Exploring Students' Lived Experiences and Wellbeing at a New Zealand University: Perspectives of International Exchange Students

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Abstract

This study provides additional insights into the lived experiences of international exchange students in New Zealand. It contributes to the literature on international higher education by proposing an expanded framework of the relationship between students' lived experiences and wellbeing. The findings make an essential contribution to students' wellbeing in international higher education by generating a thematic framework that describes how positive and negative experiences enhance international exchange students' wellbeing. The negative and positive experiences in the framework comprise five sub-themes: "Psychological adjustment", "Local differences", "Being with nature", "Interpersonal relationships", and "Experiencing new". Findings from the research highlight that university policymakers and managers of international student support services should conceive an exchange program as a psychological process to enhance international exchange students' wellbeing, rather than a strictly functional process to achieve educational outcomes.

Keywords

Student wellbeing, Student experience, International exchange students, Student support, Student services, International student support, Exchange student, Lived experience

Introduction

International exchange (IE) programs offer a platform for students to travel to host countries and engage in various experiences to achieve educational outcomes and enrich their intercultural competency (Stone & Petrick, 2013). Unlike full-time international students, IE students pay tuition to their home institution (Massey & Burrow, 2012). However, they contribute directly to the local economy by spending on travel, leisure, accommodation, and food (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008). Therefore, like many countries worldwide, the New Zealand Government works to foster the development of inbound and outbound exchange program participation to increase cultural diversity for local institutions (New Zealand Education, 2018).

IE students' experiences have become essential to higher education (HE) providers. Host universities are urged to offer a better-quality experience to fulfil the expectations of all students, including IE students, due to their ambassador role (Chelliah et al., 2019) and the development of competitive rankings in HE (Shah & Richardson, 2015). In its 2018 international education strategy, New Zealand Education (2018) focused on exchange students and students' wellbeing to achieve sustainable growth and enhance student experiences.

Through the experiences of international students, positive educational outcomes and benefits from studying abroad—both long-term and short-term—can be achieved (Stone & Petrick, 2013; Stoner et al., 2014). Stone and Petrick (2013) proposed that study abroad be viewed as a process model, starting from motivational factors, by experiencing various activities, and ending with outcomes and benefits of study abroad. Meanwhile, other researchers have found that negative experiences, the adaptation process, and students' adjustments can help international students enhance their personal growth (Jamaludin et al., 2016; Nicolescu & Galalae, 2013), which is shown to positively correlate with students' wellbeing (Jamaludin et al., 2016; Uysal et al., 2016).

However, the influence of international students' experiences on their wellbeing during exchange programs has remained unresolved. Researchers have shown an increased interest in students'

wellbeing (Bowman et al., 2010; Danielle et al., 2021; Mclachlan & Justice, 2009; O'Reilly et al., 2010; Trede et al., 2013). However, these studies have not addressed the relationship between IE student experiences and wellbeing, focusing more on psychological wellbeing and sociocultural adaptation. Moreover, as shown in tourism literature, students' wellbeing has commonly been defined by subjective wellbeing (Filep & Laing, 2019; Sirgy et al., 2011). This study aims to fill the above gaps by conceptualising students' wellbeing from different perspectives and building a connection between students' in-class and out-of-class experiences on exchange, coping strategies, outcomes, and wellbeing in international HE. The researchers contribute to the field of students' wellbeing in international HE by proposing an expanded framework to model these relationships.

Literature review

University exchange is a one-semester or a year-long program under a signed agreement between a home university and the university which hosts students to study (Barnick, 2006). IE students travel to host universities abroad to gain credits that translate into credits back at their home institutions. They engage in different activities, including academic and touristic activities; are exposed to other cultures; develop interpersonal contacts; and achieve specific educational outcomes (Stone & Petrick, 2013).

Student's experiences on exchange

In an exchange program, international students could face both positive and negative experiences which might affect their physical and emotional states. Positive experiences compose a variety of academic, touristic, social, cultural, and community activities and networks (Jones, 2017; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Stone & Petrick, 2013) which can make exchange students feel happy and/or satisfied. Negative experiences during exchange programs can include psychological adjustment or transformative challenges caused by weather adaptation, different cultures, or transition shock (Jamaludin et al., 2016; Mclachlan & Justice, 2009; Nicolescu & Galalae, 2013). Such experiences might lead students to negative affective states in their exchange programs.

More specifically, IE programs are appealing to those who seek an "authentic travel experience" (Freestone & Geldens, 2008, p. 45). This means IE students expect to become involved in cross-cultural experiences in the host country (Daly, 2011; Massey & Burrow, 2012) to build new relationships with international friends and associates. A qualitative study by Montgomery and McDowell (2009) found networks of international friends can create an academically, socially, and emotionally supportive learning environment. Also, the natural environment and opportunities for travel are integral to IE students' positive experiences. Therefore, the desire to travel is an essential factor in a student's decision to undertake a student exchange (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005; Ward & Masgoret, 2004).

Although IE students are typically short-term residents of their host country, they can suffer more negative experiences than domestic students (Russell et al., 2010). Weather is a factor contributing to the negative experiences of exchange students as "weather has long held a central place in human experience" (Keller et al., 2005, p. 724). Additionally, social isolation and cultural shock cause severe distress and negative experiences for short-term international students (Jamaludin et al., 2016). Furthermore, international students may experience a lack of emotional support while living far away from family. At the same time, they may experience difficulties in forming new relationships, adapting to the unfamiliar environment (Jamaludin et al., 2016; Russell et al., 2010), and making cultural transitions, and they may experience cultural shock (Mclachlan & Justice, 2009).

The connection between experiences on exchange, educational outcomes, and wellbeing

Student experiences play an important role in the process of creating knowledge in exchange programs. This can be explicated by the experiential learning theory which explains learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 2014, p. 41). Host institutions create many supportive platforms, such as clubs and societies, for their inbound exchange students (Jones, 2017; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013), including class/formal education, travel and touristic activities, exposure to another culture, and interpersonal contact (Stone & Petrick, 2013). Thus, exchange programs provide a learning site for IE students to experience different academic activities in classrooms and a wide range of out-of-class activities (Stoner et al., 2014). The learning site, where transformative experiences happen, helps IE students create knowledge (Kolb, 2014) and attain educational outcomes, such as a change in perspective, personal growth, and academic development (Stone & Petrick, 2013; Stoner et al., 2014).

Stone and Petrick (2013) posited that study abroad experiences might lead to educational outcomes and proposed study abroad as a process model. They explained that international students, motivated by personal characteristics, experience many activities, including tourism, social, and academic experiences, as well as educational benefits. This model represents a functional process of studying abroad without considering the psychological dimension of learning through students' experiences.

It is argued that study abroad is much more than a functional process. When immersing in a new culture, international students progressively build relationships and reflect on sociocultural issues, even within a finite time abroad, such as an exchange program (Schwieter et al., 2018). Additionally, IE students could perceive the same experiences either positively or negatively during an exchange because individuals can react differently to a specific destination (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Moreover, IE students' affective, cognitive, and behavioural reactions to experiences and individuals' adaptive coping strategies to negative experiences may reflect the nature of their personal experiences. This can be attributed to different national perspectives, cultures (Jones, 2017), and personal characteristics (Hansel & Grove, 1986). There are several personal, familial, institutional, and national elements (Jones, 2017) as well as different social and cultural challenges (O'Reilly et al., 2010) that substantially affect IE students' emotional states. Therefore, the transformative experiences through the learning site of exchange programs are more likely to help IE students gain educational benefits if they experience a sense of wellbeing.

