

## **Advanced students' adaptation to college**

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**Abstract.** Second-, fourth- and sixth-year students ( $N = 536$ ) in the humanities, sciences and medicine at a metropolitan university in Holland completed a questionnaire. It included standard measures of mental health variables, satisfactions, interpersonal orientations, and assessments of the learning environments. Evidence is presented about the reliability and validity of Crombag's College Adaptation Questionnaire (CAQ) to assess adjustment to student life. Internal consistency of adaptation scores was adequate and the association with social desirability responding was negligible. There were no significant differences between the sexes, major fields of study and cohorts. Strong support for convergent validity was obtained. The more adapted the students were, the less they experienced depressive moods, loneliness, and interpersonal helplessness; and the more they were satisfied with their lives in general, with their interpersonal relations in particular, and the more easily they made new contacts. For women students, the less well adapted they were, the more they reported psychosomatic stress symptoms. Adaptation was only weakly associated with social-risk-taking and very weakly, for men only, with problem drinking. Supporting discriminant validity, adaptation was in general only weakly related to the judgments of various facets of the learning environments ('instructional climates') in which the students partook.

This article presents some reliability and validity information about the College Adaptation Questionnaire ("Aanpassingsvragenlijst") obtained in a large sample of students at the Free University in Amsterdam. The College Adaptation Questionnaire, constructed by Crombag (1968) to assess how well students have adjusted to university life, is a self-report instrument consisting of 18 statements. Respondents indicate on a seven-point rating scale how well each statement applies. (See Appendix). Eight statements indicate good adjustment and ten statements indicate the lack of it. The total score for adjustment is the sum of the item scores, after having reflected the items which indicate a poor adaptation (in Table 2 marked with \*).

Crombag's College Adaptation Questionnaire was used in several evaluation studies of educational innovation programs at the Technical University in Eindhoven (Crombag, 1968; Klip, 1970; Meuwese & van Rooijen, 1966; van Rooijen, 1965). In a test validation study at the Free University in Amsterdam (van Rooijen & Vlaander, 1984; Vlaander & van Rooijen, 1981) with a group of (educational) psychology students the adaptation scores proved reasonably internally consistent, and moderately strongly associated with test scores for

\* With special thanks to BOVO, the Educational Research Center, University of Leyden: "Quod licet BOVis, non licet Iovis".

transient depressive mood and trait-depression. They did not correlate with social desirability response tendencies. No over-all sex, age or marital status differences were obtained. However, these second- and third-year psychology students showed lower adaptation scores than the former groups of freshman technical sciences students in Eindhoven.

Recently, the College Adaptation Questionnaire has been employed in investigations of homesickness among university students in Scotland and England, by Shirley Fisher at the Stress Research Unit, The University, Dundee. To provide comparative data and much needed psychometric evidence, this article describes some important results from a large scale survey of the well-being and satisfaction, experiences and interpersonal orientations of advanced students in a variety of disciplines at the Free University in Amsterdam.

## **Method**

### *Description of respondents*

The respondents were students at the Free University in Amsterdam, a denominational (Protestant) university with a student body of about twelve thousand. A sample of 872 persons was drawn from the second, fourth and sixth year cohorts in the fields of medicine, law, chemistry, physics, mathematics, history, Dutch language, and theology. Equal numbers of men and women were selected for each field, except that in the sciences no women were chosen because of scarcity of their enrollment. The total number selected was 50% of the registered number of students who met these criteria. The selection rate for men was 47%, for women it was 58%. Due to the preliminary nature of the research, a strict random sample of the total student body was not sought. Having three cross-sections of the population and a reasonable variety in study fields which attract sizeable numbers of students, was deemed sufficiently informative.

Questionnaires were completed by 536 students (a return rate of 61%): 329 men (return 59%) and 207 women (return 66%). Students in history had the lowest (51%) and medical students the highest return rate (67%). As the survey procedure was entirely anonymous, it could not be examined whether the non-return of questionnaires perhaps was due to any systematic factors. Some relevant biographic-demographic characteristics of the respondent sample are presented in Table 1. The average age of the respondents was 22 years. The median net income was fl. 675 monthly. The majority were preparing for their first university degree (59%), 41% were preparing for a master's level degree.

