Quantitative Study III: What makes foreign students happy?

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Introduction

Globalisation accentuates the need to makes sense of the changing world. The global interdependence of today's world has given rise to the importance of enhanced knowledge and capabilities as well as genuine empathy and commonality of acknowledging human beings and their societies (Zhou et al., 2008; Glaum and Rinker, 2002). The growing global interdependence has required students to engage and participate in local, national and global life (Zhou et al., 2008). It has been estimated that there are more than a million students and academics that are attending institutions in higher education abroad (Wiers-jenssen, 2003). Therefore, students that decide to attend universities abroad have to be able to cope with different social and educational organisations, prospects and behaviours (Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker and Grogaard, 2002; Zhou et al., 2008). The importance of the quality of the psychological, sociocultural and educational experiences is characterised as an important element for promoting global intercultural understanding and factors that create happiness (Zhou et al., 2008). Importance also lies in the understanding of the challenges of adjustments which are common in general. Also, emphasised as an important factor for internationalisation is students' exchange and flow across borders (Wiers-jenssen, 2003). Therefore, this study will compliment existing pull of knowledge on the subject and will investigate the factors which cause exchange students' happiness.

Theoretical problematisation

Happiness can be a very uncertain theme to explore. Despite this, some remarks and clarification in the scientific literature help to clarify what we mean by happiness. The concept itself consists of a hedonic and euadomic components. The former refers to the satisfaction the individual feels over ones life; more specifically, it is associated with what pleasures people can get from their livelihood. The euadomic part is more deeply rooted in one's own psychological level of satisfaction, which is an individual's ability to feel inner peace and harmony with one's surroundings, and thus gain a sort of self-satisfaction. In this sense, people can value the things they have and also strive to achieve more accomplishments in their lives. After all, a person may be well off in having for example friends, family, money and educational opportunities, but if they do not value these things (gain hedonic pleasure from them), then most likely these attributes will not affect their inner self-satisfaction (their inner psychological euadomic satisfaction). This in turn means that the individuals cannot truly be satisfied with their life and therefore can never be truly happy (Fave et al., 2010; Raibley, 2011).

One theme that can relate to happiness is social relations, which includes spending time with friends you have got acquainted with during your university studies abroad (Wiers-jenssen, 2003; Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002; Mogilner, 2010; Fave et al., 2010; Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell and Utsey, 2005). One major factor that enables seizing opportunities to spend time for engagement in inter social relations is social activities. Therefore, in this sense the availability of social activities and how satisfied students are with the activities themselves can influence how happy they are. Miller and Buys (2008) found in

their study that individuals that did not participate in social activities (for example community activities) were in general less happy and less satisfied with their overall lives. A connection can be made to other studies such as the one researched by Wier-jenssen et al. (2002), where the authors found that the social climate can affect how satisfied foreign students are with their studies abroad. In particular, the authors found that the availability of leisure activities, for example social clubs, outdoor and athletic activities, can impact how satisfied foreign students are.

As stated before, happiness can be broken down into hedonic and euadomic components. The former as previously explained, is what pleasures an individual can get from one's life. The latter is the ability of individuals to feel a sense of harmony and satisfaction with their own surroundings (Fave et al., 2010; Raibley, 2011). Social activities and their availability can make foreign students more socially integrated and allow them to feel a sense of satisfaction with the community where they conduct their studies. This can in turn lead to an appreciation of both the external (the community in which foreign students conduct their studies) and the internal (such as classroom and campus environment) academic environments. Also, social activities can give students the opportunity to gain cross–cultural experiences and thus increase their overall cultural intelligence. This minimises of course issues in regard to language and cultural clashes students may experience during studies abroad (Perry et al., 2017; Taylor and Ali, 2016; Rosen and Aune, 2010).

When participating in social activities provided by the university, students get acquainted with their teachers a bit more (if teachers are also participating in these activities). This of

course can enhance the student-teacher relationship and interaction, something that previous authors, Ashby, Richardson, Woodley (2011), have deemed to be important to enhance students' sense of satisfaction when conducting studies abroad. Through social activities in which students and teachers participate together, they can get to know each other more and form stronger relationships.

Of course, economic well-being can, according to some authors mentioned by Lauren J. Leach et.al. (1999), also affect a student's overall happiness. Naturally, if we are not satisfied with our economic situation (have a lot of debts and other financial issues) we are less likely to be happy. However, study by Mogliner (2010) claims that if a person thinks more about their financial situation rather than how to spend time doing social activities with friends, then in general they are less happy. Social activities that provide the possibility to spend time with colleagues can thus be a stronger antecedent than economic well-being when it comes to determining how happy an individual is.

