

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

2

**ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND  
GENERAL WELL-BEING OF  
UNDERGRADUATE UNIVERSITY  
STUDENTS**

A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in Psychology  
Massey University

Benjamin James Seymour

1999

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my immense gratitude to those have helped me in completing this thesis. Firstly, thanks to my supervisor Dr Hillary Bennett, for her patient guidance and advise throughout all stages of this research.

I would also like to thank Philip Mann and the staff at Student Services, whose help with the distribution and collection of questionnaires was of immeasurable assistance. In addition, I would like to thank the students who participated in this research, their generous contribution of their time and the open sharing of their experiences is truly appreciated.

Finally, I will always be grateful for the support and encouragement that my family, friends, and fellow students have extended throughout my time at university.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Acknowledgments	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Tables	viii
Abstract	x
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW	
Introduction	1
Academic Achievement	3
Social Support	3
Experienced Difficulties	6
Self-efficacy	7
English Language Ability	10
General Well-being	10
Social Support	11
Experienced Difficulties	13
Self-efficacy	15
Conclusion	16
Research Aims	16

## CHAPTER TWO: METHOD

Setting	18
Participants	18
Focus Group Participants	19
Survey Participants	19
Measures	19
Demographic Information	19
Academic Achievement	21
English Language Ability	21
General Well-being	21
Self-efficacy	22
Experienced Difficulties	23
Received Social Support	23
Procedure	24
Ethics Approval	24
Approval From Massey University	24
Recruitment of Focus Group Participants	24
Recruitment of Survey Participants	25
Construction of a Student Difficulties Scale	26
Generation of Scale Items From the Literature	26
Generation of Scale Items from Focus Groups	28
Selection of Items to be Included in the Student Difficulties Scale	29
Final Design of the Student Difficulties Scale	31

## CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS

Data Analysis	32
Coding of Survey Data	32
Missing Data	32
Analytical Techniques	32
Further Analysis of Focus Group Transcripts	33
Summary of Survey Responses	33
Relationships Between Variables	34
General Well-being, English Language Ability, General Self-efficacy, Social Self-efficacy, Experienced Difficulties, and Received Social Support as Predictors of Academic Achievement	37
Academic Achievement, English Language Ability, General Self-efficacy, Social Self-efficacy, Experienced Difficulties, and Received Social Support as Predictors of General Well-being	37
Differences Between Demographic Subgroups on Key Variables	38
Academic Achievement	39
General Well-being	41
English Language Ability	41
General Self-efficacy	43
Social Self-efficacy	43
Experienced Difficulties	44
Received Social Support	45

Descriptions of Experienced Difficulties from Focus Groups	47
Social Life at University	49
Issues Relating to Academic Staff	51
Work/School to University Transition	52
Issues Relating to Attending a Satellite Campus	53
Financial Concerns	54
Time Management Issues	54
Conclusion	55
 CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION	
 Academic Achievement	56
 General Well-being	58
 Group Differences	59
Academic Achievement	59
General Well-being	60
General Self-efficacy	61
Social Self-efficacy	61
Experienced Difficulties	61
Received Social Support	62
 Implications	63
 Limitations of this Research	64
 Recommendations for Future Research	64
 REFERENCES	66
 APPENDICES	71

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents	20
Table 2	Mean Scores, Standard Deviations, and Cronbach's Alphas for each Scale	33
Table 3	Correlations Among Variables	35
Table 4	Predictors of Academic Achievement and General Well-being	36
Table 5	Summary of Group Differences	39
Table 6	Mean Scores for Demographic Groups Varying on Academic Achievement	40
Table 7	Mean Scores for Demographic Groups Varying on Well-being	41
Table 8	Mean Scores for Demographic Groups Varying on English Language Ability	42
Table 9	Mean Scores for Demographic Groups Varying on General Self-efficacy	43
Table 10	Mean Scores for Demographic Groups Varying on Experienced Difficulties	44
Table 11	Mean Scores for Demographic Groups Varying on Directive Guidance	46
Table 12	Mean Scores for Demographic Groups Varying on Non-directive Support	47