Students' wellbeing from different perspectives in international HE

Wellbeing has been discussed from different perspectives in academic literature, such as hedonic, eudaimonic states and in positive psychology. Hedonia relates to pleasant or unpleasant feelings (Cambridge University, n.d.) while eudaimonia is connected with good spirit, true self, and human flourishing (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryff, 1989). More specifically, from a hedonic psychology perspective, Ryan and Deci (2000) emphasised the importance of basic psychological needs. They considered wellbeing as an optimal psychological functioning and experience induced not only by a positive hedonic state, but also by the perception of skills development and personal growth, i.e., a eudaimonic state. Subjective wellbeing has also been used to assess human experience (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Wellbeing is subjective because it occurs within a person's experience and according to an individual's subjective evaluations in their life (Diener & Ryan, 2009). From Diener et al.'s (1999) perspective, subjective wellbeing comprises three affective and cognitive components: the presence of positive affective states, both hedonia and eudaimonia; the absence of negative feelings; and a self-evaluation of life satisfaction. These affective states have been summarised as "happiness" (Filep, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Thus, to enhance wellbeing is to gain more

enjoyment, comfort, or positive emotions; to heighten one's level of life satisfaction; and to lower negative affects or avoid pain (Diener et al., 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

From a eudaimonic perspective, wellbeing is not exactly equivalent to subjective happiness. Other researchers advocating eudaimonism believe that fulfilment is comprised of wellbeing components (Ryff, 1989; Waterman, 1993). Accordingly, to achieve eudaimonic wellbeing, people are encouraged to live in congruence with their "daimon" or "true self". When people fully engage in life activities with deeply-held values, eudaimonia can occur (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The eudaimonic view conceptualises wellbeing not as an outcome or end state but as a process of realising one's true potential, daimon, or true nature in the expression of virtue (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryff, 1989).

In positive psychology, Seligman's theory (2004) introduced a concept model of "Authentic Happiness". This model proposes more wellbeing elements, including *Positive emotions*, *Engagement*, *Relationships*, *Meaning*, and *Accomplishment* (PERMA) (Jayawickreme et al., 2012). Jayawickreme et al. (2012) defined a "pleasant life" as filled with positive emotions resulting from satisfaction, fulfilment, pride, trust, hope, and optimism, and learning the skills to diminish but not eliminate negative emotions.

In practice, New Zealand has increasingly been focusing on students' wellbeing. For instance, students' wellbeing is situated between the two key foci of the New Zealand Government (quality education and quality student experience) to achieve sustainable growth in international education under the *International Education Strategy 2018–2030* (New Zealand Education, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2017). Moreover, in the New Zealand Education and Training Act (1989, 2020), the New Zealand Government (2020, p. 353) required the Minister of Education to issue "one or more codes that provide a framework for the wellbeing and safety" of domestic and international tertiary students. More specifically, the Ministry of Education published pastoral codes in tertiary education and made some changes effective from 1st January 2022. The latest of these codes focus on students' wellbeing and safety by ensuring consistency within tertiary education institutions (Ministry of Education, 2021). Tertiary education providers need to consider their overall systems and resources to "build capacity across their organisation to engage and empower learners to manage their own wellbeing" (Tertiary Education Commission, 2021, p. 2).

In HE literature, research has placed much emphasis on international students' wellbeing. Past studies have explored different perspectives to contribute to the wellbeing enhancement of international students. These have included: stressors and their consequences on students' wellbeing; factors or strategies to enhance wellbeing, for example, community engagement, sociocultural adaptation, cultural orientation, social support, and pedagogic partnership; wellbeing and academic performance; and student satisfaction (Audin et al., 2003; Bowman et al., 2010; Bye et al., 2020; Cotton et al., 2002; Danielle et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2021; McKinlay et al., 1996; Mclachlan & Justice, 2009; Rosenthal et al., 2008; Samad et al., 2019; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). While these studies focused on long-term students and international students, others have researched the wellbeing of the short-term international student cohort (Gomes, 2020; Homburg & Homburg, 2021; Jang & Kim, 2010; Koivurova & Ruotsalainen, 2015; O'Reilly et al., 2010). Moreover, the connection between IE students' lived experiences and wellbeing has not yet been explicated or analysed in detail in international HE.

The purpose of this study is to help build sustainable practices for HE providers by exploring wellbeing from IE students' perspectives to fill the research gap. This article contributes to the international HE literature by proposing that student engagement in an exchange program should be considered both a functional and psychological process, with the explicit presence of students' sense of wellbeing in any models. The experiential learning through both unpleasant and pleasant experiences in exchange programs contributes to enhancing the fulfilment of IE students from the aforementioned perspectives of wellbeing.

Methodology

Research method and data collection

The researchers adopted a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design to explore IE students' wellbeing as it describes the personal experiences of a phenomenon experienced by individuals in their "real-world" life (Creswell, 2014). By describing lived experiences, "the phenomenological understanding is attained, the meanings emerge from them" (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 139). Similarly, in this study, the researchers listened carefully to what incoming students said about their experiences of their exchange programs. These IE students developed and reported subjective understandings of their experiences. This data was interpreted by the researchers (Creswell, 2014) to understand the relationship between such experiences and students' wellbeing.

This empirical study focused on incoming exchange students from one university in New Zealand to enhance the homogeneity of the sample. The project was approved according to the host university's Human Ethics Committee protocols. A type of non-probability sampling, convenience, and snowball sampling was adopted to approach and select the right participants who were able to share their stories effectively (Insch & Stuart, 2015; Neuman, 2014). Ten incoming students with various backgrounds were chosen to participate in the research project to represent a range of subject majors and avoid bias. All participants were given pseudonyms to ensure their privacy (see Table 1). This sample size was appropriate for the project owing to its phenomenological research design (Daniel, 2019). Moreover, from the researchers' observations during the interviewing process, the types of experience were repeated amongst participants' stories and appeared to be saturated by the tenth interview.

The data collection took place from early November to early December 2019. All interviews were audio recorded, with written field notes taken for future transcriptions, and were conducted in English for a duration of up to one hour. The probing questions were worded such as: "Could you describe your experience here in detail?" and "Can you tell me your most wonderful experience at a special place in New Zealand: your happiest moments?" to motivate further narration. The interviewers followed the interview protocol and inspired the interviewees to reflect on their narrative based on the flow of their stories.

Table 1: Profile of participants

Participant profile					
Interview	**Pseudonym**	**Level of study**	**Length of stay**	**Ethnicity**	**Gender**
1	Karina	Undergraduate	2 semesters	Asian	Female
2	Tiffany	Undergraduate	2 semesters	European	Female
3	Miranda	Undergraduate	2 semesters	Caribbean	Female
4	Camila	Undergraduate	1 semester	American	Female
5	Melissa	Postgraduate	1 semester	European	Female
6	Valerie	Postgraduate	1 semester	European	Female
7	Alexander	Postgraduate	1 semester	European	Male
8	Simon	Undergraduate	2 semesters	European	Male
9	Maggie	Undergraduate	1 semester	American	Female
10	Jonathan	Undergraduate	2 semesters	European	Male

Data analysis

Six-phase thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was undertaken to find emergent themes. First, the researchers repeatedly read all the transcripts to ensure familiarity with the data and comprehend the meaning of the text as a whole. Taking an inductive approach, the researchers worked through the research questions, extracting relevant sentences from each transcript across the whole dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Repeated words or phrases with similar meaning were chosen from the extraction and grouped into clusters to generate initial codes (see for example, the "Nature" cluster, detailed in Figure 1).

