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Chapter

Individual and Contextual Determinants of (mal)adjustment in College Students who Study Abroad

Laura Di Giunta, Carolina Lunetti, Silvia Pagliarani, Giulia Gliozzo, Alessia Teresa Virzì, Clementina Comitale and Chiara Riccioni

Abstract

This study focuses on a sample of college students who study abroad and the individual and contextual factors that, interacting with each other, may affect their (mal)adjustment. Studying abroad is an immersive experience that could potentially bring great benefits for students' careers and personal growth, but at the same time, without the right tools, can lead to the risk of students' maladjustment. Self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions and empathic self-efficacy were considered as individual factors, and an inclusive teaching environment was considered as the contextual factor necessary for promoting youths' adjustment (prosocial behavior and academic performance) and for preventing maladjustment (internalizing and externalizing problems). American college students (169 mean Age = 20.59, SD = 1.59; 78% males) participated to this study. A path analysis model showed that: internalizing problems were negatively predicted by self-efficacy beliefs in dealing with negative emotions; externalizing problems were negatively predicted by self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions; prosocial behavior was positively predicted by empathic self-efficacy, self-efficacy beliefs in dealing with negative emotions, and inclusive teaching; scholastic performance was positively predicted by inclusive teaching.

Keywords: abroad students, self-efficacy, inclusivity, (mal)adjustment

1. Introduction

Students' adjustment and well-being are the results of the interaction between individual and environmental factors. College students' mental health is a major issue to be dealt with considering that problems such as polysubstance abuse and dependence are more common among college-aged individuals [1, 2], as well as depression and suicide attempts [3].

Studying abroad is seen as one of the most effective ways of: (a) building students' global awareness and competence; (b) empowering cross-cultural competencies, interpersonal skills in problem-solving, and intercultural awareness [4–6]. College students who study abroad must face many challenges arising from interfacing and interacting with a new culture while living by themselves and taking care of their education. For example, one issue is that college students more than double their weekly alcohol use while abroad and, even if most of them reduce their drinking upon return, those who drink the heaviest tend to return home drinking at higher levels [7]. Therefore, having the personal resources and a supportive environment is a matter of crucial relevance to promoting psychophysiological health among these students.

For the purpose of this chapter, we considered as indicators of adjustment students' academic performance and prosocial behavior; conversely, we considered as indicators of students' maladjustment and their internalizing and externalizing problems. Finally, we examined the predictive values of individual factors, such as self-efficacy beliefs, and contextual factors, such as an inclusive teaching environment.

Among the individual factors, self-efficacy represents one of the key elements to improve youths' adjustment and well-being. Self-efficacy represents an important resource as it reflects the unique capability of humans to learn from experience and to handle challenging life situations [8]. Self-efficacy is defined as a person's belief of being able to successfully reach the desired outcome [8]: self-efficacy beliefs have an impact on the feeling of accomplishment, leading to a virtuous circle, therefore, if a person experiences success, this will contribute to building up self-efficacy, enhance their motivation and capabilities, and broaden their interests [8].

Specifically, empathic self-efficacy and self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions have been proven to be essential in promoting youths' adjustment [9, 10].

Furthermore, emotion regulation is of high importance when it comes to adapting to various situations to meet the expectations of social and cultural environments [11]. The capacity for self-regulation is one of the core features of human agency in the social cognitive theory [12]: perceived self-efficacy plays a pivotal role in this process of self-regulation because it affects actions not only directly, but also through its impact on cognitive, motivational, decisional, and affective determinants [11]. According to Bandura and colleagues [10], perceived self-efficacy to regulate negative emotions is negatively associated with depressive symptoms and delinquent conduct, and positively associated with prosocial behavior both directly and indirectly through its impact on perceived academic self-efficacy, self-regulatory efficacy, and empathic self-efficacy.

Empathy, on the other hand, could be considered one of the main predictors of interpersonal functioning, of the development of meaningful affective bonds, and of understanding others [13]. Perceived empathic self-efficacy has been found to be associated with self-esteem, psychological well-being [14], and prosocial behavior [15].

