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MENTAL HEALTH AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT AMONG FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS IN SOCIAL SCIENCES: A FIELD STUDY CONDUCTED AT THE FACULTY OF SOCIAL AND HUMAN SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF HAMMA LAKHDAR – EL OUED

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ABSTRACT

The psychological well-being of first-year university students is a critical factor that has garnered considerable attention from researchers and specialists, as mental health significantly influences academic adjustment, either positively or negatively. Building on this premise, the present study investigates the relationship between mental health and academic adjustment among a sample of 75 first-year students enrolled in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Hamma Lakhdar University of El Oued. The study also examines potential differences in mental health and academic adjustment according to gender. To achieve these objectives, a descriptive research design was employed, utilizing validated and reliable instruments for measuring mental health and academic adjustment. The findings indicate a positive correlation between mental health and academic adjustment ($r = 0.679$). Furthermore, while no significant gender differences were found in mental health, the results revealed statistically significant differences in academic adjustment, favoring female students.

Introduction.

In contemporary educational discourse, university students are increasingly viewed as a cornerstone of societal advancement. As a form of strategic human capital, they embody both the present vitality and future potential of their communities. The quality of higher education and scientific research is intrinsically linked to the holistic well-being of students—encompassing moral integrity, cultural awareness, intellectual competence, and psychological resilience.

Education's ultimate mission is to cultivate responsible citizens who can contribute meaningfully to both personal and national development. Achieving this goal requires a comprehensive approach to student support—addressing academic, emotional, social, and developmental needs.

The transition from secondary school to university, particularly in the first year, often brings a unique set of challenges. Many first-year students encounter psychological alienation, difficulty integrating into the new academic and social environment, and tension between their expectations and the realities of university life. Such experiences can generate internal conflicts that demand significant adjustment.

In this context, mental health becomes a pivotal factor. It may be defined as the individual's capacity to adapt effectively to life's demands, to engage productively with their environment, and to maintain harmonious relationships within the framework of societal norms and values. Good mental health underpins self-regulation, resilience, and the ability to navigate crises—qualities essential for academic persistence and success. Conversely, maladaptation can disrupt psychological balance, leading to decreased performance and well-being (Al-Shammari, 2013, p. 115).

Building on this perspective, the present study seeks to offer actionable insights for university educators, mental health professionals, and parents—highlighting the importance of fostering both academic adjustment and psychological well-being among students.

Research Problem

The university stage holds a distinctive position in the educational continuum, serving as the capstone of formal education and a critical bridge to professional life. By providing access to diverse disciplines and specialized knowledge, universities offer students opportunities for self-development, skill refinement, and goal attainment. This process enables them to explore personal interests, clarify career aspirations, and enter the labor market with confidence.

The significance of this phase extends beyond knowledge acquisition; it involves preparing individuals to participate actively in societal development alongside other social and economic actors (Jaber, 1997). However, the transition is not without its challenges. Maladaptive behaviors—such as aggression, disengagement from academic responsibilities, and strained interactions with faculty—can emerge.

Academic adjustment, defined as the ability to adapt effectively to the academic environment, is a fundamental determinant of success. Students who adjust well tend to experience enriched academic and social interactions, enhanced skill development, and better mental health outcomes. Those who struggle with adjustment often face barriers that impact their behavior, psychological stability, and academic performance (Ismail, 2001).

Academic maladjustment is thus an educational, psychological, and social concern. It can manifest as tension, anxiety, and emotional instability, which may lead to confusion, withdrawal, or aggression—behaviors that complicate teaching and learning processes (Addad, 2008).

Empirical evidence reinforces this connection. Krishna and Kumar (1979) found that maladjusted adolescents exhibited significantly lower levels of psychological security and well-being compared to their well-adjusted peers (Al-Zubaidi, 2007). Helmy's (1986) study revealed a negative correlation between adjustment problems and academic achievement, while Hassan (1989) reported that underachieving students with poor adjustment displayed lower mental health, characterized by feelings of inferiority and excessive daydreaming (Al-Zubaidi, 2007).

