

STRESS, HEALTH AND COPING AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MALTA



Claire Borg and Carmel Cefai

Second Monograph in Resilience and Health
Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health
University of Malta

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Resilience and Health Monograph Series

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We are pleased to publish the second monograph in the *Resilience and Health* series by the Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health at the University of Malta. The series aims to provide an open access platform for the dissemination of knowledge and research in educational resilience and social and emotional health. We plan to have one e-publication per year in such areas as social and emotional development, health, resilience and wellbeing in children and young people, social and emotional learning, mental health in schools and professionals' health and wellbeing.

The publication of the Resilience and Health Monograph Series is based on the philosophy of the Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health, which is to develop and promote the science and evidence-based practice of social and emotional health and resilience in children and young people.

We welcome contributions from colleagues who would like to share their work with others in the field.

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INTRODUCTION

The University of Malta is fast becoming an international community as the number of international students continues to increase from one year to the other. There are currently over 600 full time international students and about 500 exchange and transfer students from 80 countries, registered at the University of Malta. Their length of stay varies from one semester to a full time course programme. Though the majority of undergraduate students stay for one semester or one academic year, the number of full time postgraduate students is increasing with the recent opening of the International Masters Programme at the University of Malta. Over the past years, studying at the University of Malta has been made easier for international students as the University has reviewed its structures to be in line with the Bologna process. With its diverse programmes, expertise and high academic standards, the use of the English as the official language, and free registration for EU nationals, coupled with Malta's rich historical and architectural heritage, temperate climate and the hospitality of the people, the University of Malta provides a very attractive, worthwhile and unique package for international students.

Studying abroad however, does present a number of challenges, particularly for first time students studying. While registration in the case of the University of Malta, fees are waved away for EU undergraduate students, while other students benefit from scholarships and other funding schemes, the expenses involved in living and studying abroad, coupled with finding adequate accommodation, is a main issue for many overseas students [Yusliza Mohd & Chelliah, 2010]. Another challenge is related to proficiency in the English language, particularly at the academic level, since for many students, English is not the mother language. At more informal levels, such as in social gatherings, Maltese may also be spoken, which may leave the students feeling somewhat excluded. International students may also have to adjust to new ways of learning and assessment, including written examinations in English. This would be over and above the common stresses associated with academic life, which such students share with Maltese peers [Cefai & Camilleri, 2011]. Finally, international students would also need to adapt to a new culture, and the process may require considerable time, energy and effort. In many instances, they would also find themselves away from their families and friends and their usual sources of support. Homesickness is in fact one of the most frequently reported concerns of international students [Poyrazli, Thukral, & Duru, 2010; Yusliza Mohd & Chelliah, 2010].

This study explores the perceived health and wellbeing of international students at the University of Malta. More specifically it examines the personal and academic concerns and challenges of international students, their perceived stress, health and coping, and whether these vary by gender, language and country of origin, and how they compare with the health of Maltese university students [as reported in Cefai & Camilleri, 2009].

All undergraduate foreign students at the University of Malta were approached to complete a questionnaire online. Seventy-six students, mostly exchange and transfer students, completed the questionnaire: 48 females and 28 males, average age 20-25 years, from 30 different countries, mostly European. The questionnaire was based on the one used by Cefai and Camilleri [2009] in the study with Maltese university students. A section was added, however, on the issues and concerns experienced by international university students such as financial and accommodation issues, language and culture, homesickness and loneliness [Poyrazli, Thukral, & Duru, 2010; Thomson, Rosenthal & Russell, 2006; Yusliza Mohd & Chelliah, 2010]. The questionnaire consisted of four sections, namely demographic details including mother language and country of origin, physical health and lifestyle, emotional and social wellbeing, and life and challenges as an international student. Students were asked to answer a number of statements in each section and tick the most suitable response. There were also a small number of qualitative questions. The questionnaire was piloted with a small number of students and some minor modifications were made to the final version. The questionnaire was administered online anonymously.

The Chi-Square test and the One-way ANOVA test were used to make inferences through tests of hypothesis; for both tests a 0.05 level of significance was employed. The Chi-Square test was used extensively to determine whether the associations between health-related variables and demographic variables were significant. The One-way ANOVA test was used to compare the mean values of various quantitative dependent variables across the categories of independent explanatory variables, such as age, gender, language and country of origin. The P-value and the Z-score of the percentages of the study were compared with those of the study with Maltese students [Cefai & Camilleri, 2009], making use of z score to p value conversion calculator.

FINDINGS

Physical Health

Figure 1 shows that 89% of undergraduate international students feel healthy, with only 11% feeling quite unhealthy. Overall, more male students feel that they are healthy and more females believe that they are unhealthy, but the P-value is slightly above the 0.05 and thus not significant (Figure 2). These results are quite similar to those of Maltese students (90% healthy, 10% unhealthy), but Figure 3 also shows that international students feel healthier than Maltese students.

When asked about psychosomatic symptoms in the past semester, the participants chose tiredness as the symptom which they suffer most from (30%). This is followed by neck and shoulder pain, sleep problems, back pain, sadness, bad temper, anxiety, stomach pain, and dizziness respectively; the least common symptoms were allergy problems, headache and asthma. Tiredness, shoulder pain and back pain may signify the busy yet sedentary life of a university student. When the international and Maltese cohorts are compared, all the results are statistically significant (except for back pain), suggesting that international students reported significantly lower levels of psychosomatic symptoms than Maltese peers (Figure 4).