Nature; Seeing nature; Nature around me; Amazing nature; The gorgeous nature; Out in nature

Different flora and fauna; birds, plants, trees; the sheep around

The rainforests; mountains; great walks; mountaintop; hill; volcano

NATURE

Sun setting; sun going down; sunny; fresh air; cleanness

Amazing views; Magnificent views; seeing the whole city

Lake; river; the ocean; beach

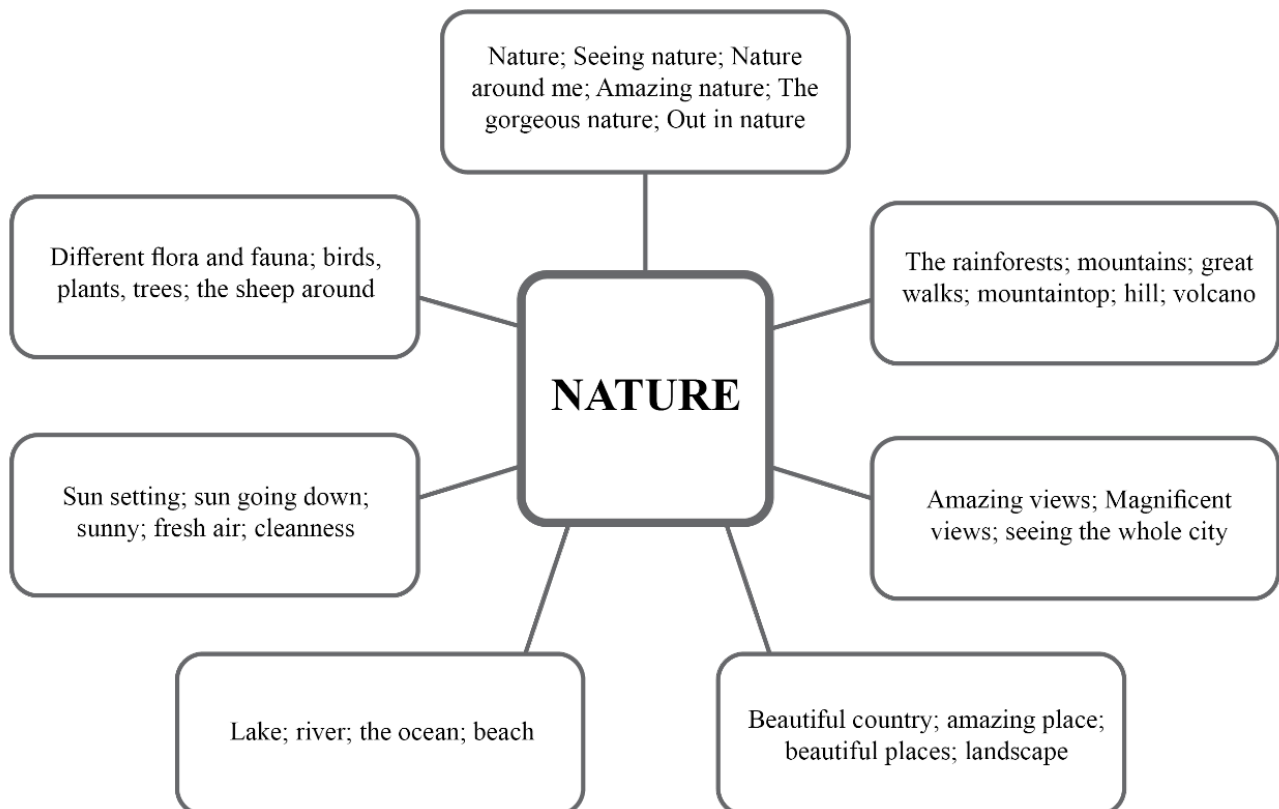Beautiful country; amazing place; beautiful places; landscape

Figure 1: Example of grouping similar words/phrases into a cluster to find dominant codes

Next, the researchers identified the relationships amongst the clusters. Word maps were also drawn to examine the frequency of codes and identify dominant codes (see Figure 2).
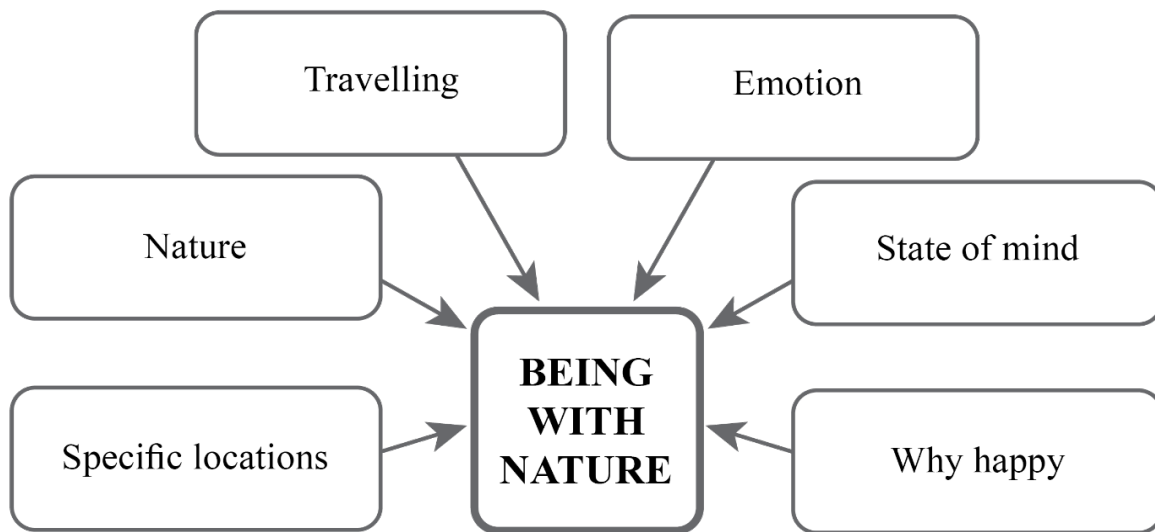

Figure 2: Word map to develop the sub-theme "Being with nature" from dominant codes

This interpretative work helped identify the features of dominant codes and develop relevant themes. A meeting with the Student Exchange experts at the university's International Office and Student Wellbeing Support was held to discuss the essence of each theme and determine what aspect of the data each theme captured (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were then defined and named. Finally, a thematic framework was developed to illustrate the central themes and the relationship between the two central themes and five sub-themes.

