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Studying-away Strategies: A Three-wave Longitudinal Study of the Wellbeing of International Students in the United Kingdom

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Abstract: Few longitudinal studies have examined the changes over time in international students' wellbeing. This study aimed to explore any change in wellbeing from the beginning of the first semester until the end of the academic year and the impact of using 'wellbeing away' strategies on international students' wellbeing. The survey used the Smith Wellbeing Questionnaire (SWELL), a 'quality of university life' questionnaire, a 'being away strategies' questionnaire and three open-ended questions focused on difficulties, coping strategies and the respondents' most demanding time during their study period in the UK. A total of 104 participants completed the three phases. Repeated measurements showed no significant difference in students' wellbeing over the academic year. A hierarchical regression analysis showed that positive effects were predicted by positive personality, lower level of course demands, by unwinding after study and by quality of life in the second phase. Themes derived from open-ended responses showed that participants found the hardest parts were pre-arrival and the first few weeks in the UK: 48% of the students reported academic difficulties such as exams, deadlines and lack of adjustment to the education system. Time management and study-life balance were the next most difficult issues, especially for those who reported themselves married. Finally, students reported getting social support from family and friends and used exercise as a coping strategy. Results give support to the value of 'studying away' strategies that can help students who are away from home to maintain wellbeing.

Keywords: *International students; Studying overseas; Wellbeing; Wellbeing away strategies*

Introduction

Students may decide to study abroad for various reasons, but most think of ensuring a better future for themselves through higher education and higher-paid jobs. Studying away from home, however, has been linked with negative outcomes, such as depression, stress and feeling lonely during particular stages of transition. These outcomes vary across people. The literature on international students shows that some factors, such as cultural distance and English language fluency, affect the experience of studying abroad. For example, when students come from similar cultures, they tend to find the experience less stressful, and students with high English ability are generally better at academic work and communication with host-society members. Mixed and inconsistent results have been found for some factors, such as age and gender, in studies on international students (Alharbi & Smith, 2018).

Although researchers have paid much attention to international students' mental health issues, such as stress and depression, during adjustment and transition, little research has focused on students' well-being and the factors that affect moving from home to university. Subjective well-being—defined by the presence of positive affect, a lack of negative affect and a high degree of life satisfaction—is stable over the life course. However, it is affected positively and negatively by events, including the transition to university. For example, British students studying away from home reported higher anxiety and depression scores after their transition to university (Fisher & Hood, 1987). Similarly, international students in the United States experienced significant decreases in well-being after approximately three

months (Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008). Ying and Liese (1991) examined pre-and post-arrival changes in the emotional well-being of 171 Taiwan students in the United States. Of the sample, 55% reported post-arrival decline in well-being, which was associated with a lack of preparation for overseas study, a smaller support network, fewer friends in the United States and lower levels of English language skills (Ying & Liese, 1991). Most of these factors have been mentioned in other studies and reviews and linked with negative outcomes (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Andrade, 2006; Church, 1982; Wang & Xiao 2014; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). However, studies on maintaining well-being are rare. In one of the few studies addressing the maintain of wellbeing of international students, Tsenc and Newton (2001) conducted qualitative research with two international students in the United States. Tsenc and Newton (2001) found that the students used six strategies: knowing and understanding self and others, building friendships with peers and relationships with advisors, expanding one's individual worldview, asking for help when needed, improving English proficiency and letting problems go. The students used these strategies only while they were in the host country.

A new model developed by the Sodexo Quality of Life Institute (2014), however, suggests a number of strategies to help maintain wellbeing and reduce negative outcomes from the pre-departure stage until the return home. The first stage of pre-departure planning includes four strategies: discussing expectations about being away, setting up a support network, acknowledging that the separation is real, and planning for contacting and communicating with family and friends at home. The last strategy is especially important for people who will be away and working long hours, with little free time or Internet access. The second phase is being away and includes two strategies: first, adapting to being away without being overly reliant on technology and, second, developing the ability to unwind from work and study as it is known that dwelling on work- and study-related issues leads to negative outcomes. The model also suggests switching activities from studying. For example, students benefit more from exercising in their free time than doing activities similar to those associated with studying, such as surfing the Internet.

