

# International student stress and adjustment



## RESEARCH

‘Uprooting Stress, Coping, and Anxiety: A Longitudinal Study of International Students’

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## Background

Studying abroad can be a stressful experience for many international students as they navigate their new environment. Equally stressful can be the negative feelings of leaving friends, family, and important belongings behind.

There are two ways that people can cope with these stressful situations; either by trying to control the situation, or by accepting the circumstances and adjusting to the new environment.

Researchers have found that these two strategies are effective in lowering levels of anxiety about being away from home. However, depending on the context, one may be more effective than the other.

The Centre for Applied Cross-cultural Research, part of Victoria University of Wellington, undertook a study to determine how these coping strategies help relieve feelings of anxiety and distress for Western and Asian international students in New Zealand.

## Main research findings

It was found that students who coped with the difficulties of studying abroad by trying to control the situation, actually found it backfired on them by increasing levels of anxiety.

Researchers attribute this to the fact that direct, sustained attempts to cope with the stress by actively trying to control what is essentially an uncontrollable situation, actually increases anxiety.

On the other hand, those students who coped by changing their own beliefs and expectations to suit their new environment, were able to adjust better.

For example, accepting the fact that separation from home is temporary, but relatively uncontrollable, allows the person to concentrate their energies on making new friends and exploring life in the host society, instead of putting considerable effort into attempts to nourish relationships with significant others from the home country.

## Relevance of findings to New Zealand

Asian students make up a large portion of the international student population in New Zealand. This study indicates that Asian students reported more symptoms of anxiety than their Western peers.

This is important because it indicates that Asian students should generally be more closely monitored and assisted in using effective coping strategies. So, although visiting family would be a really good active strategy to control negative feelings, it is not really an option for most international students, thus coping techniques should be focused elsewhere. In the case of this current research, this means all students, but particularly those at higher risk, should be taught to cope by being open to developing new beliefs and given realistic expectations of how they might want to engage with family from home.

Giving international students practical information about the Kiwi way of life, and what to expect in and outside of school, could give them useful tools in navigating their way and facilitating in better adjustment.