

Thriving in university under the crisis: Exploring the relations between students' belonging, activity emotions and burnout'

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Biography

Xin Ren is a PhD candidate in Educational Psychology at the University of Canterbury. Her research experience lies in exploring potential risk factors that may hinder the psychological wellbeing of students and effective ways to promote it. She has conducted extensive research based on holistic educational psychology theories. Her research primarily focuses on learning environments, transitional experiences, stress and coping perception and their interactions with other psychological factors.

ABSTRACT

Global education is calling for recovery due to the lingering effects of COVID-19. In a game of whac-a-mole, institutions strive to address one challenge whilst other challenges pop up. There have been increasing risks to students' learning and psychological well-being due to changes in the learning environment and personal circumstances. Especially in universities, students have been affected by lockdowns, institution closures, and unstable transitions between campus-based learning and online learning. Isolating from the learning community and adapting to the hybrid learning strategies could result in a lack of belongingness, which may lead to negative emotions and academic burnout. However, there is a paucity of empirical evidence investigating the psychological effects of the pandemic on university students. Drawing on control value theory, this study aims to fill this gap by understanding these combined experiences and their interrelationships, which are imperative to support students' psychological wellbeing and resilience in higher education. After a nationwide lockdown, 193 New Zealand university students completed an online survey measuring students' belonging, activity emotions and burnout (self-efficacy, cynicism and emotional exhaustion) using quantitative approaches. This study shows that students' demographic variables may influence their perception of learning. Students aged over twenty-five reported the highest level of self-efficacy. Compared to domestic students, international students reported a higher level of activity enjoyment and belongingness and a lower level of burnout. The study suggests that students are more likely to enjoy learning activities if they feel they belong to the university. The students who find learning activities enjoyable could hold a greater self-belief in their ability to accomplish learning tasks and are less likely to report emotional exhaustion and cynicism. In addition, the current study develops and examines a structural equation model (SEM) in which belongingness could alleviate academic burnout. This dynamic could be strengthened by improving learning-related emotions as it mediates the relations between belongingness and academic burnout under the COVID-19 context.

The study has provided a deeper insight into students' psychological well-being in the changing phase of the pandemic. It adds to the literature by illustrating the relations between belonging, emotions and burnout under the COVID-19 pandemic. The study provides practical implications for educational institutions better respond to public crises and recovery. Faculties and institutions need to raise awareness about the detrimental effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on how students think and feel about their learning, what they experience in different learning environments, and how this contributes to their confidence, fatigue, and commitment to study. The post-pandemic era calls for long-term development in higher education, and this will not be possible without a range of inclusive practices that support students' mental health.