The third phase, preparing to return, can have significant impacts on well-being. In this stage, it is important to realise that people (both the person who is away from home and their family and friends) may change, even over short periods of time, which can affect wellbeing. One strategy that can help in this stage is changing activities before returning home, which can smooth the transition from a very different 'away' environment to home. In the fourth phase of returning from the host country, it is important to increase the amount of leisure or relaxation time. In the final stage of being back, students have returned home and need to readjust to their family, friends and country. In theory, disconnections between physical return and psychological return affect wellbeing levels.

An earlier investigation (Smith, Smith & Jelley, 2018) using the wellbeing-away-strategies model found that the being-away strategies were predictors of high-quality university life, and the authors suggested that the use of being-away strategies mediated the relationship between positive wellbeing and the quality of university life. In addition, a comparison study by (Alharbi & Smith, 2019, in press) on

international and home students in the United Kingdom supported the effectiveness of using wellbeing-away strategies during the first two stages of the model (pre-departure and being away). For example, students who applied more pre-departure strategies reported a better quality of university life, and using being-away strategies was associated with positive wellbeing.

The present study aimed to examine the entire studying-away model and all the strategies in each phase throughout the academic year. The study's longitudinal design had three phases and used open-ended questions in the survey in each phase which provided students with opportunities to elaborate on aspects about studying abroad. The study findings may give insights into the well-being of international students in the UK and the effectiveness of using being-away strategies for international students in the United Kingdom which could help develop an intervention to maintain well-being among people studying or working abroad or away from home.

Study Purpose

The study was aimed at extending the findings of previous studies of well-being away strategies and addressed the following questions:

1. Does students' well-being change over the academic year?
2. Does students' well-being at the beginning of the academic year differ depending on their demographic variables, English fluency and experience of studying abroad?
3. To what extent can use of well-being-away strategies predict positive and negative well-being?
4. What concerns do international students have at the beginning of the academic year? What is the greatest challenge students face after four months and what coping strategies do students use?

Methods

Study Design

The longitudinal study design included a repeated measure (positive and negative affect) over three time points during the academic year and one open-ended question in each phase. Phase 1 occurred during the enrolment week at the beginning of the academic year (September 2017). The participants completed surveys with the following questions:

- A demographic questionnaire
- Self-reported English language proficiency
- Positive and negative affect questions
- Seven questions related to personality, healthy lifestyle and feelings (positive and negative) over the past six months (SWELL)
- Four questions measuring pre-departure strategies
- One open-ended question ('What concerns do you have about studying and living in the UK?').

Phase 2 occurred at the beginning of the second semester, approximately three months and two weeks after the first phase (February 2018). In this phase, the participants answered questions on:

- Positive and negative affect
- Eleven questions on course demand and support, illness, happiness at university and quality of university life
- Three questions measuring the use of being-away strategies

- An open-ended question ('What is the most difficult challenge you faced in the past four months, and what were your coping strategies?').

Finally, in phase 3 at the end of the academic year (May and June 2018), the participants completed the following survey:

- Positive and negative affect questions
- Seven questions measuring the use of preparation-to-return, return and being-back strategies.
- Questions about financial difficulties and academic achievement satisfaction
- An open-ended question ('What was the most difficult part of your journey in studying abroad [e.g. pre-arrival, saying goodbye or being away?

The data files were linked by using the students' email as identification. Only the participants who completed phase 1 took part in phase 2, and only those who completed phase 2 took part in phase 3. All the measures used are shown in the appendix.

Sampling Procedure and Participants

Approval for the study was obtained from the ethics committee of the School of Psychology, Cardiff University, and data were collected in the 2017–2018 academic year. The participants were recruited through e-mail and face-to-face contact with students from the Cardiff Business School and School of Modern Languages, which had the highest numbers of international students. The first questionnaire was completed by 312 students at the beginning of the academic year (September 2017). The response rate dropped in the second phase (February 2018), when only 135 participants completed the survey, possibly partly due to invalid email addresses entered in the first phase. The final sample consisted of 104 students who participated in all three phases of the study. Their ages ranged from 18 to 40 years (mean: 26.36 years), 49 were married, and 80% reported living with their spouse in the UK. The participants were from 15 countries. Table 1 presents the sample characteristics at the three time points. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed non-significant differences between the three samples (Wilks' Lambda = 9.75 F (16,1012) = .792, p =.696), indicating that the participants who dropped out did not differ from the participants who completed all the three phases.