Discussion of findings

In this study, two central themes—*Lived experiences* and *Students' wellbeing*—were identified from the outset. Five sub-themes (see Figure 3) emerged from the data as lived experiences that contributed to participants' sense of fulfilment during their exchange programs. The first central theme, *Lived experiences*, can be further broken into negative and positive experiences. Under this central theme were three sub-themes, *Being with nature*, *Interpersonal relationships*, and *Experiencing new*, which represent positive experiences. In contrast, *Psychological adjustment* and *Local differences* represent negative experiences that affected the participants' wellbeing. The second central theme, *Students' wellbeing* created by the patterns reflecting various senses of mood, satisfaction, a pleasure for achievement, grateful attitude, positive relationships, and even the personal growth of the IE students (see Figure 4), confirmed the components of individual wellbeing in the literature.
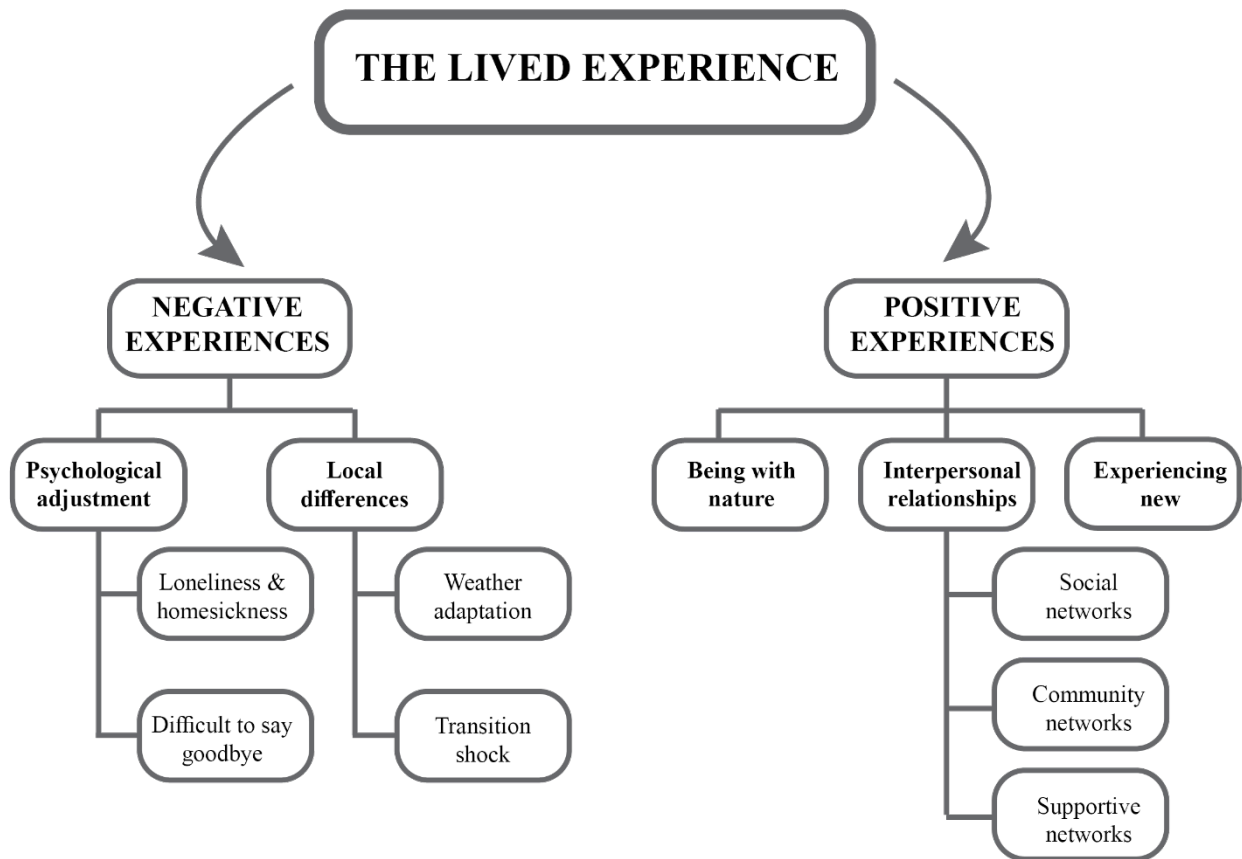
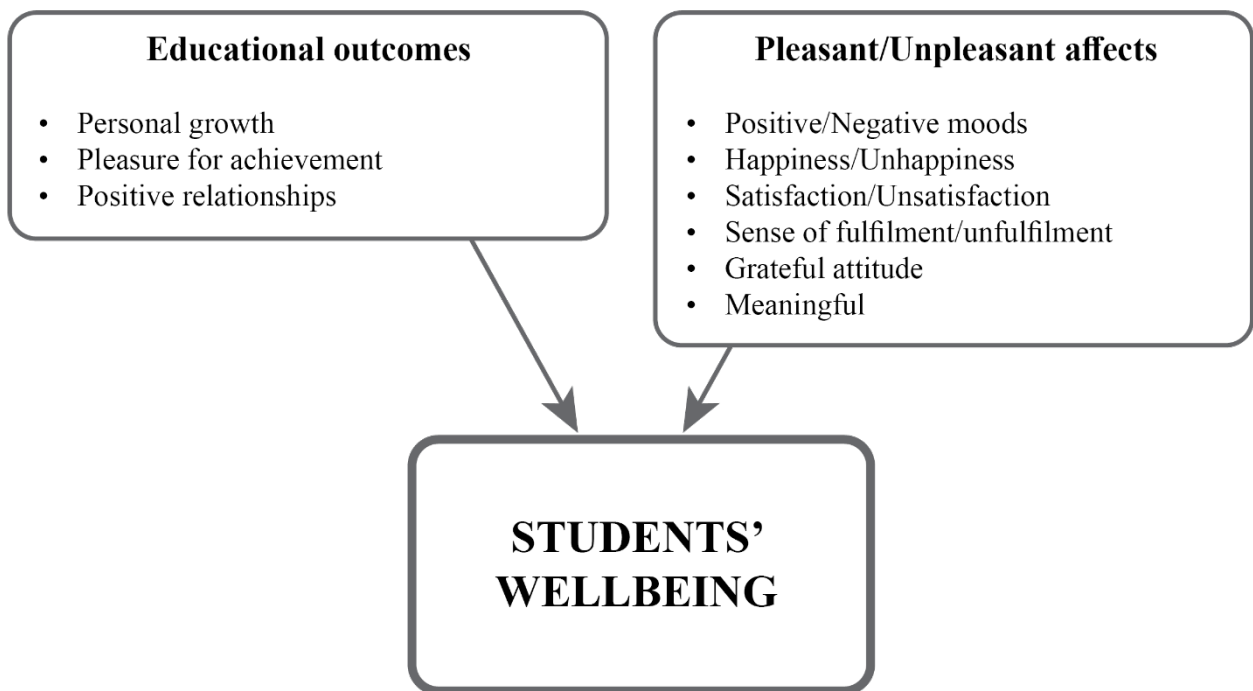*Figure 3: The central theme "The lived experience"*

Figure 4: The second central theme, "Students' wellbeing"

Applying both existing perspectives on wellbeing, namely subjective wellbeing (Diener et al., 1999) and authentic happiness (Seligman, 2004), the findings show a non-linear relationship between the two central themes and reflect interactions amongst these two central themes and five sub-themes. The coding process revealed many patterns in the data; however, prominent sub-themes were chosen for discussion here using selective excerpts to illustrate the points in relation to the academic literature. This article presents students' negative, then positive experiences.

