



Bridging the Gap: Academic and Social Challenges of First Year Out-of-Town English Students at Mulawarman University

Mukhtasyar Al Hazami¹, Yuni Utami Asih², Aridah³

Universitas Mulawarman, Indonesia

Mutasar.alhazami03@gmail.com¹, yuniutamiasih@fkip.unmul.ac.id², aridah@fkip.unmul.ac.id³

Correspondence author Email: Mutasar.alhazami03@gmail.com

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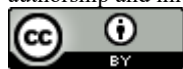
Abstract

This study aims to investigate the academic and social challenges faced by new students in the English education, study program at Mulawarman University Who come from outside the city. This study uses a qualitative case study design with four participants who had the lowest GPA in the last semester. Data were collected through Semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The results of the study show, remained these academic challenges Social Challenges and strategies for overcoming these challenges. Academic challenges include time management in dealing with heavy workloads and difficulties in understanding English-based learning. Social challenges include homesickness, lack of confidence, and difficulties in social adaptation. Despite facing various obstacles. students implemented several strategies, such as asking for help from Friends, joining campus, organizations, and Independent Learning This study emphasizes, the importance of Campus, support systems, in helping new students from outside the region, adapt and succeed academically. And socially These findings can serve as input for lecturers, program administrators and campus officials in designing orientation programs, and students Support Services.

Keywords academic challenges; social challenges; First-Year Out-of- Town Students.

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1. Introduction

The transition from high school to university can be especially difficult for transferring first-year students who come from out of town. They have to face academic challenges such as independent study and heavier workloads, as well as adapt socially without support from family or friends. These problems are often compounded by limited academic preparation and access to support networks. Baker and Siryk's (1984) Academic Adjustment Theory and Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory explain how motivation, environment, and support systems affect student adjustment. Research by Nurfitriana, Ping, and Asih (2024) shows that language



barriers, cultural adjustment, and lack of shared language affect students even in local EFL contexts, making them dependent on peer support and self-learning. Medani et al. (2024) add that out-of-town students also face emotional, financial and health stress. Despite this, existing research often overlooks the unique struggles of out-of-town students. This research focuses on first-year English Education students at Mulawarman University to explore their academic and social challenges, as well as the strategies they use to adapt.

1.2 Concept of Academic Challenges

Academic challenges refer to the problems students face with assignments, time management, and adapting to new learning styles. First-year students often struggle with the transition from school to university, as they need to be more independent and disciplined. This transition is explained through Academic Adjustment Theory, which highlights how college students cope through motivation, engagement in learning, and skill development (Baker & Siryk, 1984). Out-of-town students face additional stress due to separation from family and unfamiliar surroundings (Akhtar, 2024). First-year students experience stress due to living alone, heavy workloads, fear of failure, and lack of support (Tenkorang et al., 2020). Many students also experience difficulties in understanding lectures, managing assignments, and dealing with academic pressures (Mulaudzi, 2023). These challenges, if not addressed, can lead to anxiety and poor academic performance in new students.

1.3 Concept of Social Challenges

Social challenges are common among first-year out-of-town students who have to adapt to a new environment, build friendships, and overcome homesickness. This transition can be stressful and overwhelming. According to Schlossberg's Transition Theory, college students' ability to adjust depends on their personal strengths and the support they receive from others (Schlossberg, 1981). Strong social support can reduce loneliness and stress, while the absence of social support can lead to isolation and adjustment difficulties (Hussein & Yousef, 2024). Personal traits such as patience and resilience also help; patient and emotionally strong students



are better able to handle homesickness and social pressures (Hidayat et al., 2024). Bayaga et al. (2022) found that first-year students also struggled to adapt to a new environment, poor housing, and limited on-campus engagement, even though they managed to make friends. In Indonesia, many students from small towns face similar issues such as culture shock, high living costs, and lack of support systems.

