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The role of social identities in the mental health, well-being and academic performance of international students: An application of the Social Identity Model of Identity Change

Nikole Wing Ka Ng

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Abstract

International students typically face a range of challenges from the time they leave their home country, which includes the need to adapt to a new culture and norms and to a new educational landscape. Due to their unfamiliarity with local culture and language barrier, the stress of adjustment often leads them to feel lonely, socially isolated and homesick. However, the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC) model suggests that during life transitions, an individual's group memberships and associated social identities can buffer people from these negative effects of life change.

This thesis presents three studies that explore the contribution of social identity change to the academic performance, retention, mental health and well-being of international students who have left their home country and moved to Australia to pursue tertiary education. To explore the relevance of SIMIC for international students' transition to studying overseas, the first study reports the findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 international students attending an Australian university. Thematic analysis undertaken provided support for the relevance of SIMIC's new group membership and maintained group membership pathways in the transition, and revealed a number of associated factors that acted as either facilitators (e.g., a host family that supported community integration) or barriers (e.g., experiencing culture shock) to successful adjustment in the face of social identity change.

The second study is a longitudinal investigation of 210 international students studying in a Foundation Year programme in a large Australian university across three time points over the course of one year. Consistent with SIMIC, this found that social identity variables predicted (a) higher academic performance, (b) better mental health and (c) better well-being outcomes. Maintained group membership also indirectly improved student retention across time.

The final study builds on the previous two to explore the feasibility of a four-module manualized program, GROUPS 4 HEALTH for International Students (G4H-IS), adapted from the evidence based intervention GROUPS 4 HEALTH and developed specifically for international students to increase social connectedness by building group-based social identifications through an in-vivo group experience. The G4H-IS program was delivered to a group of international students ($N=123$) from an international college. New group membership and maintained group membership resulted in reduction in depression, improved life satisfaction and self-esteem over time. However, there was limited evidence that G4H-IS directly affected these outcomes. Nevertheless, feedback from facilitators and participants pointed to ways in which the program might be improved before conducting further trials.

Together, the various components of the present thesis point to the ways in which social identity mechanisms impact on identity change in the course of the life transition that international

students undergo when moving overseas to study. Findings from the three studies corroborate previous research in showing how maintained and new group membership support health and well-being outcomes, and this thesis provides novel insights into the capacity for these processes to also affect academic performance and drop out. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed, as well as directions for future research.

Declaration by author

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

I have clearly stated the contribution of others to my thesis as a whole, including statistical assistance, survey design, data analysis, significant technical procedures, professional editorial advice, adaptation and delivery of the G4H-IS programme and any other original research work used or reported in my thesis. The content of my thesis is the result of work I have carried out since the commencement of my research higher degree candidature and does not include a substantial part of work that has been submitted to qualify for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution. I have clearly stated which parts of my thesis, if any, have been submitted to qualify for another award.

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Ng, N. W. K., Haslam, S. A., Haslam, C., & Cruwys, T. (2018). “How can you make friends if you don’t know who you are?” A qualitative examination of international students’ experience informed by the Social Identity Model of Identity Change. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 28, 169-187. doi: 10.1002/casp.2349

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Contributor

Ng, N. W. K.

Statement of contribution

Conception and design (40%)

Analysis and interpretation (50%)

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Haslam, S. A.

Conception and design (20%)

Analysis and interpretation (20%)

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Haslam, C.	Conception and design (20%) Analysis and interpretation (20%) Drafting and production (20%)
Cruwys, T.	Conception and design (20%) Analysis and interpretation (10%) Drafting and production (10%)

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<i>Contributor</i>	<i>Statement of contribution</i>
Ng, N. W. K.	Conception and design (40%) Analysis and interpretation (55%) Drafting and production (50%)
Haslam, S. A.	Conception and design (20%) Analysis and interpretation (10%) Drafting and production (20%)
Haslam, C.	Conception and design (20%) Analysis and interpretation (10%) Drafting and production (10%)
Cruwys, T.	Conception and design (20%) Analysis and interpretation (25%) Drafting and production (20%)

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List of Abbreviations

SIA	Social identity approach
SIT	Social identity theory
SCT	Social categorization theory
SIMIC	Social identity model of identity change
AUFY	Australian university foundation year
G4H	GROUPS 4 HEALTH
G4H-IS	GROUPS 4 HEALTH-For International Students

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Experience of International Students

As the world becomes more globalised and technology increasingly finds new ways to bring people closer together, an increasing number of students choose to study abroad in the hope of benefitting from high-quality international education offered by overseas providers. Such education becomes a gateway for students to get a head start in gaining international experience through education – something that many employers value in global organisations. In the years ahead it is anticipated that increasing numbers of students will choose to pursue an education overseas in order to gain international experience, which is often needed to fulfil aspirations to have successful careers in multi-national companies. To support these aspirations, many parents look to give their children exposure to overseas study believing that this is a pathway to a bright future.

The international education industry also plays a key role in Western nations' economies as international students pay a premium for their education overseas. This led to many tertiary education institutions around the world investing in growing their international student numbers to sustain a strong international reputation and healthy revenue stream. In line with these objectives, the number of international students enrolled globally increased by 50% between 2005 and 2012, and as many as 4.5 million students were enrolled outside of their home countries in 2012 with numbers growing year on year (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015). It is estimated that by 2025, there will be a total of 7.2 million international students around the world (Bohm, Davis, Mearns, & Pearce, 2002). In Australia, the international education sector contributed \$19.7 billion to the Australian economy, the fourth biggest export industry (Hare, 2016). Due to this critical role in the economy of most Western nations, research that explores factors contributing to the successful adjustment of international students is also of increasing importance. Parents and students often use academic and welfare outcomes as a guide in decide which education institution to apply to in their pursuit of higher education. Parents are also interested in issues of adjustment and well-being, wanting the student to be comfortable and well-adjusted while they are studying overseas (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008).

International students undergo a major life transition when they embark on their journey to study overseas. Such life transitions often adversely affect an individual's psychological well-being, regardless of whether the outcome of a transition is positive or not (Miller, 2010). In particular, from previous literature we know that life transitions usually induce feelings of uncertainty and stress (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; Miller, 2010). Indeed, life transitions often impact an individual's psychological well-being even when the transition is desired and has a positive outcome. This is because the process of change and adjustment brings with it challenges, changes in

lifestyle, and a sense of uncertainty (Haslam et al., 2008). Even when the outcome of the transition is positive, the change process itself may cause individuals to feel anxious, depressed or “out of control” (Jetten, O' Brien, & Trindall, 2002). Thus, while the particular life transition that international students undergo is a source of opportunity for personal growth and development, this does not prevent people from experiencing difficulties in adjustment. It is not unusual for international students to feel overwhelmed by their new environment and experience a range of negative psychological and physiological effects (Rabkin & Struening, 1976).

In line with these observations, a recent study by Russell, Rosenthal, and Thomson (2010) of approximately 900 international students in Australia found that 41% of international students experience substantial levels of stress — typically as a result of homesickness, cultural shocks, or perceived discrimination. In comparison to domestic students, international students are often stereotyped as handicapped, lacking in English language abilities and familiarity with the Western education system (Pedersen, 1991). They also face negative stereotypes associated with their ethnicity, cultural background, are often targets of racism and discrimination, and are also victims of exclusion, isolation and unfriendliness from domestic students (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Ramos, Cassidy, Reicher, & Haslam, 2016; Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003; Wang, Singh, Bird, & Ives, 2008).

Along similar lines, Khawaja and Dempsey (2008) compared international and domestic students enrolled at a large Australian university and found that international students reported having less social support, using more dysfunctional coping strategies, and experiencing a greater incongruence between their expectations and experiences of university life. It also appears that unlike their domestic counterparts, international students face additional barriers to social integration as their family and friends from their home country and social network are generally not within easy reach (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008). Furthermore, the social network of international students is less likely to be compatible with — and therefore help students understand — the explicit and implicit culture of the host country, in particular when non-Western students attend tertiary education at a Western institution (Zhou et al., 2008).

Based on such findings it is clear that as much as studying overseas has its benefits, it has a downside too. Speaking to this conclusion, data from 200 intensive interviews with international students indicated that two-thirds of participants experienced problems of loneliness and isolation, especially in the early months of their study (Sawir et al., 2008). Drilling down into this, Sawir's (2008) study identified three aspects of loneliness experienced by international students: (i) personal loneliness due to the loss of contact with families, (ii) social loneliness due to the loss of networks, and (iii) cultural loneliness, triggered by the absence of the preferred cultural and linguistic environment. Along these lines a systematic review of 64 published studies identified four key

sources of stress: academic stressors and problems, acculturative stress, perceived discrimination or prejudice, and cultural adjustment difficulties (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). The review also concluded that international students with higher stress levels had more symptoms of psychological distress, whereas those with greater social support had fewer such symptoms (Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

These findings were further supported by the research of Russell and colleagues (2010) which identified three patterns of adaptation among international students. The majority of students (59%) were considered “positive and connected” – meaning that this group of students felt connected to their host country and had low cultural and psychological stress in general. However, 34% reported being “unconnected and stressed” – feeling socially isolated alongside experiencing high levels of stress about their financial situation, lifestyle balance, and academic progress (Russell et al., 2010). Finally, 7% were classified as “distressed and risk-taking” – with social isolation being associated with both higher reported levels of stress and depression and risk-taking behaviours that included substance misuse, gambling, as well as engaging in unsafe sexual practices and self-harm (Russell et al., 2010). It is clear from such data, then, that the problems encountered by overseas students are neither rare nor trivial. Some international students fare better than others when experiencing life transition, a phenomenon that this thesis seeks to understand.

It is also the case that international students who experience considerable levels of stress are less connected to academic and social life at university (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012). At the same time, it is generally hard for them to reach out to their previous support networks due to their distance from friends and family in their home country. This often compounds their problems and can result in the transition being more isolating and entailing a higher risk of psychological distress and increased dropout rates than observed among domestic students (Pedersen, 1991; Praherso, Tear, & Cruwys, 2017). A sense of belonging may also be particularly hard to establish during the transition period, because minority students frequently face social setbacks and feelings of isolation (Walton & Cohen, 2011). If they construe such experiences as evidence that they do not belong, they are also at higher risk of developing depression and anxiety disorders (Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein, & Hefner, 2007).

While the above evidence speaks to the inherent vulnerability of international students during their life transition, it also appears to be the case that social support can mitigate against negative psychological and emotional symptomatology (Paykel, 1994). In particular, research indicates that social networks of students have considerable influence on international students’ ability to adjust to their new environment, especially during their first year of arriving in the host country (Christie, Munro, & Fisher, 2004; Severiens & Wolff, 2008; Tinto, 1998; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). This evidence further suggests that in students’ first year of overseas study,

social and academic support from family and friends is an important predictor of study success and student retention (Wilcox et al., 2005). As a corollary of this, international students who drop out of higher education often state that their social networks provided insufficient support for them to continue (Christie et al., 2004).

Finally, evidence also indicates that having friends from the same culture as well as from the host country, sharing accommodation with other students, being a member of student associations or sports clubs can support social integration and thereby help to reduce attrition and improve academic performance (Bok, 2009; Russell et al., 2010; Severiens & Wolff, 2008). Those who identify more strongly as a university student are also more likely to be socially well-adjusted and perform better academically (Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Hendres, 2011). According to Tinto (1998), students not only need to study hard in order to graduate, but they also need to participate in student activities, both within and outside of their immediate learning environment. Further research by Severiens and Wolff (2008) also showed that students who feel at home, who are well-connected to fellow students and teachers, and who take part in extra-curricular activities are more likely to graduate. Other research also suggests that a strong identity as a student is associated with a deeper approach to learning, which in turn is linked to higher academic performance (Bliuc et al., 2011). Along related lines, in a study of 293 undergraduate students, Smyth, Mavor, Platow, Grace, and Reynolds (2015) found that stronger identification as a student of their cohort (e.g., as a psychology student) was associated with deep learning approaches which were associated with better academic outcomes.

As seen from the above research findings, international students are often left to their own devices to cope with the changes and demands of moving overseas to study. They experience isolation, cultural differences, language barriers and stressors from their new environment. These international students are far from home, away from the comforts of their home country, family, friends and everything that are familiar to them. Many succumb to psychological distress when they are unable to cope with the demands of their new environment, experiencing depression, anxiety and stress. Some engage in risk-taking behaviours as a coping mechanism to deal with the distress they are feeling emotionally. Previous research has highlighted that having friends in the host country, as well as participating in associations in the university help with social integration. Students who are better connected, have more support from family and friends, and identify strongly as a university student are observed to be better adjusted, and are more likely to perform better academically. These are some of the factors this present thesis will explore to better understand international students' transition to life change.

The present thesis

As seen from the research reviewed above, the international education industry is not only profitable for the economy of the host countries, it also provides an avenue for the exchange of culture and ideas between people from different countries. However, it is evident from previous research that international students need to undergo profound cultural and emotional adjustment when they first arrive in their host countries. Many researchers have focused on the negative effects of transition for international students and on the way in which isolation plays a big part in hindering a successful transition. However, few have identified factors that facilitate successful transition and adjustment to the host country. Some research suggests that peer support and identification as a student improves learning outcomes and student retention (Bliuc et al., 2011; Bok, 2009; Christie et al., 2004; Smyth et al., 2015). However, there is no clear indication as to how these outcomes can be achieved or what can be done to facilitate achieve positive outcomes. In order to continue benefitting from an ever-growing international education industry, it is important to investigate factors which contribute to the successful transition for international students. With this knowledge, we can then develop and provide a comprehensive support network in order to facilitate the best possible transition for international students when they first arrive in their host countries.

This thesis draw upon modern social psychological theory with the aim of (i) providing a more forensic analysis of the social factors which facilitate or hinder international students' adjustment to this life transition, (ii) exploring how these impact on international student performance and well-being, and (iii) trialling an intervention aimed at raising awareness of these social factors and determining the feasibility of the intervention as a means of facilitating a more successful transition for international students. This thesis will extend on what is known about international student adjustment by applying the social identity perspective and focusing on the role of social group memberships in the transition. In particular, it examines how social group memberships can function as a psychological resource for students in the transition by creating a meaningful and positive basis for identification and facilitating adjustment for international students as they go through this transition.

A large body of research provides evidence that social connectedness is a strong predictor of mental and physical health, better well-being and academic success for students (Bliuc et al., 2011; Russell et al., 2010; Severiens & Wolff, 2008). Students with stronger and more meaningful social ties are more successful in achieving their academic goals, have an increased sense of personal control, and are generally healthier and happier (Cruwys, Greenaway, & Haslam, 2015; Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). Joining and belonging to groups provides individuals with an avenue to build social ties and forge meaningful relationships with others. Groups provide people

with social and emotional support, which helps to reduce the effects of everyday stressors. Group memberships also provide people with a sense of belonging which helps them feel that they are not isolated and not facing challenges alone. In this thesis, we will attempt to understand these processes by using the social identity approach (SIA) and the social identity model of identity change (SIMIC) as a theoretical framework to understand the relationship between social identity, group membership and its influence on the process of life change for international students. SIA and SIMIC centre around the premise that when people define themselves as members of a social group, the group to which they belong to informs their social behaviour and beliefs (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Turner et al., 1987). The following chapter will look at an overview of the social identity approach and outlines how this theoretical framework can address the aims of this thesis.

Chapter 2

Social identities and social identification as determinants of international students' experiences

In order to understand the contribution of social identity to the adjustment of international students, it is important to have a theoretical framework in place to guide our understanding of international student identity. The identity of international students is often complicated by the fact that they are 'strangers in a foreign land'. As the prevailing literature on international students adjustment has shown, there is no clear framework to understand the processes and mechanisms involved in forming and shaping international students' identity. The absence of a framework to understand these processes makes it hard to develop relevant interventions or provide the support network necessary to encourage positive life transitions. Addressing this limitation, this thesis draws on the social identity approach as its guiding theoretical framework in order to understand the factors which contribute to the formation of international students' sense of identity and ultimately shed light on the implications of this transition for well-being and academic performance. This is essential because it is by only understanding these processes that we can tailor and direct appropriate resources and support to ease any negative effects that life transitions may have for future international students.

The Social Identity Approach

The social identity approach (SIA) provides a theoretical framework to understand how an individual's sense of self is formed by both their identity as an individual and by the groups to which they belong. In particular, it asserts that people define themselves not only as individuals, but also in terms of group memberships. This means that our sense of self is determined by our relationship with groups of others as well as by our individuality. When groups are internalized within our sense of self, this gives us a sense of *social identity* and becomes an important part of who we are. This in turn directs our beliefs and behaviour.

The SIA consists of two theories; *social identity theory* (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and *self-categorization theory* (SCT; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). These two theories share common ideas for understanding the ways in which people's sense of self is structured by their group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). The theories conceptualise the self as flexible, context-dependent and comprised of both personal (i.e. idiosyncratic; Turner, 1982) and social (i.e., shared and group-based) identities. In this way, when individuals define themselves in terms of a particular group membership, this will play a key role in shaping how they think, feel, and act (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

According to SIT, our self-concept is formed by a range of identities that fall on an interpersonal–intergroup spectrum that ranges from personal identity (as “I” and “me”) to a collective identity (such as “we” or “us”) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Personal identity includes attributes which we use to define ourselves as distinct from others, for example, “I am smart” or “I am hardworking” (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). Yet we define ourselves not only by the unique attributes in our personality but also by the groups and categories to which we belong, such as “I am an international student” or “I am Korean”. Social identity is that portion of an individual's self-concept which is derived from their membership in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social identity theory suggests that our behaviour will largely depend on which of these personal or social identities are salient in any given situation. The salient identity will form the basis of how the individual views and behaves in that situation. Here, an individual's behaviour will become group-based and guided by the norms of what is acceptable within that social context (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994). The key principle of SIT is that social group membership informs our self-concept, and along with this membership comes knowledge of the characteristics that define the group and appropriate normative behaviour to think, feel, and act (Oakes et al., 1994). When an individual has internalized the group as an integrated part of their self, the group will have a profound influence on the attitudes and behaviour of the individual as they adopt the principles and values derived from the social group with which they identify (Oakes et al., 1994). For example, international students who become international student ambassadors for their host country's local embassy will typically embrace their identity as a representative of the international student body and strive to promote the attractions of their host country to encourage more international students to come and pursue their overseas education here. These ambassadors take pride in being chosen as ambassadors and they strive to uphold the clean and bright image of their country. In line with SIT, then, such ambassadors generally endeavour to uphold the norms of their ingroup, striving to be a “good group member” that represents both ‘who we are’ and ‘who we want to be’.

SCT extends this reasoning by describing when and how an individual's self-definition shifts from being based on personal identity to being based on shared group identity, and explaining which particular social identity becomes salient in any given context. For example, when will Lisa, a scholar from China who arrives in Australia to pursue her education, see herself as a unique individual rather than as an international student who shares group membership with other students arriving from all around the world (Turner et al., 1987)? SCT specifically argues that the identity that forms the basis for how the way an individual sees him or herself in any given context is determined by the prior and present meaningfulness of a particular personal or social identity (Oakes et al., 1994). More specifically, it argues that the likelihood of a particular social identity

becoming salient is determined by an interaction between *perceiver readiness* (a.k.a., relative *accessibility* and *fit*, both comparative and normative) (Turner et al., 1987). This means that individuals define themselves in terms of social identities that allow them to make sense of their current circumstances (*fit*), and that have proved to be useful and meaningful in the past (Oakes et al., 1994). The principle of comparative fit indicates that people are more likely to believe that a collection of people represents a meaningful social group to the degree that the differences between those people are perceived to be less than the differences between that collection of people and other people (McGarty, 1999). For example, if a particular group of international student speaks the same language (e.g., Chinese), and are all in the same country to pursue their tertiary education, this will tend to mean that their shared identity as international students (vs. domestic students) has high comparative fit, in ways that will tend to make this identity relatively salient. In contrast, their identities as students of a particular discipline (e.g., as psychologists) may have low fit, because the discipline-based differences within this group are greater than discipline-based similarities.

In the case of international students, some of the common dimensions of which fit with international student identity can be established are: (a) their arrival from overseas countries that are often far away from their host country, (b) their being in the host country to pursue an education, (c) their first language not being English, and (d) their status as foreigners in their host country. Normative fit relates to the extent to which the perceived behaviour or attributes of an individual or collection of individuals conforms to the perceiver's expectations (Oakes et al., 1994). For example, domestic students are expected to be more familiar with their culture and surroundings as a result of being locally brought up in this environment; whereas international students are expected to be unfamiliar with the culture of their host country being newly-arrived foreigners. Accordingly, other people may tend to categorise foreign students as international students to the extent that they appear 'out of place' rather than 'at home'.

Perceiver readiness, reflects a person's past and present experiences, current expectations, values, goals and needs (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Using the above example, this means that once Lisa takes on the social identity of an international student after arriving in her host country, she will be more likely to take on the same identity again in the future (e.g., in her interactions with new students in future years). This explains why identification and prior involvement in a group are important factors that increase the likelihood of a particular social identity becoming salient. It also suggests that more important and meaningful social identities have a higher chance becoming salient and being used to make sense of the world. Self-categorization theory also states that a person's sense of self is determined by their group membership and this forms the basis for behaviour by shaping the individual's expectations and goals derived from group memberships and previous group encounters (Turner et al., 1987). This in turn forms the basis for

social interaction and allows for meaningful and supportive social behaviour as group members take action on behalf of the group, even if this comes at some personal cost (Haslam, Reicher, & Levine, 2012).

This framework has utility for understanding international students' identity development; in part because it takes into account the transient nature of identity in international students. Previous studies have shown that international students create identities and social networks that are tied to the host country while studying, and that these result in the development of multiple social and cultural identities similar to those of other transient migrants (Gomes, Berry, Alzougool, & Chang, 2014). These experiences shape their identities in ways that typically differ from those of domestic students — not least in being tied to a person's ethnic origins and experiences in their homeland (Vertovec, 1997). These differences require (and propel) students to change their behaviours in order to adjust to the demands of living and learning in a new environment, and change the way they perceive the world around them and their identity-based representation of themselves in that world (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Identity formation is thus an ever-changing process for international students that occur differently than for domestic students. Giddens (1991) argues that identity entails a process of continuous individual development which takes place on a daily basis; hence it is not static but complex and developing. Furthermore, identity is influenced by an individual's interactions with others in their surroundings and involves continuously integrating events which occur in the external world and sorting them into an ongoing story about the "self" (Giddens, 1991). In the context of international students' lives, this means that they experience complex shifting layers of identities as a result of their past experiences from their home country and new experiences through their social networks and every day experiences in their host country. The SIA provides an appropriate framework for understanding these shifting identities because it accounts for the transient nature of international students and allows for an examination of the processes through which international students understand themselves, and act, as group members (often in ways that differ from parallel processes occurring among domestic students).

Application of the social identity approach to health

In recent years, a large body of research as pointed to the fact that subjective group memberships are highly relevant to health and well-being. Studies have shown that developing social connections with others in a new community predicts better adjustments and higher satisfaction with life (Wang, Wei, & Chen, 2015). In line with this claim, there is a wealth of evidence from medical, epidemiological, psychological and social literatures that social connectedness is a strong predictor of mental and physical health, of lower burnout rates, and of

academic success (Cruwys et al., 2015; Iyer et al., 2009; Smyth et al., 2015). People with stronger and more meaningful social ties are not only more successful in achieving their performance-based goals, but they also have an increased sense of personal control, and are healthier and happier (Bliuc et al., 2011; Greenaway, Cruwys, Haslam, & Jetten, 2016). A key reason for this is that groups provide us with a sense of belonging, meaning, purpose and social support, all of which are key to good health and well-being (Haslam, Branscombe, Haslam, & Jetten, 2009).

As a corollary of this, evidence from people experiencing mental health problems, such as depression, suggests that they benefit greatly from joining meaningful social groups because these social groups build stronger social identities. These protect and enhance mental health, not least by facilitating positive interpretations of stress and failure (Cruwys et al., 2013; Cruwys, Haslam, et al., 2014). The key though, is that group membership will only enhance outcomes when the individual *identifies* with the group in question (Jetten, Haslam, & Haslam, 2012). When an individual has a strong sense of belonging and identification with a given group, that group serves as a psychological resource from which he or she can draw strength and support (Haslam, O'Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, & Penna, 2005). Understanding that social identification has an impact on our health gives us insight into how to influence our health outcomes. In the section below, further evidence of the capacity for social identities and group memberships to improve health and well-being in the context of life change are discussed.

Using the SIA framework for the present thesis

From the evidence above it can be seen that the social identity approach has become an important theoretical framework for understanding intergroup and intragroup psychology and behaviour in multiple fields in recent years (Reicher & Haslam, 2006). Armed with this framework, social psychology researchers have explored a range of social processes across a wide range of domains and provided valuable insights in many areas across society. As a key part of this growth, in recent years there has been an increasing appreciation of the way in which group membership and social identity processes influence health and well-being outcomes (Haslam, Jetten, Cruwys, Dingle, & Haslam, 2018; Jetten et al., 2012).

This interest is stimulated by recent research findings centring on the capacity for strong group identity to provide people with psychological resources such as stability, purpose, direction and support (Jetten, Haslam, Iyer, & Haslam, 2010). In line with the tenets of self-categorization theory that were discussed above, shared group memberships impact on the psychology of individuals through their capacity to be internalised as part of self. In this way, group membership can be enriching and make people stronger and healthier because it provides a basis for self-esteem, belonging, meaning, a sense of purpose, control and efficacy in life (Cruwys, Haslam, et al., 2014;

Greenaway et al., 2015; Jetten et al., 2015). More generally, groups have the capacity to act as “social cures” and group memberships can impact positively on health and well-being (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009; Jetten et al., 2012). At the same time, though, there is also evidence, that in certain groups, norms may encourage unhealthy behaviours (e.g., smoking among adolescents, drug use among substance users) and here maintained social identity has the capacity to compromise health and well-being (Dingle, Stark, Cruwys, & Best, 2015). In such cases, identity change and the acquisition of new group memberships has therefore been found to improve health (e.g., by decreasing substance use) over time (Dingle et al., 2015).

In line with these ideas, a broad body of empirical work speaks to the capacity for social identities to promote both physical and psychological well-being (for a recent review see Haslam et al., 2018). In particular, there is considerable evidence that both maintaining strong social identities and acquiring new social identities can have positive effects for health and well-being (Haslam et al., 2008; Jetten et al., 2010; Sani, Herrera, Wakefield, Boroch, & Gulyas, 2012). Social identities are known to improve well-being by satisfying basic psychological needs, such as, a sense of purpose and belonging and self-esteem (Greenaway et al., 2016; Haslam et al., 2005; Jetten et al., 2015). In line with points made above, other research also shows that it is individual’s subjective identification with groups, rather than the objective amount of contact with groups, predicts well-being (Cruwys, Haslam, et al., 2014; Sani et al., 2012). More generally, the more an individual identifies with a given group, the more their sense of self will be intertwined with the group, and the more likely they are to benefit from the psychological resources it provides (Haslam et al., 2005).

We tend to think that developing and maintaining social relationships are easy. However, maintaining relationships often becomes particularly challenging when people undergo significant life changes, of which moving to a foreign country to pursue further education is a prime example. At such times, greater awareness of social group memberships and their management becomes crucial for helping people to overcome the challenges that the life transition presents. In this regard, recent research demonstrates that social connectivity is a strong factor in protecting against stress during transition phases (Cruwys et al., 2015; Iyer et al., 2009), not least because it increases people’s sense of connectedness and reduces feelings of isolation and loneliness (the sense that “I am going through this alone”; Haslam et al., 2008).

In line with these points, research by Seymour-Smith, Cruwys, Haslam, and Brodribb (2017) showed that that one of the reasons why the postpartum period is a high risk for women’s mental health is that that this life transition often entails identity loss. Accordingly, the acquisition of new group memberships, together with the maintenance of old ones, were both predictive of better mental health for this population. Similar findings have been obtained in a range of other populations — including recent retirees (Steffens, Cruwys, Haslam, Jetten, & Haslam, 2016),

patients recovering from brain injury (Haslam et al., 2008), and adults recovering from drug and alcohol addiction (Dingle et al., 2015).

There is also evidence that speaks to the relevance of the social identity approach in educational contexts; particularly in relation to student learning and academic outcomes. Here, increased connectedness with social groups has been found to have positive effects on well-being and learning outcomes (Greenaway et al., 2015). Social expectation and group identity were also found to influence high school students' pathway to further studies regardless of demographic factors (i.e. age, gender and family background) and socio-economic contexts (Bornholt, Maras & Robinson, 2009). In line with this point, research by Bornholt (2001) found that high school students' intentions to pursue further study were based on their self-categorisation and perceptions of their nature talent at school work, rather than their actual performance. Further research with high school and universities students showed that social identification and group memberships were significantly related to psychological well-being such as self-esteem and individual well-being ((Bizumic, Reynolds, Turner, Bromhead & Subasic, 2009; Cameron, 1999). Social connectivity is also a strong protector against stress and burn-out during transitional phases such as arrival at university and it increases connectedness which enhances feelings of self-control (Cruwys et al., 2015; Smyth et al., 2015).

As we saw in the previous chapter, research has also shown a robust association between deep learning approaches and better academic outcomes (Bliuc et al., 2011; Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012). On this basis researchers have started to employ the social identity framework to better understand the role of social identities in shaping learning and academic outcomes (Mavor, Platow, & Bizumic, 2017). For example, Bliuc et al. (2011) argued that students' approach to learning can be predicted by the extent to which they take on board the social identity of a student. More specifically, they found that a strong student identity was associated with deep approaches to learning (as compared to surface approaches), suggesting that the way students approach learning can be predicted by norms of the groups they identify with in a given learning community (Bliuc et al., 2011). In other words, students who have stronger student identity within their discipline of study are more likely to engage in a deep approach to learning, which is in turn linked to higher academic performance (Bliuc et al., 2011). This is consistent with research by Smyth et al. (2015) which found that stronger identification as a student predicted adoption of deep approaches to learning, and in turn was associated with superior academic outcomes. These findings expand our knowledge about the benefits of group membership in the educational context beyond health and well-being outcomes.

By bringing together theoretical evidence on the relationship between social identity and health from a range of contexts, it also appears that practical strategies can be developed for

maintaining and enhancing well-being among the international student population. Up till now, there has not been any research that specifically explores international students' academic performance (including retention rates) using the social identity approach. Doing so will therefore extend our knowledge of how to best manage and deliver support to international students. It will also provide insights that help develop support systems for international students, making these more efficient, better targeted and more sustainable. Bringing these various lines of enquiry together, this thesis will therefore examine the ways in which social identification shapes international students' mental health, well-being and academic performance in the context of transitioning to both a new country and place to study.

One model of identity development which has been derived from social identity and self-categorization theories and which is particularly relevant to these present concerns is the *social identity model of identity change* (SIMIC). As with the social identity approach as a whole, the idea that our self-concept is determined by the social groups to we belong is central to this model (Jetten et al., 2012). Group memberships that influence us in a positive way are a source of support which enhances our well-being and play an important role in helping individuals adjust to life transitions (Reicher & Haslam, 2006). SIMIC identifies three key aspects of group memberships and associated social identities that are particularly relevant to health in the context of life transition. First, having access to *multiple social identities* increases the likelihood of an individual having access to more psychological resources and social support when need arises (Haslam et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2009; Sani et al., 2012). Second, maintenance of group memberships over time provides a sense of *social identity continuity* in the face of change and uncertainty (Haslam et al., 2008). Third, acquiring new group memberships provide opportunities to develop *new social identities*. In the sections that follow, this thesis will look at these three key group processes more closely.

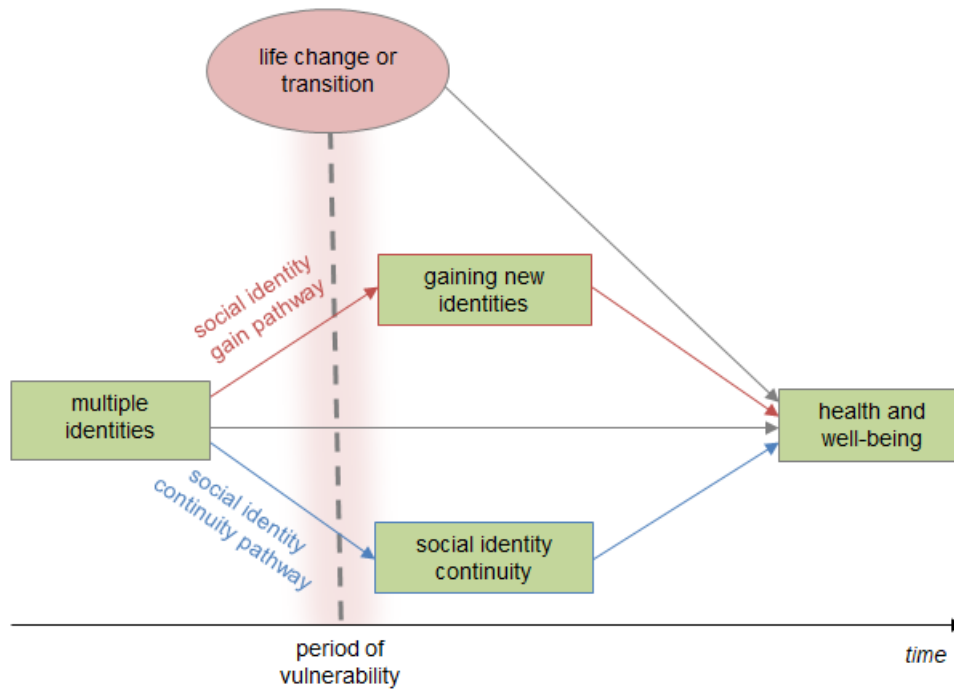


Figure 2.1. The SIMIC model (Haslam, Jetten, Cruwys, Dingle, & Haslam, 2018; see also Jetten et al., 2009, 2010)

The importance of multiple positive group memberships.

As outlined above, social identification with a group can have benefits for health. It follows that identifying with *multiple* groups is even more protective, as this provides individuals with multiple social group capital that can buffer them from negative consequences associated with identity change or loss (Haslam et al., 2008). If an individual only has a single source of social identity, this puts them in a potentially vulnerable situation whereby their sense of self is invested exclusively in one group membership (as if all their psychological “eggs” were in the same basket). This puts them at risk because in the event that that one source of identity is threatened or lost, they will have nothing to fall back on for support. In contrast, having multiple identities provides various sources of psychological resources and more bases of support for people to draw on in times of difficulty or transition, whether planned or unplanned. Supporting this claim, Jetten et al. (2015) found that having multiple important group memberships was a source of increased personal self-esteem because people derived a sense of meaning and self-worth from their important group memberships. Likewise, Iyer et al. (2009) found that first year university students who had more group memberships had access to greater levels of social support and adjusted better to student life as a result. In addition, they were also more likely to perceive their university student identity as compatible with their existing identities and to identify as a university student, which had a positive impact on their well-being. These results suggest that identification with multiple groups is a

resource to help students cope with the negative impacts of life change (i.e. transition to university) (Iyer et al., 2009).

Longitudinal research also shows that the more group memberships an individual has, the more likely they are to be able to take on a *new* identity, and the better their well-being as a result (Thoits, 1983). Illustrating this, a study of 53 stroke patients by Haslam et al. (2008) showed that individuals who had belonged to multiple groups prior to stroke were more likely to report higher levels of well-being after their stroke. Further research by Steffens et al. (2016) found that retirees who have more social group memberships following their transition to retirement have better quality of life and objective health, even after controlling for initial quality of life and health, as well as sociodemographic covariates such as age, gender, relationship states and socioeconomic status.

In the context of this thesis, it is therefore proposed that international students with a greater number of multiple group memberships should have less difficulty (a) maintaining previous group memberships from their home country and (b) forming new group memberships with others in their host country. *In line with SIMIC, our first prediction here is that the students will experience higher levels of well-being and better academic performance the more group memberships they have prior to moving overseas to study.* However, SIMIC also makes several other predictions about the life change relevant to students engaging in international study. In the following sections we examine these to explain how multiple group memberships provide a platform for identities to be maintained across transition, in ways that provide a sense of identity continuity; (Haslam et al., 2008), and to acquire new social groups in the course of transitioning to a new phase of life (Haslam, Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle, & Chang, 2016; Iyer et al., 2009).

The importance of maintained group memberships.

As we have seen, existing research has shown that group membership provides psychological resources, or capital, that individuals can draw upon to enhance their well-being or to buffer against psychological stress such as a life transition (Haslam et al., 2008; Jetten et al., 2015; Thoits, 1983). These resources are not static and can be tailored according to the individual's need (Sani, 2008). The benefit of multiple group memberships may derive from the fact that these enhance the resources available to the individual but also from the fact that when an individual is a member of multiple groups, it is more likely that he or she will be able to maintain at least some of these memberships following a life transition (Haslam et al., 2008). In other words, having resources in multiple locations enhances the likelihood that we can access some of these resources even when others are inaccessible.

Anecdotal evidence to this effect comes from research by Clarke and Black (2005) who studied the impact of maintained group membership on the well-being of a stroke survivor and observed that her continued involvement in a tai chi class appeared to produce significant improvement in her quality of life. This is further supported by evidence from Haslam et al. (2008) that, after a stroke, cognitive failures compromised well-being primarily because they made it hard for individuals to maintain group membership. This argument is also consistent with the findings from Seymour-Smith et al. (2017) which showed that maintaining pre-existing group memberships after giving birth was predictive of better mental health in postpartum mothers. Among students entering university Iyer and Jetten (2011) also found that lower identity continuity had negative consequences for well-being. This is further supported by longitudinal evidence from Praherso et al. (2017) who found that maintaining group memberships following a significant life stressor was protective against the decline in well-being over time among international students adjusting to their first semester of university. These various findings highlight the importance of social identity continuity in facilitating mental health and well-being outcomes.