The negative experiences

One of the most prominent findings from data analysis is the psychological troubles that IE students can encounter. Participants commonly used negative emotional words or phrases to describe unfavourable emotional states they experienced at different times. Dominant words, such as "sad", "lonely", "homesick", "alone", and "depressed", reflect unpleasant experiences with significant meaning for these exchange students. Two sub-themes were identified: *Psychological adjustment* and *Local differences*.

Psychological adjustment

Living in a foreign country without family, IE students who have never been away from their home countries often face loneliness and homesickness (O'Reilly et al., 2010). Some participants explained that they missed their family and friends in their home countries when they first came to the host country. Also, being in an unfamiliar environment, the participants experienced psychological adjustment with various emotions which sometimes confused them. For example, Melissa explained that she felt more fragile with negative thoughts and became angrier rather than upset, while Camila had different fears:

> *It was hard to be away from my friends and my family. My biggest fear is I won't have the same place I had when I get back.*

When they first came to the host country, interviewees struggled to become acquainted with new environments. When they finished their exchange programs, they found it stressful to say goodbye to the places where they experienced their student life. The insights from Alexander's and Maggie's stories revealed an essential part of the negative experience because it substantially affected their moods. These participants had been living in the host city for several months and had built many memories and relationships. They felt nostalgia; however, they might have experienced disappointment due to the obliviousness of local students at this stage. Maggie cried twice upon sharing her story in which she could not meet her local friends to say goodbye as they did not seem to have tried hard enough to make the time:

> *I only have some days left, so I tried hard to meet up with people that have been significant to me, but they don't seem to be making the same effort back.*

This negative experience can be explained by the fact that the understanding of friendships among local and international students is not the same (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017). Local students may perceive the local–international student relationships as "unimagined" and "unnecessary" because they have other existing relationships in their student life (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017, p. 701).

Local differences

The participants had to overcome various challenges such as adapting to the weather and experiencing transition shock, which formed the second sub-theme of negative experiences: *Local Differences*.

Weather adaptation

Several participants reflected on their unpleasant experiences in terms of weather differences. For example, the local weather with few sunny days in winter substantially impacted the mental wellbeing of Camila, Valeria, and Alexander. Alexander and Simon had some expectations of the weather before attending their host campus but it was worse than they thought. Camila and Melissa, from different climatic zones, struggled with the weather due to opposing seasons:

> *My body was not expecting that winter ... that has been a hard transformation for me to go from summer to winter.* (Melissa)

Keller et al. (2005) demonstrated that weather plays a critical role in human experience, and exposure to sunlight affects mood and cognition. Likewise, the weather at their host campus is one of the essential factors that can cause a negative experience for exchange students.

Transition shock

Many previous studies have emphasised the importance of social experiences in international education (Daly & Barker, 2010; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). The IE students sought social support to enhance their psychological wellbeing (Zhou et al., 2008). When Alexander and Maggie were unable to meet such expectations, they felt disappointed. Alexander showed his disappointment about not being able to connect well with his New Zealander host, while Maggie believed that local students made assumptions about her:

> *It was the feeling of loneliness and being misunderstood because people here didn't grow up with me .... It's a sense of people making assumptions of me.*

When encountering cultural differences, international students might suffer substantial transition shock (Mclachlan & Justice, 2009). Such cognitive adaptation might lead to a sharpening of negative stereotypes and aggravate homesickness and loneliness (Zhou et al., 2008). This is also applicable to short-term international students. The interviewees' stories implied various types of transition shock in terms of misunderstanding and stereotyping. For instance, Miranda assumed that what she experienced was more likely "white privilege":

> *I would say that's more ingrained ignorance from being the dominating race .... We called that white privilege.*

The positive experiences

The relevant codes for the positive experiences revealed three significant sub-themes: *Being with nature*, *Interpersonal relationships*, and *Experiencing new*.

Being with nature

One prominent finding of this study is that nature was a major factor in helping most respondents to be happy during their educational travels in New Zealand. The emergent codes reflect many touristic activities which the participants engaged in, for example, sightseeing, hiking, hitchhiking, and rock climbing. Also, specific locations with amazing views were recalled and associated with natural beauty and students' positive emotions.

There are several possible explanations for what made many respondents happy when they engaged with nature. A sense of fulfilment and pleasure from achievement is one explanation. Participants (Tiffany and Jonathan) expected to see unique places during their educational travels. When they could fulfil their immediate expectations, they felt happy (Wilson, 1967) as Jonathan shared:

> *And it was also exciting because one of the reasons I wanted to come to New Zealand, was because it was a beautiful country ... I'd been here that I really saw that beauty and saw how much, yeah, and so is exciting because I've been waiting for that, you know been waiting to see why it has ... it was so beautiful.*

The experience of fulfilment could be substantially increased when the participants experienced something authentically or uniquely:

> *And even tomorrow, I'm hiring a car ... I'm going up to Abel Tasman ... I have to go alone because all my friends are back in their home countries. But things like that which is very important to my mental wellbeing because it's the ability to be with nature and I can't do that back home.* (Maggie)

A comparison of the findings with those of other studies confirms that subjective wellbeing depends on an individual's reactions (Diener et al., 1999). The participants reflected upon their subjective wellbeing in many ways. For example, Alexander and Jonathan revealed their satisfaction with what nature they had been expecting to see. Tiffany, Camila, and Maggie expressed their wellbeing as their grateful attitude toward what they were experiencing, as well as unexpected emotions, such as crying, upon witnessing New Zealand's natural beauty. These reactions, namely positive affective states and life satisfactions, were deemed components of students' wellbeing from the subjective wellbeing approach, as Tiffany described:

> *When you go to nature, it's just you and nature .... At this moment, I realise how lucky I'm to be here.*

The above excerpt reflects not only an affective component of wellbeing to express, "I am happy", but also such responses reflect the underlying meaning of an evaluative element in wellbeing to convey, "life is good". The participants' wellbeing, at this time, likely became a mixture of subjective wellbeing and authentic happiness (Diener et al., 1999; Seligman, 2004).

The sub-theme, *Being with nature*, demonstrates the close association between positive experience and participants' wellbeing. For some participants, cold weather in New Zealand made their experiences unpleasant. Then, *Being with nature* could make their experiences pleasant. *Being with*

nature also reflects the underlying meaning of out-of-class learning. It implies a similar feature of tourism experience because there is a similarity between the benefits of short-term study abroad and travel benefits (Stone & Petrick, 2013).

Interpersonal relationships

Diener and Ryan (2009) demonstrated the consistent correlation between high subjective wellbeing and high levels of socialising and the significance of friends. During the coding process, dominant codes—friends, flatmates, different communities, student clubs, and relationships with co-nationals and with family and friends back home—were grouped as social networks, community networks, and supportive networks. These patterns revealed the underlying meaning of positive social experiences which was defined as *Interpersonal relationships*, another sub-theme of positive experiences.