1.4 Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

To overcome academic and social challenges, students use various strategies such as finding academic help, joining student organizations, and utilizing campus support services. These approaches help them adjust more smoothly and build confidence. According to Farias et al. (2025), adapting to university life requires not only study skills, but also emotional resilience and effective time management. Besides institutional support, help from peers also plays an important role. For example, the “My Uni-Buddy” program at Taibah University, where senior students mentor freshmen, helps freshmen feel more confident and less lonely (Alharthi, 2020). Similarly, Ayiz & Tauchid (2022) highlighted that peer teaching significantly reduced public speaking anxiety among EFL learners, with the mean anxiety score decreasing from 64.23 to 54.44, thus improving their confidence and language learning outcomes through collaborative learning and constructive feedback. Thus, strong peer networks, emotional resilience, and well-designed university programs are key to improving students' adjustment and academic success.

1.5 Research Gap and Objectives

Although many studies have explored student transitions, little attention has been paid to out-of-town students in the Indonesian context. Most research focuses on international students, and neglects local students who face unique academic and social challenges, especially in English language education programs (Nurfitriana et al., 2024; Akhtar et al., 2024). In addition, little attention has been paid to addressing Social challenges, such as homesickness and adjustment to a new environment in out-of-town freshmen.

This study aims to:



1. Investigate the academic challenges faced by first-year out-of-town students in the English Education program at Mulawarman University.
2. Explore the social adjustment difficulties they experience.
3. Identify the strategies used to overcome these challenges within the local institutional and cultural context.

This research offers insights into improving student support systems in Indonesian universities.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This research used a qualitative case study design to explore the academic and social challenges of first-year out-of-town students at Mulawarman University. The study focused on four English Education students with the lowest GPA in their final semester, who were selected through purposive sampling. This approach allowed for an in depth understanding of personal experiences and adaptation strategies that could not be captured through quantitative methods. Their experiences provided valuable insights into the struggles commonly faced by students adjusting to new academic and social environments.

2.2 Data Collection Instruments

Data will be collected using a semi-structured interview guide. This method allows flexibility for students to share their experiences openly while still focusing on key topics related to academic challenges, social challenges, and adaptation strategies. The interview guide will include questions about academic workload, social adjustment, homesickness, coping methods, and use of university support services.

2.3 Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected from the interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher will transcribe the interview recordings, carefully read through the transcripts, and then code the data to identify recurring patterns and key themes. These themes will be grouped under categories related to the academic and social experiences of first-year out-of-town students, as well as the coping strategies they use.



3. Findings and Discussion

This current section presents the results of the study in accordance with the main themes of the research questions. The research questions are recapped for ease of reference: Thus, (1) What academic challenges are faced by first-year out-of-town English students at Mulawarman University? (2) What social challenges do they experience while adjusting to university life? (3) How do students overcome these challenges?

3.1 Academic Challenges Faced by First-Year Out-of-Town English Students at Mulawarman University

In the process of transitioning to a higher education environment, students often face various academic challenges that affect their success in adapting academically. Based on the theory of academic adjustment developed by Baker and Siryk (1984), academic adjustment includes students' ability to meet academic demands, which include involvement in learning activities and confidence in academic abilities that are very different compared to junior high school. Some of the challenges faced by participants in this study were in terms of time management and changes in learning methods.

Students were surprised by the heavier workload compared to high school. They also admitted to having difficulties in time management, especially in completing coursework that has tight deadlines and high volume.

P1 stated:

“In high school, there weren't many assignments, but in college, assignments came every week with strict deadlines. So, I started working on them at night, went to bed at 10pm and woke up at 2am to work on the assignments until 4am, then slept again until morning.”

P2 added:

“In high school, assignment deadlines are loose. In college, assignments can be completed in 1-2 days. If I had a lot of assignments, I struggled, often stayed up late, and sometimes overslept.”

P4 stated:



“At the beginning of college, I was surprised by the number of assignments compared to high school. I had trouble managing my time, but now I'm starting to adapt and understand that college assignments are much different, much more difficult and numerous.”

