

THE ATTACHMENT STYLE AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF UNIVERSITY FOREIGN STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MESSINA

O ESTILO DE APEGO E A EXPERIÊNCIA EMOCIONAL DE ESTUDANTES ESTRANGEIROS DA UNIVERSIDADE DE MESSINA

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RESUMO

Este trabalho relata a pesquisa que foi objeto da tese de mestrado de um estudante brasileiro, formado pela Universidade de Messina em Psicologia Clínica e da Saúde no Ciclo de Vida - A. A. 2018/2019. Estudar no exterior não é uma escolha simples. Os estudantes que decidem enfrentar esse tipo de experiência encontram grandes desafios cognitivos, físicos e pessoais. Esse tipo de mudança pode expor o aluno à vulnerabilidade emocional, favorecendo o surgimento de dificuldades, como gerenciar tarefas diárias, lidar com a carga de estudos, exames e gestão do dinheiro (FORBES-MEWETT; SAWYER, 2016). O objetivo da pesquisa foi examinar a relação entre estilo de apego e experiência emocional em uma amostra de estudantes universitários estrangeiros; especificamente sintomas relacionados à ansiedade de separação e sintomas depressivos. O estudo envolveu 80 estudantes estrangeiros da Universidade de Messina matriculados em um curso de três anos; mestrado ou doutorado. Os participantes responderam a um questionário estruturado relacionado à experiência de estudar no exterior, um instrumento que verificava o estilo de apego (Revised attachment scale for adults - Version for close relationships, Collins, 1996); um instrumento que avaliava a presença de sintomas de ansiedade (Measure of severity for separation anxiety disorder – adult, APA, 2013) e um instrumento para verificar a presença de sintomas de depressão (Beck Depression Inventory II, Beck, Steer e Brown, 1967). Os resultados desta pesquisa oferecem ideias para melhorar os serviços oferecidos aos estudantes estrangeiros, a fim de incentivar a integração na Universidade de Messina e o bom resultado dos estudos.

Palavras-chave: Apego. Estudantes estrangeiros. Ansiedade. Depressão.

ABSTRACT

This work reports the research that was the subject of the master's thesis of a Brazilian student, graduated from the University of Messina in Clinical and Health Psychology in the Life Cycle - A. A. 2018/2019. Studying abroad is not a simple choice. Students who decide to face this type of experience undergo great cognitive, physical and personal challenges. This type of change can expose the student to emotional vulnerability, favoring the onset of difficulties such as managing daily tasks, coping with the load of studies, exams and money management (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). The objective of the research was to examine the relationship between attachment style and emotional experience in a sample of university foreign students; specifically symptoms related to separation anxiety and depressive symptoms. The study involved 80 foreign students enrolled at the University of Messina in a three-year degree course; master degree or Ph.D. Participants answered a structured questionnaire related to their experience of studying abroad, as well as an instrument that checked the attachment style (Revised attachment scale for adults - Version for close relationships, Collins, 1996); an instrument that assessed the presence of anxiety symptoms (Measure of severity for separation anxiety disorder - adult, APA, 2013) and an instrument to verify the presence of depression symptoms (Beck Depression Inventory – II, Beck, Steer e Brown, 1967). The results of this research offer ideas for improving the services offered to foreign students, in order to encourage integration at the University of Messina and the successful outcome of studies.

Keywords: Attachment. Foreign students. Anxiety. Depression.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of globalization, every decade more pronounced, has had strong repercussions on the labor market and consequently on the personal life of workers and inevitably on their professional career paths. Global economic changes have prompted many countries, such as the United States, Australia, Japan and EU countries, to encourage students to leave their country of origin and acquire different types of knowledge, not only technical, but also of life in a faraway place, living firsthand in another culture, learning other languages, sharing one's personal experience with students from other parts of the world (Altbach, 2013).

The global map published in 2013 of the best 500 universities in the world shows a strong concentration of the best universities located in some specific regions: North America (in particular the eastern and western coasts of the United States), Europe (in particular the north-western part), Asia (mainly Japan and China) and some in Oceania (south-eastern Australia). These regions attract the largest concentration of international academicians. This ability to attract talent from all over the world on a highly competitive basis allows these institutions to further strengthen their capabilities because their ranking enhances their reputation. In this sense, the current geography could also guide future mobility and there could be a greater concentration within these regions. Many Asian governments see science as an integral part of economic growth and, consequently, have developed their scientific infrastructures. This is especially true for China, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore (Altbach, 2013).

