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Culture Shock or Love at First Sight? Exploring the 'Honeymoon' Stage of the International Student Sojourn.

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Culture shock or love at first sight?

Exploring the ‘honeymoon’ stage of the international student sojourn

Abstract

An issue neglected by researchers and educators is that the ‘international’ student experience goes beyond the time spent abroad and begins before the actual arrival in the host country, with the decision to study abroad. Additionally, research suggests that student sojourners’ immediate reactions to the new environment are important for the success or otherwise of their sojourn, but also that these tend to be far from uniform. Following Kim’s (2001) notion of ‘preparedness for change’, the present study sought to examine whether and, if so, how dispositional ‘pre-arrival’ factors impinge on student sojourners’ subjective wellbeing in the early sojourn stages. Specifically, we investigated the interrelationships between several predispositional factors – intercultural competence, host language ability, knowledge about the host country, and degree of self-determination in the decision to study abroad – and their predictive value for subjective student wellbeing in the initial sojourn stage. Our findings suggest that these pre-arrival factors impact significantly on both psychological wellbeing and satisfaction with life in the early sojourn stages. We also found significant associations among the factors themselves. Our findings helped to illuminate a multi-faceted and fine-grained perspective on the relationships between pre-sojourn and early-stage factors and the quality of international students’ experiences in the crucial early stage of adjustment, and as such are likely to have important implications for future research, and for educators and policy makers in Higher Education.

Background

An increasing number of students study at higher education (HE) institutions outside their country of origin, predominantly at English as first-language speaking universities, although the proportion attending others is growing (OECD, 2012). These international student sojourns, defined in the literature as a temporary stay abroad for a specific purpose (Ward,

Bochner and Furnham, 2001) are a growing global, educational and intercultural¹ phenomenon, and consequently the international student experience has attracted considerable research interest over the years (Montgomery, 2010). There are currently around 4 million student sojourners worldwide, and their numbers have more than doubled since 2000 (OECD, 2012). Projections indicate that this number could grow to 8 million by the year 2020 (Forest and Altbach, 2006). Other terms used in the literature to describe this student group include ‘international students’, ‘foreign students’ and ‘overseas students’. All these terms commonly describe individuals who leave their country of origin to undertake tertiary study abroad (Ramsay, Jones and Barker, 2007). In this study, we focus on mobile degree students, i.e. those who undertake a full degree programme abroad (Wiers-Jenssen, 2013). This student group has a strong presence in the United Kingdom (UK), making up almost 70 per cent of full-time taught postgraduate degree students. Overall, almost one in five of the total UK university student population is ‘international’ (Scudamore, 2013), with international student enrolment standing at 19 per cent nationally (UKCISA, 2013). Despite recent efforts on the part of the UK government to limit the rise of international student numbers in the future, student sojourners in the UK and elsewhere will nonetheless remain an important part of the HE student body for the foreseeable future (Coppi, 2007), and will continue to contribute to the finances and diversity of their host institutions (Coughlan, 2011).

The surge in international student numbers has led to a burgeoning literature on the adjustment processes and adaptation experienced by this student group (Andrade, 2006; Brown, 2008a; Young et al., 2013; Young and Schartner, 2014). However, one issue neglected by researchers and educators is that the international student experience goes beyond the time spent abroad and begins before the actual arrival in the host country, with the

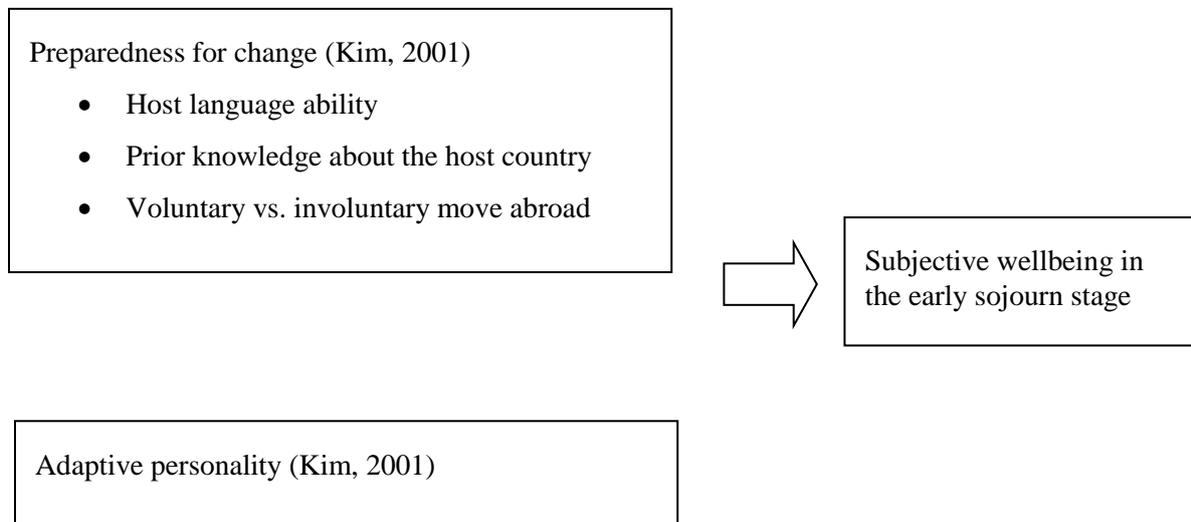
¹ This article uses *inter* and *cross* cultural synonymously throughout, although there is some debate about distinctions between the two (e.g. Gudykunst, 2003).

