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IRSTI: 15.31.31

10.51889/2959-5967.2025.85.4.034

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PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE SOCIAL ADAPTATION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN UNIVERSITIES: CURRENT APPROACHES AND EMPIRICAL STUDY

Abstract

The article presents the results of a preliminary pilot study conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation aimed at examining the psychological and organisational factors influencing the engagement of students with special educational needs (SEN). The study involved 39 respondents with diverse health and developmental conditions (15 men and 24 women) studying in an inclusive educational environment. All participants had individual educational needs requiring specialised academic and psychological support.

The relevance of the study is determined by the need to improve the quality of inclusive education, enhance the psychological mechanisms of social and academic adaptation of students with SEN, and optimise systems of support and accompaniment within higher education institutions. The purpose of the study is to identify the relationships between the level of institutional support, the availability of educational resources, and the degree of engagement of students with SEN in the educational process.

Data were collected using a structured psycho-pedagogical questionnaire – the international methodology of the WHODAS 2.0, designed to assess the degree of functioning and participation of individuals with disabilities. Statistical data analysis was performed using quantitative methods. The results revealed a significant positive correlation between the level of support and engagement ($p < 0.05$), as well as between resource accessibility and engagement ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.05$).

The scientific novelty of the research lies in expanding the theoretical understanding of the factors influencing psychological engagement among students with special educational needs within inclusive education. The findings clarify the role of institutional support, accessibility, and psychosocial functioning as key predictors of educational motivation and social integration of students with SEN. The practical significance of the study lies in the potential application of its results for developing psycho-pedagogical support programmes and enhancing the effectiveness of inclusive practices in higher education institutions.

Key words: social adaptation, students with special educational needs, psychological factors, university environment, inclusive education.

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УНИВЕРСИТЕТТЕРДЕГІ АРНАЙЫ БІЛІМ БЕРУ ҚАЖЕТТІЛІКТЕРІ БАР СТУДЕНТТЕРДІҢ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК БЕЙІМДЕЛУІНЕ ЫҚПАЛ ЕТЕТІН ПСИХОЛОГИЯЛЫҚ ФАКТОРЛАР: ҚАЗІРГІ ТӘСІЛДЕР МЕН ЭМПИРИКАЛЫҚ ЗЕРТТЕУ

Аңдатпа

Мақалада арнайы білім беру қажеттіліктері (АБҚ) бар студенттердің оқу үдерісіне қатысуына ықпал ететін психологиялық және ұйымдастырушылық факторларды зерттеуге бағытталған докторлық диссертация шеңберінде жүргізілген алдын ала пилоттық зерттеудің нәтижелері ұсынылады. Зерттеуге инклюзивті білім беру ортасында оқитын денсаулық жағдайлары мен даму ерекшеліктері әртүрлі 39 респондент (15 ер адам және 24 әйел) қатысты. Барлық қатысушылар оқу үдерісінде арнайы академиялық және психологиялық қолдауды талап ететін жеке білім беру қажеттіліктеріне ие болды.

Зерттеудің өзектілігі инклюзивті білім берудің сапасын арттыру, АБҚ бар студенттердің әлеуметтік және академиялық бейімделуінің психологиялық механизмдерін жетілдіру, сондай-ақ жоғары оқу орындарындағы қолдау және сүйемелдеу жүйелерін оңтайландыру қажеттілігімен айқындалады. Зерттеудің мақсаты – институционалдық қолдау деңгейі, білім беру ресурстарының қолжетімділігі және АБҚ бар студенттердің оқу үдерісіне тартылу дәрежесі арасындағы өзара байланыстарды анықтау.

Деректер халықаралық әдістеме – WHODAS 2.0 психологиялық-педагогикалық құрылымдалған сауалнамасы арқылы жиналды, ол мүмкіндігі шектеулі тұлғалардың қызмет ету деңгейі мен қатысу дәрежесін бағалауға арналған. Статистикалық деректерді талдау сандық әдістерді қолдану арқылы жүргізілді. Нәтижелер қолдау деңгейі мен тартылу арасында статистикалық тұрғыдан маңызды оң корреляцияның ($p < 0.05$), сондай-ақ ресурстардың қолжетімділігі мен тартылу көрсеткіштері арасында да оң байланыс бар екенін көрсетті ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.05$).