They often feel overwhelmed by the heavier academic load in college compared to high school. Tight deadlines and poor time management are major challenges, leading some of them to adjust their sleep schedules, even though this leads to fatigue. This is in line with Zhiyuan et al. (2025), who found similar struggles among international students, and Husna et al. (2025), who added that increased academic demands often increase stress and fatigue, especially during the transition from high school to college.

In addition to experiencing difficulties in time management in studying and doing assignments due to changes in learning methods, participants also experienced difficulties in understanding learning in English and felt less confident to speak in English. This is especially true for participants who are new students of the English program, they are not used to and are surprised by the learning that is taught in full English when in class.

P1 stated:

“I find it difficult when the lecturer uses full English in class. I understand when the lecturer explains the material, but when asked to express my opinion, I am at a loss for English words.”

P2 added:

“I can follow classes taught in English because from junior high to high school I am used to speaking foreign languages, both English and Arabic. However, I still have difficulties in speaking and expressing my opinion.”

P4 added:

“I struggled because entering the English education program was not my choice. At first it was difficult to understand English classes, and until now it is still confused and difficult to express opinions using English.”

The participants indicated that they had difficulty adapting to teaching that was entirely in English. Many students experience anxiety about making mistakes when speaking, which



can inhibit their willingness to participate in conversations (Nasution et al., 2022). Similarly, Rosita (2024) identifies anxiety as a major barrier to English speaking among Indonesian students, with 86.1% reporting it hinders their participation—supporting the idea that fear of errors reduces engagement in class discussions.

3.2 Social Challenges in Adjusting to University Life

New English Education students who come from out of town will experience academic and social challenges during the transition to college life. This transition from high school to a new and unfamiliar environment is a major life change. According to Schlossberg's Transition Theory, successful adjustment depends on four factors: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategy. The participants in this study faced difficulties in adapting to new friends, a different campus culture, and being away from family. Many reported feelings of homesickness and loneliness, especially early in the semester when they were still adjusting to living independently in a new environment.

Some students have difficulty adjusting to a new social environment that is arguably different from their previous environment because they come from different regions. Some students, especially those from pesantren educational backgrounds or homogeneous environments, feel awkward or lack confidence in interacting with new friends in a more diverse and open campus environment.

P4 said that he previously studied in a pesantren-based dormitory, so his interactions with the opposite sex and peers were very limited.

“I just started to socialize widely on campus, because previously I studied in a boarding school that limited interaction, especially with the boy. At ESA, I often interact, thus expanding my social network.”

P4 pointed out that limited social skills create awkwardness, which improves through campus organizations that help expand social connections and ease interactions in more diverse environments.



P2 added:

“I have difficulty opening up topics of conversation with new people, but through activities in ESA, I can meet new friends and understand their interests, making it easier for me to start conversations.”

Meanwhile, P3 did not experience difficulties in adapting to the new campus environment. This reflects that students' level of social adaptation can vary greatly depending on their personality and how actively they are involved in social activities.

“I have no difficulty in socializing and adapting to the campus environment. Since high school I have been used to socializing and interacting with many people.”

Participants' statements show that educational and cultural backgrounds greatly influence students' self-confidence in social interactions in the campus environment. This is in line with the findings of Rusnac & Rosciupchin (2023) and Anjani et al. (2024) which emphasize the importance of social support in increasing self-confidence. According to Schlossberg (1981), this challenge is related to the “Self” factor in transition theory. Therefore, joining campus organizations or study groups is an important strategy to overcome these social barriers.

In addition to experiencing difficulties in adjusting to a new social environment, both the university social environment and the environment outside the university, students also experience several personal problems such as loneliness and homesickness which can interfere with students in socializing and adapting to a new environment. Loneliness and homesickness are often faced by First-Year Out-of-Town students, because they often feel lonely and homesick when studying higher education far from where they live (Hidayat et al., 2024).

