



Studying Away Strategies: Well-being and Quality of University Life of International Students in the UK

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Authors' contributions

This research was carried out in collaboration between all authors. Authors APS and TJ designed the study. Author HS collected the data and prepared the database for statistical analysis. Author APS carried out the statistical analyses and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. They all read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Background: Reviews of previous research have identified factors which influence the well-being of international students studying away from home. One area that has received little attention is the extent to which these students adopt positive coping strategies that help their adaptation to being away from home.

Objectives: The present study investigated the well-being and quality of life of international students studying in the UK. The importance of adopting certain strategies from pre-departure planning to those related to returning home was also assessed.

Method: A cross-sectional online survey was completed by 402 international students (54.5% first year; 49.5% male; mean age: 22.23 years, range 18-50). The survey measured well-being using the student version of the Smith Well-being (SWELL) questionnaire. A quality of student life questionnaire was also developed and this measured the university experience and benefits (e.g. life being easy and efficient; promotion of a healthy lifestyle; strengthening bonds, and feeling valued at university; the physical environment; and the impact of university life on learning and

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progress). Strategies that help studying away were assessed in a questionnaire measuring pre-departure planning, adapting to being away, planning the return home, and managing the transition from university to home.

Results: The newly developed questionnaires were shown to be good measuring instruments (Cronbach alphas: Quality of university life scale: 0.79; Studying away strategies: 0.70; Positive well-being: 0.78; and Negative well-being: 0.73). Quality of student life was predicted by a healthy life-style, positive personality, few excessive demands, high control and the use of studying away strategies. Positive well-being was predicted by healthy life-style, positive personality, low demands, high control and a high quality of university life. Negative well-being was predicted by low levels of the same variables.

Conclusion: Quality of student life was predicted by course characteristics, personality and the use of strategies to adapt to studying away from home. The quality of university life is one of the predictors of the general well-being of international students.

Keywords: International students; wellbeing; wellbeing away; quality of university life.

1. INTRODUCTION

Being away from home and family can have an adverse effect on psychological well-being. This negative effect of studying away from home is often observed when one examines the literature on the well-being of international students at a university in another country [1]. It is estimated that the number of international students around the world will reach 8 million by 2020, and universities in the UK could host over 850,000 international students by 2020 [2]. Studying at university as an international student can entail a variety of issues, including separation from family, new responsibilities, financial concerns, finding a balance between studying, work and private life, and succeeding at university. The process of studying abroad has many stages, beginning with a major life transition, adapting culturally and academically to the host country, addressing financial and other practical issues, maintaining contact with family and friends, creating a new social network in the country where they are studying, and also returning home [1]. Any of these stages [3] can lead to psychological conflict, overload and/or uncontrollability (i.e. reduced well-being).

A recent approach to being away from home treats it as a five-phase experience from pre-departure planning to returning home [3]. This simple model can be applied to individuals away from home in different circumstances for varying periods of time. The five-phase model is a way to manage potential adverse impacts on psychological well-being while the person is working or studying away from home. The first phase of the model is pre-departure planning which is often only carried out at a superficial level, with the expectation being that technology

will mitigate separation. There may, therefore, be an inadequate discussion of expectations, failure to say "goodbye" properly or setting up of support networks, and even lack of a main point of contact for communication. The second phase involves issues associated with being away. Again, technology may appear to be a ready solution, but often it only offers an artificial sense of connectedness. Problems with normal, meaningful communication can lead to distraction, disengagement and the inability to progress. The ability to unwind after studying is also important and this can often be difficult when away from home. The third phase involves the transition from studying to returning home. Preparing to return is very important as the individual or their perceptions may have changed and returning home to continue "as before" may not be possible. Returning home also requires planning. Some less intense study or a change of activity before returning can help the transition, as can a staged return which allows unwinding before being at home. Finally being back home needs to be managed. Travel to home may involve little more than a flight, but psychological adjustment can take much longer [3].

