Article

International Student Wellbeing and Academic Progress

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ABSTRACT

The measurement of subjective wellbeing may provide an easily administered indicator of social, psychological or academic adaptation issues experienced by international students. We compare the subjective wellbeing of international students achieving unsatisfactory academic progress against peer international students achieving satisfactory academic progress. Students with unsatisfactory academic progress reported significantly lower levels of well-being than students achieving satisfactory academic progress across all domains.
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Background

The study was conducted at the Central Queensland University (CQU) Melbourne campus. The campus has a significant number of international students enrolled relative to the number of domestic students and the social, cultural and academic acculturation of international students is a major focus of campus student support. International students are evenly distributed across undergraduate and postgraduate taught courses. CQU uses a learning support programme which monitors all students' academic progress to facilitate early support for students who may be experiencing issues with their studies.

International Student Acculturation and Adaptation

To be successful in their studies, international students must learn to successfully to a new social and educative environment. The range of academic, social, cultural and economic issues which can be experienced by international students has been explored for over many years. In an early paper, Ward (1962) suggested international students can experience the "foreign student syndrome", a situation where students experience high levels of anxiety-related problems, yet show no physical signs or symptoms. By 1983 research had advanced and Zwingman and Gunn (1983) developed an (initial) guide discussing psycho-social health

problems experienced by international students and remedial measures which could support students experiencing 'uprooting' issues.

Students may experience stresses such as cultural distance, cultural shock, language and other communication issues (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). They may also experience psychological feelings such as loneliness, helplessness, inferiority, anxiety and depression. Some students, in particular students unfamiliar with constructivist pedagogy, may also encounter challenges in adjusting to a different pedagogy.

Ward has identified two discrete but inter-related constructs in cross-cultural adaptation: psychological adaptation (feelings of wellbeing and satisfaction) and sociocultural adaptation (the ability to fit in and to negotiate interactive aspects of the new culture) (Searle and Ward, 1990, Ward et al., 2001, Ward and Kennedy, 1993, Ward and Kennedy, 1994). In a review of studies examining predictors of international student psychological and social adjustment to life in the United States, Zhang and Goodson (2011) found the most common predictors of adverse psychological symptoms were stress (both acculturative and academic) and lack of social support. The most common predictors of positive sociocultural adjustment were English proficiency and social contact with locals. Comparable results have been found in other countries (refer for example, Tafarodi and Smith (2001) and the Swami et al (2010) studies of Malaysian student sojourners in the UK).

Successful adaptation to a new social and academic environment is a significant concern for educators. Academic issues can take time to emerge. Individual student psychological or social issues may not be immediately evident to staff faced with the need to support large numbers of students with whom they may have limited regular contact. Administering a battery of discrete and often complex social, psychological and academic adaptation instruments is not efficient in a busy academic environment. There is a need for an easily administered instrument to provide an indicator of potential issues with student adaptation.

Subjective Wellbeing

Subjective wellbeing is an indicator of the ways people assess their own sense of personal wellbeing and how they evaluate their lives, and is therefore an indicator of how well a person perceives they are engaging with their environment.

The principal subjective wellbeing theories are set-point theories which argue individuals maintain a consistent level of wellbeing, usually positive, which is only defeated by sustained extraordinary circumstances (Diener and Suh, 1997). Subjective wellbeing scales do not measure adaptation; however, they provide an indication of the extent to which those who shift from an environment they are familiar with to an unfamiliar environment have succeeded in adapting to their new environment and therefore have been able to maintain their sense of wellbeing.

The Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) (International Wellbeing Group, 2006) is a widely used subjective wellbeing scale. The PWI was developed by Cummins and colleagues at the Australian Center on Quality of Life[1] and is based on the earlier Comprehensive Quality of Life Scale (Cummins, 1996,1997). The PWI scale has been successfully deployed in a broad range of contexts and countries, both developed and developing. The scale comprises eight domains (see Table 1), with one question per domain.

Table 1: Personal Wellbeing Index Domains

Domain	Description
Standard of living	Material wellbeing, environment
Health	Overall health
Achievements in life	Outcome of productive activity
Relationships	Intimacy, friends, family connections
Connections with the community	Social connections, education, job status, community integration and involvement, empowerment.
Safety	Security, personal control, privacy, independence, autonomy, knowledge of rights, residential stability
Future security	Ongoing material, productive, social, and personal safety
Spirituality or religion	Form of emotional wellbeing

Source: (Cummins, 1996, Wills, 2009)

Spirituality/ religion was added to the scale following research in several Christian countries (Wills, 2009) but was excluded from this study as it was considered after discussion with colleagues from mainland China that concepts relating to spirituality or religion could not be reliably measured for students from China.

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[1] www.acqol.com.au/

Academic Progress

It is not appropriate to measure academic performance directly against subjective wellbeing, given the confounding impact of factors such as prior subject knowledge and varying academic assessment criteria. It is, however, considered valid to use academic progress as a normative measure as this measures students' ability to complete their studies within the timeframe required by their course of study. CQU has developed a hierarchical 'Monitoring Academic Progress' (MAP) programme to monitor student progress and to facilitate the provision of early teaching and learning, or general student support for students who are not achieving satisfactory academic progress. The MAP programme is used for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Criteria for participation in the programme are:

- Failure to pass at least 50% of courses in the previous term
- A cumulative pass rate of <50% of the courses taken in the programme, over the course of the programme to date.
- Failing the same course more than once.

