

THE STUDY METHODS AND ACADEMIC RESULTS OF FIRST-YEAR OVERSEAS STUDENTS AT AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

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Summary

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The study methods of first year overseas students were examined by the use of Standardised Study Inventories and open-ended questions; and a correlation between the study habits and academic results obtained from the End of Year University Examination was determined.

The results were examined against comparable material obtained from a controlled group of Australian students.

The conclusion reached (other reports to the contrary) was that both in quantity and quality the academic results of overseas students were superior to those of Australian students, but the overseas students' methods were inefficient and inferior (i.e. uneconomical in time and effort) to those of the Australian students, since they denied the students leisure time to enjoy Australian life and engage in a wider spectrum of profitable experiences.

Report

It can reasonably be assumed that, in general, the primary goal of the overseas students who are pursuing tertiary education in Australia is to pass their examinations and thereby obtain the academic qualifications and credentials which will enable them to obtain rewarding professional employment upon their return to their home countries.

In the course of attaining this goal, however, overseas students are confronted by a number of handicaps in comparison with their Australian counterparts. These handicaps are of two types. The first is related to the fact that they are overseas students: They must adapt to unfamiliar social customs quite dissimilar to their own; their dietary habits must undergo radical alteration; most important of all, they are isolated from their families and friends. The second type of difficulty is linked with the fact that they are overseas students: They must adjust to different instructional and assessment methods from those to which they have become attuned; they are faced with the communication and linguistic problems arising from the necessity of conducting their studies in a foreign language.

Additional 'student' handicaps appear to stem from the fact that the training and experience of the overseas student in his home country does not always constitute a fully appropriate background for tertiary education in Australia. He relies more than Australian students on the authority of the

lecturer (Noesjirwan, 1970:394). He is much more familiar with reproducing facts and principles than he is with evaluating them and extrapolating from them (Adam, 1966:15). He has scant acquaintance with suitable methods of preparing for examinations of the type customarily encountered in Australia (Brennan, 1968:20). He is disinclined to initiate discussion or to express critical opinions in seminars and tutorials (Kaldor, 1965:33).

It has also been pointed out on a number of occasions that the overseas student's educational background predisposes him to use ineffective study methods. He relies largely on rote memorisation; he focuses upon the recall of a limited range of factual information; he over-emphasises the reproduction of the material contained in lecture notes and prescribed readings.

Considering these impediments to effective study, it is hardly surprising that it is also often reported that overseas students achieve relatively poor academic results and have a pass rate which is lower than that of local students. (Adam, 1966:1). Further, Posen has pointed out that the academic performance of the private students¹ is inferior to that of the sponsored students (Posen, 1968: 484-85).

An empirical study was carried out with the first-year overseas students at Monash University in an attempt to provide a factually-based answer to such questions as:

1. Do overseas students have poor study methods compared with those of Australian students?
2. Are the academic results of overseas students inferior to those of Australian students?
3. Do sponsored students achieve better academic results than private students?
4. What is the relationship between the study methods of overseas students and their academic performance? Do students with 'good' study methods achieve better results than those with 'poor' study methods?

In addition, it was hoped to throw some light on the overseas student's general study behaviour. How does he attempt to overcome the handicaps with which he is faced? How often, and for how long, does he study? Does he work harder than the Australian student? Does he manage to keep up with set work and assignments?

Study Methods

Two well-known, standardised study inventories were used: the Wrenn Study-Habits Inventory (WSHI) and the Brown-Holtzman Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes (SSHA). These were administered during the second term of the academic year to 65 first-year overseas students (approximately 80 per cent of all first-year overseas students) and a randomly-selected control group of 37 first-year Australian students.

¹ A private student is one who lacks any governmental or institutional sponsorship.

Wrenn Study-Habits Inventory: The scores on the WSHI reveal several striking features. The Australian students, with a mean score of 40.0 are markedly superior to the overseas students, whose mean score is 6.7. This finding is particularly significant in the light of Wrenn's warning that "if your total score is below a plus 15, which is the average total score (median) of a large group of college freshmen, you certainly need to examine your individual scores with great care" (Wrenn, 1941:2). Statistically, this difference between the scores of the overseas and Australian students is highly significant ($P = .001$).

When males and females are considered separately, the same characteristics are observed. The control group males achieve a mean score of 46.0, compared with 10.8 for overseas males; control group females score 25.9 compared with -9.9 for overseas females.

A negative score on the WSHI is indicative of very poor study methods. Of the overseas students, 42 per cent obtain a negative score compared with 19 per cent of the Australian students.

All differences are statistically significant.

Brown-Holtzman Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes: The SSHA provides similar findings. While the mean score of the control group is at the 55th percentile, that of the overseas students is at the 33rd percentile.

Control group males attain a mean score equivalent to the 56th percentile compared with the 40th percentile for overseas males. The score of the control group females is equivalent to the 53rd percentile compared with the 10th percentile for overseas females.

If their responses to standardised study inventories are a valid criterion, the study methods of overseas students must be judged to be quite inefficient, and inferior to those of Australian students.

Academic Results

The examination results of all the 83 first-year overseas students at Monash University were compared with those of the total of 1,572 non-overseas students.

All students sat for four subjects. When the actual number of subjects passed by the overseas and Australian students is compared, there is again a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($P = .05$). The difference, however, is in favour of the overseas students who passed an average of 3.65 subjects, compared with 3.42 for the Australian students.