The first aim of the present study was to determine whether the above model is related to the well-being of international students studying in the UK. Development of a questionnaire investigating strategies used to maximise well-being while studying away was the first objective. A second objective was to develop a questionnaire, the student version of the Smith Well-being Questionnaire [4], that measures established predictors of well-being (e.g. positive personality; life-style; demands; control and support) and both positive (e.g. life satisfaction, happiness) and negative (e.g. perceived stress,

anxiety and depression) appraisals and outcomes. Previous research has led to a Student Well-being Process Questionnaire [5] which provides a rapid method of assessing the above factors. The present questionnaire extended this approach by including questions on other important domains such as work-life balance, presenteeism and illness caused or made worse by studying. These additional questions have been shown to be important in studies of workers [4,6,7,8,9] and the questions were adapted to a student context.

Another aim of the present study was to examine the quality of university life and its associations with well-being and studying away strategies [1,3]. Quality of life and well-being are often seen as synonymous and address similar domains [10,11,12,13,14,15]. However, the quality of life issues investigated here differed from the well-being measures in that they were related to features of the university experience (e.g. life being easy and efficient; promotion of a healthy lifestyle; strengthening bonds; and feeling valued at university) and benefits (e.g. the physical environment; the impact of university life on learning and progress). The present study logically follows on from a literature review which aimed to evaluate studies that examined stress and well-being among international students in the UK [1]. This review addressed the different types of stressors that international students face, and some of the individual differences that play an important role in moderating both stress levels and well-being. The review also evaluated studies that examined the correlation between stress and well-being. From this review, it was found that the majority of the studies either focussed on how well international students adjusted to their host culture, or tried to identify the factors that influenced their stress levels. The present research extended these approaches by examining associations between the well-being process, quality of university life and the extent to which individuals used positive strategies to cope with studying away from home. Statistically, this involves multi-variate analyses as there are several potential predictors of outcomes and univariate analyses looking at the correlations between predictors and outcomes do not account for the influence of other factors [4-9].

2. METHODS

The present study was carried out with the approval of the ethics committee, School of Psychology, Cardiff University (EC. 15.10.13.4219) and the informed consent of the

participants. It involved an online survey measuring studying away strategies, quality of university life and wellbeing.

2.1 Participants

402 international students (54.5% first year; 49.5% male; mean age: 22.23 years, range 18-50) from 87 different countries were recruited using advertisements in UK universities. They were paid £10 in shopping vouchers for participation in the study. One of the inclusion criteria was that they had returned home at least once while at university and before completing the survey.

2.2 Online Survey

Participants completed the survey shown in Appendix 1. The survey consisted of 3 parts. The first, the student version of the Smith Well-being Questionnaire (Student SWELL) consisted of four established predictors of well-being: Positive Personality (high self-efficacy; self-esteem; optimism) or Psychological Capital; Healthy Lifestyle; Course Demands; and Academic Control/Support. The outcomes measured were negative well-being; positive well-being; absence due to illness, and presenteeism. The next section of the survey measured quality of university life: positive effects on efficiency, lifestyle and bonding; and the positive impact of the environment, being valued, learning and progress. The final section measured studying away strategies: pre-university preparation; coping away from home; planned adjustment to returning; the journey home; and adapting to being at home.

3. RESULTS

Analyses showed that the scales had high reliability (Cronbach alphas: Quality of University life: 0.79; Studying away strategies: 0.70; Positive well-being: 0.78; Negative well-being: 0.73). The multi-variate analyses used here were regressions which included blocks of variables. Initial regression analyses examined predictors of quality of life. Demographic characteristics were included in the first step of the model followed by positive personality, course demands, academic control/support (the established predictors) and then the studying away strategies. The output from the regression is shown in Table 1.