Survey Questions

Demographic questionnaire: This measure captured the participants' age, gender, marital status, nationality, ethnicity, programme type, year of study and experience studying overseas.

English language proficiency*:* One self-reported item had the following response options: 1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = average, 4 = good and 5 = very good (fluent).

Positive and negative affect*:* Four items subjectively measured positive and negative affect with a 10-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = not at all to 10 = very much (e.g. 'How stressed are you? How happy you are?'). The Cronbach's alpha for this two items scale for each positive and negative affect over the three point of time was calculated as or above .81.

Smith Wellbeing Questionnaire (SWELL): Eighteen items covered aspects of well-being rated on

a 10-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = not at all to 10 = very much. This measure has been used in many studies investigating well-being among students (Smith et al., 2018) and workers (Smith & Smith, 2017). For the current investigation, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated as .68, which is acceptable in exploratory research.

Quality of university life: This six-item scale (Smith et al., 2018) measured different elements related to the quality of university life, including the university environment, learning, support and value (e.g. 'To what extent do you feel that your university life is easy and efficient?'). The items were rated on a 10-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = not at all to 10 = very much. The Cronbach's alpha for this six-item scale was calculated as .79.

Being-away strategies*:* This 14-item scale (Smith et al., 2018) measured the use of different strategies in the five stages of being away (pre-departure at T1, being away at T2 and preparation to return, return and being back measured at T3). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated as .6, which is acceptable in exploratory research.

Financial difficulties*:* This scale rated one item ('To what extent did you face financial difficulties while studying in the UK?') on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 = not at all to 10 = very much.

Satisfaction with academic achievement scale: This scale consisted of one item ('To what extent are you satisfied with your academic achievement?') rated on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 = very dissatisfied to 10 = very satisfied.

Three open-ended questions*:* One was asked in each phase: 'What concerns do you have about studying and living in the UK?' at Time 1 'What was the most difficult challenge you faced in the past four months, and what were your coping strategies?' at Time 2 'What was the most difficult part of your journey in studying abroad (e.g. pre-arrival, saying goodbye or being away)?' at Time 3.

Table 1

Demographics of the Samples.*

	Time 1		***Time 2***		***Time 3***	
	N	*percent*	*N*	*percent*	*N*	*percent*
Age M (SD)	26.66 (6.55)		26.61 (6.89)		26.36 (6.40)	
Age range	17-52		18-52		18-40	
Gender						
Male	102	32.7	43	31.9	24	23.1
Female	210	67.3	88	65.2	80	76.9
Marital status						
Single	199	63.8	85	63	55	52.9
Married	113	36.2	46	34.1	43	47.1
Type of programme						
Undergraduate	111	35.6	54	40	28	26.9
Master	115	36.9	42	31.1	40	41.3
PhD	86	27.6	36	26.7	33	31.7
Year at university						
First year	153	49	56	41.5	52	50
Other years	159	51	76	56.3	52	50
English proficiency						
1 very poor	1	.3	0	0	0	0
2 poor	13	4.2	4	3.1	1	1
3 average	94	30.1	30	22.9	33	31.7
4 good	138	44.2	64	48.9	53	51
5 very good(fluent)	66	21.2	33	25.2	17	16.3
Studying Overseas before						
Yes	134	42.9	55	40.7	44	42.3
No	178	57.1	76	56.3	60	57.7
Ethnicity						
White	54	17.3	30	22.2	9	8.7
Black or African	12	3.8	6	4.6	3	2.9
Mixed	3	1.0	0	0	1	1
Asian	76	24.4	23	17.6	20	19.2
Arab	160	51.3	68	51.9	60	67.3
Other	7	2.2	4	3.1	1	1
Total	**312**		**135**		**104**	

**Some of the values were missing.*

Results

Data Analysis

Only those who completed all phases of the study were included in the analyses. Statistical analyses were performed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25 for Windows. Tables 2, 3 and 4 present descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and correlations, for all of the study variables in each phase. A repeated-measures statistical analysis was conducted to investigate changes in the levels of positive and negative well-being at three time points. Two stepwise regression analyses were performed to detect the predictors of well-being at the beginning of the academic year. A series of multiple hierarchical regressions were conducted to determine if well-being related factors and the use of each being-away strategy predicted positive and negative well-being. Finally, data from open-ended questions were analysed thematically.