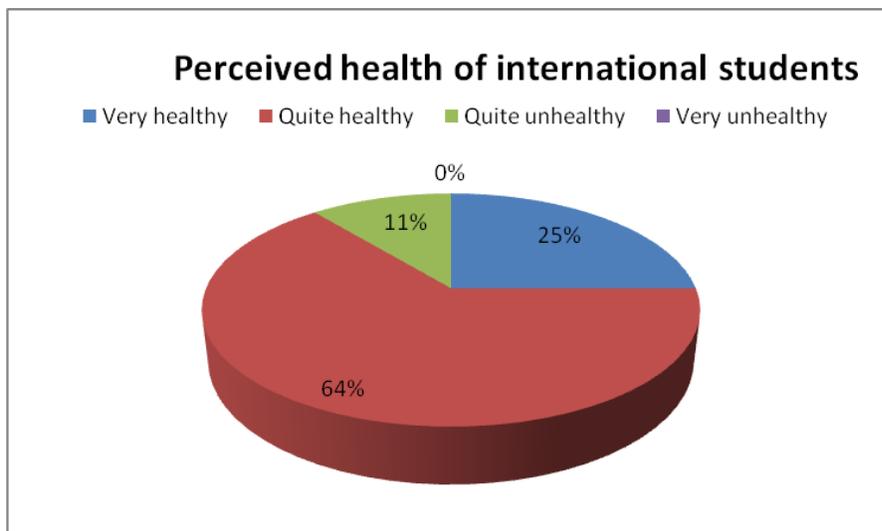


Figure 1. Perceived health of international students

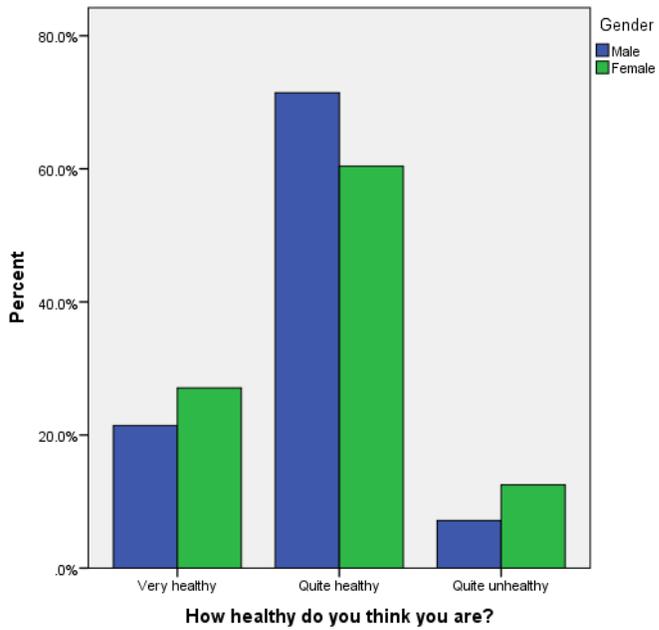


Figure 2: Perceived health by gender

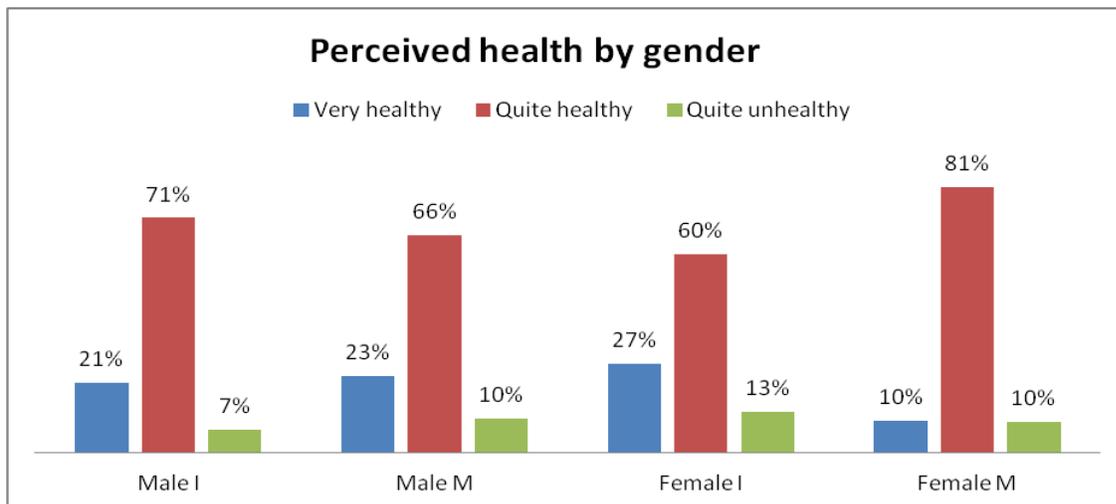


Figure 3 Perceived health of international and Maltese students

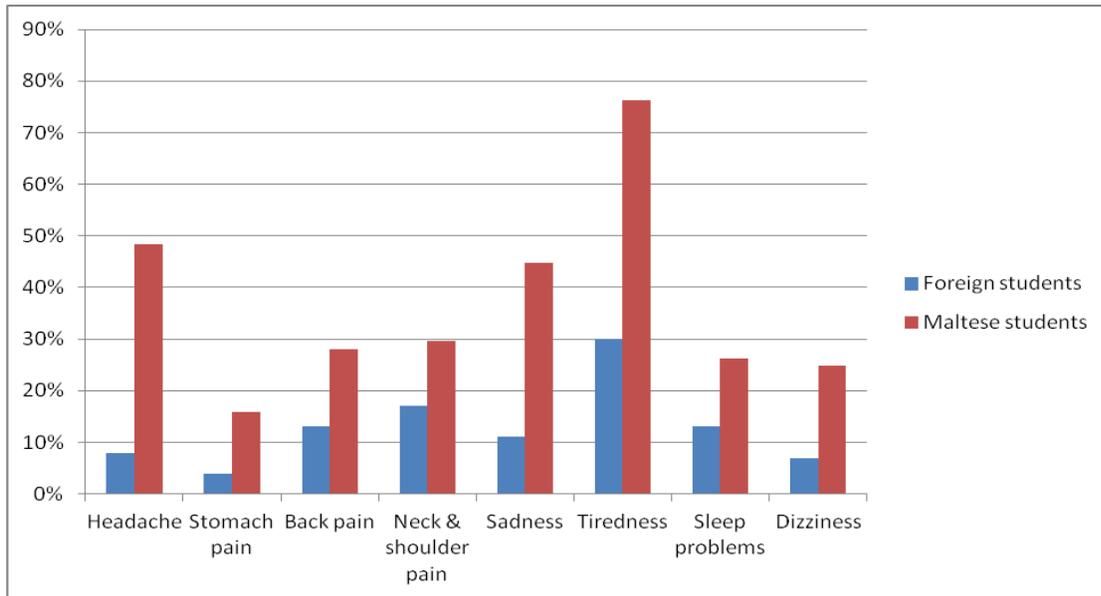


Figure 4. Psychosomatic symptoms amongst international and Maltese students

Emotional Health

Figure 5 shows that the vast majority of the participants are happy as university students, while Figure 6 shows that the majority of the students feel emotionally healthy. This contrasts with the relatively low percentages of those who find it difficult to cope, feel emotionally exhausted and helpless. However, 27% claimed to feel sad quite often, 28% feel bad tempered on a regular basis and 26% suffer from anxiety quite often. 19% of students often feel panicked 16% insecure, 26% too busy to cope and 28% emotionally exhausted. 17% reported feeling quite helpless and 10% said that they often suffer from depression. When compared with Maltese students, international students appear to be more satisfied, happy and confident and less likely to feel exhausted and helpless (Figure 7).

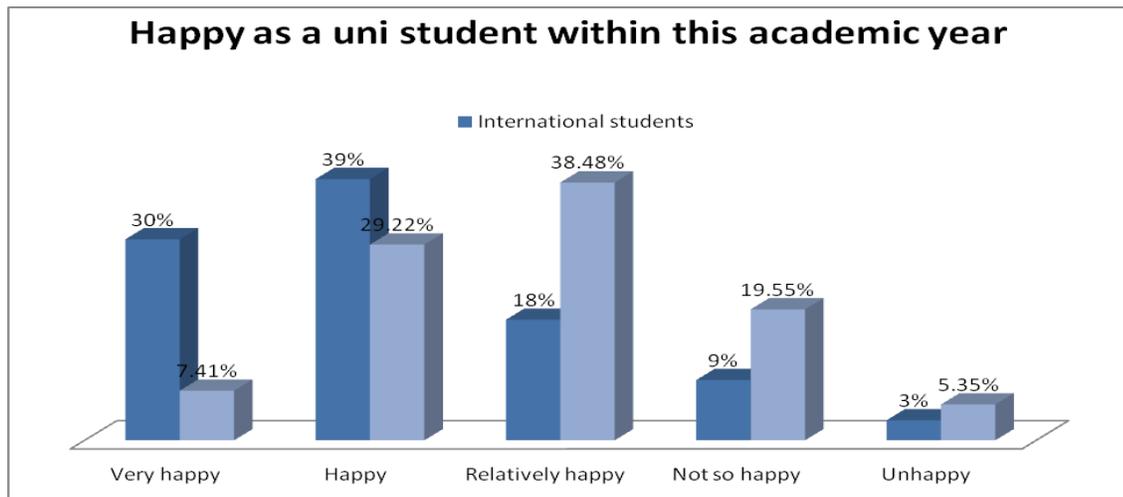


Figure 5. Feeling happy as a university student

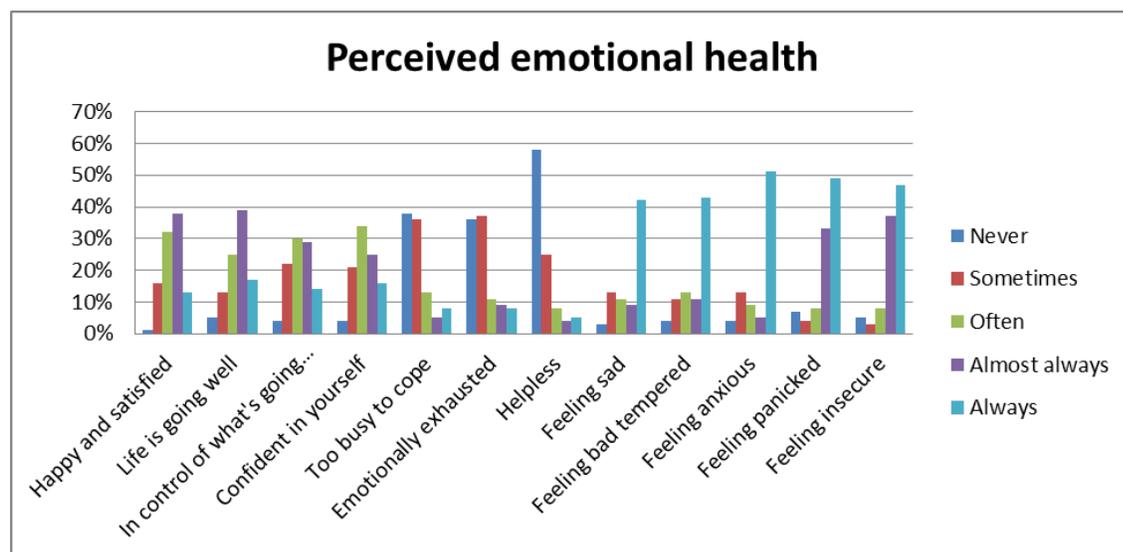


Figure 6. Perceived emotional health

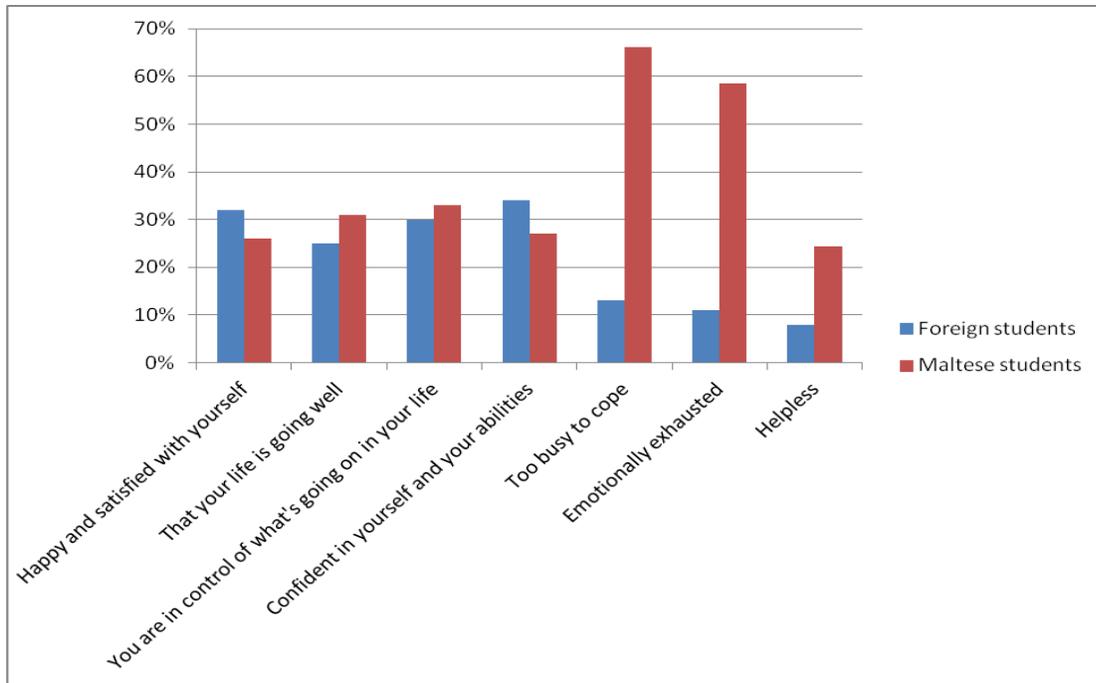


Figure 7. Perceived emotional health amongst international and Maltese students

Social Health

As expected, the communication levels between international students' and their significant others such as parents, siblings, friends and partners decreased since they left their home country (Figures 8-11). However, 68% said they still find it easy to speak with their parents about issues that trouble them. As one may also expect, three quarters of the students reported missing their friends and families, one third to a significant degree (Figure 12). Figure 13 shows that the majority of the students do have a number of close friends, and only 11% reported having only one friend or no friends at all. When asked about their personal relationships, 72% reported that they are satisfied with their relationships, but more than one fourth may not be (Figure 14). Figure 15 suggests that the more close friends one has, the happier one is, though the relationship is not significant. Figure 16 shows that while the majority of international friends do not experience loneliness, 23% appear to be lonely, which is considerably lower than the 51.5% rate for Maltese students.

