

FORUM

MEMBER
MAGAZINE

Discussing international education

THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT

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CULTURAL CONNECTION

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FACILITATING CULTURAL CONNECTION**



EDITORIAL

Working with and on behalf of international students is a core activity and daily reality for many of us who serve as international education professionals. We manage mobility programmes that facilitate the intake of international students into our countries and higher education institutions. We help to develop and deliver curricula designed to meet international student needs and interests. We advocate for and oversee student service and support systems that are calibrated to respond to the demands of a growing and diversifying international student population. Equally, for a good many of us, we also relate on a very personal level to the international student experience. Who among us was not at one time an international student in some capacity? We ‘get’ what it means to be an international student – or do we? How much do we really know about ‘the international student’ in our midst today – their identities, needs, expectations and experiences?

Our current issue of *Forum* takes up this fundamental question and reminds us to think broadly and deeply about the students from around the world who study in our midst today – both as individuals and in relation to larger trends and issues that frame their experiences. At a very essential level, Frank Haber’s piece reminds us of the importance of helping international students to effectively address crucial (and universal) matters of stress management and mental health support. Student wellbeing is the



core building block for whatever else we might aspire to for the international student experience and must be carefully attended to. Meanwhile, in the realm of broader trends and concerns, Aisling M. Tiernan’s examination of how ‘changing political environments’ can have an impact on international students is timely and relevant. Our interview with Safi Sabuni, President of the Erasmus Students Network, also speaks to the profound importance of the intersection between individual experience and major trends in the world at large.

More at the level of institutional experience, we are treated to a range of highly current examples that help us think more creatively about good practice in the field, touching on such topics as

better integrating international students into the host institution and local context where they study and live; enhanced planning and execution of strategies for retaining international students; and more effective delivery of career guidance to international students.

The international student discussion among our colleagues is grounded in great sensitivity to the unique needs and interests of this population. But, by contributor Elspeth Jones, we are also requested to consider turning that question upside down and ask ourselves, “Are international students so different?” We wonder what conclusions you will come to as you explore this issue of *Forum*.

— LAURA RUMBLEY, EDITOR
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DE-STRESS,
LET GO, RELAX!

Professionals in international higher education tend to hear many stories about international students in distress. Especially front-line staff seem to have more and more difficult conversations with international students overwhelmed by their experience – cultural adjustment demands, high workload, challenging social life, difficulty finding student jobs and affordable accommodation. How do we help these students relax?

Sometimes, international students just need an empathic listener. Sometimes, however, they need someone who can help them look at their situation a bit more systematically: a trusted person who is willing to add perspective and able to propose a strategy to tackle a problem step by step. Ideally, an overtaxed and emotionally challenged student should be referred to a psychological counsellor. However, not every student who is displaying signs of distress must or wants to be seen by a mental health expert. Fortunately, higher education professionals can support distressed students already by having a structured and goal-oriented conversation with them. A simple yet effective method that does not require in-depth psychological training is referred to as the ‘psycho-educational approach to stress management’. Being knowledgeable about and practicing this method can help professionals to become better stress managers themselves.

DEFINING STRESS AND COPING

In academia, international students are trained to think about problems in conceptual terms. What is the cause, what is the effect? Are there mediating and moderating variables that influence process and outcome? When talking about stress, references to scientific models of explanation offer a safe ground for exploring the student’s stress-related concerns. Models provide orientation by defining the ‘what is what’ of otherwise confusing and conflicting subjective experiences.

Basic assumptions are:

- Stress is a combination of physical, physiological and behavioral responses to events that challenge or threaten us.
- Stress management is the ability to analyse one’s own stress experience, to develop possible coping alternatives and to use them for achieving a personal goal without experiencing distress.
- This competency is developed and refined throughout one’s lifetime.

THE TRANSACTIONAL STRESS MODEL

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping was originally developed by Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman. It explains how humans respond to stress by emphasising the influence of cognitive appraisal patterns. The model depicts a process that starts with a stress-eliciting event, a so-called stressor such as a demanding course, a language barrier, a conflict with others, an illness that affects the ability to learn and study, *etc.* The stressor triggers a stress response. If not coping well with a stressful exam, for instance, we may respond *physiologically* with too much muscle tension and a racing pulse. *Cognitively*, we may focus too much on the potential threat to our grade while experiencing difficulty retrieving test-relevant data from our memory. *Emotionally*, we may feel anxious or upset. *Behaviorally*, we may try to avoid the situation (procrastinating, not showing up) or we work too hard on it while neglecting other important needs (cramming, bingeing, *etc.*) According to

the model, however, there are important mediating and moderating variables located between the stressor and the stress response. They explain why separate individuals may respond to one and the same stressor very differently; it's about our personalities, our attitudes, our mindsets. If we appraise a situation as a challenge through which we can learn and grow, as opposed to viewing it as a threat or loss, for instance, we are likely to experience fewer symptoms of psychological distress.