Table 13	Mean Scores for Demographic Groups Varying on Tangible Assistance	48
----------	--	----

48

## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the academic achievement and general well-being of a sample of 107 students studying at the Albany campus of Massey University's College of Business. Relationships between academic achievement and general well-being, and the variables of English language ability, experienced difficulties, general self-efficacy, and received social support were investigated. To further understand these variables, demographic group differences including gender, age, ethnicity, residency status, country of birth, years enrolled at Massey University, proportion of life lived in New Zealand, years of secondary schooling in New Zealand, home environment, course of study, and major subject, were assessed. In addition, a Student Difficulties Scale is constructed to measure experienced difficulties and focus group transcripts were analysed to facilitate an enhanced understanding of the specific difficulties experienced by this student population. Positive correlations were identified between academic achievement and the variables of general well-being, English language ability, and general self-efficacy. A positive correlation was also identified between general well-being and general self-efficacy. Experienced difficulties was negatively related to all variables other than received social support. English language ability was identified as the best predictor of academic achievement and experienced difficulties as the best predictor of general well-being. Significant differences between demographic subgroups were found on all variables other than the 'positive social exchange' dimension of received social support. Recommendations were made as to how the overall academic achievement and well-being of this population of students may be enhanced.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent economic and social trends have changed the context and composition of New Zealand's work environment. In particular, rapid technological changes have led to rapid changes in the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to be successful in the workforce. Furthermore, individuals who would once spend their working lives in a single occupation, perhaps even with the same organisation, are now looking at an average of up to five different careers during their life time (Fay, 1995). In addition, changing migration patterns have resulted in far greater ethnic diversity in many of New Zealand's communities.

These changes have, in turn, had a significant impact on the educational requirements of New Zealanders and, therefore, a significant impact on the demands placed on tertiary education institutions. The changing economic environment, and the new career demands created by these changes, often necessitate the acquisition of new knowledge and skills through retraining. Hence, individuals must continue education throughout their lifespan, continually updating their skills. The consequence for Universities is the enrolment of an increasing number of mature students who have already experienced working life. The changing ethnic composition of the general population has also contributed to a more ethnically diverse student population for which Universities must cater (Cunningham, 1998). In addition, Universities are increasingly marketing themselves overseas, attracting full-fee paying international students (Martin, 1999).

Changes in government planning and policy in relation to Universities has also had a significant impact over the last decade. Fee subsidies and access to student allowances have been greatly reduced. One impact of this is that many of the younger students remain living with their parents. Financial restraints also mean that greater numbers of students are choosing to study part-time, and that most students whether part-time or full-time must engage in paid employment to support themselves while studying. The increased sacrifices associated with tertiary study are also increasing the urgency for academic success and for training and qualifications that will transfer to

secure well-paid employment (Cassie, 1999). Increased competition among students for limited places in popular courses adds to this pressure.

In sum, the factors discussed above indicate that the demands being placed upon New Zealand's Universities in providing quality education are increasingly complex, while the acquisition of funding is increasingly difficult. Simultaneously demands on students have increased with pressure to achieve more in an increasingly challenging environment.

This study is primarily interested in two aspects of student life over which it is assumed the University environment exerts considerable influence. The first of these is perhaps the most obvious function of tertiary education, namely academic achievement. It is through academic achievement that students gain qualifications, the attainment of which is a core purpose for most of those attending University. The second focus of this study is general well-being. General well-being may be considered a primary gauge of the quality of human existence (Christopher, 1999). An individual's state of well-being will influence how they perceive and interact with the environment and their interactions with the environment will influence their well-being (Bandura, 1997).

