The mental wellbeing of prospective international students

Adrian J. Tomyn, PhD
Kym Nguyen
The mental wellbeing of prospective international students:

Key findings from a collaboration between Bupa and QS Enrolment Solutions’ 2019 International Student Survey

Adrian J. Tomyn, PhD
National Manager, Research & Analytics, Bupa, ANZ
Honorary Fellow, School of Psychology, Deakin University

Kym Nguyen
Commercial Director
QS Enrolment Solutions APAC
Background

- Published data concerning the mental wellbeing of international and overseas students (OS) are scarce
- This is an important issue because international and OS are a known risk group
- The current study concerns pre-departure student prospect mental wellbeing risk
- This study leveraged the 2019 QSES International Student Survey

This is the first study to:

1. Explore mental wellbeing in a sample of prospective international and overseas students (OS) (known as ‘pre-departure’)
2. Quantify pre-departure levels of life satisfaction, trait level anxiety, stress, loneliness, felt pressure to succeed in future studies abroad and social support
3. Identify differences in the pre-departure mental wellbeing profile of international and OS prospects according to their age, gender, nationality / country of origin, intended level of study and intended area of study
QSES SERVICES

LEAD MANAGEMENT
Maximise completed applications by connecting with and nurturing leads

APPLICATION SUPPORT
Prioritise assessment ready applications to ensure quick turn around times

OFFER CONVERSION
Optimise enrolment conversion through multi-channel engagement and case management

ENGAGEMENT & RETENTION
Build rapport and connect students to relevant support services
QSES INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY

- 77K Responses from around the globe
- 29K Considering studying in Australia
- 22 Participating Australian institutions
- 193 Countries represented in the survey

**WHAT** do prospective students value when making decisions on where and what to study?

**HOW** can institutions effectively communicate with prospective students?

**WHERE** do prospective students want to end up after they’ve finished their studies?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost of living</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of scholarships</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding accommodation</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting a job</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being made to feel unwelcome</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether I will do well academically</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will miss my home, family and friends</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural differences</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking the local language</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to meet my family's expectations...</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating and studying in English</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food choices</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What kind of services would make them less worried?

- Able to ask questions to existing international students: 45%
- If I knew a lot about the culture of the country I am applying to: 44%
- Heard from family or friends that there is good support for international: 41%
- Confidence there would be no language barriers: 37%
- If I knew others going to study at the institution I am applying to: 36%
- Able to visit the country before applying: 35%
- Support services available in native language: 23%
- Mental health services promoted in prospectus or website: 20%
- Something else: 6%

Participant demographics

**12,204**
Participants

**175**
Countries
- India (11.0%)
- Pakistan (9.4%)
- China (8.9%)

**Gender**
- 56%
- 43%

**Age**
- Average age: 24.4 years
- SD age: 6.6 years
- Age range: 16-58 years

**Level of study**
- Postgrad (coursework) - 37%
- Undergrad – 35%
- Postgrad (research) – 21%

**Type of study**
- Business & Admin (22%)
- Engineering (15%)
- Maths & Comp. Sciences (8.5%)

**State of interest**
- Victoria – 34.8%
- New South Wales – 30.6%
- Queensland – 21.6%
- ACT – 7.4%
- South Australia – 4.2%
- Western Australia – 1.4%

**22**
Participating educational institutions & colleges
Life satisfaction

How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?

0 = No satisfaction at all
10 = Completely satisfied

*All scores converted onto standardised 0-100 point scale
Life satisfaction compared to Australian adult normative data

How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?
(0 = Not at all satisfied; 100 = Completely satisfied)

- Average life satisfaction for prospective students (70.6 points) is statistically significantly lower than the Australian adult average (77.6 points); and below the Australian adult normative range of between 76.0-79.1 points

- Prospective students (22.3%) are 2x more likely than Australian adults (10.9%) to be depressed / high depression risk

- Only two thirds (66.7%) of prospective students scored in the normal 70+ point range on the measure of life satisfaction, compared to 83.8% of Australian adults
Trait negative affect

How [lonely, stressed, anxious] do you generally feel?’