Prosocial behavior refers to voluntary actions undertaken to benefit others [16]. It includes a variety of behaviors, such as sharing, donating, caring, comforting, and helping. It is often associated with altruism because both pursue others' good and may imply common components such as empathic concern and sympathy [17, 18]. Prosocial behavior has been proven to be positively associated with well-being, for example, helping others increases overall happiness of one's own [19].

Self-efficacy beliefs are also negatively associated with internalizing (anxiety, depression, and somatic complaints) and externalizing problems (aggressive and rule-breaking behavior). In particular, self-efficacy beliefs in dealing with negative emotions reflect one's capability to deal with difficult situations and stressors that

involve the insurgence of negative feelings, such as anger, irritability, discomfort, and sadness [20]: people with low self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions usually engage in an emotion-oriented coping strategy that could lead to an inward-oriented reaction, also resulting in a higher risk of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and self-harm behaviors [21–25]; or, the same emotion-oriented reaction could lead to an outward-oriented reaction, resulting in the expression of anger outbursts, disruptive behaviors, delinquent conduct directed toward the surrounding environment and toward other people [10, 22–24, 26].

For what concerns contextual factors, the inclusivity of the college environment that deals with different students with unlimited individual differences in terms of personality, different cultures, and principles could play a fundamental role in promoting psychological health and adjustments of students who study abroad.

Therefore, in order to improve abroad students' mental health and well-being, reflected by their enhanced prosocial behavior and academic performance, and reduced internalizing and externalizing symptoms, it is relevant to examine the role played by individual factors, such as self-efficacy beliefs in dealing with negative emotions and empathic self-efficacy, that allow the students to face difficult challenges and to deal with theirs and others' emotions, as well as contextual factors, such as an inclusive environment that welcomes students' individual, cultural, and social differences.

According to previous studies on the role of empathic self-efficacy and of self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions in promoting youths' adjustment [10, 18], as well as those ones on the role of inclusive teaching in predicting youths' well-being [27–31], the overall aim of the present chapter consists of examining the contribution of empathic self-efficacy, self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions, and inclusive teaching in explaining prosocial behavior, academic performance, internalizing and externalizing problems, in a sample of college students who study abroad.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were a sample of 169 American college students (mean *Age* = 20.59, *SD* = 1.59; 78% males) from Temple University, in the United States, who were studying abroad in Rome, at Temple University Rome (TUR).

Years of education for mothers and fathers of those college students were 11.01 (*SD* = 7.74) and 10.77 (*SD* = 7.05), respectively.

Regarding participants' status, 82,2% of college students reported being single, 4,8% reported being married, 2,7% reported to be cohabitating, and 10,3% reported being in an exclusive relationship but not living together.

Regarding participants' ethnicity, 82% of participants were Caucasians, 7,2% were African American, 8,6% were Hispanic, and 2,2% were Asian.

2.2. Procedure

After receiving the IRB approval from the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology, La Sapienza University of Rome, a web link on the Qualtrics Platform was created, containing both the consent form and the online survey in English. The average time duration to complete the survey was around 20 minutes.

Data collection was conducted in May and April, and in November and December 2019. This project was advertised to all the TUR social media and with flyers at the TUR campus.

2.3. Measures

Social desirability. Participants’ social desirability was measured via the 13-item Social Desirability Scale-Short Form, which has demonstrated reliability and validity across various cultures [32]. Previous cross-cultural findings with our sample support the validity of this scale [33]. Participants were asked whether each of the items (e.g., “I’m always willing to admit it when I make a mistake”) described them (1 = “Yes”) or did not describe them (0 = “No”). Responses were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater social desirability. Cronbach’s alpha for the total score of social desirability was 0.60.

Prosocial behavior. Participants’ prosocial behaviors were measured via 15 items [33], on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = never/almost never; to 5 = almost always/always true), which assesses the frequency by which students apply behaviors of helping, sharing, and comforting (e.g., “I try to help others”). Cronbach’s alpha for the total score of prosocial behavior was 0.92.