Irrespective of the actual number of passes obtained, the two groups may have differed in the quality of their answers. To test this hypothesis, the honours results (Credit, Distinction, High Distinction) were compared. Again, there was a significant difference in favour of the overseas students. 40.3 per cent of all results of the overseas students are of honours standard compared with 34.8 per cent for the Australian students.

On the basis of these results, it seems clear that, both in quantity and quality, the academic results of overseas students are superior to those of Australian students.

Sponsored vs Private Students

Of the total of 83 overseas students, 35 were sponsored and 48 private students. The sponsored students sat for 140 subjects. Of these, they passed 130 and failed 10, at an average pass rate of 3.71 subjects per student. The 48 private students sat for 192 subjects, passed 173 and failed 19, at an average pass rate of 3.61 per student. There is no statistical difference between the results of the two groups of students.

The sponsored and overseas students were also compared with respect to the honours gained. This was done in two ways. First, the total number of honours gained by each group was compared. Second, a weighted honours score¹ was calculated for each student, and the groups were then compared. On neither basis is there any statistical difference between the two groups. Private students achieve just as high a proportion of honours, and of equally as high a standard, as do sponsored students.

On the evidence of these findings there is little foundation for the belief that sponsored students achieve better academic results than private students.

Comparison of Study Methods and Academic Results

The correlation between students' scores on the WSHI and SSHA and their academic results was determined in order to ascertain whether students with 'good' study methods (as shown by high scores on WSHI and SSHA) tend to achieve better results than students with 'poor' study methods.

In the case of the control group students, scores on both the WSHI and SSHA show a positive and significant relationship with academic results.²

On the other hand, on neither the WSHI nor the SSHA do the scores of the overseas students show any relationship whatsoever with their academic results.³ Overseas students with low scores on standardised study schedules are just as likely to obtain high academic results as are those with high study methods scores.

Characteristics of Study Behaviour

The preceding results, taken in conjunction, raise a number of questions. How does it come about that the overseas student whose study habits are, on two well-recognised criteria, noticeably inferior to those of the Australian student, nevertheless obtains higher academic results? Are there other factors operating which might account for the apparent anomaly - factors which enable him to be a poor, but highly successful, student?

All students in the overseas and Australian samples were asked a number of open-ended questions which provided them with an opportunity to amplify their answers and to include comments and explanations. The responses to several of these items shed some light on the manner in which the overseas students surmount their difficulties.

¹ Credit = 1, Distinction = 2, High Distinction = 3.

² The product-moment correlation coefficients are $r = 0.46$, $P = .01$ and $r = 0.39$, $P = .05$ respectively.

³ The coefficients are $r = 0.03$ and $r = 0.02$ respectively.

Question: "On the average, how many nights a week do you study?"

The overseas students study, on the average, 5.7 nights per week, compared with 5.1 for the control group.

93 per cent of overseas students study at least 5 nights per week; 63 per cent work at least 6 nights per week. For the control group these figures are 72 per cent and 37 per cent respectively.

Question: "On those nights, how many hours do you usually study?"

On their study nights, 57 per cent of overseas students and 42 per cent of Australian students study for at least 4 hours per night. The average time worked on each study night is 3.7 and 3.3 hours for the overseas and Australian students respectively.

Thus, the overseas student works on more nights and he works longer on each occasion. Taking these two items jointly, the overseas student studies, at night, for an average of 23.1 hours per week compared with 16.8 hours for the control group - that is, almost half as much again.

Question: "For approximately how many hours altogether do you usually study at week-ends?"

60 per cent of the overseas students study for 10 hours or more at the week-end. Only 9 per cent of the control group do so.

Question: "On the average, at what time do you go to bed each night?"

More than one-third (34 per cent) of the control group go to bed before 11 p.m. Only 3 per cent of overseas students do so: 97 per cent of them go to bed after 11 p.m.

The average bed-time for the control group is 5 minutes past 11. For the overseas student, it is almost midnight (5 minutes to 12).

Question: "In general, how often do you go out in the evenings for entertainment or pleasure?"

Less than one in five (19 per cent) of the control group, compared with more than half (52 per cent) of the overseas students rarely or never go out.

More than one-quarter (28 per cent) of the Australian students go out at least twice a week. Only one overseas student (2 per cent) does so.

Question: "In general, do you manage to keep up to date with set work and assignments?"

Almost all control group students (92 per cent) state that they keep up with set work, whereas one-third (32 per cent) of the overseas students state they are not able to do so.

Implications

Academically, the overseas students achieve highly commendable examination results, but the price that they pay is high - probably much higher than it needs to be. The educational traditions to which they have been exposed

and the demonstrably inefficient study methods which they employ, are counteracted only by dint of single-mindedly focussing attention upon their academic goals.

In comparison with Australian students, they study more often, work longer, have less sleep, sacrifice more of their week-ends, and have far fewer social and recreational outings. And yet, despite their industriousness, they experience much more difficulty in keeping up to date with set work - an ever-present factor which appears to perpetuate the cycle.

As things stand, the overseas students are achieving their academic goals, but little more. Off the campus they have only fringe contact with the broader web of Australian life and little opportunity to gain any real measure of awareness and understanding of the Australian people and their way of life.

In view of the results of this study it seems a feasible hypothesis that if the overseas students were assisted to adopt more efficient study methods they would obtain equally high academic results while allowing them more leisure time not only to enjoy their stay in Australia but to engage in a wider spectrum of profitable activities and experiences than they do at present.

References

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