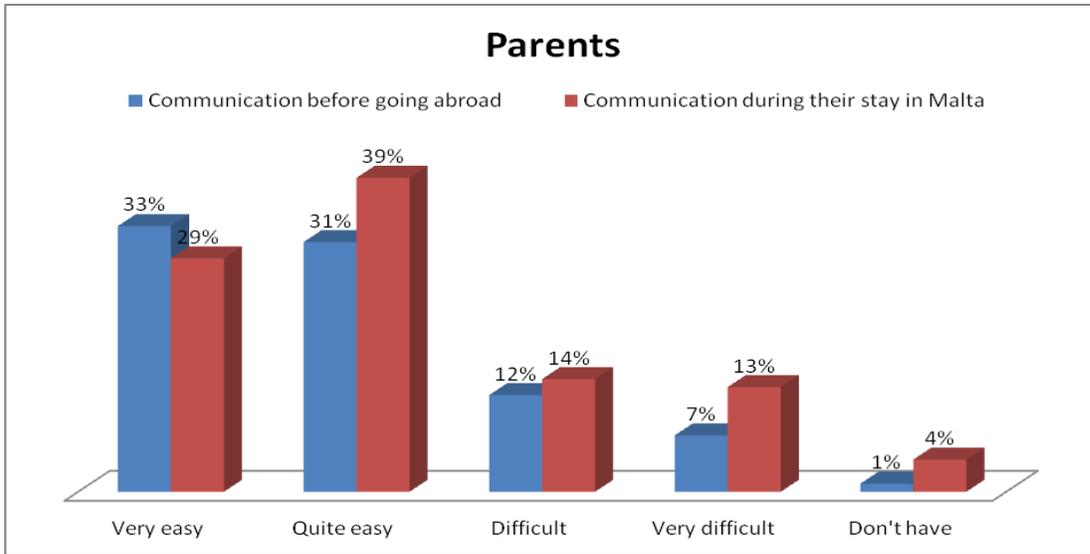


Figure 8. Communication with parents: before and after coming to Malta

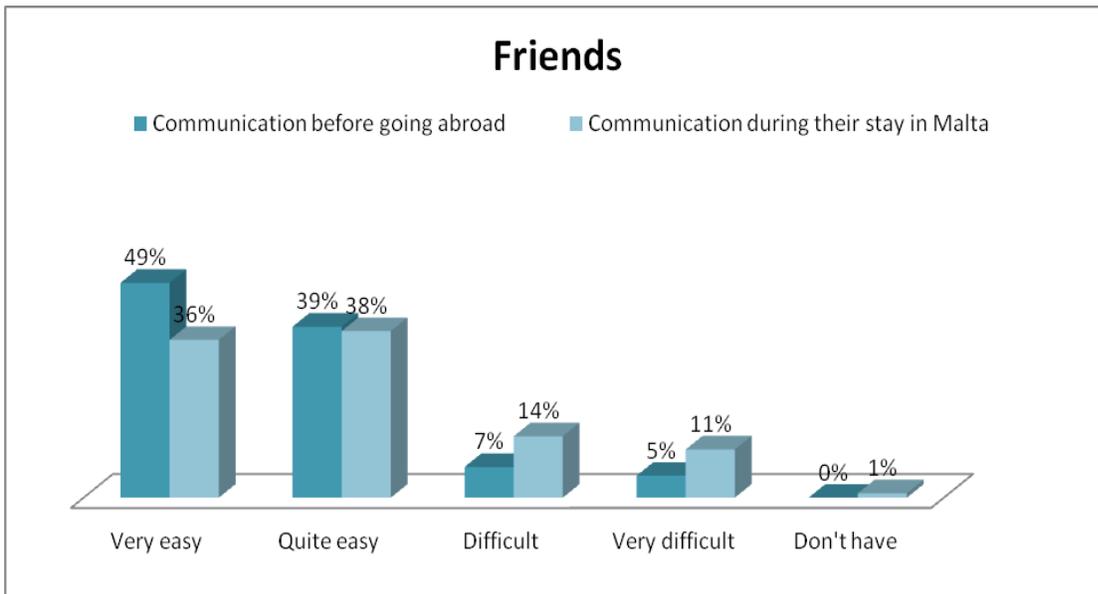


Figure 9. Communication with friends: before and after coming to Malta

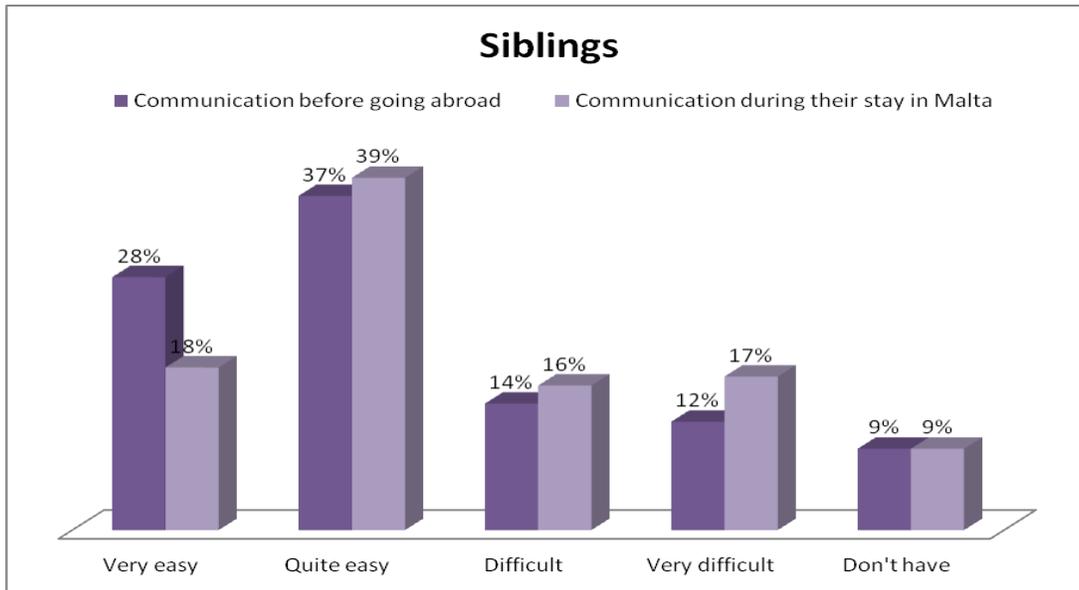


Figure 10. Communication with siblings: before and after coming to Malta

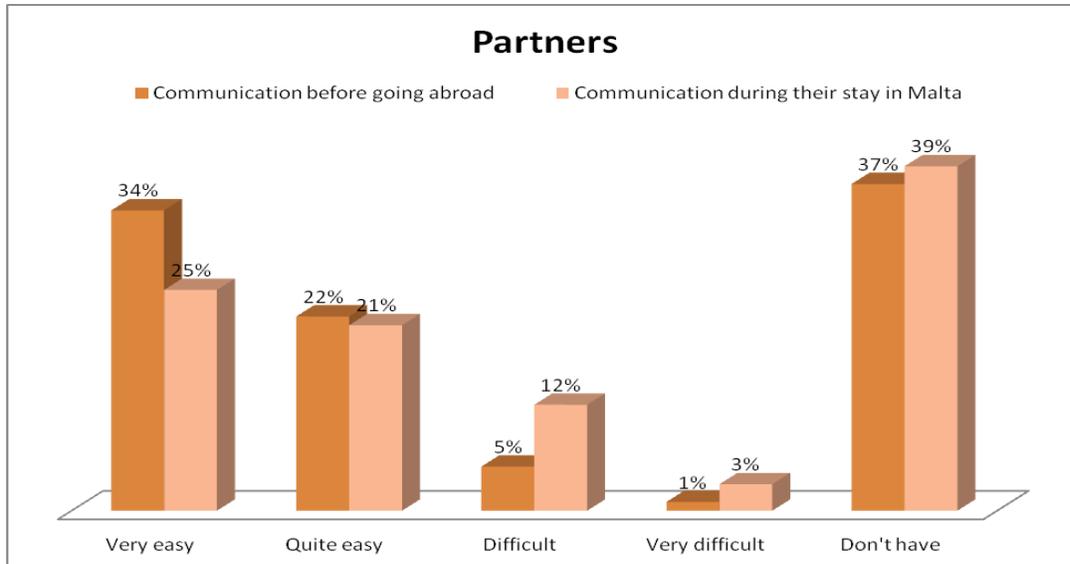


Figure 11. Communication with partners: before and after coming to Malta

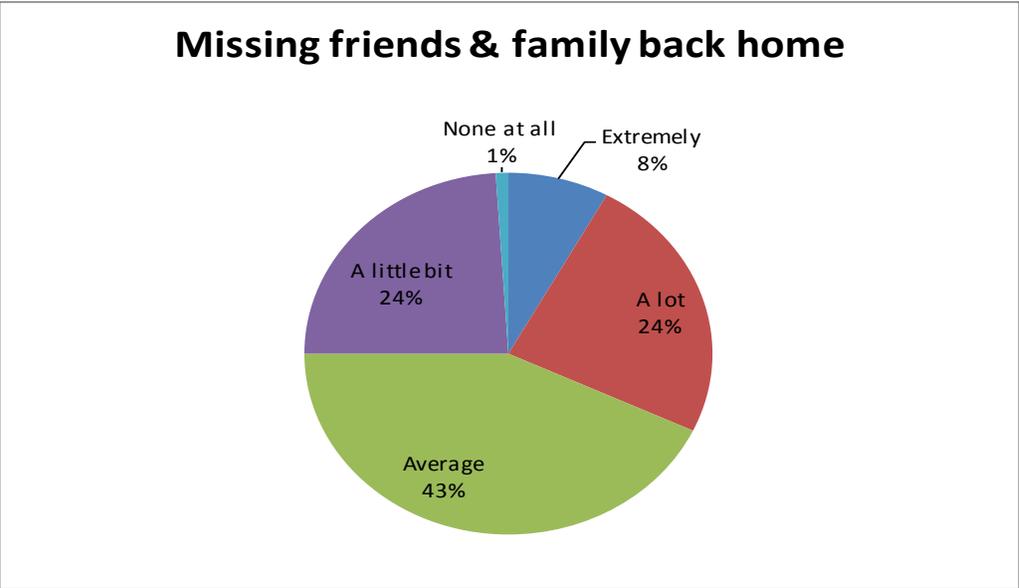


Figure 12. Missing friends and family.