More recently, Al-Shammari (2013) demonstrated a significant positive relationship between mental health and academic adjustment among students of the Faculty of Physical Education. Collectively, these studies underscore the interdependence of mental health and academic adjustment (Abdel-Hamid, 1990).

Based on this evidence, the present study investigates the relationship between mental health and academic adjustment among first-year students in the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences at Hamma Lakhdar University, El Oued, Algeria. The study addresses the following questions:

1. Is there a statistically significant relationship between mental health and academic adjustment among first-year students in the Faculty of Social Sciences at El Oued University?

2. Are there statistically significant gender differences in mental health and academic adjustment among these students?

Hypotheses

- There is a statistically significant relationship between mental health and academic adjustment among first-year students in the Faculty of Social Sciences at El Oued University.
- There are statistically significant gender differences in mental health among these students.
- There are statistically significant gender differences in academic adjustment among these students.

Significance of the Study
This study is significant in that it:
- Highlights the central role of mental health in shaping academic adjustment.
- Identifies factors influencing the educational trajectories of university students.
- Provides faculty and administrators with actionable insights into students' psychological well-being, which is a critical determinant of their academic and professional futures.

Objectives
The study aims to:
- Illuminate the dynamics of the university experience.
- Identify factors that influence academic adjustment.
- Examine the relationship between mental health and high academic adjustment.
- Assess the role of mental health alongside students' abilities and resources in facilitating academic success.

Operational Definitions
- **Mental Health**: The individual's effective adaptation to life and others, a positive sense of happiness, and alignment with societal norms and values (Barakat, 1978, p. 32). In this study, it is measured by scores on the Mental Health Scale developed by Kamel Al-Zubaidi and Sanaa Mujoul Al-Hazza, administered to first-year Social Sciences students at El Oued University during the 2018/2019 academic year.
- **Academic Adjustment**: The ability of first-year students to integrate effectively with peers, faculty, and the curriculum, demonstrated through constructive interactions, diligence, and adherence to university regulations. Measured using Youngman's Academic Adjustment Questionnaire.

Study Scope
- **Timeframe**: November 5–23, 2018.
- **Location**: Department of Social Sciences, Hamma Lakhdar University, El Oued.
- **Population**: First-year Social Sciences students in the common core program.

Mental Health
Definition: A positive emotional state resulting from the fulfillment of physiological and psychological needs, producing feelings of comfort, happiness, satisfaction, security, and the ability to maintain appropriate levels of psychological and social adjustment while effectively managing life's challenges (Ghorab, 2015, p. 26).
Importance: Mental health plays a pivotal role in individual and collective functioning across educational, social, and economic domains. In family contexts, it fosters healthy personality development; in educational settings, it supports constructive relationships and academic growth; in professional sectors, it enhances productivity and development (Al-Farah & Tayem, 1999).
The University's Psychological Role: Universities draw students from diverse backgrounds, each with aspirations and goals. Through its academic and social structures, the university can shape behaviors positively, encourage problem-solving skills, and promote respectful engagement. Faculty members, in particular, play a crucial role in addressing challenges constructively, enabling students to learn from experiences and avoid psychological strain that could hinder academic progress (Al-Sboul, 2007).

Academic Adjustment
Definition: An ongoing process of adapting to the academic environment, including curricula, assessment systems, faculty relationships, and peer interactions, with the aim of achieving high academic performance (Massoudi, 2008).
Importance: Academic adjustment is vital for stability and success. Students who adjust well are better equipped to handle academic pressures and maintain a balance between demands and personal capacities. Poor adjustment often results in stress, underachievement, and maladaptive behaviors such as withdrawal or aggression, which may lead to psychological disorders (Al-Shazly, 2001).