The results from the regression analyses show that quality of university life was greater in older

Table 1. Predictors of quality of university life

Model	Beta	Std err	t value	p value
(Constant)	15.909	3.683	4.320	.000
Age (years):	.227	.105	2.173	.030
Gender:	-1.244	.608	-2.046	.041
Ethnicity	-.800	.266	-3.007	.003
University Year	-3.853	.645	-5.974	.000
A healthy lifestyle.	.434	.178	2.436	.015
Positive personality	.795	.180	4.404	.000
Course demands	-.635	.182	-3.496	.001
Control/support	.972	.185	5.244	.000
Studying away strategies	.187	.025	7.649	.000

participants, males, white/Caucasian students and those in the first year of study. All of the established predictors had a significant effect, with high quality of life being associated with a healthy lifestyle, positive personality, low course demands and high control/support. In addition, those with more positive studying away strategies also reported a greater quality of university life and this was significant even when demographics and established predictors were adjusted for.

The next regression examined predictors of positive well-being (happiness, satisfaction with life and university). These results are shown in

Table 2. Positive well-being was predicted by a healthy life-style, positive personality, high demands, high control (the established predictors – [4-9]) and a high quality of university life (the novel predictor).

A third regression identified predictors of negative well-being (stress, fatigue, anxiety/depression and poor work-life balance). Negative well-being was predicted by low levels of the same variables that predicted positive well-being (the exception being course demands, where high demands were associated with greater negative outcomes). In addition, being older, female and white were also associated

Table 2. Predictors of positive well-being

Model	Beta	Std err	t value	p value
(constant)	.682	2.509	.272	.786
Age (years):	.029	.069	.414	.679
Gender:	.098	.456	.214	.831
Ethnicity	.262	.199	1.317	.189
University Year	.543	.503	1.079	.281
A healthy lifestyle	.935	.132	7.071	.000
Positive personality	1.100	.138	7.995	.000
Course demands	.425	.140	3.041	.003
Control/Support	.442	.141	3.147	.002
Quality of life	.316	.037	8.578	.000

Table 3. Predictors of negative well-being

Model	Beta	Std err	t value	p value
(constant)	38.868	3.770	10.309	.000
Age (years):	.366	.104	3.514	.000
Gender:	1.914	.683	2.800	.005
Ethnicity	-1.068	.299	-3.567	.000
University year	-.786	.754	-1.043	.298
A healthy lifestyle	-.548	.199	-2.745	.006
Positive Personality	-.811	.209	-3.883	.000
Course Demands	1.309	.209	6.265	.000
Control/Support	-.793	.210	-3.777	.000
Quality of Life	-.145	.055	-2.605	.010

Table 4. Predictors of low rates of illness caused or made worse by studying and low presenteeism scores

Model	Beta	Std err	t value	p value
(Constant)	2.998	.409	7.332	.000
Age (years):	-.038	.011	-3.330	.001
Gender:	-.204	.074	-2.751	.006
Ethnicity	.177	.033	5.423	.000
University year	.376	.082	4.589	.000
A healthy lifestyle	-.030	.022	-1.368	.172
Positive personality	.090	.023	3.993	.000
Course demands	-.033	.023	-1.458	.146
Control/Support	-.045	.023	-1.962	.051
Quality of life.	.015	.006	2.467	.014

with greater negative well-being. These results are shown in Table 3.

The final regression considered predictors of an illness caused or made worse by studying and also presenteeism. These results are shown in Table 4. Low rates of illness due to studying and low presenteeism were associated with being younger, being male, being Asian, not being in the first year, having a positive personality and high quality of university life.

4. DISCUSSION

The present study was the first to examine the impact of studying away strategies of international students on their quality of university life and their well-being. This was done using a large sample of students from many different countries and at different stages of their academic career. The survey involved the development of new measuring instruments and these were shown to have good reliability. Established predictors of well-being, namely positive personality, healthy lifestyle, course demands and academic control and support were shown to have their usual associations with the well-being outcomes. The new measure of quality of university life was also associated with the established predictors (even when demographic factors were controlled). Of major interest was the finding that studying away strategies predicted quality of university life, with those with more frequent use of the different strategies reporting a better quality of life. Again, this effect was significant even when demographic variables were included in the analyses. This result confirms the prediction from the studying away model [3].

