. Socializing and lack of time management skills were the main challenges. Based on the research analysis, it was concluded that previous academic background of the students did not have much impact on their academic achievements at the university. For further research on the topic, several issues need to be addressed. Time was insufficient for collecting bigger number of answers and convenient sampling, as ideally random sampling should be applied to the research in order to generalize results to the whole population.