On this basis, in this thesis we will explore the ways in which social identity continuity impacts the international student population — in particular, how it contributes to their academic performance, retention rates, mental health and well-being. *In line with SIMIC, our second prediction is that the students will experience higher levels of well-being and better academic performance the more they are able to maintain valued identities after moving overseas to study.*

The importance of new group memberships.

As the evidence reviewed above suggests, health and well-being are enhanced not only by maintenance and strengthening of existing social identities, but also by gaining new identities after life transitions. In previous research, gains in social identification associated with joining a new group have been shown to improve both physical and psychological health among people who are vulnerable as a result of social isolation (Gleibs, Haslam, Haslam, & Jones, 2011). Recent studies have also found that individuals with a greater number of social identities are less likely to report compromised well-being (e.g., in the form of stress, anxiety and depression) when unplanned life transitions occur, such as experiencing a stroke (Haslam et al., 2008) brain trauma (Jones & Jetten, 2011), or multiple sclerosis (Tabuteau-Harrison, Haslam, & Mewse, 2016). The analysis conducted by Cruwys et al. (2013) shows that gaining new group memberships is both protective against developing depression and preventive of relapse. In this study, depressed participants with no group memberships who joined one group reduced their risk of depression relapse by 24%; and if they joined three groups their risk of relapse was reduced by 63%. This is also consistent with findings from the substance misuse literature where gaining a new identity (in particular through acquisition

of a recovery identity) predicts better health outcomes and reduce risk of relapse (Dingle et al., 2015). These lines of research indicate that new group memberships facilitate the development of new self-understandings to form a more healthy sense of self. There is also evidence obtained in non-clinical settings showing that gaining new social group memberships has beneficial effects on populations that include children, older adults, former residents of a homeless shelters and university students (Cruwys, Dingle, et al., 2014; Jetten et al., 2015). In this vein, the eight studies these researchers conducted all provided clear evidence that the more groups a person identified with, the higher their self-esteem (Jetten et al., 2015).

The above findings are consistent with a growing body of research which speaks to the ways in which an individual's adjustment to life transition is shaped by their changing portfolio of group memberships. More specifically, it appears that alongside the maintenance of current group memberships, the development of new group memberships is particularly important during life change. This thesis will explore the relationship between social identity gain in the international student population and its contribute to their mental health and well-being as well as their academic performance and retention rates. *In line with SIMIC, our third prediction is that the students will experience higher levels of well-being and better academic performance the more they are able to acquire valued new identities after moving overseas to study.*

Conceptually, SIMIC argues that having multiple groups prior to a life transition can support the development of new group memberships following the transition for at least two reasons. The first is that existing social networks can act as a scaffold to support people in forming new networks (i.e., an international student who is a churchgoer in their home country may be more likely to join a church in their host country), potentially creating new group membership. The second reason is that existing group memberships can provide people with the skills and resources necessary to develop group memberships in general. This suggestion is supported by findings from Cruwys et al (2014), who found that homeless people who had positive social group experiences showed reduced signs of maladaptive social schemas in ways that helped them to increase social engagement with others and overcome barriers to the development of social connections. In line with the large amount of supporting evidence provided by previous work of this form, maintained group membership and new group memberships are used as pathways for this present research.

The present research seeks to provide a novel analysis of the challenges of international student adjustment using a social identity analysis. In particular, we test the two key pathways proposed by SIMIC in the context of an international student population undergoing life transition associated with moving overseas to study. While previous research speaks to the importance of the social identity continuity pathway for mental health and life satisfaction, we extend on this to examine the combined influence of SIMIC's social identity and continuity pathways in supporting

students through the transition (Praharso et al., 2017). Indeed, international students are at risk of both failing to flourish and of developing mental health symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and suicidality (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010; Ren & Hagedorn, 2012; Rienties et al., 2012). The present research also extends on previous outcome evaluations to assess the relevance of SIMIC theorizing to mental health, well-being, academic performance and retention of international students — all of which are important indicators of adjustment and future professional success in this population. Here we propose a novel theoretical extension of SIMIC in arguing that, just as social identities have been found to predict performance and retention in organizational contexts (Cole & Bunch, 2006), so too the model's pathways should predict mental health, well-being, academic performance and retention in the context of life transition.

Using the social identity approach to understand the international student experience:

Thesis overview

Taking a social identity perspective, this thesis focuses on exploring the contribution of social identity change to the health and academic performance of international students. As we have seen, the social identity model of identity change (SIMIC) model argues that an individual's social identities and group memberships can provide a buffer against the negative effects of life change by being a basis for both identity maintenance and identity acquisition. Yet while there are a number of quantitative studies that provide support for SIMIC (Haslam et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2012; Steffens et al., 2016) no previous studies have used qualitative methods to understand life transition in international students. *Chapter 3* fills this gap by presenting the first qualitative study using SIMIC as a basis for exploring the process of identity change and its influence on the experiences of international students.

This is followed up in *Chapter 4* by a quantitative study that examines these processes longitudinally over four waves. More specifically, this chapter investigates the social identity continuity and social identity gain pathways specified in SIMIC, in the context of the international student population. While previous research has found evidence of the importance of social identity continuity for mental health and well-being among international students (Praharso et al., 2017), Chapter 4 also, for the first time, explores the role that SIMIC pathways play in shaping academic performance and academic retention — both key indicators of successful adjustment to life change in this population.

Chapter 5 extends the findings of Chapter 4 by assessing the specific social identification mechanisms that were responsible for changes in mental health and well-being for international students over time. This analysis centres around a feasibility study of GROUPS 4 HEALTH-For International Students (G4H-IS). G4H-IS is an adapted version of an evidence-based intervention informed by SIMIC — GROUPS 4 HEALTH (Haslam et al., 2016)— and this chapter examines its

utility as an intervention to build and strengthening social group connections that might support health and well-being outcomes in this population. G4H-IS is a four-module manualized program that I adapted specifically for international students as part of my thesis (See Appendix), that seeks to build their social connectedness and group-based social identification in the context of the specific life change that they have undergone.

Finally, the thesis concludes in *Chapter 6* with a discussion of the broad theoretical and practical implications of the overall findings and how these findings can be used for practical intervention. A key conclusion here is that not only does social identity theorizing provide unique and valuable insight into the experience of international students, but so too it provides practical insight into ways in which those experiences can be enhanced.

Chapter 3

“How can you make friends if you don’t know who you are?”

A qualitative examination of international students’ experience informed by the Social Identity Model of Identity Change

Abstract

This paper explores the contribution of social identity change to international students’ health and well-being. International students typically face a range of challenges from the time they leave their home country, including the need to adapt both to a new culture and norms and to a new educational landscape. Previous research informed by the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC) suggests that during such life transitions an individual’s group memberships and associated social identities can provide a buffer against the threats to well-being that such transitions present. To examine the relevance of SIMIC for the transitions that international students experience, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 international students attending an Australian university. Thematic analysis provided support for the relevance of SIMIC’s social identity gain and social identity maintenance pathways in the transition, and revealed a number of associated factors that acted as either facilitators (e.g., a host family that supported community integration) or barriers (e.g., experiencing culture shock) to social identity change. These findings present the first qualitative support for SIMIC within an international student population and help to flesh out the specific ways in which social identity processes contribute to both positive and negative health and well-being outcomes.

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“How can you make friends if you don’t know who you are?”

A qualitative examination of international students’ experience informed by the Social Identity Model of Identity Change

Life transitions affect us all and each is typically followed by a period of adjustment (Miller, 2010). Even when the transition is a positive experience, it has the capacity to impact negatively on an individual’s psychological well-being, primarily because the process of change brings with it various challenges, including changes in lifestyle and a sense of uncertainty (Haslam et al., 2008). Although many transitions occur as a result of unplanned life events (e.g., injury, illness; Haslam et al., 2008), many also happen by choice (e.g., transitioning from high school to university; Iyer et al., 2009) and can be associated with positive outcomes as a result (e.g., developing skills or obtaining a qualification). The present study aims to develop our understanding of how life transitions impact on health and well-being by focusing on the ways in which international students who move to an overseas university adjust to the life changes that their move entails.

As the world becomes more globalized, an increasing number of students prefer to study at overseas universities to gain international experience and benefit from high-quality education provided by overseas education providers. Indeed, because having international training is often associated with having more opportunities for future employment (either in the country of one’s origin or overseas), it is anticipated that increasingly more students will seek international experience in coming years. On the other side of the equation, the international education industry has a critical role in the economy of most Western nations, and thus there is a need for research to inform efforts to promote the successful adjustment of international students. In this context, educational outcomes are often the most scrutinized element when prospective students are deciding whether (and where) to pursue international education. At the same time, though, issues of well-being are also important: all parties want the student to be safe, secure and happy while they are studying abroad.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the process of moving overseas can itself present threats to health and well-being (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Gu et al., 2010; Russell et al., 2010; Sawir et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2008). In this regard, international students who move abroad face a series of challenges from the time that they leave their home country. In particular, they are often pigeonholed as foreigners who are unfamiliar with the education system and the language and culture of their host country, and may be the target of negative stereotypes on the basis of their ethnicity and cultural background (Brislin, 1990; Pedersen, 1991). These stereotypes and accompanying displays of racism can be more or less extreme, but it is common for students to experience exclusion, isolation and unfriendliness from multiple sources, not least domestic students (Gu et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2008).

A range of recent studies provide evidence of these various patterns. For example, Russell et al. (2010) conducted a study with over 900 international students in Australia and found that 41% reported substantial levels of stress, usually due to homesickness, culture shock, or perceived discrimination. Along related lines, Sawir et al. (2008) found that two-thirds of 200 international students residing in a western country reported experiencing problems of loneliness and/or isolation, especially in the first months of their time overseas. Focusing on this process of initial adjustment, Brown and Holloway (2008) interviewed newly arrived international students at a university in the south of England and found that, instead of excitement, all 13 participants experienced negative psychological and emotional symptoms more commonly associated with culture shock.

Drilling down into these experiences, Khawaja and Dempsey (2008) compared the adjustment process among international and domestic students enrolled at an Australian university. Their findings indicated that the international students had less social support, used more dysfunctional coping strategies, and had greater incongruence in their expectations and experiences of university life than their domestic counterparts. This mirrors observations by Rienties and colleagues (2012) that international students feel they need to work harder than domestic students to integrate socially with their new community because social networks from their home country are typically not easy to access (Rienties et al., 2012). Furthermore, the social networks that international students previously had access to may be quite different to, and in certain ways incompatible with, those in the host country — in part as a result of differences in customs and culture (Rienties et al., 2012).

Yet while these various findings are clearly instructive, it is also the case that they have not always been integrated within an overarching model of the adjustment process. Seeking to address this lacuna, the present research investigates adjustment trajectories in international students embarking on a program of overseas study and seeks to examine the particular role that group memberships play in this transition, especially in shaping mental health and well-being outcomes. This interest derives from social psychological research which shows that group memberships are central to the way people experience and respond to change. Primarily this is because groups furnish individuals with a sense of *social identity* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982) and this, in turn, has been shown to be a significant determinant not only of adjustment but also of health and well-being (Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2012).

Social identity and the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC)

The social identity approach — comprised of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorisation theory (Turner, 1982; Turner et al., 1987) — is founded upon the observation that group memberships are not peripheral to a person's sense of self, but instead are

often internalised and incorporated into a person's view of who they are, what they stand for, and what they do. In this sense, then, rather than the self being defined only by a person's idiosyncratic characteristics (their personal identity) it can also be defined by characteristics that they share with others (their social identity; (Turner, 1982). More generally, Turner (1982) argues that group behaviour results from, and is made possible by, a process of *depersonalization* through which group members come to define themselves (i.e., self-categorize) in terms of a sense of shared social identity.

In part because they make meaningful group behaviour both possible and meaningful, group memberships tend to have positive implications for mental health and well-being and to play an important role in facilitating the adjustment of individuals undergoing life transitions (Reicher & Haslam, 2006). Relatedly, research has shown that individuals are more likely to give and receive support from others when they perceive themselves to share social identity with those others (i.e., they are *in-group members*) and that in this context support is also more likely to be interpreted positively (Haslam et al., 2005; Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005). Moreover, support that is based on shared identity has the capacity to buffer people from the negative consequences of potentially stressful life transitions (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). This is because as well as providing emotional and material relief from hardship, it can also give them (a) a sense of acceptance and self-worth (Jetten & Haslam, 2016), (b) a sense of control (Greenaway et al., 2016), and (c) a sense of grounding (Cruwys, Haslam, et al., 2014). More generally, social identity is associated with a sense of connection to others which facilitates understanding and coping in the face of the challenges that life transitions bring (Haslam et al., 2009; Iyer et al., 2009).

Speaking to the relevance of these arguments for the present research, a number of studies have observed the benefits of group membership among international students transitioning into life overseas. For example, the research by Russell et al. (2010) found that international students fell into three categories: most students (59%) reported feeling "positive and connected", but a sizeable minority were either "unconnected and stressed" (34%), or "distressed and risk-taking" (7%) referring to students who were overwhelmed by their environment, and who, as a result, engaged in risky behaviours such as drug taking, high alcohol consumption, and self-harm. These students who experienced most stress appeared to be less bound into the academic and social life at university and hence had no access to (new) group memberships that might buffer the negative effects of their transition, resulting in a perpetual loop that reinforced their distress and risk-taking behaviour (Russell et al., 2010). On the other hand, most of the students that fell into the larger group identified with their host community (Melbourne), and reported being less culturally and psychologically stressed and happier with their financial state, health and academic progress as a result (Russell et al., 2010).

These observations chime with earlier longitudinal research by Iyer et al. (2009) which provided quantitative support for similar observations in a study of domestic students transitioning into university in the UK. The study found that once they arrived at university, identification with new groups buffered these students from the negative consequences of change for their well-being. Similarly, a more recent longitudinal study of international students from China who were studying in America observed that the two most significant predictors of mental well-being and adjustment were (a) English proficiency and (b) students' ability to form social connections via meaningful group memberships with others in their host country — something which was itself mediated by their English proficiency (Wang et al., 2015).

Importantly, one model which provides an integrated framework for understanding the role that social identities play in promoting well-being in the context of life transition is *the Social Identity Model of Identity Change* (SIMIC; Haslam et al., 2008; Jetten et al., 2010). In line with observations above, SIMIC suggests that life transitions have a general capacity to compromise well-being. At the same time, however, it suggests that group memberships have an important role to play in buffering people from this threat. In this, it suggests that belonging to multiple old identities prior to a transition is important because this can be a basis for both (a) maintaining (at least some of) those prior group memberships over the course of the transition (*the social identity maintenance pathway*), and (b) forming new group memberships after the transition (*the social identity gain pathway*).

Alongside Iyer et al.'s (2009) and Praharso et al.'s (2017) studies, support for SIMIC was initially provided by a study of people who had recently suffered a stroke (Haslam et al., 2008). This found that individuals who had more group memberships prior to their stroke were more likely to maintain some of those group memberships after it and that this was a basis for them to report greater well-being than those who initially had fewer group memberships. Other studies have provided further support for SIMIC in the context of other life transitions — notably becoming a mother (Seymour-Smith et al., 2017) and retiring from work (Steffens et al., 2016). A recent longitudinal study of international students informed by SIMIC also found that those students who experienced a loss of social identity as a result of the transition experienced subsequent decline in well-being (Praharso et al., 2017).

SIMIC suggests that group memberships generally make a positive contribution to individuals' well-being, especially in the context of adjusting to life transitions. In line with this claim, evidence suggests that having multiple identities is especially important in periods of vulnerability (Jones & Jetten, 2011; Thoits, 1983). Indeed, Iyer et al.'s (2009) longitudinal study showed that having multiple group memberships was especially protective during adjustment not only because it allowed some group memberships to be maintained, but also because it increased

the likelihood of students being prepared to identify with new groups in the unfamiliar environment that they found themselves in (Iyer et al., 2009).

A key benefit of multiple group memberships is that they enhance the psychological and material resources that a person has available to them (Jetten et al., 2012). Moreover, as Haslam and colleagues (2008) found, if an individual is a member of multiple groups, there is a greater likelihood that he or she will be able to maintain one or more group memberships following a life transition. This in turn should contribute to a sense of *social identity continuity* (i.e., maintained group membership) and this has been found to be a significant predictor of well-being in the context of threats to well-being (for reviews see Sani, 2008). For example, this was a key finding of a qualitative study by Tabuteau-Harrison et al. (2016) which observed that people who were diagnosed with multiple sclerosis were more likely to adjust well to the diagnosis if they were able to maintain pre-existing social relationships.

Joining new groups is also argued to mitigate the negative effect of losing group memberships on well-being during life transitions. In particular, previous research has shown that joining new groups can be a powerful way of staving off the negative effects of social isolation associated with a lack, or loss, of social identity and thereby reducing the risk of developing depression, anxiety and stress as a result (Cruwys, Haslam, et al., 2014; Haslam et al., 2016). In line with this point, both of Iyer et al.'s (2009) studies with British secondary school students showed that identification with new groups helped buffer respondents from the negative consequences of change for well-being. The same point also emerges from a more recent study of international students in Hawaii, which found that those who developed more new social connections after moving overseas reported being more content and less homesick as a result (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011). The only caveat here is that in order to be protective of well-being, SIMIC suggests that new group memberships need to be compatible with a person's pre-existing social identity networks. The importance of this was seen in Iyer et al.'s (2009) study where working-class students experienced more difficulty upon entering university than students with higher socio-economic status because their group memberships were incompatible with those they encountered in their new lives.

The present study

As the above evidence shows, social identities play a key role in managing major life changes of the form that moving overseas to pursue study as an international student would seem to represent. While a number of quantitative studies provide evidence that supports this model (Haslam et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2012; Steffens et al., 2016), no previous studies have used qualitative methods to understand whether social identity processes are part of the

experience of international students' adjustment to life in a new country. The present study is the first qualitative exploration of SIMIC in the international student population. As the first stage in a larger programme of research, its aim was to fill this gap by conducting a qualitative study of international students' experience of their life transition and exploring the role of group-based social relationships in adjustment to this change. In ways suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), our sense was that this would allow for a richer understanding and exploration of these processes of identity change from the perspective of students themselves than is afforded by previous quantitative studies (e.g., Iyer et al., 2009; Praherso et al., 2017).

Method

Participants

Participants were international students in a Foundation Year programme at a large Australian University (that we will hereafter refer to as AUFY). AUFY is a bridging programme for international students that give them direct entry to university upon completion of their studies. Fifteen students took part in the study — 6 males and 9 females aged between 17 to 21 years ($M=18.53$, $SD=0.92$).

The participants had arrived in Australia between 3 to 5 months before participating in this study and this was the first time that any of them had been in Australia for an extended period of time. The timing of the interviews was intended to give participants time to experience their transition and develop social relationships that could potentially impact on their social identity development. The study was advertised in AUFY and students who wished to participate contacted the researcher. They did not receive a financial incentive for doing so. Participants were informed that individual interviews would be conducted during their break time in between classes. Table 1 provides demographic information for these participants and shows they came from a range of countries and all had a reasonably good record of class attendance.

Table 3.1. *Participant demographics*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Attendance (%)</i>
1	Hong Kong	Male	19	93
2	Mozambique	Female	17	97.1
3	Malaysia	Female	18	98.3
4	Malaysia	Male	18	99.5
5	Hong Kong	Male	19	92
6	China	Female	18	99.2

7	Taiwan	Male	19	89.7
8	Macau	Female	19	93.2
9	Korea	Male	19	97.3
10	China	Female	18	79.1
11	Singapore	Female	18	87.1
12	Kenya	Female	21	86.5
13	China	Male	18	82.4
14	Kenya	Female	19	93.7
15	Hong Kong	Female	18	97.2

Procedure

The study was approved by the relevant ethics committee at the first author's university (15-PSYCH-PHD-09-JH). Interviews were conducted approximately three months after the participants had started their studies with AUFY. Prior to interview, participants gave consent for the process to be audio recorded and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that the interview would remain anonymous.

One-on-one interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences of life as an overseas student and to gain insight into any influence that various social groups may have had on their adjustment to their life as an international student. The interviews were conducted in a private office and lasted between 38 and 53 minutes ($M=43.47$). The first author who conducted the interviews was working as a counsellor in AUFY and had also been an international student herself.

The interviews were semi-structured to ensure that participants were guided by, but not restricted to, the interview protocol set out in Table 3.2. Participants were allowed to talk freely with no restrictions on what they discussed during the interview other than prompts to clarify their experiences as international students. Where appropriate, the interviewer prompted with additional exploratory questions (examples provided in Table 3.2) in response to issues brought up by the participants, thus allowing the discussion to flow as smoothly as possible. Questions were repeated or reframed when necessary to ensure comprehension. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved (i.e., when new interviews were generating no new themes; (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Mason, 2010). After the interview had ended participants were fully debriefed.

Table 3.2. *Interview protocol.*

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Prompt</i>	<i>Pathways of the SIMIC model</i>
Adjustment to the life transition	How are you finding life as a student in the AUFY?	How are you adjusting to AUFY?	Social Identity Maintenance Issues
Changes after life transition	Have you experienced any changes since you became a student in AUFY?	How about homestay or your accommodation? What about people you hang out with?	Social Identity Gain Issues
	How have these changes affected you?	In school, at home and with your friends?	Social Identity Gain Issues
Social group relationships after the planned life transition	Can you describe your social experiences as a student in the AUFY?	What do you do outside class? Do you hang out with any other groups besides your friends in AUFY?	Social Identity Gain Issues
Well-being after the planned life transition	How do you feel about your life as an AUFY student?	How do you feel about yourself now?	Social Identity Maintenance Issues

Analytic strategy

Interview responses were analysed by means of thematic analysis, with a view to identifying themes and sub-themes underlying participants' narratives about their life transition and associated experiences. Thematic analysis offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data by searching for themes or patterns in the broader social context while retaining focus on the material and other limits of reality (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This was considered the best approach for our present research purposes as it is a data-driven strategy that marries the "top-down" theoretical perspective that we wished to examine here with the "bottom-up" experience of participants (Haslam & McGarty, 2014).

Interview recordings were listened to in full and then transcribed. The resulting transcripts were re-read several times. Common experiences, emotions and observations were identified in the verbatim data and sorted into similar patterned responses or meanings in a separate spreadsheet. These meanings were then analysed further and translated into sub-themes, which were compared and differentiated further according to their commonalities and differences. This differentiation and merging of themes allowed for the development of overarching themes composed of sub-themes that were descriptively close to the verbatim data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Although the identified themes were closely informed by the specific words and phrases used by respondents, the coding was also guided by SIMIC. Accordingly, references to life transitions, social changes, and identity were given particular weight and attention in the coding and this led to the abstraction of themes related to SIMIC-relevant processes of social identity gain and social identity maintenance.

Three experienced researchers then reviewed the credibility and coherence of the themes analysed by the interviewer. Further analyses were conducted to sort through, filter, and rearrange the themes. Any discrepancies were discussed between the research team and the themes were amended accordingly. The different themes were explored and refined in part by representing their inter-relationship schematically (as recommended by Braun & Clarke, 2012). The quotations selected for presentation below were those that were seen to best represent the data that reflected particular themes and sub-themes.

Results

Thematic analysis led to the identification of three main themes in the interviews. These were (1) barriers to adjustment, (2) staying connected, and (3) becoming part of the host culture. These are presented in the thematic map (Figure 3.1) below. Subthemes related to each of these main themes are discussed with quotations from participants below. The three themes encompassed different social processes that were noted in participants' descriptions of their experiences of

adjusting to life as a student in Australia. Theme 1 relates to barriers that interfere with international students' transition and make adjustment more problematic. Theme 2 describes how participants' connections with family and others from a similar background contribute to their experience as a student in Australia. Theme 3 concerns factors which contribute to participants becoming part of Australian culture and the way that these contribute to a more positive transition. In what follows, we map out these themes and subthemes and illustrate them with verbatim comments from participants.

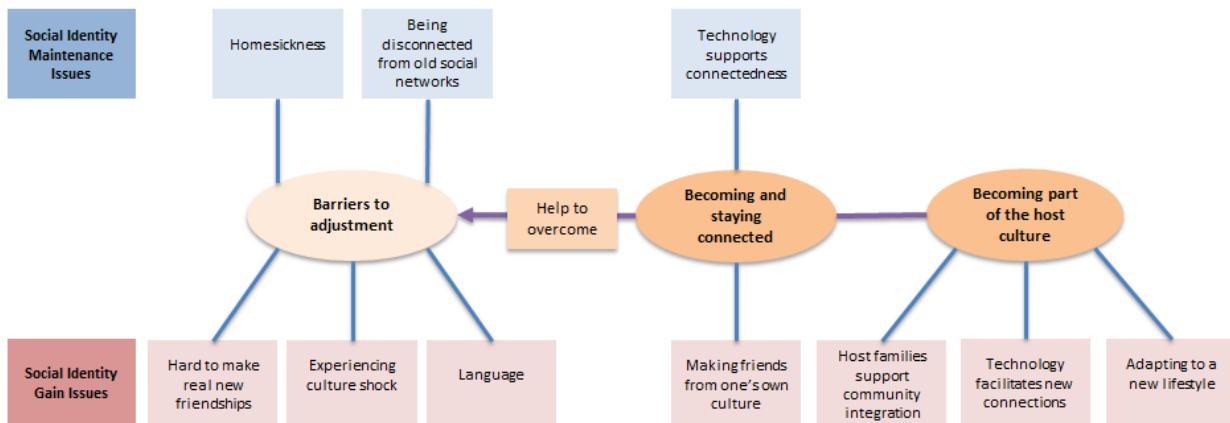


Figure 3.1. A schematic representation of the key themes identified within participants' accounts of their experiences as overseas students.

Theme 1: Barriers to adjustment

Feeling homesick

Feeling homesick was one of the more common experiences that came up in the interviews. Participants looked sad when describing their experiences of feeling homesick which tended to have negative consequences for their well-being; as seen in the following reflections:

- *Just sometimes you feel uncomfortable and you're sick and it feels like no one is taking care of you. Even though your friends text you or phone you to see if you're all right, but I just feel like after you realise you are in a room, miles away from home, it just feels like I miss home and you don't feel yourself suitable in this place. (P5, M, 19, Hong Kong)*
- *Every time my dad calls me on FaceTime and you see your siblings you think of home and your parents and everything. You just miss home really badly. I guess with time it will change. There are times when it's okay, but then it just hits you and you're like, "Oh my god, I miss my family so much." (P14, F, 19, Kenya)*

Many of the respondents compared the life they used to have back in their home country with the life they were now living in Australia. Participants often highlighted services that they used to have

access to but which were no longer available to them — such as a reliable and well-connected public transport system, long opening hours of essential services, and the availability of particular types of food compatible with their religious beliefs. Moreover, this process of comparing what they did not have currently to what they used to have was typically reported as a hindrance to adjusting to the new environment and a trigger for feelings of homesickness. In particular, participants drew attention to differences between their home country and Australia, in ways that served to highlight the lack of overlap between their old and new lives:

- *I miss the convenient traffic. Traffic here is so expensive. And it's not so good. Buses on Sundays there's only about six buses one day. It's really inconvenient. The nearest train station is not within walking distance because it's about 40 minutes to walk. (P6, F, 18, China)*
- *It's the accessibility of food in general. The city closes at 5:00 pm, which is ridiculous. Back home you can go to Hokkien centres at any time of the day and get whatever you want. The food is a lot cheaper and it's just tastes like home and the way they make Singaporean food here just sucks. (P11, F, 18, Singapore)*
- *Back home almost everything is halal, but with here, no. I get sick and tired of eating vegetarian all the time. I'm not a vegetarian, but I have no other option but to eat vegetarian. (P14, F, 19, Kenya)*

Being disconnected from old social networks

Despite the assistance of social media and technology, participants reported finding it hard to maintain the relationships that they had in their home country due to physical distance and time difference. In this context, as the following comments illustrate, they reported feeling disconnected from friends and family in their home country, who were an important source of support in the transition. This in turn made them more vulnerable to loneliness which hindered adaptation:

- *My best friends in my own country are studying in foreign country as well. They have a very big time difference with me. Some of them study in Europe, some of them study in America, so this is very hard for us to talk with each other. Even texting, I text them in their sleeping time and when they reply me I have slept. Not that close anymore because they have met a lot of new friends because they went there in September. I start mine in February. (P8, F, 19, Macau)*

- *For the past 17 years I've been living every day with my family and suddenly boom, one day no family, no one. It's quiet. I feel lonely. So I didn't want the feeling of loneliness. (P4, M, 18, Malaysia)*

These experiences were seen to create barriers to adjustment, making it hard for students to let go of their old identities and maintain their old support network as they navigated their way through the transition process.

Finding it hard to make new real friendships

Another barrier that students commonly reported experiencing was difficulty making new friends and joining new social groups in their new environment. A number of participants felt that this was because they were new to Australia, and hence did not know either how to go about finding, and making contact with, people who had similar interests or how to find out about activities in their neighbourhood that they could take part in. Participants indicated that finding and developing quality friendships was hard. They struggled to reach out to people and feared that the time they spent with them would not develop into deep and proper friendship and that they would merely be acquaintances:

- *It's very hard for me to make connections with people, a lot of trust issues and stuff. Coming from my home country and having already a set group of friends who already understand your quirks and everything and then coming here you feel so isolated and it's very traumatising. For me, the hardest thing to do is on weekends and on days where you don't have stuff to do, it's hard to go and reach out and find activities to do that you are interested in. When I went home from school I just stayed at home and I didn't do anything because I didn't know how to reach out outside of school and to go make friends that I could be close to, on the same wavelength as me. (P11, F, 18, Singapore)*

Others compared their current circumstances to the quality of the old friendships they had left behind in their home country, and felt that their new relationships were less meaningful and authentic — lacking the depth and openness of the relationships that they had previously enjoyed at home. Moreover, many felt unable to speak their minds freely for fear of how others would respond:

- *Honestly though, I feel I'm friends with the people here because of circumstances, but I connect to my friends back home more because we have a lot in common, we understand each other, we have the same sense of humour. (P14, F, 19, Kenya)*
- *The relationship is just different in my home country. It's like a soul mate that I can share everything with her even the good, the bad, or the angry things I can talk everything with them*

because they grow up with me. For my new friends here, because we don't know each other deep, you do not know how they think, how is the way they ask each other. Just, for me, I just always scared that I'll say something wrong. (P8, F, 19, Macau)

Some participants also reflected that these experiences created a sense of loss and confusion about their identity, and that this interfered with their ability to build new social relationships:

- *It changes you slowly. It's a very, very gradual process. Back in Singapore it's very closed minded and now when you're out here it's very open minded. You see a lot more things that you've never seen before.... You struggle to find your own identity and because you're learning so much about yourself that you didn't know before it's very hard to make friends because how can you make friends if you don't know who you are? (P11, F, 18, Singapore)*

Experiencing culture shock

Several interviewees reported having a sense of “culture shock” after arriving in Australia as they struggled to learn about and adapt to the changes in their new surroundings. They reported that people did not react the same way when they communicated — that there was a need to be more cautious with the words they used and that it was hard to communicate with others at a deeper level, making it hard to build close relationships:

- *It's still very hard because at first when you come to Australia it's more like you see everything that's new around you and it's a lot of trying to get used to new things.... The biggest culture shock was more of not having the familiarities of home..... The people here are a lot different and it's very hard to make close connections with people. (P11, F, 18, Singapore)*
- *You don't express yourself the way you would when you were back home. Culture is a big issue. You don't want to offend a specific culture. You have to be more cautious of what you say. You can't say just anything. (P14, F, 19, Kenya)*

Finding language a barrier to forming relationships

Most participants made the observation that not speaking a common language undermined their sense of belonging, because language provides a platform for developing a sense of shared connection in new relationships. For many participants English was not their first language and they observed how speaking a common language served to group people from the same countries together and to distance them both from other international students who were from a different country and from residents in the host country:

- *I think speaking in the same languages seems to be easier to group into same group because I've found that in college many students become friends because they speak the same language. (P8, F, 19, Macau).*
- *I've noticed the Chinese, they hang out with themselves. They don't really branch out so it's hard to socialise with them and then when you do socialise with them they talk in their language so you can't really input your opinion or anything. (P14, F, 19, Kenya)*

Some interviewees also reported feeling singled out due to their language, and this left them feeling isolated and excluded from the international student community:

- *My Chinese isn't very good, so when I hang out with the China students it's like ... and I get a lot of racist remarks ever since I've been here. They will suddenly burst out, thinking I cannot speak Chinese. Because they are the majority in the school and as the majority they feel that they have the power to say these kinds of things. The only racism I've got here is from them. (P11, F, 18, Singapore)*

This quote highlights the language and cultural barriers that can exist within the international student community, making it difficult for some students to form a meaningful identity as part of the international student body. This in turn is likely to make social identity continuity more difficult, as having an international student identity might help students bridge across old and new cultural identities during their transition. When maintaining previous identities become challenging, there is nothing to anchor onto when exploring into the unknown while trying to develop new social bonds with other students, both local and international, in a foreign environment. Coupled with cultural shock and language difficulties, these barriers prove to be inhibiting both the maintenance of previous identities and creating a big hurdle to cross in trying to gain new identities.

Theme 2: Becoming and staying connected

Making friends from one's own culture facilitates connectedness

International students come from a different culture and often speak a different language from domestic students. Both these factors contributed to participants seeing themselves as different and as a group set apart from others in the host country. In an attempt to counter this, all participants talked about the importance of making friends in the host country, as they recognised that, being away from home, these friends were their main source of support in times of loneliness and homesickness. This is seen clearly in the following comments:

- *Friends really help. I feel that friends are a big factor here. Basically, when you're lonely, you get homesick and so if you're not lonely you won't get homesick. I think humans are social*

people so we just need that camaraderie among people. We just need to know that there's someone there for us. (P3, F, 18, Malaysia)

- *For international student you need some belonging so it's really important to find some friends here and you've still got support. (P7, M, 19, Taiwan)*

Importantly, though, most participants reported that the new friendships which they formed were with groups of people from the same country, culture, language and background and that these generally served to maintain their sense of connectedness with their home country. This is illustrated by the following observations:

- *With the Malaysians I can relate very well because we are from the same country, our lifestyles are the same, so it's very easy for me to talk to them, to go out with them. I just feel that they're more accepting of how I am and how I live because they can relate. They lived a similar life, same type of community, the same environment. They can understand what I go through every day when I come here and I can understand what they go through, the feeling of being away from home, the feeling of being in the country which is so different from Malaysia. (P4, M, 18, Malaysia).*
- *I met a lot of Hong Kong friends here, so it's feel like family. Everyone in the group come from the same country so we can share a lot of same topics. It's feel like we're still in Hong Kong. (P15, F, 18, Hong Kong).*

Communication technology supports connectedness and facilitates connections with new groups and activities

All participants reported using technology and social media to maintain relationships with family and friends back in their home country. They also observed that this kept them connected to their old groups back home despite the challenges of physical separation and time difference. The following comments typify this observation:

- *We FaceTime on the weekends. We WhatsApp each other every time. We have a group of family, my mum, my dad, and my sisters, we have a group chat so we just talk and talk on the group chat every day. (P12, F, 21, Kenya)*
- *In Hong Kong my most close friends are in church because we grew up together... Sometimes we have Skype or FaceTime together because they miss me and I miss them. (P15, F, 18, Hong Kong)*

Participants also observed that the availability of advanced technology and internet capabilities allowed them to expand their social network by using social media to organise activities and connect with, and bring together, other groups of international students. As the following

comments illustrate, social media was generally seen to be a good vehicle for participants to reach out to others to engage in various group activities:

- *Maybe someone want to go Illumi Run and someone will suggest in the group and if someone want to go and agree with this event they will just raise their hand and say, “I will go together.” ... In the group chat, WhatsApp. (P5, M, 19, Hong Kong)*
- *We have a group chat in WhatsApp so it’s easy to organise these kind of things [going for a movie or visit Gold Coast]. We actually pull people in as long as they’re willing to talk to us. (P3, F, 18, Malaysia)*

Although participants experienced barriers to identity continuity as depicted in Theme 1, it is clear that using technology and reaching out to other fellow international students helped to facilitate both social identity continuity and the formation of new social identities. Referring to the SIMIC model, theme 2 focuses on how technology facilitated and increased the ability of international students to stay connected with their previous networks, which in turn enabled the maintenance of previous positive identities. This further provides the stability international students need to venture into new territories, having anchored themselves with their previous identities, knowing that they can fall back on their social support during times of need. With this security, international students can then go out and foster new social relationships knowing that they can always count on their previous network for social support, which in turn increases the possibility of new identities formation. Technology also increases the accessibility of forming new social bonds by bringing international students together and making it easier to organise shared activities to nurture new social relationships. Indeed, this role that technology played in facilitating a positive identity transition was a particularly interesting and unexpected finding of the research.