Зерттеудің ғылыми жаңалығы инклюзивті білім беру жағдайында арнайы білім беру қажеттіліктері бар студенттердің психологиялық тартылуына әсер ететін факторлар туралы теориялық түсініктерді кеңейтуінде болып табылады. Нәтижелер институционалдық қолдау, қолжетімділік және психосоциалдық қызмет ету деңгейінің оқу мотивациясы мен әлеуметтік интеграцияның негізгі детерминанттары ретіндегі рөлін нақтылайды. Зерттеудің практикалық маңыздылығы – оның нәтижелерін психологиялық-педагогикалық қолдау бағдарламаларын әзірлеуде және жоғары оқу орындарындағы инклюзивті тәжірибелердің тиімділігін арттыруда қолдану мүмкіндігінде.

Негізгі сөздер: әлеуметтік бейімделу, арнайы білім беру қажеттіліктері бар студенттер, психологиялық факторлар, университет ортасы, инклюзивті білім беру.

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ПСИХОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ ФАКТОРЫ, ВЛИЯЮЩИЕ НА СОЦИАЛЬНУЮ АДАПТАЦИЮ СТУДЕНТОВ С ОСОБЫМИ ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНЫМИ ПОТРЕБНОСТЯМИ В УНИВЕРСИТЕТАХ:

СОВРЕМЕННЫЕ ПОДХОДЫ И ЭМПИРИЧЕСКОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ

Аннотация

В статье представлены результаты предварительного пилотного исследования, выполненного в рамках докторской диссертации, направленной на изучение психологических и организационных факторов, влияющих на вовлечённость студентов с особыми образовательными потребностями (ООП). В исследовании приняли участие 39 респондентов с различными состояниями здоровья и особенностями развития (15 мужчин и 24 женщины), обучающихся в инклюзивной образовательной среде. Все участники имели индивидуальные образовательные потребности, требующие специализированной академической и психологической поддержки.

Актуальность исследования определяется необходимостью повышения качества инклюзивного образования, совершенствования психологических механизмов социальной и академической адаптации студентов с ООП, а также оптимизации систем поддержки и сопровождения в высших учебных заведениях. Цель исследования – выявить взаимосвязи между уровнем институциональной поддержки, доступностью образовательных ресурсов и степенью вовлечённости студентов с ООП в образовательный процесс.

Сбор данных осуществлялся с использованием международной психолого-педагогической методики WHODAS 2.0, предназначенной для оценки уровня функционирования и участия лиц с ограничениями здоровья. Статистический анализ данных проводился с применением количественных методов. Результаты выявили статистически значимую положительную корреляцию между уровнем поддержки и вовлечённостью ($p < 0.05$), а также между доступностью ресурсов и вовлечённостью ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.05$).

Научная новизна исследования заключается в расширении теоретического понимания факторов, влияющих на психологическую вовлечённость студентов с особыми образовательными потребностями в условиях инклюзивного образования. Полученные результаты уточняют роль институциональной поддержки, доступности и психосоциального функционирования как ключевых предикторов учебной мотивации и социальной интеграции студентов с ООП. Практическая значимость работы состоит в возможности применения её результатов при разработке программ психолого-педагогического сопровождения и повышении эффективности инклюзивных практик в высших учебных заведениях.

Ключевые слова: социальная адаптация, студенты с особыми образовательными потребностями, психологические факторы, университетская среда, инклюзивное образование.

INTRODUCTION. The psychological adaptation of students with special educational needs within higher education represents a complex, multidimensional process involving cognitive, emotional, motivational, and social components. Although inclusive education policies formally guarantee equal access to learning, the real conditions of adaptation depend largely on the psychological resources of students and the quality of institutional support provided by universities.