Table 2
Correlation and Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables Time1 (N = 104)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	*M*	*SD*
1. Positive well-being T1	__	-.415**	.412**	.182*	.106	.148	-.028	.180*	12.87	3.19
2. Negative well-being T1		__	-.208*	-.086	.076	.208*	.252**	-.054	11.17	4.32
3. Positive personality			__	.266**	.118	.153	.014	.244**	6.58	1.77
4. Healthy lifestyle				__	.099	.107	.171*	.230*	6.68	1.85
5. Pre-departure planning					__	.527**	.232*	.174*	6.66	2.19
6. Discuss expectations about being away						__	.149	.240**	5.93	2.16
7. Acknowledged the reality of separation							__	.290**	6.41	1.95
8. Agree on likely communications with family and friends								__	7.10	1.84

** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level
* correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Table 3
Correlation and Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables Time2 (N = 104)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	*M*	*SD*
1. Positive wellbeing T2	__	-.486**	-.244**	.194*	.249**	.089	.240**	.415**	12.30	3.62
2. Negative wellbeing T2		__	.224*	-.128	-.155	-.074	-.114	-.211*	10.01	4.37
3. Course demands			__	-.161	-.086	-.048	.077	-.324**	6.68	2.06
4. Control and support				__	.227*	.127	.133	.385**	6.17	1.92
5. Adapting being away					__	.221*	.220*	.221*	7.06	1.77
6. Adapting being away without reliance on technology						__	.283**	.052	5.18	2.56
7. Unwind After studying							__	.063	6.06	1.62
8. Quality of university life								__	32.12	8.57

** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level
* correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Table 4
Correlation and Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables Time3 (N = 104)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	*M*	*SD*
1. Positive wellbeing T3	__	-.492**	.482**	-.271**	.180*	-.207*	.120	-.059	.248**	.164*	.119	12.20	3.80
2. Negative wellbeing T3		__	-.280**	.305**	-.098	.206*	.126	-.013	-.042	-.044	.084	11.35	4.61
3. Satisfaction with academic achievements			__	-.008	.176*	-.011	.061	.030	.081	.176*	.002	6.11	2.03
4. Financial difficulties				__	.089	.068	.108	-.016	-.289**	-.040	.059	4.86	2.59
5. Preparing to return					__	.219*	.078	.233**	.212*	.088	.089	5.69	2.25
6. Change activities						__	.105	.431**	.012	.249**	.124	4.23	2.33
7. Consider that you and matters at home may change while you've been away.							__	.218*	-.032	.439**	.457**	6.06	2.20
8. Stage your return								__	.124	.466**	.388**	4.52	2.44
9. Unwind and relax on Journey to home									__	.102	.068	6.24	2.34
10. Expected time to adjust being home										__	.651**	5.03	2.51
11. Expected time to act on the realisation to psychologically adjusted											__	4.93	2.27

** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level
* correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Level of International Students' Well-being During the Academic Year

A repeated-measures analysis was conducted to detect changes in wellbeing over time. Time did not have a statistically significant effect on positive wellbeing, F (2,204) = 1.157, p =.316, or negative wellbeing, F (2,204) = 2.66, p =.07, during the academic year. However, when general wellbeing - which was measured by how participants felt over the last six months - included in the analysis only positive wellbeing, F (2.56,259) =12.21, p <.001, differed significantly to the three phases and no statistically significant difference on negative wellbeing, F (2.41,246) =2.78, p >.05. See figure 1.