decision to study abroad. While the pre-departure stage has been explored with samples of exchange students (e.g. Ehrenreich, 2006; Brown and Aktas, 2012), this time period remains underexplored for degree mobile students. In addition, in-depth investigations of the earliest stage of the adjustment process also remain relatively scarce, and have mainly been of a qualitative nature (e.g. Brown, 2008b, 2008c). However, an investigation of the factors that impact on early-sojourn wellbeing is crucial as it is in this stage that students need to adjust to a new academic and sociocultural environment fairly quickly - this is especially true for international students undertaking one-year taught MA programmes, the usual model in the UK, as their time abroad is more 'condensed' than those of their peers enrolled in undergraduate or doctoral research degrees (usually of anything between three and six years).. A consideration of the early sojourn stage is therefore vital in order to develop a more comprehensive empirical understanding of student sojourners' adjustment journey.

The frequently cited U-curve model of sojourner adjustment (Lysgaard, 1955) depicts the first few weeks in the host environment as a 'honeymoon phase' of excitement and euphoria, usually followed by 'culture shock' (Oberg, 1960). However, recent research has contested and problematized this outlook and found evidence of anxiety and nervousness in the initial sojourn stage (Ward et al., 2001; Brown, 2008b; Brown and Holloway, 2008). A study sojourn abroad is a uniquely subjective experience (Madison, 2006), and international students are a highly heterogeneous group (Mestenhauser, 2002) with a range of motivations and prior experiences. Thus, their reactions to the new environment are likely to be far from uniform. Therefore, in this study we were interested in a set of dispositional factors that form part of Kim's (2001) concepts of 'preparedness for change' - including host language ability, knowledge about the host country, and degree to which the move abroad was voluntary or influenced by external factors - and 'adaptive personality'. The latter was conceptualised here as intercultural competence (IC), which has been identified as an important contributory

factor for international students' adaptation in a number of recent studies (e.g. Leong, 2007; Young et al., 2013; Schartner, 2014). Our theoretical framework is detailed in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Theoretical background for this study



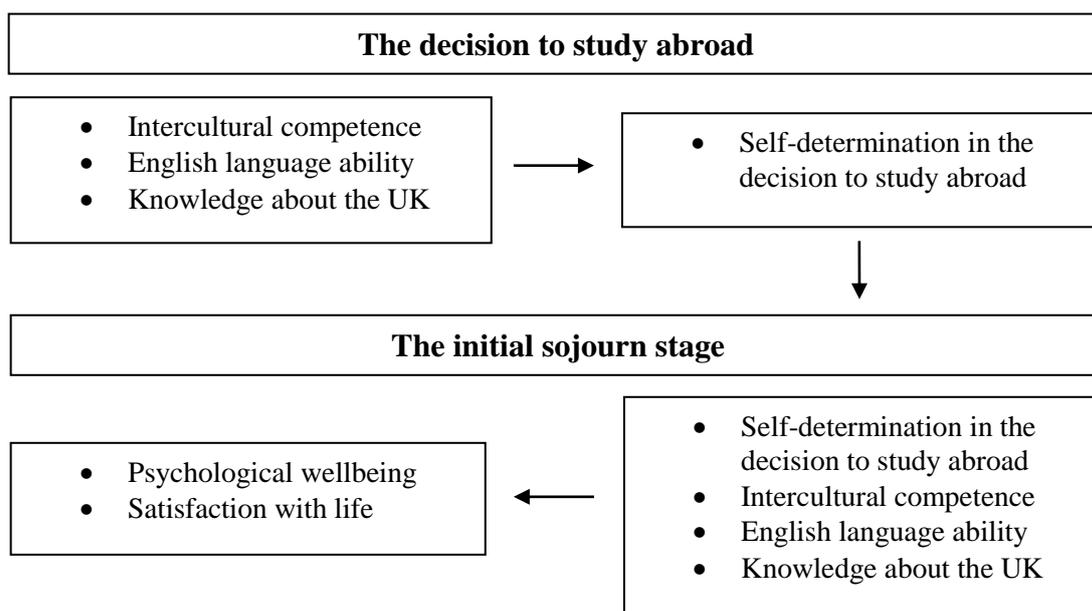
We explicitly tested Kim's (2001) theory in relation to the initial 'transition' stage of the sojourn. More specifically, we investigated the statistical interrelationships between four predispositional factors via our survey; intercultural competence (IC), self-determined motivation for study abroad (SDSA), knowledge about the host country (KNW), and English language ability (ELA), as well as the predictive value of these variables against two indicators of subjective student wellbeing: psychological wellbeing (PWB) and satisfaction with life (SWL), a common distinction used to conceptualise psychological reactions to the host environment (Sam, 2000; Ward et al., 2001). We were also interested in whether intercultural competence, knowledge about the host country and English language ability may impact on the degree of self-determination in the decision to study abroad.