Scientific evidence indicates that students with SEN experience a higher risk of academic and psychosocial difficulties, including elevated anxiety, reduced self-efficacy, and limited sense of belonging to the university community [1, 2]. These difficulties may stem not only from functional limitations but also from insufficient emotional support, limited peer interaction, and inconsistent pedagogical practices [3]. Such factors weaken engagement in learning activities and impede both academic progress and psychological well-being.

Research by Ryan and Struhs (2004) highlights that the barriers faced by students with special educational needs in higher education extend far beyond physical accessibility and are deeply embedded in the psychological and sociocultural climate of the university environment. The authors emphasise that many students encounter implicit exclusion through negative attitudes, limited academic flexibility, and insufficient interpersonal support from both peers and faculty. These barriers

reduce the sense of belonging and diminish academic self-efficacy, ultimately undermining the adaptive potential of students with SEN [4].

Building on these findings, contemporary research demonstrates that successful adaptation of students with SEN is shaped not only by external conditions but also by a set of internal psychological mechanisms. Perceived social support, self-regulation skills, stress resilience, and the quality of interpersonal communication have been identified as key determinants of engagement and academic functioning within inclusive university settings. Despite the increasing number of studies addressing these aspects, the existing literature still lacks comprehensive models that conceptualise adaptation as an integrated psychological process driven by the interaction of personal, interpersonal, and organisational factors. This gap underscores the need for a more holistic scientific perspective on the mechanisms facilitating or hindering the inclusion of students with SEN.

In the context of Kazakhstan, inclusive practices have expanded in recent years; however, universities continue to face challenges related to the insufficient development of psychological and pedagogical support services and the inconsistency of institutional responses to SEN-related needs. Empirical findings indicate that many students with SEN lack access to adequate counselling, adaptive learning strategies, and structured emotional support, which collectively undermines their engagement and academic motivation.

Given these gaps, there is a need for systematic psychological research aimed at identifying the factors that facilitate or obstruct successful adaptation and engagement among students with SEN. Addressing this issue is essential for improving the quality of inclusive education and for developing evidence-based psychological support models that enhance students' functioning and participation within the university environment.

The aim of this article is to conduct a theoretical and methodological analysis of the psychological conditions that contribute to the successful adaptation of students with SEN in the university educational environment.

The following objectives are set within the study:

1. To define the concepts of adaptation, psychological conditions, and inclusive environment in the context of higher education;
2. To analyze key internal and external psychological factors influencing the adaptation of students with SEN;
3. To systematize contemporary theoretical approaches and identify the most significant directions for future research.

Literature review. The contemporary scientific literature conceptualises the adaptation of students with special educational needs in higher education as a multidimensional psychological process arising at the intersection of personal resources, interpersonal interactions, and institutional conditions. Current theoretical frameworks converge on the view that adaptation is not merely behavioural adjustment but a dynamic socio-emotional and cognitive regulation process shaped by individual agency, perceived support, and contextual affordances [5;6].

A central emphasis across modern research is placed on the role of self-efficacy and autonomous motivation, which have been consistently linked to academic persistence, emotional stability, and coping among students with disabilities [7-9]. These internal mechanisms operate in parallel with emotion-regulation capacities and resilience, which determine the ability to navigate stressors associated with academic overload, communication barriers, and inconsistent institutional support [10;11].

Complementing individual-level explanations, ecological and social-contextual models offer a systemic understanding of adaptation. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, updated in contemporary applications to inclusive education, demonstrates that adaptation outcomes depend on the interplay of micro-level relationships with peers and faculty, meso-level organisational practices, and macro-level cultural norms [12]. These findings are reinforced by disability studies scholars who argue that inclusion depends less on individual characteristics and more on the removal of structural

and psychological barriers, such as inflexible teaching formats, lack of accommodations, and negative faculty attitudes [13].

