

# A Comparison of Academic Stress Among Australian and International Students

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## ABSTRACT

This study is based on previous research from Misra and Castillo (2004). It looks at the differences between the levels of academic stress in Australian and international students living in an international dorm in Melbourne, Australia. 85 students from 21 countries were surveyed using Gadzella's Student-Life Stress Inventory (1994). The results indicated that overall there was no significant difference between the amount of academic stress experienced by Australian students and the amount of academic stress experienced by international students. There was a significant difference found in the subcategory of pressure related stress between Australian and international students. International students reported experiencing less pressure related stress than Australian students. These findings were not consistent with Misra and Castillo's (2004) research.

## INTRODUCTION

Academic stress is mental and emotional pressure, tension, or stress that occurs due to the demands of college life. Some academic stress is normal for all college students, because of the stress that comes from being exposed to new educational concepts, adjusting to new social settings, and taking on the larger workload. Too much academic stress can contribute to depression and physical illness (MacGeorge, Samter, & Gillihan, 2005), which can in turn can negatively affect academic performance.

There are ways that students can guard against the harmful consequences of academic stress. A study by MacGeorge, Samter, & Gillihan (2005) found that supportive communication was negatively associated with depression across levels of academic stress. Supportive communication can be broken into emotional support (sympathy and affection) and informational support (information and advice).

A study by Kramer, Pruffer-Kramer, Stock, and Tshiananga (2004) showed that short term (less than 2 years) female international students studying in Germany were less likely to receive social support than German students. Their study also found that male international students studying in Germany had a higher level of perceived stress than German students.

However, a study by Brown (1998) opposes Kramer, Pruffer-Kramer, Stock, and Tshiananga's (2004) and MacGeorge, Samter, and Gillihan's (2005) research. Brown (1998) found that US students from small colleges in California showed lower distress levels while studying abroad than their baseline mood showed prior to their departure from the US.

So, the research that has been done on the stress perceived by international students has been inconsistent. Some studies point towards increased stress while abroad, while other research shows lower levels of stress in international students.

My study is modeled after research done by Misra and Castillo (2004), entitled *Academic Stress Among College Students: Comparison of American and International Students*. This study found that American students have higher levels of perceived academic stress than international students. Also, international and American students have different reactions to their perceived stressors. American students have higher behavioral reactions (i.e. crying) to stress, while international students have higher cognitive reactions (i.e. strategies for coping) to stress. These findings contradicted the hypothesis that international students would have higher perceived academic stress and show more reactions to these stressors than American students.

Misra and Castillo's (2004) hypothesis can be related to social support and the fore-mentioned studies by MacGeorge, Samter, & Gillihan (2005) and Kramer, Pruffer-Kramer, Stock, and Tshiananga (2004). Respectively these studies showed that social support helps buffer against negative reactions to academic stress and that international students may receive less social support than native students. These studies go against Mista and Castillo's (2004) findings.

However, socialization was not taken into consideration in Misra and Castillo's study. Socialization is the process through which people learn to adopt their culture's value system. This includes learning the behaviors and skills necessary to live in their culture. Socialization is the means through which everyone develops a social identity and learn to live and function in their society.

The values that United States residents learn are different than the values learned in other countries. Relevant to Misra and Castillo's (2004) study are the values of individualism, time, and personal efficacy. Americans learn these values from a very early age. They are taught that people need to take care of themselves (Paige, 2006). Also, Americans are very time focused. Time is not supposed to be wasted and we are taught to be productive and make the most of every second (Paige, 2006). This makes it hard to relax. Americans are also taught personal efficacy, a value which states that people get what they deserve (Paige, 2006). American children are taught that if they work hard enough and give 100%, they will succeed and if they don't, they didn't work hard enough. These values which American children learn at a very early age through the process of socialization put a lot of pressure on individuals to be productive (Paige, 2006). This could cause Americans to perceive higher levels of academic stress than students from other cultures with different cultural values, that don't place so much emphasis on work and productivity. Socialization could be the reason behind Misra and Castillo's (2004) findings that international students experience lower perceived academic stress than American students.

I believe that Brown's (1998) study could be used to support my theory that socialization complicated Misra and Castillo's study. When the American students were removed from the high stress society in the United States, their distress levels fell, despite the fact that they were in an unfamiliar environment lacking social support.

My study will replicate the Misra and Castillo (2004) study in a new population. I will be comparing perceived academic stress and reactions to academic stress in Australian students and international students. Australians learn different values than American children through socialization, which may make them less susceptible to academic stress than the American students who participated in the Misra and Castillo (2004) study. I hypothesize that students native to Australia will experience lower perceived academic stress and show fewer reactions to academic stress than international students.

## **METHOD**

### *Participants*

There were 85 participants in this study. All of the participants were residents of Chisholm College at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. There were 40 male participants and 45 female participants. The participants came from 21 different countries. The various participants were enrolled in virtually every major. Thirty-six of the participants were international students and 49 participants were native Australian students.