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondent sample.

Variable	%	Variable	%
<i>Sex</i>		<i>Domicile of origin</i>	
Men	61	Large city (>100,000 inhab.)	32
Women	39	Small city (25 – 100,000 inhab.)	29
<i>Age</i>		Village (10 – 25,000 inhab.)	24
19 – 20 years	32	Rural (<10,000 inhabitants)	15
21 – 22 years	27	<i>Living situation</i>	
23 – 24 years	27	With parents	29
≥ 25 years	15	With landlord, -lady	24
<i>Marital status</i>		Student housing	26
Single, unattached	55	Home owned or rented	21
Single, attached	36	<i>Field of study</i>	
Married	8	Medicine	30
Divorced	1	Law	16
<i>Religious upbringing</i>		Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics	24
Christian Reformed	33	History, Dutch language	17
Dutch Reformed	15	Theology	10
Roman Catholic	26	Other	2
Other	6	<i>Year of study</i>	
None	20	Second	41
<i>Present religious affiliation</i>		Fourth	31
Christian Reformed	24	Sixth	28
Dutch Reformed	9	<i>Study achievement</i>	
Roman Catholic	15	Ahead of schedule	2
Other	5	On schedule	56
None	47	Behind schedule	42

Note.  $N = 536$ .

### Questionnaire

A self-administered, structured questionnaire was sent by mail in October 1979. Respondents completed it at their own convenience and returned it in a pre-stamped envelope. Questions were posed, among other things, about biographic-demographic characteristics, the students' motives for pursuing their particular field of study, and their access to doctors, dentists and counselors.

*Adaptation to university life* was assessed with the College Adaptation Questionnaire. This contains a set of 18 statements, such as 'I am glad that I came to study here' or 'I find it very difficult to adjust to student life' (Crom-

bag, 1968; Vlaander & van Rooijen, 1981). Respondents endorsed each item on a 7-point scale ('does not apply' = 1, 'applies very much' = 7). The scale score is the sum of the item scores after reflection of ten items indicating poor adjustment. (The latter are marked with \* in Table 2).

In addition, the questionnaire included several measures to assess *mental health* related variables. *Psychosomatic stress* was measured with a 20-item list of bodily symptoms commonly associated with psychological stress. Respondents indicated for each somatic complaint (such as headache, shortness of breath, dizziness) whether it had deteriorated during the previous twelve months. This list was adapted from indices used by van Rooijen (1979) and Dirken (1967). The score is the number of complaints which deteriorated. *Depressive mood* was assessed with the VROPSOM-M, the Dutch version of one of the Depression Adjective Checklists (Lubin, 1965; van Rooijen, 1980). This list contains 34 adjectives that imply unpleasant or pleasant moods and feelings, such as 'sad' or 'fine'. Respondents checked each word that described how they felt in general. The score for depressive affect is the number of unpleasant terms which are checked plus the number of pleasant words which are not checked. Reliability and validity of this measure have been clearly established in various populations (van Rooijen, 1979, 1980, 1986; van Rooijen & Vlaander, 1984; van Rooijen & Arrindell, 1985). A Dutch adaptation of the Short Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test (SMAST) was used to assess *problem drinking* (Selzer, Vinokur & van Rooijen, 1975). This consisted of twelve questions about consequences of alcohol consumption. The original American instrument has demonstrated a satisfactory reliability and validity (Miller, 1976; van Rooijen, 1974). Respondents answered 'yes' or 'no' to each question. The SMAST score is calculated by counting each alcoholism-indicating answer as one point and adding the points.

The students' *satisfaction with various areas of well-being* and their lives in general was measured with the Life Satisfaction Index, developed after Flanagan (1978) by Dijkstra (personal communication). This consisted of eight items representing important domains of well-being: one's financial situation, residential circumstances, health, relations with relatives, relations with friends, study achievement, subject matter of studies, and life in general. Respondents indicated how satisfied or dissatisfied they felt with each of these on 5-point scales ('very much dissatisfied' = 1, 'very much satisfied' = 5). Item scores are summed to obtain the scale score.