Therefore, in regard to these facts mentioned, the research study and aim will be focused on analysing the social activity of foreign students' experiences abroad, to see how this can affect their overall happiness.

Research question: How does foreign students' satisfaction with their universities' availability of social activities affect the student's happiness?

Research aim: To measure how foreign students' satisfaction with their universities' availability of social activities affects their happiness.

Hypothesis development

As Fave et al. (2010) and Raibley (2011) pinpoint in their study, happiness can be related to the harmony and inner peace a person has and that is related to their own surroundings. This is achieved by, for example, forming strong and good friendship ties with people in one's own social network. Research by Miller and Buys (2008) indicates that participating in social activities in the local community can enhance an individual's overall life satisfaction. Through these activities a person can form stronger bonds and become more familiar with the surrounding environment. Through these types of activities people can form new social ties and friendships with new individuals. In this sense, individuals can form a stronger sense of connectedness and strong belonging towards the community in which they reside. Apart from feeling more life satisfaction when participating in social activities, Miller and Buys (2008) also revealed that active participation in social activities can increase a person's health and well-being.

Wier-Jenssen et al. (2002) also describe in their article the importance of arranging different kinds of social activities to enhance foreign students' happiness. These activities can for example be social clubs, outdoor activities and gym activities. When doing these, the foreign students can become more satisfied during their time they study abroad. These types of activities can build up and improve the social climate in a university, meaning that a foreign student can more easily get acquainted with other fellow students from university. This of course strengthens a person's social relations with other people, something that according to several previous studies improves an individual's happiness (Wiers-jenssen, 2003; Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002; Mogilner, 2010; Fave et al., 2010; Anderson, Berkel,

Caldwell and Utsey, 2005).   Also, making foreign students participate in social activities can help them get to know and feel a sense of joy towards the community in which they conduct their studies. As Miller and Buys (2008) but also Wier-Jenssen et al. (2011) pinpointed, individuals that have the possibility to participate in social activities can benefit, since they are given a chance to increase their life satisfaction and improve their overall psychological health. The following hypothesis therefore is presented below:

H1: Increased availability and satisfaction with the social activity offered by a university will create a positive relationship towards foreign students' happiness.

Method

The data that was obtained was collected from a survey questionnaire. This was mentioned by Broberg, Umans, Skog and Theodorsson (2018) as an efficient method of obtaining data from a large sample group, and has also been used by others in previous studies. The survey was therefore sent to a large number of people through the Högskolan Kristianstad International office. It was also put on Facebook so that foreign students could participate. The questionnaire was also sent to Swedish exchange students from Högskolan Kristianstad. The survey was posted on Facebook from five students from the advanced research methods course and was evidently shared another three times. There were also eight students from the same course programme that shared the survey with their Facebook friends. In total, we got 107 respondents, and 101 survey answers were complete.

The data collected is part of a research paper that we are creating to understand foreign exchange student antecedents to happiness. The research survey questions were inspired by

previously tested research aims in a qualitative research study. This was to get another perspective on the obtained data. To minimise risks, we created the survey questionnaire with our course lecturer to ensure the quality of the survey and to minimise the risk of misunderstandings from the participants.

Table 1 represents the demographic statistics for the final sample. A total of 101 answered the survey, of which 36 were male and 64 were female. We had a 6% missing value which could be stated as non-stated gender.

Gender of the respondents				
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	36	33,6	35,6	35,6
	Female	65	60,7	64,4	100,0
	Total	101	94,4	100,0	
Missing	System	6	5,6		
Total		107	100,0		

Table 1 Gender

Table 2 presents the respondents' age when answering the questionnaire. The average age of the respondents was 25-26 years old, while the youngest was 18 years old. The oldest respondent in this survey was 52 years. So overall, we had a good sample base with respondents from all age groups, which strengthens our research because it obtained data from people in all walks of life.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
Age	102	18,00	52,00	25,8725	5,60529
Valid N (listwise)	102				

Table 2 Age Distribution

Operationalisation

Dependent Variable

Initially the concept of *Subjective happiness* was measured by using adjusted the Subjective Happiness Scale by Lyyubo-mirsky and Lepper (1999). It contained four items rated on a seven-point Likert scale with strongly disagree =1 and strongly agree = 7 as scale extremes. Modifications to the scales were made to capture subjective happiness experienced at one specific point of time (latest foreign exchange). This experience could have taken place in the past or could have been ongoing. The original scale is presented in the regular text while modified questions are in *italics*

1. In general, I consider myself a very happy person/While on a foreign exchange I have considered/I consider myself to be a happy person

2. Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself happier/While on a foreign exchange I have considered/I consider myself to be a comparatively happier person than my peers

3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterisation

describe you? /Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterisation describe you while you were/are on a foreign exchange?

4. Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterisation describe you? /Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterisation describe you while you were/are on a foreign exchange?). Reverse-coded.

The reliability testing revealed that four question instruments had inadequate reliability (α = 0.511) which we attribute to misunderstood reverse-coded question number 4. We thus removed that question; reliability tests indicated that modified questions 1 to 3 outlined above had acceptable reliability (α = 0.711) which is why the final measure of the concept was represented by an average of three questions 1-3.

Independent Variables

The independent variable for our research is social activity, as this is said in the literature to have a direct effect upon foreign exchange student's happiness. Wier-Jenssen et al. (2002) emphasized the importance of universities having socially arranged activities and suggested that foreign exchange student satisfaction can be related to the social activities provided by the universities for these students. Also, other studies, for example Miller and Buys (2008), have shown that individuals who participate in social activities have increased psychological and physical well-being.

Three questions were thus established for the respondents as follows:

> 1. During the exchange period I have had an opportunity to participate in organised social activities
>
> 2. During the exchange period I have had an opportunity to participate in spontaneous social activities
>
> 3. During the exchange period I have been satisfied with the availability of organised and spontaneous social activities

The three questions hoped to determine what foreign students thought about the social activities they were offered and the value these social interactions had for the exchange students themselves. All three questions were measured on a seven-point Likert scale with strongly disagree = 1 and strongly agree = 7 as scale extremes. When conducting the reliability testing all three questions had acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.851$).

Concept related control variable for regression model 1

The concept related control variable for this research was the quality of the academic teaching. More specifically, we wanted to embrace the pedagogic quality of education and how the interaction between student and teacher increased the students' happiness. Studies have shown that teachers that are very socially engaged and know how to motivate every student in class (heighten their sense of well-being and academic confidence) serve an important facilitators or enhancers roles, making students more active and socially confident of participating in social activities (Gibbons 2003; Wier-Jenssen et al.,2002) Therefore three questions were constructed:

> 1. During the courses I felt that interaction with the teachers was intellectually stimulating

2. During the courses the feedback received on my work helped me clarify things I did not understand

3. During the courses I have had meaningful exchanges with teaching staff

The questions were measured on a seven – point Likert scale with strongly disagree = 1 and strongly agree = 7 as scale extremes. Questions were taken from Ashby, Richardson, Woodley (2011), which talks about the interactions between students and teachers, using subjects such as teaching, assessment and personal development.

Concept related control variables for adjusted regression model 2

Another concept specific control variable that we used was personal growth, as this is closely related to social activity. Due to the fact that social interactions and academic endeavours put a person outside of his/her comfort zone, the different interactions develop personal characteristics that are established, formed and shared along the way. Personal development is a tool for achieving inner-well-being, given that it epitomizes investment in the future (Jain, Apple and Ellis, 2015). Thereby, three questions were developed to help grasp the topic of personal growth. A seven-point Likert scale was used to measure the topics with strongly disagree = 1 and strongly agree = 7 as scale extremes. Below are the topics that were addressed using the Likert scale.

1. I frequently find myself looking for new opportunities to grow as a person (e.g. information, people, resources...)

2. I am the type of person who probes deeply into new situations or things.

3. Everywhere I go I am looking for new things or experiences.

The three questions were measured by the use of an adjusted scale by Kashdan, Rose and Fincham (2004).

The second concept related control variable we used for our regression model 2 was relationship quality. Many researchers have pointed out the importance of relationships as a source of students' happiness (Argyle, 2001; Fave et al., 2011; Mogilner, 2010; Sam, 2001; Watson, 1930). Therefore, the concept of Relationship Quality was measured using four questions adjusted from the survey used by Wilkinson (2008). The aforementioned questions were modified in order to capture how the targeted students perceived the relationships they have/had at one specific point of time (latest foreign exchange). This experience could have taken place in the past or could have been ongoing. The four questions were asked and rated on the seven-point Likert scale, with strongly disagree =1 and strongly agree = 7 as scale extremes. The original questions are presented below in normal text format while the modified questions are in italic.