This research has attempted to better understand the academic achievement and general well-being of a specific population of students, those studying Business at Massey University's Albany campus. To achieve this aim the current study has examined the nature of the relationship between these two variables and their relationship to several important demographic variables (e.g., age, ethnicity) and certain individual variables that have been associated with academic achievement and general well-being in research conducted in other countries (i.e., self-efficacy, social support, experienced difficulties, English language ability). It was hoped that examination of these relationships would provide suggestions for how the University on which this research has focused might improve the services they provide in order to maximise the academic achievement and general well-being of its' students.

Over the course of this introduction the constructs of academic achievement, general well-being, self-efficacy, social support, English language ability and

experienced difficulties are defined and recent literature concerning these constructs, and their relationships to academic achievement and general well-being is reviewed. This is followed by the specific aims of the current study.

### **Academic Achievement**

Academic achievement has long been a key area of interest in research relating to the student experience. The primary focus of most studies has been the prediction of academic achievement based on a range of variables. The aim of such research has been to identify interventions that may best enhance students' academic achievement (Wilhite, 1990). Typically the variable of 'academic achievement' is defined and measured by Grade Point Average (GPA), a mean score based on the numeric translation of final course grades. Alternatively, academic achievement has been operationalised as a subjective self-evaluation of performance by individuals (e.g., DeFour & Hirsch, 1990; Tofi, Flett, & Timtimu-Thorpe, 1996).

Subjective measures are commonly utilised in academic research when objective measures are unavailable, such as when ethical concerns relating to students' privacy prevent the use of this data. The use of subjective measures has been viewed with some caution as past research has demonstrated a tendency for students to overestimate their grades and has also indicated that this overestimation may differ with regard to variables such as gender, level of study, and level of achievement (Flake & Goldman, 1991; Frucot & Cook, 1994). However, despite the existence of such systematic variations, past validity studies have indicated that self-reports of GPAs do generate high positive correlations with actual GPAs (e.g.,  $r = .91$ ; Frucot & Cook, 1994). Hence subjective measures do provide a sound alternative to objective measures of academic achievement.

### **Social Support**

Social support is one predictor of academic achievement that has received considerable attention over the last two decades. 'Social support' has been defined as "those social interactions or relationships that provide individuals with actual assistance

or that embed individuals within a social system believed to provide love, caring, or sense of attachment to a valued social group or dyad” (Hobfoll, 1988, p. 121). However, it is generally accepted that this broad definition of Social Support encompasses several distinct constructs which vary in their interactions with other specific variables of interest (Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). Predominant among these are ‘available support’, also referred to as ‘perceived support’ and ‘received support’, also referred to as ‘enacted support’. Available support is the perception of support that would be available if needed while received support refers to actual support transactions (Sarason et al., 1990). Correlations between received and available support typically range from low (Sandler & Barrera, 1984) to moderate (Cohen, McGowan, Fooskas, & Rose, 1984; Sarason, Shearin, Pierce, & Sarason, 1987), thus supporting the notion that received and available social support are two distinct, albeit related constructs. Although terminology varies greatly between studies it is generally possible to interpret specific measures of social support along the lines of these definitions.

Research examining the relationship between academic achievement and social support has yielded fairly contradictory results with the differing effects of available and received support being particularly apparent. With a large sample of undergraduate students, Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, and Russell (1994) investigated the predictive value of received support from parents with regard to GPA scores. Received support from parents, particularly ‘reassurance of worth’, explained the most variance in GPAs when controlling for academic aptitude, family achievement orientation, and family conflict. Support from friends and partner/spouse was not associated with GPAs.

With a sample of African American graduate students, DeFour and Hirsch (1990) found that a ‘perception of achievement as better than average’ was associated with frequent non-school contact with African American faculty members, low proportion of African American students in their social network, and high satisfaction with African American academic support. Students who received satisfactory personal support from non-African American network members tended to rate their satisfaction with academic achievement more highly than those less satisfied with support from non-African American network members.