Social networks play a critical role in student life, as described by many interviewees. The participants acknowledged the crucial role of their social networks with local friends, international students, or flatmates during their educational journeys. For example, flatmates could share the frustration resulting from unpleasant experiences, such as stereotyping (Miranda). Social networks also could bring pleasure with laughs, share similar interests, and care for each other (Miranda, Melissa, Maggie, and Jonathan). "Greater happiness could be explained by the greater amount of time spent in positive, happy engagement with people" (Diener et al., 1999, p. 280). Such interpersonal relationships with local students helped the participants (Camila and Melissa) enhance their intercultural comprehension, one of the authentic educational outcomes from studying abroad (Stone & Petrick, 2013):

> *I lived with other New Zealanders, who know everything about the culture … I got more immersed than I would have if I were just living with other international students.* (Camila)

The emergent codes demonstrated the importance of community networks in enhancing the interviewees' wellbeing. The host university and the host community created social networks for the participants through volunteering activities and student clubs. As a result, the participants, such as Tiffany, Camila, Melissa, and Simon, had the right platforms to meet new friends and be involved in meaningful activities. The engagement during the exchange programs that enhanced the IE students' happiness is amongst five elements: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning in life, and accomplishments that create authentic happiness (Seligman, 2004). Diener and Ryan (2009) further confirmed that "people who seek high subjective wellbeing engage more frequently than people with low subjective wellbeing in altruistic, pro-social activities such as volunteering for community and charity groups" (p. 393). Tiffany described this:

> *I started volunteering in galleries and aquatic spaces, which allowed me to meet new people …. This is a very big part of why it made my experience here so much better.*

Another source of support includes family support and noninstitutionalised extrafamilial networks (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). For example, one participant (Karina) could share her uncomfortable feeling with her friends back home in her native language. Another (Miranda) believed that her boyfriend in her home country could well understand her situation. Meanwhile, Jonathan highlighted the healthy relationship he had with his parents at home:

> *My parents know me very well. They can be very good at encouraging me.*

Conversely, one participant emphasised the role of local networks, such as a tight attachment between lecturer and student, and the student accommodation centre. From her perception, all the interpersonal relationships that an IE student could get in the host university might become a support system:

> *The people here could become my support system, instead of the people that I know back home.* (Melissa)

Ultimately, social, community, and supportive networks constitute the *Interpersonal relationships* sub-theme of positive experiences. Each system has a role in helping the participants balance their psychological challenges and enrich their social life in an unfamiliar environment. For example, the interviewees could feel happy thanks to their social networks; they could feel connected in communities in their host campus through local networks; and they could feel care and draw motivation from these supportive systems.

Experiencing new

Another candidate factor in explaining the association between positive experiences and students' wellbeing in this study is the *Experiencing new* sub-theme. This study's findings show that many of the participants felt very excited when they had opportunities to engage in something completely new (Karina, Tiffany, Camila, Melissa, and Simon). For example, there was an opportunity to travel without parents, to experience freedom (Karina). Melissa described her motivation to grow when trying new routines and not getting stuck in the same habits at home. Melissa felt more euphoric and happier during novel experiences. Participants' new experiences also included new social networks. Melissa was interested in meeting new people in her new classes, while Camila was happy to have a new hobby:

> *Rock climbing was a new hobby that I picked up. That brought much happiness because there were new people and new skills.*

The participants were also excited to be involved in new academic experiences. For instance, Simon was excited to share his experience of Māori class and Tiffany was happy with the flexibility of choosing modules, which was quite different to what she experienced in her home institution:

> *… it allowed me to study subjects that I would never even consider before and I really loved it and I feel like it's really expanded my knowledge within my subject because everything is quite interrelated. Yeah, so I'm very happy about it.*

Several educational benefits of study abroad have been explained in previous literature (Stone & Petrick, 2013). The current study adds to literature findings by exploring the educative outcomes derived from *Experiencing new*. This sub-theme of positive experiences could be explained by the theory of experiential learning proposed by Kolb (2014), who emphasised the central role of experience in the learning process. New adventures in which the participants engaged through the learning site of exchange programs were deemed to create new skills and networks, and expand

their knowledge to lead to a change in perspective and worldview (Stoner et al., 2014). Participants reflected upon experiencing freedom; being motivated to "grow"; and becoming more open-minded and mature, which could enhance their personal development.

The relationship between the lived experiences and respondents' wellbeing:

Both negative and positive experiences are gained from in-class and out-of-class activities. They are similarly related to exchange students' cognitive, affective, or behavioural factors when engaging in sociocultural activities at different levels—such as personal, institutional, and national—in the host country. These lived experiences are subjective and relatively distinctive depending on students' personal and familial factors, adaptation ability, and coping strategies (Diener et al., 1999; Jones, 2017; Zhou et al., 2008).

In undesirable situations during international education, some participants were active in choosing appropriate coping strategies to ensure their subjective wellbeing (Diener et al., 1999). First, many interviewees developed the theme *Being with nature* to release negative emotions and regain their energy (Tiffany, Valeria, Alexander, Simon, Maggie, and Jonathan). They fulfilled themselves with mindful moments and forged a connection between themselves and "Mother Earth" during their trips (Tiffany, Valeria, and Maggie). The trips were a therapy, a mental clean-up process, released stress from formal learning experiences, and refreshed the students (Valeria and Alexander). Such touristic trips were also excellent opportunities for the interviewees to make friends and socialise with flatmates (Simon and Jonathan). They could talk and laugh with each other which enabled them to release their stress, as Simon described:

> *I was happy because I can relax and turn my head off knowledge …. If I've gone alone, everything is entirely different. I enjoyed the forests, walks, making the food, and the good conversations we had … most of them were my flatmates.*

Second, the participants chose to keep busy with their learning, driven by their passion to overcome the challenging situation. For example, Tiffany and Simon believed that the sense of achievement was a favourable type of motivation for them, such that they enjoyed their study abroad and experienced enhanced wellbeing. In challenging situations, "coping strategies are consistently related to higher subjective wellbeing" (Diener et al., 1999, p. 286). As Tiffany explained:

> *Just study, take your mind off other things …. Getting good marks back definitely improved my self-confidence. These were the happy moments.*

In short, *Psychological adjustment* and *Local differences* were negative experiences that participants dealt with during their exchange programs. While negative experiences descriptively demonstrated negative emotional moods, interpretively, it was coping with negative experiences that contributed to students' sense of accomplishment.

Reflection also played an integral role during these negative experiences. For instance, Melissa thought she was unable to overcome the struggle. When recalling this situation, she laughed at her reaction at that time:

> *At the start, I must admit that I want to go home.*

The participants realised they had changed positively through the challenging situations (Melissa and Alexander). Melissa humorously described what made her more mature:

> *I became more independent and a tough cookie … I had two options, either I could stay, or I could go home. To survive, I needed to suck it up a bit.*

The respondents were generally pleased with what they had gained, despite their negative experiences. Their personal accomplishments and growth in attributes, such as independence and resilience, were shown to be achieved through a transformative experience. From the subjective wellbeing approach, these growth-related values are likely to be positively correlated with students' wellbeing, even for short-term IE students (Jamaludin et al., 2016; Uysal et al., 2016). Similarly, from the authentic happiness perspective, accomplishment is amongst the five components of an individual's wellbeing (i.e., positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning in life, and accomplishments) (Jayawickreme et al., 2012).