The students' *evaluations of their university learning environment* were assessed using an inventory, adapted by Dijkstra (personal communication) from Geensen (1970) (Gaff, Crombag & Chang, 1976). This University Learning Environment Evaluation consisted of 58 statements describing various aspects of the department in which the student was enrolled and the instruction he or she was receiving. Respondents indicated how well each statement reflected their

experiences on a 5-point scale ('badly' = 1, 'very well' = 5). The statements fall into ten clusters, each yielding a subscale score by summing the appropriate item scores (after reflection of unfavorable items). Examples of these subscales are: *Personal attention to students* ('Teachers and students in this department are strangers to one another' is a typical item) and *Time-out* (lack of time pressure; e.g. 'The study program allows for enough leisure time'). The names of all ten subscales are given in Table 4. These subscales have been found to discriminate between various university departments (Dijkstra & van Rooijen, manuscript in preparation).

Also, various *interpersonal orientations* were assessed: *Social risk-taking* was measured with the Dutch version of the Social Risk-taking Scale, developed after Sermat (1980). This is a list of 40 descriptions of social interaction situations which require a certain amount of courage to engage in, as they entail risks of damaging one's self-esteem, imposing upon others, or incurring retributions from others. Respondents stated how easy or difficult they considered doing each of these things on a 6-point scale ('very difficult' = 1, 'very easy' = 6). The social risk-taking score is the sum of the item scores. An example of the items: 'When a group of people is going somewhere and asks if someone else wants to come along, to tell them right away that I would like to join'.

Six other items concerned the ability to *establish interpersonal relations*. Respondents reported how easy they found making contacts with men, women, older people, teachers, students, and classmates, using 4-point scales ('very difficult' = 1, 'very easy' = 4). The item scores are added to obtain the scale score. *Satisfaction with interpersonal relations* was measured with a 5-item index. Respondents indicated how satisfying they considered their relations with parents, brothers and sisters, male friends, female friends, and their interpersonal relations in general. Six-point scales were used ('not at all satisfying' = 1, 'very satisfying' = 6). The total score is the sum of the item scores. *Loneliness* was assessed with a scale consisting of 22 statements, developed by de Jong-Gierveld (1978). Half of these expressed feelings of deprivation with respect to a partner, company or being cared for ('There is nobody who really cares for me'). The other half referred to the time perspective of feeling lonely or the inability to overcome it ('Once lonely, always lonely'). Respondents endorsed each statement on a 5-point scale ('strongly disagree' = 1, 'strongly agree' = 5). The loneliness score is calculated by summing the item scores.

Seven statements aimed to assess *interpersonal helplessness* (Dijkstra, 1980). 'I would like to talk about my problems but I don't know to whom' and 'Most things which interest me are not so important as to disturb others with' are examples. Respondents stated their agreement on 5-point scales ('disagree very much' = 1, 'agree very much' = 5). The helplessness score is the sum of the item scores.

Finally, a short version of the Social Desirability Scale was included to assess *approval-seeking* (the tendency to convey a favorable, socially desirable impression of oneself in order to gain the approval of others) (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964). Ten statements concerned the tendency to assert desirable things about oneself (e.g. 'No matter whom I am talking to, I am always a good listener'). Ten others concerned the tendency to deny undesirable things about oneself (e.g. 'There have been occasions when I felt like smashing something'). Respondents checked 'yes' or 'no' to indicate whether each statement applied. The approval-seeking score is the number of favorable statements which are affirmed, plus the number of unfavorable statements which are denied.

## Results

### *Internal analysis*

The distribution of 536 adaptation scores, as condensed in Figure 1, turned out to be regular, unimodal but negatively skewed:  $M = 95.6$ ,  $SD = 15.7$ ,  $SE = 0.68$ , median = 98.2, skewness =  $-0.92$ . Theoretically, the scores can range between 18 and 126, in fact they ranged between 36 and 126.