1. I don't feel as close to my friends as I would like - *During the exchange period, I do/did not feel as close to my fellow students as I would have liked to.*
2. I let my friends know about things that trouble me - *During the exchange period, I let my fellow students know about things that trouble me.*
3. I avoid discussing personal things with my friend - *During the exchange period, I avoid(-ed) discussing personal things with my fellow students.*
4. I am confident my friendships will last- *During the exchange period, I am/was confident that relationships I made with my fellow students would last.*

Control Variables

Gender – Respondents were asked to indicate whether they were Female=1/Male=0. Gender was used as a control, given that previous studies have indicated that there might be some differences between genders and women run a greater risk of being depressed (Alavi, 2007)

Age – Respondents were asked to report the year of their birth, which we then subtracted from 2018 to determine their age. According to Hoggard (2005), older people tend to be satisfied with life and thus happier compared to younger people.

Nationality region – As the study was performed in Sweden, we controlled for Swedish =1 vs non-Swedish = 0 respondents as well as for EU = 1 vs non-EU=0 respondents, because national and regional differences might have an influence on the perception of happiness (Ngoo et al.2015).

Exchange region – We controlled for the country where the students gained their exchange experience because previous studies have indicated that foreign country experiences are related to people's emotional states (cf. Jose 2008). Similar to Nationality region, we coded the exchange region into Sweden =1 vs other country = 0 as well as EU = 1 vs non-EU country=0.

Years since last exchange – Since individuals responding to the questions dealing with the past have been shown to differ from people reporting current experience (Grover and Lyberg, 2010) we controlled for the years that had passed since the respondent's foreign exchange experience. We did that by subtracting the year of exchange experience from the current year, 2018.

Exchange student – In line with the discussion on the years since last exchange, we controlled whether the respondent was

currently an exchange student =1 or had been a student in the past =0

Prior study experience – We have controlled and asked the respondents for the number of years they had spent at the university prior to their exchange year. We controlled for this experience given that past studies have indicated that gained experiences allow for better coping with new situations (Cohen and McKay, 1984) that foreign exchange students are exposed to during a student exchange.

Results

Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 D.Happiness									
2 Social activity	,338**								
3 Academic Quality	,416**	,261*							
4 C.Age	-,252*	-0,017	-,224*						
5 C.SwedenCitizenship	-0,059	-0,123	-0,236	-0,127					
6 C.SwedenExchange	-0,03	-0,004	0,076†	0,193	-,464**				
7 C.EUExchange	-0,115	0,016	0,045	0,133	-,551**	,520**			
8 C.E.Student	-0,051	-0,034	-0,126	-,290**	0,066†	,238*	0,048		
9 C.Years	-0,066	0,001	0,055†	0,047	-,237*	0,152	0,057†	0,132	
10 C.Gender	0,05	-0,176	0,127	-0,023	-0,128	0,058†	0,101	,207*	0,016

p<0.01** ;p<0.05* ;p<0.1†

6.1 Table 3 Correlation matrix

The correlation results from the data obtained gave us the results we see in table 3 above. The first thing we can observe is that there is a significant positive relationship between social activity and happiness. p<0.338, indicating according to Pallant

(2012) an average strength of the relationship between happiness and social activities.

When it comes to the concept related variable of academic quality then two things can be observed. The first one is that there is a significant relationship between academic quality and happiness. As shown in the correlation matrix the significance of the relationship between academic quality and social activity was p<0.01, which shows that we can to a certain extent be confident that there is a positive relationship between the two variables. The number 0.416 was the result obtained from the analysis, demonstrating thus that there is an average strong correlation between academic quality and happiness. The second thing that can be observed is that there is a weak relationship between academic quality and social activity. The result and the number achieved was 0.261 which, according to Pallant (2012), indicates that there is a small positive relationship between academic quality and social activity.

Another thing worth mentioning is that the control variable of age has a negative and weak significant impact upon happiness. The number was -0.252 and the significant value was p<0.05. According to Pallant (2012) a value of p < 0.05 indicates that the results are probably reliable.

	Model 1	
Variables		
	Std.B	Std. E
Social activity	0,131	0,105
Academic quality	0,305'	0,089
Age	-0,17	0,03
Sweden citizenship	-0,069	0,466
Sweden exchange	0,114	0,316
Eu exchange	-0,186	0,444
Exchange student now/not	-0,107	0,306
Years	-0,06	0,079
Gender	0,068	0,263
Constant	5,050***	1,099
F-Value	1,719	
Adj.	0,079	
VIF value highest	2,864	
	n=76	

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.10$

6. 2 Table 4 Regression model 1

The regression model above (in table 4) shows that the VIF value for the constructed model is below 0.10, which indicates that there is no multicollinearity between the independent variables used in the model. According to Pallant (2012) this indicates that the results shown in the model can be considered reliable. The model shows that academic quality has an impact on students' happiness with their abroad academic experience, while social activity does not have an impact at all. Overall the model explains 7.9% of the variance in the foreign students' general happiness, as shown in the adjusted r-square.