Theme 3: Becoming part of the host culture

Host families support community integration

When international students first arrive at AUFY, all of them are given an option to move in with local families, as part of a homestay program. Many chose to take up this option, not least because their families back in their home countries believe that homestay hosts will provide them with social support and guidance. Speaking to this point, several participants explained how their host families had facilitated their integration into Australia society by helping them understand Australian culture and the peculiarities of local jargon. This point is illustrated by the following comments:

- *Homestay family is a very important factor because they take care of you... the homestay family is Australian local, so they help you a lot about the Australian culture. (P10, F, 18, China).*
- *I think staying in the homestay really helps the language. I can talk with my host and I can practice speaking and listening at the same time ... native speakers speak it's quite different from what the teachers teach in class. They are different because the vocabularies and the way they talk ... there are some slangs and some abbreviations of words which people use a lot in their English. Such as, "I reckon." ... "carbs" and "vegies", things like that. (P6, F, 18, China).*

In this regard too, it is apparent that host families were seen to provide international students with more than just a place to stay and food to eat. In particular, as several interviewees noted, many hosts attended to students' well-being by introducing them to new friends and providing care in place of their parents:

- *I also made a few friends through my host. She would take me out for family dinners or if someone invites her she would take me as well... You can say she is like my mother in Australia. She calls me her daughter. (P2, F, 17, Mozambique).*

Adapting to a new lifestyle

Interviewees also discussed how they needed to adapt to their new lifestyles by becoming more independent and responsible for their own daily lives. This required them to learn to take responsibility for such things as financial planning, time management, food shopping, cooking and doing their own laundry. After coming to Australia, many participants reported seeing themselves as becoming more of an adult, no longer needing to rely on their parents to provide and make decisions for them. This is not unlike the experience of local students who at a similar age may be moving out of their family homes and transitioning into independent living to begin their college studies. Most international students, especially students originating from Asian and African countries, usually do not move out of their parents' home until they are married. In this context, many interviewees reported that they gained freedom when they became an international student because they were removed both from their parents and from the societal expectations of their home country, and, in particular, now had the freedom to choose their own way of life:

- *You need to cook by yourself, plan by yourself, do your own laundry. You need to make your own decisions or you can't survive (P7, M, 19, Taiwan).*
- *I need to take responsibility on what I do... I just feel like I finally became an adult and I can take control of everything (P5, M, 19, Hong Kong).*

- *When I came here there was no one telling me what to do, saying that you should be this kind of person, so I am the person that is naturally me (P4, M, 18, Malaysia).*
- *After I come Australia I have been more relaxed than Hong Kong and Australian is very nice to me. Sometimes I will talk to them although we don't know each other. You need to enjoy and explore our life... Australia is a place that is very good to relax and you can do anything you like (P1, M, 19, Hong Kong).*

In this way, becoming integrated into Australian culture was seen to facilitate a positive transition for international students. In this regard too, having homestay families to guide students through the process of adapting to a new independent lifestyle of living was seen as especially helpful. In particular, this was because homestay families facilitated the process of forming new connections and identities in the context of students' ongoing life transition. Having a host family to guide them on how to navigate the new cultural landscape and facilitating new social bonds by introducing them to their personal social networks greatly enhance the success of international students developing positive new social identities in the host country.

Summary

In summary, Theme 1 concerns barriers to successful adjustment and the factors that contribute to this. These include homesickness, losing contact with old networks, having a hard time establishing new friendships, and experiencing language barrier and culture shock. Theme 2 relates to international students' efforts to make new friends with students from the same home country in light of the sense of common identity that this shared background facilitated. This also encompasses their use of technology not only to maintain existing relationships in their home country, but to find out about different social activities in their host country. Finally, Theme 3 related to the ways in which students attempted to integrate into the host culture and the ways that this was facilitated by opportunities for personal growth and the efforts of host families.

As Figure 3.1 suggests, it is apparent that, in different ways, these themes speak to issues of social identity maintenance and social identity gain, in a manner that corresponds to component processes of the SIMIC model. Moreover, as we discuss more below, this model provides a framework for integrating the themes in order to understand how facilitators of identity change (Themes 2 and 3) help students overcome barriers to adjustment (Theme 1).

Discussion

This qualitative study explored the contribution of changes in social relationships, particularly those associated with social group memberships, to the experience of international students trying to adjust to studying in Australia. In this, we drew on the Social Identity Model of

Social Identity Change (SIMIC) as a framework to understand how group loss, continuity, and gain, bear upon students' experience. In line with this model, interviews suggested that in order to understand how international students adjust to their new circumstances it is instructive to examine not only how (and whether) previous group memberships are maintained (as suggested by SIMIC's social identity continuity pathway) but also how (and whether) new group memberships are acquired (as suggested by SIMIC's social identity gain pathway). More specifically, as Figure 3.1 suggests, it appears that *staying connected* (Theme 2) and *becoming part of the host culture* (Theme 3) are facilitators that help students overcome the *barriers to adjustment* that they face as they adapt to life as an overseas student (Theme 1). In what follows we will explore more closely the relevance of these themes to social identity theorising.

The relevance of themes to the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC)

All of the international students that we interviewed reported encountering *barriers* that interfered with their development of a sense of belonging with the host country and community, as well as their capacity to stay connected with their previous networks. These made the transition to life as a student in a new country more problematic. Despite (and in some cases because) they communicate with their family and friends back home frequently via social media, many participants talked about *feeling homesick*. This reminded them of the fact that they were far away from home and that the comforts and familiarities of their former life were not within easy reach, creating difficulties in maintaining their previous social identities. This observation accords with findings from Sawir et al. (2008) who identified three kinds of loneliness experienced by international students: (i) personal loneliness because of the loss of contact with families, (ii) social loneliness because of the loss of networks and (iii) cultural loneliness, triggered by the absence of a preferred cultural and linguistic environment. In ways suggested by Gu et al. (2010), these feelings of loneliness are often inflated by students' difficulty adapting to a new environment (e.g., one in which public transport is expensive and infrequent, shops close early every day and they cannot access food that they are familiar with) and the disconnectedness they feel as a result. This speaks to the fact that social identity maintenance emerges as a major challenge for overseas students.

It is clear that physical distance and time difference can also make it hard to maintain previously important social identities (e.g., with family and friends at home). If old support networks fall away, this tends to exacerbate feelings of identity loss that have been found to be problematic for people going through other life transitions (Haslam et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2009; Seymour-Smith et al., 2017). In the present case it was clear that this contributed to a sense of social isolation and loneliness and that this undermined students' well-being in ways previously

discussed by Cruwys, Haslam, et al. (2014). Relatedly, many participants reflected on their *difficulty developing real friendships* after coming to Australia. Some felt that it was hard to develop trust, and that they could not take it for granted that others would reciprocate their feelings if they committed themselves to a friendship or that they would be accepted ‘for who they really are’. Others compared their new friendships with their previous friendships in their home country, and reported that difficulty letting go of their existing bonds also hindered the process of forming new relationships. At the same time too, due to the changes in group membership that they were undergoing, several students reported having *existential doubts about their own identity* that undermined trust in their own ability to make meaningful social connections. These observations are consistent with — but help to flesh out — the findings of Iyer et al. (2009) in which well-being was compromised when students attending university for the first time found it hard to take on new identities and thereby establish a sense of belonging. Although identity maintenance is a barrier to successful socialization in some instances because international students become so entrenched in their own culture and habits that it is hard for them to adapt to a new culture and environment, it is important to understand that identity maintenance can also act as an anchor to provide security for international students to move out of their comfort zone, knowing that they can always fall back onto their previous social networks for support in times of need.

In line with the findings of previous research, students’ experience of *culture shock* also hindered their efforts to join new groups (Brislin, 1990; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Gu et al., 2010; Pedersen, 1991; Wang et al., 2008). Not only did this result from drastic changes to their surroundings, but also from having to deal with people who do not share, and may not always accept, the group memberships that they bring with them to their new life (e.g., those based on nationality, ethnicity, or religion). These factors tend to make the process of acquiring new social identities challenging, as does the experience of *language barriers*. As observed by Neri and Ville (2008) and Rienties et al. (2012), one consequence of these is that they incline students to interact primarily with others who speak the same (or similar) language. And while this is a basis for maintaining previous identities (especially those based on nationality, see below) it can be problematic if it isolates them from others who do not speak their language, and can make it hard to gain new identities in their new environment.

Set against these barriers to adjustment that related to the twin challenges of maintaining pre-existing social identities and acquiring new ones, there were, however, two themes that related to factors which promoted adjustment and helped students overcome the negative effects of the barriers they encountered. One of these centred on opportunities for *staying and becoming connected*. This had two sub-themes. First, participants described the process of *gaining new*

friends from a similar cultural background as an important facilitator of adjustment and social identity gain. Indeed, as previously observed by Pham and Saltmarsh (2013), it appeared that most interviewees identified quite highly with fellow international students from their home country and sought to form social networks with others who shared a similar culture and background (in particular, as noted above, ones based on common language), and, moreover, that they experienced this as protective of their well-being. Indeed, as a corollary of points made above, this process assumes particular importance in light of the difficulties that many students experience in reaching out to, and forming new relationships, within the host community.

A second sub-theme that related to opportunities for social connection centred on *access to communication technology*, which was seen by most interviewees as facilitating the maintenance of their social identity. Social media in particular was seen to facilitate maintenance and development of valued group memberships by providing an easy means of staying in contact with others. Indeed, compared to the tools at people's disposal just a decade or so ago, social media today allows for quick, cheap and relatively hassle-free communication between individuals regardless of place and time, thereby allowing international students to keep in touch with family and friends back in their home country, as well as to build new relationships with others — especially with other international students in their host country (Gomes et al., 2014). Indeed, maintaining previous group memberships in this way appears to empower international students to forge new relationships while knowing that they have the foundational support and 'grounding' of their old support networks (Gomes et al., 2014). In ways conceptualised in 'social cure' research (e.g., Haslam et al., 2016; Jetten et al., 2012) it also appears that they also are a basis for support, control and security, giving people both the confidence and the resources to navigate around the challenges of the transition and to combat the threats to well-being that we identified above (particularly loneliness and homesickness).

The second theme that was associated with successful adjustment related to participants' acquisition of a new lifestyle and, more particularly, *becoming part of the host culture*. By integrating with the host culture and actively facilitating identity change, this has the potential to help break down the barriers of adjustment international students face and to facilitate the development of their new identity. Here one sub-theme related to the capacity for *host families to support community integration* in ways that created possibilities for positive social identity gain. This is important because, as Rienties et al. (2012) point out, international students can have a hard time integrating with the host community due to a lack of familiarity with its customs and culture. Here host families were reported to provide multiple forms of relevant support (emotional, cognitive and material), all of which served to reduce the stress of adjustment (e.g., in ways

suggested by (Deutsch & House, 1983; Jetten et al., 2012; Russell et al., 2010). Most particularly, though, host families can be seen to facilitate the acquisition of new group identities in ways that serve to improve students' overall quality of life (as observed by (Cruwys, Haslam, et al., 2014). It was also that case that the process of moving overseas to study was seen by respondents as providing them with freedom to escape existing family and societal structures. Here participants' comments pointed to a range of positive affordances associated with the *acquisition of a new lifestyle* associated with their new identity as an international student — not least those associated with the development of life skills necessary for independent living.

Limitations and directions for future research

The key strength of this study is that it is the first to provide an in-depth qualitative analysis of SIMIC within the international student population. As such, it uses qualitative methods to explore how group processes facilitate and constrain the adjustment of international students to life overseas, thereby deepening our understanding of identity change process. At the same time, though, as with all research, this study also has limitations that have a bearing on the nature of the conclusions that can be drawn from our findings.

The most obvious of these was that the study involved interviews with a relatively small sample of students who were purposively accessed within a particular community of overseas students. It certainly seems likely, then, that had we sampled students from a wider range of countries and educational contexts we might have revealed additional themes bearing upon the processes in which we were interested. Because we were reliant on participants who were prepared to come forward and volunteer to be interviewed, it also seems likely that there may be other sub-populations of overseas students (e.g., those that were chronically depressed, or who were very time poor) whose experiences we have failed to capture. The fact that the study was cross-sectional and only elicited views from students at the beginning of their studies also means that it does not give us insight into the way in which these experiences unfold over time.

It is also the case that while the observed patterns speak to the importance of SIMIC's identity maintenance and identity gain pathways, they did not relate directly to issues of group compatibility in ways specified within the model. This is not to say that group compatibility was not a factor in the patterns reported above, but rather that its role was latent rather than manifest — potentially as a result of the specific questions that were included in the interview protocol. Certainly, there is scope for future research to hone in more closely on this factor.

As noted above, the first author who was the interviewer for this study had been an international student herself and also worked as a counsellor in AUFY. While this may have

contributed to putting the participants at ease and facilitated their honesty and openness when sharing their experiences, it is also possible that it discouraged participants from sharing more negative experiences for fear that these reflections would be unwelcome.

For all this, though, the study did allow us to engage with theoretically meaningful issues in a way that previous work informed by SIMIC has not. Furthermore, the fact that the experiences we captured are consistent with this model gives us some confidence in its relevance to this domain, while also helping to flesh its insights out through fine-grained observation. In this respect too, our findings also provide more specific insights than previous research into the phenomenology of social identity continuity and social identity gain pathways (i.e., what they actually ‘look like’ and how they are subjectively experienced). We would also note that our goal was to generalise on the basis of theory rather than on the basis of our findings per se (as recommended by Haslam & McGarty, 2014; Turner, 1982). Moreover, in this context there are grounds for thinking that the basic social identity processes we have explored are likely to be generalizable across contexts and cultures due to the commonalities we observed among participants who nevertheless came from a range of different countries and cultural backgrounds (Suh, 2002).

It is also the case, however, that it would clearly be beneficial to subject SIMIC to further test in future qualitative research with different international student populations (e.g., from different ethnic and national cultures; from students in different type of program). It would also be beneficial to test SIMIC in longitudinal studies that explore the contribution of different pathways not only to health and well-being (as in Praherso et al., 2017), but also to student progression and academic performance. Indeed, armed with the knowledge that this study has furnished, these studies are currently underway.

Conclusion

Appreciating the facilitators of, and barriers to, social identity continuity and gain among international students appears to provide a powerful way of capturing the nature of their experiences and, more particularly, of better understanding the process of successful transition to overseas study. In this respect too, a significant advantage of SIMIC is that it provides an integrated and coherent way of making sense of a diverse array of student experiences. This would seem to have important practical value for international education providers and for those more generally interested in ensuring that students’ transition to life overseas is successful — not least in helping them to identify strategies to enhance systems of student management and assistance that are in place, and to identify appropriate loci of intervention. In particular, this model speaks to the importance of working to

promote successful transition by putting in place facilitators of social identity continuity and gain, while at the same time working to remove obstacles to these two pathways.

Chapter 4

Identity continuity protects international students' academic performance, retention, and mental health: A longitudinal examination of the Social Identity Model of Identity Change

Abstract

International students transitioning to university undergo a drastic transition in their social identity related to the need to adapt to new culture, language, environment and way of living. This paper explores the impact of this social identity change on academic performance, attrition rate, mental health and well-being. Previous research using the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC) model suggests that during life transitions, an individual's group memberships and associated social identities can buffer people from the negative effects of life change. To examine the relevance of SIMIC for international students' transition to studying overseas, a longitudinal study collected data across three time points over the course of one year from 210 international students studying in a Foundation Year programme in a large Australian university. Consistent with SIMIC, social identity variables predicted (a) higher academic performance, (b) better mental health and (c) better well-being outcomes. Maintained group membership also indirectly predicted student retention across time.

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Identity continuity protects international students' academic performance, retention, and mental health: A longitudinal exploration of the Social Identity Model of Identity Change

Over their lifespan, people experience many major transitions, all of which require some form of adjustment. These life transitions can happen by choice (e.g., transitioning from high school to university or retiring from the workforce), or can be unplanned (e.g., suffering from a stroke or experiencing a debilitating injury). Life transitions can be a positive experience when individuals gain concrete benefits and associate the transition with positive outcomes, such as gaining an opportunity to develop skills, acquiring new friends, or starting a new job. However, they can also be accompanied by feelings of stress and uncertainty, especially when the transition is associated with negative well-being outcomes, or uncertainty about future prospects (Manzi, Vignoles, & Regalia, 2010). A substantial body of work has found that life transitions tend to negatively impact psychological well-being (Beadle, Ownsworth, Fleming, & Shum, 2016). In this study, we explore the transition process experienced by international students who move to a new country to pursue further education. Here our focus is on the way that this transition affects students' self-concept — in particular, their social identity — and the implications of this for their academic performance, retention rates, mental health, and well-being.

Life transitions: The case of international students

International students face many challenges from the time they leave their home country. Living abroad in a new country typically involves adapting to a new culture and societal norms, adjusting to a foreign language, changes in weather and climate, different foods and eating habits as well as unfamiliar cultural and religious influences in daily life. All of these experiences can easily prove to be overwhelming experiences for a young student (Gomes et al., 2014). Consistent with this point, a study by Khawaja and Dempsey (2008) that compared international students and domestic students enrolled at an Australian university found that in comparison to domestic students, international students reported having less social support, using more dysfunctional coping strategies, and having greater incongruence between their expectations and experiences of university life. Moreover, even though international students were found to perform better academically and have lower dropout rates than their domestic counterparts, they were less socially integrated with the rest of the university community and rarely forged relationships with domestic students or others in their local community (Neri & Ville, 2008; Rienties et al., 2012). A large body of research speaks to the fact that this lack of social integration (whether at the university or local community level), is associated with higher stress levels, more depressive symptoms, poor sociocultural adjustment, and

less access to social support (Jackson, Ray, & Bybell, 2013; Neri & Ville, 2008). Speaking to this point, a case study conducted by Wu, Garza, and Guzman (2015) of ten international students studying in America found that they were confronted with academic challenges, social isolation, and challenges of cultural adjustment on a daily basis. Among these, academic challenges such as communication with professors, classmates and staff proved to be particularly daunting, given that for the majority of international students, English is not their first language (Wu et al., 2015).

Social challenges, though, are often also profound and nuanced. This point is made by Sawir et al. (2008) who identified three kinds of loneliness experienced by international students: (i) personal loneliness due to the loss of contact with families; (ii) social loneliness due to the loss of networks and (iii) cultural loneliness, triggered by the absence of a preferred cultural and/or linguistic environment. In part, these difficulties reflect the fact that language and cultural barriers not only make integration difficult, but can lead to rejection from members of the host culture (Brislin, 1990; Pedersen, 1991). A range of studies have therefore found that international students routinely report being on the receiving end of racism, exclusion, and unfriendliness (Gu et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2008). Putting these things together, a recent study of 900 international students in Australia, Russell et al. (2010) found that 41% of international students experienced substantial levels of stress, usually due to homesickness, culture shocks, or perceived discrimination.

In light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising that many international students fail to complete their program of study. As evidence of this, a recent report on higher education from the Department of Education and Training in Australia (2014) found that 37% of international students dropped out of their studies over the period 2011-2014. In this regard, as is also the case with their domestic counterparts (Tinto, 1975), first-year international students are at particularly high risk of dropping out due to factors relating to poor adjustment (Wu et al., 2015). This is further supported by evidence that homesickness and a lack of belonging contribute to high dropout rates within this group of students (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Sun, Hagedorn, & Zhang, 2016). More specifically, students (both international and domestic) who drop out of higher education often report that their social networks failed to provide sufficient support for them to continue their education (Christie et al., 2004). This lack of social support and social networks is also associated with higher risk of depression, and depression is itself a significant predictor of a lower grade-point average (GPA) and a higher probability of dropping out (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009).

However, as a corollary to these patterns, research by Severiens and Wolff (2008) found that students who feel more at home, who are better connected to fellow students and teachers, and who take part in more school activities tend to achieve better academic results and are more likely to

complete their university education. Relatedly, Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2015) argued that adjustment to higher education environments is critical because this predicts later academic success.

Seeking to understand these various processes, numerous studies have tried to identify factors that influence academic performance and well-being within the international student population (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010; Ren & Hagedorn, 2012; Rienties et al., 2012). Current research indicates that educational institutions and social networks of international students have a large influence on how students adjust (Li et al., 2010; Ren & Hagedorn, 2012; Rienties et al., 2012). Having friends from the same culture as well as from local communities, sharing accommodation with other students, and being a member of a club or society has also been found to enhance social integration and to increase academic performance (Bok, 2009; Russell et al., 2010; Severiens & Wolff, 2008). Likewise, research by Soledad, Carolina, Adelina, Fernández, and Fernanda (2012) has found that academic and social integration both predict study performance. Having a social life outside the academic environment also positively predicts academic integration (Rienties et al., 2012). Thus, according to Tinto (1998), students not only need to persist in their study to achieve academic integration, but they also need to participate in the student culture to achieve social integration with their community, both within and outside the immediate context of the learning environment.

Yet while studies in this area have identified a range of factors that contribute to students' adjustment and well-being, there is limited understanding of the particular factors that improve academic performance and improve academic retention. Moreover, to date, there is no integrated theoretical understanding either (a) of how (and why) various social factors hang together, or (b) of how (and why) they feed into academic performance. Drawing on recent evidence from social psychology on the relationship between social identity, health, and educational outcomes (Haslam, 2014) the goal of the present study is to develop, and test, an integrated model of this form. Derived from social identity theorizing (after Tajfel & Turner, 1979), this focuses on the particular role that social group memberships — and the sense of *social identity* that they give their members — play in protecting international students during their transition into overseas study, and, more specifically, on their contribution to academic performance, student retention, mental health and well-being.

The social identity model of identity change (SIMIC)

According to the social identity approach (comprised of social identity theory, Tajfel & Turner, 1979, and self-categorization theory, Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty, 1994), people's sense of self is determined not only by their sense of themselves as individuals (their personal identity as "I" and "me"; Turner, 1982) but also by

their sense of themselves as members of various social groups (their social identity as “we” and “us”; Tajfel, 1978). This speaks to the capacity for the self to be defined not just in terms of people’s individuality but also by attributes and qualities that they share with other people (Turner, 1982). This reflects the fact that when a person defines themselves (i.e., self-categorizes) in terms of social identity they use their group membership as a lens through which to interpret and make sense of the world. This is argued to be particularly true in the context of life transitions (Jetten, Haslam, Haslam, & Branscombe, 2009; Jetten, Haslam, Iyer & Haslam, 2010; Sani, 2008). For here group memberships and associated social identities (e.g., as Chinese, as a university student, as a member of one’s family) are argued to provide individuals with a sense of connection, meaning, support and control — all of which serve to protect well-being and help individuals cope with, and adjust to, the life changes they are going through (Sani, 2008). In line with these ideas, Amiot (2007) presented a model of identity development which showed how the acquisition of new social group membership leads migrants in a new country to re-evaluate their old identities, to negotiate the clashes that can emerge between these differing social identities, before merging and redefining old and new social identity and integrating them into the self over time. As Amiot observes, successful social identity of this form integration enhances psychological adjustment and well-being and can buffer people against environmental stressors (e.g., the negative effects of discrimination; Amiot, 2007).

Consistent with these claims, lack or loss of group memberships has been shown to be an important predictor of depression in both clinical and non-clinical populations (Cruwys et al., 2014; Sani, Madhok, Norbury, Dugard, & Wakefield, 2015; for a review see Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle, Haslam, & Jetten, 2014). Speaking specifically to the role that group memberships play in helping people to negotiate life transitions, these have been found to be important predictors of well-being outcomes for (a) patients who have suffered a stroke (Haslam et al., 2008), (b) people who have been diagnosed with MS (Tabuteau-Harrison et al., 2016), (c) women who have given birth (Seymour-Smith, Cruwys, Haslam, & Brodribb, 2017), and (d) retirees (Steffens et al., 2016). Particularly relevant to the present research, Iyer and colleagues also found that loss of group memberships was a particular problem for students transitioning to university and was felt especially keenly by working-class students because they had particular difficulty identifying with groups in their new educational environment (Iyer et al., 2009).

Such findings not only confirm the generally harmful effects that identity transitions can have on well-being, but are consistent with other research which points to the specific difficulties that students experience in their transition to university (Gu et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2008). In the case of international students, a study by Wang et al. (2015) showed that social connection with others in the new community was a significant predictor of positive adjustment and satisfaction

with life for international students from China who were studying in USA. Importantly too, studies by Schmitt et al. (2003) have found that international students' group identification suppressed the negative effect that perceived discrimination had on self-esteem and in this way buffered those students from the negative effects of perceived exclusion from the host community.

Schmitt and colleagues' (2003) findings are consistent with a large body of social identity research which supports the specific predictions of the *rejection-identification model* (Branscombe, Schmitt & Harvey, 1999). This argues that one key way in which members of disadvantaged and minority groups cope with various forms of rejection (e.g., associated with discrimination, prejudice, and exclusion) is through social identification with those groups. Indeed, a general point that emerges from other work informed by the *social identity approach to health* is that social identification with *any* group tends to have positive implications for health and well-being (Haslam et al., in press; Haslam, Jetten, Postmes & Haslam, 2009; Jetten, Haslam & Haslam, 2012). Moreover, there is also evidence that the more groups one identifies with the better this is for health (Cruwys et al., 2014; Iyer et al., 2009; Sani et al., 2015). A key reason for this is that, as noted above, internalized group memberships are a source of social psychological resources — in particular, social support (Haslam, Reicher & Levine, 2012) — that help people to tackle various life challenges. Similarly in the finding of Amiot (2007), multiple social identities are found to change over time and become integrated with the self. When the identity integration process is successful, it increases one's ability to cope with change. Accordingly, it should generally be the case that the more of these resources one has, the better equipped one is to confront those challenges.

These various ideas have been integrated within the *social identity approach to identity change* (SIMIC; Haslam et al., 2018) to target the specific challenges associated with life changes. This model — which is represented schematically in Figure 2.1 — specifies two pathways that lead from multiple social identities to positive adjustment. The first of these is a *social identity continuity pathway* in which access to multiple group memberships protects well-being because this increases the likelihood that a person will be able to maintain at least some of those group memberships after the transition — thereby facilitating a sense of *self-continuity* over the course of the transition (Jones & Jetten, 2011; Thoits, 1983). The second pathway is a *social identity gain pathway* in which having multiple group memberships provides a platform for the acquisition of new identities after the transition (See Figure 2.1).

SIMIC has been supported by a large number of studies that have been conducted in clinical, organizational, and educational contexts (Cruwys, Haslam, et al., 2014; Haslam et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2002; Seymour-Smith et al., 2017; Steffens et al., 2016). However, three lines of educational research are particularly relevant to the present research. First, as intimated above,

Iyer and colleagues (2009) found that students adjusted better to life at university to the extent that they had multiple group memberships prior to starting their study and hence were more likely to retain some of those group memberships in their new life. Second, in another study of first-year university students, Greenaway et al. (2016) found that the acquisition of new social identities over a seven-month period was positively associated with students' self-esteem, belonging and meaning which in turn, predicted reduced depression (see also Hendrickson et al., 2011). Third, research shows that international students adjusted less well to study overseas — and, in particular, were more stressed and depressed, to the extent that this was associated with a loss of valued group memberships (Levine et al., 2005; Praharso et al., 2017; Reicher & Haslam, 2006; Schmitt et al., 2003).

The present study

The present research investigates the key propositions of SIMIC in the context of an international student population undergoing life transition associated with moving overseas to study. While previous research (notably Praharso et al., 2017) speaks to the importance of the social identity continuity pathway for mental health and well-being, in the present research we also explore the role played by new group membership, and the degree to which well-being outcomes feed into academic performance and academic retention, both being important indicators of adjustment and future professional success in this population. More specifically, we report the findings of a longitudinal study conducted with international students from a Foundation Year programme in a large Australian University (that we will hereafter refer to as AUFY). AUFY is a bridging programme for international students that give them direct entry to university upon completion of their studies. During the time of data collection, these international students were newly arrived in Australia from their home country, and had just begun their Foundation Year programme. In line with SIMIC, the main hypotheses for this study were as follows:

- H1: If international students maintain multiple group memberships when they move overseas to study this will predict enhanced (a) academic performance, (b) mental health and (c) well-being.
- H2: If international students acquire new group memberships after moving overseas to study this will predict enhanced (a) academic performance, (b) mental health and (c) well-being.
- H3: The positive impact of prior group memberships will be mediated by maintained group membership (H1) over time.
- H4: The positive impact of prior group memberships will be mediated by social identity gain (H2) over time.

Beyond the effects of new and maintained identity on health and well-being, we also want to explore how these two SIMIC pathways relate to international students' subsequent retention. Here we predict that:

H5: To the extent that international students maintained previous social identities and acquire new ones, this will predict improved retention via academic performance, mental health, and well-being.

These five hypotheses are represented schematically in Figure 4.1.

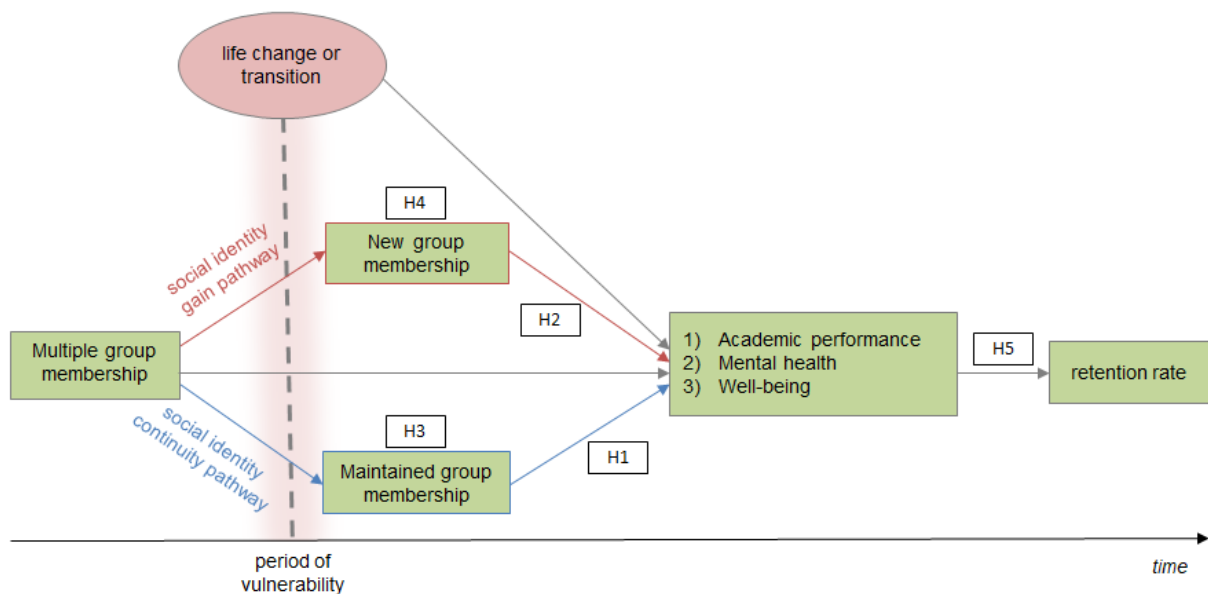


Figure 4.1. A schematic representation of research hypotheses

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were international students in a Foundation Year programme at a large Australian University (AUFY). AUFY is a bridging programme for international students that provide a foundation for them to gain entry to an Australian university upon satisfactory completion of the programme.

Students were drawn from 19 different countries (China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Oman, Taiwan, Korea, Turkey, Ecuador, Macau, Vietnam, Kenya, Mozambique, Russia, Laos, Thailand, Mongolia and Saudi Arabia) and were recruited during their Academic English classes. They were surveyed longitudinally at three time points. Time 1 (T1) was in the first week of the academic year. Time 2 (T2) was at the end of their first semester, approximately 3 months later, Time 3 was at the end of the academic year (approximately 5 months after T2). At T1, 237

participants responded (111 male and 126 females aged between 17 to 31, $M=18.73$). At T2, 210 participants had completed the survey across the first two time points (95 male and 115 female students again aged between 17 to 31, $M=18.78$) Academic data were collected from these same 210 students at Time 3. The attrition rate between time 1 and time 2 is 11%; there is no attrition between time 2 and time 3 as the academic results of the same 210 students at time 2 were collected from the AUFY system by the researcher at time 3. Binary logistic regression analysis indicated that attrition at T2 was unrelated to our constructs of interest or demographic variables at T1.

Procedure

The study was approved by the relevant ethics committee at the authors' university (15-PSYCH-PHD-09-JH). International students studying in AUFY were recruited during their Academic English classes. We obtained participants' consent to administer the surveys and to extract their academic performance from the AUFY system at the end of each semester.

The survey took around 20 minutes to complete. Participants were asked to complete the same survey at T1 and T2. At T2, participants' academic performance was extracted from the AUFY student management system and matched with their survey data. At T3, academic records were accessed for the T2 participants to provide an indication of who had dropped out of the program of study (vs. completed the full year of study).

Measures

The survey comprised measures of social identity, mental health, adjustment and well-being.

Multiple group membership. A four-item scale adapted from Haslam et al. (2008) measured the degree to which respondents saw themselves as belonging to multiple social groups (sample item: "Before I became an AUFY student, I belonged to lots of different groups"; $\alpha_{T2} = .87$). Here and for all other social identity and life satisfaction measures, responses were made on seven-point scales (where 1 = "do not agree at all" and 7 = "completely agree").

New group membership. A four-item scale from Haslam et al. (2008) measured participants' strength of association with new social groups after their life transition (sample item: "After I became an AUFY student, I developed strong ties with one or more new groups"; $\alpha_{T2} = .90$).

Maintained group membership. A four-item scale from Haslam et al. (2008) measured the degree to which participants were able to maintain their pre-existing social group membership during the transition (sample item: "I continue to have strong ties with the same groups that I had ties with before I became an AUFY student"; $\alpha_{T2} = .86$).

Mental Health. This was assessed using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) — a 21-item scale ($\alpha_{T2} = .95$) that measures negative emotional states of depression, anxiety and stress. Participants rated the extent to which they had experienced a particular state over the course of the past week (sample items: “I found myself getting upset by quite trivial things”, “I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all”, and “I felt scared without any good reason”). Responses were made on four-point scales from 0 (“did not apply to me at all”) to 3 (“applied to me very much or most of the time”). Scores for Depression, Anxiety and Stress were calculated by summing the relevant items. The mental health composite score was derived by summing the scores for depression, anxiety and stress and multiplying by two in compliance with the scoring of the full DASS-42 scale.

Well-being. This was indexed by the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Larsen, Levine, and Emmons (1985) $\alpha_{T2} = .86$; sample item: “In most ways my life is close to ideal”).

Academic Performance. This was indexed by participants’ Grade Point Average (GPA) achieved across five subjects during their studies in AUFY. This was extracted from the official AUFY grading system at the end of Semester one. GPA is calculated on a seven-point scale where 7.0 is a perfect score and 4.0 is a pass.

Academic Retention. This was indexed by students’ enrolment status at T3, as extracted from the AUFY’s student management system at the end of Semester 2 (where discontinued = 0, completed course = 1).

Results

Analytic approach

All hypotheses were assessed using structural equation modelling (SEM) in AMOS to model all of the hypothesised relationships simultaneously. Five-thousand bootstrap trials were used to perform the analysis (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007). Analyses were conducted with multiple group memberships (T1) included as an exogenous variable, and with (a) academic performance, (b) mental health and (c) well-being (T2) and academic retention (T3) as endogenous variables. Maintained group membership and new group membership (T2) were entered as mediators. Time 1 variables for maintained and new group membership, mental health and satisfaction with life were entered in the model as predictors of their T2 equivalent and allowed to covary. Results of these analyses are presented in Figure 4.2. The mean, standard deviation and correlations across all measures for the three time points are presented in Table 4.1.

Tests of hypotheses

H1 suggested that maintained group membership after moving to university would predict (a) academic performance, (b) mental health and (c) well-being. This hypothesis was partially supported, with maintained group membership at T2 predicting academic performance ($\beta = .26, p < .001$) and well-being ($\beta = .13, p = .028$) at T2. The relationship between maintained group membership at T2 and mental health at T2 ($\beta = -.07, p = .183$) was not significant.

H2 suggested that new group membership after moving to university would predict (a) academic performance, (b) mental health and (c) well-being. This hypothesis was not supported as new group membership at T2 did not predict any of these outcomes.

Table 4.1 Mean, standard deviation and bivariate correlations.

	Mean	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. T1 Multiple group membership	4.43	1.38	1-4											
2. T1 New group membership	4.51	1.56	1-4	.35**										
3. T1 Maintained group membership	4.41	1.46	1-4	.41**	.32**									
4.T1 Mental Health	29.44	20.66	0-126	-.09	-.04	-.03								
5.T1 Life Satisfaction	4.58	1.23	1-5	.17*	.11	.10	-.22**							
6. T2 Multiple group membership	4.49	1.32	1-4	.31**	.21**	.24**	-.11	.09						
7. T2 New group membership	4.48	1.34	1-4	.22**	.30**	.18**	-.06	.08	.47**					
8.T2 Maintained group membership	4.53	1.37	1-4	.26**	.17*	.30**	-.18*	.17*	.49**	.37**				
9. T2 Mental Health	29.34	23.55	0-126	.02	.08	-.00	.61**	-.13	-.09	-.07	-.18**			
10. T2 Life Satisfaction	4.41	1.26	1-5	.13	.11	.12	-.26**	.56**	.17*	.14*	.23**	-.19**		
11. T2 Academic Performance	5.15	1.24	1-7	.11	-.05	.06	-.17*	.00	.11	.08	.25**	-.29**	.08	
12. T3 Academic Retention	.85		0-1	.09	.06	.00	-.13	.02	.08	.09	.20**	-.21**	.00	.69**

Note: * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$ (2-tailed). Higher numbers indicate greater agreement. Academic Retention is a dichotomous variable, 0=Discontinued, 1=Completed.