According to Wende (2015), the United States is the country with the largest number of Asian students and academics. Europe as a whole has benefited much less (except the U.K.) from the absorption of Asian students as compared to the United States. European mobility is mainly intra-European (over 90% of student mobility). It is important to pay attention to how this phenomenon will affect Europe with its aging population and lack of skills and opportunities (Altbach, 2013).

According to Alharbi & Smith (2018), it is estimated that the number of international students worldwide will reach 8 million by 2020. International students represent a significant percentage of university enrollments and degree titles. They also offer many economic and cultural events to the host country.

Researchers D.C. Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) say that many international students complete their studies with few difficulties, whereas others have difficulties with social integration, problems in daily activities, homesickness, role conflicts, academic worries, depression, physiological symptoms and cultural adaptation difficulties.

Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer (2016) clarify that the health problems of international students are often aggravated by the stress associated with living away from home in a foreign environment.

Given these premises, in this work we investigate how the first link between the child and his caregiver, described by Bowlby (1951) as an attachment, can affect the experience of these students abroad.

Attachment is a moderately stable trait of personality that is assumed to have a lasting influence on people's functioning (Fraley & Brumbaugh 2004).

Many authors (e.g. Ainsworth, 1989; Bretherton, 1985; Cassidy, Jones & Shaver, 2013; Collins & Feeney, 2013; Hesse, 2016; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016) have reported that this bond accompanies and characterizes individuals for the whole arc of their life, and in the adult phase, it is usually triggered in moments of high stress, in which it would seem that the subject tends to behave in accordance with his style of attachment.

According to Hazan and Shaver (1987) this response can contribute to the search for functional help in subjects with a secure attachment style, and conversely with dysfunctional behaviors in the case of an insecure attachment style (anxious / avoidant). People with insecure styles of attachment can demonstrate responses ranging from discomfort to real anxiety and / or depression disorders in different forms in various stressful situations .

Nielsen and his co-workers (2017) suggest that it is indispensable to keep the degree of correlation with separation anxiety disorder and depression in mind. This is because of the marked coexistence, as well as the difficult verification existing between the border that places itself in the middle of these two constructs, both in experimental research and in theoretical discussion.

For the person suffering from separation anxiety disorder, every reason or situation that implies a departure (from parents, husband or wife, close friend, from home, etc.) generates fear and anxiety that is so significant so as to be limiting in life choices, with even invalidating results.

On the other hand, with its quite marked characteristics such as cognitive disabilities and social dysfunctions, it is estimated that depression will become the leading cause of health loss (apart from injuries) worldwide by the year 2030 (Dagan, Facompré & Bernard, 2018).

Gusmão and collaborators (2017) see depression as a chronic disorder characterized by relapses, with residual symptoms and persistence in the subcategory of patients. In general, depressed individuals are characterized by the presence of sad, empty or irritable moods, accompanied by somatic and cognitive changes that significantly influence the individual's abilities.

Groh and collaborators (2014) point out that attachment theory provides an important framework for understanding the etiology and development of depressive symptoms.

Due to the limited number of studies focusing on the prospective correlation between attachment and depression, Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) explained that there is an empirical gap regarding the alleged impact of insecure attachment in the course of long-term depression. To do this, they assumed, based on the literature, that insecure attachment has a greater chance of leading to depression than secure attachment.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the relationship between the attachment style of foreign students of the University of Messina and the emotional condition experienced by them in terms of separation anxiety and depression.

OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

The present research was developed with the intention of investigating the emotional experience of foreign university students as they adjust to the new culture. From the literature it emerges that the phenomenon in question is expanding. Several authors underline the importance of understanding the specific needs of students studying in countries other than their own in order to make their study experience truly rich and satisfying, avoiding trauma or mental distress (Hautasaari, Yamashita & Kudo; 2017).

Based on the studies described so far, the aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between the attachment style and the emotional experience due to being a student abroad in a sample of adult university and foreign students; specifically the symptoms related to separation anxiety and depressive symptoms are investigated.