REMOVING OR MINIMISING STRESSORS

Psycho-educational stress management teaches a methodology to influence the stress experience at all the aforementioned variables of the process; on the level of the stressor, we need to look closely at specific stressful situations. Since it is usually several coinciding stressors, it's helpful to note them down on a whiteboard or flipchart. Once they



coping'. What can you do to decrease workload? How can you solve a conflict? Where can you find information that will help you to make a decision? All these and other questions can be discussed with your international student on a very practical and solution-focused level.

students are actually surprisingly aware of their stress-producing tendencies. International students were asked this question during a short stress management workshop. Statements such as "I am just too much of a perfectionist" or "Perhaps I care too much about what others think about me" can offer valuable starting points for committing to changing unhelpful attitudes and behaviors. In terms of psycho-education, it might also be worthwhile to present some of the most typical irrational beliefs that Albert Ellis, founder of the influential Rational-Emotive-Therapy, identified in his clients. Here are two big ones:

- The irrational idea that it is easier to avoid than to face life's difficulties.
- The irrational idea that your worth as a person depends on how much you achieve and that you have to be competent in everything you do instead of acknowledging that all humans have limitations and shortcomings.

If we appraise a situation as a challenge through which we can learn and grow, we are likely to experience fewer symptoms of psychological distress

are named, they already lose a bit of their overwhelming nature. In a second step, they can be ranked according to their perceived impact. Finally, one can explore various options on how to influence them in order to make them less stressful. This rationale comprises all activities aiming to minimise or remove a stressor and is referred to as 'problem-focused

CHANGING MINDSETS

Sometimes, while exploring means to reduce or remove a stressor, it can become apparent that a certain coping style or personal bias prevents your client from tackling a problem rationally. Here 'emotion-focused coping' comes in. The leading question is: How do you tend to put yourself under stress? Oftentimes,

MAIN SOURCES OF STRESS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS (IN THEIR OWN WORDS)

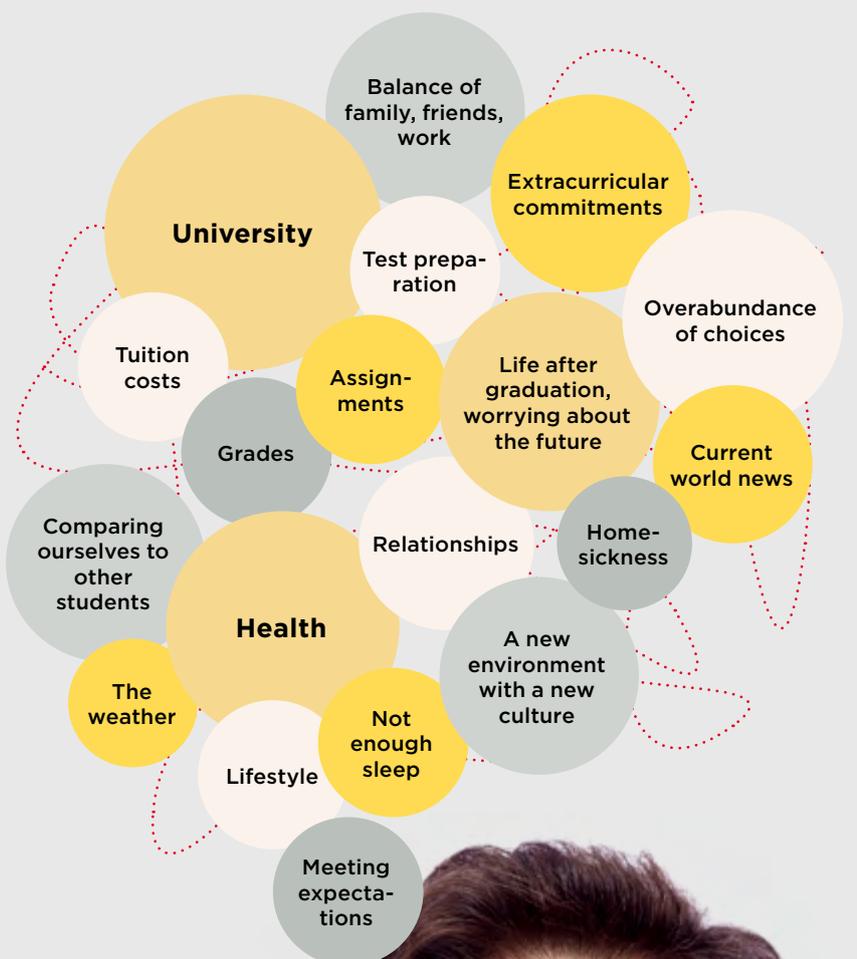


Illustration: N. Nguyen

RELAX!

Finally, looking at the response level of the stress experience, you can explore how your international student tends to react physically to the mentioned stressors. Oftentimes, distressed individuals experience very high levels of physiological arousal. This can lead to all sorts of negative acute and chronic effects such as hyperventilation, excessive sweating, palpitations, tension headaches, *etc.* Consequently, relaxation techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing and progressive muscle relaxation as well as physical exercises such as yoga or long-distance running are methods of choice when it comes to minimising potentially harmful effects of stress. Depending on the setting and how experienced you are at applying them, you may want to consider introducing your favorite relaxation methods towards the end of the counselling or

Oftentimes, international students are actually surprisingly aware of their stress-producing tendencies

guidance session. The very last thing before saying "goodbye" should always be asking the student what he or she takes away from the conversation. While they will usually only mention one or two insights, you can rest assured they are taking those thoughts to heart.

— FRANK HABER