Exploring Social Connectedness and its Impact on University Adjustment and Well-being: A Mixed-Methods Study in New Zealand

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**INTRODUCTION**

Studying at higher education institutions exposes both domestic and international undergraduate students to a variety of challenges within academic, social, institutional, and personal-emotional domains. The transition to independence is different for each student; some adapt well to their new situation, whereas others find it harder to settle.

A high degree of social connectedness has been found to promote student adjustment and psychosocial wellbeing. Social connectedness can be defined as having strong social relationships or networks. However, the increased availability of lecture content online and the COVID-19 pandemic have affected how students interact with, and are connected to, each other and their support networks. Reduced social interactions and a lack of social support may negatively affect students' adjustment and wellbeing, for instance, increased dropout rates, depression, eating disorders, mental disturbance, sleep difficulties, and risk of obesity. There is, therefore, justification for undertaking a study on the social connectedness of first-year university students and their impacts.

**AIMS & OBJECTIVES**

- How does social connectedness of first-year university students in New Zealand impact adjustment to university and psychosocial wellbeing?
- Examine the strategies first-year university students use to form social connections and identify their adjustment challenges in the era of Covid-19.
- Conduct a New Zealand validation of the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ).
- Measure the social connectedness of New Zealand university students together with adjustment and psychosocial variables at two-time points:
  1. Determine the impact of social connectedness on university adjustment and psychosocial wellbeing.
  2. Identify risk and protective factors for students' adjustment and psychosocial wellbeing associated with differing levels of social connectedness.

**METHODS**

**Mixed Methods**

- Qualitative:
  - Interviews
  - Survey

- Quantitative:
  - Study 1
  - Study 2
  - Study 3

- Phase 1: Baseline
- Phase 2: Follow-up
- Phase 3: Longitudinal

**FINDINGS**

- Study 1
  - Male: 6
  - Female: 15
  - Age range from 18-28
  - Domestic student: 15
  - International student: 6
  - 32% were unaware of any social connection strategies provided by their institution.
  - 45% experienced loneliness
  - 59% experienced stress
  - 59% encountered university adjustment challenges
  - 85% experienced difficulty in making new friends

- Study 2
  - Valuating the questionnaire (SACQ) to use in further Study 3.
  - Current recruiting phase

- Study 3
  - Interviews to explore the university experiences of undergraduate students (n=23).
  - 300 first-year university students to complete online anonymous survey.

- 400 first-year students to complete an online survey.

- Collect data from participants upon recruitment (baseline T1: approx. Feb/March, 2024), with follow-up (T2) nine months later (approx. Oct/Nov, 2024) using the same measures.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

- This research will contribute to a greater understanding of the factors that impact the successful transition to a university environment. It may also enable tertiary institutions to develop strategies to enhance students' academic experience and safeguard their wellbeing.

**Hypothesis**

- Students who report increased levels of social connectedness at T2 (compared to T1) will demonstrate a higher level of adaptation to university (as measured by SACQ) and lower levels of depressive, anxiety and stress symptoms (as measured by DASS-21) at T2 compared to T1.

**Key words:** social connectedness, university students, adjustment, psychosocial well-being, social relationships, social networks, Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), academic experience, university adjustment.