Based on the literature on the subject, it is hypothesized that secure attachment positively correlates with low separation anxiety and a euthymic humoral state. The possibility that insecure attachment positively correlates with a greater level of separation anxiety and depression is examined at the same time.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The present study involved a sample of 80 adult subjects, foreign students of the University of Messina, of which 44 are males (55%) and 36 are females (45%). 25% of participants are aged between 18 and 23; 58.8% between 24 and 29 years; 12.5% are between the ages of 30 and 34 and 3.8% over the age of 35.

As for the country of origin, 33% of participants come from Vietnam; 12.5% from Brazil; 54.5% come from other countries in the world (Argentina, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Hanoi, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Italy, Kosovo, Mexico, Nigeria, Russia, Rwanda, Syria, Damascus, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Uzbekistan). The only student from Italy (enrolled at the University of Messina) took part because at the time the research was carried out he was an exchange student in Ireland. 13.5% are enrolled in a three -year degree course; 82.5% are pursuing master's degrees or other post-graduate degrees and 3.75% are pursuing a research doctorate.

PROCEDURE

The participants were voluntarily recruited, signing an informed consent in which the aims of the research were clarified. The administration took place electronically, using the Google docs platform. The tools administered were in English.

INSTRUMENTS

The following questionnaires were given to the sample:

- **Checklist on the experience of studying abroad**, built ad hoc to investigate the living and existential conditions of the students, for an exploratory overview of the group of participants. In particular, the questionnaire investigates the following areas: the reason for choosing the University of Messina; whether this was the first experience abroad; satisfaction with the course of study in comparison with expectations; reception of the university secretary, teachers and native colleagues; scholarships, state of mood regarding the international study experience; change of mood in the first 6 months of this experience; whether students would recommend this study experience in Messina to other colleagues, friends or students in general.

- **Revised Adult Attachment Scale (Collins, 1996) - Close Relationships Version (RAAS)** -a tool that assesses adult attachment style. Three scales can be distinguished, corresponding to three dimensions of attachment: Close (proximity), in which proximity comfort and intimacy are evaluated (items 1, 6, 8, 12, 13, 17); Depend (dependency), which measures the need for closeness to others (items 2, 5, 7, 14, 16, 18); and Anxiety (concern), which assesses the concern to be left alone and not to be loved (items 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 15). The self-report consists of 18 total items, 6 for each dimension. The assignment of a response on a 5-point Likert scale (1 - not characteristic for me, 5 - very characteristic for me) is required. Items 2, 7, 8, 12, 13, 16, 17 and 18 are reverse questions.
- **Severity Measure for Separation Anxiety Disorder — Adult** Includes 10 items that examine the last 7 days based on a scale from 0 (never) to 4 (always). The items focus on separation and thoughts, behaviors and feelings related to separation anxiety (Craske et al., 2013a, 2013b). The 10 items were structured with reference to the diagnostic criteria for DSM-5 separation anxiety disorder (APA, 2013).
- **The BDI-II (Beck Depression Inventory - II)** (Aaron T. Beck, Steer and Brown, 1996) Beck's inventory of depression that assesses the subject's mental distress and depression. It is a self-report tool useful for assessing the severity of depression, aimed at adults and adolescents, as it detects the presence and intensity of depressive symptoms in the week preceding the administration. It contains 21 items on a Likert scale of 4 points- from 0 (no symptom) to 3 (severe symptoms). It provides a total score and two scores relative respectively to the somatic-affective area (loss of interests, loss of energy, changes in sleep and appetite, agitation and crying, etc.) and the cognitive area (pessimism, guilt, self-criticism, etc.) typical of depression. The scoring range is from 0 to 63 (Beck et al, 1961). The authors argue that the frequency and intensity of symptoms are directly related to the depth of depression.

RESULTS

Data analysis was performed with the help of the SPSS 0.17 statistical software.

RESULTS OF THE EXPLORATORY SURVEY ON THE PARTICIPANTS

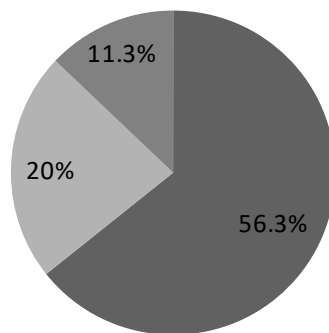
From the analysis of the results it emerged that:

The 78.7% of the participants reported that it was their first experience, while 21.3% had already lived the experience of studying abroad.