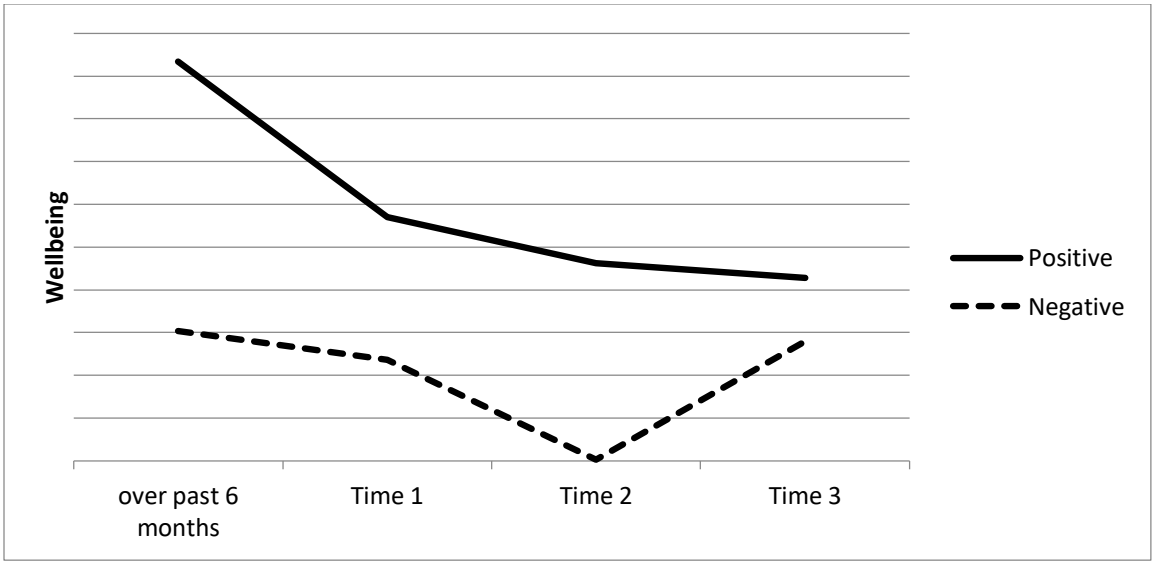

Figure 1. Changes in positive and negative well-being.

Demographic Variables, English Fluency, Year at University and Experience of Studying Abroad as Predictors of Well-being at the Beginning of Academic Year

Stepwise regression analyses were performed using positive and negative well-being at T1 as the outcomes and age, gender, marital status, English fluency, year at university and experience of studying abroad as the predictor variables. Gender was the only significant predictor of negative well-being ($p < 0.001$) and accounted for 10% of the variance in negative wellbeing at T1, with females reporting greater negative well-being. Positive well-being was predicted by year at university ($p < 0.01$) with first-year students reporting higher positive wellbeing. The overall model explained 7% of the variance in positive wellbeing at T1.

Using Wellbeing-away Strategies and Wellbeing

Six hierarchical regressions (two for each phase) were conducted to determine whether positive and negative wellbeing were predicted by factors related to wellbeing, such as positive personality, healthy lifestyle, quality of university life, course demand, control and support and, most importantly, the use of each being-away strategy.

Time 1

The first regression was conducted to determine the predictors of positive well-being at T1. The full results are shown in Table 5. Positive personality and healthy lifestyle were entered in step 1. Positive personality was a significant predictor positive wellbeing (F (2, 103) = 10.8, $p < .001$) and explained 16% of the variance in positive wellbeing at T1. The regression coefficients showed that students with positive personalities reported greater positive well-being. In step 2 of the regression, four pre-departure strategies were entered, but none were significant predictors of positive well-being at T1. The second regression was conducted to determine the predictors of negative well-being at T1. The same variables were entered in steps 1 and 2. The model was only significant in step 2 (F (6, 97) = 3.3, $p < .01$) and explained 12% of the variance in negative well-being at T1. Significant predictors of negative wellbeing at T1 were less positive personality ($p=.05$), discussion of expectations for being away ($p < .05$) and acknowledgement of the reality of separation ($p=.007$).

Time 2

The third and fourth hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted to determine the predictors of positive and negative well-being at T2. Course demand and control and support for academic work were entered in step 1, while being-away strategies and quality of university life (QUL) were entered in step 2. Positive well-being was predicted by lower course demand in the first model but not the second model. Instead, QUL ($p < .001$) and unwinding and relaxation after academic work ($p < .05$) were significant predictors of positive well-being and explained 19 % of the variance in positive well-being at T2. None of the variables or the strategies were significant predictors of negative wellbeing at T2 (F (6, 97) = 1.6, $p > .05$).