Some participants experienced occasional homesickness and loneliness, especially during weekends, illness, or long periods without seeing family. P1 mentioned feeling homesick mainly when she was sick.



“When I feel homesick, it usually happens when I am sick. As an only child, I am used to being well cared for at home. Here, I have to cook by myself and buy my own medicine, which makes the situation even more difficult.”

This situation of emotional discomfort arises when students have to take care of themselves without direct support from the family, especially when they are sick.

Participant 3 also said the same thing, despite living with her sister:

“I have experienced homesickness, especially when I miss my parents. Even though I have my sister who accompanies me in the boarding house, I still miss them. In addition, I also miss my hometown because the atmosphere is very different from Samarinda.”

This shows that the presence of family members does not always completely eliminate homesickness, especially because the atmosphere and habits of the place of origin are difficult to replace in a new environment.

Meanwhile, participant 4 said that she experienced homesickness only at certain times, especially when she had nothing to do on weekends, or when she started thinking about her desire to go home:

“Sometimes I think about going home, especially on weekends with no activities. If I don't go home, I often go to my aunt's house to stay overnight.”

while participant 2 has a different opinion from the other participants:

“I rarely experience loneliness and homesickness, because in front of my house there is an aunt's house too and on weekends I often go home.”

Responses from participants indicate that family support is important to reduce loneliness and homesickness, especially during illness. This finding is in line with Hidayat et al. (2024) who stated that out-of-town students are more prone to loneliness because they are



far from the main support, namely family. Lewis (2023) also added that emotional distress due to homesickness can interfere with concentration and reduce learning motivation.

3.3 Strategies for Overcoming Challenges in University Adjustment

In facing the academic and social challenges of transitioning to higher education, students rely not only on their personal abilities, but also on the strategies they use. Students need to have strategies to overcome these challenges, but the university also has an important role in helping this adjustment process through supportive campus programs. Findings from the interviews show that students use various means, such as asking friends for help and joining campus organizations. These strategies not only help them survive, but also support successful long-term adaptation to the higher education environment.

Support from friends is very helpful for students in facing challenges, both academically and socially. Most participants relied on classmates, seniors, and friends across majors as a source of academic help, as well as a place to share stories. This form of support includes re-explaining material, helping to check assignments, and providing comfort when facing difficulties or anxiety. The interview findings showed that friends made it easier to adapt to the new campus environment.

P1 stated:

“if I still don't understand I ask my friends and seniors. Sometimes I ask friends to check whether my work is correct or not.”

Not only in the academic context, support from friends is also a means to build social connections. P1 added that the relationships that had begun to be built since the beginning of college helped her feel more comfortable and less awkward:

“When I first entered college, I was already acquainted with them through chat and when I met at the beginning, I already knew them and it was not awkward.”

Similarly, P2, who initially admitted that it was difficult to get along with new people, felt that the presence of friends and members in ESA made him feel accepted and comfortable:



“because I am a person who is difficult to adapt, but because the older siblings are happy and interact with me, it makes me comfortable and easy for me to adapt.”

The support of friends was also felt by P3, which greatly helped her to adapt to the new environment

“friends often invite me to have a conversation first and make me comfortable and easy to adapt.”

Meanwhile, P4 explained that he felt that he understood the lecture material better when it was explained by friends than by lecturers, because the language used was easier to understand:

“I ask my friends to explain in their language, because I understand their language better than the lecturer's language.”

In addition, this participant also showed how the network of friends across study programs became a source of strength in social adaptation:

“friends from other study programs really helped me in adapting because I became comfortable with the campus environment.”

The interview results show that peer support is very important in shaping new students' confidence, caring and motivation to learn. This is in line with Wu et al. (2024) state that positive interactions between friends can reduce academic stress. In addition, social interaction has a positive effect on students' psychological well-being and mental health (Aslamina et al., 2024).