Similarly, Hackett, Betz, Casas, and Rocha-Singh (1992), with a sample of 218 engineering students, found a moderate, positive relationship between encouragement from academic staff and academic achievement. Encouragement from academic staff was assessed by the frequency with which students had encountered a series of specified supportive statements. However, a more general measure of received social support was associated with diminished academic achievement.

Other studies have failed to find any relationship between academic achievement and social support. Jay and D'Augelli's (1991) study with a sample of 165 undergraduate students compared the relationship between available social support and academic achievement for both African American and European American students. Social support was not predictive of academic achievement, although increased contact with network members showed a near significant relationship with lower GPAs. Halamandaris and Power's (1999) research with a sample of 183 undergraduate students and Hersberger and D'Augelli's (1992) research with a sample of 165 undergraduate students, also failed to find significant effects of social support on academic achievement.

Overall, while the relationship between social support and academic achievement is unclear there is some evidence for received support from parents (Cutrona et al., 1994) and academic staff (DeFour & Hirsch, 1990; Hackett et al., 1992). Clear conclusions are inhibited by a lack of consistency in the operationalisation of the constructs across studies. The relationship between these variables is still the focus of researchers' attention, so it is likely that as the body of empirical research expands a progressively clearer picture of the role of social support in enhancing students' academic achievement will emerge.

## Experienced Difficulties

Considerable effort is expended by universities in adjusting systems to minimise student difficulties and to assist students with difficulties that they are experiencing. This is demonstrated by the significant resources allocated to facilities such as student learning centres and student health and counselling centres. It follows that a considerable amount of research has investigated the nature of specific difficulties experienced by students in the course of their studies (recent examples include, Chandler & Gallagher, 1996; Dill & Henley, 1998; Mullins, Quintrell, & Hancock, 1995). Such research has typically been descriptive in nature and has investigated group differences with the intention of finding how students may best be assisted.

'Experienced difficulties' are typically represented by scales including items that refer to specific situations and events that would be considered difficulties in the lives of a given population (e.g., Tofi et al., 1996; Wong & Kwok, 1997). The extent to which such difficulties are relevant to an individual is then indicated by marking the extent which they agree with a given statement, or the extent to which a given difficulty applies to them.

Research has investigated the links between variables such as social support and experienced difficulties. For example, Wong and Kwok (1997) investigated social support and experienced difficulties with a sample of 600 Hong Kong University students over the age of 23 years. The researchers were interested in the sources and levels of support, as well as the perceived adequacy of this support, and how this effected the levels and types of difficulty experienced by the participants. The main areas of difficulty for this sample were study, work, and family. A clear relationship emerged in which increased support was associated with diminished difficulties. The receipt of informational support, a construct comparable to directive guidance, proved to be the most influential, and demonstrated significant negative associations with study, interpersonal relations, work, family, and social life dimensions of experienced difficulties.



While such research proved very helpful in developing a difficulties scale for the current study it reveals little about the relationship between experienced difficulties and academic achievement. Such information has typically come from research investigating the antecedents and outcomes of stress, with stress being assessed using scales such as 'the daily hassles scale', which may be seen to parallel 'experienced difficulties'.

Tofi et al. (1996) measured the extent to which a sample of 61 Pacific Islander students at Massey University's Palmerston North Campus experienced difficulties from a list of 42 specific and commonly experienced problems. The authors examined the relations between these experienced difficulties and social support, academic performance, and psychological well-being. Experienced difficulties were indeed associated with diminished academic achievement. Contrary to the authors' expectations this relationship was not effected by differing levels of social support. In Hackett et al's. (1992) study, discussed above in relation to social support, a scale was administered assessing academic, financial, family, and social difficulties. Lower levels of experienced difficulties were associated with higher GPA's, increased attainment of academic milestones, and a reduction in negative outcome expectancies.

In sum, the literature specifically investigating relationships between experienced difficulties and academic achievement in student populations is relatively sparse. However, available evidence supports the intuitive assumption that increased levels of difficulty will be associated with diminished academic achievement.