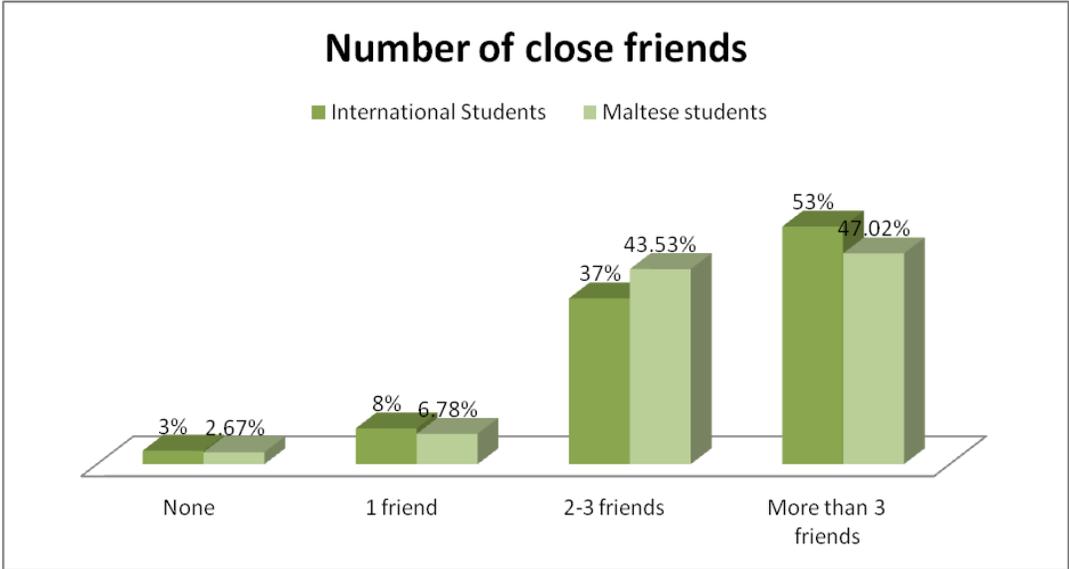


Figure 13. Number of close friends of international and Maltese students

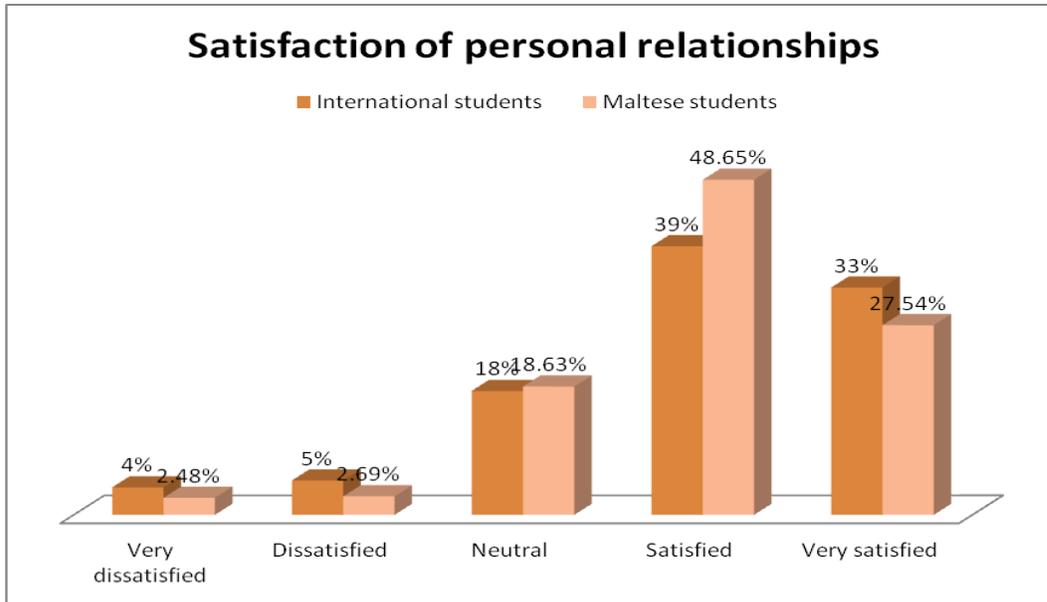


Figure 14. Satisfaction with relationships amongst international and Maltese students

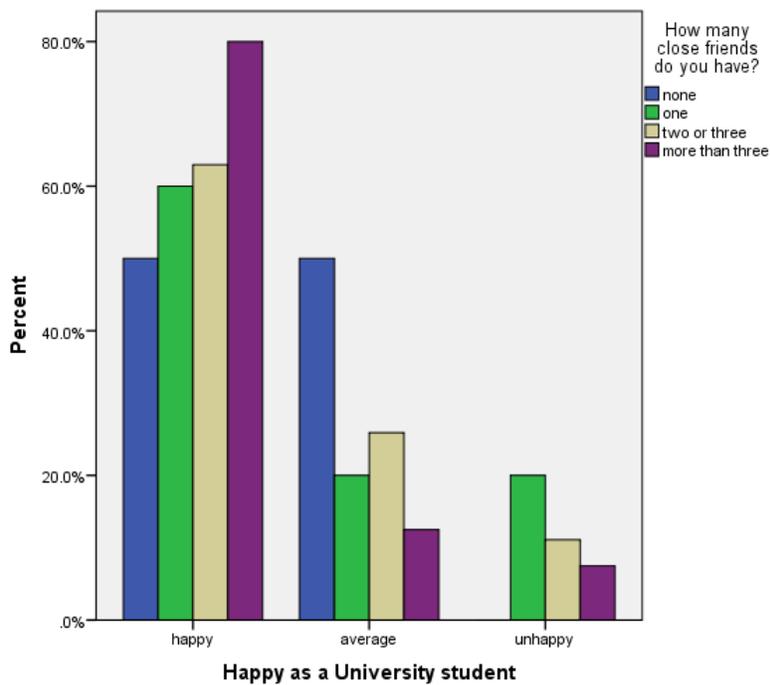


Figure 15. Relationship between degree of happiness and number of close friends

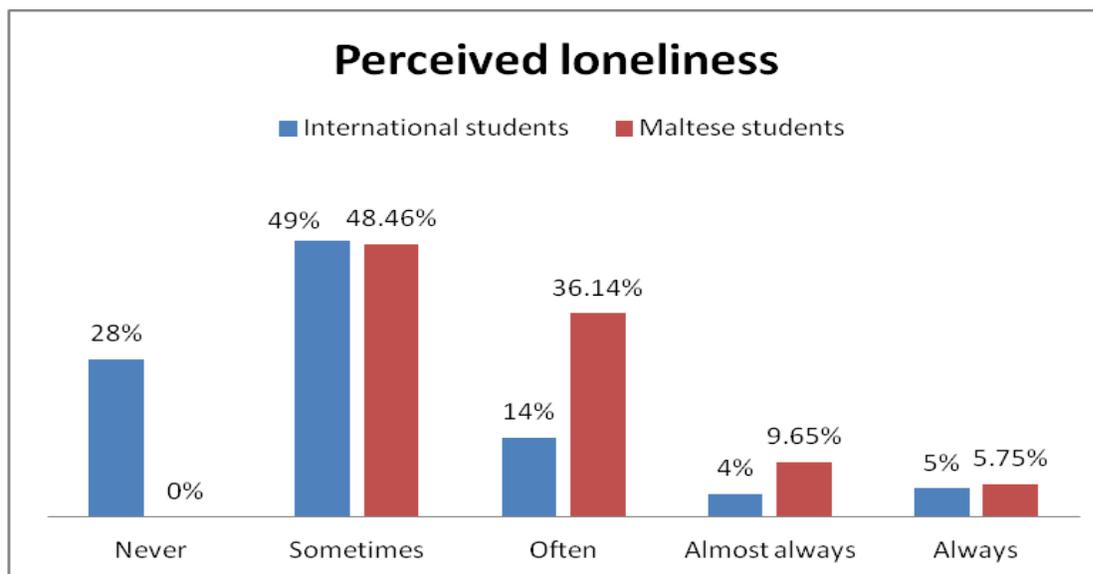


Figure 16. Feelings of loneliness amongst international and Maltese students.

Stress, Health and Coping

The majority of undergraduate international students do not feel stressed, but one third feel that life at University is stressful or very stressful, with female students being more stressed. This is significantly lower, however, than the two thirds of Maltese students who feel stressed; the difference is particularly striking in the very stressful category [7% vs 26%] while in all potentially stressful items, local students are more stressed [Figures 17-19]. When presented with a list of potential stressors, half of international students said that tests and exams were the most stressful, followed by transport [38%] and too many assignments/projects [30%]. This is to be expected since most international students use public transport; in fact in comparison to Maltese students, parking is the least stressful for the former, followed by too many students in one class and writing a dissertation. Most international students do not complete a dissertation as they come here for one or two semesters, and they may be used to large classes in their home university.

When perceived stress level was compared to physical ailments, no significant results or particular trends could be noted. This is probably due to the low levels of physical complaints expressed by students, as well as the moderation of stress by

other psychosocial variables. On the other hand, however, there was a significant negative relationship between the level of perceived stress and the perception that life was going well [Figure 20]. A similar relationship was observed, though the p value was slightly higher than 0.05, between the level of perceived stress and the difficulty to make friends [Figure 21].

As one can see from Figure 22 on coping strategies, international students make most use of 'friendship support', 'positive thinking', 'better planning and organization' and 'going out to social events'. On the other hand, 'counseling', 'avoidance', 'praying' and 'studying harder' are the least common coping strategies. Maltese students used 'praying', 'better planning and organization' and 'studying harder' more than international students, while the latter made more use of palliative coping strategies such as eating, drinking, smoking, as well healthier practices like 'friendship support', 'positive thinking', 'better planning and organization' and 'going out to social events'.