Viewing the standardised beta (STDB) numbers one can observe that academic quality has a 30.5% significance contribution over the other variables in the model, explaining the variance of the dependent variable of happiness. However, social activity did not have any significant impact on the variance of happiness, as shown in the model. The significant value for academic quality was $p < 0.05$, which, according to Pallant (2012), indicates that the result can be considered to be reliable.

Model 2

Variables		
	Std.B	Std.E
Social activity	**0,202***	0,078
Personal Growth	**0,416***	0,097
Relationship Quality	0,129	0,062
Age	-0,133	0,018
Sweden Citizenship	-0,051	0,239
EU citizenship	0,04	0,223
Constant	2,551***	
F-Value	7,438***	
Adj	0,305	
VIF value highest	1,441	
	n=89	

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.10$

6.3 Table 5 Regression model 2

Regression model 2 (see table 5) shows that both social activity and personal growth are significant for explaining the variance in happiness. The VIF value in model 2 is lower than in model 1, which indicates that the risk of multicollinearity is lower here in model 2 than in model 1. Variance of 30.5% in the students' happiness is indicated from the model when referring to the adjusted r-square. The standardised beta has a value of 20.2%

(social activity) and 41.6% (personal growth). The variables both contribute to the explanation of the other variables in the model. Relationship quality was not shown to have any strong effect upon foreign students' happiness. The significant value for personal growth was $p < 0.001$ and for social activity the same value was $p < 0.05$. According to Pallant (2012) the results for how strongly personal growth and social activities impact on foreign students' happiness can in regards to their significant value be considered reliable.

Discussion

Upon further comparing the two regression models it is evident that social activity and personal growth when combined (as in model 2) can explain the variance in foreign students' happiness better than academic quality (in model 1) can. It is thus to some extent apparent that social activities when leading to personal growth can become a vital factor in determining foreign students' happiness. This can be connected to the claims made by Wier-jenssen et al. (2002) and Miller and Buys (2008) where the authors argue for the importance of using social activities as a means to improve the well-being and inner satisfaction of individuals.

Although academic quality in regard to the interactions between teachers and students can, according to Ashby et al. (2011), have an effect upon foreign students' happiness (which was also shown in model 1), perhaps this relationship does not have that strong an impact if students feel that during their academic years they do not develop socially. This in line with Fave et al. (2010) and Raibley (2011) who found that in order to feel truly happy, people have to first value and feel satisfaction with the positive things they have in life. Examples can be good academic pedagogic quality and close friendship ties.

When for example an individual does not see any value in having these things then they cannot really be truly happy.

Relationship quality when added to model 2 was not shown to have any significant impact upon happiness. Again, this probably relates to the fact that although a person may have strong friendship ties with colleagues and teachers this really does not lead to increased happiness. If a person does not truly value and see the benefits for himself when it comes to having close friends and strong social interactions with teachers, then these do not really have any effect upon the person's own happiness (Fave et al., 2010; Raibley, 2011).

None of the control variables used in model 2 had any impact upon happiness; however, in model 1 the control variable of had an impact. What is worth noting is that when personal growth was added in model 2 then age stopped having any significant impact upon happiness. Thus, perhaps it is not as Hoggard (2005) claims that how young or old you are determines your overall happiness, but instead what is important is whether, during your life (for example, your exchange experience), you feel self-satisfaction about life and personal social development. This of course relates to the personal growth aspect of a person's life. Another thing worth mentioning is the fact that the control variable gender in model 1 had no significant impact upon happiness. This was despite the fact that most of the respondents were female and that previous studies by Alavi (2007) showed that females have a greater risk than males of falling victim to depression.

Conclusions

This study investigated the impact of social activities and how this has a significant influence upon foreign students' overall happiness. What was found is that this aspect can indeed have

a positive influence upon foreign students' happiness, but only if these activities lead to higher self-satisfaction and well-being for individuals themselves (personal growth). Therefore, it is not only important for universities to offer students a wide range of social activities, but also to ensure that these activities lead to a higher degree of self-confidence and well-being for the participants themselves.

As previous studies have shown, while it is good to have inter-actions and shared activities with other people on a daily basis, a person has to value these activities and feel they are getting something out of them. Only then perhaps can individuals find true happiness. This of course can also be applied to foreign students. Increased availability and quality of social activities can minimise the issues foreign students' face regarding cultural, language and other academic issues that may arise when studying abroad. By minimising these issues through social activities with others, a person can become more appreciative of and more at ease with his own surroundings.

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