Table 5

Predictors of Well-being at Time 1

Step	Predictors	Positive				Negative			
		B	SE	β	T	B	SE	β	t
1	Positive personality	.707	.169	.392	4.182*	-.487	.246	-.200	-1.978*
	Healthy lifestyle	.133	.161	.077	.826	-.077	.35	-.033	-.330
		R^2 = .176	Adjusted R^2 =.159			R^2 = .044	Adjusted R^2 =.026		
2	Positive personality	.655	.176	.363	3.726*	-.477	.241	-.196	-1.980*
	Healthy lifestyle	.125	.167	.072	.745	-.171	.229	-.073	-.748
	Predeparture strategies								
	Pre-departure planning	.040	.162	.27	.246	-.163	.222	-.082	-.736
	Discuss expectations about being away	.093	.164	.062	.568	.550	.224	.272	2.454*
	Acknowledged the reality of separation	-.136	.164	-.082	-.831	.614	.224	.272	2.736*
	Agree on likely communications with family and friends	.134	.178	.076	.756	-.284	.243	-.119	-1.165
		R^2 = .190	Adjusted R^2 = .140			R^2 = .169	Adjusted R^2 =.118		

* Significant at 0.05

Table 6

Predictors of Wellbeing at Time 2

Step	Predictors	Positive				Negative			
		B	SE	β	T	B	SE	β	t
1	Course demands	-.380	.169	-.216	-.239*	.438	.207	.207	2.118*
	Control and support	.287	.182	.152	1.575	-.206	.222	-.091	-.929
		R^2 = .081	Adjusted R^2 =.062			R^2 = .057	Adjusted R^2 =.039		
2	Course demands	-.259	.166	-.148	-1.566	.386	.218	.182	1.770
	Control and support	-.018	.184	-.009	-.096	-.042	.243	-.019	-.175
	Being in strategies AND Quality of university life								
	Adapting being away	.250	.194	.122	1.287	-.207	.255	-.084	-.812
	Adapting being away without reliance on technology	-.027	.134	-.019	-.198	-.020	.176	-.011	-.111
	Unwind After studying	.461	.212	.206	2.170*	-.259	.279	-.096	-.927
	Quality of university life	.138	.044	.317	3.143*	-.060	.058	-.114	-1.034
		R^2 = .236	Adjusted R^2 = .189			R^2 = .090	Adjusted R^2 =.034		

* Significant at 0.05

Time 3

The fifth and sixth hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted to determine the predictors of positive and negative well-being at T3. Financial difficulties and satisfaction with academic achievement were entered in step 1, while the three strategies related to the three stages of the well-being-away-strategies model were entered in step 2. The overall regression model was significant (F (9, 91) = 6.7, $p < .001$) and explained 41% of the variance in positive wellbeing at T3. Satisfaction with academic achievement ($p < .001$), fewer financial difficulties ($p < .01$) and lower levels of changing activities before returning home ($p< .05$) were significant predictors of positive well-being. Negative wellbeing was predicted by lower satisfaction with academic achievement, higher levels

of financial difficulties and higher levels of changing activities before returning home. The overall model was significant (F (9, 91) = 3.08, $p < .01$) and explained 16% of the variance in negative wellbeing at T3.

Table 7
Predictors of Wellbeing at Time 3

Step	Predictors	Positive				Negative			
		B	SE	β	T	B	SE	β	t
1	Satisfaction with academic achievements	.920	.159	.488	5.790*	-.580	.210	-.257	-2.760*
	Financial difficulties	-.401	.125	-.271	-3.213*	.520	.165	.294	3.155*
		R^2 = .305	Adjusted R^2 =.290			R^2 = .149	Adjusted R^2 =.131		
	Satisfaction with academic achievements	.826	.160	.438	5.178*	-.499	.217	-.221	-2.299*
	Financial difficulties	-.381	.128	-.258	-2.984*	.533	.174	.301	3.067*
	Time 3 (*3 stages in wellbeing away model*) Preparing to return								
	Preparing to return	.266	.148	.158	1.803	-.308	.201	-.154	-1.537
	Change activities	-.318	.149	-.195	-2.137*	.524	.203	.268	2.584*
	Consider that you and matters at home may change while you've been away.	.126	.164	.072	.767	.209	.223	.100	.938
2	Returning								
	Stage your return	-.191	.158	-.122	-1.206	-.186	.215	-.099	-.864
	Unwind and relax on Journey to home	.188	.142	.116	1.328	.229	.192	.118	1.191
	Being back								
	Expected time to adjust being home	.073	.180	.048	.405	-.225	.245	-.124	-.919
	Expected time to act on the realisation to psychologically adjusted	.195	.189	.117	1.035	.209	.257	.105	.815
		R^2 = .408	Adjusted R^2 = .349			R^2 = .234	Adjusted R^2 =.158		