Our analytical framework is detailed in Figure 2 below. Our research questions were:

- How do intercultural competence, English language ability, and knowledge about the host country relate to self-determined motivation for study abroad?

- How are self-determined motivation for study abroad, intercultural competence, English language ability, and knowledge about the host country associated with psychological wellbeing and satisfaction with life in the early sojourn stage?

Figure 2 Analytical framework: Contributory and outcome factors investigated in this study



Intercultural competence

There are suggestions in the theoretical and empirical literature that sojourners' degree of intercultural competence (henceforth IC) can alleviate acculturative stress and impact positively on their psychological adjustment (Kim, 2001; Yakunina et al., 2013; Young et al., 2013). IC is variously conceptualised (Fantini and Tirmizi, 2006), but here refers to measurable abilities and predispositions contributing to an individual's effectiveness in intercultural settings (Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee, 2002).

In order to assess intercultural competence, we used the *Multicultural Personality Questionnaire* (MPQ, Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2000), a self-report psychometric survey which includes scales on cultural empathy (CE), open mindedness (OM), social initiative (SI), emotional stability (ES), and flexibility (FL). The instrument has repeatedly demonstrated predictive validity for a range of outcome indices in a number of investigations

across different sojourner groups (e.g. Van Oudenhoven, Mol and Van der Zee, 2003; Leone et al., 2005), including international students (Leong, 2007; Young et al., 2013). For the latter, the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire-scales have previously been found to predict subjective student wellbeing in a number of studies in different contexts (e.g. van Oudenhoven and van der Zee, 2002; Leong, 2007; Schartner, 2014). Thus, we anticipated that IC would also contribute to student wellbeing in our sample. We further expected IC to be associated with self-determined motivation for study abroad as it seemed likely that students with high IC would be intrinsically attracted to such an intercultural experience. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that looks specifically at these relationships in a quantitative manner.

Self-determined motivation for study abroad

Relocating abroad is a major life decision and the degree to which this decision was voluntary will ultimately determine how well the sojourner adjusts to the new environment (Kim, 2001). In two recent studies, Chirkov and colleagues (Chirkov et al., 2007, 2008) investigated student sojourners' degree of self-determination in their decision to study abroad, and its impact on their subsequent adaptation. They found that this motivational variable predicted a range of adjustment outcomes, including subjective wellbeing. In their research, the authors were guided by self-determination theory (SDT) of human motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2004) which emphasises the importance of autonomy and self-determination in people's functioning. According to SDT, people's success and wellbeing while undertaking an activity strongly depends on their level of self-determination in choosing to undertake it (Chirkov et al., 2007). Thus, we expected that student sojourners who felt that they stood behind their decision to study abroad would be happier and more satisfied in the new environment than those who felt they were pressured by external factors to study abroad (cf. Chirkov et al.,

2008). According to SDT, four types of behaviour regulation can be distinguished on a self-determination continuum (cf. Chirkov et al., 2007):

1. *Intrinsic motivation*: students make the decision to study abroad independently from others because they are genuinely attracted to study abroad
2. *Identified regulation*: students move abroad because they are motivated by external outcomes (i.e. gaining a qualification abroad seems important for their future career)
3. *Introjected regulation*: students do not receive direct pressure but decide to study abroad to gain social approval or avoid feeling guilty (e.g. they feel they 'ought' to study abroad)
4. *External regulation*: students embark on a sojourn as a result of direct pressure from others (e.g. international students' parents insist or promise a reward)

On this continuum, intrinsic motivation represents fully autonomous motivation whereas external regulation reflects a complete lack of self-determination.

Pre-sojourn knowledge about the host country

The importance of pre-departure preparation – including the acquisition of host country specific knowledge – for sojourner adjustment has been highlighted by several authors (e.g. Kim, 2001; Ward et al., 2001). However, in the international student context, the role of pre-departure knowledge is relatively under-explored, and studies on the effects of pre-departure preparation remain largely limited to the international business context (Littrell et al., 2006). While there is very little recent research, there is some empirical evidence from earlier studies suggesting that pre-departure knowledge about the host environment impacts positively on student sojourners' adaptation. For example, Chapman, Wan and Xu (1988) found that prior knowledge of the US educational environment was a significant predictor of the academic achievement in a sample of international postgraduate students in the US. Interestingly, the same variable was found not to be associated with appraisal of academic stress in another sample of postgraduate student sojourners in the US (Wan, Chapman and Biggs, 1992). In a

more recent study, Tsang (2001) found that pre-departure knowledge was positively related to general and interaction adjustment of students sojourning in Singapore. Similarly, Ying (2002) found that prior knowledge about the US predicted greater social contact with Americans among a sample of Taiwanese postgraduate students in the US. Most recently, Schartner (2014) found significant associations between pre-departure knowledge and satisfaction with life in the host country. For the present study, we anticipated that those who felt more knowledgeable about the UK would also be happier and more satisfied upon arrival in the UK.