Academic performance. Participants were asked to report their grades in major university courses according to the grading system in North America (see **Figure 1**).

| GRADING SCALE | | | | |
|---------------|----------|----------|----------|--------|
| 93-100 A | 87-89 B+ | 77-79 C+ | 67-69 D+ | 0-59 F |
| 90-92 A- | 83-86 B | 73-76 C | 63-66 D | |
| | 80-82 B- | 70-72 C- | 60-62 D- | |

Figure 1.
North America grading system.

Internalizing and externalizing problems. Participants were asked to fill in the Adult Self-Report questionnaire (ASR) [34] to assess their internalizing and externalizing problems. The questionnaire used in the present contribution consists of 76 items that are designed to have useful information on the behavior and emotional reactions of participants in different areas, such as academics and social skills. Participants’ responses were recorded on a Likert scale (where 0 = not true, 1 = somewhat or sometimes true, and 2 = very true or often true). For the purpose of this chapter, we considered 41 items of the internalizing composite score (e.g., “I am unhappy, sad or depressed”) and 35 items of the externalizing composite score (e.g., “I steal”). Participants were asked to answer those items by thinking about their behavior in the previous 6 months (internalizing problems alpha=0.94; externalizing problems alpha=0.88).

Empathic self-efficacy [10, 14]. Participants were asked to respond to a six-item scale that encompass their personal efficacy to read and understand others’ emotions, needs, and feelings (sample item e.g. “How well can you recognize when someone wants comfort and emotional support, even if he/she does not overtly exhibit it?”) on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1= not well at all, to 5= very well). Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was 0.87.

Self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions [10, 21]. Participants were asked to respond to a 22-item scale that encompasses their personal efficacy to manage negative emotions, such as sadness, anger, shame, and guilt, in several situations (sample

item e.g. “How well can you reduce your upset when you don’t get the appreciation you feel you deserve?”) on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1= not well at all, to 5= very well). Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was 0.94.

Inclusive teaching. We considered two sub-scales, adapted from the “Iowa Cultural Understanding Assessment – Client Form” [35], as part of a project that aimed to promote the cultural competence of staff in educational settings. Specifically, participants were asked to respond to five items relating to the perception of the role of professors in promoting an inclusive academic environment (e.g., item “On average, how easy do you think it is to ask for an individual meeting with your professors?”; “On average, how much do you think your professors are willing to listen your requests in the academic field?”) on a 10-points Likert scale (1 = not at all; 10 = fully). Cronbach’s alpha for the total score of an inclusive academic environment promoted by teachers was 0.71

Furthermore, participants were asked to respond to seven items related to the perception of the role of university staff in promoting an inclusive academic environment (e.g., item “TUR staff understands the ideas that I or others in my culture might have”) on a 5-points Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha for the total score of an inclusive academic environment promoted by the TUR staff was 0.95.

Considering that Pearson’s correlation between the two scales was equal to 0.39, $p < .01$, a single construct of inclusive teaching was created by averaging the two scores.

2.4. Statistical analyses

We preliminarily computed the descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis) of the studied variables for the total sample and the Pearson’s correlations among them using SPSS 19.0 software (SPSS Inc.)

To further investigate the identified associations among the variables, a path analysis model using MPlus 8 statistical software [36] has been implemented considering empathic self-efficacy, self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions, and inclusive teaching as predictors, participants’ prosocial behavior, academic performance, internalizing problems and externalizing problems as outcomes, and participants’ gender and social desirability as covariates. We also estimated the correlations among the predictors and the correlations among the outcomes. The following parameters were used to evaluate the model’s goodness-of-fit: Chi-square goodness-of-fit (χ^2) with its degrees of freedom (df), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR). In addition to nonsignificant χ^2 , we also considered CFI and TLI values $> .90$ [37], RMSEA $< .07$, and SRMR $< .08$ [37] as indicators of acceptable model fit.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis for all the examined variables for the total sample. Values less than 2 for univariate skewness and less than 5 for univariate kurtosis were used as criteria or evaluating univariate normality [38].