Looking at H3 and H4 simultaneously, the overall indirect effect of multiple group membership (T1) via maintained group membership was significant for academic performance ($\beta = .06$; CI: .00, .09) and well-being ($\beta = .08$; CI: .00, .07). In order to test this indirect effect further, we examined the specific pathways separately.

H3 tested for the positive impact of prior group memberships as mediated by maintained group membership over time. Results of this analysis provided clear support for H3. More specifically, multiple group memberships at T1 significantly predicted maintained group membership at T2 ($\beta = .16$, $p = .023$) and, through this, they also indirectly predicted academic performance ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$) and well-being ($\beta = .13$, $p = .028$). Again, the relationship between maintained group membership at T2 and mental health was non-significant ($\beta = -.07$, $p = .183$).

H4 tested for the positive impact of prior group memberships as mediated by new group membership after moving overseas to study. There was no support for this hypothesis. Multiple group memberships at T1 did not predict new group membership at T2 ($\beta = .13$, $p = .072$), and the indirect effects of this on (a) academic performance ($\beta = -.02$, $p = .779$), (b) mental health ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .919$) and (c) well-being ($\beta = .05$, $p = .382$) were all non-significant ($p > .05$).

Accordingly, it is clear that the indirect effect of multiple group membership prior to moving overseas to study on subsequent academic performance and well-being is primarily attributable to support for H3. That is, having multiple group memberships prior to moving overseas to study protected academic performance and well-being three months later because students with more prior group memberships were more likely to maintain social identities in their new environment than students with fewer prior group memberships.

H5 predicts that maintained group membership (H3) and new group membership (H4) would indirectly improve academic retention via their role in supporting academic performance, mental health and well-being. To test this proposition, we used Bayesian analyses treating retention rate as a true binary dependant variable (Albert & Chib, 1993). The results were equivalent to those of a standard SEM, and so we report the standard SEM here. In partial support of H5, the indirect effect on retention was significant for multiple group membership at T1 ($\beta = .03$; CI: .00, .06) and maintained group membership at T2 ($\beta = .26$; CI: .08, .26). Moreover, only academic performance at T2 ($\beta = .68$, $p < .001$), but not mental health (T2) ($\beta = -.02$, $p = .623$) or well-being (T2) ($\beta = -.05$, $p = .310$), predicted academic retention at T3. This suggests that multiple group memberships and maintained group membership protect students from dropping out primarily because they are associated with improved academic performance.

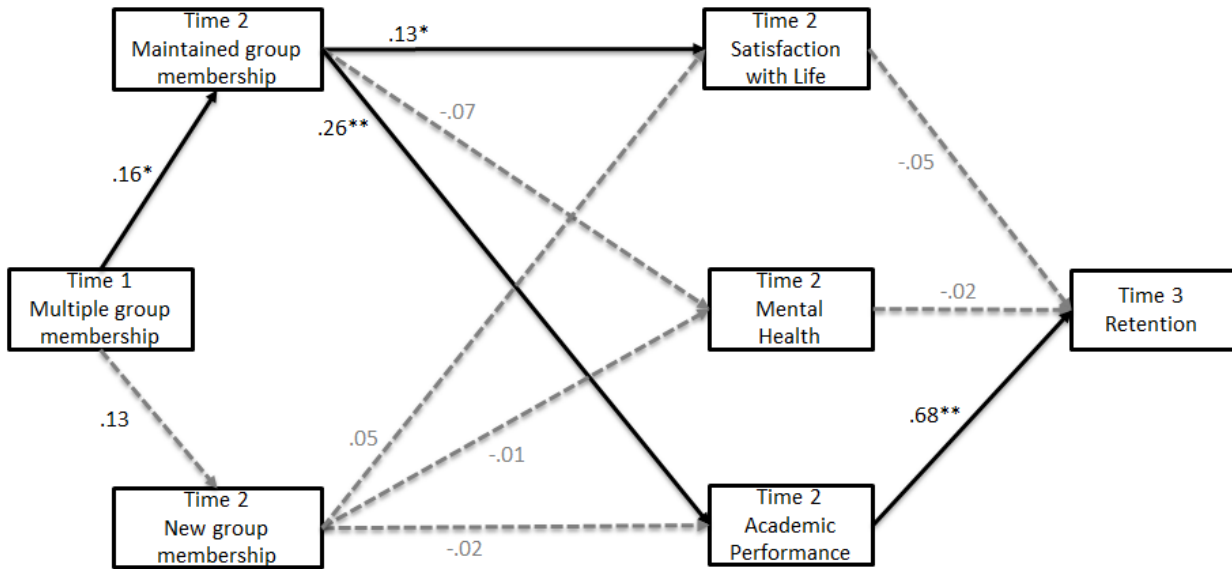


Figure 4.2. Model demonstrating social identification pathways impacting on academic performance, mental health and well-being, leading to retention. T1 variables for maintained and new group membership, mental health and satisfaction with life were entered in the model as predictors of their T2 equivalent and allowed to covary.

Note: * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$ (2-tailed).

Sensitivity analysis

To establish the fit of the proposed model, we used a number of absolute and relative fit indices including the χ^2 goodness-of-fit test, comparative fit index (CFI), goodness of fit index (GFI), normal fit index (NFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and Akaike's information criterion (AIC). Details of these statistics are presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2. Model fit statistics.

CFI	GFI	NFI	RMSEA	AIC	χ^2
.92	.95	.87	.08	140.20	68.20**

Notes: ** $p < .01$

CFI=comparative fit index, GFI=goodness of fit index, NFI=normal fit index, RMSEA=root mean square error of approximation, AIC=Akaike's information criterion.

The χ^2 value was significant ($\chi^2 [30 df] = 68.20, p < .01$) and RMSEA showed an optimal fit of .08. This indicates that the model tested in this study is a good fit for the data. Hypothesis 5 proposed that maintaining and gaining new group membership can predict retention rates via academic performance, mental health and well-being. This was confirmed — indicating that international students who maintain group memberships have higher academic performance which in turn increases the likelihood of them not dropping out of study.

Discussion

The processes underpinning the academic and social integration of international students are not yet well understood within the higher education sector (Rienties et al., 2012). Speaking to this knowledge gap, the present study sought to gain a better understanding of the ways in which group memberships and associated social identity processes are implicated in international students' retention rate, academic performance, mental health and well-being. More specifically, the study sought to shed light on the way in which new group membership and maintained group membership pathways specified within the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC; see Figure 2.1) might impact on international students' academic performance, mental health, well-being, and ultimately their course completion.

Broadly speaking, the findings of this study are consistent with previous research which suggests that groups and associated social identities have an important role to play in buffering international students from the harmful effects of leaving their home country to pursue educational goals in a foreign country (Gomes et al., 2014; Gu et al., 2010; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008). In particular, the study provided clear evidence to support the hypothesis that having multiple group memberships before moving overseas supports students' well-being and academic achievement because it is a basis for them to retain a sense of maintained group membership (in line with H1 and H3). This finding is consistent with epidemiological research which points to multiple social identities as an important source of social capital (Kawachi and Berkman (2001) as well as with clinical research which shows that people with multiple group memberships are protected from the negative consequences of both stroke (Clarke & Black, 2005; Haslam et al., 2008) and depression (Cruwys et al., 2013; Cruwys, Haslam, et al., 2014). According to the social identity theorising which informs SIMIC, the key reason for this relationship is that social identities provide people with access to key resources — notably a sense of social connection, support, meaning and agency (e.g., see Cruwys et al., 2014; Haslam et al., 2018; Jetten et al., 2014), and hence the more of these they are able to maintain in the course of a given life transition the more resources they will have available to negotiate that transition successfully.

Nevertheless, a novel dimension of the present study is that it shows that, as well as affecting well-being, maintained group membership also has implications for academic performance and student retention. This possibility is hinted at in previous work (e.g., by Iyer, 2009), and it accords with research by Severiens and Wolff (2008) which shows that students who remain well connected to students and teachers from school, are more likely to achieve better academic results and more likely to graduate from university. The present study extends these findings to show that maintained group membership is an important psychological substrate to these links between social engagement and academic outcomes.

Supporting H5, there was also clear evidence that maintained group membership predicted students' ability to ultimately complete their course of studies. Overall, then, the results fitted well with a model in which course completion was predicted by earlier academic performance that it was associated with having more prior group memberships that provided the platform for a greater sense of maintained group membership while studying abroad. While previous experimental and survey research has established a close link between social identity processes and student well-being and performance (e.g., see Mavor et al., 2017), to our knowledge, this is the first study to provide longitudinal evidence of the unfolding link between maintained group membership and long-term course completion.

At the same time, though, there was no evidence of a direct link between multiple prior group memberships and these outcomes (as predicted under H1) and no evidence that multiple prior group memberships supported well-being and academic achievement because it provided a basis for the acquisition of new group membership (as predicted under H2 and H4). This had been predicted on the basis of SIMIC's social identity gain pathway and evidence both (a) that new group membership enhances students' self-esteem, sense of belonging, and mental health (Greenaway et al. (2016) and (b) that the acquisition of new group-based social connections leads international students to be more satisfied, content, and less homesick (Hendrickson et al. (2011).

Precisely why there was no evidence of such relationships in the present data is unclear. One possibility is that international students are more attuned to — and hence more affected by — the prospect of social identity loss (which would create a sense of discontinuity) than by that of social identity gain. Some support for this proposition comes from qualitative work in the present program of research which found that, at least in the early stages of their time abroad, students were more focused on the need to stay connected to family and friends at home (and of the barriers to doing this) than they were on possibility of joining new groups (Ng, Haslam, Haslam, & Cruwys, 2018). In part, this was because students reported needing to know that old identities were secure before feeling sufficiently confident to develop new ones. Relatedly, it is also possible that international

students do not see the importance of joining new groups because they do not intend to stay in their host countries for very long. This suggests that in future research there may be value in seeing whether support for hypotheses associated with the social identity gain pathway is moderated by the length of time that students' intend to be away from their home country.

Practical implications

The above findings suggest that in order to understand how international students adapt to the identity changes they confront, it is important to understand not only the nature of their pre-existing identity networks and the ways these will be affected by the transition, but also how their new student identity fits with previously established identities (Iyer et al., 2009). More specifically, our findings suggest that higher education institutions which are seeking to improve overseas student retention (as most are) should attend to these identity dynamics and seek to develop and implement programmes that help international students maintain and consolidate group-based social connections from the very start of those students' time overseas. This is because when (and to the extent that) students have a strong network of social identities and this is preserved across life transitions, it appears to increase the likelihood of them being able to cope with, and adjust to change (Haslam et al., 2008).

The importance of this point is reinforced by the fact that in the present study the acquisition of new social identities proved not to be as important for international students' adjustment as we had anticipated (e.g., following Hendrickson et al. (2011)). While we are wary of reading too much into a null result, it is possible that as suggested above, this reflects the fact that for new students, maintained group membership may be more important than new group membership. At the very least, then, this suggests that acculturation and orientation programs that draw students' attention to the possibility of joining news groups should be complemented by programs that emphasize the importance of maintaining their old social networks and using these as a secure psychological platform from which to reach out to form fresh bonds with others in their new environment.

Limitations and directions for future research

A key limitation of this research is that some of our measures relied on self-reported surveys that were completed in a classroom setting. This might have encouraged students who were vulnerable or who worried that they might be singled out for attention to respond in a socially desirable manner. At the same time, though, we took steps to ensure that the participants were comfortable about responding and, in particular, it was emphasized that their responses would remain confidential. Importantly too, while socially desirable responding might have affected the

self-report variables, our indicators of academic performance and student drop-out were objective measures based on student records, and so it is a strength of this research that were able to predict these outcomes.

Although this research advanced on previous cross-sectional research in this area (e.g., Neri & Ville, 2008; Gu et al., 2010; Russell et al., 2010; Rienties et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2015) by using a longitudinal design and also performing relevant sensitivity analyses, it is also the case that its design does not allow us to make strong statements about causality. Accordingly, future research might benefit from designs that involve not only a greater number of survey waves but also experimental manipulations of identity continuity with the aim of assaying the causal impact of this on student well-being and performance. Another possibility for future research is to explore whether new group memberships can also involve maintaining old identities but with a new group with people (i.e. cultural groups for international students). Future studies could also involve survey participants filling in the names of the groups that they have joined in order to code the type of group memberships that they are in.

One clear possibility here would be for this to take the form of *structured intervention*. Indeed, the obvious candidate here is the GROUPS 4 HEALTH program (Haslam, Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle, & Chang, 2016) since this targets the two pathways specified within SIMIC. Work of this form is currently being undertaken as a final phase of the current program of research. As with the present research, our hope is that this will provide another important piece of a jigsaw which, together, presents an integrated and coherent picture of the ways in which the alignment of old and new social identities underpins the experiences and outcomes of students living overseas.

Chapter 5

GROUPS 4 HEALTH-For International Students (G4H-IS):

Assessing the feasibility of a social identity-based intervention for international students

Abstract

International students undergo a major life transition when they leave their home country to pursue education overseas. The stress of adjustment often leads them to feel lonely, socially isolated and homesick, for reasons that may include unfamiliarity with local culture and (sometimes) limited English language ability. This study assessed whether changes in social identification were responsible for changes in mental health (depression) and well-being (satisfaction with life and self-esteem) for international students ($N=123$) over time. We followed this up with a feasibility study in which we divided participants into two groups: a control group ($N=96$) and a group who participated in GROUPS 4 HEALTH-For International Students (G4H-IS) ($N=27$). G4H-IS is a four-module manualized program, adapted from the evidence-based GROUPS 4 HEALTH (G4H) program to suit the international student experience of life change and seek to increase social connectedness by building group-based social identifications via an in-vivo group experience. The program targets different aspects of social group life that are affected by life transition as identified within the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC). Although the results showed that gaining new and maintaining old identities after moving overseas to study resulted in reduced depression as well as improved satisfaction with life and self-esteem, there was limited evidence that G4H-IS affected these outcomes. Qualitative feedback from facilitators pointed to ways in which the program might be refined and improved for this population ahead of further trials.

GROUPS 4 HEALTH-For International Students (G4H-IS):

Assessing the feasibility of a social identity-based intervention for international students

Many students choose to travel overseas to pursue their education. This is because young people and their parents often believe that this will have a positive impact on their career path and prospects. Indeed, for students who move abroad, overseas education provides cross-cultural opportunities that can have tangible benefits: broadening a person's life experiences, promoting academic and personal growth, as well as gaining understanding of different cultures (Andrade, 2006). For their host countries, international students contribute academically, culturally and financially to their universities and to society as a whole. In the market-driven landscape of international education, international students are often assumed to be global citizens with an understanding of values and culture of western capitalist economies (Marginson, 2011). Their identities are constructed on the basis of personal and social experiences from their home countries that change when they are enriched (and also complicated by) their new experiences in their host country. In this regard, international students undergo a major life transition when they leave their home country to embark on their education overseas. In particular, previous research indicates that the initial stages of adjustment often come with feelings of stress and uncertainty (Miller, 2010). Some research has also identified a variety of cultural differences that are risk factors for international student adaptation, while other work recognizes cultural barriers as a source of anxiety that international students confront in navigating their daily lives (Dravid, 2014).

In a recent study conducted among approximately 900 international students studying in a western country, 41% were found to experience substantial levels of stress, due to homesickness, cultural shocks and perceived discrimination (Russell et al., 2010). In a qualitative study conducted with 200 international students, interview data revealed that two-thirds of participants experienced problems of loneliness and isolation — personal loneliness due to the loss of contact with families, social loneliness due to the loss of networks, and cultural loneliness triggered by the dislocation from a preferred cultural and linguistic environment (Sawir et al., 2008). Furthermore, international students are often stereotyped as handicapped: lacking English language ability, and familiarity with both the local culture and the education system (Lee & Rice, 2007; Pedersen, 1991). Having limited English proficiency adds to the stress of adjustment in both academic and non-academic settings, bringing further difficulties when it comes to communicating their concerns and seeking social support from others (Zhou et al., 2008). In this context, international students are often targets of discrimination and may be isolated from domestic students (Gu et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2008).

Khawaja and Dempsey (2008) compared international students and domestic students enrolled at an Australian university and found that international students have less social support, use more dysfunctional coping strategies, and experience greater incongruence between their expectations and experiences of university life. As a result, international students are more susceptible to loneliness, social isolation and feelings of homesickness — especially in the first few months of their studies (Sawir et al., 2008). Loneliness and social isolation in turn are often predictors of depressive symptoms, and this makes international students more at risk of dropping out of university all together (Cacioppo, Hawkley, & Thisted, 2010). Indeed, students who drop out of higher education often state that their social networks provided insufficient support for them to continue (Christie et al., 2004). In part this is because, due to their distance from friends and family in their home country, the life transitions that international students undergo take place in isolation from previous support networks (Pedersen, 1991; Praharso et al., 2017).

In the context of these transitional challenges, social group memberships are especially important to international students (see Chapter 3). Studying overseas involves changing an individual's physical location, leaving home and friends behind, becoming more independent and navigating the waters in a foreign country. This is a time where new group memberships are established and new group identities arise in the context of experiences that students share and differentiate them from other groups, such as domestic students (Schmitt et al., 2003).

In line with these observations, findings from research by Iyer et al. (2009) not only confirmed the detrimental effects on well-being that university students experienced after a life transition, but also showed that identification as a university student can mitigate the negative effects of life transitions and improve well-being. In the same study, identification as a university student was found to predict higher levels of well-being, independent of other factors (e.g., academic obstacles, financial obstacles, and general goal achievement) that may influence students' experience at university. Further evidence for the protective nature of group identification emerged from examination of the processes that underpin this identity transition. Specifically, it appeared that identification with one or more groups at university provides students with distinct resources — in particular, social support — that help them cope with the negative consequences of the transition (Iyer et al., 2009).

A host of other studies reach similar conclusions. For example, a longitudinal study by Praharso et al. (2017) found that international students who experienced a loss in one or more social identities as a result of the transition to overseas study experienced a subsequent decline in well-being. Similarly, a longitudinal study by Jetten, Iyer, Tsivrikos, and Young (2008) of students entering university provided further evidence that identification with new groups was predictive of

the quality of students' experience — such that the more they identified with university students as a group, the more likely they were to believe that attending university would serve as an upward mobility strategy and help improve their socio-economic status. Severiens and Wolff (2008) also found that students who feel “at home”, who are well connected to fellow-students and teachers, and who take part in extra-curricular activities are more likely to graduate. And, finally, Wilcox et al. (2005) found that social support from family and friends, having friends, sharing accommodation with other students, and having informal contacts with university staff all have a positive influence on both social integration and study success.

Consistent with these various observations, previous studies in this program of research has found that social identity gain (via integration with the host culture) and social identity continuity (via maintained connection with one's own culture) both facilitate positive social identity change that serves to buffer well-being in the context of life transition (Ng et al., 2018). A three-wave longitudinal study provided further evidence of the importance of social identity processes for successful life transitions — with maintained group membership over time predicting higher academic performance and better well-being outcomes (Ng, Haslam, Haslam, & Cruwys, under review).

Importantly, this evidence for social identity principles suggests that this theoretical framework might be used to inform intervention which guides international students through the process of adjusting to their new life overseas. Speaking to this possibility, the present research builds on our previous research by (a) further exploring the relationship between social identity processes in international students' adjustment, and (b) exploring the feasibility of an evidence-based intervention program designed to improve the mental health and well-being by helping to maintain pre-existing social identities while also developing new ones, adapted here for international students.

Social identity and the theoretical underpinnings for a novel intervention for international students

In social identity theory and self-categorization theory, group memberships are observed to provide people with a sense of social identity that proves to be central to the way they experience and respond to change (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982). Here, social identity refers to those aspects of an individual's self-image that are derived from the social categories or groups to which they see themselves as belonging, together with the value and emotional significance attached to that category or group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Groups therefore have psychological impact — in particular, as a basis for group behaviour — when their members internalise a shared sense of

social identity and use this to inform their perceptions and actions (Turner, 1982). This internalised group membership then serves to define a person's sense of 'who they are' in a given context. The more an individual identifies with a group, the more their sense of self will also be intertwined with the group and the more their thoughts, feelings and behaviour will be shaped by the group.

In this way, groups provide individuals with shared grounding as well as connectedness to others, and are thus an important platform for health and well-being (Jetten et al., 2012). Moreover, because our sense of self is bound up with our social identities, losing group memberships is expected to have an adverse impact on health (Cruwys et al., 2013). In line with this point, the negative consequences for well-being that follow from change to, or loss of, an important group membership are well-documented (Chandler & Proulx, 2008; Thoits, 1983). Indeed, social identity loss typically leads to feelings of loneliness and isolation that can be a catalyst to the development of depressive symptoms (Clarke & Black, 2005). Evidence of this is provided in research by Seymour-Smith et al. (2017), who found that loss of group membership among new mothers was associated with increased depressive symptomology. Similar findings have also been reported in studies of other populations in which identity change follows from multiple sclerosis (Tabuteau-Harrison et al., 2016), stroke (Haslam et al., 2008), depression (Cruwys et al., 2013; Cruwys, Haslam, et al., 2014) and retirement (Steffens et al., 2016). In slightly different ways, these studies all speak to the way in which social identity supports social connectedness and, through this, increases resilience in the face of life change.

In this regard, the main model that has attempted to specify the effects that loss and change in group memberships have during life change is the *Social Identity Model of Identity Change* (SIMIC; (Haslam et al., 2018). SIMIC identifies three group processes that serve to protect well-being when people are going through life transition: (a) belonging to multiple social groups, (b) social group maintenance, and (c) social group gain (See Figure 2.1). In line with the reasoning outlined above, previous research shows that belonging to multiple groups is important because it increases the likelihood of a person having access to useful forms of support during life change (Haslam et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2009; Praherso et al., 2017; Sani et al., 2012). Early support for SIMIC was also provided by a study of stroke sufferers which found that belonging to multiple groups was associated with better quality of life because there was a greater likelihood that some of those memberships would be preserved after life transition (Haslam et al., 2008). In line with this point, belonging to multiple important groups has also been found to predict personal self-esteem in children and older adults over time (Jetten et al., 2015).

Social identity gains associated with joining new groups have also been shown to improve physical and psychological well-being, especially among people who are vulnerable as a result of

social isolation (Gleibs et al., 2011). Supporting this point is evidence from a study of university students which found that identification with one's university (and well-being) was enhanced among students who perceived their new university identity to be compatible with their existing identities, and who held more group memberships before the transition (Iyer et al., 2009). This highlights another aspect of SIMIC predicted to contribute to adjustment in the context of transition: the fit or compatibility between various group memberships. As these data suggest, where there is compatibility this help buffer individuals from the negative well-being consequences of change.

GROUPS 4 HEALTH

In recent years, insight into the different pathways specified within SIMIC has informed the development of an evidence-based program, GROUPS 4 HEALTH (G4H), designed to counteract the negative effects of social isolation associated with a lack or loss of social identifications. G4H is a five-module, manualized program that seeks to increase connectedness by building group-based social identifications in the context of an in-vivo group experience (Haslam et al., 2016).

Each G4H module contains a series of exercises and discussions that target the different aspects of group life identified within SIMIC (Haslam et al., 2016). The first module is "Schooling". This is a psychoeducational module which raises awareness of the health-related benefits of social group memberships and associated social identities. The second module is "Scoping" which focuses on identifying group-based resources through *social identity mapping* — a tool developed to map participants' social world, allowing them to visualise their groups and existing social identities more concretely and think about how well these meet their needs (Cruwys et al., 2016). The third module is "Sourcing"; which encourages participants to reflect on existing group memberships with a view to optimizing and sustaining these in the long term. The fourth module is "Scaffolding," and in this participants identify new social group connections that they wish to develop in the context of creating a social plan to address any changes they wish to make. The final module, "Sustaining", is a booster session held one month later that aims to troubleshoot any difficulties that have arisen in the course of participants' efforts to implement their social plans and also to revisit their social identity maps in the context of their involvement in the program.

In previous research, G4H has been delivered to young adults presenting with social isolation and associated affective disturbance (Haslam et al., 2016). Results show that the intervention has the capacity to significantly improve mental health, well-being and social connectedness both on program completion and at a six-month follow up (Haslam et al., 2016). In line with social identity theorizing, improvements in depression, anxiety, stress, loneliness and

satisfaction with life were also underpinned by participants' increased identification with their G4H group and with multiple groups (Haslam et al., 2016).

GROUPS 4 HEALTH-For International Students (G4H-IS)

As the above description highlights, the G4H program targets social isolation and lack of connectedness, which are the core issues that international students often face when they transition to their host country to pursue tertiary education. In light of this, in the present research we sought to adapt G4H for international student participants and then assess its feasibility as intervention to help members of this population tackle the range of social and mental health challenges to which they are often prone.

In line with the goals of the original G4H program, GROUPS 4 HEALTH-For International Students (G4H-IS) seeks to tackle psychological challenges associated with identity loss and associated social isolation and thereby improve general mental health and satisfaction with life. To reduce the logistical challenges associated with running a five-module program, G4H-IS was reduced to a four-module manualized program in which there was no follow-up (fifth) session. The content was also revised to be fit for international students who have experienced life change as a result of moving overseas to pursue their education. Thus, while examples in the programme manual and workbook were adapted to ensure they were more relevant to the international student population, the G4H exercises and discussions targeting different aspects of group life pertaining to the processes of life transition identified within SIMIC were retained.

The present study

The aims of the present study were first, to investigate the social identity processes and its impact on international students and second, to assess an intervention to help manage the consequences of social disconnection in international students. This second aim was addressed through (a) piloting the G4H-IS program and (b) examining process and feasibility issues with facilitators who ran the program. The study was conducted with international students from a Foundation Year programme in a large Australian university (that we will hereafter refer to as AUFY). AUFY is a one-year bridging programme for international students that give them direct entry to university upon completion of their studies. G4H-IS was delivered at the end of the Foundation Year programme at a point when participants were reaching the end of their studies in AUFY and in the process of planning to pursue further tertiary study. Thus, not only had these students experienced a significant life transition when taking up their AUFY study, but they were also about to face another transition as they progressed into their university studies proper.

Drawing on SIMICs reasoning the study was guided by the following hypotheses:

H1: To the extent that international students (a) strengthened their sense of belonging to multiple groups at the beginning of the study, (b) acquired new groups at, and/or (c) maintained social group memberships across time at the end of studying in AUFY, this would be associated with better mental health and well-being outcomes.

H2: Running G4H-IS with international students to (a) pilot an adapted programme to see if G4H-IS improved their health and well-being scores upon programme completion, and (b) consider questions of feasibility as examined with program facilitators.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and twenty one international students within a Foundation Year programme at AUFY were initially recruited to participate in this study. They were recruited during their Academic English and Behavioural Science classes, and completed questionnaires for the study at two time points approximately five weeks apart. Students from the Academic English classes (n=155) were included in the study as controls, while those from the Behavioural Science classes (n=66) were recruited to the G4H-IS intervention. The researcher obtained permission from AUFY's senior management, Director of Studies and subject heads to recruit participants during their Academic English and Behavioural Science class time. These classes were selected by the senior management for logistic reasons related to access to relevant resources (e.g., timetabling issues and availability of computer labs). The Academic English class was selected because this is a compulsory subject for all AUFY students; hence accessing this provided the best opportunity to access the full cohort of AUFY students. The Behavioural Science classes were selected due to the logistic issues mentioned above. Of these, 127 participants and 34 participants respectively, in control and intervention conditions, were available to take part in T2 data collection. However, there was considerable missing data from 38 participants and thus the data for final analysis came from 96 participants in the control condition (45 males, 51 females; aged 17 to 23, $M = 19.21$, $SD = 1.17$) and 27 participants in the intervention condition (8 males, 19 females; aged 18 to 25, $M = 19.30$, $SD = 1.49$). The attrition rate for the control condition is 38.01% and for the intervention condition it is 59.09%. Binary logistic regression analysis indicated that attrition at T2 was unrelated to our constructs of interest or demographic variables at T1. This attrition rate was due to students withdrawing as a result of assignment deadlines and upcoming exams, or being absent on the day of data collection (see Figure 5.1). Participants came from 13 different countries: China,

Oman, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Macau, Mozambique, Thailand, Zambia, Hungary, and Malaysia.

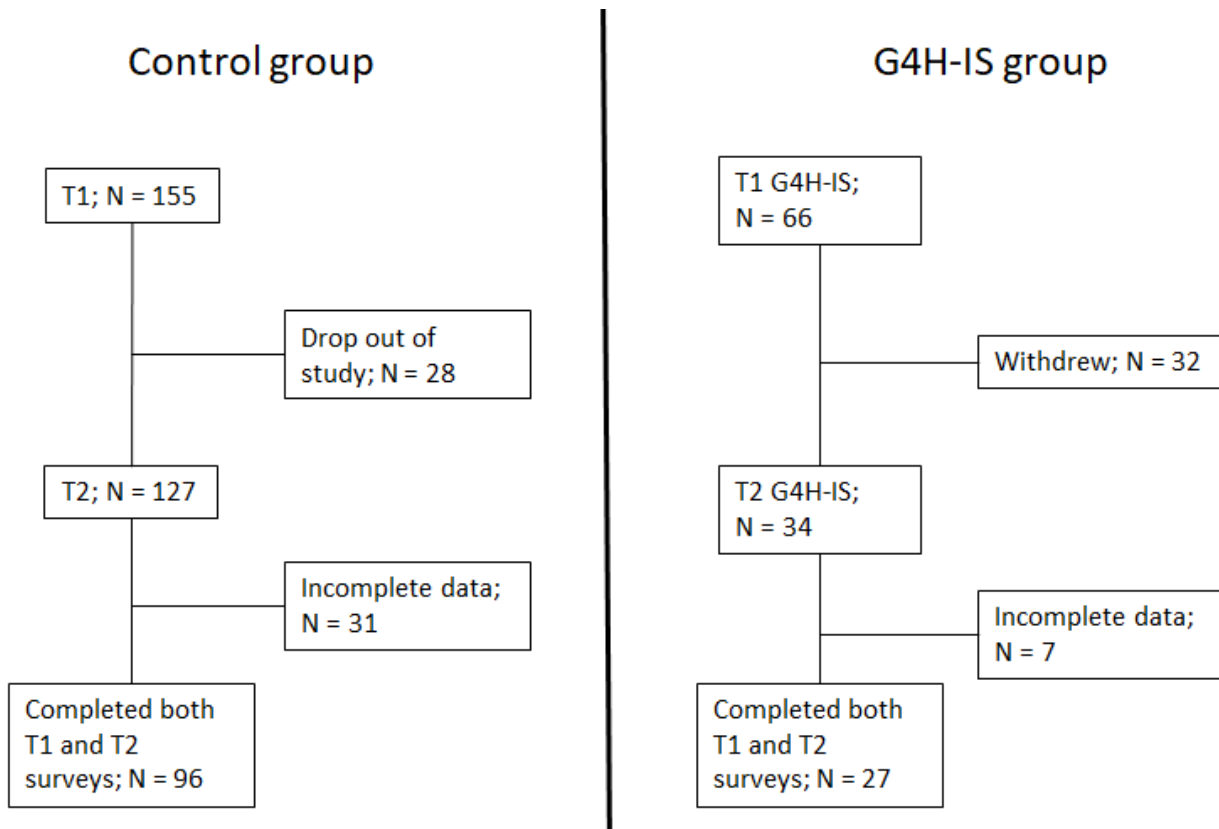


Figure 5.1. Flow diagram showing participant progress in the study ($N = 123$)

Measures

An online survey contained the same measures of social identity, mental health, well-being and self-esteem across both time points in the study, and was administered to both the control and G4H-IS groups. The details of these were as follows:

Multiple group membership. This was a four-item scale ($\alpha_{T2} = .91$) adapted from Haslam et al. (2008) that measured the degree to which people saw themselves as belonging to multiple social groups (e.g., “Before I became an AUFY student, I belonged to lots of different groups”). Here and below (unless otherwise stated), responses were made a 7-point scales with anchors (1) *do not agree at all* and (7) *completely agree*, and the scale was constructed by taking the mean of these items.

New group membership. This is a four-item scale ($\alpha_{T2} = .94$) from Haslam et al. (2008) that measures participants’ strength of association with new social groups after experiencing a life

transition (e.g., “After I became an AUFY student, I developed strong ties with one or more new groups”).

Maintained group membership. This four-item scale ($\alpha_{T2} = .91$; from Haslam et al. (2008)) measured the degree to which participants were able to maintain their pre-existing social group membership during the transition to overseas study (e.g., “I continue to have strong ties with the same groups that I had ties with before I became a UQ Foundation Year student”).

Mental Health. The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) was used to measure depression. The seven-item subscale was used to measure depression. Participants rated the extent to which they had experienced depression over the past week. The items include questions such as “I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all” (depression subscale, $\alpha_{T2} = .92$). Responses were made on a four-point scale from 0 (*did not apply to me at all*) to 3 (*applied to me very much or most of the time*). Scores for depression were calculated by summing the scores for the relevant items and multiplying by two.

Well-being. This was indexed by the Satisfaction with Life Scale, a five-item scale ($\alpha_{T2} = .88$) previously developed by Diener et al. (1985) “In most ways my life is close to ideal”). Items were answered on seven-point scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and the score was derived from the mean of the scale's five items.

Self-esteem. This was indexed by a single-item scale, adapted from Robins, Hendin, and Trzesniewski (2001) measuring participants' self-esteem (“I have high self-esteem”). Responses were made on a seven-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Manual and workbook. The G4H-IS Therapist Manual (Ng, Haslam, Cruwys, Haslam, & Bentley, 2016a) provided facilitators with instructions to deliver modules consistently and aided the preparation of the module content and materials. The content in the therapist manual included a full description of exercises coupled with suggestions for introducing the topic and managing challenges that might arise during the sessions. The purpose of the manual was to support facilitators to run the programme and ensure consistency. The participant workbook (Ng, Haslam, Cruwys, Haslam, & Bentley, 2016b) was developed as a participant resource. This included the main activities and learning points for each session, and provided space to complete activities during the session and to document any relevant notes and plans to achieve particular goals. Both the manual and workbook were adapted from the original G4H program to suit the needs of an international student sample.

Procedure

The study was approved by the relevant ethics committee at the first author's university (15-PSYCH-PHD-09-JH). After obtaining consent (T1), participants were asked to respond to a survey

that took 20 minutes to complete. Participants in the active condition were assigned to a G4H-IS group that was conducted over four one-hour sessions held weekly in the AUFY classrooms. One or two graduate psychology students facilitated each group and the same facilitators were allocated to the same groups every week. To ensure programme fidelity, all facilitators received training to deliver G4H-IS according to the therapist manual and received weekly group supervision. Participants in the control group received education as usual. Within two weeks of the G4H-IS program concluding participants were asked to complete the T2 survey containing the same questions asked at T1.

On completion of the program, all facilitators and the behavioural science teacher who was present in every G4H-IS session were interviewed individually to gather feedback about program feasibility, content, delivery and areas for improvement in future iterations. These semi-structured interviews were conducted in a private office, recorded, and lasted between 30 and 46 minutes. Interview questions were guided by, but not restricted to, the interview protocol set out in Table 3. Interviewees were allowed to talk freely with no restrictions about what they discussed. Where appropriate, the interviewer prompted with additional exploratory questions (see examples provided in Table 5) to clarify any issues brought up by the interviewees. Questions were repeated or reframed when necessary to ensure comprehension. After the interview had ended the interviewees were debriefed and thanked for their time.

Interview data analysis strategy

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview responses in order to identify the themes and sub-themes associated with the interviewees' experience of delivering the G4H-IS program to international students in AUFY. Thematic analysis is a theoretically flexible approach which searches for themes or patterns in the qualitative data while retaining focus on the material from the interviewees (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This approach is most suitable for our present study as it marries a "top-down" theoretical perspective with the "bottom-up" experience of the interviewees (Haslam & McGarty, 2014).

In line with recommendations, interview recordings were transcribed after they had been listened to in full several times. The resulting transcripts were proofread several times. Common themes and comments were identified in the transcripts and sorted into similar patterned responses in a separate excel spreadsheet. Similar comments and observations were sorted through and grouped together. These topics were proofread by an experienced researcher to ensure the accuracy of the grouping. These topics were then sorted again into overarching themes that were descriptively close to the verbatim data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Further analyses were then conducted to sort through, filter, and rearrange the themes. The resulting themes were reviewed by

three experienced researchers who focused on their credibility and coherence. Any discrepancies were discussed between the team and the themes were amended accordingly. The different themes were explored and refined in part by representing their inter-relationship schematically (as recommended by Braun & Clarke, 2012). The quotations selected for presentation below were those that were seen to best represent the data that reflected particular themes and sub-themes.

Table 5.1. *Interview protocol.*

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Prompt</i>
Health and well-being of international students	What do you think are the main health and well-being issues that international students face?	
Program delivery	What was your experience of running the G4H-IS intervention after having run it?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you feel it went? • Do you think it was suitable for international students? • What was good about it, and what was not so good? • What were the main challenges associated with running G4H-IS? • How could the G4H-IS program be improved? • How might delivery and student engagement be improved?
Effectiveness of program	Do you think that G4H-IS was useful in helping to tackle the health and well-being issues that international students face?	
Feedback after program delivery	<p>After running the programme, do you think the participants gained sufficient skills to increase or maintain their social connectedness?</p> <p>Do you have any other observations about the G4H-IS program?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have any specific examples of this?

Results

Results are discussed in two sections; the first relating to quantitative analysis involving participant retention and testing of hypotheses, and the second, to analysis of interview data. The mean, standard deviation and correlations across all measures for both time points are presented in Table 5.2.