Mental Health and Academic Adjustment

The relationship between adjustment and mental health is so closely intertwined that the two are sometimes treated as overlapping concepts. Academic adjustment, in particular, is a critical determinant of mental well-being. Students who face adjustment difficulties may experience anxiety, low confidence, and reduced performance.

Creating a supportive psychological climate—both inside and outside the classroom—can promote a sense of security, minimize conflict, and enhance both well-being and academic success. Conversely, unresolved adjustment issues can lead to psychological distress, underscoring the need for proactive support strategies to ensure students' holistic development and achievement (Ismail, 2001).

Several studies investigating the psychological characteristics of academically well-adjusted students have demonstrated that such students exhibit notable changes in their levels of psychological and self-competence, as well as in their social adjustment within the school environment. They also tend to display a heightened sense of psychological and social security.

Conversely, findings from research focusing on academically underachieving students have revealed that these students often possess lower levels of certain psychological traits, such as diminished adjustment, feelings of deprivation, and reduced self-confidence (Al-Zarrad, 1997).

Methodology and Instruments

Research Design

Given the nature of the present study, a descriptive-correlational approach was adopted, which involves investigating the phenomenon as it exists in reality and clarifying its characteristics.

Study Population

The current research targeted first-year students enrolled in the Common Core of Social Sciences at Hamma Lakhdar University, El Oued.

Study Sample

A simple random sampling method was used to select the participants from first-year Social Sciences students. A total of 120 questionnaires were distributed—one measuring academic adjustment and another measuring mental health. Only 75 completed questionnaires were retrieved, with the remainder either lost or discarded. The characteristics of the sample are presented in the following tables:

Table 1. Distribution of participants by gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	27	36%
Female	48	64%
Total	75	100%

Table 2. Distribution of participants by age

Age	Frequency	Percentage
19	47	62.67%
20	21	28%
21	07	9.33%

From Tables 1 and 2, it is evident that the number of female participants is almost double that of males (64%), and that students who did not follow the standard educational progression to university—being delayed by one or two years—make up a higher proportion (62.67%).

Data Collection Instruments
Mental Health Scale

Developed by Kamel Al-Zubaidi and Sanaa Majoul Al-Hazza' (1997), this scale consists of 24 items with no time limit for completion. Responses are recorded using a three-point Likert scale: *Strongly Agree*, *Somewhat Agree*, and *Disagree*. The scoring key assigns values of (1, 2, 3) for positive statements and (3, 2, 1) for negative statements. The maximum possible score is 72, and the minimum is 24. The hypothetical mean

of the scale is 48; lower scores indicate better mental health, while higher scores suggest poorer mental health (Al-Zubaidi & Al-Hazza', 1997).

Regarding validity, the scale was reviewed by a panel of specialized academic judges, and items that received an agreement rate of 80% or higher were retained, ensuring that all items measured the intended mental health construct. Reliability was assessed through Pearson's correlation coefficient using a test–retest method, yielding a correlation value of 0.81, indicating strong stability.

Validity in the Current Study

In the present research, psychometric properties were evaluated by calculating internal consistency between each item and the overall scale score. The test was administered to a sample of 45 university students from the same faculty. The results are shown in Table 3

Table 3. Pearson Correlation Coefficient for Each Item with Its Dimension and the Total Score of the Dimension

Item	Correlation Coefficient	Item	Correlation Coefficient	Item	Correlation Coefficient	Item	Correlation Coefficient
01	,663**	07	,652**	13	,636**	19	,685**
02	,543**	08	,614**	14	,694**	20	,624**
03	,539**	09	,569**	15	,510**	21	,676**
04	,515**	10	,615**	16	,632**	22	,610**
05	,539**	11	,599**	17	,661**	23	,604**
06	,625**	12	,661**	18	,645**	24	,539**
*Significant at the 0.05 level.				**Significant at the 0.01 level.			

The results are shown in Table 3, which presents Pearson correlation coefficients for each item. All coefficients were statistically significant at the 0.01 level, confirming the scale's validity.