The students reported several reasons why they chose to study at the University of Messina as reported in below **(Graph 1)**:

Graph 1. Reasons why the students chose to study at the University of Messina.

■ want to have an experience abroad ■ the perfect opportunity for me
■ the only opportunity I have found



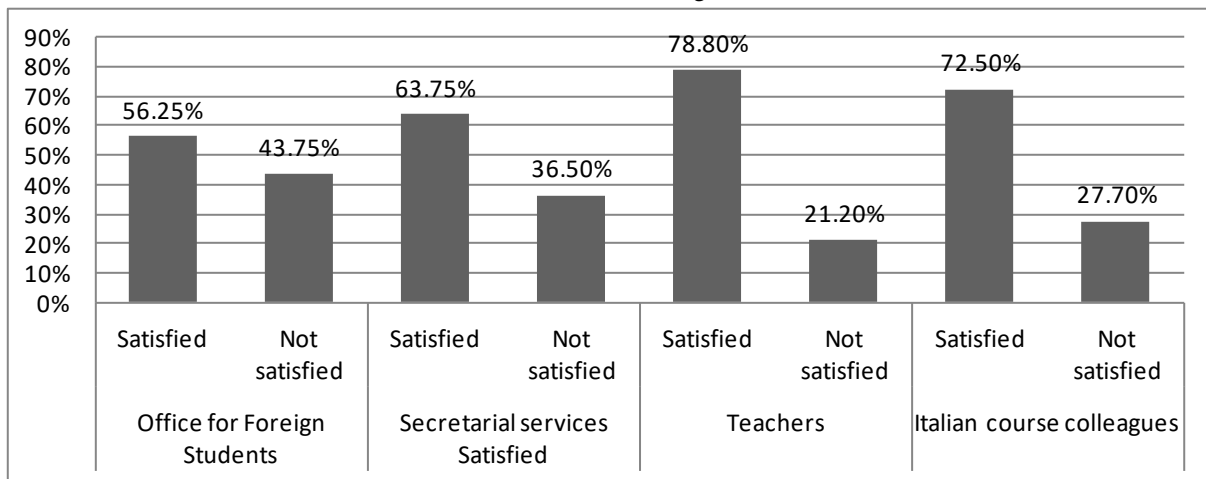
The University of Messina was the first choice for 56.2% of subjects; 43.8% on the contrary had chosen it as a second option.

The majority of subjects (73.8%) reported being satisfied with the course of study in reference to their expectations; 26.2% said they were dissatisfied, pointing out the discrepancy between expectations and experience.

The main factors of student dissatisfaction refer to: lack of practical activity and excess of theory, practical uselessness of the theoretical contents, unsatisfactory study methods and lack of contents in terms of scientific research.

Graph 2 shows the answers of the students regarding the perceived reception by the staff assigned to the office of foreign students; the teaching secretary of the course of study, of the teaching staff and the native colleagues of their course.

Graph 2. Degree of satisfaction expressed by the students relative to the office staff, the student secretary, the faculty and the course colleagues.



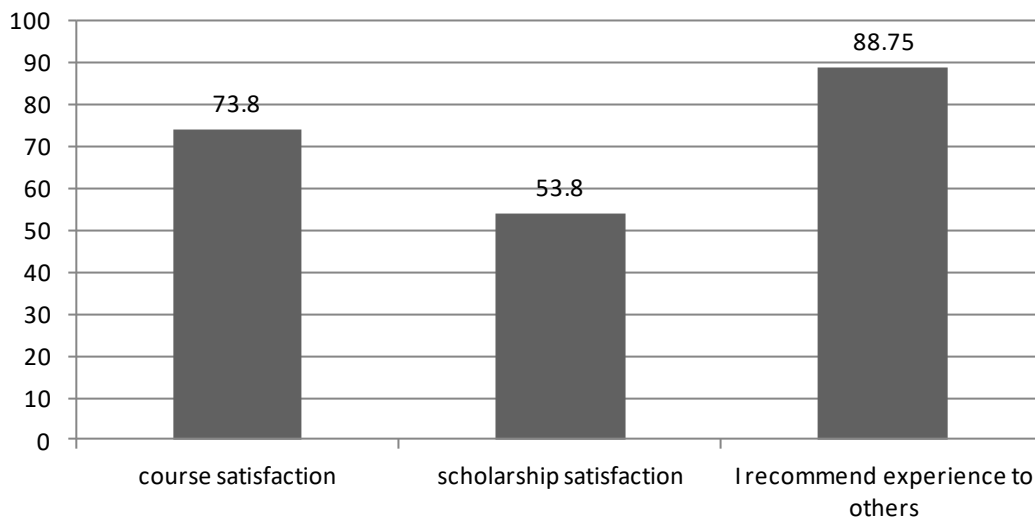
Referring to the overall experience, 65% of participants said they were satisfied with it, unlike 35% who declared dissatisfaction with their expectations.