‘How pressured do you feel to succeed in your future studies in another country?’

0 = Not at all
10 = Extremely
The relationship between trait negative affect and life satisfaction

- The figure below shows that average life satisfaction decreases with increasing levels of trait negative affect across all four affects.
- Approximately 1 in 10 reported extreme levels of loneliness, stress and anxiety (80-100 points).
- Approximately 1 in 4 reported an extreme level of pressure to succeed in their future studies in another country (90-100 points).

Average life satisfaction for each level of reported trait negative affect

- Normal range for life satisfaction in Australia:
  - 45 to 80 points is considered normal.
  - Below 45 points is considered very low average life satisfaction.
  - Above 80 points is considered high depression risk and vulnerability.

How [lonely, stressed, anxious] do you generally feel? (0 = Not at all; 100 = extremely)
How pressured do you feel to succeed in your future studies in another country? (0 = Not at all; 100 = Extremely)
Social support

I can get help from a friend, family or neighbour when needed?

Yes, definitely
Sometimes
Rarely
Never
Social support and life satisfaction

- 65.5% responded ‘Yes, definitely’ to the question ‘I can get help from friends, family or neighbor when needed’ – their average life satisfaction is almost within normal range
- 34.5% are not certain that they could access social support in a time of need – these people have very low corresponding average life satisfaction

Life Satisfaction 0-100 points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Life Satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, definitely (65.5%)</td>
<td>74.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes (27.3%)</td>
<td>65.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely (5.6%)</td>
<td>57.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all (1.6%)</td>
<td>50.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Very low average life satisfaction & high depression risk / vulnerability

I can get help from a friend, family member or neighbour when needed
Social support and trait negative affectivity

- High social support accessibility is associated with substantially lower average trait negative affect
- Social support likely plays a key role in alleviating / ‘buffering’ people from feelings of distress
Other interesting observations

**Nationality / country of origin and life satisfaction**

- This figure shows average life satisfaction for some of Australia’s largest enrollment groups and emerging markets.
- All average scores are below the Australian adult normative range.
- Some between country variation in average life satisfaction.

![Graph showing life satisfaction scores for different countries.](image-url)

- **India** (n=1343): 73.3
- **China** (n=1092): 70.9
- **Nepal** (n=276): 70.4
- **Vietnam** (n=130): 68.4
- **Malaysia** (n=254): 68.7
- **Sri Lanka** (n=326): 72.2
- **Brazil** (n=140): 70.7
- **Ghana** (n=452): 66.9
- **Nigeria** (n=851): 67.5

Normal range: 76.0
Other interesting observations

Study level and average life satisfaction
- Average life satisfaction is highest among the post-graduate research group and lowest among the foundation course group.
- Average scores across all three non-tertiary groups and the undergraduate group are below 70 points.

Study level and low life satisfaction / depression risk
- Less than 1 in 5 (18.9%) post-graduate research student prospects has very low life satisfaction compared to 1 in 4 (25.9%) undergraduate student prospects.
- More than 1 in 4 (27.9%) student prospects across all three non-tertiary groups has very low life satisfaction.
Summary & implications

- International students are a risk group before they arrive in Australia to study:
  - Two times the risk for very low life satisfaction and depression compared to the Australian population
  - Significant proportions scoring very-high to extreme levels of loneliness, stress, anxiety and felt pressure to succeed
  - More than one third reported perceptions of limited accessibility to social support in a time of need

- This research has major implications for the education sector and their partners / stakeholders as:
  - Student welfare
  - Overwhelming, growing (and perhaps underutilized) demand for on-campus counselling and medical services
  - Interventions and initiatives to better support students, better manage and reduce the impact of mental illness
  - Early intervention and help-seeking
  - Student educational attainment - including attrition and associated loss of income
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