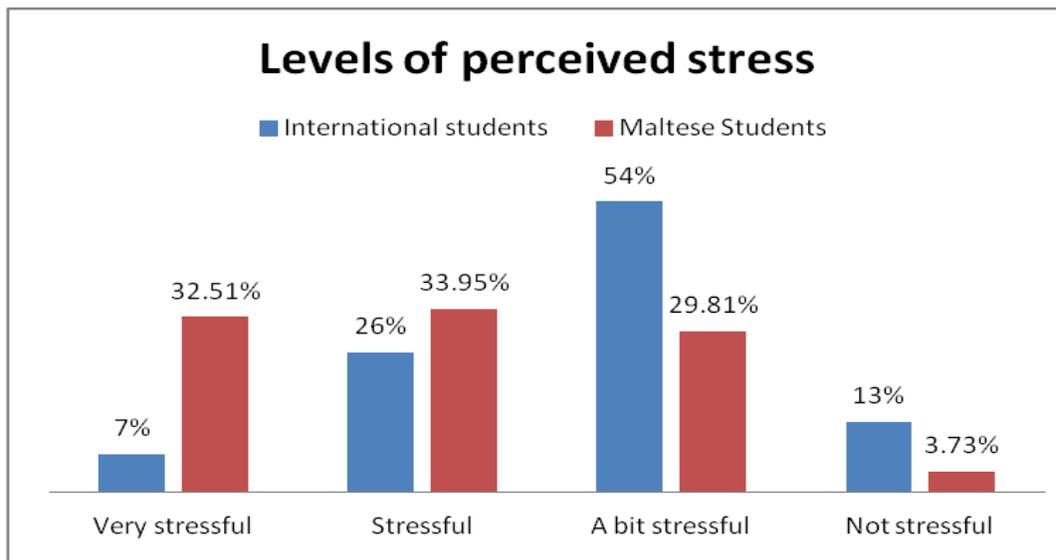


Figure 17. Level of perceived stress amongst international and Maltese students

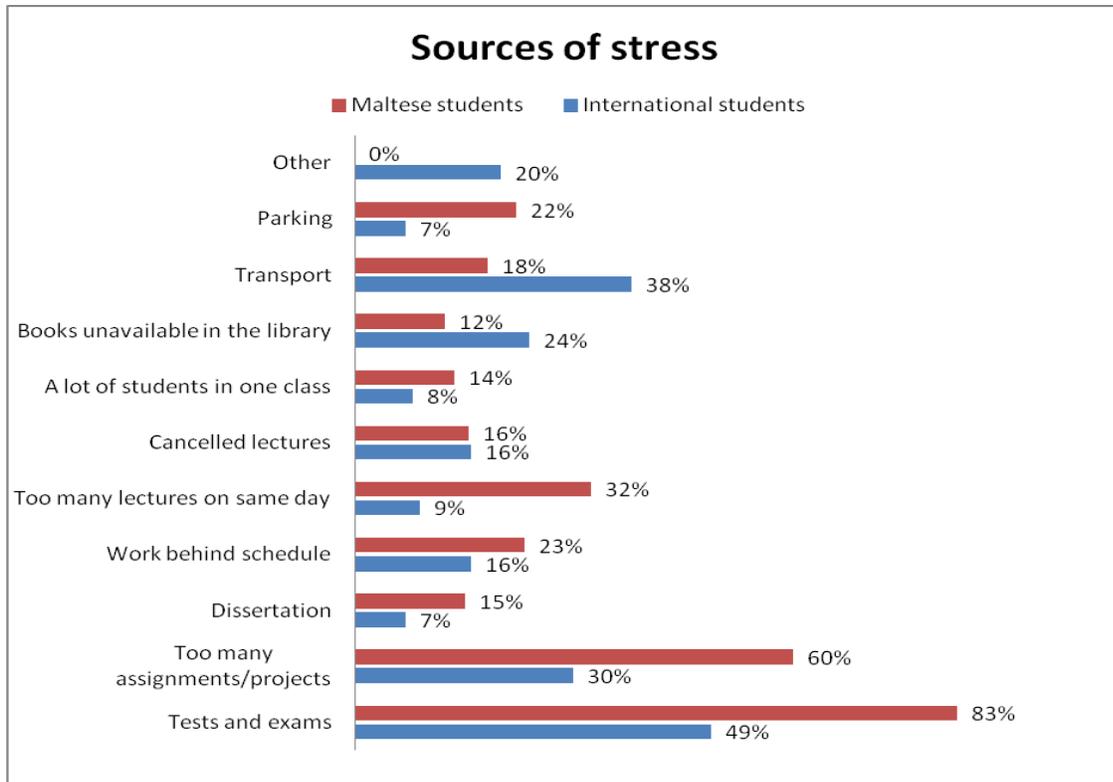


Figure 18. Sources of stress amongst international and Maltese students

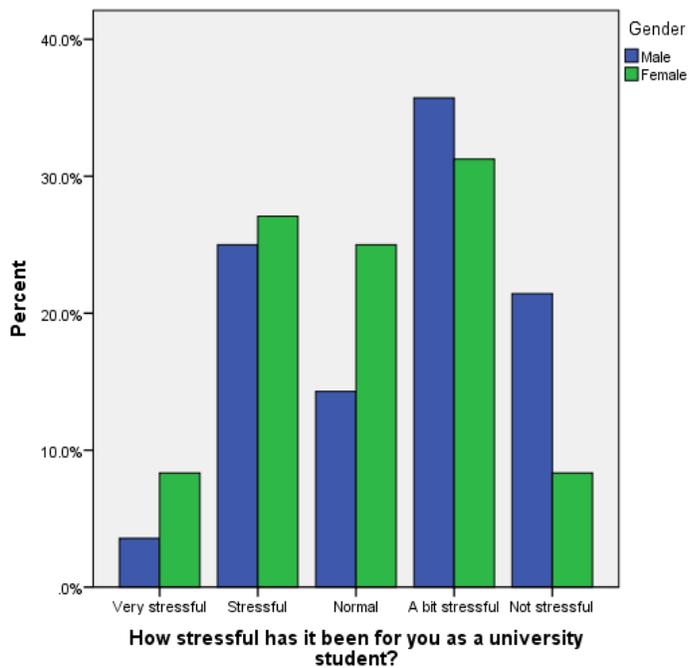


Figure 19. Perceived stress level by gender

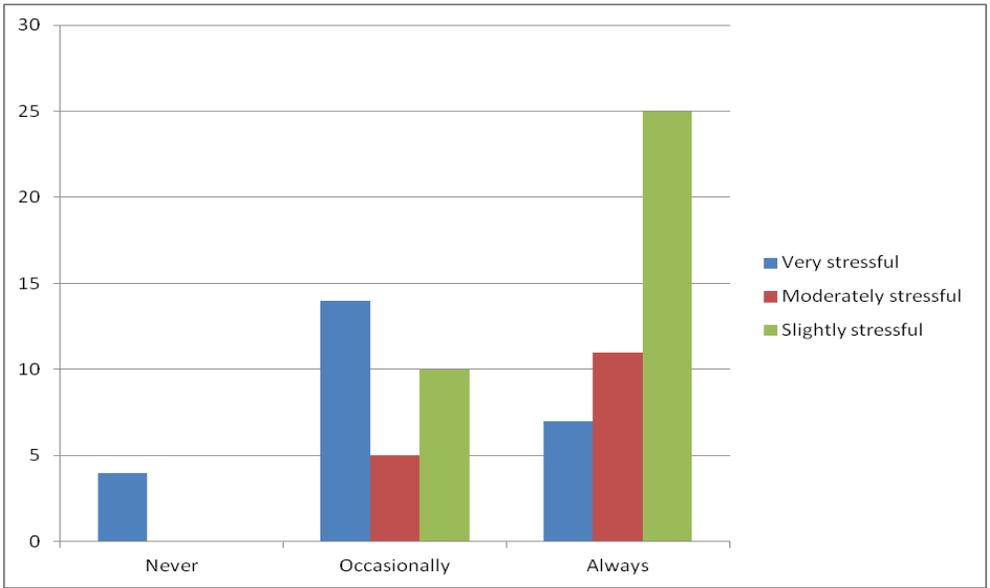


Figure 20. Perceived stress level and feeling that life is going well

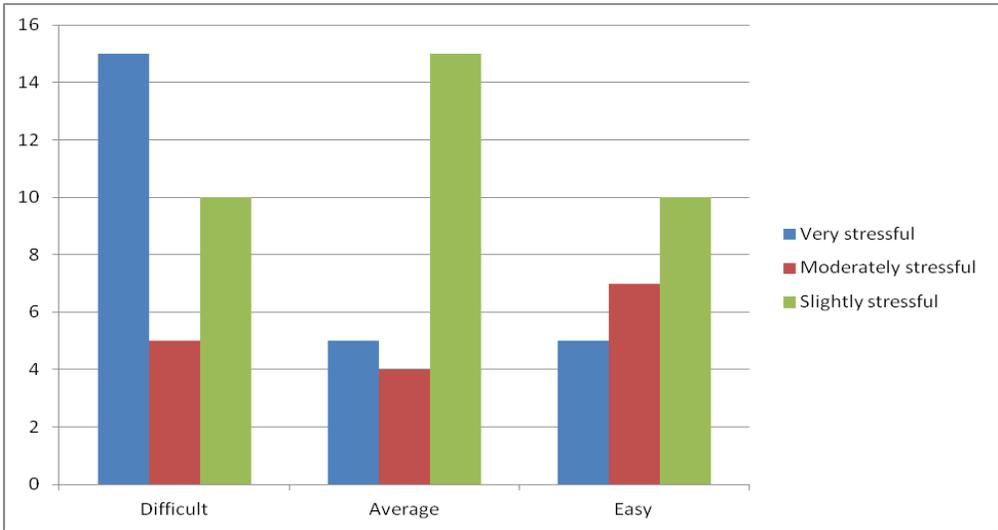


Figure 21. Perceived stress level and ease in making friends

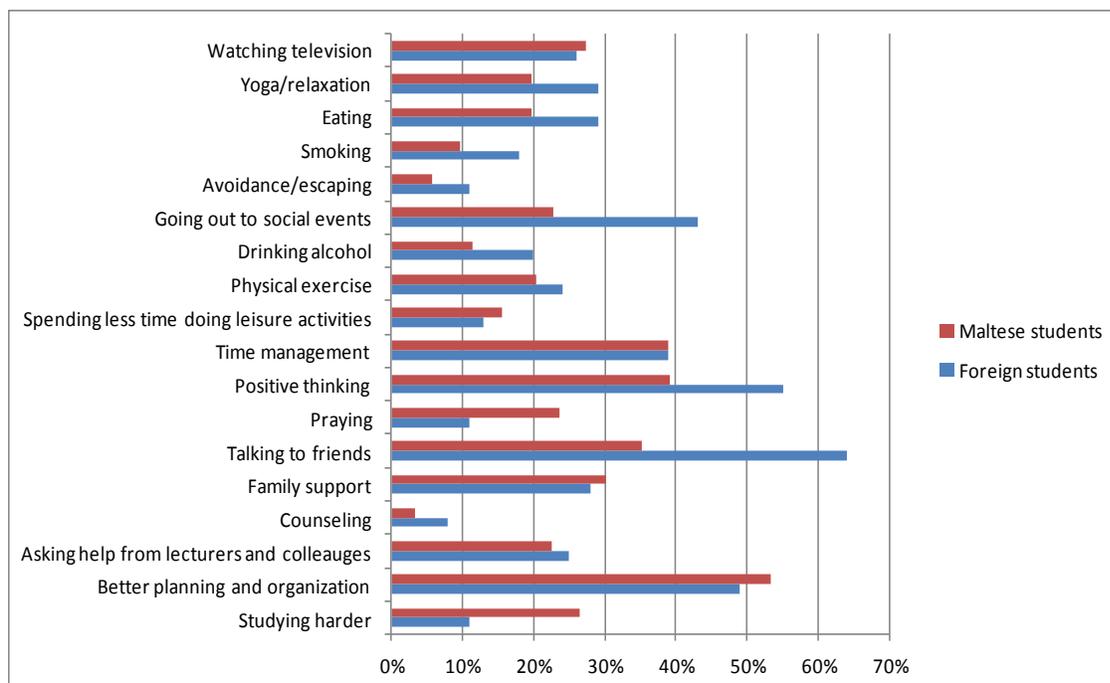


Figure 22. Coping strategies adopted by international and Maltese students

International Students' Issues and Concerns

A number of qualitative questions indicated that a small number of students felt that studying in Malta was quite challenging at first. Leaving family and friends behind did make them feel homesick at times. Some students also found it difficult to deal with certain responsibilities such as finding a place where to live, managing their budget, making friends, coping with language difficulties and with different lecturing methods. Some students also found it difficult to adapt since Maltese students tended to work on their own and not in groups, and thus had difficulty to make friends, to get help with lecture notes and share course materials. Some students experienced a mild culture shock because they felt that the University of Malta operated quite differently than their own university. However, on a general note, students were very glad to be in Malta and did not take long to adjust to a new way of living. Moreover, variables such as financial issues, missing loved ones, making friends or experiencing a different university system, were not significantly related to stress.

