International students in the UK: Perceiving discrimination, adaptation, and well-being.

In the beginning of the 2006/07 academic year, a group of researchers at the University of St. Andrews started a 2-year study examining how international students adapt to their new environment. The aim of the study was to observe which strategies and psychological mechanisms students use to manage the initial stress and general difficulties of moving to a new country. The researchers were particularly interested in understanding how those who just arrived to the UK cope with experiences of discrimination. The present report aims to inform all participating students and universities about the key findings of the study.

Psychological research has shown that being a member of a devalued group has harmful implications for one’s well-being. This is not surprising given that the groups we belong to are important for how we (and others) see and define ourselves. For example, a Black person living in a society which nurtures the idea that Black people are inferior is likely to internalise this perspective, which in turn tends to be reflected in feelings of relative low self-worth. In a similar vein, in the face of discrimination, an international student is likely to feel less proud or satisfied from being an international student (or student from his/her own particular nationality for example), which in turn tends to result in poor well-being. Indeed, research has demonstrated that perceiving discrimination against one’s group is often translated into low self-esteem, and also increased anxiety and depression. Yet, despite these harmful effects of discrimination, previous studies have shown that some individuals have a number of psychological mechanisms that allow them
to cope with these situations. Which psychological mechanisms can aid international students to cope with discrimination? Do individuals distance themselves from the group that is being discriminated against in order to protect their well-being? Do individuals strengthen ties with their group in order to resist discrimination? How these processes affect personal self-esteem, levels of depression and anxiety, and their academic performance?

The present study argued that the way in which international students make sense of and cope with perceived discrimination depends upon their attitude towards the British. More specifically, the study distinguished international students who are interested in participating in British culture and society (i.e., an integration attitude) from those who are not interested in any contact with the British (i.e., separation strategy). It was expected that endorsing a separation attitude would serve to resist discrimination and allow students to strengthen a positive shared feeling about being an international student or/and a student from one’s nationality. It was also predicted that proponents of an integration attitude, in contrast, would not be able to protect themselves from the harmful consequences of rejection. For these international students, being rejected by those who they want to be close to would make them vulnerable and deprived of a successful strategy to cope with discrimination.

**Method – How was the study conducted?**

The study followed a group of first year international students for a period of two academic years. Participants were from a total of 32 different countries around the world (e.g., Germany, China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, India, Mexico, Congo, etc.) and all had English as a foreign language. These students were recruited from a total of seven
universities in Scotland (University of Glasgow, Strathclyde, Edinburgh, Napier, Heriot-Watt, Dundee, and St. Andrews) and were asked to complete a survey upon their arrival (T1 - Time 1). One year later, when international students were in their second year, they were asked to respond to another questionnaire (T2 - Time 2). Both surveys employed a range of measures aiming to assess the extent to which participants had experienced discrimination since they arrived, their attitudes towards the British, how they felt towards the group of international students and students from their own country, and also their personal self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and perceived academic performance. All responses were made in scales ranging from ‘1’ very low to ‘7’ very high.

Results – What were the study’s key findings?

Chart 1 shows the mean scores obtained for the study’s measures. The chart indicates that students’ perceptions of discrimination were around the midpoint of the scale at both time points (an average of 3.8 at T1 and 3.9 at T2), suggesting that they have had some experiences of discrimination. Participants were feeling relatively good about being an international student (5.3 at T1 and 5.5 at T2) and also about being a student from their own country (5.2 at T1 and 5.3 at T2). Students scored high on self-esteem (5.5 at T1 and 5.4 at T2) and low on depression (1.5 both at T1 and T2), and anxiety (2.0 both at T1 and T2). Students were also relatively pleased with their academic performance (5.0 at T1 and 4.9 at T2). Importantly, the chart suggests that perceptions of discrimination slightly increased over time. This pattern is reversed for the well-being measures and academic performance where the trend was to slightly decrease over time. Finally, an inspection of students’ attitudes towards the British revealed that 33% of the total number of students at
T1 endorsed a separation attitude. At T2 this percentage slightly decreased to 28%. The remaining students endorsed an integration attitude.