Quantitative findings

Participant attrition

As already mentioned in the Participant section, there was significant attrition in the experimental study. Of those who commenced this study as the control group, 61.9% were retained at T2. As compared to the control group, of those who commenced G4H-IS, 51.5% were retained at T2. This level of attrition reflected the difficulties running G4H-IS at the end of the AUFY programme year. Many participants withdrew from the study quoting that they need the time to work on their assignments to meet the assignment deadlines. More and more participants did not turn up in class as the weeks go by and when the researcher contacted them, they gave the reason that examinations are in a few weeks' time, hence they want to stay at home to study for their exams. This reflects on the timing of the G4H-IS programme being run at the end of the semester, a point which we will discuss in more depth in the discussion section.

Hypothesis testing

Our first hypothesis regarding social identity processes and their influence on international students were tested using hierarchical regression and the second hypothesis speaking to program effectiveness were tested using mixed analyses of variance (ANOVA). The mean and standard deviation for both the control group and G4H-IS group across all measures for both time points are presented in Table 5.3.

Three hierarchical regression analyses were used to test H1 examining the influence of multiple group membership, maintained group membership, and new group membership separately on mental health and well-being. For each regression model, Step 1 included T1 multiple group membership and outcomes measures. In Step 2, new group membership at T2 and maintained group membership at T2 were added. T2 outcome measures were added as dependent variables. As can be seen from Table 5.2, these analyses lent partial support to H1. In particular, new group membership at T2 predicted reduced depression ($\beta = -.18, p = .049$) and improved self-esteem ($\beta = .19, p = .053$), and this finding was marginally significant. Additionally, maintained group membership at T2 predicted improvement in satisfaction with life ($\beta = .25, p = .005$). No other significant effects emerged from this analysis.

To assess the effectiveness of G4H-IS (i.e., H2) we examined differences between (a) the intervention and control groups and (b) pre- and post-intervention of the G4H-IS group on key outcome measures (i.e., depression, self-esteem, and life satisfaction). This was done by means of a 2 (*condition*: control vs. intervention) X 2 (*phase*: T1, T2) mixed design analysis of variance (ANOVA). The results of this analysis are presented in Table 7. In the case of depression, no main effect, $F(1,121) = .32, p = .573$, or interaction, $F(1,121) = .62, p = .434$, was found. Similarly, no main effect, $F(1,121) = .14, p = .705$, or interaction, $F(1,121) = .10, p = .754$, was found for self-esteem. As this shows, there was no effect of the G4H-IS intervention over T1 and T2 on these measures. The one significant effect that emerged was a main effect of time on life satisfaction, $F(1,121) = 4.05, p = .046$; such that participants were more satisfied at T2 than they had been at T1. Nevertheless, the interaction was not significant $F(1,121) = .31, p = .581$, indicating that this improvement was not reliably different from the control group. As such, there was no substantive support for H2.

Table 5.2. Mean, standard deviation and bivariate correlations

	Mean	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. T1 Multiple group membership	5.00	1.30	1-4	1															
2. T1 New group membership	4.68	1.46	1-4	.46*	1														
3. T1 Maintained group membership	4.61	1.55	1-4	.57**	.55**	1													
4. T1 Depression	11.33	9.22	0-42	-.27	-.19	-.03	1												
5. T1 Anxiety	14.44	8.69	0-42	-.05	-.35	-.12	.55**	1											
6. T1 Stress	15.56	10.78	0-42	-.13	-.09	.03	.75**	.59**	1										
7. T1 Life Satisfaction	4.17	1.40	1-5	.17	.07	.18	-.51**	-.31	-.61**	1									
8. T1 Self-esteem	5.07	1.27	1-7	.08	-.28	-.19	-.25	.20	-.09	.43*	1								
9. T2 Multiple group membership	4.74	1.37	1-4	.68**	.33	.33	-.37	-.12	-.32	.37	.24	1							
10. T2 New group membership	5.21	1.15	1-4	.47*	.46*	.36	-.46*	-.12	-.36	.43*	.06	.74**	1						
11. T2 Maintained group membership	5.06	1.18	1-4	.17	.01	.11	-.16	.25	-.19	.15	.07	.30	.43*	1					
12. T2 Depression	12.74	11.26	0-42	-.35	-.32	-.09	.73**	.46*	.61**	-.40*	.05	-.56**	-.73**	-.14	1				
13. T2 Anxiety	13.26	10.22	0-42	.08	-.05	.33	.48*	.58**	.31	-.14	-.01	-.09	-.10	.26	.56**	1			

14. T2 Stress	16.44	12.32	0-42	-.29	-.34	-.13	.73**	.54**	.71**	-.44*	.07	-.40*	-.55**	-.07	.75**	.58**	1		
15. T2 Life Satisfaction	4.50	1.35	1-5	.01	.07	-.06	-.14	.05	-.23	.56**	.51**	.40*	.54**	.29	-.24	.06	-.06	1	
16. T2 Self-esteem	5.19	1.18	1-7	.27	-.05	-.14	-.32	-.05	-.10	.41*	.76**	.43*	.29	-.03	-.30	-.20	-.06	.59**	1

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$ (2-tailed). Higher numbers indicate greater agreement with exception for DASS where smaller numbers indicate a better score.

Table 5.3. Regression analyses to assess H1.

Variable	Depression				Satisfaction with life				Self-esteem			
	R ² change	p-value	β	SE b	R ² change	p-value	β	SE b	R ² change	p-value	β	SE b
Multiple identities	.24	.713	-.03	.62	.25	.233	-.10	.07	.14	.479	.06	.08
Gaining new identities	.04	.049*	-.18	.66	.10	.158	.13	.08	.04	.053*	.19	.09
Social identity continuity	.04	.524	-.06	.67	.10	.005**	.25	.08	.04	.937	.01	.09

N=123

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$ (2-tailed).

Table 5.4. ANOVA analyses to assess H2.

Variables	Range	Control group		Control group		G4H-IS group		G4H-IS group		Main effect		Interaction	
		Means	SD	Means	SD	Means	SD	F	p-value	F	p-value		
(a) Depression	0-21	13.25	13.02	8.78	9.62	11.33	12.74	9.22	11.26	.32	.573	.62	.434
(b) Satisfaction with life	0-7	4.48	4.67	1.09	1.14	4.17	4.50	1.40	1.35	4.05	.046*	.31	.581
(c) Self-esteem	0-7	4.85	4.86	1.41	1.23	5.07	5.19	1.27	1.18	.14	.705	.10	.754

N=123

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$ (2-tailed).

Interview analysis

After interviewing the rest of the G4H-IS facilitators and the behavioural science teacher, the thematic analysis identified five themes that emerged from the interviews. These five themes were (1) group size, (2) session timing and length, (3) facilitation and recruitment, (4) the language barrier and cultural differences, and (5) social identity mapping. In what follows, we map out these themes and illustrate them with verbatim comments from participants.

Theme 1: Group size

Facilitators felt that the size of G4H-IS groups (i.e., $n \approx 8$) was too large. They reported that in many groups, two or three dominant personalities within the group took over while others sat back. It was felt that smaller groups would be more comfortable and intimate for participants to engage in discussions with each other.

- *I think the group size for these people needs to be fairly small. As soon as the group gets any more than a couple of people, social loafing takes over and they simply sit back and think, “Thank goodness nobody asked me”. [Behavioural science teacher]*
- *The group was a bit smaller than at the beginning [at the beginning the groups have around 8 people but this number reduced as the weeks progressed] and, I guess, then it probably just felt more comfortable because it was a smaller group and they would come up with some issues. I guess they wouldn't mention that in the big group.*

[Facilitator 3]

Theme 2: Session timing and length

As participants typically take time to settle down before G4H-IS can begin, this impinged on the one-hour slots in which the program was allowed to run to fit into the students' timetable. Facilitators also pointed out that four sessions insufficient to cover all the program content. Ideally, they suggested that it would be better to follow up with a fifth session several months later to check in with the participants to see how they were doing and whether they had any success in putting their G4H-IS-derived lessons and plans into practice (as in the original validated G4H program). With regard to the timing, they suggested that G4H-IS should be held at the beginning of the foundation year as part of students' orientation or during the holiday period, rather than at the end of the foundation year — not least to reduce attrition rates due to inevitable exams and assignment deadlines.

- *We only had an hour, if I remember rightly. The students were often a little bit late so we were already a bit compromised.* [Facilitator 1]
- *Up to four weeks it's something that you just teach them, but it doesn't mean that they can really go out and do it. So maybe after, let's say, three months you meet up again and just see how things are going.* [Facilitator 3]
- *I would do it at a time when the time pressure on them for assessment wasn't so great. Either during orientation week, as part of orientation activities, or holiday time.*
[Behavioural science teacher]

Theme 3: Facilitation and recruitment

Logistically, it would be ideal to conduct G4H-IS in a neutral location rather than in the participants' regular classrooms. This is because facilitators felt that being in the classroom retains the "teacher-student" relationship and that this made it difficult for students to relax and share more personal information and experiences about themselves. It is also possible that teachers could be trained to deliver G4H-IS program themselves, as they are usually familiar with their students, understand them well, and may be best placed to assess the appropriate level of complexity for the students. Such observations are reflected in the following comments:

- *It's a tricky thing that you're delivering it in their own classroom, so they're really familiar with that classroom rather than it being a different space where they possibly take a different thinking approach by virtue of it being a different physical environment.* [Facilitator 1]
- *Actually you could almost imagine (the behavioural science teacher) delivering the intervention himself and would do a very, very good job of it. He really liked the material, he engaged very strongly with the material, so he would have no problem learning the program, which is very well structured and provided for in terms of manuals and workbooks, and then he could deliver it and he knows his students, so he knows how to elicit discussion, what level they're at, and the particular references and ideas to talk about with the group.* [Facilitator 1]

Theme 4: The language barrier and cultural differences

The G4H-IS which was conducted in English due to the cultural diversity of the student cohort, but it was felt that language was a barrier for some participants who struggled at times to open up. It was also apparent that engagement with G4H-IS within the AUFY

education program may have been construed by some as an unwelcome (or at least uninvited) addition to their study load, given the priority to do well academically in AUFY.

- *The barrier for them that is that they first of all feel self-conscious because of their language and, secondly, their attitude to life is work and “Why would I want to involve in a cultural activity when I should be doing my assignments?”* [Behavioural science teacher]
- *There was generally more resistance with the international students. They don't see the point of thinking about groups that way.* [Facilitator 2]
- *Because they come to Australia and they're under a lot of pressure, the other pressure they're under is that their parents have paid a lot of money for them to come here and there's a lot of expectation on them to succeed. The only thing they care about is passing. G4H-IS wasn't part of passing at AUFY, right, so it didn't take a great priority in their life.* [Behavioural science teacher]

Theme 5: Social identity mapping

Facilitators generally felt that the process of mapping people's social groups was enjoyed by participants. Moreover, there was an impression that it got them thinking about whether they are satisfied with their social world and what they are going to do in order to achieve their ideal social world in the future, especially upon transitioning to university in the following month. In this regard, facilitators felt that it would be helpful for participants to complete the mapping process twice (as do participants in the standard G4H program). This second mapping could be flagged at T1 so that participants could look forward to adding new groups they might wish to join (but have yet to) on the map and focus on using the skills taught during G4H-IS to pursue these new group memberships, and then reflect on their success in doing so at T2.

- *In this program we only did the mapping once and I think that in an ideal world it's always better to do it more than once, because I think there's just something inherently useful and very powerful when people literally do the process at two particular time points.* [Facilitator 1]
- *Look at the idea of an ideal map because you're not doing so much looking back, you're more looking forward about what your future situation is. So you could maybe incorporate an idea of an ideal map as that last mapping process so that people might put hypothetical groups on their map they haven't yet joined, but to give them a sense*

of what they might want to do in the future given that things that have been discussed in the intervention so far, given what they're trying to achieve. [Facilitator 1]

As these qualitative data highlighted, there were a number of challenges in delivering the program that facilitators felt hindered engagement with the program, but a number of important lessons learned in the course of delivery. Key among these were that better sensitivity to the culture and language needs of international students and more planning is needed in the future runs of G4H-IS. It is important to understand the priorities of international students, in relation to what is prioritised by their family (i.e. valuing educational outcomes instead of social relationships). Facilitators need to be aware of the cultural issues such as language barrier and the difficulties international students have in understanding the context of the message being delivered in English. Lastly, the timing and location of each session being held within the G4H-IS programme. Further discussion of these points will be in the following section.

Discussion

There is no doubt that life transitions impact negatively on the mental health and well-being of the international students population (Andrade, 2006; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Gomes et al., 2014; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Wu et al., 2015). The challenge has been to determine the best way to deliver an evidence-based intervention to address and buffer these negative effects. The purpose of this study was to investigate the contribution that social identities make to the health and well-being of international students and to test the feasibility of running an adapted evidence based intervention, G4H-IS with this population. More specifically, this study builds on previous research (Haslam et al., 2016) to explore the capacity for a theory-derived psychological intervention that focuses on improving and maintaining social group relationships, to counter effects of psychological distress that result from the process of transitioning to overseas study. G4H-IS targets social groups as a psychological resource that protects mental health and well-being by building and sustaining a person's sense of social identity in ways suggested by previous research (Cruwys et al., 2013; Cruwys, Haslam, et al., 2014; Haslam et al., 2010). It focuses on the development of multiple social group ties — educating participants about their value as resources for health, and as a platform for building and sustaining social relationships in the long term. In this way, the program aims to provide a long-term solution to managing psychological distress as

compared to traditional interventions that focus on individualized social and cognitive skills training.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research which suggests that social identities buffer the negative consequences of life transition and improve the health and well-being of international students (Gomes et al., 2014; Gu et al., 2010; Praherso et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2015). More specifically, the study yielded evidence which supported H1, showing that social identity processes — specifically maintained group membership and new group membership — reduce symptoms of depression and at the same time increase satisfaction with life and self-esteem across time within this international student population. These findings replicated evidence from our longitudinal research (as reported in the previous chapter) which showed that the processes specified within SIMIC make a significant contribution to the well-being of international students (Ng et al., under review).

Piloting G4H-IS in this study, H2 looked at the differences between the control group and G4H-IS group to explore whether the adapted G4H-IS programme is a feasible intervention to buffer the negative consequence of life transition for international students. There were no significant differences between the two groups, and hence H2a was not supported. In accordance with the SIMIC model, the original intention was to run the programme at the end of the AUFY year because participants would be experiencing another major life transition within two months (i.e. transiting into university from AUFY after their final examinations). Our idea was that G4H-IS would equip them with skills to cope and navigate this major life transition. However, the timing of running G4H-IS could have impacted on the results of this study, resulting in a null finding. As participants were in their final months of studying in AUFY, one potential reason for this null finding is that patterns of group-based support were already well entrenched and hence resistant to change. This indeed, would explain the lack of support for H2 and account for the lack of difference between the outcome scores of the control group and G4H-IS group

H2b was explored by interviewing the respective facilitators and behavioural science teachers. Five key themes emerged from these interviews addressing the issue of feasibility of G4H-IS for international students. These themes highlighted the need to modify the programme content, structure and delivery in order to better suit this clientele. Interviewees brought up issues relating to the size of the group, session timing and length, how G4H-IS was being facilitated, issues regarding recruitment of participants, the difficulties with language barrier and cultural differences, as well as the benefit of adding extra social identity mapping into the programme. Based on the feedback from the facilitators and behavioural

science teacher after the G4H-IS program delivery, it appears that G4H-IS may be a feasible program for international students if the issues that were raised in the feedback were worked through and ironed out. We will discuss these further in the section below.

Lessons and potential improvements

The first lesson relates to attrition, which, as with many psychological interventions, was quite high in the present study. As the facilitators and behavioural science teacher commented during the post-program interviews, there is room for improvement to be made to the content delivery of the program in order to reduce program attrition rates. One of the most crucial points is the timing of program delivery. Due to academic curriculum constraints, G4H-IS was delivered at the end of the foundation year programme at a time when participants were about to undergo another life transition (i.e. leaving AUFY and transiting into University). Unfortunately, this resulted in a higher than usual attrition rate due to participants dropping out of the program halfway in order to meet assignment deadlines and prepare for their upcoming exams. Indeed, it may have been those students most in need of the program that struggled to make time for it and were thus lost to follow-up. Running the G4H-IS programme at the end of the foundation year also limited our ability to capture the longitudinal change across the cohort after implementing the programme and it also limited opportunities to track participants who may have dropped out of the AUFY programme due to their inability to successfully adapt to this major life transition. Culturally, many international students may never have had the opportunity to think about their well-being being related to the groups they belong to. Their parents' expectation is for them to do well in AUFY and achieve good academic results. Many parents also frown upon them having too many social activities because that would mean less time focused on studying. As a teacher pointed out during the feedback session, international students are focused on their academic achievements as their parents have paid a lot of money for them to go overseas to study. Developing skills to improve their social connections are not a priority for these participants, and many of them may not have felt that these skills will help them academically in any way. Many international students also feel that they will disappoint their parents if they do not do well academically and that it does not matter to their parents if they do not engage in any social activities. Indeed, many parents would rather their children not interact with too many people socially, as they see this as a distraction from their academic pursuits. This points to the fact that it is important to understand the cultural sensitivities and priorities of international students and to adapt the content of G4H-IS in ways that strengthen their

understanding of the ways in which strengthened social identity feeds not only into improved health and well-being, but also better academic performance. Although these are currently addressed in the first module (Schooling) of G4H-IS, perhaps spending more time focusing on the benefits of social identification for academic outcomes will help reduce attrition rates further.

The second lesson relates to delivery. This is broken into two parts, (a) timing and (b) location. It appears that conducting G4H-IS at the beginning of the foundation year, when students commence AUFY, would be a better point at which to run the program. Here participants would be freshly arrived in a new country and the skill set that is taught in G4H-IS would have greater relevance in helping them develop skills and abilities that might help increase their social circle in their new environment while also maintaining their pre-existing social identities from their home country. Starting G4H-IS at the beginning of the year would also allow facilitators to run a follow-up session (i.e., a Sustaining module) to monitor participants' progress. This fifth session would also present opportunity to complete another social identity map, assess whether there have been changes to participants' social world and also to refine their efforts to achieve their ideal social world. Having the fifth session one-to-three months later would also give participants time to try out the new skills they have learnt in the real world and for the facilitators to address any barriers they might encounter when they put their newly learnt skills into practice.

Regarding the location, when running the G4H-IS program, we encountered additional logistic challenges which should be addressed in future iterations of the program. In particular, in this instance G4H-IS was conducted in eight-person groups in one-hour sessions across four weeks and in participants' classrooms. Feedback from the facilitators and teachers indicated that this group size was too large and that smaller group size would be ideal. Logistically we also had to fit the program into AUFY's timetable, which resulted in sessions that were too short to fit in the entire G4H-IS content — especially when the size of the group made it difficult for facilitators to manage the group dynamics during the sessions. Running the sessions in the classroom also made it hard for participants to engage in the intervention as a therapeutic session rather than as a standard classroom learning experience. Moving forward, it would be ideal to run G4H-IS as a separate curriculum from the standard timetable, employing a sign-up system for recruiting participants who volunteer to engage in this program. In this way, the size of each group can be limited and the sessions can be conducted in a neutral location away from regular classrooms. Without the logistical constraints of a mandated timetable, the time of each session could be increased to one and a

half hours and run five sessions – four sessions on a weekly basis and the fifth session three months later, as in the original G4H program.

The third lesson relates to cultural differences and language. Here our sense is that in future it will be helpful to run separate groups with participants that speak English as a second language. That way, they should feel less self-conscious about their language ability, and this should make them feel more at ease and possibly more willing to share during the sessions. As pointed out by Facilitator 2, international students generally do not think about groups in the way that is being taught in G4H-IS. To address this issue, more time can be given to this group to run the sessions more slowly, both to ensure that they understand the context behind the teachings and to unpack the importance of group membership for them in order to address the cultural gap. Here increasing students' understanding of the benefits of group memberships should help to mitigate the negative consequences of loneliness and isolation, especially as they move forward to their next life transition (i.e., moving from AUFY to university).

Another limitation is that participants were not randomly assigned to the respective control and intervention group: instead they were assigned into the groups based on the classes which they were attending. Clearly, a full randomized control trial would eliminate selection bias that might influence the outcome of the treatment. Accordingly, future research should aim to randomly assign participants to conditions to eliminate systematic baseline differences that may have influenced outcomes in this study.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that there is clearly scope for improvement, the design of this study allowed us to explore — and confirm — the benefits for international students of the social identity mechanisms that are specified within the SIMIC model from which G4H-IS was derived. In particular, its results substantiate claims that multiple identities, gaining new identities, and social identity continuity contribute to reduced depression, stress and improved satisfaction with life and self-esteem within this population. At the same time, though, there was no direct evidence that the G4H-IS program was successful in allowing participants to enrich their social identity in this way.

Nevertheless, the study provided some clear and important lessons for improving the delivery of G4H-IS among this population of students. Our sense is that revisions to the program would be beneficial, and that more investment in addressing issues relevant to prioritising social relationships, cultural differences and structural elements of delivery would enhance the meaningfulness of a program such as G4H to this population. This would

provide the basis for further studies of G4H-IS to better gauge its capacity to speak to the challenges that social disconnection raises in the context of studying in a foreign land. More generally too, it is apparent that the core lessons of G4H were ones that our facilitators — professionals whose goal is to enhance the experience of international students — were keen to take on board.

Chapter 6

General Discussion

On the basis of social identity theory — particularly as set out in the social identity model of social identity change (SIMIC) — the present thesis has explored how of identity gain and loss impacts on the international student population in the course of undergoing this life transition. More particularly, the studies reported in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 have examined how multiple identities, social identity continuity, and the acquisition of new identities contribute to international students' adjustment — as assayed by mental health, well-being, academic performance and retention. In this chapter, we will discuss the main findings from the three studies above and address this thesis' aim of (a) understanding how social identities influence international students' transition after life change, and (b) managing the social identity change in this student population.

Summary of findings

Chapter 3 was a qualitative study that used interviews with international students to understand their experiences of social identity loss, continuity and gain after coming to their host country. In line with SIMIC, the interviews asked participants to reflect on if and how they had maintained previous group memberships from their home country and if and how they had joined new social groups after arriving in their host country.

Three key themes emerged from this analysis (see Figure 3.1). The first was “barriers to adjustment” and all participants reported experiencing barriers which hindered their adjustment to the host country. These included issues around social identity maintenance such as feeling homesick, being disconnected from old social networks due to distance, and using technology to maintain social connection with their old networks. As for social identity gain issues, themes such as experiencing culture shock, finding it hard to make new friends, language barriers due to English not always being the students' preferred language, using technology the and host family to facilitate new social connections, and forming new relationships with others from similar cultural background are issues brought up by the interviewees. Many students also doubted their own ability to make new meaningful social connections and to overcome cultural and language barrier in their host country. The content of these themes were consistent with previous research which showed that identity loss is common for people undergoing life transition and results in the feeling of loneliness and social isolation (Cruwys, Haslam, et al., 2014; Haslam et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2009).

Countering these barriers were two key themes, “becoming and staying connected” and “becoming part of the host culture”. The first of these pointed to the role that social media generally played in facilitating identity maintenance as a platform for international students to maintain existing social network from their home country, so that they can draw on previous psychological resources to facilitate their adjustment to the new environment. The theme also spoke to the fact that many students also made friends with others from a similar country or culture, in particular, people who speak the same language, as a way of maintaining their social identity. Importantly too, social media offered a means for identity gain by being a vehicle through which students could reach out to new friends in the host country. As conceptualised in the social cure literature, maintaining previous social networks while reaching out to forge new social relationships provides a basis for support and security, giving international students resources to navigate the challenging domain of life transitions and thereby buffer the negative effects of change on well-being (Haslam et al., 2018; Jetten et al., 2012).

To help facilitate identity change, in comments related to “becoming part of the host culture”, participants spoke of the helpfulness of staying in host families as a way to break down cultural barriers to facilitate adjustments. Host families provide physical and psychological support to help international students integrate with the host culture and facilitate the acquisition and development of new identities. This is important because, by moving overseas, international students break away from their existing family and societal expectations and, as a result, need to develop new life skills and independent way of living.

Chapter 4 built upon the findings from Chapter 3 by means of a quantitative longitudinal study that explored the relationship between maintained and new group membership and the mental health and well-being of international students across three time points. Importantly too, it also provided novel insight into the contribution of SIMIC pathways to academic performance and retention. As the contribution of social identity processes to health and academic outcomes has not been extensively researched previously, this chapter speaks to an important knowledge gap in the existing literature. In line with SIMIC, the results provide clear evidence that the mental health, well-being and academic achievement of international students was supported by having multiple group memberships in their home country before moving overseas for study. It was also apparent that this effect was largely attributable to the fact that having multiple identities was a platform for maintaining these group memberships after coming to the host country (in ways specified by SIMIC’s continuity pathway). This finding is consistent with previous research showing the

importance of multiple identities as an important resource and a protective factor during life change (Haslam et al., 2008; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Praharso et al., 2017). Importantly, the results also provided novel evidence that social identity continuity has positive implications for academic performance and student retention. The finding of this study shows that we will be able to predict the likelihood of retention from baseline SIMIC variables on future international student cohorts, which will be helpful in improving the retention rate of international students across all tertiary education providers.

At the same time, though, Study 2 provided no evidence of a direct effect of the acquisition of *new* identities on mental health and well-being outcomes, or on academic performance and retention. It was unclear why this was the case, but it is possible that perhaps international students are more focused and concerned about losing their sense of identity after transition than that of identity gain in their host country. In sum, though, this second study presented novel evidence that multiple group membership and social identity continuity are important psychological resources and are a basis for social engagement and academic performance which ultimately feeds into student retention down the track. Notably, this is the first study to provide such longitudinal evidence of the implications of social identity continuity for international student retention in the international student population or the higher education sector more generally.

Chapter 5 extended the findings reported in Chapter 4 by exploring the relationship between the SIMIC pathways and international students' mental health and well-being. Data was collected over two time points with a different sample of international students and, confirming findings from Study 2, results provided evidence of the benefits of social identity continuity for international students' mental health and well-being outcomes. In this case though, there was also evidence of benefits arising from new group membership, which was not apparent in Study 2.

Chapter 5 also piloted and examined the feasibility of an intervention: GROUPS 4 HEALTH-For International Students (G4H-IS). G4H-IS was adapted from an evidence-based intervention, GROUPS 4 HEALTH (Haslam et al., 2016), which targets the building and strengthening of social group connectedness to support health. G4H-IS was adapted as part of my PhD for the international student population to tackle the difficulties of social isolation that are associated with this life transition with a view to improving students' general mental health and well-being. It is a four-module program that contains a series of exercises and discussions that target different aspects of group life pertaining to the processes of life transition identified within SIMIC, emphasizing the importance of developing and sustaining

social group memberships. After delivering G4H-IS to a group of international students, feedback was collected via interviews with the facilitators to consider questions of program content, delivery, and improvement. Although quantitatively there were no significant difference between the control group and the G4H-IS group, the qualitative feedback provided by the facilitators indicated that, suitably refined, G4H-IS may have the potential to be a useful program for international students. The suggested refinements include raising awareness of social (alongside educational) priorities as well as addressing issues of culture, timing, location, and delivery.

Limitations and future directions

The results reported in this thesis serve to deepen our understanding of the identity change process that international students undergo. However, notwithstanding its many strengths, as with all research this project was not without limitations. First, the qualitative study reported in Chapter 3 had a relatively small sample of participants who volunteered their time to participate in the individual interview. Perhaps more participants from a range of international educational contexts — involving students from wider mix of ethnic and national cultures, or international students from a different program — might uncover additional themes. These participants were also volunteers and it is possible that different insights might be gleaned from the inclusion of students who might be less willing initially to come forward; in particular, those who are not adjusting well to the transition or those that are time-poor. Future research needs to invest in finding ways to encourage these students to also have their voices heard. This study was also cross-sectional in nature and only investigated the early phase of students' transition to their host country. Future studies could explore how people's experiences themes unfold over time.

A key issue with the longitudinal study reported in Chapter 4 was that its conclusions were based on an online self-report survey that was administered during particular classes. This means first that students who did not attend class at that time (who may be those who are experiencing most difficulty) would have missed out on participating in the survey. Nevertheless, participation in the surveys was high among the cohort. Second, responses were obtained were in a classroom setting. Although measures were taken to ensure that the participants were comfortable and that they were made aware that their responses were anonymous, participants might still have been inclined to give socially desirable answers when completing the questionnaire. Yet while this may affect the self-report variables, it is worth pointing out that our data for academic performance and student retention rates were

objective measures based on AUFY's student records, and hence these outcomes of this study were not subject to these limitations. Although the results of this study did not point to the importance of international students joining new groups, it is noteworthy that we did not measure participants' intentions to stay in their host country; and this is one obvious new identity that we might (and should) have included. In future studies, there would therefore be value in seeing whether the benefits of social identity gains are moderated by the length of time international student intend to stay in their host country.

Finally, there were quite a few limitations to the pilot study reported in Chapter 5. Primarily these reflected the major challenges in delivering an intervention program during class time while also trying to tailor this into the demands of the existing student curriculum. Logistically it was also a challenge to fit the whole G4H-IS program into a one-hour session every week for four weeks, as required by the AUFY program. This meant that there was simply not enough time to ensure participants felt comfortable, welcome, and on task before working through the content. In light of the fact that some international students struggled to understand English, there was also insufficient time to explain the details of G4H-IS to them during the program. Culturally, it is true too that many international students struggle to appreciate the benefits of social groups (Chang et al., 2017). Because many of their parents have paid considerable sums for them to study overseas they are inclined to focus on academic achievement, often to the exclusion of all else. While our evidence suggests that this is likely to be detrimental to both their health and their academic performance, this nevertheless resulted in high attrition rates over the course of the G4H-IS program. Due to the constraints of the curriculum, we were unable to locate the G4H-IS program outside the classroom. This study nevertheless provides valuable insights into how future iterations of G4H-IS might be improved, both in terms of content and delivery, such as holding groups in a neutral location.

Another limitation to consider relates to the fact that the data of the three studies were collected during different phases of the socialization process. As different issues surface during different phases of the transition process, we are unable to compare the results collected across the three studies and compare them to explore any possible relationship. Future studies could therefore consider standardizing the data collection to a specific time point of the transition process in order to explore the implications of this factor.

Practical implications

The findings of the three studies reported in this thesis provide insight into how international students adapt to study abroad and how their previous identities from their home country impact on adjustment via the SIMIC new and maintained group membership pathways. At the most basic level, then, the results of this research could be used by higher education providers to tailor their orientation activities and programmes so that they have a stronger and clearer focus on developing and maintaining group-based social connections from the very start of international students' time overseas. Rather than focusing purely on social integration, more attention should be given to help international students maintain their networks and connections from their home country, as shown in our findings above. For when international students have safe and secure identities, they have more psychological resources available to them in order to navigate the unknown waters they need to chart and to forge new social relationships in their host country. This is important because students with a strong network of social identities that is preserved across this life transition appear to have a significantly increased chance of being able to cope with and adjust to this change (Iyer et al., 2009).

More emphasis should also be placed on encouraging international students to join in the group-based activities of their domestic counterparts, rather than (just) grouping together with other international students from similar culture. This is because while the latter can be an important means of maintaining identity, it is also important, so far as possible, for students to gain new identities by integrating with others from their host country in order to benefit from the holistic experience of international education. At the same time, though, it needs to be recognized that domestic students and groups in the host country may not always be willing for this to occur (Ramos et al., 2016). Indeed, it is precisely because they preclude social access of this form that discrimination and prejudice are such a pernicious feature of the educational and social landscape.

Another interesting point to note is how social identity continuity impacts on academic performance and, through this, the likelihood of international students staying in study versus dropping out. As shown in Chapter 3, during life transition, international students have a strong need to reach out to family and friends from their home country to get a sense of security and connectedness. Parents of international students often urge their children to focus on studies and their academic achievement and not spend too much time socialising or maintaining their social network. According to our findings, it is important for international students to spend time keeping in touch with their friends and family back home

as a way to maintain their social identity across time and distance. Perhaps a good way to facilitate this is for tertiary education to provide a sponsored international phone card or data plan during orientation and encourage international students to call or skype home to their family and friends. Many tertiary education institutions focus on encouraging international students to actively participate in activities and make more new friends on campus. It will be a good addition to supplement that with encouraging international students to make a call home to their family and friends after their day ends just to reconnect with their social connections back home.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present thesis extends our understanding of international students' social identity changes after experiencing life transition and how these processes influence their mental health, well-being and academic performance. More specifically, it explores these factors through the lens of a social identity perspective and highlights the challenges of maintaining and acquiring social identities that international students face on a daily basis. These findings have implications for tertiary education institutions that are welcoming international students into their institutions for a meaningful and enriching overseas education experience. Supported by the findings of this thesis, as much as it is important for tertiary education institutions to encourage international students to forge new relationships in their host country, it is even more important to also encourage international students to continue working on and maintaining their social identity with family and friends back in their home country. This thesis highlighted the importance of social identity maintenance and the benefits it has for the international students' population. This understanding will be beneficial in advancing orientation planning and on-going pastoral care to improve the social support provided to international students to enhance their psychological well-being and academic performance.

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Appendix



WORKBOOK

International Students Edition

Nikole Ng
Catherine Haslam
Tegan Cruwys
S. Alexander Haslam
Sarah Bentley



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GROUPS 4 HEALTH WORKBOOK

International Students Edition

Centre for Health Outcomes, Innovation & Clinical Education,
The University of Queensland

© Centre for Health Outcomes, Innovation & Clinical Education

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Introduction to
GROUPS 4 HEALTH
for International
Students

**GROUPS 4 HEALTH:
IS**

Why do we need GROUPS 4 HEALTH for International Students?

Social interaction is what makes us human, and is an integral part of most human functioning. Accordingly, many of us see and interact with other people most days. We do this at home, online, and most importantly, when we are learning. We also interact with others in a range of capacities — for example, as friends, as colleagues, and as students and learners.

Whenever these interactions are positive they make a huge difference to our lives — helping us to feel a part of something, giving us support when we need it, and even helping to keep us healthy, both in mind and in body. Interestingly, on all these fronts, evidence suggests that it is people's relationships as members of various groups — our peer groups, our work teams, our learning groups — that are most important.

Nevertheless, it is easy to take our membership of groups for granted and to overlook the significance of group life. It is also easy to sometimes find ourselves a little disconnected from social groups, even sometimes a little isolated. There are times in our lives when it is hard to do what we need to do to keep connected. This is where GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS comes in. Through this program you will learn:

- How groups make a difference to our lives and to our learning,
- Ways to help you keep connected to groups, and
- Skills you need to build meaningful and sustaining social connections.

This will be achieved over 4 sessions, one hour session every week for 4 consecutive weeks.

This Workbook has been developed to support your learning not only whilst in the GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS program, but also if in the future you would like to refer back to some of the thoughts and ideas which GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS represents. The GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS program is designed to empower you as a learner to make more of your educational journey through a better understanding of how social connectivity and group ties can positively benefit all aspects of learning.

“I am what I am because of who we all are.”
(Leymah Gbowee, characterizing the African Philosophy Ubuntu)



Module 1

Schooling

Why your group ties matter

Module aims

1. To raise awareness of the role that social groups play in our lives and our learning.
2. To discover how social groups can be a psychological resource for learning.

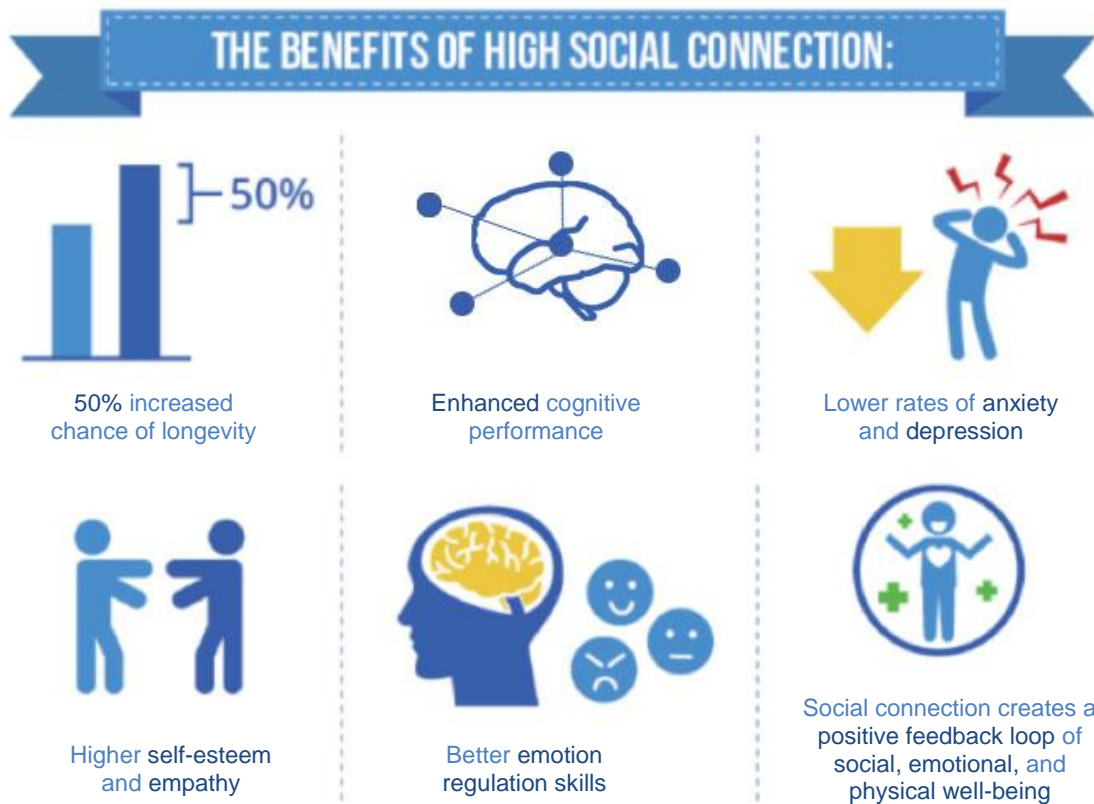
What are social groups?