Clearly, the majority of students were very well adapted, as one might expect. The mean score was similar to the mean scores obtained in several groups

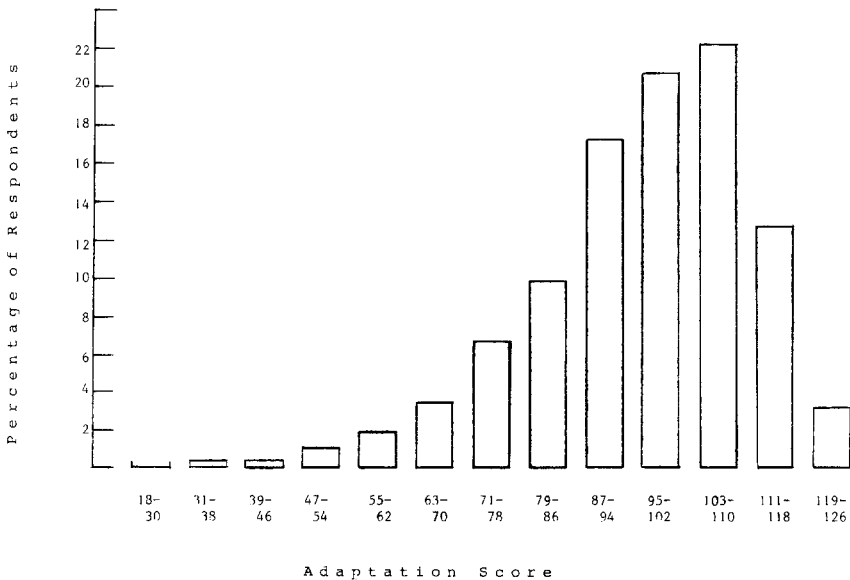


Fig. 1. Percentage distribution of adaptation scores.

of technology students in Eindhoven, but slightly higher than that found for psychology students at the Free University (Vlaender & van Rooijen, 1981):  $t(180)=2.0$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

Internal consistency coefficient alpha (Cronbach, 1951) was 0.83, indicating that the reliability of the adaptation index was quite good. Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of the item responses, as well as the item-restscale correlation of each item with the sum of all other items ( $r_{it}$ ).

Table 2. College Adaptation Questionnaire: Means and standard deviations of item-responses and item-restscale correlation coefficients ( $r_{it}$ ).

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$r_{it}$
1. I am very satisfied with the course of my studies.	4.73	1.75	.35
*2. Sometimes I want to give it all up.	5.20	1.91	.44
*3. I often ask myself what I am doing here.	5.55	1.75	.54
*4. I would prefer to study somewhere else.	6.24	1.52	.39
5. I made many friends here.	4.31	1.73	.38
*6. I do not feel very at home at the University.	5.76	1.68	.43
7. I never feel bored here.	4.27	2.06	.25
*8. Sometimes I feel very discouraged here.	5.09	1.86	.50
9. I find life as a student very pleasant.	5.16	1.58	.41
*10. Sometimes I feel rather lonely.	4.93	1.97	.44
*11. Sometimes I don't know what to do with my time.	6.23	1.48	.34
*12. I find it hard to get used to life here.	6.35	1.26	.51
*13. What I miss here is someone to talk to freely from time to time.	6.01	1.66	.43
14. I am very satisfied with my way of life.	4.82	1.55	.48
15. If I feel blue, my friends will help me to get out of it.	4.64	1.98	.28
*16. I find it very difficult to adjust to student life.	6.02	1.54	.49
17. I am glad that I came to study here.	5.06	1.82	.44
18. I feel very much at home here.	5.21	1.62	.57

Note.  $N = 536$ . Means calculated after reflection of starred items. All items on 7-point scale. Each  $r_{it}$  is statistically significant.

Sixteen of the  $r_{it}$ 's ranged from 0.57 to 0.34; only two were below 0.30, with the lowest equal to 0.25. Three items had  $r_{it} > 0.50$ . These were the statements 'I feel very much at home here', 'I often ask myself what I am doing here', and 'I find it hard to get used to life here'. (The two items with low  $r_{it}$  were 'I never feel bored here', and 'If I feel blue, my friends will help me to get out of it'.)

These internal consistency results clearly supported the construct-validity of the College Adaptation Questionnaire.

### *Comparisons between the sexes, disciplines and cohorts*

Several three-way analyses of variance were performed to find out whether there were significant differences between:

1. men and women;
2. students in medicine, students in the humanities (Dutch language, history, law or theology) and students in the sciences (chemistry, physics or mathematics);
3. the second, fourth and sixth year cohorts.