When asked why they chose to come to study in Malta, the most common reason was the sunshine and the weather, followed by the use of the English

language and the good reputation of the University and course content respectively. Historical heritage and culture, the sea, geographical position, proximity or lack of, to their country, and the hospitality of the Maltese people were some of the other reasons mentioned by the participants [Figure 23]. A number of students also said that they had friends who were living or had been in Malta and who recommended the country to them. Some students were already living here and/or having partners living in Malta or had been to Malta on holiday before. Finally, a small number of students said that they chose Malta because they were not chosen for another country, because of low tuition fees and because in Malta there is a residence for international students.

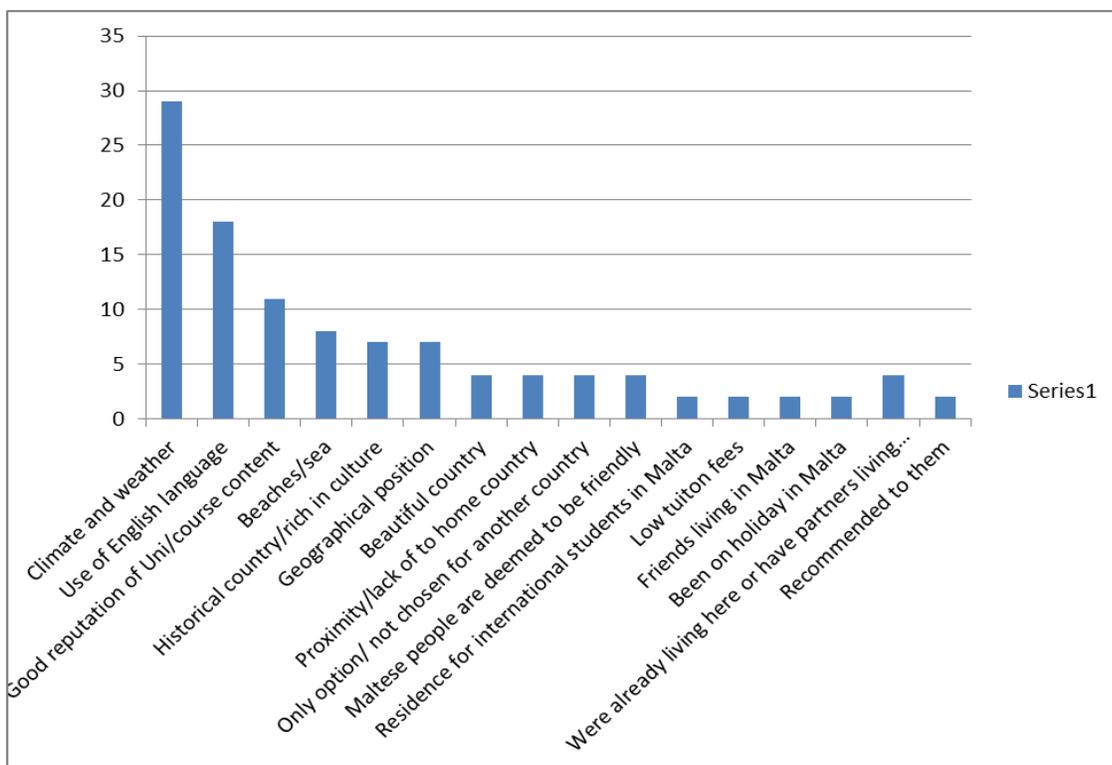


Figure 23. Reasons for studying in Malta

As Figure 24 shows, 91% of international students said that their understanding of the English language is good or very good; however, this dropped to 77% when it came to speaking: 22% said that their speaking is average to bad.

Figure 25 illustrates that 40% of international students encountered problems when making friends with Maltese people [not necessarily Maltese students]. With

regards to relationships with the university community, the great majority of students [78%] reported that their lecturers are helpful and caring, while 83% said that local students are friendly and supportive [Figures 26-27]. When asked about the use of and help provided by the various university services, students sought help mainly from the International Office and their respective department Departments, but made less use of student organizations, admissions office, Counseling services and the Chaplaincy [Figure 28]. The great majority of students reported that the staff at the International Office as well as the staff in their respective departments, were helpful, but one fourth would have appreciated more support. 43% found student organizations helpful, followed by about 30% for Admissions Department and KSU respectively [Figure 29]. Figure 30 shows that the majority of international students [60%] do not participate in activities at University, while only 21% are active on a regular basis. This may not be surprising however, as there appears an overall lack of motivation on the parts of the students in participating in such activities; in the case of Maltese students the rate of participation is even lower.

The vast majority of international students reported that they never experienced any form of discrimination. While discrimination due to race, disability, gender, religion, sexual orientation, students is rare, a small number of students expressed concern about discrimination due to language and nationality, followed by physical appearance [Figure 33].