When we talk about social groups, what do we mean? What is a group?

A group represents any social connection that is meaningful to you. This could be with one other person or with hundreds of other people. It could take the form of a family group, or a sports club, an informal coffee group, or official membership of a group or association. A group can also be reflected in shared beliefs that you and others might hold – such as being a vegetarian, or supportive of a political perspective. All these different social connections form our social worlds and in turn shape who we are as individuals.

What the latest research can tell us

Much research now shows how important social groups are for all aspects of our health and well-being, both in mind and body.

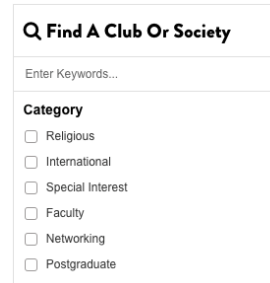
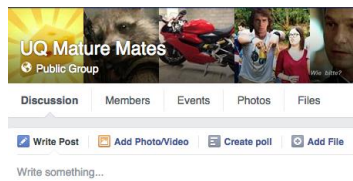


Extending on this, there is growing research highlighting the importance of social connectivity for all aspects of learning. Students who identify with their subject of learning tend to engage more deeply with the learning material that in turn produces better learning and better performance outcomes. So feeling connected to your learning not only increases engagement and enjoyment, but also higher grades!



Connecting with your social environment when you arrive at UQ

Just a few examples of the many options available:



Social groups are a psychological resource

We can think of the benefits of social groups as working a little like air travel. That Airbus A380 would never get off the ground without fuel, aerodynamic design, innovative lightweight technology, and above all, a whole host of human team work. Without this collective effort that aeroplane would still be sitting on the tarmac! Social groups not only keep our minds and bodies healthy, but they also give us a better sense of self-control, higher self-esteem, improved cognitive function, and overall help us to travel our educational journey in a way which improves our health, well-being and learning outcomes.



What are the particular social groups that make up our lives?

What are the sorts of groups that people could belong to? Have a think about the different groups that make up your social world.



Groups

Write down some of the groups you belong to here.

Remember – a group can be any social connection that is meaningful to you.

Write down some of the



The benefits of social groups

There are many benefits we get from being part of different social groups. What do you think these benefits are or might be?

Add in some of your own ideas...

Some of the benefits of being part of different social groups

Belonging

Stability

Support

What might be some of the benefits you could gain from being part of this G4H group?



Your thoughts?



A well-stocked cupboard!

- Sharing
- Support
- Exchanging experiences
- Identification
- Learning
-
-

Different groups provide help and support in different ways and at different times. This is why belonging to multiple social groups is so important. Having access to more sources of help increases the likelihood that we'll have access to the type of support we need and from the best source.

Social group → **Psychological resource** ✓

Multiple social groups → **Multiple psychological resources** ✓✓✓



Which groups matter most for our health?

What we know is that the groups that matter most are those that we connect strongly with — those with which we see ourselves as sharing a strong common bond.

Now go back to the groups you listed on page 11.

1. List each of the groups that you identified there in the table below.
2. In the second column indicate the importance of each group to you — from being “not important” to “very important”.
3. In the third column rate how much you turn to each group for support — from “not a lot” to “a great deal”.

Group Membership	How important is this group to you? (tick one box)	How much support does this group provide you with? (circle one number)		
	1 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>not important</i>	2 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>moderately important</i>	3 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>very important</i>	<i>not a lot 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal</i>
	1 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>not important</i>	2 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>moderately important</i>	3 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>very important</i>	<i>not a lot 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal</i>
	1 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>not important</i>	2 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>moderately important</i>	3 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>very important</i>	<i>not a lot 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal</i>
	1 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>not important</i>	2 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>moderately important</i>	3 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>very important</i>	<i>not a lot 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal</i>
	1 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>not important</i>	2 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>moderately important</i>	3 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>very important</i>	<i>not a lot 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal</i>
	1 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>not important</i>	2 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>moderately important</i>	3 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>very important</i>	<i>not a lot 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal</i>
	1 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>not important</i>	2 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>moderately important</i>	3 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>very important</i>	<i>not a lot 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal</i>
	1 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>not important</i>	2 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>moderately important</i>	3 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>very important</i>	<i>not a lot 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal</i>
	1 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>not important</i>	2 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>moderately important</i>	3 <input type="checkbox"/> <i>very important</i>	<i>not a lot 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal</i>


What research shows is that our sense of belonging to groups — how much we *identify* with them — guides how much health benefit they give us. In this regard, “importance” gives us a reasonable indication of how strongly we identify with others. So our very important groups are generally:

1. The groups we connect and identify with most strongly, and
2. The groups we turn to most for support.

Session summary: Learning points

Use the space below to jot down some learning points from today's session.

Learning points from today's session



Module 2

Scoping

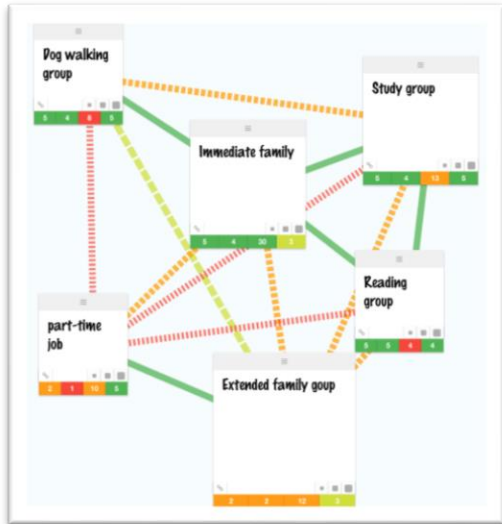
Mapping your social group ties

Module aims

1. To raise awareness of your social group networks.
2. To raise awareness of the inter-relationships between your social groups.

Social Identity Mapping

This interactive on-screen tool allows you to visualise all the different groups that currently make up your social world. Here is an example of a social map created using this online social mapping tool:



As you will see when you start the mapping process, each group is represented separately, and, after you have identified each group (by putting its name on each e-note) you then rate each group on different criteria (see the numbers along the bottom of each e-note), such as how positive you feel about it, and whether or not you feel you are a typical member.

Once all the groups are created, you then think about how they relate to each other. Are they similar or very different? And how compatible are they?

1. Create an e-note for one of your groups and give it a name.

2. Choose a size for the group – the more important it is to you, the bigger the size of the e-note.

3. Rate the group on a number of dimensions by clicking on the bar at the bottom of each e-note.

4. Repeat this process by creating a new e-note for all the groups you belong to.

5. Drag the e-notes around so that similar groups are close together.

6. Click on the 'link' icon to join the e-Notes together and indicate how compatible your groups are with each other.



Group Properties

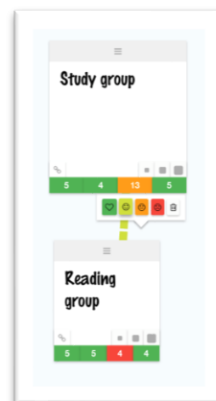
Group Name
Study group

How positive are you about this group?

How representative are you of this group?

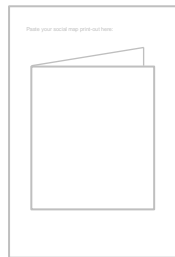
How many days per month do you spend with this group's members?

How well do you understand this group?



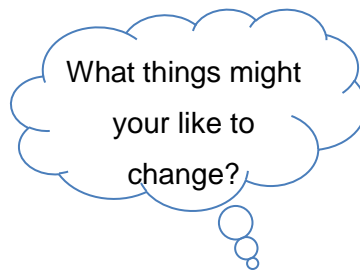
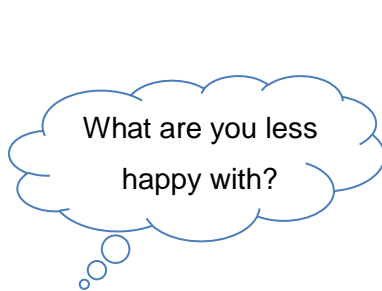
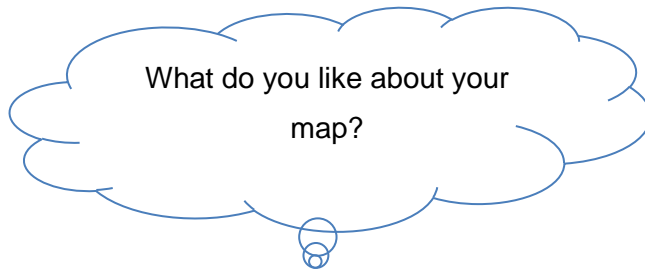
Your overall map should provide a visual representation of your social world. Continue adjusting it until you are happy with the map you have created.

Paste your social map print-out here:



Fold your A4 map in half to stick it into your workbook

Thinking about your maps

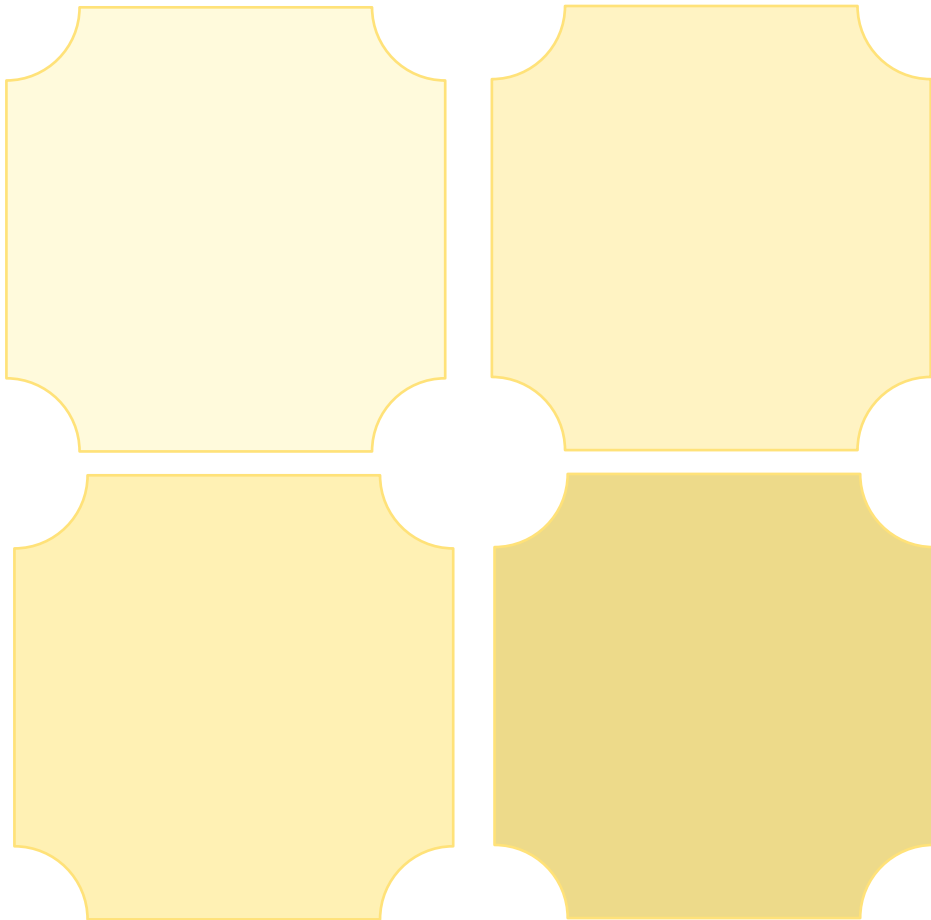


Write down your thoughts about your map below:

Some things that come to mind when looking at your map

Session summary: Learning points

Use the space below to jot down some learning points from today's session.

The image shows four yellow sticky notes arranged in a 2x2 grid. Each sticky note has a rounded top and bottom edge and a central circular hole. The notes are intended for taking notes during the session.

Module 3

Sourcing

Drawing on your existing social
networks

Module aims

1. To understand how you feel about, and draw on, your existing group ties.
2. To discover the best ways to make the most of your group ties.
3. To discover ways you can reconnect with old group ties.

Making the most of your social world

Let's review your social map from Module 2. Not all relationships are perfect and sometimes we need to work on them to make them more ideal and ensure they give us what we need.

Improving your relationships

One of the things that we all need to come to terms with is that even good relationships are not perfect all the time. We can get frustrated with people we really care about and this can sometimes lead to us say things we normally wouldn't or to have arguments.



What can we do to reduce this from happening?



Communication strategies

1. *Active listening*

2. *Positive language*

Communication strategies

3. *Active listening*

4. *Positive language*

Examples

Examples

Self-care strategies

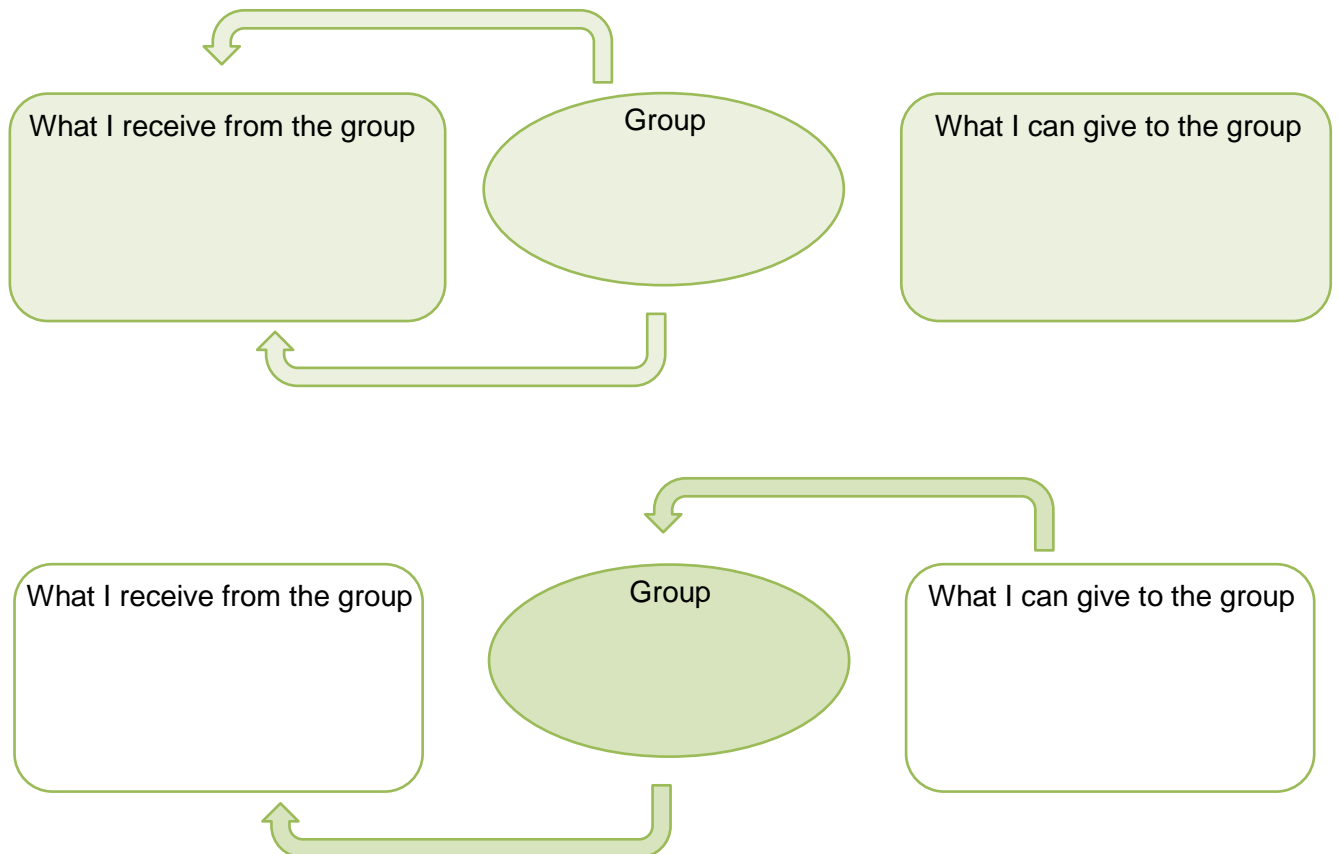
-
-
-
-
-
-

The importance of giving and receiving

Working with our groups to make the most of them is a good way for them to work for you and to keep them alive. A healthy group is like a healthy plant — a healthy plant needs water in the same way a group needs nurturing for it to be supportive. But nurturing is a two-way street: not only should the group nurture you, but you should also nurture the group.



So think about what you actually do, or could do, to support your groups. In the *Giving and Receiving Diagram* below identify one or two of your groups from your identity map and note down some examples of the help, support and even advice that you have either given to your groups or that you feel your groups expect from you.



Reconnecting with old group ties

We all know our social groups change over time. There are probably some that you've lost touch after coming to Australia. This could include some old school friends from your home country, or family members who you have not seen for a while.

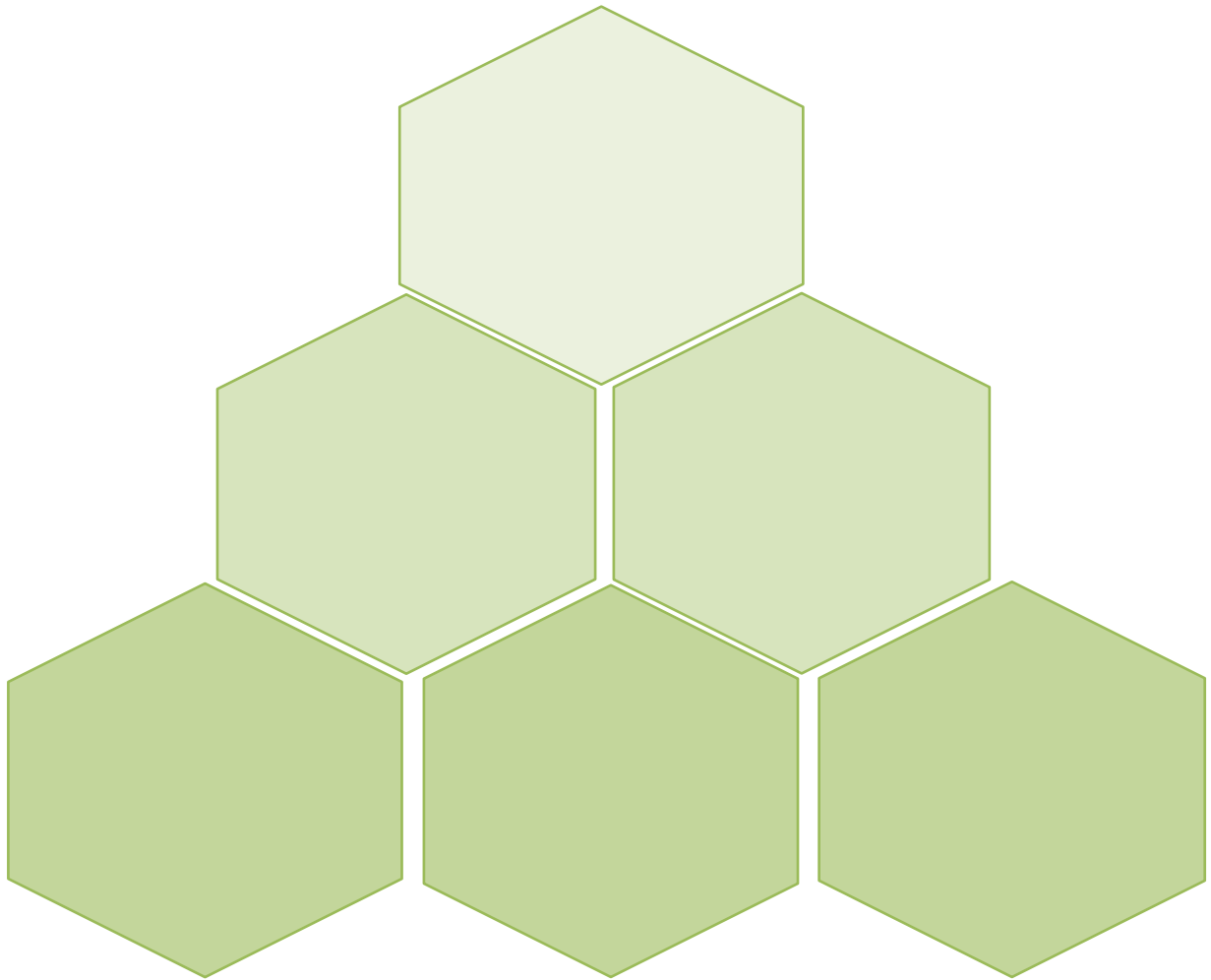


With which groups have you lost touch (they might be school or neighbourhood friends, members of your family who you might not have contacted since you left for Australia, etc.)? Use the space below to identify these. Then think about actions you could each take to reconnect and make them part of your existing Social Identity Map — perhaps catching up via social media and meeting up over coffee or lunch to reminisce about old times when you are back in your home country, or in other ways that you used to enjoy spending time together.

<p>Existing Group</p>	→	<p>Strategies and actions to stay connected</p> <p>Strategies and actions to stay connected</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p>Existing Group</p>	→	
<p>Existing Group</p>	→	

Session summary: Learning points

Note in the hexagons the group's learning points from today's session.



Module 4

Scaffolding

Building new connections

Module aims

1. To identify groups you want to join.
2. To explore the benefits of joining new groups as well as barriers to doing so.
3. To develop the confidence to join new groups.
4. To make a specific and concrete plan for social connectedness.

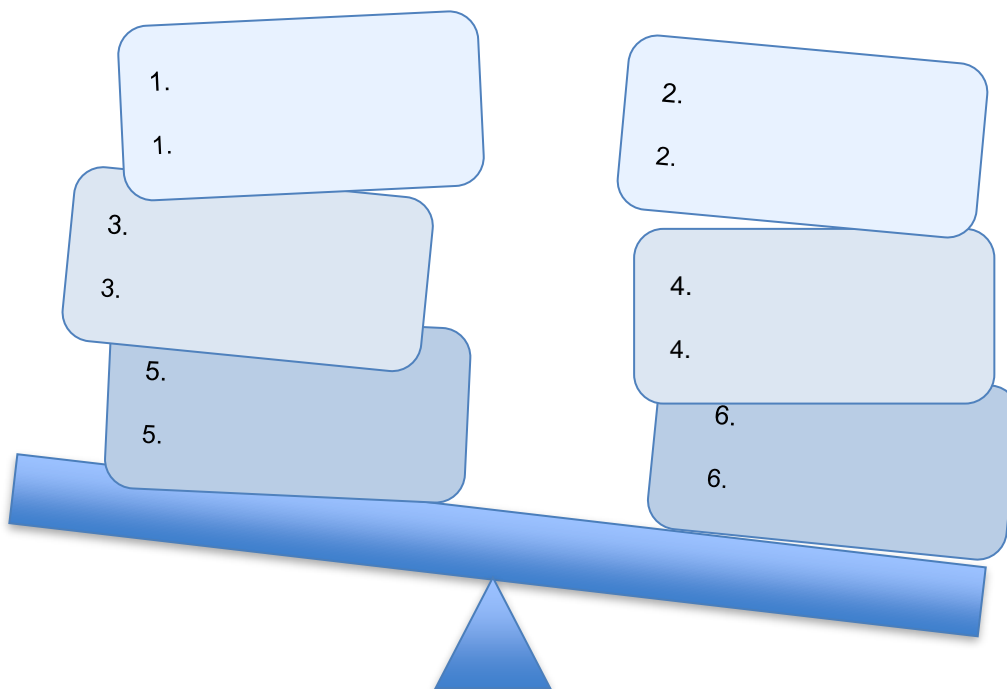
Why is it sometimes so hard to join groups?

A lot of us want to spend more time being social and building new connections, but sometimes we find that this process is not as easy as it looks! Why might that be?

Are there any difference engaging Australian students as compared to International students?

What are some barriers that make it hard for you to join new groups?

Let's have a think about what might **get in the way** of new groups becoming an important (and health-enhancing) part of your social world.





So if most people feel like groups are hard work, how can they stay together? **If we are to gain the long-term benefits of groups, we often need to overcome short-term inconvenience or discomfort.**

The focus of today's module is to learn ways to do just that.

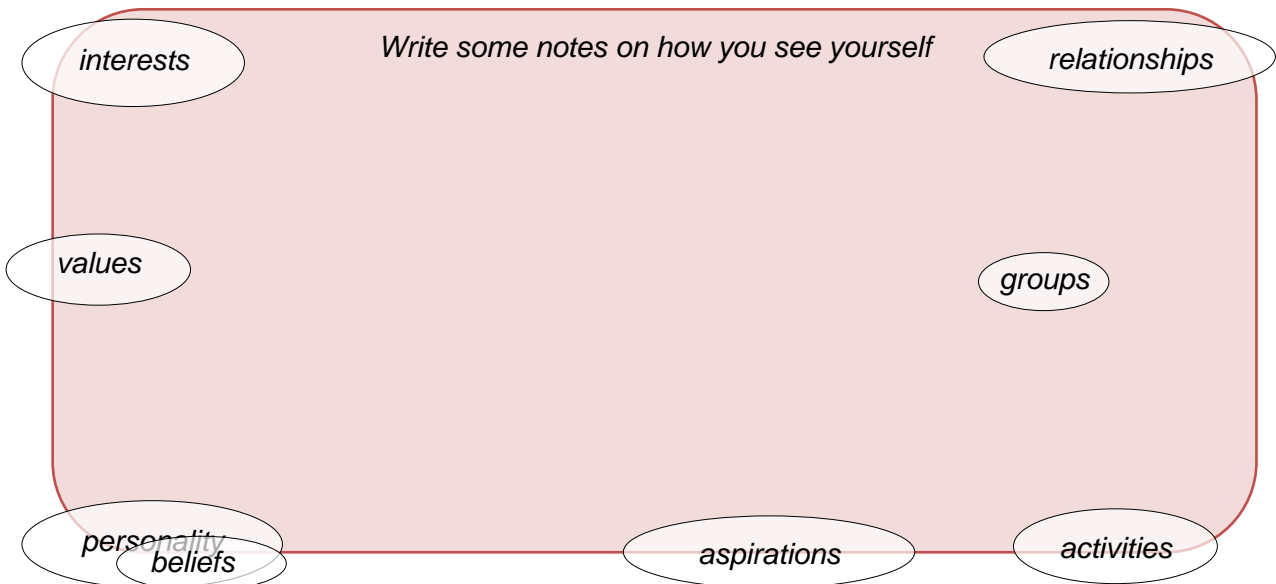
Are your groups a good reflection of who you are?

We've talked about how the most important social connections are the ones that are most meaningful to us, and it is from these groups that we receive the most support, and also it is to these groups that we give the most attention. But how do we ensure that these social connections are really meaningful to us?

In an ideal world, we want a good fit between our sense of self and our social world. That is, you want your groups to be a reflection of you and how you see yourself as person. When such a synchrony exists, social groups can be most beneficial to our lives and our learning.

So, let's think about this process in a little more detail...

Think about how you see yourself as a person.



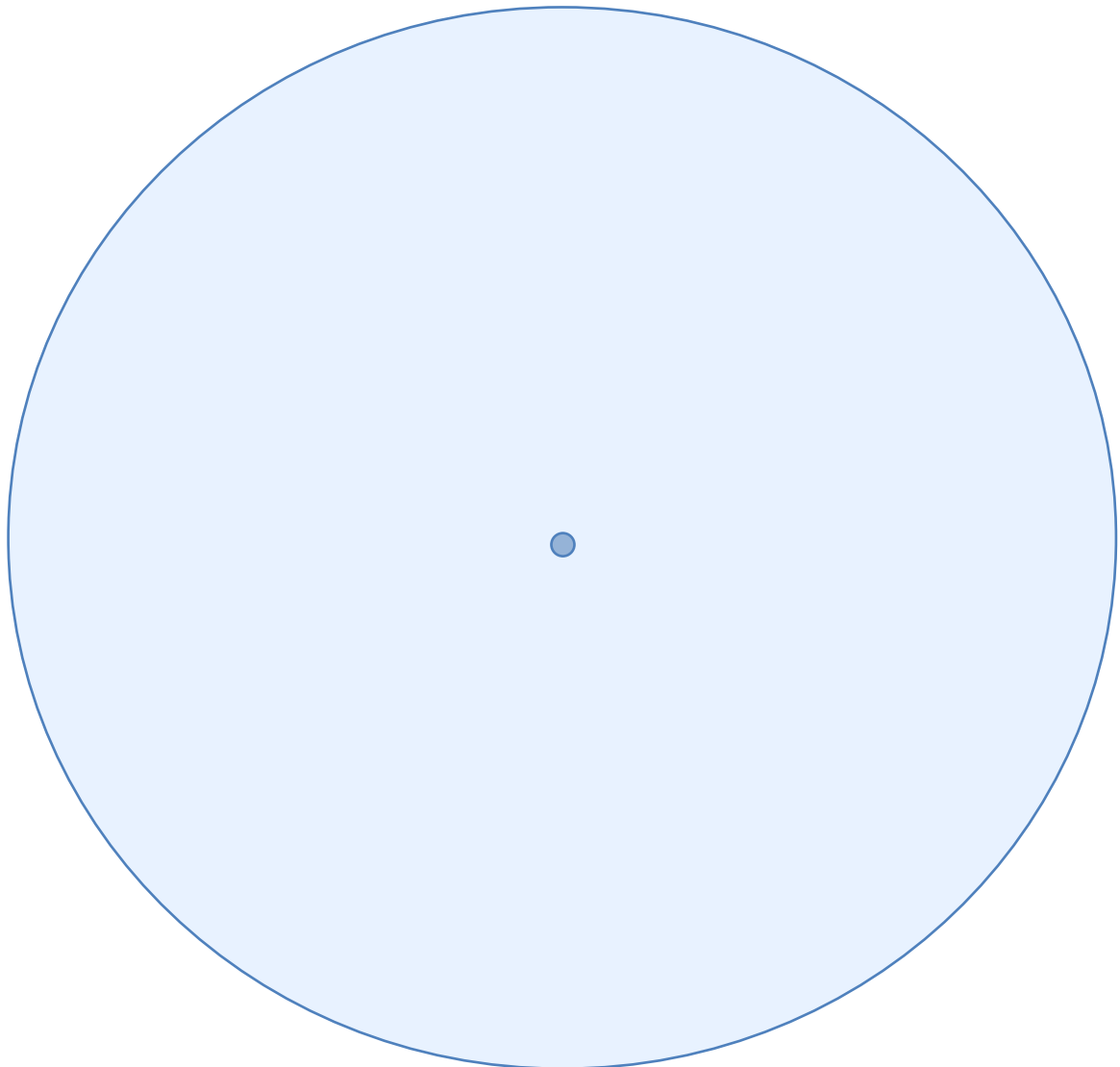
Self-aspect pie

For each idea you have written above, consider how crucial it is to how you see yourself. Very important self-aspects should be bigger and less important self-aspects should be smaller. Have a look at this example before having a go at your own self-aspect “pie” on the next page.



My self-aspect pie

Now sketch out your own self-aspect pie, using the thoughts about yourself you wrote down on the previous page. Draw in the segments of pie to best represent the importance of each aspect.



When you have finished drawing your pie, underline any self-aspects that you think are *not* well-represented in your social groups.

What aspects of your self-aspect pie are not well-represented in your social groups?

When you have finished working on your pie, think back to the social map that you created in session 2. Do you think there are any parts of your self-aspect pie that are not well represented in this current map? Jot them down here.

A large green rounded rectangle containing ten horizontal dotted lines for writing.

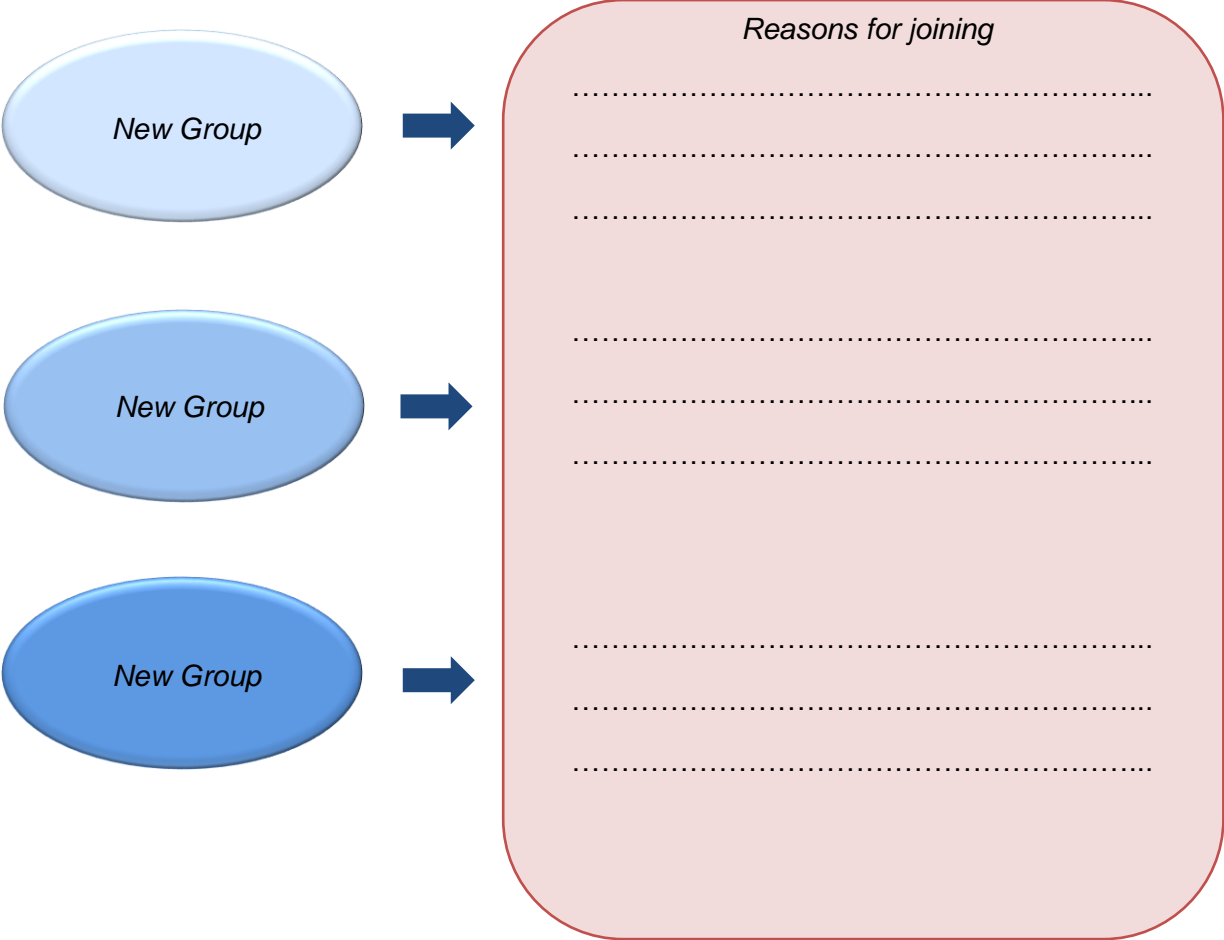
Identifying new groups to join

You have now created your own social map, thought about what is important to you and your social world, and then looked back at your map to see if it best represents you and your interests.



So now, let's think about new groups and connections that you could make to enhance and extend your social world. These could simply be groups that you want to be part of — for example, because they do something that you like, or because they represent something you would like to be part of. Or they could be specific groups which target areas in your education that you do not think are currently being fulfilled.

In the space below, note down potential new connections and your motivation or reason for wanting to join these groups.



Next, expand the details in your plan.

To help you achieve your social goals, make sure your plan is **SMART**:

1. **Specific**. You need to think about exactly what you are going to do.
2. **Measurable**. You need to be able to know that you've made progress.
3. **Aligned** with your values. Your social plan needs to fit with your self aspects.
4. **Realistic**. You need to be able to make steady progress towards your goals.
5. **Timely**. You need to identify when exactly you are going to act on your plan and you need to ensure you don't leave it too long before getting started.



Developing a social plan:

Identify three priorities for new groups that you want to engage with when you are in UQ. Write them into the blue boxes on the next page, and then next to each group, write up the 5 SMART stages for integrating each group into your social world.

The following is an example of a SMART plan:

Module 4: Scaffolding

1. Statistics study group

S Find out what beginners stats groups are at UQ

M Make sure I attend at least once a month

A This will help with my psych studies

R Find time in schedule

T Make sure I have joined by week 5

Write your own SMART plan for your 3 new groups here:

1.

S _____

M _____

A _____

R _____

T _____

2.

S _____

M _____

A _____

R _____

T _____

3.

