Ask NUS Economists

Undergrads and the 3am e-mail

Why happiness, including that of students, warrants study

Georgios Georgiou

For The Straits Times

Are undergraduates in Singapore happier than the average Singaporean?

Ask any teacher whether they have received e-mails from students at 3am in the morning and chances are, they would say “yes”. As an educator myself, I always wonder what is keeping these students up and firing them to e-mail their teachers. It should be emphasised that I am not a workaholic, 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 economics study happiness and not raw money, but this is 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 happiness is one of the social foundations of happiness — such as having someone to count on, freedom to make choices, or a generally higher happiness benefit than improving a country’s income or healthy life expectancy.

Singapore’s average happiness, however, ranges from 6.2 in 2016 to as high as 6.7 in 2018. Similarly, in its rank in the world, it goes from 34th place in 2017 and 2018 to 22nd place in 2019.

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 64 to 335, depending on the size of the cohort.

This observation holds true even after accounting for estimation 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 level of local students would even be lower.

The fact that the students’ happiness is lower than the national average is disconnecting 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.

The fact that the students’ happiness is lower than the national average is disconnecting 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.

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

# Georgios Georgiou is a senior lecturer in the Department of Economics, National University of Singapore. These are his personal views and do not represent those of NUS.

# This is a monthly series by the NUS Department of Economics. Each month, a panel will address a topical issue. If you have an interesting question on economics, write to stopnion@nus.edu.sg with “Ask NUS” in the subject field.