53.8% of students reported being satisfied with their scholarship, unlike the 46.2% who responded negatively to this question.

Regarding the general characteristics of one's mood, 10.2% described themselves as anxious; 13.8% a little depressed, 7.8% anxious and depressed; 68.6% thought their mood was "normal".

Graph 3 shows the percentages relating to the degree of satisfaction with the study activities and the amount of the scholarship, as a function of the agreement between expectations and lived experience. As can be seen, a high percentage of students declare themselves satisfied with their experience at the University of Messina; in fact, 89% of the interviewees would recommend it to other colleagues or friends.

Graph 3. Percentages relating to the degree of satisfaction with the study activities and the amount of the scholarship

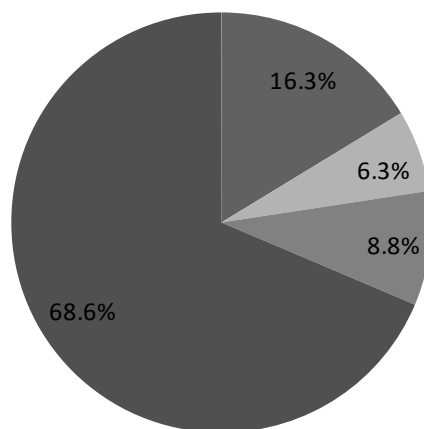


However, despite the positive experience, 60% of the students reported having perceived a change in mood over the first 6 months of their stay in a foreign country.

Graph 4 shows the data regarding the mood during the study experience at the University of Messina:

Graph 4. Mood during the study experience at the University of Messina.

■ depressed ■ anxious ■ anxious and depressed ■ normal mood



52.5% replied that the climate had a strong impact on their mood, while 47.5% replied that the climatic conditions had no effect on it at all.

Moreover 60% of the students reported having perceived a change of mood during the first 6 months of study at the University of Messina.

Finally, 88.75% of students recommended the study experience in Messina, calling it “positive”.

ATTACHMENT STYLES, SEPARATION ANXIETY AND DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistical analysis relating to the group of participants.
Descriptive Statistics

	M	DS
RAAS close	21.46	4.038
RAAS depend	18.28	3.518
RAAS anxiety	14.11	5.739
Separation anxiety	10.60	8.001
BDI-II	7.39	8.908

Table 1. Averages and standard deviation of scores obtained by participants in the Revised Adult Attachment Scale tests; Severity Measure for Separation Anxiety Disorder — Adult; Beck’s Depression Inventory-II.

As shown in **Table 1**, which shows the averages and standard deviations of the scores obtained by the subjects in the Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS) test, the secure attachment style (proximity) appears predominant in the sample.

Regarding the scores of the Severity Measure for Separation Anxiety Disorder — Adult, 7.5% of the participants fall within the “No separation anxiety” band; 42.5% in the “Slight separation anxiety” range; 42.5% appear as “Moderate”; 5% “Grave” and 2.5% “Extreme”.

As regards the scores of the BDI-II test, an average score of 7.39 is recorded, or 73.75% of the participants have a “normal” mood; 10% are in the “mild mood disorders” range; 7.5% are in the “borderline clinical depression”, 5% in the “moderate depression”; 2.5% in the “serious depression” bracket and 1.25% in the “extreme depression” bracket.

It was considered important to investigate the relationship between the attachment style, separation anxiety and depression of the present sample by highlighting the statistically significant correlations (table 2).