No statistically significant main effects or interaction effects emerged in these  $2 \times 3 \times 3$  and  $2 \times 2 \times 3$  analyses (excluding the science students in the latter). There was, however, a nearly significant effect for the sex factor:  $F(1, 379) = 2.9$ ,  $p < 0.10$ . The women tended to score slightly higher ( $M = 97.6$ ,  $SD = 15.4$ ) than the men ( $M = 94.8$ ,  $SD = 15.8$ ).

Thus, the adaptation scores did not reliably vary according to the gender of the respondents, the progression of their career as students, nor their major discipline of study.

### *Relationships with other measures*

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations and internal consistency coefficients alpha for the other measures to assess mental health related variables or interpersonal orientations. The table also shows the product-moment correlation coefficients between these measures and the adaptation index. In general, the correlations were about equal for men and women, except for the two cases indicated.

Adaptation was most strongly related to depressive affect, life satisfaction and loneliness: The more adjusted the students were, the less they experienced depressive moods and feelings, the more they were satisfied with their life as-a-whole, and the less lonely they were.



Table 3. Mental health and interpersonal orientation measures: correlations with adaptation.

Measure	$\alpha$	$M$	$SD$	Correlation with adaptation score
Depressive affect ( $i = 34$ ) <sup>a</sup>	0.82	8.3	4.6	-.58
Life satisfaction ( $i = 8$ )	0.66	31.3	4.1	.57
Loneliness ( $i = 22$ )	0.86	49.9	10.6	-.56
Satisfaction with interpersonal relations ( $i = 5$ )	0.73	23.5	4.0	.43
Interpersonal helplessness ( $i = 7$ )	0.76	15.5	3.9	-.42
Establishing interpersonal relations ( $i = 6$ )	0.81	16.9	3.0	.39
Psychosomatic stress ( $i = 20$ )	0.76	0.8	1.7	-.24 <sup>b</sup>
Social risk-taking ( $i = 40$ )	0.91	147.7	24.0	.23
Approval-seeking ( $i = 20$ )	0.63	9.5	3.4	.19
Problem drinking ( $i = 12$ )	0.63	0.7	1.2	-.10 <sup>c</sup>

Note.  $N = 536$ . Each  $r$  is statistically significant.

<sup>a</sup> Number of items composing the measure.

<sup>b</sup> For men  $r = -.19$ , for women  $r = -.32$ .

<sup>c</sup> For men  $r = -.15$ , for women  $r = .05$  ( $p$  ns).

Furthermore, adaptation correlated somewhat less strongly with satisfaction with interpersonal relations, interpersonal helplessness and establishing interpersonal contacts. Thus, compared to the more poorly adjusted, the better adjusted students also were more satisfied with their relationships with family and friends, were less helpless interpersonally and said to make contacts more easily with other people.

Finally, adaptation was moderately related to psychosomatic stress (more so for women than for men), and social risk-taking: The more poorly adapted the students were, the more often they mentioned that various psychosomatic complaints indicating stress had worsened during the previous year. Also, they turned out to be somewhat more socially anxious. Approval-seeking (social desirability responding) and heavy drinking were hardly correlated with adaptation.

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of the University Learning Environ-

Table 4. Means and standard deviations of the University Learning Environment Evaluation subscales, and correlations with adaptation.

Measure	$\alpha$	$M$	$SD$	Correlation with adaptation score
1. Time out ( $i = 8$ )	0.86	25.5	7.1	.13
2. Curriculum coherence ( $i = 9$ )	0.77	29.7	5.7	.21
3. Self-determination of course load ( $i = 4$ )	0.79	11.7	4.3	.13
4. Program flexibility ( $i = 6$ )	0.57	17.3	3.9	.04 <sup>a</sup>
5. Cohesion among students ( $i = 6$ )	0.74	20.3	4.2	.30
6. Personal attention to students ( $i = 4$ )	0.76	11.6	3.5	.20
7. Clarity of instruction ( $i = 7$ )	0.64	22.8	3.9	.27
8. Respect for students ( $i = 4$ )	0.74	10.8	3.0	.20
9. Room for student interests ( $i = 4$ )	0.65	11.0	3.3	.18
10. Availability of information ( $i = 5$ )	0.52	16.9	3.3	.23

Note.  $N=536$ . Each  $r$  is statistically significant, except under <sup>a</sup>.