Involvement in campus organizations is proven to be an important factor that helps new students in the process of social adaptation in the college environment. All participants in this study joined ESA (English Student Association), a student organization for students of English Education Study Program at Mulawarman University. Through ESA, students get a place to expand their social network, increase their self-confidence, and form social interactions that support both academically and emotionally.



As stated by P1, her involvement in ESA has a direct impact on her social interactions and provides moral encouragement for new students to build healthy and open relationships with each other:

“In ESA I can get to know friends from different classes, because I am in the same division in ESA and ESA often encourages me to make friends and tells me not to differentiate between friends..”

P2 initially had difficulty starting conversations with new people, but through ESA activities, she became more open and confident in communicating.

“because I often participate in ESA activities, I have made new friends and know the things they like, which makes it easy for me to open up a topic of conversation.”

Meanwhile, P4, who came from a relatively closed dormitory education background, felt a big change in her social skills thanks to her involvement in ESA:

“When I was in high school, I lived in a boarding school, so interaction with other people was rare. However, in ESA, I have more opportunities to interact, so my social network has become wider.”

Participants 1,2 and 4 are students who actively participate in ESA activities in contrast to P3, although he rarely participates in ESA activities, she still admits that involvement in the organization helps him make friends such as friends who are different classes from her:

“the most is just getting to know friends from other classes.”

This shows that even low levels of participation in campus organizations can have positive social impacts in the long run.

Overall, campus organization involvement (ESA) provides significant social benefits for new students. This finding is similar to the findings of other studies, Mustaqim & Wahjoedi



(2024) found that Participation in campus organizations improves social relationships and self-exploration, fosters communication skills and self-confidence.

In addition, universities play an important role in supporting new students from outside the city through programs such as peer mentoring, student organizations, and counseling services. These programs help with academic transition, reduce isolation, and improve self-confidence, time management, and social relationships, which have a positive long-term impact on student achievement and well-being. Formal services such as academic mentoring are rarely used, possibly due to limited access or lack of awareness. Strengthening and improving these services is crucial. Future research should explore how students interact with campus support services and identify areas requiring improvement to enhance their overall university experience. On the other side, faculty members play a significant role in helping students adapt academically through guidance and an inclusive classroom environment. The limited mention of faculty roles in this study highlights the need for stronger interaction between students and faculty. Regular meetings, open discussions, and a welcoming attitude can alleviate anxiety, particularly for students from outside the city. This could serve as an area for further exploration in future studies.

The challenges faced by new students from outside the region in adapting to university life are not unique to Mulawarman University, but are also experienced at various higher education institutions in the ASEAN region. For example, Pattimura University has implemented the “MENISCUS” mentoring program, which has proven effective in helping first-year medical students develop personal and professional skills through regular mentoring sessions (Harahap et al., 2023). Another study by Le et al. (2024) highlights the benefits of peer mentoring in improving academic performance, emotional well-being, and social integration among students. These findings suggest that structured institutional support and effective mentoring programs can play a crucial role in helping new students adapt to the campus environment, reduce academic stress, and enhance overall academic performance.



4. Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the academic and social challenges faced, by first year out of town students in the English education program at Mulawarman University with a focus on students with low Grade Point Average (GPA). Using qualitative case studies and thematic analysis. This study identified major difficulties such as poor time management, difficulty understanding english-based instructions, homesickness, and lack of confidence in social interactions. Despite these challenges participants, demonstrated resilience by seeking help from peers, joining campus organizations and creating structured routines.

These findings highlight the importance of peer support, family, presence and campus involvement in helping students adapt. University programs such as student organizations and mentoring systems play a crucial role in providing academic and emotional support. The study suggests that universities, create targeted, support services for out-of-town students, especially during their first year to help improve adjustment academic success and overall well-being. Additionally, these findings provide practical guidance for strengthening existing student support services and developing more inclusive programs to meet the diverse needs of university students. Future research is encouraged to adopt a longitudinal design to observe how academic and social challenges evolve over time and evaluate the long-term impact of early support systems on student development.

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