	Pearson Correlation							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1-RAAS Close	1							
2-RAAS Depend	.487**	1						
3-RAAS Anxiety	-.450**	-.533**	1					
4-Adult Separation Anxiety	-.225*	-.170	.348**	1				
5-BDI-II	-.205	-.202	.358**	.242*	1			

** . The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-code).

* . The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-code)

a. Listwise N=80

Table 2. Pearson Correlation of average scores in Adult Attachment Scale- Revised tests; Severity Measure for Separation Anxiety Disorder — Adult; Beck's Depression Inventory-II.

From the analysis carried out, a significant negative correlation is noted between separation anxiety and secure attachment ($r = -.225$; $p = 0.05$), meaning that the increase in separation anxiety decreases the level of secure attachment (closeness). There is also a significant positive correlation between depressed mood and insecure-anxious attachment ($r = .358$; $p = 0.01$) and separation anxiety ($r = .242$; $p = 0.01$). Increasing the score on the depression scale increases the score in the subscale of the insecure-anxious attachment and the Separation Anxiety scale.

DISCUSSION

The present thesis work was created with the aim of investigating whether there are any relations between the style of attachment of foreign students attending the University of Messina and the emotional experience of the students in relation to the study.

This was the first experience for many of the students as reported on the checklist.

The main reason reported about why they chose to study at the University of Messina was that they wanted to have an experience abroad and this was the perfect opportunity for them.

The University of Messina was the first choice for more than half of the subjects.

The majority of participants reported being satisfied with the course of study in terms of their expectations.

The main factors of dissatisfaction of the students refer to: lack of practical activity and excess of theory, practical uselessness of the theoretical contents, unsatisfactory study methods and lacking contents in terms of scientific research.

Compared to the reception by the staff in charge of the foreign students office, the instructional secretary of the course of study, the reception of the teaching staff and the native colleagues of the course, most of the students replied that they had received a good welcome. Referring to the experience lived as a whole, most participants stated that they were satisfied with it.

Just over half of the students reported being satisfied with their scholarship.

Regarding the mood during the foreign study experience, although some students reported some emotional distress, the majority described a "normal" mood.

Furthermore, a large part of the students reported having perceived a change of mood during the first 6 months of study at the University of Messina.

Finally, students generally recommend the study experience in Messina, calling it "positive".

From the correlational analysis there emerged the existence of a negative relationship between separation anxiety and secure attachment (closeness), this means that those who present a secure type of attachment tend to experience a lower degree of separation anxiety.

Instead, a significant positive relationship between depressed mood, anxiety symptoms and separation anxiety has been found, suggesting that those experiencing high levels of depression also have greater symptoms of anxiety and separation anxiety as adults.

Experiencing high levels of depression, on the other hand, appears to be related to an anxious, insecure style of attachment and higher levels of adult separation anxiety.

The student's anxious attachment can be considered a predictor of depressive symptoms during academic life.

The small size of the sample and its heterogeneity are the limits of this study. In future studies it would be useful to broaden the sample and extend the research to other universities in the Sicily region or nationally, in order to increase the data on the topic "foreign university students" in Italy. The evaluation of other variables such as resilience, coping skills, well-being, etc., would also be useful, which in the current literature appears to be particularly limited.

As far as the strengths of this study are concerned, it can be said that it made a positive and scientific contribution to shedding light on some important phenomena concerning the emotional experience of foreign students at the University of Messina.

The practical findings of this work were to bring back useful and functional information about the emotional experience of foreign students of the University of Messina. Greater attention must be paid to these students in terms of assistance and prevention in the areas of mental health and psychological reception.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this short survey offer ideas for the improvement of the services offered to foreign students, in order to encourage integration at the University of Messina and the successful outcome of studies. Specifically, with regard to the emotional vulnerability that characterizes the majority of students studying abroad, it would be appropriate to organize reception days, involving the psychologists of the Ce.R.I.P. and the staff of the C.O.P., as well as that of the Internationalization Office; in addition, it would be desirable to assign tutors to support study and bureaucratic activities, which can support students during their stay at the University of Messina, reducing the negative impact that detachment from families and their countries of origin could exert as well as the change in lifestyle and poor linguistic and cultural expertise.

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