The positive experiences, *Being with nature* and *Interpersonal relationships* often influenced the respondents' wellbeing. *Being with nature* and *Experiencing new* can be conceived as the bridge to build up interpersonal relationships and boost students' wellbeing, while *Interpersonal relationships* were described as positive experiences to contribute to students' relaxation and happiness directly. Maggie's statement was a typical example:

> *It was a sense of accomplishment that we had come to this country and had gone through this experience together and had made it up this mountain together … many people from all over the world with different walks of life together doing something difficult, and then making it to the top of the mountain and being able to experience that together. That was the most beautiful thing.*

In summary, lived experiences, both negative and positive, directly influence students' wellbeing, as shown in the thematic framework (see Figure 5). Negative experiences lead to negative emotional states, while positive experiences contribute to positive states of mind. Moreover, a student's coping strategies and reflection are essential to improve their wellbeing (Diener et al., 1999) during transformative experiences. Positive experiences—*Being with nature* and *Interpersonal relationships*—can increase IE students' optimism when they encounter negative experiences. Interpretively, lived experiences also lead to a sense of achievement, fulfilment, satisfaction, engagement, and a positive evaluation of the meaning of their educational travels, which are components of wellbeing from both subjective wellbeing (Diener et al., 1999) and authentic happiness (Seligman, 2004) perspectives.
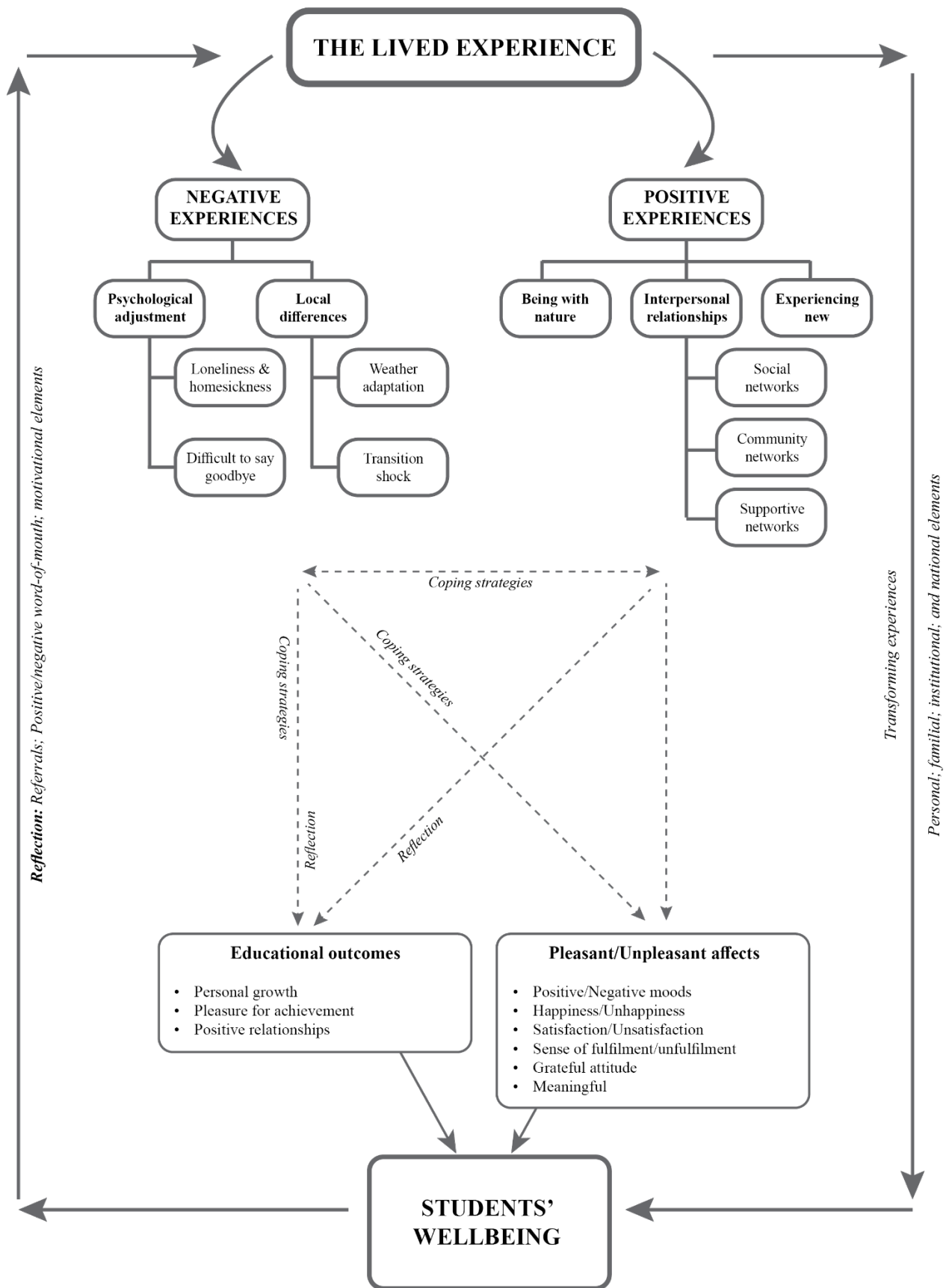
THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES

Psychological adjustment

Loneliness & homesickness

Difficult to say goodbye

Local differences

Weather adaptation

Transition shock

POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

Being with nature

Interpersonal relationships

Experiencing new

Social networks

Community networks

Supportive networks

Coping strategies

Coping strategies

Coping strategies

Reflection

Reflection

Educational outcomes

- Personal growth
- Pleasure for achievement
- Positive relationships

Pleasant/Unpleasant affects

- Positive/Negative moods
- Happiness/Unhappiness
- Satisfaction/Unsatisfaction
- Sense of fulfilment/unfulfilment
- Grateful attitude
- Meaningful

STUDENTS' WELLBEING

Reflection: Referrals; Positive/negative word-of-mouth; motivational elements

Personal; familial; institutional; and national elements

Transforming experiences

Figure 5: The thematic framework to illustrate the relationship between lived experiences and students' wellbeing

The findings of this research have explained the connection between lived experiences and the wellbeing of IE students in the international HE context from two different perspectives: subjective wellbeing (Diener et al., 1999) and authentic happiness (Seligman, 2004). Adapting Stone and Petrick's (2013) model, this study developed an expanded framework to illustrate this relationship (see Figure 6). The framework presents a continuous functional process and the underlying psychological process that students may experience during their exchange programs.