Reliability in the Current Study

Reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha and the split-half method, also applied to a sample of 45 students.

Table 4. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient for the Scale

	Number of Items	Alpha Value
Mental Health Scale	24	0.764

Table 5. Reliability Coefficient Using the Split-Half Method

	Split-Half	
	Spearman-Brown	Guttman Split-Half
Mental Health Scale	0.879	0.739

Based on the two preceding tables, it is observed that the Cronbach's Alpha value for the Mental Health Scale in this study is 0.764, while the split-half method—calculated using the Spearman-Brown and Guttman formulas—yielded a coefficient of 0.879. These results indicate that the scale possesses a high degree of reliability. Accordingly, this value provides sufficient evidence to conclude that the scale is characterized by strong reliability, allowing it to be confidently employed in the present study.

Academic Adjustment Scale

Originally developed by Youngman and translated into Arabic by Hussein Abdul Aziz Al-Drini, this instrument helps psychological and educational specialists identify factors contributing to poor academic adjustment, enabling them to provide appropriate support. The scale contains 34 items across several dimensions, with responses given as *Yes* or *No*. Scoring involves awarding one point for answers matching the key, summing across dimensions to produce a total score (Al-Drini, 1998).

Table 6. Items Included in Each Dimension

Table 7. Scoring Key for the Academic Adjustment Scale

Dimension	Items	Item Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Diligence and Effort	‹7 ،5 ،1 ،13 ،11 ،20 ،19 ،25 ،22 ،31 ،29 ،34.	Response	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO
		Item Number	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
		Response	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES
Compliance	‹8 ،3 ،2 ،10 ،9 ،15 ،14 ،17 ،16 ،23 ،18 ،26 ،24 ،32 ،28.	Item Number	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
		Response	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES
		Item Number	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
		Response	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO
Relationship with Instructor	‹12 ،6 ،4 ،27 ،21 ،33 ،30.	Item Number	29	30	32	32	33	34	
		Response	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	

Scale Validity

In the present study, the psychometric properties of the instrument were evaluated by examining the internal consistency validity, calculated through correlations between each item and the overall scale score. The test was administered to a sample of 45 undergraduate students from the same faculty. The correlation coefficients were found to be statistically significant for both the relationship between each item and its respective dimension, as well as between each item and the total score, ranging from 0.251 to 0.723. Moreover, the correlations between each dimension and the overall score were as follows: *Diligence and Effort* = 0.693, *Compliance* = 0.752, and *Relationship with Instructor* = 0.716—all of which represent strong associations.

Scale Reliability

In the current study, reliability was assessed using both Cronbach's Alpha and the split-half method. The test was applied to a sample of 45 students from the same faculty, yielding the following results:

Table 8. Cronbach's Alpha Value for the Scale

	Number of Items	Alpha Value
Academic Adjustment Scale	34	0.716

Table 9. Reliability Value Using the Split-Half Method

	Split-Half	
	Spearman-Brown Coefficient	Guttman Coefficient
Academic Adjustment Scale	0.683	0.754

Based on the two preceding tables, it is observed that the Cronbach's Alpha value for the Academic Adjustment Scale in this study is 0.716, while the split-half method—calculated using the Spearman-Brown formula—produced a coefficient of 0.683. When corrected using Guttman's formula, the coefficient increased to 0.754. These findings indicate that the scale demonstrates a high degree of reliability. Consequently, this value provides sufficient grounds to conclude that the instrument possesses good reliability, allowing it to be confidently employed in the present study.

Statistical Methods

In the present study, statistical procedures appropriate to the research hypotheses were applied, including: mean, standard deviation, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, Spearman-Brown coefficient, Guttman's split-half correction, and the *t*-test. Data were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Presentation, Interpretation, and Discussion of Results
Presentation, Interpretation, and Discussion of the First Sub-Hypothesis

The first sub-hypothesis states that:"*There is a statistically significant relationship between mental health and academic adjustment among first-year students of the Faculty of Social Sciences at El-Oued University.*" To verify the validity of this hypothesis, Pearson's correlation test was applied to the scores of the sample members on both the Mental Health Scale and the Academic Adjustment Scale.