Table 2 shows the Pearson’s correlation implemented on the full sample among the studied variables.

| | Mean | Standard deviation | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|---|-------|--------------------|----------|----------|
| Prosocial behavior | 3.71 | 0.70 | -1.09 | 3.19 |
| Academic performance | 93.17 | 6.56 | -0.75 | -0.35 |
| Internalizing problems | 1.49 | 0.33 | 0.54 | -0.71 |
| Externalizing problems | 1.40 | 0.25 | 1.34 | 2.23 |
| Empathic self-efficacy | 3.87 | 0.67 | -0.74 | 2.72 |
| Self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions | 3.21 | 0.65 | 0.37 | 0.67 |
| Inclusive teaching | 0.01 | 0.89 | -0.17 | 0.18 |
| Social desirability | 1.43 | 0.19 | 0.40 | -0.55 |

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics.

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) |
|---|--------|-------------------|---------|---------|--------|---------|------|
| (1) Prosocial behavior | 1 | | | | | | |
| (2) Academic performance | .098 | 1 | | | | | |
| (3) Internalizing problems | -.061 | -.089 | 1 | | | | |
| (4) Externalizing problems | -.078 | -.056 | .626** | 1 | | | |
| (5) Empathic self-efficacy | .390** | .122 | -.001 | .119 | 1 | | |
| (6) Self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions | .400** | -.063 | -.558** | -.376** | .279** | 1 | |
| (7) Inclusive teaching | .413** | .205 ⁺ | -.047 | -.033 | .156 | .327** | 1 |
| (8) Social desirability | -.157 | .128 | .153 | .445** | .031 | -.229** | .041 |

Note. ⁺ = $p < .10$; * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$.

Table 2.
Correlation analyses.

The results show moderate positive significant associations between college students' prosocial behavior and empathic self-efficacy (.390**), self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions (.400**), inclusive teaching (.413**); a marginally significant association between college students' academic performance and inclusive teaching (.205⁺); moderate and negative significant associations between internalizing problems and self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions (-.558**) and between externalizing problems and self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions (-.376**); a moderate and positive significant association between participants' social desirability and their externalizing problems (-.229**).

3.2. Path analysis

To examine the effects of participants' empathic self-efficacy, self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions and inclusive teaching on internalizing and externalizing problems, prosocial behavior, and academic performance, we implemented a path analysis model while controlling for the effects of participants' gender and social desirability, as covariates. This model fitted very well data: $\chi^2(9) = 11.20, p = .26$; RMSEA = 0.04 (90% CI 0.00, 0.12), CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.94, SRMR = 0.04).

It emerged that: self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions negatively predicted participants' internalizing and externalizing problems and positively predicted prosocial behavior; empathic self-efficacy positively predicted participants' externalizing problems and prosocial behavior; and inclusive teaching positively predicted participants' scholastic performance and prosocial behavior. Regarding covariates it emerged that: participants' social desirability positively predicted externalizing problems, and negatively predicted self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions; it also emerged that women reported higher academic performance and lower self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions than men (Figure 2).