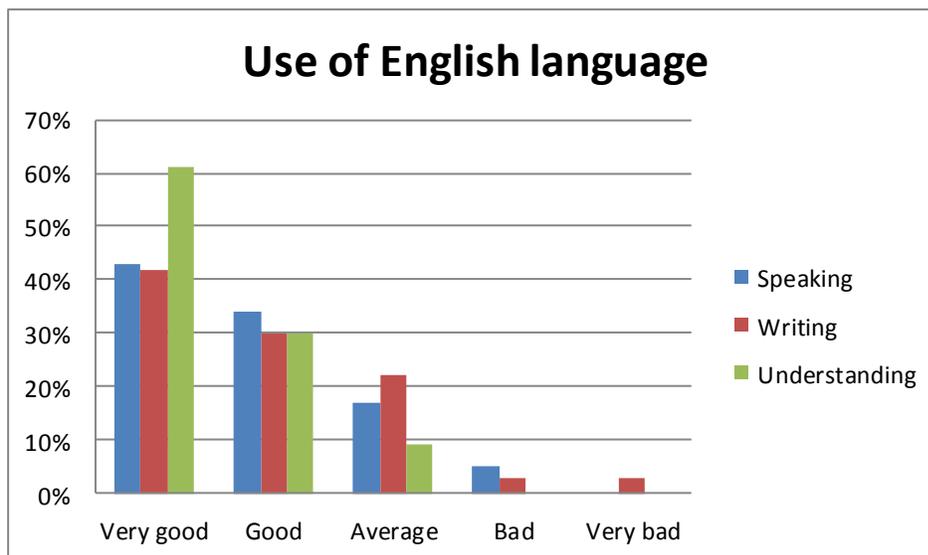


Figure 24. Use of English by international students

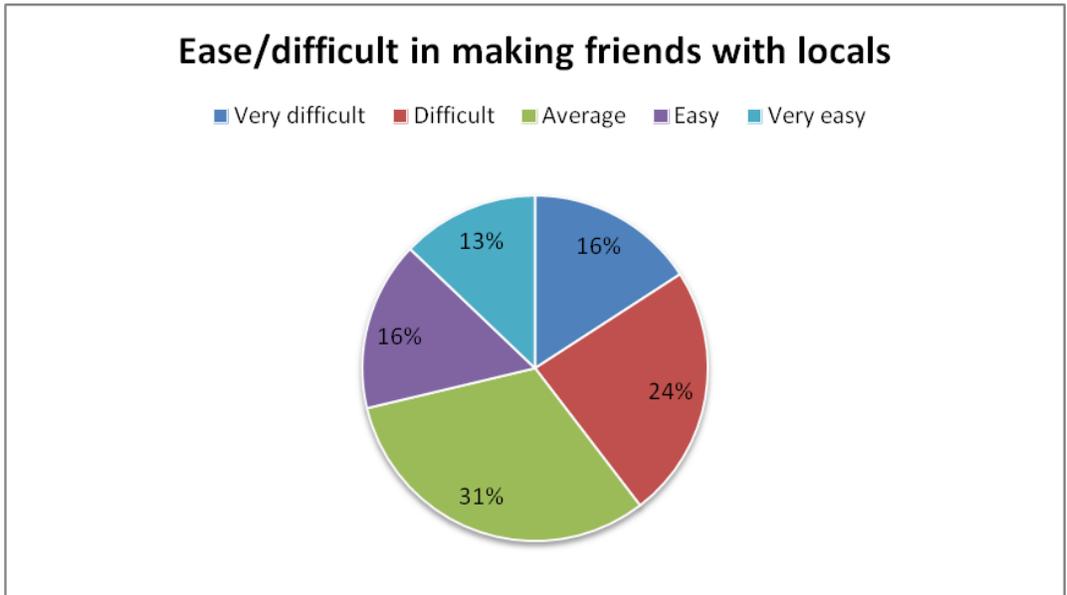


Figure 25. Making friends with locals

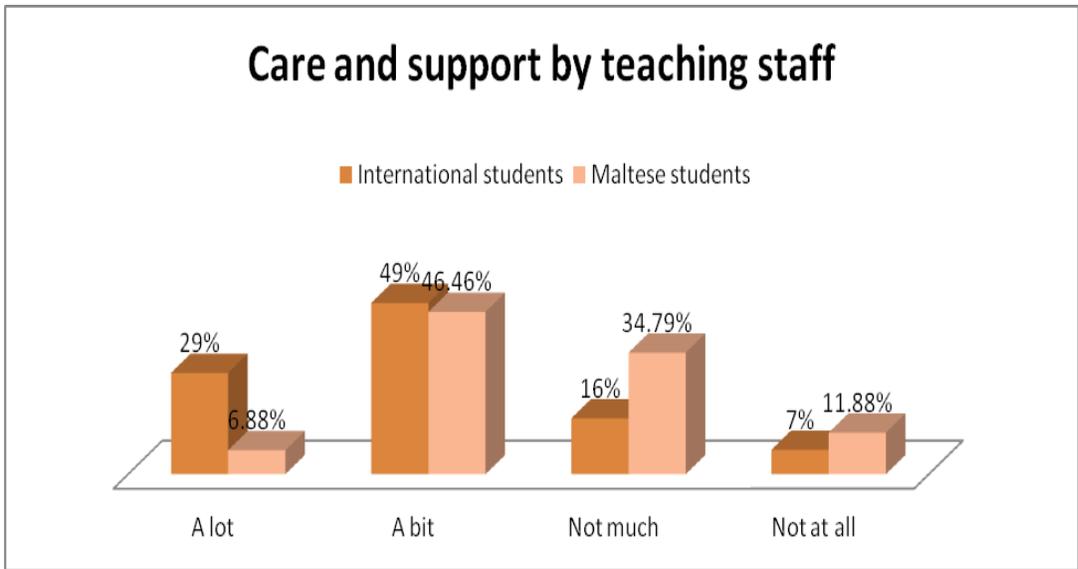


Figure 26. Support by teaching staff

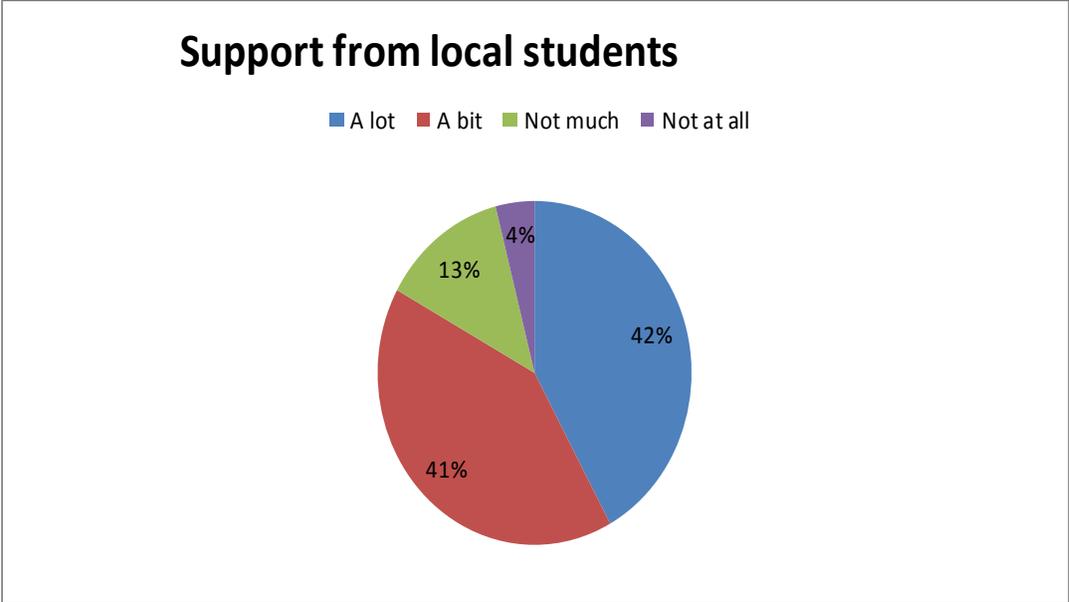


Figure 27. Support from local fellow students

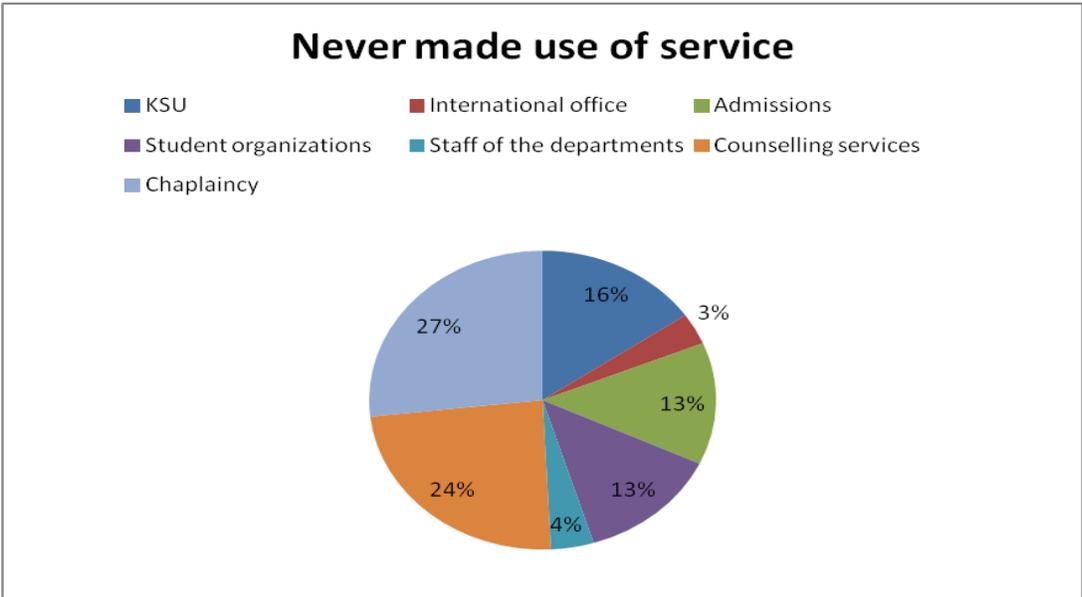


Figure 28. Use of university services by international students

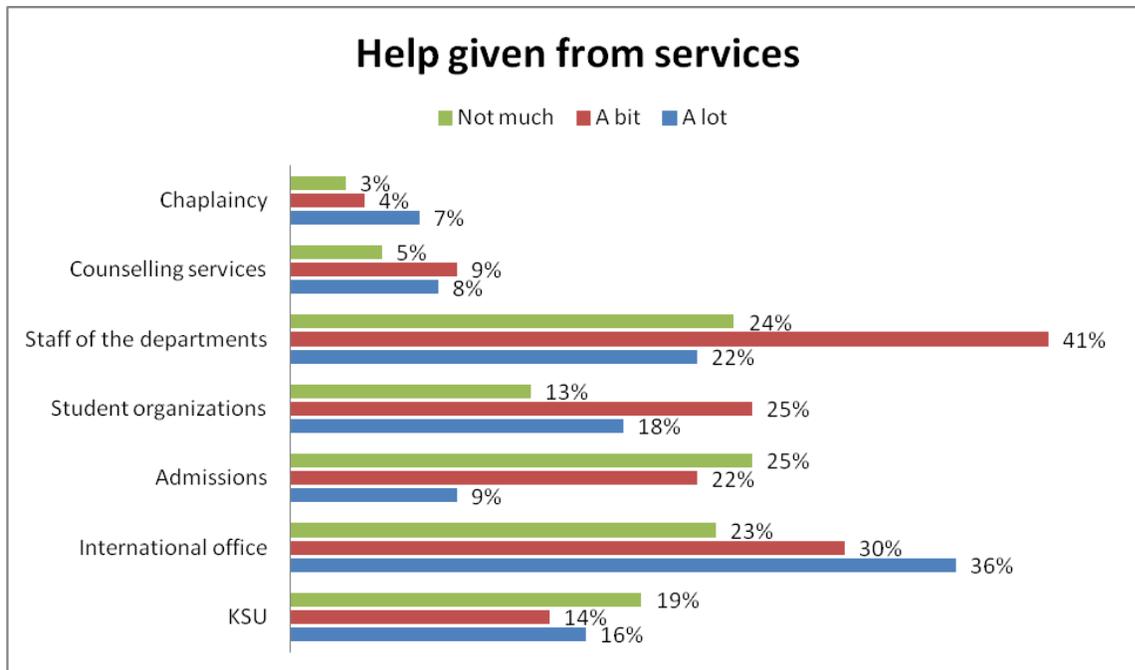


Figure 29. Help provided by university services

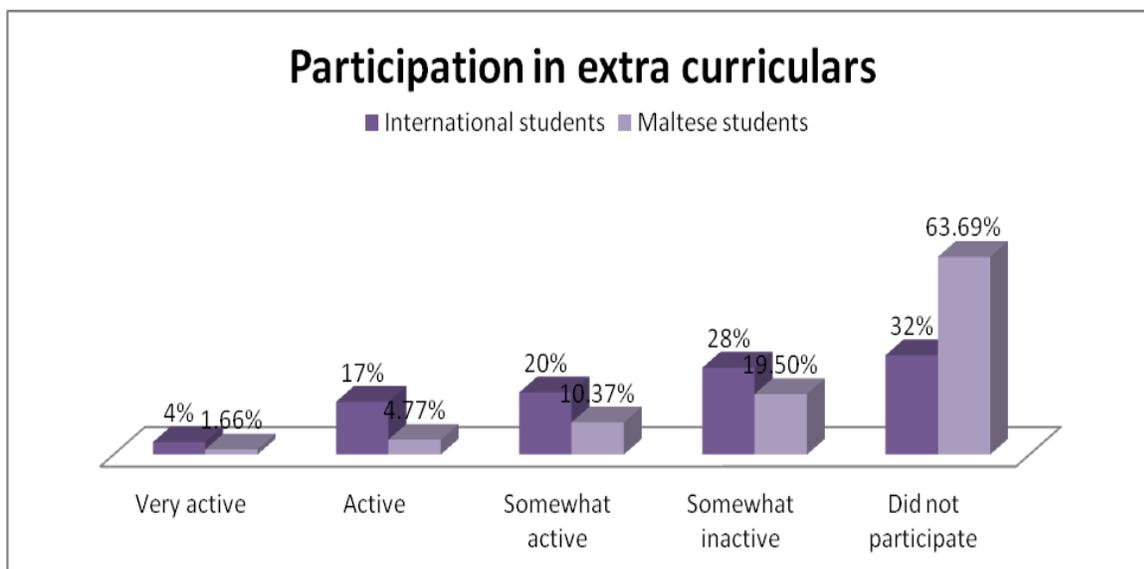


Figure 30. Participation in extracurricular activities

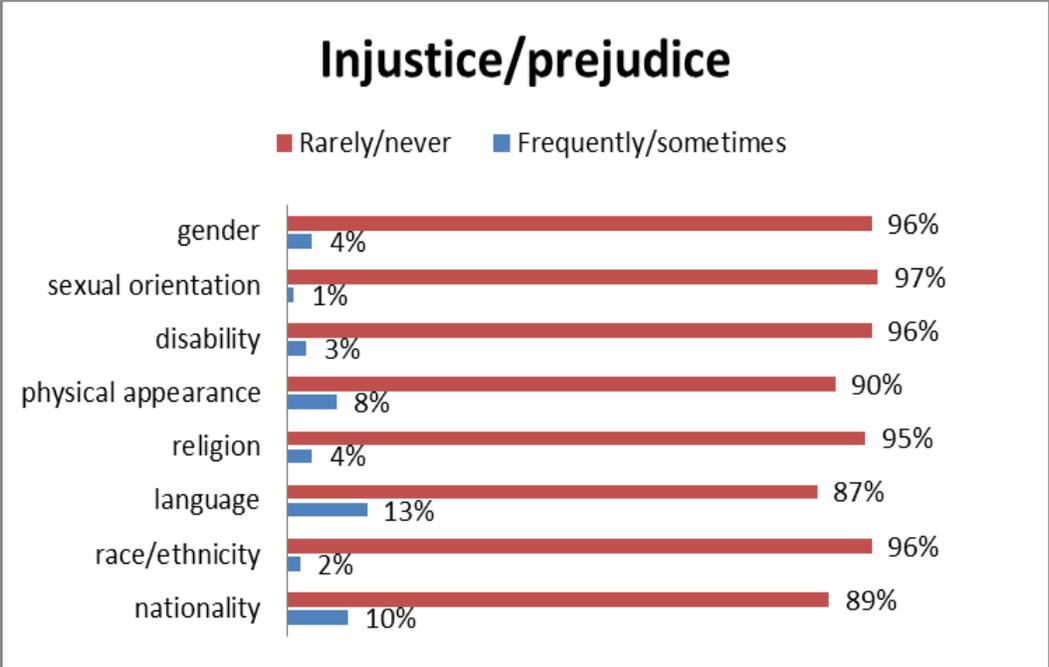


Figure 31. Prejudice and discrimination

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Health

The great majority of international students in this study said that they felt healthy or very healthy, although about one third feel frequently tired while around 10 to 15% complained of sleep problems, neck and shoulder pain, back pain, headaches and eating disorders. Stewart Brown et.al [2000] say that university students are not as healthy as people of the same age in the general population, particularly in relation to psychological and psychosomatic conditions. One might link neck, shoulder and back pain to students' sedentary life, while other ailments such as sleep problems, headaches and eating disorders might be symptoms of both academic and non academic stress. Most of the students did not consider these conditions and symptoms as being serious enough to warrant treatment or medication. On the whole, the majority of students feel happy as students at the University of Malta and enjoy good emotional wellbeing. About one fourth of the students, however, often experience problems in their emotional health, such as sadness and depression, anxiety and difficulty to cope. Despite this picture, however, these figures are relatively lower when compared with those of Maltese university students, who experience more difficulties in their psychological wellbeing.

Stress and coping

The great majority of international students reported that they only feel a little stressed; but one third feel very stressed. When presented with a list of potential academic stressors, half of the students said they found tests and exams as the most stressful; the least stressful were parking, too many students in one class and writing a dissertation. This is quite understandable as most international students are here for only one semester and thus do not own a car and do not do their dissertation here. However, more than one third of students complained about transport. 'Too many students in one class' may not be so nerve-wrecking because many international students may be used to big classes, and may also see the opportunity of making more friends.

The majority of students chose talking with friends and positive thinking as the most commonly used coping strategies, followed by better planning and organization [half of the students], social events, time management and family support. These strategies may be considered as positive action-oriented strategies, with students taking action to improve the situation. The least chosen strategy was counseling; in fact, the great majority said that they never made use of counselling services at the University of Malta. A substantial number of students made also use of unhealthy coping strategies such as eating, drinking and smoking.

Relationships and academic life

The majority of international students reported that they do not feel lonely and are satisfied with their personal relationships, with the vast majority having two, three or more close friends. Although missing their friends and family back home, most of the students felt supported by their friends. This is related to their happiness, the number of close friends being significantly related with happiness. More than three fourths of the students feel that their lecturers and Maltese students are supportive and helpful, and more than half found it easy to make friends with Maltese, though making friends with fellow international peers was easier. This could be because international students in Malta tend to seek other international students especially since Maltese students may already have their own group of friends. Moreover, outside lecture halls, many Maltese students may tend to speak in Maltese thus making international peers feel slightly excluded. It is indicative that some of the students would have liked their Maltese counterparts to be more open and inclusive, sharing resources, spending time together. Similarly while most students reported that student services and organisations at university were helpful, some would have preferred more help from Departmental staff and administration services.

Issues and concerns

A good number of students felt that studying in Malta was quite a challenge at first. Leaving loved ones behind, finding accommodation, managing finances, adjusting to a new culture and a new educational system, and making friends amongst others, are not an easy feat. Most of the students however, said after the initial culture shock, they found it easy to adapt to university life, with most of them having friends and feeling supported by their lecturers, colleagues and administrative staff.

The Mediterranean weather and the use of the English language were the reasons mostly cited by the students for choosing to come to Malta, followed by the

good reputation of the university and course content. Overall, it is interesting to note that reasons related to the university and programmes of study were mentioned less often than ones related to weather, culture, language and history, similar to the reasons why tourists come to Malta (Borg, 2009). Tseng & Newton (2002) noted that students study abroad mostly for professional knowledge and achievement outcomes, but they do mention that students go abroad to experience 'a different world, and [increase] knowledge about the world' (p.4).

Even though the proficiency of the English language and the level of perceived stress were not significantly related, a good number of students did mention that communication was a problem at times. The vast majority of students, however, said that their understanding and speaking of the English language was good or very good, and while some of felt somewhat anxious and frustrated at times because of the language, they said that by time this got better and that their aim to learn English in Malta was achieved. Indeed the English language is one of the main reasons students decided to study in Malta.

The vast majority of international students reported that they never experienced any form of discrimination. However, a small number of students said they experienced prejudice and/or discrimination because of their language and nationality. Some in fact complained about Maltese students speaking in Maltese outside lectures, thus feeling excluded, and about communication problems in general.