### **Self-efficacy**

'Self-efficacy' has been defined as "... beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). In Bandura's view our perceptions of self-efficacy are specific to given behavioral domains, that is, our perceptions of self-efficacy relating to different behavioral domains are considered to be independent of one another. For instance, an individual may have great confidence in their ability to execute the skills necessary to successfully participate in a given sporting activity while seriously doubting their ability

to execute study behaviours to successfully comprehend and retain information from an academic text in order to sit an exam.

Alternatively, self-efficacy has been conceptualised in a broader sense. In this view self-efficacy refers to our general, non-domain specific perceptions of personal competence. Sherer, et al. (1982) define 'general self-efficacy' as a generalised set of expectations that a person possesses, based on past experiences of success and failure, that affect his or her expectations of success in new situations.

Perceptions of self-efficacy have been attributed to several sources. The most influential of these are enactive mastery experiences and vicarious experience (Vrugt, 1996). Enactive mastery experiences refers to past performance experiences with clear successes being associated with enhanced self-efficacy and clear failures being associated with diminished self-efficacy. The second most important determinant of self-efficacy is vicarious experience. By observing someone else successfully executing a given behavior an individual may learn more about the behavior, hence increasing his/her confidence to complete the behavior him/herself. Alternatively the observation of others failing may lead to diminished confidence in the individuals' ability to perform the behaviour.

Although research investigating the role of self-efficacy in academic achievement is still developing, studies conducted over the last 20 years indicate that greater self-efficacy is associated with greater academic achievement. As part of a broad review of the self-efficacy literature Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) conducted a meta-analysis using 13 previous studies to investigate the hypothesis that greater self-efficacy is associated with enhanced career performance and academic performance. A moderate, positive correlation ( $r = .38$ ) was demonstrated between the two variables.

With a sample of 184 undergraduate students, Wilhite (1990) examined academic self-efficacy, locus of control, self-assessment of memory ability, and study activities as predictors of academic achievements. Although academic self-efficacy was a significant predictor of final grades for this sample, the relationship between locus of control and academic achievement was stronger. Mone (1994) set out to compare the

relative predictive validity of what he called 'outcome self-efficacy' and 'process self-efficacy' with regard to academic achievement. The operationalisation of 'outcome self-efficacy' is inconsistent with past research on self-efficacy and appears to be assessing the distinct but related construct of outcome expectancies (Bandura, 1997). However 'process self-efficacy' was operationalised as 'academic self-efficacy', a well validated construct (Wood & Locke, 1987). Both variables were significant predictors of enhanced academic achievement.

In an earlier study, Lent, Brown, and Larkin (1984) investigated the relationship between self-efficacy and persistence and success within a sample of 42 engineering and science students. Self-efficacy was assessed as students' confidence in their ability to successfully complete specific academic and occupational tasks relating to the fields of science and engineering. High ratings of self-efficacy proved to be related to greater persistence in science and engineering majors and better end of year grades. These results must be interpreted cautiously, both because the sample was non-random and drawn from a group participating in a career-planning course, and due to the small sample size.

Despite the modest body of research investigating self-efficacy and academic achievement in student populations the picture to date is clear and consistent. Referring back to the theoretical determinants and outcomes of self-efficacy, such findings are not surprising. High academic achievement, by definition, implies the experience of enactive mastery, which Bandura (1977), since his original work on self-efficacy theory, has presented as being the strongest determinant of self-efficacy beliefs. In turn greater self-efficacy is theoretically associated with greater persistence in the face of adversity, and enhanced effort (Shelton, 1990). Hence, it is apparent how an upward spiral effect between greater self-efficacy and enhanced achievement could occur.

## **English Language Ability**

Language may be considered a key competency for successful university study. Written and verbal expression is required in practically all forms of assessment and learning in universities. In the context of the current study, that is an English speaking university situated in a country where English is the major language, English language ability is likely to be of particular relevance for immigrants and international students for whom English is a second language.