Chart 1. Mean scores for the study’s key variables.

Although the mean scores for the scales above were important for the study, the main objective was to analyse the relationships between the different measures. Using standard statistical procedures, it was found that perceiving discrimination (measured at T1) resulted in poorer well-being and academic performance one year afterwards (at T2). It was also found that the effect of discrimination (at T1) on the two group memberships (at T2) depended upon students’ attitudes towards the British. More specifically, it was found that for proponents of a separation attitude, perceiving discrimination (at T1) served to maintain
positive feelings (e.g., being proud and satisfied) towards being an international and a student from one’s own country (at T2). For those who endorsed an integration attitude the results were the opposite, such that perceiving discrimination (at T1) resulted in poor feelings towards being an international and a student from their own nationality (at T2). This mechanism evolves over time and is fundamental for understanding students’ psychological well-being and academic performance at T2. In other words, the study showed that proponents of separation, in the face of discrimination, by increasing or maintaining their positive feelings towards their group memberships were able to maintain their self-esteem, levels of anxiety and depression, and academic performance on their second year. For those who endorsed integration, perceiving discrimination resulted in a perceived devaluation of their group memberships, which in turn had negative consequences for their self-esteem, anxiety, and academic performance in their second year of studies.

**Conclusion – What can we conclude from these findings?**

The present study showed that how participants feel about being an international student and a student from own country are important factors for their adaptation. In the face of discrimination, students who endorsed a separation attitude were able to protect their well-being and academic performance by rejecting a devaluation of the two relevant group memberships. Endorsing a separation strategy allowed students to reject contact with the host community and find in their own group a positive meaning among those who suffer from the same difficulties. Along these lines, for participants of the study, being an international student or being a student from their own national group composes an important psychological resource that can be used to counteract the negative effects of
discrimination. Having an integration attitude however, left students rather vulnerable. For these individuals the perspective of the British is important because students want to be close to them. Being discriminated against, alerts these students for the fact that their contact is not desired, which in turn results in poor feelings towards being an international student and a student from one’s own nationality. Thus, what is an initial positive attitude towards contact with the British can be thwarted, having costly consequences for students. Of particular importance to the study was the fact that all results were found across the period of two academic years. For this reason, the results are quite robust and indicate that the initial strategies used by students have an impact on their well-being in their second academic year. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that understanding these strategies is crucial for predicting not only students’ well-being, but also their academic performance.

It is vital to note, however, that a separation attitude might be fundamental for students’ coping strategies to unfold but at the expense of the relationship between the involved groups. That is, due to the lack of contact, separation attitudes create a gap between students and the host community. Previous research has shown that this gap is likely to contribute to problematic intergroup relations. Therefore, the attitude that can be the most effective in protecting students’ well-being is not necessarily the best for the relationships between international and British students. For this reason, practices aiming to help international students should focus on stimulating an integration attitude. The beneficial effects of a separation attitude could be simulated by instigating positive beliefs and feelings towards the two relevant groups analysed in this report. Overall, in the face of discrimination, it is vital to guarantee that international students do not experience a devaluation of the groups they belong to.
On balance, the present study emphasises an important aspect that has been somewhat neglected by current practices. So far, most work focusing on international students has examined the role of contact with the host community, language problems, cultural and learning differences, and financial issues in their adaptation. How international students perceive and give meaning to the groups they belong to has not been analysed in the literature examining their problems. Accordingly, practices developed by universities in order to aid these students do also ignore these aspects. Following from this study’s findings, it is important to understand the subjective meaning of relevant group memberships, the extent to which international students feel part of these groups, and also what sort of ties they develop with other members of these groups. The present study also demonstrated that it is fundamental to examine in parallel to these issues the ways in which international students prefer to interact with the British society (i.e., integration vs. separation attitudes).

This research is now based at the University of Exeter.

For more details about the study email: m.ramos@exeter.ac.uk