The social model of disability and relational perspectives emphasise psychological safety, belonging, and recognition as fundamental determinants of successful inclusion. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that a sense of belonging mediates the relationship between institutional climate and academic engagement, with particularly strong effects among students with SEN [14;15]. Positive peer relationships, accessible communication with instructors, and inclusion in academic or extracurricular communities significantly reduce anxiety and enhance emotional well-being [16].

Across studies, institutional and pedagogical factors consistently appear as decisive for inclusion quality. International research identifies flexible teaching practices, universal design for learning (UDL), tutoring systems, and availability of psychological counselling as key mechanisms improving academic outcomes for students with SEN [17]. Effective inclusion is characterised not only by physical accessibility but by the presence of supportive social norms, empathy-based interaction, and organisational responsiveness to student needs.

Recent integrative works highlight that adaptation is best conceptualised through four interdependent dimensions: (1) communicative integration (competence in interacting with peers and faculty), (2) emotional integration (sense of belonging, psychological comfort), (3) role adaptation (mastery of academic and social roles), and (4) normative-value alignment (internalisation of institutional norms and expectations) [12;15]. These dimensions collectively determine students' capacity to function autonomously, maintain academic motivation, and participate meaningfully in university life.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that successful adaptation of students with SEN results from the synergy of personal dispositions (motivation, self-efficacy, resilience), relational experiences (support, acceptance, communication), and institutional conditions (inclusive policies, accessible pedagogies, supportive climate). Psychological adaptation emerges as a cumulative and developmental process shaped by the degree to which the educational environment supports autonomy, competence, and social connectedness.

MATERIALS AND METHODS This article presents the results of a preliminary pilot study, conducted alongside a literature review of the most recent and contemporary research in the field of social adaptation of students with special educational needs (SEN). The pilot study aimed to explore key psychological factors influencing social engagement and accessibility within university environments, serving as a foundational step before the main doctoral research.

The study involved 39 respondents aged between 17 and 22 years. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture a range of experiences regarding accessibility and social participation. Data collection was carried out using a structured questionnaire specifically developed for this research. The instrument included items addressing perceived social support, resource accessibility, awareness of available support services, perceived barriers, and involvement in social activities at university. An online survey was conducted via Google Forms among undergraduate students of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (KazNU).

The sample consisted of 15 males and 24 females. All participants were assessed using the World Health Organization Disability Assessment Schedule 2.0 (WHODAS 2.0), a standardized instrument developed by the World Health Organization to measure health and disability across cultures and health conditions [18]. WHODAS 2.0 is grounded in the conceptual framework of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) and is designed to capture the degree to which health limitations affect an individual's everyday functioning.

The WHODAS 2.0 includes 36 items covering six domains:

1. Cognition (understanding and communicating),
2. Mobility (moving and getting around),
3. Self-care (hygiene, dressing, eating, and staying alone),
4. Getting along (interacting with other people),

5. Life activities (household, work, or academic tasks), and
6. Participation (community activities, barriers, and emotional impact).

Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (none) to 5 (extreme or cannot do), reflecting the level of difficulty experienced over the past 30 days. The total score ranges from 36 to 180, with higher scores indicating greater disability or functional limitation. For interpretive clarity, raw scores were standardized to a 0–100 scale, where higher values represent lower levels of accessibility or increased participation barriers.

The WHODAS 2.0 provides both domain-specific and global disability scores, allowing researchers to examine functioning in particular areas as well as overall well-being. The instrument demonstrates high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$ – 0.98 across domains) and strong construct validity, supporting its use for diverse populations, including students with disabilities.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS Statistics version 26.0 (IBM Corp., 2019). The study employed both quantitative (descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and χ^2 tests) and qualitative approaches to assess the relationships between institutional support, resource accessibility, and student engagement. Scores from WHODAS 2.0 were normalized and ranked to explore associations between perceived functional barriers and levels of inclusion within the higher education environment. Qualitative Analysis. A thematic content analysis was conducted for the open-ended survey questions. The following key themes emerged:

- Limited awareness of available resources,
- Physical barriers (e.g., elevators, bathrooms, transport),
- Gaps in communication with university staff,
- Positive experiences related to inclusive education (e.g., flexible deadlines, individual accommodations).