### *Materials*

Participants completed the Gadzella Student-Life Stress Inventory (1994), a 51-item questionnaire about a student's stressors and reactions to stressors. The questions on stressors are broken into nine categories: goals and social frustrations, conflicts, pressures, life changes, personal characteristics, physical symptoms, emotional symptoms, unhelpful coping, and helpful coping. Participants rate the frequency they experience the emotions or actions referred to by each of the 51 questions using a 5 point Likert scale. The inventory is scored by finding the scores for each of the nine subcategories by adding the values for each of the questions in that category. These scores for each of the subcategories are summed to obtain the total score for the inventory.

Participants also completed a demographic survey, which asked questions about the participants' age, race, country of origin, length of stay in Australia, etc. Participants were then asked to rate their perceived stress as mild, moderate, or severe.

### *Procedure*

The participants completed the surveys at the Chisholm College tower dinners. Tower dinners occurred once a week for the second half of the semester. Each week residents of particular tower are given a free dinner in the café. At these dinners I informed participants that I was conducting research and handed out informed consent and surveys. The informed consent stated that if participants consented to participating in the research they would fill out the following survey. I then collected surveys after the dinner. These survey sessions generally consisted of 15 to 40 participants and lasted about 20 minutes.

## RESULTS

I compared participants' ratings of perceived stress (mild, moderate, or severe) between Australian and international students using a chi square. Results were not significant. The majority of students reported moderate levels of perceived stress (see table 1).

**Table 1:** Student Perceived Stress

	<i>Mild</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>Severe</i>
Student status			
International	15	19	2
<b>Australian</b>	32	43	9

I used an Independent Samples *t*-test to analyze the differences in mean scores for international and Australian students on each of the subscales of Gadzella's Student-Life Stress Inventory (2004). The only significant test was the *t*-test analyzing the pressures subscale. The mean stress rating on the pressures subscale for international students was ( $M=3.10$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ) was significantly higher than the mean stress rating on the pressures subscale for Australian students ( $M=3.42$ ,  $SD = .70$ ), [ $t(82) = -2.14$ ,  $p = .035$ ]. The *t*-tests analyzing the differences in means for the other subscales yielded no significant results. In general, the scores reported were below the midpoint, indicating that students were not reporting much stress. The only exception to this statement is the mean reported for the personal characteristics subscale, which is just above the midpoint (see table 2).

**Table 2:** Subscale Means

<i>Subscale</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
Goals and social frustrations	2.61	0.60
conflicts	2.95	0.76
Life changes	2.59	0.93
Personal characteristics	3.38	0.65
Physical symptoms	2.08	0.65
Emotional symptoms	2.80	0.87
Unhelpful coping	2.43	0.79
<b>Helpful coping</b>	2.98	1.11

## DISCUSSION

This study compared the levels of academic stress experienced by Australian students to the levels of academic stress experienced by international students studying abroad in Australia. The hypothesis was not supported. International students reported lower scores for pressure related academic stress than Australian students. All other results were not statistically significant.

While international students were expected to have more academic stress than Australian students, they unexpectedly reported lower scores for academic pressures. There are several explanations for these findings. The questions in the pressures section of Gadzella's Student Life Stress Inventory (1994) are concerning deadlines, competition, overload, and relationships. International students are removed from many of these types of pressures. The students I surveyed were living in dorms and had fewer payment deadlines than they would have living at home. For example they did not have to worry about paying cable and heating bills on time. Also, some students may feel pressures from their parents to succeed academically. Being so far removed from home the pressures these relationships can cause are most likely lessened. Additionally, credits, not grades are transferred back to an international student's home university. This alleviates much of the pressure to get high grades to maintain a competitive GPA. All of these factors could contribute to the findings that international students experience fewer pressures than Australian students.

My findings back up the inconsistencies in the research done on stress levels in international students. Many studies, like Misra and Casillo's (2004) research show that international students experience lower levels of academic stress while abroad than native students, while other studies insist that international students experience higher levels of stress due to a decrease in social contacts. These inconsistencies and the inconclusive findings of my research may point to something other than status as an international or native student as the source of discrepancies in academic stress between these two groups.

The difference in coping with stress could be an individual characteristic, rather than a cultural construct or a product of being in a new environment. Someone who handles stress well in their home country will likely handle it well while in a different country.

A study by Judge (1997) found that the personal traits of self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, internal locus of control, and emotional stability were higher in individuals with higher job satisfaction and performance than in individuals with low job satisfaction and performance. These results show that certain personal characteristics make people better able to deal with stress and demands of a job. The same concept can be applied to students who choose to go abroad. Some will possess personal characteristics to help them deal better with stress and some won't. Likewise, some native students will have these characteristics and some won't. Stress levels may be related more to personal tolerance and capabilities to deal with stress than the environment a person is in.

Much research still needs to be done in the area of international students' reactions to stress. The issue that this research is trying to get at is whether international students' stress levels increase when they are abroad. I think a longitudinal with-in subjects study would be effective in collecting meaningful data on this subject. This would allow researchers to test students before they leave the country, while they are gone, and when they return. This research would show whether an individual experiences more stress when they are abroad than when they are at home.

## RESOURCES

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