More specifically, the lived experiences of IE students comprise both positive and negative experiences through different academic, institutional, touristic, community, social, and personal activities. Then, IE students may use coping strategies to overcome challenges and improve their negative mood and mental wellbeing (Akhtar & Kroener-Herwig, 2019; Baik et al., 2019), as having adaptive coping strategies constitutes an element of subjective wellbeing (Kahneman et al., 1999). Educational journeys including lived experiences can help students both obtain educational outcomes and enhance their wellbeing.
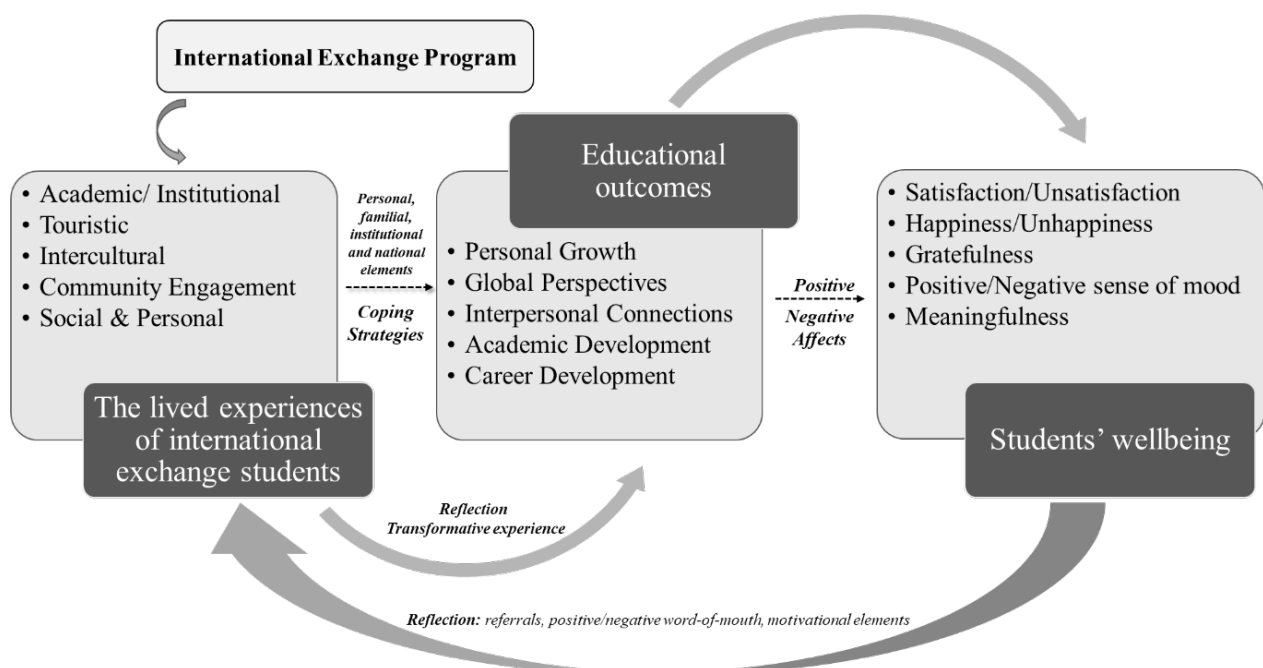

Figure 6: An expanded conceptual framework of students' lived experiences and their wellbeing. Adapted from Stone and Petrick's (2013) model

Moreover, self-reflection enhances educational outcomes from exchange programs. "Educative experiences without critical reflection are just experience, and as such, do not provide the opportunity to shape perspective, glean meaning, or make sense of the original experience" (Stoner et al., 2014, p. 160). Such reflection helps international students realise their self-development when effectively dealing with unfavourable conditions (Jamaludin et al., 2016). Additionally, the self-growth and self-fulfilment developed through challenges and learning experiences is likely positively related to students' wellbeing (Jamaludin et al., 2016; Uysal et al., 2016). Such self-fulfilment can act as a motivational element to encourage exchange students to continue engaging in new educational journeys or provide positive word-of-mouth for the host university when they complete their short-term study abroad (Chelliah et al., 2019; Jamaludin et al., 2016).

Conclusions

Research limitations and future research directions

This research had certain methodological limitations. Due to resource constraints, the study focused on one university's population in New Zealand, which may have led to single-source bias. Due to convenience sampling, most of the participants were female and this study did not examine the distinction between negative and positive experiences in the context of gender. The parameters of the study are acknowledged as a weakness regarding generalisability.

The findings provide the following insights for future research. Further work could usefully examine and compare the experiences and wellbeing of short- and long-term international students and compare similarities and dissimilarities of themes between incoming and outgoing short-term students across genders and nationalities. A quantitative approach could be taken using a large-sample survey methodology to quantify the strength of the relationships between students' experiences and students' wellbeing. Similarly, further studies could expand student population coverage to other tertiary institutions in New Zealand and in other countries. Also, a greater methodology design focus on nature in other unique locations outside New Zealand could produce further useful findings that could be constructively used to enhance students' wellbeing.

Theoretical implications of the research

The findings of this study suggest that both negative and positive experiences influence foreign exchange students' wellbeing during their exchange programs and inform a thematic framework of findings. The insights gained from this study reveal different types of students' experiences through the presence of five sub-themes. One of the most important findings of this study are the influential contributions of *Being with nature*, *Interpersonal relationships* and *Experiencing new* to enhance exchange students' wellbeing.

The findings of this study substantiate that an exchange program is not just a functional process through which to experience classroom and outside-classroom activities and gain educational benefits. Instead, it implies a psychologically multifaceted process to enhance IE students' wellbeing through their lived experiences in a host country. Individual coping strategies, such as focusing on studying, joining in touristic activities, or receiving familial/institutional support, uniquely reflect international students' adaptation and help gain educational benefits and improve their wellbeing.

This study contributes to existing knowledge of student wellbeing in international HE by proposing an expanded conceptual framework to adapt to this multifaceted process. IE students experience emotional states and underlying achievements, such as accomplishments, engagement, relationships, and meaning in life, which are components of wellbeing from both subjective wellbeing and authentic happiness perspectives. This research integrates these two perspectives in the international HE context.

Managerial implications

The research informs the field of international HE by indicating practical recommendations. The key themes of the research can assist managers of international student support to gain an overall picture of the linkages between the foreign exchange students' experiences and their wellbeing during their exchange programs. The significance of the *Being with nature*, *Interpersonal relationships* and *Experiencing new* sub-themes provide a basis for international offices to enrich activities that can enhance wellbeing for IE students.

Firstly, the findings in terms of negative experiences suggest ways to improve student support services. This study recommends that support services should not only focus on the beginning stage, but also the middle and final stages of an exchange program. For example, in the middle

stage of an exchange program, local–international student rapport should be fostered through different activities, such as introducing locals and internationals in group activities or building a mentoring program for new exchange students (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017). These activities would help to encourage cross-cultural immersion and expand local–international friendships. Moreover, some farewell trips or activities may be beneficial for IE students to say goodbye to their new friends, reduce negative impacts on students' wellbeing, and create more memorable experiences and memories for them after departure. Also, host and home institutions should encourage reflective practice on the experiences on exchange, which help IE students process their experiences and boost self-growth and other educational outcomes.

Secondly, the findings will be of interest to tertiary education branding and service managers who are responsible for international markets. Messaging around the *Being with nature* sub-theme could be incorporated in marketing communication and student pastoral care organisation and structure to recruit students from the European and North American markets. This dominant sub-theme should be authentically leveraged as a facet of the iconic brand of New Zealand's tertiary education. It suggests close cooperation between various stakeholders across the HE and tourism sectors, to design attractive touristic packages for IE students and maximise the values of touristic experience touchpoints (Khanna et al., 2014).

Finally, from the IE program management perspective in New Zealand, this study emphasises the central role of wellbeing to policymakers in international HE. IE students experience a multifaceted process, across functional and psychological dimensions, to achieve educational benefits and wellbeing enhancement during their educational travels. The lived experiences can holistically lead to enhanced wellbeing, which is also a good critical success factor to evaluate the quality of an exchange program and an integral part of internationalisation of HE. Also, when exchange students are happy with their experiences and have authentic and relatively distinctive experiences to share, they can generate referrals in their ambassadorial roles (Chelliah et al., 2019).

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