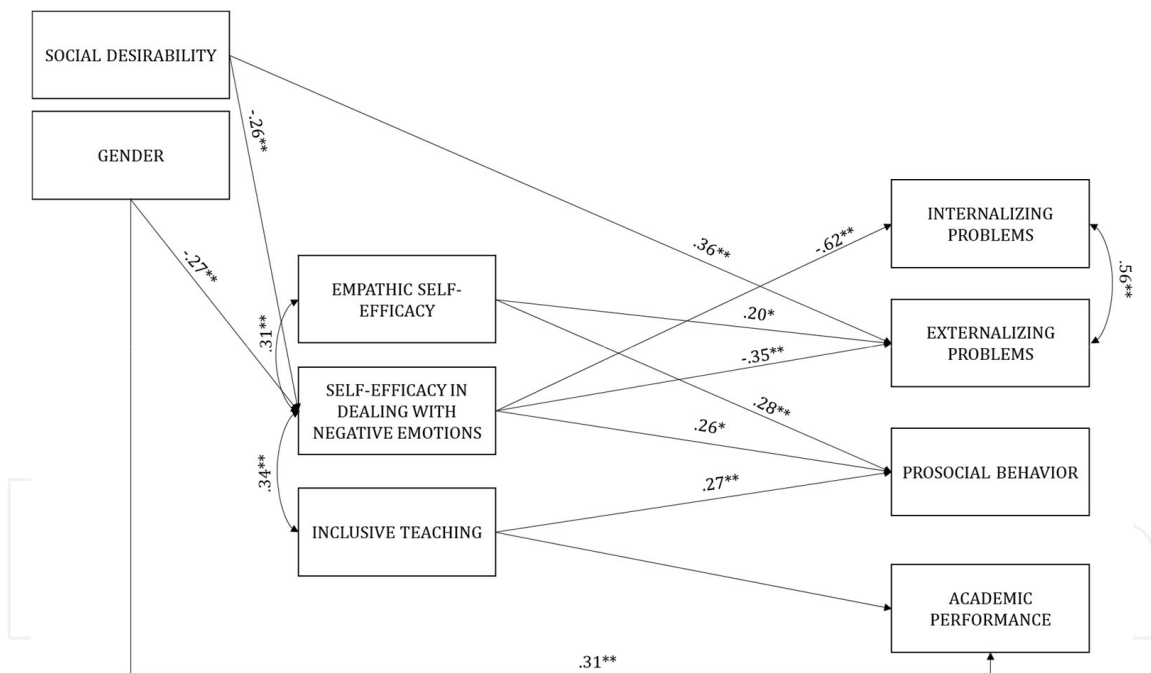


Figure 2.
 Path analysis model.

Note. $^* = p < .05$; $^{**} = p < .01$. Only significant standardized coefficients are reported. Gender: 0 = women, 1 = men.

4. Discussions

The overall objective of this chapter was to examine the impact of empathic self-efficacy, self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions, and inclusive teaching in affecting psychosocial and scholastic adjustment of college students studying abroad. Prosocial behavior, academic performance, and internalizing and externalizing problems were considered as outcomes.

Our first objective consisted of examining means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis for all the studied variables for the total sample. Our second objective was to examine the associations between study variables. Consistently with the literature focused on the role of self-efficacy beliefs in affecting prosocial behavior [17, 39], results from the Pearson's correlation analyses showed moderate positive significant associations between college students' prosocial behavior and empathic self-efficacy, self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions, and also inclusive teaching; furthermore, results showed also a marginally significant association between college students' academic performance and inclusive teaching, further confirming the beneficial role played by an inclusive educational environment in promoting students' social and academic adjustment [40].

In addition, in line with the literature suggesting that low levels of self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions could be associated with internalizing and externalizing symptoms [10, 14, 21–24], results show moderate and negative significant associations between internalizing problems and self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions and between externalizing problems and self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions.

Finally, results showed a moderate and positive significant association between participants' social desirability and their externalizing problems. This could be interpreted as the participants' tendency to avoid giving responses that are not socially desirable that regard the tendencies to show aggressive and disruptive behaviors toward other people, in order to give a better image of themselves [41–43].

Our third and final objective was to further investigate the identified associations among the variables through the implementation of a path analysis model considering participants' prosocial behavior, academic performance, internalizing problems, externalizing problems as outcomes and empathic self-efficacy, self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions, and inclusive teaching as predictors, while accounting for the correlations between the predictors, the correlations between the outcomes, and the impact of two covariates on the study variables, namely, students' gender and social desirability.

In agreement with previous studies [15, 39], it emerged the significant and positive effect of both empathic self-efficacy and self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions on prosocial behaviors. Accordingly, an increased capability to perceive themselves as able to face challenges and difficult situations that often involve the insurgence of negative emotion, and the perceived capability to not feel overwhelmed by the others' emotions, but instead being able to feel other people while being helpful to them, could be considered important predictors of prosocial behavior [17, 39].