Table 10. Pearson Correlation Coefficient between Mental Health and Academic Adjustment Scales

	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	Significance Level
Mental Health	,679**	0.01
Academic Adjustment		

From the above table, it is evident that the Pearson correlation coefficient between mental health and academic adjustment was calculated at 0.679, which is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. This finding indicates a meaningful relationship between the two variables.

The presence of this relationship can be interpreted as follows: when a university student experiences psychological stability and comfort, achieving academic adjustment becomes easier and more effective. A student's perception of being capable of adapting to university life and achieving personal academic goals fosters self-confidence, psychological balance, and happiness. This is further strengthened when the student feels accepted and valued by their social environment—whether family, faculty, university administration, or peers. Such acceptance enhances self-esteem, satisfaction, and a sense of security, enabling the student to engage fully in university life and its activities with confidence and ease. Consequently, they demonstrate diligence, adhere to academic regulations, form friendships and social networks within the university, and

remain free from major psychological or social conflicts. Furthermore, they develop problem-solving skills for both academic and social challenges, which supports their academic success and adjustment.

Conversely, students with poor mental health—due to psychological instability, persistent anxiety, depression, or tension—often struggle to adapt academically. Such difficulties may arise from negative experiences with peers, family members, or instructors, or from a lack of interest in their field of study, especially if it was imposed on them either due to their academic grades or family pressure. These students frequently exhibit maladaptive behaviors in the university setting. They may appear persistently sad, withdrawn, and disengaged from their studies, avoid interacting with professors or classmates, and prefer to isolate themselves in less visible spaces to avoid academic discussions or direct communication. This avoidance can lead to increased absenteeism, with attendance often limited to compulsory practical sessions, ultimately resulting in academic underperformance and poor adjustment.

The findings of this study are consistent with those of (Al-Sahli2003), which demonstrated a positive relationship between psychological security—one of the key components of mental health—and academic achievement, a manifestation of academic adjustment. They also align with (Al-Shammari2013) study, which established a relationship between mental health and academic adaptation, the latter being another core aspect of academic adjustment.

Presentation, Interpretation, and Discussion of the Second Sub-Hypothesis

The second sub-hypothesis states:"*There is a statistically significant difference in the mental health of first-year students in the Faculty of Social Sciences at El-Oued University attributable to gender.*" To test the validity of this hypothesis, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted for two groups of unequal size.

Table 11. Differences in Mental Health between Genders

Mental Health	Sample	Mean	Standard Deviation	Calculated t	Significance Level	Conclusion
Males	27	68.09	14.327	1.523	0.169	Not Significant
Females	48	73.50	15.116			

From Table (11), it can be observed that the mean score for male students was 68.09, with a standard deviation of 14.327, whereas the mean score for female students was 73.50, with a standard deviation of 15.116. The calculated *t*-value was 1.523, at a significance level of 0.169. This indicates that there are no statistically significant differences in mental health levels between male and female first-year students in the common core of Social Sciences.

This result can be explained by the fact that both male and female students in the study sample share a similar level of mental health. This may be attributed to supportive family environments that shield them from psychological conflicts and family problems, as well as the absence of gender discrimination. Additionally, their satisfaction with reaching the university stage—having successfully passed the demanding baccalaureate exam—appears to contribute to their sense of self-worth, self-acceptance, belonging, and psychological well-being.

The findings of the present study are consistent with those of (Abdullah 2008), who found no statistically significant differences between male and female students at the University of Algiers, and with (BenEl-Saghir2017), who also confirmed the absence of gender differences in mental health and optimism among university students. Similarly, the results align with (2018) and (Shahri and Hashemi Al-Aswad 2019). However, they differ from the findings of (Ebrahimi 2019), who reported statistically significant differences in favor of female students in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Laghouat.