The quantitative phase of analysis included:

- Descriptive statistics (mean scores, normalized values),
- Pearson correlation analysis to assess linear relationships between variables,
- Chi-square tests of independence to examine associations between categorical variables.

Prior to the main data collection, the questionnaire underwent a pilot testing phase to verify clarity, reliability, and relevance of the items, allowing refinement based on participant feedback. This mixed-method approach combining empirical data with a review of contemporary literature provides a comprehensive framework to understand the complex interplay of psychological and environmental factors affecting social adaptation in students with SEN.

RESULTS The empirical part of this pilot study was conducted among 39 undergraduate students with officially documented special educational needs (SEN), aged 17 to 22 years, with 15 male and 24 female participants. The sample included individuals with a variety of functional limitations, such as musculoskeletal, sensory, and chronic health conditions, all of whom are currently enrolled in inclusive educational programs at the university level.

To assess functional and social aspects of adaptation, participants were evaluated using the World Health Organization Disability Assessment Schedule 2.0 (WHODAS 2.0), a globally recognized instrument that captures six key domains: cognition, mobility, self-care, getting along, life activities, and participation. The tool allows for quantitative assessment of functional difficulties on a standardized scale.

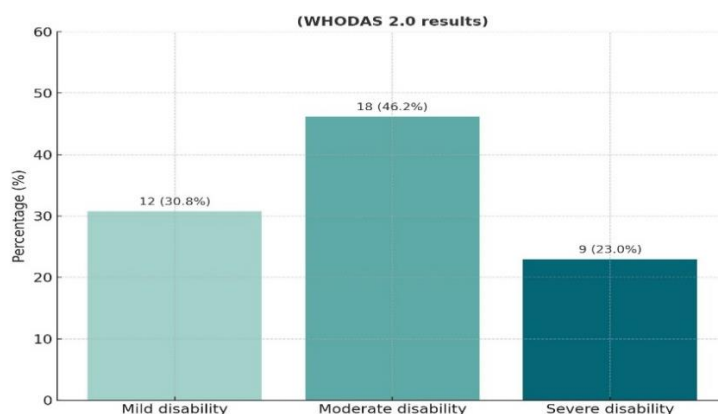


Figure 1 – Severity of Functional Limitations among Students (WHODAS 2.0 results)

According to WHODAS 2.0 results (see Fig. 1), participants were classified into three groups based on the severity of functional limitations:

- Mild disability - 12 students (30.8%),
- Moderate disability - 18 students (46.2%),
- Severe disability - 9 students (23.0%).

Descriptive statistics of key variables for the study group showed the following mean scores (based on normalized scales):

- Accessibility: 1.3 out of 2,
- Social support: 0.7 out of 1,
- Awareness of available resources: 0.5 out of 1,
- Perceived barriers: 0.75 out of 1,
- Social engagement: 0.6 out of 1.

These results reveal a moderate level of perceived accessibility and support, but simultaneously a relatively high perception of barriers to participation, indicating persistent challenges despite some available support.

Table 2. – Content Analysis

№	Category	Key Result
1	Gender	Majority female (~75%)
2	Type of Disability	Vision, motor, neuro, hearing impairments
3	Info Availability	Most say info is available
4	Counselling	Only 3 know provider
5	Faculty Preparation	Mixed responses
6	Financial Support	Low awareness
7	Learning Environment	Partially accessible
8	Toilets/Sanitation	Problems reported
9	Dormitories	Not adapted
10	Transport	No university transport
11	Nutrition	No special menu (mostly)
12	Flexible Deadlines	Some flexibility
13	Exam Adaptations	Partially implemented
14	Equipment	Limited equipment
15	Career Counselling	Almost absent
16	Social Participation	Restricted participation
17	Recommendations	Infrastructure, equipment, info

Content Analysis (Thematic summary approach), as the data were coded into key categories, summarizing participant responses into descriptive themes without in-depth interpretative phenomenological analysis (table 1).