* Significant at 0.05

International Students' Responses to Open-ended Questions

Students reported that their main concerns at the beginning of the academic year were adjusting to student life, interaction and communication with local people, being alone and away from home, not making friends and the language barrier. Few reported financial difficulties or concerns about the weather or food. In the second phase, almost half of the sample reported academic difficulties as their biggest challenge, followed by time management, particularly for female, married students. Only 5% of respondents reported homesickness and loneliness, and just 3% reported difficulty adjusting to student life and communicating with local people. Getting support from family and friends and participating in sporting activities were the most common coping strategies used. In the final phase, students reported the pre-arrival stage and the first few weeks as the most difficult part of the journey of studying abroad.

Discussions

This study has explored changes in levels of well-being during the academic year and the effectiveness of well-being away strategies among international students in the UK. International students in this study reported moderate levels of both aspects of well-being. Notably, positive levels of well-being level decreased over the academic year, while negative well-being decreased after time point one. This finding is consistent with previous studies: Distress levels were highest directly after entry in the host country and decreased over time as students adjusted to the environment (Ward et al., 1998). However, in the present study, international students reported the highest level of negative well-being at the end of the semester, which might be because of the examination held during the second semester. According to Golden (1973), students' moods rise and fall with the academic calendar. This is consistent with the responses to the open-ended question about the greatest challenges; almost 50% of participants mentioned academic issues, such as exams, writing essays, and meeting deadlines.

In terms of predicting well-being at the beginning of the academic year, it was expected that factors such as English proficiency and previous experience studying abroad would be significant predictors of well-being during the first phase, as many previous studies have shown that proficiency in the host language reduces international students' stress (Hickey, O'Reilly & Ryan, 2010;Yeh & Inose, 2003). In this study, first-year students reported higher positive well-being than those in another year; this is consistent with a previous study (Alharbi & Smith, 2019, in press). Qualitative longitudinal research among first-year universities students is needed to understand better how the experience of studying abroad changes from the beginning of the academic year to the end of the year or following year. Furthermore, female participants were more likely to report negative well-being, which is also consistent with previous findings (Alharbi & Smith, 2019, in press; Mallinckrodt & Leong 1992; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2008).

English proficiency and experience with studying abroad predicted general well-being as measured by participants' feelings over the previous six months. This means that students who reported high scores in English and had previously studied abroad were less likely to experience negative well-being before arriving in the host country. Similar to other studies that have used the SWELL questionnaire (Smith & Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2018), the present research found that positive factors led to positive outcomes and negative factors led to negative outcomes. In our study, a positive personality, high QUL, satisfaction with academic achievement, and facing fewer financial difficulties led to positive well-being. On the other hand, high course demands and financial difficulties led to greater negative well-being.

Another central objective of this study was to determine the strategies that predict positive well-being and help students maintain well-being. During phase one, discussing their expectations about studying abroad and acknowledging the reality of separation predicted negative well-being, which might be because students' expectations did not match reality. Also, acknowledging separation may be hard for most people as it is connected with loneliness, homesickness, and the loss of a social support network. All pre-departing strategies should aim to prepare students to transition and start university

without focusing on leaving home. A previous study (Alharbi & Smith, 2019, in press) found that international students who used more pre-departing strategies reported higher positive well-being. Furthermore, Ying and Liese (1990) found that Taiwanese students who prepared to study overseas were depressed but significantly less depressed than those who did not prepare.

In the second stage of the well-being away strategies model, only unwinding and relaxing after academic work predicted positive well-being. This model recommends different activities to maintain well-being. Li and Zizzi (2017) found that physical activity benefits international students, not only as a coping strategy but also as a way to build social networks in the host country. In this sample, students reported different coping methods, including physical activity and getting support from family and friends.