<sup>a</sup>  $p$  ns.

ment Evaluation subscales and their intercorrelations with the adaptation index. Only two of these subscales had product-moment correlation coefficients greater than 0.25: Cohesion among students, and Clarity of instruction. The better, rather than less well adapted respondents found the student population in their department of study more cohesive. They also judged the teaching done there as didactically clearer.

It should be noted here that the University Learning Environment Evaluation scales, strictly, are not meant to be individual differences (personality) measures. Rather, they purport to index relatively objective characteristics of the 'instructional climate' which various study departments or programs provide, as seen through their students' eyes. It would be undesirable, if the observers' personal well-being entered too much into the assessments of environmental features. Conversely, if individual adaptation scores were determined to a large extent by characteristics of the (shared) environment, they would not be good indicators of personality functioning. Fortunately, this was not the case. Thus, environmental and personality variables could be measured rela-

tively independently, even if the latter were in the affective realm. Poor adaptation did not equal a poor instructional climate, and a poor learning environment did not mean an environment to which people adjusted poorly.

## Conclusion

The data presented here clearly attest to the construct-validity of Crombag's College Adaption Questionnaire as an instrument to assess how well students have adapted to university life. Several relationships found with other mental health related variables and interpersonal orientation measures strongly support convergent validity. The more highly adapted the students are, the less they experience depressive affect and loneliness, and the more satisfied they are with various aspects of their life, such as their financial and residential situations, content matter of studies and achievement, etc. The more adjusted students are more satisfied with their interpersonal relations, are less helpless interpersonally and report to make new contacts more easily than the less well adjusted. Adaptation is moderately negatively related to stress symptoms, particularly for female students.

Apparently, to be a well adapted student does not imply to be an outspoken social-risk-taker. After all, not merely extraverted types feel at home at the university. In addition, adaptation is not substantially associated with the tendency to respond in a socially desirable manner, nor with problem drinking. (The latter measure was very much restricted in range, however, as there were only very few respondents with a drinking problem.)

Adaptation to university life was lowly related to the various University Learning Environment Evaluation subscales, excepting Cohesion among students. Apparently, adaptation as an index of general personal adjustment to life as a university student is not associated with the descriptions of specific facets of the "instructional climate" which particular study departments have created. This may mean that at this metropolitan university the specific aspects of these advanced students' learning environments were less important for their general adjustment than other domains of well-being, in particular concerning interpersonal relations. The University Learning Environment Evaluation subscales were designed to characterize the climate of instruction in various university study fields (by employing the perspective of students – it be granted –). Thus, they focus on departmental programs. They are not primarily inter-individual differences measures.

Finally, the students in the sample had advanced beyond the entrance year. Over forty percent even were preparing for a master's level degree. Therefore, the respondents were a selected group – "the cream of the crop" – in the sense that ill-adapted or unsuccessful students, having left the university earli-

er, were excluded from the sample. If future validation research with Crombag's College Adaptation Questionnaire is to be entertained, it might bear fruit to focus on changes which incoming students report during their first semester of study at the university, or to investigate explicitly those students who drop out of the university at some point in time.

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## Appendix

### *College Adaptation Questionnaire*

Please read each statement and circle the number which applies to you.

	<i>Not applicable</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	<i>Very applicable</i>
1. I am very satisfied with the course of my studies.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
2. Sometimes I want to give it all up.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
3. I often ask myself what I am doing here.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
4. I would prefer to study somewhere else.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
5. I made many friends here.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
6. I do not feel very at home at the University.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
7. I never feel bored here.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
8. Sometimes I feel very discouraged here.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
9. I find life as a student very pleasant.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
10. Sometimes I feel rather lonely.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
11. Sometimes I don't know what to do with my time.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
12. I find it hard to get used to life here.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
13. What I miss here is someone to talk to freely from time to time		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
14. I am very satisfied with my way of life.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
15. If I feel blue, my friends will help me to get out of it.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
16. I find it very difficult to adjust to student life.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
17. I am glad that I came to study here.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
18. I feel very much at home here.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	