S _____

M _____

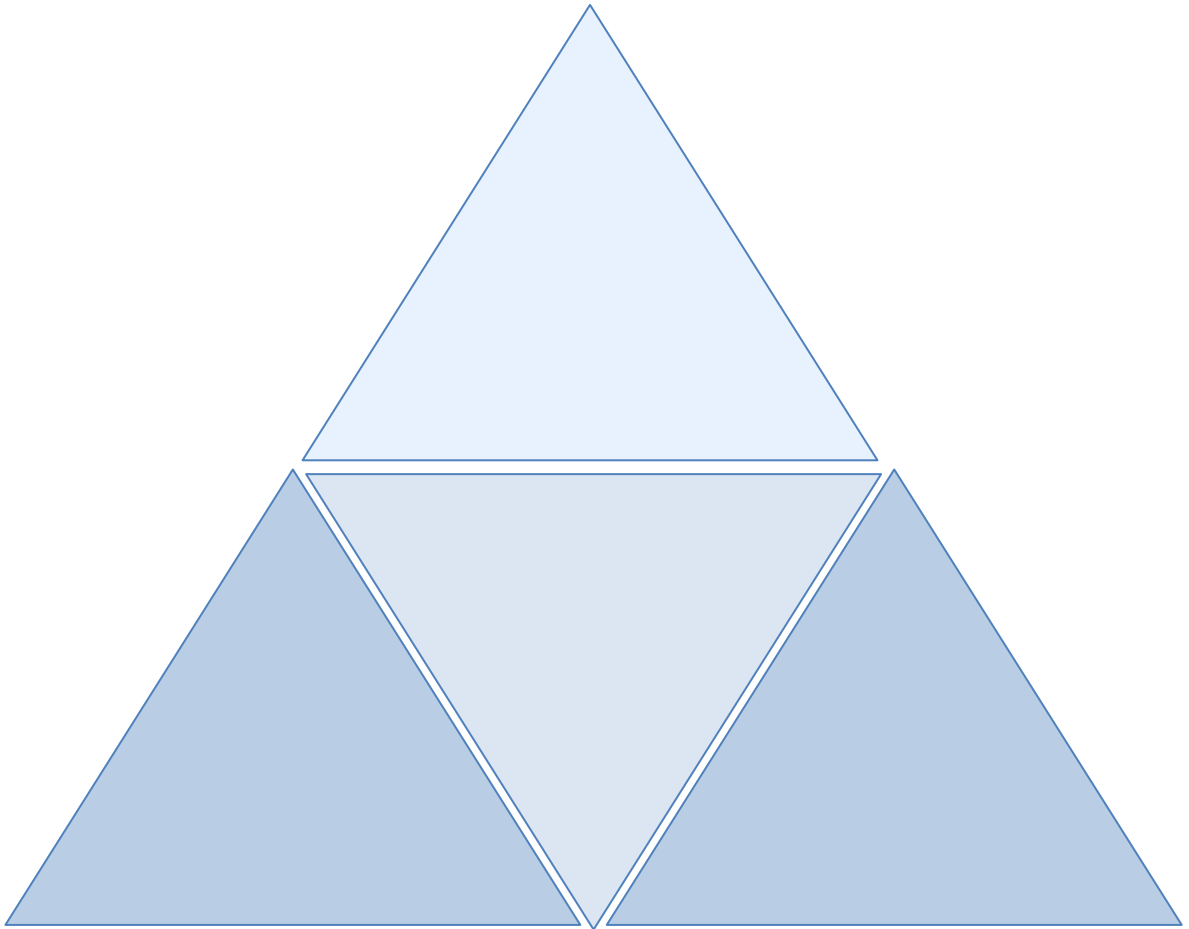
A _____

R _____

T _____

Session summary: Learning points

Note in the triangles the group's key learning points from today's session.



Where to from here?

Through this program, we hope you have developed skills and strategies that will help you manage your social groups and your social world. You will have noted many of these down in this Workbook, so it is a good idea to keep it handy as a record and a resource for the future.

We hope you enjoyed taking part in GROUPS 4 HEALTH and we wish you all the best in continuing to manage your social world.





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MANUAL

International Students Edition

Nikole Ng
Catherine Haslam
Tegan Cruwys
S. Alexander Haslam
Sarah Bentley



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GROUPS 4 HEALTH

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS EDITION

FACILITATOR'S MANUAL

Centre for Health Outcomes, Innovation & Clinical Education,
The University of Queensland

© Centre for Health Outcomes, Innovation & Clinical Education

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Program background and rationale

Background

What is GROUPS 4 HEALTH?

GROUPS 4 HEALTH is an evidence-based psychological intervention designed to improve health by providing people with the knowledge, skills and confidence to increase their social connectedness, and in particular, their group-based social identifications. In addition to this skill-based knowledge, GROUPS 4 HEALTH facilitates social group memberships by offering an *in vivo* group experience. Participants meet new people (fellow group members), practice their new skills immediately, and experience first-hand how an assortment of individuals can develop, over time, into a meaningful group that is beneficial to health.

There are a few questions that most people ask when thinking about adopting a new program.

1. Who can benefit from GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS?

The program is designed for anyone who is concerned about feeling isolated and disconnected from others in their present life or immediate future. This includes people with a clinical diagnosis (e.g., depression, chronic pain) as well as people experiencing normal life transitions (e.g., relocation, retirement, transition to overseas education).

2. Why an International Student Edition?

International students are at greater risk of developing problems with social isolation and disconnection not only because they have chosen to take up study in a new institution, but also because they have chosen to do so in a different country. Even though developing your career in this way is usually seen as positive, the challenges associated with adjusting to the transition can create uncertainty, and this in turn, can exacerbate feelings of disconnection. This is the reason for developing a version of GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS.

3. Who can facilitate GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS?

Background

GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS can be facilitated by a wide range of professionals, including psychologists, teachers, counsellors, nurses, social or youth workers. Familiarity with this manual is essential. Previous training in counseling skills, group facilitation and suicide risk assessment is recommended, as is background reading on the social identity approach to health.

If these are issues you confront in your practice and you have the resources to facilitate delivery, then GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS is a program that should meet your needs.

Why do we need GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS?

“Social relationships, or the relative lack thereof, constitute a major risk factor for health — rivaling the effect of well-established health risk factors such as cigarette smoking, blood pressure, blood lipids, obesity and physical activity.”¹

(House, Landis, & Umberson, 1981)

We all recognize that social interaction is a central part of what it means to be human. What we sometimes take for granted is the effect that social connections have on the many aspects of our lives. There is now a wealth of evidence from medical, epidemiological, psychological and social literatures that social connectedness is a strong predictor of mental and physical health, of lower burn-out rates, and of academic success. People with stronger and more meaningful social ties are not only more successful in achieving their performance-based goals, but they also have an increased sense of personal control, and are healthier and happier^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6}.

In the domain of higher education, research is now demonstrating that social connectivity is a strong factor in protecting against stress, and burn-out, not only during moments of high academic demand, but also during transitional phases such as arrival at university^{2, 3}. Increased connectedness with social groups has been shown to enhance feelings of self-control, and this is seen to have a

Background

positive impact on learning outcomes in particular, and well-being in general⁴. Research has also shown that if learner feel more identified with their place and field of study, this results in enhanced, deeper learning, which produced higher academic outcomes^{5,6}.

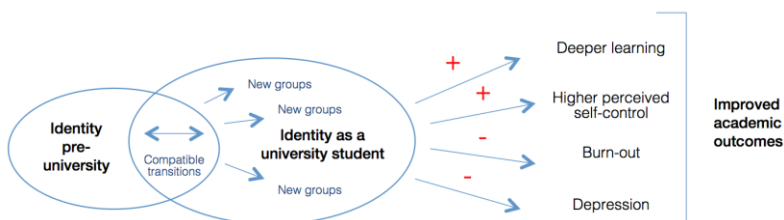


Figure 1. Positive outcomes derived from group identity during transition between pre-university and university²

There are similar and substantial effects of social connectedness on cognitive health, mental health and general well-being. During life transitions, an individual's group memberships, and the social identities that underpin them, provides a buffer against negative aspects of life transitions. Studies have shown that developing social connections with others in a new community predicts positive adjustment and greater satisfaction with life⁷. Strong identity as a university student is also associated with better learning, which is associated with higher academic performance. Having strong connections with groups of others has positive implications for health and well-being and play an important role in helping individuals adjust to life transitions⁸. A positive transition can enhance positive well-being which counteracts any adverse consequences of the change itself^{9,10}.

To date, though, there are no programs that specifically and primarily target the building and maintenance of group-based social relationships to promote physical and mental health (especially among populations who have experience a recent life transition).

Background

There are a number of reasons for this.

1. We tend to think that developing and keeping social relationships is easy, and feel that a program addressing these issues is unnecessary. That may be true for some of us, some of the time; but it is certainly not true across the board. We know that maintaining relationships is particularly challenging when we experience life change — such as moving to a foreign country to pursue further education. At these times greater awareness of social relationships and their management is crucial if we are to overcome the challenges they present.
2. Up till now, there has been no obvious theoretical framework to guide psychological intervention. However, recent development of the *Social Identity Approach to Health*^{10,11} provides this framework and it is upon this that GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS draws. Given its theoretical origins, GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS emphasizes the importance of developing and sustaining social *group* ties; something that is also consistent with a growing body of evidence showing the greater importance of group over individual ties on health outcomes¹² and self-esteem¹³.

The theory behind GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS

*“There is nothing as practical as a good theory”.*¹⁴

(Kurt Lewin, 1952. p.169)

The Social Identity Approach to Health, on which GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS is based, draws on two established and highly influential social psychological theories — social identity theory¹⁵ and self-categorization theory^{16,17}. Fundamental to these theories is the idea that social groups — whether they be family, friendship networks, community groups, sporting groups, study groups, etc. — contribute to our understanding of who we are and provide us with a distinctive sense of self — as ‘us’ and ‘we’. This approach differs from other psychological theories which tend to define the self exclusively in terms of a person’s individuality (i.e., a sense of the self as ‘I’ and ‘me’).

Background

Social identity theorists argue that our sense of self is determined as much — and often more — by our relationships with groups of others (i.e., from whom we gain a sense of “we” and “us”) as by our individuality. When groups are internalized as part of our sense of self they furnish us with a sense of social identity and thereby become an important part of who we are. Not only are they a basis for our principles, values and behaviour, but they also give a sense of meaning, purpose and direction.

Think for example, of a woman, Anne, who is a student physicist. In those contexts where she defines herself (i.e., self-categorizes) as a physicist (e.g., when she is working in the lab), then this identity becomes a basis for her behavior. What she does will be informed by the values and norms that she and other physicists collectively internalize and adhere to.

But Anne is likely to be a member of other social groups too (e.g., her family, a book club), and when those other social identities are salient in different contexts, then her thoughts, feelings and behaviours will be guided by the norms and values of those groups (e.g., helping her mother with housework, reading the club’s next assigned book). In this way, all the social identities that Anne takes on board provide a platform for distinctive and productive forms of behavior. In particular, they are a basis for communication, influence, co-operation, support and trust ¹⁸.

Background

What are the benefits of group identification?

1. Groups structure our self-concept, helping us to understand who we are, what we stand for, and what we are capable of.
2. Through this understanding, groups give us a sense of meaning, purpose, and a sense of belonging that enables us to feel connected and feel part of something bigger.
3. Groups are an important source of support (emotional, practical, intellectual) that we give to others and also receive ourselves.
4. Groups often (but not always) give us the motivation to engage in positive health-consistent behaviours.

One key contribution of self-categorization theory is to highlight the central role that social identity plays in shaping the group-related dynamics of social support^{19,20,21}. In this regard, two key ideas are that when people define themselves in terms of a given social identity (e.g., as a member of a particular work team, or study group) they (a) will tend to see other people in their group (i.e., their ingroup) as part of their self (rather than as external to self) and (b) will be motivated both to promote the well-being and interests of that ingroup by providing useful forms of support. At the same time, shared social identity also provides a basis for interpreting the helping behaviour of others in constructive ways (i.e., so that any help or support provided is seen as constructive and useful, rather than regarded with suspicion²²).

Drawing on these ideas, the Social Identity Approach to Health makes a number of predictions about the benefits of social groups. The key prediction, though, is that groups will tend only to enhance outcomes when (and to the extent that) their members identify with them.

Background

Returning to our earlier example, if Anne is struggling in her work as a student physicist and doesn't identify with this learning group, then she is unlikely to seek help and support from groups in her school or department; even though she may really need it. Instead, she might turn to other groups — her family or friendship groups, or more specific groups, such as Women in Science — with whom she might identify more strongly. And providing that the other members of those groups also share that sense of social identity, when she turns to them she is likely to receive emotional and practical support that she can use to counter stressors from the other areas of her life.

It is therefore only when we have a strong sense of belonging and identification with a given group that membership of that group serves as a psychological resource from which people can draw strength, learning and positive support¹¹. In the absence of such identification, support can be seen as unnecessary or undesirable, and, under these circumstances, it might in fact cause further strain that can be detrimental for cognitive health and well-being²³.

Knowledge of the effects that group memberships and social identification have on our health gives us some power to influence our own health outcomes. Nevertheless, we need to know how to put these to best use. This is the goal of GROUPS 4 HEALTH. The GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS extends on this to focus on giving international students the knowledge and skills they need to optimize use their groups to enhance their health and well-being in the context of transitioning to both a new country and place of study.

Why focus on the group?

“I am what I am because of who we all are.”

(Leymah Gbowee, characterizing the African Philosophy Ubuntu)

The above reasoning helps us understand why investment in social group ties might be particularly prudent. As we have noted, social groups that are internalized and become part of the self provide a basis for self-categorization

Background

(e.g., as a student, a physicist, a daughter or son). When we define ourselves in this way, and see members of these groups as an important part of who we are, then we are more open to their influence (e.g., to heed advice, to accept support) and are better positioned to influence them in return. Theoretically, then, self-categorization makes the support received from in-group members particularly beneficial.

Consistent with this reasoning, it has been shown that when it comes to enhancing brain, or cognitive, health, our group ties are more important than our ties with individuals. Recent studies of university students has shown that particularly during times of high stress within competitive academic environments,, group membership is one of the key factors which can protect against the negative impact of such stress³. Positive group membership is also associated with enhanced feelings of self-control⁴, which, in turn, significantly improves well-being³. Studies have also demonstrated that not only do group ties help during times of academic stress, such as exam periods, but they also play a pivotal role during processes of educational transition, such as moving to a new country for further education. This life transition is known to have detrimental effects on well-being, and a knock-on negative impact on academic performance. But we also know that there are factors that can buffer the effects of these stressors — notably, compatibility between old and new social connections, as well as the establishment of new social groups².

Looking at cognitive performance more generally, it has been shown that when it comes to protecting cognitive health (i.e., keeping mentally active) as we age, our group ties are the most important. This conclusion was supported by research that used population data from three waves of the English Longitudinal Study of Aging, to look at associations between the number of a person's social group memberships (indexed through self-reported membership of political, community, church, sporting and other groups) and the number of their individual relationships (with a spouse, a relative, or a friend) on cognitive

Background

function four years later. The greater importance of group ties was replicated in a further study that also investigated the mechanism through which group ties exerted their cognitive and health benefits²³. Here it was found that group ties were especially beneficial because they cultivated social identification that provided the foundation for support.

Other research in a range of health contexts also provides evidence that it is not only the content of a given intervention that leads to positive outcomes but also its delivery in a group (vs. one-on-one) format. Several studies provide evidence that health-related interventions have positive effects because — and only to the extent that — they help to promote a sense of shared social identity among participants^{24,25,26}.

Work of this form points to the fact that there is both a theoretical and empirical basis for focusing on interventions that help to develop and promote group ties.

A model to facilitate social change

“The more (and the more compatible) the merrier.”²

(Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009)

The above ideas have been tested in a large number of studies. These have looked at the effects of changing group memberships on various aspects of health and have taken the form of both large-scale population surveys and targeted intervention studies. Several of these have focused on significant life transitions that are typically associated with major changes to a person’s social networks — for example, in the context of starting university, experiencing head trauma, being diagnosed with illness, moving from home into residential care, or moving from one residential home to another.

Background

These studies consistently highlight four aspects of group membership that protect mental and physical health in the context of the threats that particular life changes present.

1. *Multiple group memberships (multiple identities)*. Studies show that belonging to, and identifying with, multiple groups is an important predictor of adjustment to life change^{2,9,27}. In particular, this is because, like having eggs in multiple baskets, this provides a person with diverse sources of support to help them cope with life changes. Indeed, having access to more social groups increases the likelihood that a person will be able to hang on to at least some of those groups after a life-changing event. Additionally, the experience of managing multiple group memberships gives a person the skills that they need to develop new social connections.
2. *Aligning group memberships (identity compatibility)*. Although it is generally good to be a member of multiple groups, it is also important that your groups are generally compatible with each other. This is because lack of compatibility can be a major source of stress and can also predict a failure to adjust to change².
3. *Maintaining group memberships (identity continuity)*. It is also beneficial to be able to hold on to important group memberships over the course of a life transition. For example, maintenance of at least some pre-existing social groups has been shown to protect general well-being in adjusting to life changes that arise from stroke⁹, brain injury²⁸, and multiple sclerosis²⁹.
4. *Acquiring group memberships (new identities)*. When we experience life change it is not always possible or desirable to retain membership in particular groups: yet the loss of these is often associated with negative health outcomes. However, helping people to develop new social group connections can buffer against these negative effects and has proved to be

Background

effective in protecting mental health ¹², cognitive health ^{9, 26, 29}, general well-being ^{25,30}, and physical health ¹⁰.

Figure 2 provides a schematic representation of the Social Identity Model of Identity Change ¹⁰, showing the relationships between these processes and the role they play in protecting mental and physical health. In particular, this shows how multiple group membership is a basis for both social identity continuity and the development of new social identities. We can see too that it is through these two pathways that health and well-being is protected, and these outcomes have been extended to include protection against stress and building of general resilience. The model was originally proposed to explain well-being outcomes in the context of life transition, and is thus particularly relevant to the context of education and learning. As we will also see later, these two pathways form two key components of GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS — notably, Sourcing (Part 3) and Scaffolding (Part 4).

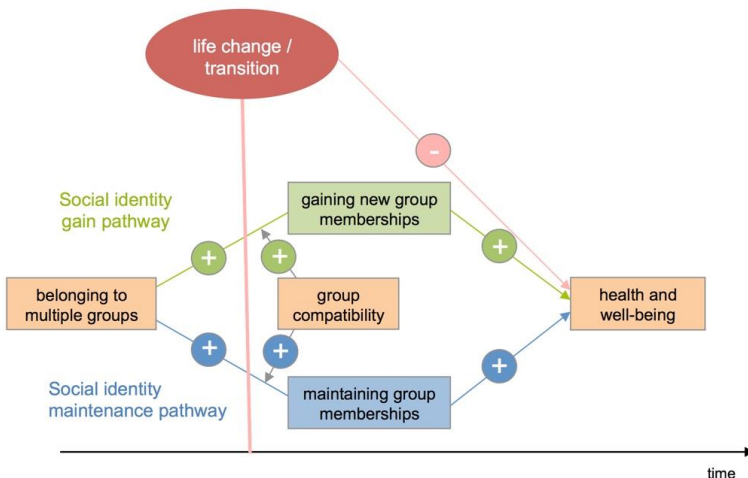


Figure 2. The Social Identity Model of Identity Change ³²

**GROUPS 4 HEALTH FOR
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS
GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS**

Background

Introduction to GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS

Group interventions come in many forms — they can involve support groups, activity or interest groups, sporting groups, and various community groups. Yet these are only successful to the extent that groups are meaningful to, and valued by those taking part.

In this regard, there are a number of lessons that we have learned in the course of testing the social identity framework to develop this edition of the program GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS

1. Simply offering any group activity is not a recipe for success.
2. If a group holds little meaning or relevance for its members, then it won't bring about benefits.
3. Learning and change are better implemented when delivered through the medium of social identification.

These lessons highlight the fact that people's needs, interests and motivations change, so groups that provide a solution at one point may not do so at another. We need a solution that will enable people to pursue and meet their social needs independently. GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS provides that solution in an international study context. Added to this, GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS is cost-effective (in treating groups of individuals with only 1-2 facilitators), avoids the stigma that can be associated with the psychological distress that arises through social disconnection³¹ — thereby ensuring that solutions are sustainable.

GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS has been developed to be efficient and easy to deliver by appropriately qualified professionals who have experience running psycho-education groups. Its broad delivery approach allows the program to be usable

Background

within a range of different educational contexts, and with a range of different populations. This manual and the associated Workbook for participants have been developed to support the planning and delivery of the program.

GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS has been designed with a classroom setting (of around 24 students) in mind. Modules 1 and 2 begin with the larger class, which is then broken down into smaller groups of around 8 participants to facilitate smaller discussions and activities. **To ensure that rapport develops in these smaller groups it is essential that these stay the same across the program.** You can set the room up in advance, with small groups of tables for about 8 participants, to facilitate these smaller sized groups are of a sufficient size to allow for the development of positive group dynamics and ensure that participants are able to contribute. Modules 3 and 4 are facilitated in these smaller groups. The four modules of the program are designed to be run weekly, over four consecutive weeks with each session estimated to take about an hour.

Program manuals and resources

Things to note

- We recommend that the GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS program is facilitated by a group leader who is supported by co-leaders, sufficient to support the work of the small groups (i.e., with 24 students, one group leader and 3 facilitators will be required to ensure one person facilitates each smaller group). The role of the leader is to work through modules, keeping the group focused on the activities at hand. The role of the co-leaders is to support the leader, while also monitoring the thoughts and experiences of group members, and facilitate smaller group activities. However, they can also make a contribution to the group (e.g., by introducing examples) if there are times when the group is struggling to participate in a given activity (e.g., a group discussion). Where possible, it's best for

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both leaders to focus on facilitation of discussion, rather than teaching, as participants will get the most out of GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS when they have a central role in given activities.

- Sections in ***bold italics*** provide suggestions about what the group leader might say when introducing or discussing topics. These are intended to be a guide only and are not prescriptive. The manual does not need to be followed “word for word” in order to adhere to the protocol.
- In addition to the *Manual*, a *Workbook* is also available for participants to use and keep. This presents a simplified outline of the program and also provides space for participants to complete exercises associated with each module.
- In several sections we have noted in *italics* areas where questions or issues may arise and we have tried to suggest ways to manage them. These are optional. The important thing is to use and integrate these suggestions as and when appropriate.
- Some resources will be required to support delivery of the program. In addition to a dedicated space to run the groups, you will need access to a whiteboard and pens for all modules.

Module 1

Schooling

Why group ties matter

Module 1: Schooling

Facilitator Notes: Preparation for Module 1

Module aims

1. To initiate rapport building amongst the larger class and smaller groups.
2. To raise awareness of the role that social groups play in our lives.
3. To educate participants about the health effects of social group membership.
4. To highlight the value of social groups as a psychological resource.

Module content

- G4H rationale
- Activity 1: Group introduction and group rules
- Activity 2: Defining social groups; Listing your social groups
- Activity 3: Listing the groups you belong to
- Activity 4. The benefits of social group
- Activity 5: Health benefits from important social groups

Module 1: Schooling

Key issues

There are a number of features that you need to bear in mind when running GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS specifically, and group programs in general.

1. Type of group: It is important to recognize that every class will have different dynamics and expectations and to observe these when breaking the class up into smaller groups.
2. Rapport: There is a need to build social engagement and rapport among members of the smaller group. In particular, attention needs to be paid to developing sound social relationships, as this is essential to facilitate group sharing and being open to the possibility of learning from the experience of others. Remember, that it is critical that membership of these smaller groups remains the same throughout the program. So people should not swap between groups.
3. Confidentiality: Emphasis must be placed on being supportive and maintaining confidentiality.
4. Language ability: For most students, English is not their first language. Speak slowly and clearly to ensure they understand the content that is being delivered.

As part of rapport building, it will be important to reflect on the group's *rules of engagement*, and this is particularly important for the smaller groups. The aim is to encourage members to talk openly about how they would like the group to operate. This is likely to involve members:

- being supportive (and not judgmental)
- maintaining confidentiality (and not discussing personal things outside the group)

Module 1: Schooling

- participating and sharing, but with equal time for all (allowing everyone a chance to talk)
- being open to feedback
- coming on time (so that people are not kept waiting)
- telling facilitators if they are unhappy (encourage people not to drop out because of concerns about the group; as you can help to work things out).

As you will see in the content section of Module 1, you may need to offer some examples to facilitate this process, but the aim is for the participants to generate the majority of these rules themselves so as to promote ownership of the process.

5. Psycho-educational experience: It is important that although the module includes psycho-education, this should not involve the group leaders “teaching” while the group listens passively. The aim is to develop a shared understanding within the group about how social relationships can be used as a psychological resource to support health — not to teach people about the standard research findings. In taking a collaborative approach to education, therapeutically, we are also practicing what we preach about the value of groups. Information provided in the manual should be discussed in a brief and straightforward way using language that all group members can understand and follow.

Module 1 Content

Why social groups matter

Aim: To establish the goals of treatment and explore why social groups matter.

Begin the module with the larger group.

As humans we are social animals. Sometimes we interact with others on a one-to-one basis, but a lot of the time we interact with others in groups — whether at work (e.g., in our particular teams or departments), where we live (e.g., community or family groups), or at play (e.g., in sports teams, with friendship networks).

Probably because socializing in groups is such a standard part of what we do in our lives there is an assumption that developing them, being active in them, and hanging on to them is easy. But there are lots of things that can get in the way; causing us to drop or lose friendships and networks that are important to us. When this happens, our risk of isolation increases and this has a proven, negative, impact on our health. We can stop this from happening, but to do so we need to be aware of how best to develop and maintain our social relationships with groups of other people.

This is where GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS comes in. GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS aims to help you understand why groups matter for your health and to learn the skills you need to feel more in control of your relationships with groups of other people, particularly in the context of moving overseas to study. This includes strengthening those relationships that matter most, as well

Module 1: Schooling

as developing new ones to help us feel more fulfilled, and, as we will see, healthier.

Activity 1. Group introduction and group rules

Introduce this to the class before breaking up into smaller groups. In most situations in which you run such groups the class is already established, so the larger group is already known.

Our job here will be to work together, as a group, to identify social challenges as well as strategies to overcome them. To do that, we will start off as a class and afterwards break the class up into smaller groups of eight. In the process of learning from each other as a class and in our smaller groups, we need to be clear about what we feel is the best way for us to work together. To do this it helps to set ourselves some guidelines that we feel comfortable working by. So these will be our principles of how we should behave in the group and how we want to treat each other. These could include things such as everyone having space to talk, not being judgmental, coming on time, and so on.

So in your smaller groups have a short conversation about what you think these principles should be?

Facilitators should then document these on a FlipChart and keep them to one side so they stay for the entire session and can be referred to if needed.

Allow only a few minutes for this task and have facilitators identify one person who will offer a principle to share with the wider group. Bring the larger class back together and have at least 4 main principles identified on the class whiteboard.

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Activity 2. Defining social groups: Who and what are they?

This activity starts with the larger group. The idea behind it, prompted by the question below, is to have group members think about what social groups are, and to discover that they can indeed be any group — based on nationality (e.g., a group of Taiwanese, or Malaysian), role (e.g., groups of students, siblings, volunteers), beliefs (e.g., feminists, Catholics), a philosophy (e.g., vegetarians), a hobby (e.g., stamp collectors, knitters, musicians), a sport (e.g., cyclists, basket ballers), and so on.

When you think about social groups, who do you think of?

If participants are feeling shy and do not respond, encourage them to identify 1 or 2 examples with their friends sitting around them for a few minutes. List these groups on the whiteboard. In doing so, you should highlight issues of diversity and range. Also note that while there are many groups we have in common (e.g., family, student), some are less common (e.g., a trainspotter, birdwatcher) — but all are relevant groups. Encourage participants to consider different types of groups, such as opinion-based groups (e.g., environmentalist), demographic groups (e.g., nationality), and informal friendship groups.

Be prepared for a question like: What about my friends who aren't part of any groups? It might be the case that they actually are part of a group that doesn't really have a name – like “the friends I hang out with on Friday nights”. In this case you could ask the group whether having a name is critical to the existence of a group. Facilitate the group to come to the conclusion that names and labels do not define the group – it's what they mean to you that matters.

Similarly, you might be asked about groups from a person's past — like the people who grew up in my neighbourhood or country town, or members of my marathon group when they no longer run. Even though we may not see people in those groups very often (or at all) or actively participate in them, we might still

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feel a strong psychological connection to them. In this case you could ask the group whether seeing people face-to-face is critical to their importance. Facilitate the group to come to the conclusion that seeing the group regularly is not central to the group's importance — a person can identify as Asian while living in the Australia and having little contact with other people from their home country. Again, it's the sense of psychological connection that matters.

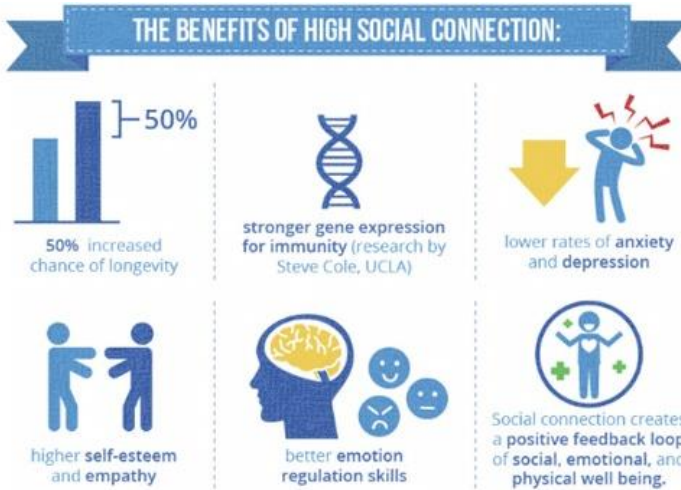
Social relationships protect health

Staying with the larger class, introduce the next activity

Aim: To educate members about the benefits of social groups to health

So we have explored what our social groups are, what we get from them, and a little about how we manage them. Yet, what we're only just starting to understand is that our social groups give us far more. Research shows that people who are more socially connected are healthier, happier and they live longer. In contrast, those who are disconnected experience worse mental health and slower recovery from illness and disease. These facts are illustrated in your Workbook.

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What we know is that being connected with others is even more important when you experience changes in your life, such as coming to a new country, or starting your studies here at UQ Foundation Year. Now, not too long ago, all of you have newly arrived in Brisbane and came to our orientation without any friends. How did you feel? Many of you went on to make groups of friends very quickly during orientation. How did joining groups make you feel?

The above figure highlights some of the health benefits of social connectedness. *Note, however, that this is also likely to bring up the question: "Should I just focus on building my social networks to be healthy, and ignore other health messages?" To answer this question you need to stress the importance of engaging in multiple strategies to enhance health — e.g., we know that engaging in exercise is not going to reduce weight if we don't also change our eating habits. The same goes for social participation — it is another active ingredient in the mix — and the reason we highlight it here is that it is all too often ignored when it comes to managing health.*

So what is it about groups that enable them to protect our health?

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Refer to the above image and jot down any additional key benefits the group raises on the whiteboard. Hopefully the following points will emerge, but bring these up if not.

- 1. Groups provide us with social and emotional support, that we can use to manage anxiety, problems with mood and balance our emotions.**
- 2. The practical, emotional and social support that groups provide, helps to reduce the effects of everyday stressors (e.g., preparing for a tough assignment or exam, moving house, changing homestay and coping with illness). When these are excessive, or are experienced in combination, they can produce wear and tear on the body. Such support is less costly for health than other coping strategies like turning to alcohol or smoking.**
- 3. Groups give meaning to our lives and contribute to our self-concept and self-understanding. The values and principles that we hold as individuals tend to be ones that we have picked up from the groups that we care about (e.g., our sense of fairness, professionalism, morality, fun, etc). This sense of purpose and direction keeps us active — physically, mentally and cognitively.**
- 4. Groups help us feel good about ourselves and the things we do. This contributes to our well-being and self-esteem.**
- 5. Feeling a strong sense of connection to, and belonging in, groups of others helps us to see that we are not isolated and need not face challenges alone.**
- 6. Extending on this, there is growing research highlighting the importance of social connectivity for all aspects of learning. Students who identify with their subject of learning tend to engage more deeply with the learning material that in turn produces better learning and better performance outcomes. So feeling connected to your learning**

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not only increases engagement and enjoyment, but also higher grades.

The above points show how important it is to connect you're your social environment. In another 2 months' time, all of you will be transiting to UQ. Let's look at some of the clubs and societies at UQ as a starting point in identifying potential groups you can join when you begin your studies at UQ.

Prepare a list of UQ clubs and societies, both for international and wider student groups. Load the websites on the computer and show it to the students on the projector screen.

Social groups are a psychological resource

Staying with the larger class, introduce the next activity

Aim: To raise awareness that social groups can serve as a psychological resource, provided we know how to use them.

As we've talked about, our sense of belonging, or identification, with social groups is essential if we are to benefit from them. How do we know which ones we identify with? They're our important groups; the ones that give our lives meaning and the ones that we would feel bad about losing. These groups with which we identify strongly are the ones that protect our health.

Social groups are a resource for our health. In the same way that a person with diabetes sometimes needs insulin, or a person with heart problems sometimes needs a pacemaker, we all sometimes need social groups to keep ourselves healthy in mind and body.

Let's take this argument a little further. If one group is an important resource, then surely adding another group gives you more of that resource? In fact research shows this to be true. As we mentioned earlier,

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people who join more groups tend to have better health (e.g., to have less mental illness, and to live longer). Indeed, the more valued groups we have, the more sources of protection we have. One group gives a little protection, but if we add another and then another we're increasing the pool of support and protection we have access to.

A useful analogy is that each group is a source of capital, like having money in a bank. When you have money you can buy the essential things you need each day, like food, clothes or paying for transport. Having money in the bank also means that you can cope with unexpected emergencies and setbacks, like moving to a new rental apartment or moving out of your home stay.

Similarly, groups give you the things you need every day, like companionship and values, but also mean that you can cope with an unexpected stressful event, like falling sick during the semester.

Activity 3. Listing the groups you belong to

Introduce the activity to the wider group, but quickly break the class into smaller groups of 8 or 9 students in order to facilitate smaller group discussions.

What I'd like you to think about now are the groups that you belong to. Some of us may have only a few and others might have more. There is some space in your Workbook to list these groups and you'll see you have a fair bit of space. Don't feel that you need to fill all the spaces, just note down the groups you belong to. As you do this you'll have an opportunity to talk about the different groups that people come up with in your smaller groups and we'll go around helping you with that discussion.

Allow about 5 minutes for this task and then spend a little time asking people generally about some of the groups they have identified. *Members who list only a few groups in this task may feel uncomfortable if they see others listing a lot. If this comes up, it will be important to stress that it is OK if different people*

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have different numbers of groups they belong to. The important thing is whether you're happy with the relationships you have and whether you'd like more. Indicate that this is part of what GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS is all about (i.e., helping people learn skills to deal with these issues) and that you will be addressing this directly in upcoming modules.

Activity 4. The benefits of social groups

Keep the class in the smaller groups of 8 or 9 students and have facilitators start the following discussion.

There are many things we can get from being part of different social groups. What are some things that you get from your groups?

If people find it difficult to think about groups more broadly, get them to focus on one of their groups — bringing this group to mind and thinking about what that particular group gives them. Use the Flip Chart to list the benefits. Essentially you're looking for group members to come up with most of the following:

- a sense of belonging
- companionship
- a sense of stability
- a sense of who I am
- values that we live by
- access to help
- a basis for feeling good about ourselves
- emotional support
- a basis for not feeling alone or isolated
- a sense of purpose and direction (giving us something meaningful to do)

Try to facilitate this discussion without giving answers and where you can, summarise points provided by group members. For example, if someone says

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“my family sometimes helps out by paying for things I can’t afford”, this can be reinforced and summarized by saying “so they can help us by providing some financial support”.

Sometimes new groups take a little time to develop and so some may feel uncomfortable talking initially. If this is the case, there are a couple of ways that you can break the ice. Pop the above potential benefits into a hat/small box/or a mug and get group members to pick one out and consider whether this is a benefit they get from one or more of their groups. Group members can do this in turn as a means of facilitating the exercise. Alternatively you can get group members to jot one benefit down and pop this into the hat. Individual group members can then pick one out in turn to see if this is a benefit they have experienced from any of their groups.

In the context of this exercise, don’t be surprised if some negative responses and feelings come up for some when discussing the benefits of groups — things like they can make you feel embarrassed, they take up a lot of time, they encourage bad habits, they create pressure. Prompt members to list these as well, if they haven’t come up already, with the following question.

Are there any downsides to groups? What might some of these be?

Don’t challenge the smaller group about these — acknowledge that groups can have some downsides or challenges and an aim of GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS is to help people navigate around these to make the most out of their groups to enjoy the benefits summarized in the activity above.

At this point it would be helpful for the group to consider the impact of having very large networks – if this hasn’t come up already as a downside.

Is there a downside to belonging to lots of different groups? How do you juggle a large number of group memberships, and is it the case that you can have too many?

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The aim of this discussion is to challenge a couple of myths.

- Myth 1: There's a magic, or ideal, number of groups.

Do you think there's a magic or ideal number of groups that we should have?

It is generally the case that the more groups people belong to (and identify with) the more resilient they tend to be, but there is no ideal number. The key issue is whether you are happy and satisfied with the number of social group relationships you have and, if you are not, this needs to be addressed. GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS provides people with strategies and helps them gain skills they need to deal with this. You can facilitate this discussion by asking members the above question.