In the final phase, students were asked about their preparation to return, going home, and their experience of being back home. Changing activities to return home predicted negative well-being, mainly because of the timing of the third phase, which coincided with the second semester examination period. More research is needed to investigate these strategies and the five phases; research should also be done with a different population who work away from home. Designing an intervention that uses well-being away strategies would help clarify the effectiveness of each strategy, as in this study, students scored between 4 and 6 in most of the studying-away strategies.

Conclusion and Limitations

The current study contributes to knowledge about the well-being of international students in the UK by identifying patterns in both positive and negative well-being at three time points during the academic year. The findings, firstly, show that several variables effect students' wellbeing and, secondly, support the value of the well-being away strategies model, which helps international students maintain their well-being and facilitates the adjustment process while reducing negative outcomes.

Although the results of this study include some noteworthy findings on the topic of international students' well-being, the methodology has several limitations. The first is attrition; the final sample is less than half the size of the initial sample. Secondly, the timing of the third data collection may have affected the findings to some extent, but as the sample size decreased by more than half in the second phase, it was decided to collect data before the summer break. Finally, regarding the sample, all students were full-time and more than half of the sample was of Arab ethnicity, which meant that one cannot generalise the findings to all international students in the UK or exchange or short-time students. Importantly, the age range was wide (18–40 years old), which was important to consider when studying wellbeing and adjustment among international students. However, in this study, age was not associated with any of the outcomes.

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Appendix

Time 1

Email Address
Demographic questionnaire
Gender (male/ female)
Age …..
Type of program: (Undergraduate/Postgraduate)
Marital status: Single Married
If you are married is your family with you: Yes No
Ethnicity: (White – Asian– Black – Arab – Mixed– Other)
Nationality: ……
Have you studied outside your home country before?
Yes No

English fluency:
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
How stressed are you?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
How anxious or depressed are you?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
How happy are you?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
How satisfied are you?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Well Being Questions
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 life style?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
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 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
How satisfied are you with life in general?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How much stress have you had in your life in general?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Would you say you are generally happy?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Would you say that you generally feel anxious or depressed?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

"Being Away" Questions
To what extent have you acknowledged and adapted to being away?**
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
To what extent did you carry out pre-departure planning with family or friends?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
To what extent did you discuss expectations of how being apart will feel?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To what extent did you say "goodbye" properly and in a way that acknowledges the reality of the coming separation?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
To what extent did you agree on likely communications while away?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Open-ended Questions
What concerns do you have about studying and living in the UK?

Time 2

How stressed are you?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
How anxious or depressed are you?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
How happy are you?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
How satisfied are you?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
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 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Do you feel you have control over your academic work and support from staff and fellow students?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How much stress do you have because of your university work?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Are you satisfied with your course?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How physically or mentally tired do you get because of your academic work?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Have you had an illness (either physical or mental) caused or made worse by your academic work?
Yes
No

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
No

How efficiently do you carry out your academic work?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Do you find your academic work interferes with your life outside of university or your life outside of university interferes with your course?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Are you happy at university?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Are you anxious or depressed because of academic work?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Quality of Life Questions

To what extent do you feel that your university life is easy and efficient?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To what extent do you feel that being a student at university promotes a healthy lifestyle through well-balanced diet and exercise.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
To what extent do you feel you are valued at the university?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To what extent does the university provide a good physical environment?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To what extent does the university strengthen bonds among individuals and facilitate access to culture and entertainment?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To what extent does the university promote learning and progress?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Being away Questions
To what extent have you acknowledged and adapted to being away?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
To what extent do you make an effort to unwind after academic work?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Open-ended Questions
What is the most difficult challenge you faced in the last four months, and what were your coping strategies?

Time 3

How stressed are you?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
How anxious or depressed are you?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How happy are you?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How satisfied are you?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Being away Questions
To what extent do you expect to prepare for your return home?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To what extent will you change activities before returning home to help the transition?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
To what extent will you "stage" your return (e.g. break up the journey home)?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To what extent do you expect to relax and unwind on the journey home?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To what extent do you expect to take time to adjust to being in the home rather than the university environment?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To what extent do you expect to act on the realisation that time may be needed to psychologically adjust to being at home?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Financial difficulties
To what extent did you face financial difficulties during studying in the UK?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Satisfaction with academic achievement
To what extent are you satisfied with your academic achievement?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Open-ended Question
What has been the most difficult part of your journey in studying abroad (e.g. pre-arrival, saying goodbye or being away?

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