

Ask NUS Economists

Undergrads and the 3am e-mail

Why happiness, including that of students, warrants study

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For The Straits Times

Q Are undergraduates in Singapore happier than the average Singaporean?

A Ask any teacher whether they have received e-mails from students at 3 in the morning and chances are, they would say “yes”.

As an educator myself, I always wonder what is keeping these students up and forcing them to e-mail their teacher. It should be emphasised that in my line of work (teaching), very rarely are these e-mails about urgent matters.

The authors just happen to be up at that time, apparently studying. Why are these students still studying at 3am, instead of sleeping?

Could the answer be related to the amount of responsibilities university students have to shoulder?

Since 2012, under the auspices of the United Nations, researchers have been surveying individuals from different countries and tracking their happiness levels on a scale from 0 to 10.

The results have been published from 2012 to this year in an (almost) yearly publication called the World Happiness Report (WHR), which ranks countries based on their average happiness scores.

It may come as a surprise that economists study happiness and not just money, but the so-called “happiness economics” has become popular in recent years through the work of prominent economists such as Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz and Jeffrey Sachs.

In fact, one of the major conclusions of this line of research is that improvements in the social foundations of happiness – such as having someone to count on, freedom to make choices, or generosity – yield higher happiness benefits than improving a country’s income or healthy life expectancy.

Singapore’s average happiness, in particular, ranges from a low of 6.26 in 2018 to a high of 6.80 in 2015. Similarly, its rank in the world goes from 34th place in 2017 and 2018 to 22nd place in 2015. Therefore, Singapore’s average happiness and rank on the happiness survey seem to have fallen in the past few years.

Interestingly, its happiness level is not keeping up with the fact that Singapore is one of the richest countries in the world.

However, this is not unprecedented in East Asia. Japan and South Korea, countries that



are particularly affluent as well, also manifest relatively low happiness levels; in fact, even lower than Singapore’s.

This serves as a frame of reference, but what I am more interested in is understanding the happiness of Singapore’s university students.

I collected happiness responses from students of a particular university in Singapore from early 2016 to early this year (however, here I report only results for the years 2016-2019 to avoid factoring in the effect of the coronavirus pandemic, which remains unclear).

The students were enrolled in the same course throughout these years and they came from a multitude of academic disciplines, from engineering and the sciences to law and humanities. The number of responses each year ranged from 84 to 330, depending on the size of the cohort.

The students’ average happiness level ranged from a low of 5.45 in 2016 to a high of 6.03 in 2017. But what was more interesting was that they were consistently registering happiness levels lower than the national average, year after year.

This observation holds true even after accounting for estimation

The fact that the students’ happiness is lower than the population average is disconcerting because research has shown that young people are supposed to be happier than the average person. Happiness generally falls over one’s lifetime as the insouciance of youth is followed by the responsibilities of middle age and the health problems of old age. But this is not what we are observing in Singapore.

uncertainty. In particular, the difference between the national average and the students’ average ranged from 0.3 to 1.1 points on the 10-point happiness scale.

It is important to note that these numbers include responses of exchange students, many of whom originate from Nordic countries, famous for their extremely high happiness levels. In my polls, the students from these countries indeed register considerably higher scores than local students – which suggests that if we were to exclude them, the average happiness levels of local students would be even lower.

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Why do we see this? One reason could be that university education comes with elevated responsibilities: studying for classes, handing in assignments,

stressing about grades, and so on.

Another could be that undergraduates simply have higher expectations about life in general and so report lower happiness levels.

If indeed, the responsibilities of university education cause lower happiness levels in students, then this may be a matter that societies would want to address.

If Singapore society, in particular, decides that it would like students to be happier, then there are institutional tools (most notably, but not exclusively, at the university level) that can be tapped to achieve such an outcome. And my hunch is that if the students’ happiness increases, we will all be peacefully asleep at 3am.

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The lower happiness levels among students could be that university education comes with elevated responsibilities or it could be that they simply have higher expectations about life.

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