English language ability

The crucial role of proficiency in the local language, or in English if this is the language of instruction, in international students' adjustment is widely recognised (see Andrade, 2006). There are strong indications in the literature that language ability not only affects student sojourners' academic adjustment (Robertson et al., 2000; Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day 2010), but also has a significant bearing on their overall wellbeing (Poyrazli et al., 2002; Duru and Poyrazli, 2007). Studies have shown that many international students tend to lack confidence in their English abilities (Senyshyn et al., 2000) and fear making mistakes (Jacob and Greggo, 2001). Thus, in this study we were interested in students' self-perceived English language ability (ELA). We anticipated very little difference in tested ELA prior to arrival, as this had been the case with previous cohorts undertaking the same degree programmes (see. Young et al., 2013; Young and Schartner, 2014), and post-arrival checks revealed this to be the case, with the vast majority of participants having achieved an *International English Language Testing System* score of 6.5 or an equivalent. We therefore felt that a self-report measure, relating self-concept and language confidence upon arrival, would be a more appropriate measure of language ability than a standardised pre-arrival English language test (cf. Young et al., 2013). We expected that students who were satisfied with their ability to communicate

in English would also show higher psychological wellbeing and satisfaction with life scores in the initial sojourn stage.

Methods

The Participants

Participants were non-UK students undertaking one-year taught postgraduate degrees in Cross-cultural Communication, or in Applied Linguistics and TESOL² at a single UK university (N = 239). Both degree programmes were closely matched in structure, content, assessment methods and in student cohort composition. A self-report survey (see further details below) was administered to the students when they were two weeks into their programme of study. All participants received an English version and completed it at the end of a core lecture in early October in the presence of one of the researchers. Informed consent was obtained prior to collecting data and confidentiality was assured and maintained throughout.

After an initial screening of the data, 16 participants had to be excluded from further analysis as they had previously obtained undergraduate or postgraduate degrees from UK universities. It was felt that the inclusion of this data in the analysis would have affected the authenticity of the findings due to the great familiarity of these students with life and study in the UK. Of the remaining participants (N = 223), a majority (55%) came from the People's Republic of China (PRC), the largest 'sending' country of international students to the UK (UKCISA, 2013). The rest came from a variety of countries and territories³, including Europe (37), the Americas/Caribbean (20), East Asia (30), the Middle East (10), and Africa (2).

Participants' age ranged from 20 to 42 ($M = 24.04$) and almost 90% were female, mirroring

² Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

³ In some cases, students identified territories which are not officially recognised as nation states as their places of origin (e.g. Palestine, Kurdistan, Taiwan) – these places are included here as reported by the students, although their 'official' nationality may be different (e.g. a Kurdish student with an Iraqi passport)

the gender balance that is common on the degree programmes under study here (cf. Wright and Schartner, 2013; Young et al., 2013). Seventeen students were first language speakers (L1) of English, mainly from Canada and the US. All students who were second language (L2) English speakers had obtained the minimum English language entrance requirement for their programmes of study (IELTS 6.5 or equivalent). Forty-one per cent of participants had previous overseas experience of five months or more. A large majority (80%) indicated that the UK was their preferred destination. Finally, all participants had previously obtained an equivalent of a UK undergraduate degree of at least a higher 2nd class ('2.1').

The Survey

Scales and survey items were selected based on the information needed to address the research questions (Rosenthal, Russell and Thomson 2006). Measures for the survey were either taken directly or with slight modifications from existing scales. With the exception of demographic items, all survey questions were answered on a 5-point Likert scale. Measures for the survey were taken directly or with slight modifications from existing scales.

Respondents were asked to provide the following demographic background information: date of arrival in the UK, country of origin, age, gender, first language, and previous overseas experience.

Degree of self-determination in the decision to study abroad

To assess the degree of self-determination in students' decision to study abroad we used the *Self-regulation Questionnaire-Study Abroad* (SRQ-SA, Chirkov et al., 2008). In accordance with Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2004), this 10-item scale differentiates between four types of motivation on a self-determination continuum: intrinsic motivation (INTRI, 2 items), identified regulation (IDENT, 2 items), introjected regulation (INTRO, 4 items), and external regulation (EXTER, 2 items). The items were rated on a 5-point Likert

scale, ranging from 1 [totally not applicable] to 5 [completely applicable]. From these items, a *Relative Autonomy Index* (RAI, cf. Chirkov et al., 2007) was computed by weighting the four subscales based on their intercorrelations [+2 = INTRI, +1 = IDENT, -1 = INTRO, -2 = EXTER]. A positive score represented the prevalence of autonomous motivation over controlled motivation, and a negative score represented the prevalence of controlled motivation over self-determined motivation. Table 1 shows example items and their measures of internal consistency (Cronbach's α).