- Myth 2: Multiple groups are a burden and so adding more only adds to your stress.

There are two factors that contribute to development of this myth.

First, many people believe that to be part of a group you need to see the group or think about the group all the time to show you care and belong. This isn't the case — some groups you might see often (like family, work groups) and others only occasionally (e.g., book club). This is OK, as different groups operate and function in different ways and you can still feel part of a group without regular, face-to-face contact. In fact, some groups can be virtual (as in the case of online communities).

To bring out this point you can ask members: ***Do you think you need to see and think about your groups every day to feel a part of them?***

In the course of this discussion you can ask members to think about those groups that they see more and less often, and then explore whether a low level of exposure necessarily means that the group in question is no longer one of your groups. The point to get across here is that a low level of exposure doesn't

Module 1: Schooling

tend to change a group's status as "one of your groups" — it is still one of the groups that you belong to.

Second, having to complete many tasks or assignments, for example, just adds to our stress; so why should juggling multiple groups be any different?

To explore this aspect of the myth ask the group: ***When we have many tasks or assignments on our list of things to do, this can add to our stress. So is juggling multiple groups different? How do you juggle and manage your groups?***

A couple of things should emerge from this discussion:

- You don't have to see your groups all the time. It's OK to miss occasional activities/events and to prioritize some over others when you need to. A group's importance is not necessarily related to how often you see other group members.
- Because groups are a source of support, they can also save you time. A politician would never get elected if they had to do all of their campaigning alone! Groups can be a way of helping you to achieve goals that are important to you and solving problems that stand in the way.
- When the groups we belong to don't have a lot in common, it may make managing them a little more challenging. The important thing is to be aware of this and develop strategies to deal with the challenge. We will come back to talk about these and other strategies in Modules 3 and 4 of the GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS program.

The rationale behind Activities 3 and 4 is to get people to think about social groups and make them *salient* — all in preparation for the next piece of work that focuses on recognizing social groups as a health resource.

We can think of this in the following prescription:

A social group = a psychological resource

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This is like having one egg in your basket.

Multiple social groups = multiple psychological resources

This is like having multiple eggs in your basket — and from which you can choose the right egg. Also, if you drop and break one, you still have other eggs in your basket from which to choose.

It's all well and good to know that our groups can benefit us in these ways, but for these to be a real and practical resource we need to know how best to use them.

Activity 5. Health benefits from important social groups

Let's go back to those groups that you listed on page 11. In the table on page 14, in the second column rate the importance of each of the groups that you listed, and in the third column indicate how much you turn to each group for support.

Allow time for this task.

There's likely to be a range in your ratings of importance: some groups are very important and get a 5-star rating; others may be less so. Not all of our groups are equally important.

So for groups you rated as less or moderately important, what were some of the reasons for this?

For your very important groups what were some of the reasons for your rating?

Take a little time to review these and highlight points that relate to support (social, emotional and practical), self-understanding, well-being, and mood.

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What we know from research is that our sense of belonging to groups — how much we identify with them — guides how much benefit we get from them. “Importance” gives us a good gauge of how strongly we identify with others. So the very important groups are the ones we tend to connect and identify with most strongly.

So are your more important groups the ones you identify with most strongly? Do you look to them more often for help and support?

Explore this with the group and encourage members to provide some examples. This leads into the final section of this module that introduces the notion of social groups as a general psychological resource.

Bear in mind that some of the groups we value do not always return support. In some of these cases, the failure to receive support can be damaging. Indeed, not receiving support when we expect it can be especially detrimental to health. Again, don't avoid this and explore with the group the ways in which other group ties can be used to counteract these effects and note that this will be considered in later sessions.

Session summary: Learning points

So, based on our discussion today what have we learned? Encourage the group to identify these:

1. Groups matter, but it is those groups that we identify strongly with that matter most.
2. Groups that are important to us are a resource that keeps us healthy.
3. The more of these important groups that we belong to (or the more groups we identify with), the more resources (or eggs in our basket) we have to protect us in tough situations.

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These are the group memberships that we want to develop and maintain. In future sessions we will focus on skills and strategies that help us (a) maintain groups we value, and (b) develop new groups to better manage our social environment.

Module 2

Scoping

Mapping social group ties

Module 2. Scoping

Facilitator Notes: Preparation for Module 2

Module aims

1. To raise awareness of participants' social group networks through Social Identity Mapping.
2. To underline the point that people's social groups are also a reflection of who they are.
3. To raise awareness of the social groups from whom we can, and do, seek support.

Module content

- Mapping members' social worlds to raise awareness of our social selves and social identities.
- Activity: Social Identity Mapping.

Module 2. Scoping

Resources

This session will require a number of resources in addition to group members'

Workbooks:

- Access to computer lab for students to complete their social identity maps online
- Access to printer to print out the students' social identity maps

Key issues

Many of us take our social relationships for granted, failing fully to realize how important they are to our self-understanding and as sources of support that, when utilized well, protect health. This is not surprising in the context of living busy lives, but a little effort to consciously recognize their value can bring considerable benefit.

We started the process of recognizing group memberships in Module 1, but now we want to consolidate this by developing a complete map of each participant's group memberships, how they contribute to self-understanding and how they can be used as sources of support. As these networks are much easier to understand and process when illustrated, we have developed the Social Identity Mapping exercise to facilitate this experience and help participants to envision their social worlds.

The Social Identity Mapping exercise provides the main focus for this session. It is important to bear in mind that while this exercise is critical for raising awareness of participants' social group world, it is also likely to raise a number of issues that you need to manage in the group context.

1. *The Social Identity Maps that people develop are likely to differ. Some may be rich, comprising lots of different social groups, while others may be quite simple with only one or two groups. In the course of creating these identity maps in a group context, the group will see what others are producing and*

Module 2. Scoping

this may influence the development of their own maps — perhaps even adding groups that they otherwise would not have included, to be more closely aligned with those of other group members. Make sure that everyone knows from the start that their maps will differ – this will be evident in some people having connections to many different groups of varying importance, and others might have just a few very important groups. It is also likely that those with few important groups will finish the task faster than others. If this occurs, then it will be important to keep people engaged — perhaps asking them to think about who is part of the groups identified, the sorts of things that the group does together (e.g., go out, give moral support, etc.), as these things will be useful for the various tasks and questions that will come up when doing this exercise. By raising awareness of these possibilities from the start you will help to reduce any anxiety that might arise in response to people seeing differences. Bearing this in mind, it will also help if you ask everyone to spread out when developing their maps to give them some space, but also so that they are less likely to feel under surveillance from others in the group.

- 2. Producing an impoverished map might also affect some people emotionally; perhaps leading them to feel a bit down. In this event it is important to acknowledge any member's reaction but also to reassure them that their current map is only a starting point, and the goal of the program is to teach them how to build their networks in a way that best suits them.*
- 3. A common question people ask is whether they can include family, friends, or groups that don't really have a name (and hence might not be thought of as a "real" group). Reassure participants that all groups, even including family subgroupings (e.g., immediate family, wider family), should be included as they all make up people's social worlds. Reminding the group of last session's exercise on defining a group will help here, without biasing everyone's responses to the exercise by providing particular examples.*

Module 2 Content

Mapping your social world

Aim: To raise awareness of the social groups in members' networks.

Run this in a computer lab for maps to be produced. Start as the larger class before breaking up into the same smaller groups that you used in Module 1.

It's probably fair to say that there are times when we take our social relationships for granted. Can you think of times this happens?

Allow the class some time to consider these situations. Here you're simply trying to get across the point that we all do this sometimes. Recognizing this helps us just to be a bit more mindful of not doing this too often, and finding that our social groups aren't there when we need them. Remember too, that a reduced level of face-to-face contact isn't necessarily a sign that you're taking people for granted. There are certainly groups that we don't see very often, but with whom we feel very strongly connected. A lot of this depends on the *norms* of the group – or what the group does. If an important part of being a family member is to socialize in some way weekly, then failure to do so might be a sign of them being taken for granted. Alternatively, you may only meet with your book club monthly, which is OK as this is how the group functions to allow everyone time to read the next book.

To make the most of our groups as a resource, it helps to know who is out there, particularly when we need to turn to others for help. If we can see, or visualize, our social world then it's easier to make good use of them. This is what we are going to do in today's session. In this exercise you will be generating a diagram or map that shows your social groups. You will also rate how important each is, how much you see yourself fitting in with them, how often you engage with them, and how positively you feel about them.

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The reason for doing this is that all these factors have been shown to predict better health outcomes.

Activity: Social Identity Mapping

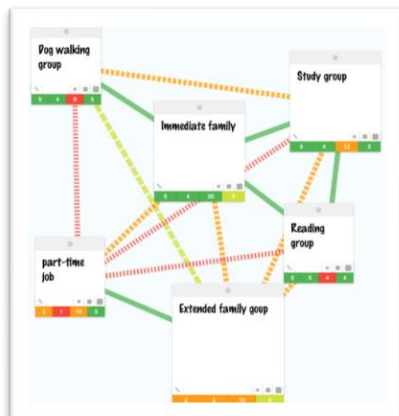
Encourage people to refer to their Workbook which list the instructions on how to use the online mapping tool. At each stage, encourage the group to engage with the activity.

In this next part the class will be introduced to the process of visually mapping out their social worlds using the on-screen social identity mapping tool. Briefly describe the tool, and give a very quick on-screen demonstration of how to go about creating a social identity map. Ensure that you are familiar with the tool yourself beforehand.

This part of the group session will require computer access for each participant with online capability. When the participants are done, instruct them to print a copy of their social identity map.

This interactive on-screen tool allows you to visualise all the different groups that currently make up your social world. Here is an example of a social map created using this online social mapping tool.

As you will see when you start the mapping process, each group is represented separately, and, after you have identified each group (by putting its name on each e-note) you then rate each group on different



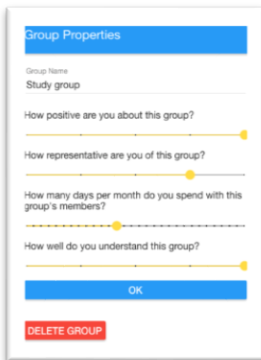
Module 2. Scoping

criteria (see the numbers along the bottom of each e-note), such as how positive you feel about it, and whether or not you feel you are a typical member.

Once all the groups are created, you then think about how they relate to each other. Are they similar or very different? And how compatible are they?

Step by step instructions:

1. Create an e-note for one of your groups and give it a name.
2. Choose a size for the group – the more important it is to you, the bigger the size of the e-note.



3. Rate the group on a number of dimensions by clicking on the bar at the bottom of each e-note.



4. Repeat this process by creating a new e-note for all the groups you belong to.

5. Drag the e-notes around so that similar groups are close together.

6. Click on the 'link' icon to join the e-Notes together and indicate how compatible your groups are with each other.



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Your overall map should provide a visual representation of your social world. Continue adjusting it until you are happy with the map you have created.

In concluding the session, enable discussion about the process and contents of mapping. So if participants try to avoid the task or indicate they'd like to do it at home, encourage them to continue and indicate that you are there to support them in the task.

Once it has been completed, break the students up into their smaller groups and proceed with the following questions to facilitate processing of the information and the task.

What are some of the positive features of your maps and the relationships they highlight?

It is important to focus on the positive aspects first, to raise awareness of those relationships that make us feel good or meet our needs in particular ways. Encourage the group to talk about the reasons for feeling positive about these relationships to help draw out what they need to look for when trying to acquire new groups (as part of the Scaffolding module that occurs later in the program). Hopefully the discussion will bring out the following reasons for feeling positive about our group memberships:

- they allow us to develop and share a common interest,
- they make us feel positive about ourselves by enhancing our self-esteem and making us feel good about who we are and what we do,
- they give a sense of purpose and meaning to our lives,
- they give us support when we need it, and
- they help us feel that we are not alone.

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However, try to make the discussion specific to the experiences and groups of your participants, rather than about groups in general. Facilitate sharing of examples as a means of showing how important groups can be for building self-understanding, self-esteem and social support — all important ingredients in keeping us healthy. Spend about 10 minutes on this task to allow the group time to share these positive experiences.

It is possible that some members don't have any positive experiences or just can't bring them to mind. If this is the case and a member raises their dissatisfaction with their groups, this will prompt your next question in which you recognize that not all groups are always good for us. Acknowledge this, but also make sure there has been sufficient discussion of the positive aspects of groups before moving on.

Were there things that you were less happy about with your map and would like to change? What were they?

This may bring up some of the following points:

- 1. Gaps in social relationships associated with not being part of many groups.*
- 2. A sense that the groups that are identified do not fully capture the self.*
- 3. Incompatibilities between groups, potentially making them difficult to juggle and manage.*
- 4. Potentially stressful or harmful past experiences — for instance, a group might sometimes encourage behaviour that's bad for your health (heavy drinking, substance use), might sometimes be a source of strain and stress, or may sometimes make us feel less positive about ourselves.*
- 5. Lack of balance in one's life — for example, if all groups that are identified are associated with work and none with other aspects of self.*

Some of this may be difficult for people to share, but as everyone has gained some familiarity with others in the group, hopefully there will be sufficient trust within the group to talk about these “less liked” aspects of people's maps.

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Remember, even if our groups can sometimes make us feel less positive or optimistic, most groups are unlikely to do that all the time, as our tendency will be to move away from these groups and value them less. We need to recognize that this can happen in some relationships, and that what is critical is to develop strategies that help us to make the most of the relationships we value. It will also be important to be clear that this is the focus of the Sourcing module — to help people make the most of the relationships they want to keep.

The aim of this discussion is to prompt people to:

- a) Share some of the contents of their maps (but try not to let one person dominate). This can help people to visualize who they turn to when they feel down, or when they need help or support.
- b) Share what they learned about themselves, and their sense of self, in the process of doing the task. It will be particularly important to highlight emotional experiences in this context as learning with emotion is typically more powerful and motivating where change may be required.
- c) Visualize where there might be areas of *social growth* (perhaps to feel more socially connected with others, or to address particular support needs).
- d) Raise awareness of any areas of *social loss* – which may have happened due to moving to Australia for further education.
- e) Tap into any emotional reaction/response to the exercise — that is, how it made members feel. *(However, bear in mind that these will be mixed, comprising both positive and negative feelings, and that both are important to capture. The negative feelings in particular are likely to be linked to a need for social growth or a sense of social loss and it will be important to reflect back that the program aims to give members the skills they need to facilitate that growth).*

The points relevant to social growth and emotional reaction are particularly important to emphasize and discuss. So if there is an opportunity to highlight social growth with particular examples from group members, then use these to

Module 2. Scoping

support your rationale for the forthcoming modules on Sourcing and Scaffolding.

In addition to what the group has learned about their social world through the mapping exercise, it will also be important to tap into *process*. The questions about the positives and negatives of people's maps might bring these out. Understanding the mapping process and how to use it makes it easier for members to repeat the process as they need. Indeed, this is something they will do again at the end of the program. The following questions may help the group to think about this.

Do you think your maps will stay the same?

Hopefully responses to this question will help you make the point that our social group relationships are not fixed. People change, as do their circumstances and needs. One key reason for this is that the groups we are in themselves change dramatically over time.

Because our lives change, the people and the groups in it will also change. And by the same token, as our groups change, so do we. Do you think this tool could help you understand the nature of this change when it happens?

Facilitate the group to consider Social Identity Mapping as a tool that they can return to time and again, to re-evaluate their social world as they need — perhaps when they experience a significant life change, like graduating from university, or if they feel that they need more out of their social group relationships. Share with the group how to use Post-its, pen and paper to draw their Social Identity Mapping instead of using the online version.

Session summary: Learning points

So, based on our discussion today, what have we learned?

Module 2. Scoping

Encourage the group to identify the following:

1. It is important to be aware of who is in my social world.
2. My social groups are a reflection of who I am as a person.
3. It is important to be aware of who I can — and do — seek support from.

I'd like you to review your map over the week and think about two things:

- 1. If necessary, add any groups to the map you feel were left out in the session.***
- 2. Think about what your ideal map might look like. Do your existing groups give you what you need? What needs aren't being met?***

Module 3

Sourcing

Drawing on existing social networks

Module 3. Sourcing

Facilitator Notes: Preparation for Module 3

Module aims

1. To understand how we feel about, and draw upon, existing group memberships.
2. To discover ways that enable people to make the best of their existing group memberships.
3. To identify strategies to reconnect with old (pre-existing) group memberships.

Module content

- Activity 1: Creating the perfect group?
- Activity 2: Giving and receiving.
- Activity 3: Reconnecting.

Module 3. Sourcing

Resources

Participants' Workbooks and pens are the only materials you will need for this session.

Key issues

In this module the focus will be on members' overall satisfaction with their existing group networks and whether they meet their needs in terms of self-understanding, self-esteem, and social support.

It will be important to be solution-focused in this exploration. To address this you need to be upfront about the realities of social relationships. Specifically, not all relationships are perfect and there are ways to improve the ones that matter. Note too, that we can also develop new relationships to fill gaps left by ones that are difficult to improve or matter less. Reassure members that these issues will be covered in this module and Modules 4 of the program, so you will be addressing these issues. Remember to focus on equipping students with skills to engage with the local Australian students who they will meet in UQ. Emphasize on the importance of balancing their current international student networks and reaching out to new groups that could include local Australian students.

Module 3. Sourcing

Module 3 Content

Start this session by letting students know that in the previous sessions you have engaged in both large and smaller group discussions. In the remaining modules the work will be done in your smaller groups

Activity 1. Creating the perfect group?

Break the class into smaller groups of 8 or 9 students in order to facilitate smaller group discussions for the entire module.

Aim: Reviewing social identity maps, raising awareness of existing relationships and how well they serve your needs.

Last week, all of you created your Social Identity Maps. Let's review your social identity map to see if it fully captured your social group network.

Facilitate discussion if this occurred.

Were you able to think of ways of getting more out of your groups?

Allow a little time for people to discuss what needs are not being met and encourage the group to talk through ways they might be able to get more from their existing groups. This will provide the background for the present module that aims to help people make the most out of the groups they have.

Getting the best out of your social groups

**General Aim: To identify strategies to bring out the best in our relationships and make sure they meet our needs.
Working out what we can do to improve the things we don't like in our maps.**

Module 3. Sourcing

Let's think about your Social Identity Maps and identify groups in your existing network that are particularly important to you. Which are the groups that you want to keep despite the distance, because they are such an important part of you?

Allow the group some time to come up with examples.

Let's say you become frustrated and lashed out at your family back home because of a difference in opinion. Not only that, you lashed out and know that you may not see them for a while because they overseas. What might be a way of getting over this and responding in a way that reduces the frustration that you and your family may feel?

Allow the group some time to come up with examples of how to manage this situation. This might involve coming to some compromise — for example, listen to your family's point of view before reacting. These examples are likely to bring out more positive styles of communication: more active listening and use of positive language. Highlight these (below) and ask the group to provide examples of what these might involve in the context of the example you raised. There is space on page 15 of the Workbook to jot some of these examples down.

There are a few things that engaging in these alternative ways of responding require:

- ***Active listening, rather than immediately lashing out. Allowing your best friend to share their point of view with you, which allows you time to think through what they are suggesting and how best to respond. So what might active listening involve in this case?***
- ***Be a positive and encouraging when you respond, which allows for a more open dialogue in seeking a solution that works best for everyone (but recognize too that this may not necessarily be ideal for either party). *What could you say in response?****

Module 3. Sourcing

- ***Being accepting of difference and imperfection — none of us can be everything we want to be all the time, and so we need to expect this of others and be willing to have a group that is not perfect.***

There are also ways that we can be better prepared to deal with these sorts of experiences if we look after ourselves. Clearly we're more likely to respond with frustration when we are tired, stressed, and pressured. So what do we need to do to help ourselves to not be so tired, stressed and pressured?

Encourage the group to bring up examples which could include things like:

- a) engaging in better self-care (e.g., getting more sleep, having better time management),
- b) being more attuned to bodily signs of rising pressure and fatigue (e.g., headache, physical fatigue) to reduce the likelihood of them affecting behavior negatively, and
- c) recognizing and apologizing for our own failings when they affect others.

Try to encourage the group to jot these down in their Workbook, so they can use this as a reminder or a resource if needed in future.

What you want to emerge from this entire discussion is not only a recognition that relationships don't always function perfectly, but that our choices and behaviours can help make them function better more often. We can also improve our relationships if these lapses are infrequent, as occasional lapses are easier to forgive (both in ourselves and others).

Module 3. Sourcing

Activity 2: Giving and receiving



Working with these strategies to make the most of our groups is a good way to keep our groups alive and working well for us. A healthy group is like a healthy plant. A healthy plant needs water to survive. A healthy group needs nurturing for it to work well for us — to help us feel good about ourselves and to give us the help and support we need.

But nurturing is a two-way street: not only should the group work for us, but it should also work for everyone in it. So to maintain the groups we value we need to give to and invest in the group in the same way the group invests and gives to us. In fact there is a lot of evidence showing that people who provide emotional and practical support to others are actually healthier than those who simply receive it. This is because giving in this way helps us feel good about ourselves, builds our self-esteem and gives us purpose; so it's as good for us as it is for others.

So let's move on to thinking about both giving and receiving when it comes to your groups. Break up into pairs and talk about what you give and receive from your groups. On page 16 of your Workbook, there's a group Giving and Receiving Diagram for you to jot down a few of your groups and note down some examples of the practical help, support and even advice that you have received and then have given to members of your groups.

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Allow about 5 minutes for this task. The aim is to raise awareness that for groups to help us, they need input and sustenance in return to survive.

Let's share some examples of the ways that you have supported your groups.

Have members of each pair talk about what their partner gives and receives. The examples of “giving” are likely to be similar to the forms of support that members receive from their own groups, and it is important to make participants aware of this point. Hopefully this will lead into a discussion of the “effective ingredients” in keeping groups alive, many elements of which come from work by Moos (2007)³¹ on the effective ingredients of self-help groups. The sorts of things that should come up are:

1. providing emotional, practical and informational support,
2. providing positive encouragement to promote a sense of self-belief and efficacy in their groups,
3. providing some focus and structure to help the group pursue and reach their goals, and
4. acting as a role model, to help show others in the group how they might achieve their goals.

In the course of this discussion, it is possible that a couple of issues/questions will emerge.

- a) *Am I providing the right support?*
- b) *Am I providing enough help/support? I sometimes don't have enough energy to give support.*
- c) *I don't have anything to offer my groups.*

The beauty of a group context is that the group can provide some answers here, so facilitate the group to respond in a supportive way. You could simply ask the group “What do you think is right here?” If these questions don't emerge, bring them up yourself to facilitate the discussion.

Module 3. Sourcing

Activity 3: Reconnecting with old ties

We all know our social groups change over time. There are probably some that you've lost touch with even before coming to Australia. This could include some old school friends from your home country, or family members who you have not seen for a while. Yet sometimes it helps to get back in touch because they are important to you and may provide another source of support. We also know that sometimes this can be hard to do, even without the distance. So what are some of the reasons that people lose touch?

Encourage the group to discuss and reflect on these changes. How has moving to Australia impacted on their social connections? The aim of this part of the module is to get students to develop strategies to reconnect with those groups that they would like to be part of their social world again or to keep the connection with old groups from their home country. Highlight the fact that this need not involve seeing or touching base with them every day. It may simply involve feeling connected and touching base every now and then. It does not have to physically be in the same country either. Discuss the different social media and online tools to keep in touch with family and friends back home.

Clearly there are lots of reasons why we lose touch with people, as you have all highlighted. The critical thing is that loss of this kind has been shown to be bad for our health. So to protect our health these losses need to be replaced — either by reconnecting with people we may have lost touch with or by developing new connections. Today we'll focus on the best ways to reconnect, and in our next session we will focus on developing new relationships.

As an example, one of the big changes we all experience after moving to a new country is your friendship with your old friends from back home. In fact, the evidence shows that reconnecting with others via the web is becoming increasingly popular — about 70% of us have at some time

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used social media like Twitter or LinkedIn to reconnect with our old school buddies or used websites like Facebook or Instagram.



The internet is a good tool, and you can contact old friends to organize reunions which are becoming more and more popular and allow people to meet up with groups of old school mates, family members who you have lost touch with, etc.

Has anyone tried to find or reconnect with old friends either through the internet or through reunions when you are back home? Was it a positive experience and did it encourage you to stay connected in some way?

Explore the different experiences of group members.

Of course, there are different groups of people and different ways to reconnect. Has anyone thought of other old groups (e.g., an old sporting team or a group of friends from Senior High), that they might want to reconnect with? What could you do to make this happen?

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Explore this with people in the group and encourage them to come up with solutions to the challenges of reconnecting (i.e., doing it through friends or other known networks, email, Facebook, WeChat, Whatsapp, phone, even letter or a postcard, organising a reunion yourself during school holidays or with one of the old group, etc.).

In pairs (or a group of three if there are uneven numbers) ***I want you to think about groups that you could reconnect with and brainstorm ways and actions that would help make this happen.***

The focus here is on group reconnection; not connection to another individual. So emphasize this when bringing up the activity and encouraging members to be creative about the different ways this could be achieved. Bring the discussion back to the larger group and talk about the different strategies that the group came up with. The idea is to brainstorm ways to reconnect to give people a set of strategies they could apply to make contact with groups of people that they want to reconnect with. If not generated by the group, introduce reunions as one possible way that is also increasing in popularity — given the growing number of school, university and family reunions.

For instance, student alumni organizations might be an important resource to support class/university reunions if they wish to pursue these. These can be difficult when living overseas, but many students often visit home during study and the timing of such reunions might be able to be organized to fit in. Once some people know about an event then they can spread the news to their friends and this, in turn, increases opportunities to make contact with people you may have lost touch with. The importance of raising this topic is to encourage students to be open to these opportunities as possible ways to increase their social group networks through linking in with people they already know.

Sometimes despite giving this a lot of thought, it's difficult to reconnect and stay connected. It can hurt if you make the effort to reconnect and it doesn't always work out. All kinds of things can get in the way of our

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efforts to rebuild our group connections. Can you think about what some of these things might be?

What you're trying to bring out here is awareness that the things that get in the way of reconnecting for other people may be the same things that prevent participants from reconnecting.

Possible reasons might include:

- The distance makes it all too hard.
- Contact information is incorrect or out of date, so your message doesn't get through.
- When you are home during your holidays, they might not be free during that time.
- There might be a lot of things going on in the life of the people you contact – they might be moving, they might be doing exams or have an assignment deadline, be dealing with an illness, or have responsibilities that limit how much they can interact with others.
- Some of the people you contact might be anxious about re-connecting, anxious about what they look like or what they've done in their lives.
- Perhaps the old group and the way it functioned is incompatible with the current groups of the people you contact and their sense of who they are — that is, their current values and interests may have changed considerably since leaving school — so this mismatch in interests might motivate some people to not reconnect.
- Sometimes people don't connect because they feel bad about being out of contact for so long!

Are these reasons that might affect you reconnecting with other people too?

The bottom line is that all the above reasons are equally likely to be reasons why we don't connect ourselves. So the point is that you want everyone to see that this failure to reconnect is not necessarily personal.

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Sometimes we might also feel that reconnecting is just too hard. What do you think life would be like if we don't make the effort? What could we do to overcome these feelings?

Often when we feel down and that things are against us, it simply feels much too hard to make the effort to reconnect. However much we can sympathize with this attitude (as we can all feel it sometimes), we need to overcome it. This is why we ask everyone to think about what their lives would look like if they just stopped making the effort and to consider ways to overcome feeling this way. The aim here is to be solution-focused, so everyone has resources they can use when feeling this way.

An issue that might come up in the context of this discussion is that some people just don't want to reconnect and are explicit about this – for instance, when parts of the family just do not get on and attempts to reunite are completely blocked. Sometimes it's worth pursuing these and sometimes not. To figure out what's best it's often helpful to talk it through with others; family members in this case. In the end, we need to recognize that not all attempts at reconnecting work out as we'd like. The important thing to stress is that some attempts are successful and that we have other ways of building our social world — in particular, developing new connections, which we will focus on next time.

Session summary: Learning points

Based on our discussion today what have we learned? (encourage the group to identify these):

1. Groups need care: giving is as important to health as receiving.
2. Belonging to multiple groups helps us share the load of help and support.
3. Reconnecting with others can help to build our social group networks, and awareness of their pros and cons is important to make the best of these resources.

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But reconnecting with old groups is not the only way to build your networks. Sometimes we develop completely new bonds based on our interests and motivations.

In preparation for the next session I want you to think about your Social Identity Maps and ask yourself two questions:

- 1. Are there any gaps in your group memberships?***
- 2. Could these be filled by joining new groups? If so, what might they be?***

It may be the case that you'd simply like to try out some new groups — because they do things that you want to learn more about (e.g., chess, painting), develop a skill or ability (e.g., tennis, computing), follow an interest (e.g., reading, walking), or even because it would just be nice to hang out with another set of people.

Module 4

Scaffolding

Building new social connections

Module 4. Scaffolding

Facilitator Notes: Preparation for Module 4

Module aims

1. Identify new groups to join.
2. Understand the benefits of, and barriers to, joining new groups.
3. Build participants' skills and efficacy to engage in new groups and develop new affiliations.
4. Provide a framework for participants to build ongoing social connections with one another where this is desired.

Module content

- Activity 1: Barriers to joining new groups.
- Activity 2: Self-aspect pie.
- Activity 3: Identifying new groups to join.
- Activity 4: Developing a social plan.

Resources

- Members' Workbooks.
- Pens.

Key issues

In this module the focus will be on joining new groups and helping members to think about ways to achieve this goal. Some of the challenges that people might face in discussing this are likely to be similar to those discussed in the previous

Module 4. Scaffolding

module when thinking about ways to reconnect and the barriers these might create. A key feature of this module is using the group (larger and smaller) itself as a “scaffold”, to model the experience of joining a new group, so remember to use this as a basis for exploring strategies.

Module 4 Content

As in the last session, the work in this module will be done in the smaller groups of 8 or 9 students that students have worked in throughout the program.

Activity 1: Barriers to joining groups

As with all life transitions, sometimes it is hard to make new friends when you are in a new and unfamiliar environment. What kinds of barriers make it hard to join and enjoy time with new groups?

The goal of this discussion is threefold:

- a) to validate the difficulties group members have had in the past with forming new connections,
- b) to demonstrate that their experience of awkwardness or anxiety is a common one.
- c) to address any concerns relating to cultural difference and language barrier.

In other words, part of the reason why group memberships can be hard to maintain is that everyone experiences these challenges and sometimes they're difficult to overcome and so the connection falls away.

Examples of the barriers people might come up with in brainstorming are things like the following (list the barriers group members generate on the Flip Chart):

- Feel awkward talking to new people
- Don't know what to talk about
- Not confident in speaking English

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- Don't know what groups to join
- Not enough time
- Health barriers
- Practical problems (e.g., transport)
- Anxiety or self-doubt

So there are lots of reasons why it can be hard to build new group connections. Some of these are clearly very common — like feeling awkward with new people, being too busy or feeling cautious because of your English language ability. If lots of people in a group feel this way, how can it stay together?

Help group members to generate for themselves the idea that groups can only survive if people overcome these barriers because they see that the long-term gain is worth short-term inconvenience or discomfort. You could also get everyone to think about the present GROUPS 4 HEALTH: IS group as an example here and explore whether anyone experienced any barriers in joining and becoming part of this group.

The main focus for the rest of today's session is on helping you learn strategies to overcome some of these barriers. In particular, we are going to talk about strategies we might use in choosing groups, strategies for building a sense of connection with those groups, and, when you want to create a new group, strategies for "kick-starting" it into existence. Remember too, you don't have to join new groups on your own. There may be someone in your smaller group here who is interested in joining a group with you.

Activity 2: Self-aspect pie: Are your groups a good reflection of who you are?

Module 4. Scaffolding

In an ideal world, we want a good fit between our sense of self or identity, and our social world. That is, you want your groups to be a reflection of you and how you see yourself as person. When your groups are a good reflection of how you see yourself, social groups can be good for our lives and our well-being.

So, let's think about this process a little more ...

On page 21 on the workbook is a space for participants to make some notes about themselves – their interests, values, their personality and beliefs, their aspirations, relationships, groups and activities. Encourage participants to use this space to brain storm thoughts about themselves.

This process of self-reflection is in preparation for the next activity – creating a self-aspect pie. This is a visualization of the self, with the different aspects of the self-subdivided to represent differing levels of importance. This visualization is then a key step in the process of further analyzing whether or not our social maps are a good representation of who we are, or who we want to be.

Self-aspect pie

In this part of the session participants will transfer the ideas from the previous activity onto the self-aspect pie.



Now sketch out your own self-aspect pie, using the thoughts about yourself you wrote down on the previous page. Draw in the segments of pie to best represent the importance of each aspect.

Next, encourage participants to look again at their pie and think about which aspects are most important and connected to their health and well-being. Plus, get them to think about any aspects which may not be so compatible with positive well-being outcomes.

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Now think about which aspects of your pie are most important to you currently. Facilitators can demonstrate by drawing their own self-aspect pie on a Flip Chart and using it as an example for students to follow.

Do you think there are any aspects of yourself that are not so compatible with each other?

Finally, ask participants to look back at the social identity maps in the light of their self-aspect pies, and to try and identify similar areas between them both, as well as to notice where aspects of themselves may not be so well represented in their social maps. Encourage participants to write down at the bottom of page 23 any discrepancies between their self-aspect pie and their social identity maps.

In an ideal world, we want there to be a good fit between our sense of self and our social world. That is, we want our groups to be a reflection of how we see ourselves as a person and who we think we are. For example, if you love sport and love spending time with the reading club, you might want your social identity map to contain a sports team or two, a club you support, and perhaps a group of friends who are also interested in reading.

However, if there isn't good fit between your self-concept and your social world, this is an opportunity to identify new groups you might want to join.

Module 4. Scaffolding

Activity 3: Identifying new groups to join

You have now created your own social map, thought about what is important to you (your self-aspect pie), and then looked back at your map to see if it best represents you and your interests.

So now, let's think about new groups and connections that you could make to enhance and extend your social world – in order to make the most of your experience going to UQ. These could simply be groups that you want to be part of — for example, because they do something that you like, or because they represent something you would like to be part of. You can refer to your self-aspect pie while you are trying to identify new possible groups.

Allow students to discuss with each other and come up with examples of possible new groups to join. There is a space on page 24 for participants to write down three new groups they would like to join. If people are having difficulty identifying three groups, remind them that nothing is set in stone, and that these group aspirations may change. Also, it may be that participants don't exactly know what group it is that they would like to join, in which case ask them to write down an idea of the type group they think they may be looking for, and their reasons for wanting to extend their social maps in this particular direction.



Module 4. Scaffolding

Activity 4: Developing a social plan

An important way to help ourselves follow through on the process of joining a new group involves making a specific plan that incorporates concrete goals. This can include details like the next step you want to make, when you plan to do it, and how you plan to overcome any barriers you encounter. Turn to page 26 in your Workbook now and we will jot down a few details of this plan.

For each group, expand the details of your plan using the SMART approach. What this means is that your plan for joining groups needs to be:



6. **Specific**. You need to think about exactly what you are going to do.

7. **Measurable**. You need to be able to know that you've made progress.

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8. ***Aligned with your values and what is important to you. Your social plan needs to fit with your self-aspects.***
9. ***Realistic. You need to be able to make steady progress towards your goals.***
10. ***Timely. You need to identify when exactly you are going to act on your plan and you need to ensure you don't leave it too long before getting started.***

Evidence tells us that people are more likely to act on their intentions when they are important to them, when they have a specific plan in place, and when they feel confident in their ability to act. In completing this exercise, help students to complete their plans with the aim of building their sense of confidence and developing a clear idea of what specific forms of action they are going to undertake (and what forms of behavior they are going to change).

Ask participants to write the three groups previously identified onto the chart on page 28. There will not be time for participants to create a SMART plan for all three, so just get them to work through the 5 SMART stages for the first group, and ask them to fill in the other groups later in their own time.

Identify three new groups that you want to engage with when you are in UQ. Write them into the blue boxes, and then next to each group, write up the 5 SMART stages for integrating each group into your social world.

Spend some time for participants to discuss with each other and share it with the rest of the group.

Module 4. Scaffolding

Session summary: Learning points

Based on our discussion today what have we learned? (encourage the group to identify these):

1. When identifying new groups to join, it is best to choose ones that are compatible with one another and with our self-concept.
2. Building a shared identity with fellow group members requires work – both at the micro level (conversation topics and body language) and the macro level (groups should be positive, distinctive, enduring).
3. One good social experience can open the door to many more – increasing motivation, and helping to build confidence and individual ties.

Gather the groups into a larger class for the wind down and closure.

As you know, this is our final session and so the group won't be meeting formally in this way again. We hope you have found Groups 4 Health to be useful and that the things you learned from it are things you can use in future.

A brief summary of what we have learnt during the past 4 sessions:

1. Groups are an important resource that keeps us healthy, and it is those groups that we identify strongly with that matter most.
2. My social groups are a reflection of who I am as a person and who I can seek support from.
3. Reconnecting with others can help to build our social group networks, and awareness of their pros and cons is important to make the best of these resources.

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4. One good social experience can open the door to many more – increasing motivation, and helping to build confidence and individual ties.

We'd like to thank you for being part of this group and for your thoughtful feedback, suggestions and support of everyone throughout. Do keep in mind that your current Groups 4 Health groups are also a resource which you can tap on in the future for help and support if things did not go according to plan.

We will be contacting you via email a few months later for an online follow up. Goodbye, and may the group force be with you.

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