Presentation, Interpretation, and Discussion of the Third Sub-Hypothesis

The third sub-hypothesis states: *"There is a statistically significant difference in academic adjustment among first-year students of the Faculty of Social Sciences at El-Oued University attributable to gender."* To verify this hypothesis, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted for two groups of unequal size.

Table 12. Differences in Academic Adjustment between Genders

Academic Adjustment	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	Calculated *t*	Significance Level (*p*)	Conclusion
Males	27	86.93	11.206	4.396	0.000	Significant
Females	48	97.69	12.223			

From Table (12), it is evident that the mean score for male students was 86.93, with a standard deviation of 11.206, whereas the mean score for female students was 97.69, with a standard deviation of 12.223. The calculated *t*-value was 4.396 at the 0.01 significance level, indicating statistically significant differences in academic adjustment between male and female first-year students in the common core of Social Sciences, in favor of female students.

The researchers interpret this result as follows: most female students had previously studied literature and languages in high school, making the transition to studying social sciences at university both natural and generally expected. A few exceptions were those who had studied experimental sciences and had aspired to fields such as medicine or pharmacy; however, lower-than-required grades or parental restrictions on studying outside the province led them to choose social sciences. This shift positively impacted their academic adjustment, as social sciences were perceived as far easier than scientific disciplines, motivating them to excel and often to aspire toward doctoral studies.

In contrast, few male students came from literature tracks in high school, and many perceived social sciences as inconsistent with their personal interests and ambitions. Their scores in the baccalaureate exam often altered their career expectations. Furthermore, female students tended to maintain consistent attendance—whether in lectures or practical sessions—demonstrating greater discipline, academic engagement, and competitiveness. Male students, by contrast, often attended only compulsory sessions, such as tutorials or practical classes, or when required to present work, frequently prioritizing other commitments. Some worked part-time jobs or managed small businesses, believing that professional experience would secure their future more reliably than academic qualifications, which they feared might lead to unemployment like many other graduates.

Social traditions also played a significant role in the superior academic adjustment of female students. Many women in the region leave home only for essential purposes, and university study has become one of these core pursuits. As a result, they tend to invest significant effort in their studies at home, using their free time productively, avoiding certain household responsibilities, and seeking to demonstrate their capabilities to their families in order to continue their education.

The results of the current study align with several prior studies, including (Quraishi 2002), (Sahib2010), (Khatara2011), (Rashid 2011), and (Midoun & Abi Miloud 2014), all of which found statistically significant differences in academic adjustment in favor of female students. These studies attributed such outcomes to females' relatively greater maturity in certain cognitive abilities, higher motivation, better time management, and stronger commitment to completing academic tasks regardless of mood or circumstances.

Conclusions

The findings of this study confirm that **mental health and academic adjustment** are strongly interconnected, with improvements in students' mental health being directly reflected in their ability to adapt to the university environment and its academic demands, and vice versa.

Results also indicated that **gender differences** in mental health were not statistically significant, suggesting that general conditions, family atmosphere, and societal environment have provided a relatively similar level of psychological support for both male and female students. However, **academic adjustment** showed significant differences in favor of female students. This can be explained by a combination of academic, social, and cultural factors, including prior academic orientation, attendance commitment, time management, and societal role expectations.

Moreover, the results align with previous research findings, reinforcing the view that **psychological and social factors** play a pivotal role in shaping students' academic paths and ensuring academic success. Therefore, promoting students' mental health through targeted psychological and social support programs within the university could significantly enhance their academic adjustment and overall academic performance.

Recommendations

1. Establish university counseling centers dedicated to providing psychological and social support for students.

2. Organize workshops to raise awareness about the importance of academic adjustment and strategies for managing psychological stress.

3. Encourage students to participate in university activities that promote self-confidence and a sense of belonging.

Create an inclusive academic environment that accommodates individual differences and supports the needs of diverse student groups.

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