Table 1 Example items and measures of internal consistency for the SRQ-SA

SRQ-SA			
<i>I came to study abroad because...</i>			
INTRI	IDENT	INTRO	EXTER
<i>...I thought I would enjoy it</i>	<i>...it was one of my life goals</i>	<i>...I wanted other people to approve of me</i>	Example: <i>...I would have gotten into trouble if I did not</i>
$\alpha = .83$	$\alpha = .60$	$\alpha = .69$	$\alpha = .55$

Intercultural competence

In order to assess participants' IC, the English-version of the *Multicultural Personality Questionnaire* (MPQ, Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee, 2002) was obtained. It included 91 items, each relating to one of five dimensions of IC: cultural empathy (CE, 18 items), open mindedness (OM, 18 items), social initiative (SI, 17 items), emotional stability (ES, 20 items), and flexibility (FL, 18 items). Respondents could give their answers on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 [totally not applicable] to 5 [completely applicable]. Table 2 shows example items for the subscales and measures of internal consistency.

Table 2 Example items and measures of internal consistency for the MPQ

IC Subscales				
CE	OM	SI	ES	FL
Example: <i>Understands other peoples'</i>	Example: <i>Finds other religions interesting</i>	Example: <i>Waits for others to initiate</i>	Example: <i>Remains calm in misfortune</i>	Example: <i>Enjoys unfamiliar experiences</i>

<i>feelings</i>		<i>contact (-)</i>		
$\alpha = .81$	$\alpha = .81$	$\alpha = .85$	$\alpha = .76$	$\alpha = .75$

English language ability

A four-item scale asked ‘At this point, how satisfied are you with your ability to communicate in the English language?’ Respondents were asked to self-rate their abilities in four skill areas – reading, writing, listening and speaking – on a 5-point Likert scale ($\alpha = .74$) ranging from 1 [not at all satisfied] to 5 [very satisfied], with high mean scores representing high perceived competence in English.

Pre-departure knowledge

One item asked ‘How much, would you say, did you know about the UK before coming here?’ Students could rate their answer on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 [no knowledge at all] to 5 [a lot of knowledge]. This single-item measure aimed to gauge, broadly, students’ own perception of their pre-sojourn knowledge about the UK.

Wellbeing measures

In order to capture a snapshot of students’ state of mind in the early sojourn stage, two wellbeing indicators were included in the survey: psychological wellbeing (PWB) and satisfaction with life (SWL), with PWB capturing a more affective dimension of subjective student wellbeing, and SWL reflecting a more cognitive dimension (Sam, 2000). Scales on PWB were obtained from the *RAND Mental Health Inventory* (RAND, 2012). Eleven items ($\alpha = .86$) asked students how they had been feeling over the past four weeks. Example items include: ‘I have felt full of energy’ (+) and ‘I have been a very nervous person’ (-). Answers could vary from 1 [none of the time] to 5 [all the time]. As a measure of SWL, Diener et al.’s (1985) 5-item *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS) was used. Example items include: ‘The

conditions of my life are excellent’ and ‘If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing’. Answers could vary from 1 [totally not applicable] to 5 [completely applicable].

Cronbach’s α for this scale was 0.87.

Findings

Descriptives

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for the Relative Autonomy Index (RAI) and the four self-regulation subscales. Scale means for intrinsic motivation (INTRI) and identified regulation (IDENT) were above the midpoint of the scale, and below that midpoint for introjected motivation (INTRO) and external regulation (EXTER). SD for the subscales varied between .71 and .81. The mean score for the RAI was 6.48, indicating that most students in this sample made the decision to study abroad independently from others.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics for the RAI and the self-regulation subscales

	RAI	INTRI	IDENT	INTRO	EXTER
M	6.84	4.20	4.03	2.45	1.56
SD	3.12	.80	.80	.81	.71
Min	-2.50	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.00
Max	12.00	5.00	5.00	4.50	3.50

Table 4 presents the means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations for the five MPQ subscales. The five subscales were not independent, with Pearson’s r ranging from .22 to .65. Respondents scored above the midpoint of the 5-point scale on CE, OM, SI and FL, and nearer to the midpoint on ES. SD varied between .38 and .45. Students reported an ‘open and unprejudiced attitude towards different groups’ and the ‘ability to empathise with the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of individuals from a different cultural background’ (Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee, 2002: 684), reflected in particularly high means for CE and OM. High means for Cultural Empathy and Open-mindedness are common in studies

employing this questionnaire, and are associated with effectiveness in intercultural settings (e.g. Leong, 2007; Young et al., 2013).

Table 4 Bivariate Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for the MPQ Subscales

	Subscales	2	3	4	5	M	SD
1	Cultural empathy	.60**	.47**	.09	.22**	3.78	.41
2	Open mindedness		.65**	.30**	.31**	3.66	.41
3	Social initiative			.35**	.37**	3.34	.45
4	Emotional stability				.23**	3.08	.39
5	Flexibility				-	3.19	.38

**significant at $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

The overall mean response for English language ability was 3.22 (SD = .70, Min = 1.25, Max = 5.00). On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not able to communicate at all to their own satisfaction in the English language, and 5 being a great deal, 52 per cent of participants rated themselves positively (i.e. above the midpoint of the scale) at T1. The remainder (48%) self-rated at the midpoint or below (i.e. 3-1).