Furthermore, in line with our initial hypothesis about the role of inclusive teaching in promoting students' adjustment [28–30], also inclusive teaching significantly and positively predicted prosocial behavior. Therefore, it is reasonable to think that an environment that is open and welcoming to its students' needs and individual differences, promotes prosocial behavior among students.

Furthermore, according with previous studies, academic performance was positively and significantly by inclusive teaching. This is interesting considering that the literature is not still fully clear about this association [44]. For example, Fruth and Woods [45] questioned whether an inclusive environment would be beneficial also for those students who did not have any disability in a class with disabled students, and the results were not consistent: they had about the same academic performance, with a slight increase only in a few subjects and a decrease in others.

This means that these associations need more investigation, considering the heterogeneity of students and educational systems, this could be a challenging process.

In addition, consistent with previous studies [21–24] suggesting that the inability to regulate negative emotions is an important predictor of negative affect and anxiety/depression, in the present study it emerged that self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions significantly and negatively contributes to explain internalizing problems.

Lastly, consistent with previous research which supported that self-efficacy beliefs play a key role also in preventing externalizing problems [10], it was found that self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions significantly and negatively predicted externalizing problems.

Unexpectedly, it emerged a positive association between empathic self-efficacy and externalizing behaviors. It might be speculated that being capable of understanding others' needs can be also a tool to be used against others and, thus, connected also with externalizing and antisocial behaviors. However, this result certainly needs further analysis to be corroborated.

Regarding study's covariates, participants' social desirability positively predicted externalizing problems, and negatively predicted self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions. Finally, women reported higher academic performance and lower self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions than men.

5. Limitations, future directions, and implications

The present study has some limitations.

First of all, the sample is relatively small in its size, thus limiting the generalizability of the study's findings.

Also, considering that we are dealing with students who study abroad, that come from different environments and ethnicities, and that could affect self-efficacy beliefs [46]. Another important limitation of the present contribution consists of not having considered the role of students' socio-economic status that could affect the identified associations among the studied variables. Furthermore, the examined data are cross-sectional in their nature, thus preventing any causal relations among the study variables. Future research could overcome these limits by implementing longitudinal designs to examine the impact of the considered predictors on college students' psychosocial well-being. Although the study has several limitations, it is one of the few studies focused on a sample of college students' who study abroad considering both individual and contextual determinants of their psychosocial well-being.

This study's findings also provide useful information in terms of intervention programs aim at promoting well-being of college students who study abroad.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the contribution of individual and contextual factors in determining (mal)adjustment of college students who study abroad. The opportunity of studying abroad is one of the best ways to build students' global awareness and global competence, ranging from cross-cultural competencies and interpersonal skills in problem-solving, to intercultural awareness [4–6]. Despite the major benefits of this experience, studying abroad could also lead to some risks concerning students' physical and mental health [47], as they could present culture

shocks, homesickness, and separation anxiety [48]; as well as the expression of risky behaviors [7]. Therefore, it is very important that these students have the right tools to engage in this opportunity and to be ready to face all the possible risks associated with it. A crucial personality factor for the student who studies abroad that needs to be addressed is self-efficacy in the domain of both emotion regulation and interpersonal relationships [9]. Specifically, self-efficacy in dealing with negative emotions has been found to increase attitudes in prosocial behavior and decrease delinquent behaviors [11, 22]; and empathic self-efficacy contributes to prosocial behavior both cross-sectionally and longitudinally [11, 15].

As for the contextual factors, inclusive teaching has been considered important for students' well-being [29, 30].

Therefore, the present study contributed to highlight those factors that promote psychological well-being in students who study abroad and that provide them with the necessary tools (both internal and contextual) to make the most of the study abroad experience, where they can feel both up to the task of facing all the opportunities that arise, as well as protected by an environment that accepts them in their uniqueness.

Acknowledgements

We thank students who participated in the project and researchers who collected data.

Conflict of interest


The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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