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## **EXPERIENCES OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AT NAZARBAYEV UNIVERSITY, USING TINTO'S MODEL OF ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION**

### **Abstract:**

This mixed-method study examines and develops an in-depth understanding of first-year university experience of undergraduate students at Nazarbayev University, an elite international university, located in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. The study is based on the investigation of students' perceptions of their first-year experience with a focus on challenges and opportunities that students encounter during their first year in university and the ways they address them.

The students' perceptions have been investigated through an online survey as an initial stage of the study that identified preliminary themes and categories to build on further through in-depth focus groups and individual interviews that eventually comprised the main body of the study.

The study has revealed that first-year experience is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon which is shaped by a number of various aspects and factors. According to students' perspectives the success of their university experience, which they largely define as feeling comfortable academically and socially, and remaining motivated and confident in own abilities to progress in studies, greatly depends on such factors as early communication of information and orientation of prospective student, comprehensive new student orientation, quality of curriculum and classroom instruction, and good campus facilities. On the top of it appears to be interactions with peers and faculty, and academic and social support that students receive at the university from peers, faculty and staff.

The study suggests some important areas that higher education institutions in Kazakhstan may find useful to focus on when addressing challenging and promoting opportunities that students face during their first-year in university. Those areas include clear communication of information, continuous support and encouragement, and every effort to integrate students into an institution both academically and socially in order to ensure enriching and rewarding first-year experience.

### **Keywords:**

first-year experience, social support, academic support, student success, student integration, student retention.