In the first term of determination of unsatisfactory progress, students are assigned to MAP 1. If unsatisfactory progress continues to a second term, despite extra support, this is escalated to MAP 2. If this continues beyond two terms this is further escalated to MAP 3. This is a terminal status and enrolment is cancelled.

Sample

At the time data was collected all students were required to enroll on campus in person. Two rounds of data collection were undertaken mid-2010:

- Round One: MAP 1, MAP 2 and non-MAP students were sampled (n=547). Data was collected during the Term One enrolment period. Students were randomly selected to complete the survey and did so individually during the enrolment process whilst waiting to meet with an academic adviser. Participation was voluntary. No incentive was provided.
- Round Two: MAP 2 students were sampled (n=44). Data was collected during Term Two. The second sample was collected to check the consistency of the MAP sample across academic terms. Completion of the survey was online. Participation was voluntary. No incentive was provided. The response rate was 62.8%.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the PWI for the two MAP samples. There was no significant difference in domain scores between the original sample taken on site (*M*=62.92, *SD*=15.163) and the follow-up sample solicited by email (*M*=61.59, *SD*=13.58); $t(88)=0.437$, $p=0.663$ (two tailed). The samples were combined for analysis.

The principal regions of origin for students sampled were the Sub-Continent and China/ SE Asia, these being the two principal groups of international students at the campus. A small number (n=33) students from a wide range of other regions were excluded from the analysis due to the range of socio-cultural and educational backgrounds

Results

The Scale was tested for reliability. The Cronbach's Alpha (CA) was significant at 0.85. The CA for each domain was tested. No domain was rejected. As shown in Figure 1, Chinese/ SE Asian students reported lower levels of PWI than Sub Continent students[2], within the categories of satisfactory and unsatisfactory progress. However, levels of PWI were lower for all students failing to achieve satisfactory academic progress, irrespective of region of origin.

Figure 1: PWI by Region of Origin and Academic Progress
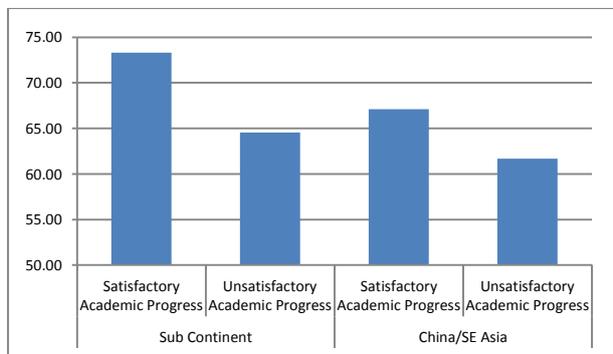
N=591

As shown in Table 2, students who were not achieving satisfactory academic progress (S-PWI) reported lower PWI, at both overall and at each domain-level, than students who were achieving satisfactory progress (US-PWI).

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[2] This may be attributable to cultural response bias (Lau et al, 2005)

Table 2: PWI Relative to Academic Progress

	Subjective Wellbeing		Standard of Living		Health		Achievement in Life		Personal Relationships		Safety		Community Connect		Future Security	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
S-PWI	70.6	14.2	68.3	17.5	75.3	19.0	66.1	18.8	75.2	20.1	70.8	20.8	70.8	19.3	68	19.9
US-PWI	62.2	14.3	62.4	18.2	65.8	20.5	56.0	15.4	68.6	19.4	63.8	22.7	60.3	20.4	59.0	19.6
t	5.161		2.909		8.039		7.954		7.576		7.351		8.004		7.658	
p	<.001		<.05		<.001		<.001		<.001		<.001		<.001		<.001	
Eta^2	0.05		0.01		0.10		0.10		0.09		0.08		0.10		0.09	

A comparison of domain scores indicates the difference across all domains was significant and the difference between values for each domain was moderate-large (Mean ETA^2=0.09), with the exception of Standard of Living. Overall, when considered at the domain level, international students achieving an unsatisfactory rate of academic progress evidence significantly lower levels of wellbeing.

Discussion

International students, in particular students who are experiencing both a new country and a new pedagogy, need to acculturate and adapt to their host and study environments quickly in order to be successful with their studies. Students who are not successful in adapting have a greater risk of being unable to settle into their studies and achieving satisfactory academic progress. This may also impact their sense of wellbeing.

The present study is the first study to examine the relationship between subjective wellbeing and international student academic progress. We conclude students who were not achieving satisfactory academic progress were either failing to acculturate and adapt to life and/ or study in their host country and this impacted both their sense of wellbeing and their academic progress, or alternatively failure to achieve satisfactory academic progress had a pervasive impact on students' wellbeing.

Issues with academic progress can take time to surface. The study is correlational. Data is point-in-time and longitudinal research is required to explore possible causal relationships between academic progress and subjective wellbeing over the course of study (research is

ongoing). Results from the present study indicate the measurement of subjective wellbeing may provide an easily administered early indicator of issues international students may experience settling into their new living and new educational environment, and may facilitate effective early intervention to increase the probability of satisfactory academic outcomes. Subjective wellbeing scale is an easily administered scale and may provide educators with early identification of potential issues, thereby enabling proactive intervention to support international students.

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