Recommendations

In view of these findings, the following recommendations may help to improve the academic experience, social life, health and wellbeing of undergraduate international students at the University of Malta. It must be borne in mind, however, these recommendations are based on the views of the students rather than on an evaluation of the services at the University of Malta, and that some of them may have already been implemented since the collection of the data for this study.

- A number of students often experience problems in their emotional health, such as sadness and depression, anxiety, loneliness, and difficulty to cope amongst others, as well as other conditions such as sleeping and eating disorders, but make little use of psychological or counseling services. A health and wellness service which includes psychological and counseling services (see Cefai & Camilleri, 2009 for more details on the setting up of such a service), would benefit not only international students but Maltese ones as well. Promotional leaflets on depression, anxiety, loneliness, eating

disorders and other conditions, including what to do, where to go, and whom to talk to, could be distributed in places usually frequented by international students, such as the International Office, Student House, and the university residence. More promotion by the Counselling services, particularly in view of the very low use of the service, would also be useful. International students may also be encouraged to join Students for Healthy Living, a peer education online programme in mental health promotion, stress management, and substance use.

- Organisation of stress management workshops and seminars given that one third feel highly stressed, while a substantial number are using unhealthy coping strategies such as comfort eating, alcohol use and smoking. Removing where possible the sources of stress, such as reducing overassessment and testing [see Cefai & Camilleri, 2009], and improving transport to and from university for international students.
- Having a support team made up of staff from the International Office, Counselling Services, and KSU amongst others, to help students who are experiencing difficulties of adjustment, particularly in the initial weeks and months of the semester. This may include befriending and peer mentoring schemes and support seminars for international students in the first weeks of the semester.
- Holding academic, social and cultural events where international students have the opportunity to get to know Maltese peers and develop working and social relationships with them. Lecturers may encourage more mixed groups when assigning group projects, and ensure international students feel welcomed and included in their courses. International students may also be encouraged to participate more actively in Degree Plus initiatives and activities by students' organisations.
- Less use of Maltese language when international students are around, including informal occasions such as breaks where possible, so that international students may feel more included and participate more in what it is going on.
- More frequent organisation of multicultural events on campus, where different nationalities, cultures and traditions are celebrated amongst the whole community.

- Organisations, departments and services, such as Departments, International Office, Admissions, KSU, and student organisations, continue to strive to provide improved international student-friendly, helpful and accessible services.
- The history, achievements, track record, academic excellence and international recognition of the University of Malta may be underlined more in marketing programmes and courses for international students; on the other hand, the weather, history, cultural heritage, English language and hospitality of the Maltese people, need also to feature in social marketing, given these were some of the main reasons students chose to study in Malta.

CONCLUSION

Studying and living in Malta appears to be a positive experience for undergraduate international students, with high levels of positive feelings and satisfaction and low levels of stress, physical complaints, psychological problems and relationship issues, particularly when compared with local university students. Though issues related to accommodation, finance, language, culture, and distance from home, family and friends, may pose initial problems in adaptation, most of the students appeared to have adapted quite well after the initial transitional period. Besides the use of good coping skills and a good network of social support, such adaptation was facilitated by the good weather, local culture and history, the hospitality of the Maltese people, the widespread use of English, access of services and facilities at university, and friendly staff amongst others. All in all, undergraduate international students in Malta reported being happy and satisfied with their decision to come to study in Malta and felt that this experience helped them both on a professional and a personal level.

This study however, is based on a relatively small sample of students and the findings and conclusions need to be treated with caution. Due to the small sample size it was also not always possible to compare the means of the various dependent variables by age, gender, language or country of origin. The participants were mainly transfer and exchange undergraduate students. A larger scale, more comprehensive study of the academic and social experience of all international students at the University of Malta, including qualitative data, would provide a more robust portrait of studying and living in Malta, and consequently lead to an improvement of the services and facilities for international students at the University of Malta.

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Studying and living at the University Malta is a positive experience for undergraduate international students, with high levels of positive feelings and satisfaction and low levels of stress, physical complaints, psychological problems and relationship issues, particularly when compared with local university students.

Besides the use of good coping skills and a good network of social support, adaptation was facilitated by the good weather, local culture and history, the hospitality of the Maltese people, the widespread use of English, access of services and facilities at university, and friendly staff amongst others.

All in all, undergraduate international students in Malta reported being happy and satisfied with their decision to come to study in Malta and felt that this experience helped them both on a professional and a personal level

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