The overall mean response for pre-departure knowledge was 3.00 (SD = .80, Min = 1.00, Max = 5.00). Twenty-five per cent of respondents self-rated at 2 ('hardly any knowledge') or 1 ('no knowledge'), and 24 per cent self-rated at 4 ('good knowledge') or 5 ('a lot of knowledge').

Correlations and predictive validity

The decision to study abroad

The RAI correlated significantly with cultural empathy ($r = .45$, $p < .01$), open-mindedness ($r = .45$, $p < .01$), social initiative ($r = .47$, $p < .01$), emotional stability ($r = .24$, $p < .01$), and flexibility ($r = .33$, $p < .01$), indicating that IC is associated with the degree of self-determined motivation in the decision to study abroad. Indeed, a multiple regression analysis using the enter method revealed that the MPQ scales together explained 28% of the variance in the data.

Coefficient results showed that CE, SI and FL all predicted self-determined motivation in the decision to study abroad, with cultural empathy as the strongest predictor (Table 5).

Table 5 Multiple regression analysis of IC and the RAI

	RAI	
	β	t
(Constant)		-6.11**
Mean CE	.26	3.58**
Mean OM	.09	1.09
Mean SI	.20	2.55**
Mean ES	.09	1.40
Mean FL	.15	2.42**
R ²	0.28	
Adjusted R ²	0.25	
F (5, 215)	10.56	
Sig.	p < .001	

**significant at the 99% level

No significant correlation was found between English Language Ability and the RAI, indicating that ELA does not impact significantly on degree of self-determination in the decision to study abroad. Knowledge about the UK correlated significantly with the Relative Autonomy Index ($r = .25$, $p < .01$) and was able to predict 6% of the variance in the data; $F(1, 217) = 13.94$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .06$, adjusted $R^2 = .056$, $\beta = .25$, $t = 3.73$.

Student wellbeing

Our next interest was in the relationship between the pre-arrival factors and two indicators of subjective student experience; Psychological Wellbeing and Satisfaction with life. Positive correlations were found between all MPQ-scales and both wellbeing indicators (Table 6), with the strongest correlations between PWB and emotional stability, and between Satisfaction with life and Social initiative.

Table 6 Bivariate correlations between the IC scales and the wellbeing indicators

IC	PWB	SWL
CE	.31**	.37**
OM	.33**	.36**

SI	.36**	.40**
ES	.51**	.21**
FL	.22**	.24**

**significant at $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

A regression analysis showed that the MPQ scales together explained 34% of the variance in PWB and 22% of the variance in SWL. Emotional stability emerged as the strongest predictor of Psychological Wellbeing, and Cultural Empathy was the strongest predictor of Satisfaction with life (Table 7).

Table 7 Regression analysis of the IC scales and PWB and SWL

	SWL		PWB	
	β	t	β	t
(Constant)		-.07		-.08
Mean CE	.22	2.80**	.21	3.01**
Mean OM	.04	.44	-.02	-.19
Mean SI	.21	2.51*	.11	1.37
Mean ES	.08	1.28	.45	7.51**
Mean FL	.09	1.33	.04	.65
R^2	0.22		0.34	
Adjusted R^2	0.20		0.32	
F (df)	11.86 (5, 215)		22.06 (5, 216)	
Sig.	$p < .001$		$p < .001$	

**significant at the 99% level; *significant at the 95% level

Next, the Relative Autonomy Index correlated significantly with both PWB ($r = .38$, $p < .01$) and SWL ($r = .25$, $p < .01$). A regression analysis revealed that the RAI explained 14% of the variance in PWB; $F(1, 218) = 36.73$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .14$, adjusted $R^2 = .14$.

Coefficient results showed that the RAI was a significant predictor of PWB; $\beta = .38$, $t = 6.06$, $p < .001$. Another regression analysis showed that the RAI explained 6% of the variance in SWL; $F(1, 217) = 14.05$, $p < .001$. Coefficient results showed that the RAI was a significant predictor of SWL; $\beta = .25$, $t = 3.75$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .06$, adjusted $R^2 = .06$.

No significant correlation was found between English Language Ability and Psychological Well-being, but ELA did correlate significantly with Satisfaction with Life

($r = .30, p < .01$). A regression analysis showed that ELA explained 9% of the variance in SWL; $F(1, 197) = 20.10, p < .001, R^2 = .09, \text{adjusted } R^2 = .09$. Coefficient results showed that ELA was a significant predictor of SWL; $\beta = .40, t = 4.48, p < .001$.

Knowledge about the host country correlated significantly with both Psychological Wellbeing ($r = .16, p < .05$) and Satisfaction with life ($r = .23, p < .01$). A regression analysis revealed that KNW explained 2% of the variance in PWB; $F(1, 218) = 5.44, p = .021, R^2 = .02, \text{adjusted } R^2 = .02$. KNW was a significant predictor of PWB; $\beta = .16, t = 2.33, p = .021$. Next, a regression analysis revealed that KNW explained 5% of the variance in SWL; $F(1, 217) = 12.48, p = .001, R^2 = .05, \text{adjusted } R^2 = .05$. KNW was a significant predictor of SWL; $\beta = .23, t = 3.53, p = .001$.