Quality of life was also a major predictor of well-being, with those with high quality of life scores reporting greater levels of positive well-being and lower levels of negative well-being. Interestingly, studying away strategies did not have direct effects on well-being when quality of life was included in the analyses. This can be interpreted in terms of the effects of studying away strategies on well-being being mediated by quality of life and not being independent of it. The present study provides support for the underlying model and confirms the utility of the methodology that has recently been used to investigate student well-being [4-9].

The study has a number of limitations. The first was that only one time point was examined and it would be better to use a longitudinal design to examine changes in the variables over the course of study. A longitudinal design would also give a clearer indication of causality. It is possible that reverse causality was present in the current study, with quality of life influencing the use of studying away strategies rather than effects just occurring in the other direction. The present methodology can now be used to address other aspects of studying away. For example, even students studying in their own country are often in locations which require them to leave home. Another study [16] has compared international and home students using the present approach. Working away from home is also common in certain industries (e.g. working offshore, the maritime and the mining industries) and it is important to assess whether working away strategies play an important part on well-being at work and when the person returns home.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present study examined the impact of potentially beneficial studying away strategies on the quality of university life and wellbeing of international students at universities in the UK. The results showed that greater use of studying away strategies was associated with an increased quality of university life. Quality of life was one of the predictors of greater wellbeing of the students. The present methodology can now be used with other samples working away from home. If the benefits of working away strategies are confirmed in future research, training in the use of these strategies may be a useful method of improving the quality of life and wellbeing of those away from home.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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Appendix 1: The survey

Well-being questions

(1 = Not at all, 10 = very much so)

A healthy lifestyle involves taking exercise, eating a balanced diet, not smoking, not drinking excessive amounts of alcohol, and not being overweight. To what extent do you have a healthy lifestyle?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

People often describe themselves as being positive ("seeing the glass as half full") or negative ("seeing the glass as half empty"). How would you describe yourself?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

Please answer the next set of questions by "Thinking about the last six months":
How satisfied are you with life in general?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

How much stress have you had in your life in general?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

Would you say you are generally happy?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

Would you say that you generally feel anxious or depressed?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

How demanding do you find your course (e.g. do you have constant pressure, have to work fast, have to put in great effort)?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

Do you feel you have control over your academic work and support from staff and fellow students?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

How much stress do you have because of your university work?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

Are you satisfied with your course?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

How physically or mentally tired do you get because of your academic work?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

Have you had an illness (either physical or mental) caused or made worse by your academic work?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Do you ever come to University when you are feeling ill and knowing you can't work as well as you would like to?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

How efficiently do you carry out your academic work?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

Do you find your academic work interferes with your life outside of the university or your life outside of university interferes with your course?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

Are you happy at university?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

Are you anxious or depressed because of academic work?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

Quality of University Life Questions

To what extent do you feel that your university life is easy and efficient?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent do you feel that being a student at university promotes a healthy lifestyle through a well-balanced diet and exercise.

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent do you feel you are valued at the university?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent does the university provide a good physical environment?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent does the university strengthen bonds among individuals and facilitate access to culture and entertainment?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent does the university promote learning and progress?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

“Studying Away” questions.

Before you left home:

To what extent did you carry out pre-departure planning with family or friends?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent did you discuss expectations of how being apart will feel?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent did you say “goodbye” properly and in a way that acknowledges the reality of the coming separation?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent did you agree on likely communications while away?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

Being at university:

To what extent have you acknowledged and adapted to being away?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent do you live the reality of being away without over-reliance on technology (your phone, e-mail, Skype or social media)?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent do you make an effort to unwind after academic work?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

Preparing to go home:

To what extent do you expect to prepare for your return home?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent will you change activities before returning home to help the transition?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent do you consider that you and matters at home, or your perceptions of these, may have changed while you've been away?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent will you "stage" your return (e.g. break up the journey home)?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent do you expect to relax and unwind on the journey home?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent do you expect to take time to adjust to being in the home rather than the university environment?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

To what extent do you expect to act on the realisation that time may be needed to psychologically adjust to being at home?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (10)
(1)	<input type="radio"/>									

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