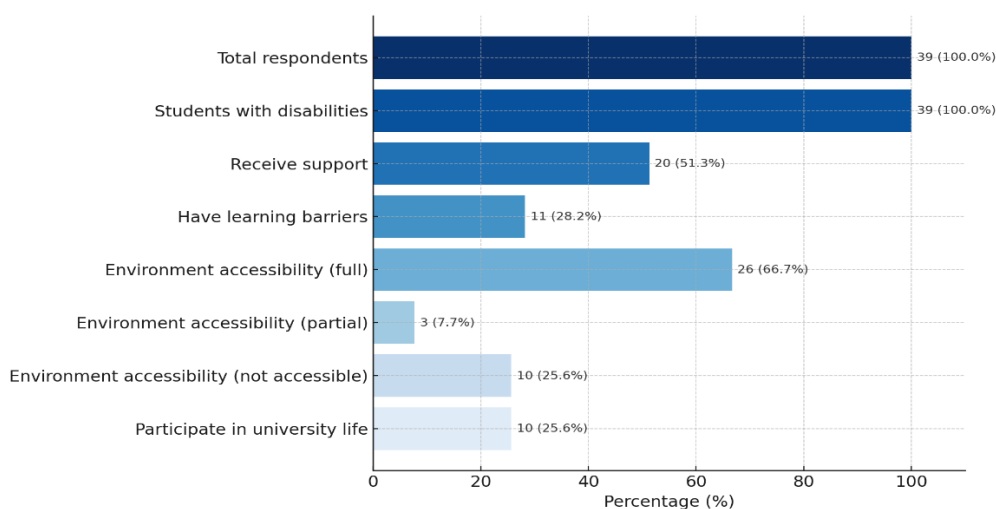


Figure 2. – Summary of Students with Disabilities Survey

Descriptive analysis revealed that out of 39 respondents with SEN. Among them, 51.3% received support, while 28.2% reported experiencing barriers in learning. Only 66.7% perceived the environment as fully accessible, 7.7% as partially accessible, and 25.6% as not accessible. Furthermore, 33.3% received information about services, and 25.6% participated in university life. See Figure 2 for a visual representation of these findings. Bar plot illustrating the percentage distribution of students with disabilities by key variables.

Statistical analysis revealed a significant association between perceived social support and engagement in social activities ($\chi^2 = 6.5$, $p = 0.01$). This indicates that students perceiving higher levels of social support tend to be more actively involved in university social life.

Table 3. – Chi-Square Test of Independence

	Active	Passive	Total
High social support	15	5	20
Low social support	6	13	19
Total	21	18	39

$\chi^2 (1, N = 39) = 6.5$, $p = 0.01$. This result is statistically significant, indicating that students who perceive higher levels of social support are more likely to be actively engaged in university life. This study revealed a significant relationship between perceived social support and social participation among students with disabilities. While support systems are in place, perceived barriers remain high. Findings underscore the need for improved accessibility, better communication, and targeted awareness efforts to foster inclusive academic and social environments.

Table 4. – Pearson Correlation Analysis

Variables	r	p-value
Social support – Social engagement	0.45	0.02
Accessibility – Social engagement	0.50	0.01
Barriers – Social engagement	-0.40	0.03
Accessibility – Participation in social activities	0.45	0.02

Awareness – Social engagement	0.35	0.06
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Furthermore, a positive correlation was found between resource accessibility and social engagement ($r = 0.45, p = 0.02$), indicating that improved access to physical, informational, and institutional support systems facilitates more active student involvement in social life. The main findings revealed: a statistically significant relationship between the level of perceived support and social engagement ($p < 0.05$); a moderate positive correlation between resource accessibility and both general engagement and participation in social activities ($r = 0.45, p = 0.02$). These results highlight the pivotal role of both structural accessibility and social support systems in fostering inclusive university environments.