Discussion and conclusion

Figure 3 (below) details the significant associations between the contributory and outcome factors found in this study.

The decision to study abroad

Our findings indicate that degree of self-determination in the decision to study abroad is strongly associated with pre-departure knowledge about the host country as well as high cultural empathy, social initiative and flexibility. It seems likely that individuals with the ability to empathise with different groups, who are proactive and flexible, and who feel knowledgeable about the host country are inclined to feel intrinsically attracted to a sojourn abroad and may thus be more inclined to make their decision to study abroad independently from others. This is an important finding and contributes to the literature by using the Relative Autonomy Index as an outcome rather than as a predictor variable (for the latter see Chirkov et al., 2007, 2008). It also contributes to our understanding of factors that might affect the decision to study abroad and has implications for pre-departure training offered to

international students. Intercultural training and orientation programmes help to induce an element of self-determination among prospective students.

Subjective student wellbeing in the early sojourn stage

Student sojourners exhibiting high levels of Psychological Wellbeing in the early sojourn stages were, we found, also likely to report high levels of emotional stability, to show high levels of cultural empathy, and to show high levels of self-determination in their decision to study abroad. We also found a weak yet significant association between Psychological Wellbeing and pre-departure knowledge about the UK. International students' Satisfaction with life in the early sojourn stage was, we found, associated with English language ability, Cultural empathy, Social initiative, pre-departure knowledge about the UK, and degree of self-determination in the decision to study abroad.

Our finding that Intercultural competence was associated with both psychological wellbeing and satisfaction with life provides further corroborative evidence for the predictive validity of the MPQ scales for student sojourner wellbeing (cf. Leong, 2007; Young et al., 2013). Three of five aspects of intercultural competence – cultural empathy, emotional stability (related to psychological wellbeing) and social initiative (related to satisfaction with life) – were significant in predicting subjective student wellbeing in the early sojourn stage. It is likely that students with the ability to empathise with others will be better able to understand the new environment, thus feeling happier and more satisfied with life. Emotional stability previously emerged as an important predictor for sojourners' psychological wellbeing in a number of MPQ studies (e.g. Mol, Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee, 2001; Van Oudenhoven, Mol and Van der Zee, 2003). It also predicted psychological adjustment among Singaporean study abroad students (Leong, 2007), among international students in the US (Yakunina et al., 2013), and, most recently, among postgraduate student sojourners in the UK (Young et al., 2013; Schartner, 2014). This indicates that emotionally-stable individuals

are likely to cope better with the stress and uncertainty that is inherent to cross-cultural transition. The importance of Social Initiative for Satisfaction with life could be explained by the fact that a proactive disposition facilitates relationship-building (Black and Gregersen, 1999). It is likely that student sojourners who approach social situations in an active way and form social ties quickly will be more satisfied with life in the new environment.

Our finding that pre-departure knowledge about the UK was significantly associated with both wellbeing indicators highlights the importance of pre-departure preparation and orientation for student sojourners. Studies suggest that international students tend to prepare for their sojourn mainly in organisational terms, including earning money for travel or seeking information about accommodation (Pitts, 2005). Other preparation often remains limited to the purely linguistic (Copland and Garton, 2011). More specific information about the host country and immediate environment could very usefully be integrated into pre-departure orientation sessions. Such initiatives would not only help the students to develop realistic pre-arrival expectations (Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1999) but would also equip them with host country specific knowledge that can enable them to successfully carry out daily tasks in the new environment.

Our results show that autonomy in the decision to study abroad was able to predict both Psychological well-being and Satisfaction with life, suggesting that students who fully endorse their decision to study abroad are more likely to feel happy and satisfied in the new environment. This is in line with Chirkov et al.'s (2007, 2008) findings and contributes to our understanding of why some international students adapt better to the host environment than others (Kim, 2001). This finding can assist host institutions in providing tailored support services to those students who are studying abroad not because of their own choosing but due to external factors such as parental pressure.

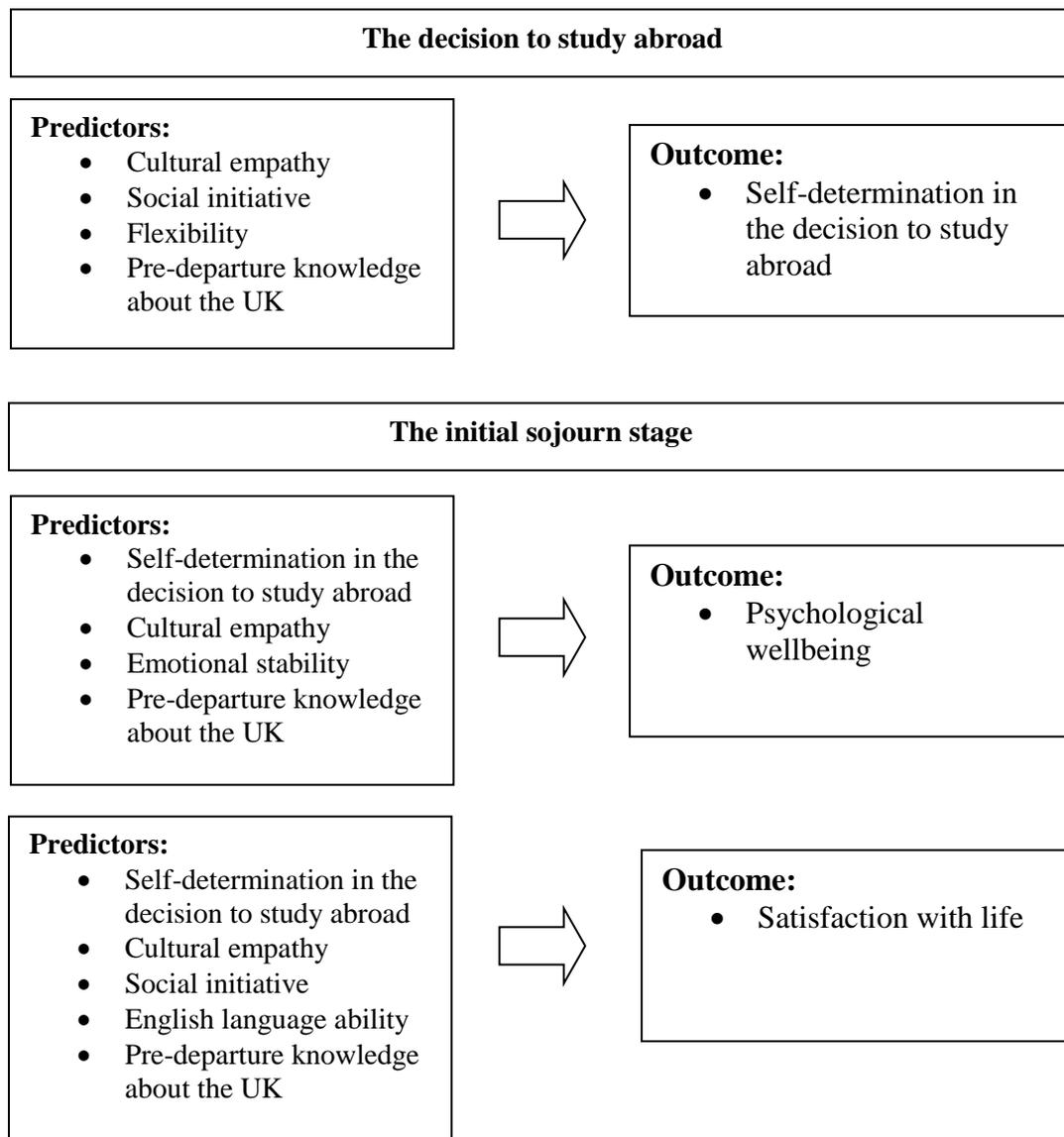
Our finding that English language ability was able to predict student sojourners' Satisfaction with life in the early sojourn stage is largely in line with previous studies (e.g. Perruci and Hu, 1995; Ward and Masgoret, 2004), although a recent UK-based study by Young et al. (2013) found no significant association between language ability and Satisfaction with life. It seems likely that language ability is closely linked to the ability to form social ties in the host environment (Ward et al., 2001) which could in turn affect students' life satisfaction. Moreover, better language ability may aid students in coping with the demands of academic study (Andrade, 2006), thereby also enhancing their life satisfaction. Language ability may also help students to adjust to the different modes of study experienced in the home and 'new' academic environments.

Limitations and directions for future research

Our findings highlight a number of interesting possible future research directions. Firstly, this study focused on a very specific segment of student sojourners (i.e. those undertaking one-year taught postgraduate programmes). All students in this study had previously obtained at least an undergraduate degree and many had previous work experience. Consequently, they were likely to be older and potentially more autonomous in their decision to study abroad than international undergraduate students. Future research could therefore very usefully include comparative studies of postgraduate taught students and other student sojourner groups (i.e. international undergraduate students, international exchange students, international doctoral students). Secondly, it might be difficult to generalise our findings beyond the UK context. Thus, future research could very usefully include cross-location comparisons, exploring the experiences of student sojourners across different host countries. Given the gender imbalance in our sample (90% female) it is difficult to draw any conclusions about possible gender differences, but this too could be a future avenue for research.

We conclude by pointing out that although this study took a group perspective, the ‘international student experience’ in the pre- and initial sojourn stages varies considerably among individuals. Our findings suggest that individual adjustment trajectories are more complex and dynamic than indicated in the U-curve model, which may therefore represent a somewhat simplistic and one-directional view of the international student sojourn. Whether or not international students experience a ‘honeymoon’ stage at the beginning of their sojourn may depend on a set of highly individual pre-sojourn characteristics. Thus, we call for more in-depth investigations of this crucial stage, perhaps focused on individual case studies in different locations, data from which could very usefully augment the complex set of interrelationships we have identified in the present study.

Figure 3 Significant associations between contributory factors and outcome indices



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