DISCUSSION. The findings of this study confirm the critical role of social support, accessibility, and inclusive practices in facilitating the adaptation and social integration of students with special educational needs in higher education. Consistent with previous research, the results demonstrate that emotional, informational, and practical support from faculty, peers, and institutional structures significantly buffer the challenges associated with disabilities, enhancing engagement, self-efficacy, and psychological well-being [13;16]. The positive correlation between accessibility and engagement underscores the importance of tangible inclusive measures, including physical infrastructure, academic accommodations, and effective communication of resources. At the same time, the persistent perception of barriers highlights gaps in existing support systems, indicating the need for ongoing improvements in the inclusivity and responsiveness of university environments.

Recent empirical research by Moldakhanova et al. (2025) provides direct evidence on the psychological conditions facilitating adaptation of students with special educational needs in higher education. Their study highlights that effective adaptation is mediated by a combination of internal resources and external factors including social support from peers and faculty, institutional accessibility, and inclusive practices [19]. The findings reinforce the notion that adaptive success is not solely dependent on structural provisions, but critically involves psychosocial processes that enable students to engage fully in academic and social university life. This aligns with broader theoretical frameworks emphasizing the interaction between personal, interpersonal, and institutional determinants of adaptation [7;17].

Despite these valuable insights, the study has several limitations. The relatively small and homogeneous sample ($n=39$) limits generalizability, and the cross-sectional design prevents causal conclusions or analysis of adaptation over time. Data were collected via self-report, introducing potential subjectivity, and the absence of a control group prevents direct comparison with students without SEN. Moreover, the single-institution sample may not reflect broader systemic trends. Nonetheless, this pilot research provides a foundation for further investigations and has several strengths, including the use of a standardized international instrument (WHODAS 2.0), which ensures reliability and cross-contextual comparability, and the identification of concrete links between psychosocial factors and adaptive outcomes.

Future research should consider multi-institutional or national-level designs, incorporate qualitative methods to explore lived experiences, include teachers' and administrators' perspectives, and develop intervention programs aimed at enhancing adaptation and participation. Methodologically, factor analysis, multiple regression, MANOVA/ANOVA, structural equation modeling, and longitudinal analysis represent appropriate statistical approaches for testing comprehensive models of adaptation and social integration in higher education. These findings contribute important empirical evidence regarding the psychological and environmental determinants of social adaptation for students with SEN. They reinforce the necessity of comprehensive support structures, accessible resources, and an inclusive educational climate as foundational elements for promoting engagement, well-being, and equal participation in higher education settings.

CONCLUSION. This pilot study, combining theoretical review and empirical data, confirmed the critical influence of psychological and social factors on the social adaptation of university students

with special educational needs. According to the WHODAS 2.0 assessment, all 39 participants had functional limitations of varying degrees. The severity distribution showed that 30.8% of students had mild limitations, 46.2% moderate, and 23.0% severe.

The statistical analyses revealed a significant association between perceived social support and the level of social engagement ($\chi^2 = 6.5$, $p = 0.01$), as well as a moderate positive correlation between resource accessibility and participation in social activities ($r = 0.45$, $p = 0.02$). These findings emphasize the importance of cultivating an inclusive university environment where students with SEN are not only academically supported but also socially integrated and actively involved in campus life. Despite the presence of some support mechanisms, average WHODAS domain scores indicate persistent barriers, limited awareness, and only moderate accessibility. These outcomes highlight the need for a strategic institutional shift toward systemic inclusion, involving not only physical and informational accessibility but also psychosocial and emotional support structures.

In conclusion, the successful integration of students with SEN into higher education depends on the synergy between personal resources, peer and faculty support, and inclusive institutional policies. Sustainable inclusion requires not only infrastructural adaptation but also enhanced faculty training, increased social awareness, and meaningful student engagement. These factors collectively contribute to reducing marginalization, fostering resilience, and enabling full academic and social participation.

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