Such an expectation is supported by recent research. Stonoff (1997) examined factors associated with the academic achievement of 77 international students in their first year of study at an American university. Greater language proficiency was associated with greater GPA's, greater credits earned, and reduced likelihood of withdrawal. Similarly, Bosher and Rowekamp (1992), with a sample of 52 refugee/immigrant students, found that English language ability was the second most important predictor of academic achievement. The best predictor for this sample was number of years of schooling completed in the student's native country.

Such research strongly indicates the importance of English language ability in the academic achievement of those for whom English is a second language. Despite such findings the importance of English language ability for the academic achievement of native speakers does not seem to have inspired similar research.

## **General Well-being**

General well-being, represented by its numerous operationalisations, has been the focus of much research. The understanding and promotion of well-being may be considered a primary goal of the discipline of Psychology, with the professional lives of many researchers/practitioners devoted to its optimisation. Despite the existence of this large body of research investigating variables that enhance or diminish well-being, little attention has been focused on the construct of 'well-being' itself (Christopher, 1999).

Generally, well-being has been approached in terms of both individuals' judgements about their life satisfaction, and the balance between positive and negative effect (Christopher, 1999). This is consistent with the approach taken by the current study, in which well-being has been assessed using the General Health Questionnaire which assesses the extent to which participants are able to carry out normal healthy functions such as concentration and sleep, and the occurrence of undesirable phenomenon such as loss of self confidence and depressed mood (Goldberg & Williams, 1988).

Due to the sparsity of past research relating this specific operationalisation of well-being to the questions posed by the current study, this review has extended to research that has assessed more specific indicators of well-being, such as depression, anxiety, and somatic symptoms. While such measures do not claim to indicate an individual's general state of well-being, they do indicate the presence of symptoms that are likely to diminish well-being. Other researchers have referred to 'adjustment' (e.g., Jay & D'Augelli, 1991). This is typically a composite of measures of specific domains of functioning, such as academic achievement and indexes of physical and psychological health.

### **Social Support**

Earlier in this introduction the observation was made that a clear understanding of the relationship between social support and academic achievement is some way off. Significantly greater progress has been made with regard to the study of social support and well-being, with much of the body of research investigating social support focusing on this issue. Viswesvaran, Sanchez, and Fisher's (1999) research is illustrative of this progress. The authors conducted a meta-analysis of 68 studies to investigate the role of social support in the process of work stress.

This study was interested in how the relationship between 'stressors', which are environmental conditions that adversely affect health, and 'strains', which are individual responses to stressors, are affected by social support. Essentially the authors were testing several general models of this relationship. 'Direct effects models' assume that social

support and stressors each have an independent influence on strain. Alternatively, the 'moderator effects' model proposes that reduced levels of social support will strengthen the relationship between strains and stressors. In addition, several 'mediational models' were tested including the 'buffering hypothesis', in which social support is thought to diminish the effects of stressors thereby reducing strain. Findings indicated that social support reduced the strains experienced, mitigated perceived stressors, and moderated the stressor-strain relationship (Viswesvaran et al., 1999). It follows that this research supports both the direct effects model and the moderator effects model.

With a sample of 888 undergraduate psychology students Finch et al. (1997) investigated the relationship between four dimensions of received support, namely, positive social exchange, tangible assistance, and directive guidance, with the outcome variables of depression and life satisfaction. Tangible assistance and directive guidance were associated with increased depression, while positive social exchange was associated with reduced depression. Only positive social exchange was predictive of life satisfaction with greater levels of positive social exchange being associated with enhanced life satisfaction.

With a sample of 311 Hispanic undergraduates Solberg and Villarreal (1997) investigated the relationship between available social support and well-being. It was reported that, for students reporting high levels of stress, increased available support was associated with greater levels of well-being. However, for students reporting low levels of stress increased available support was associated with diminished well-being. The authors interpreted this finding as demonstrating the reciprocal nature of supportive relationships in this population. That is, those who perceive high levels of available support may also perceive an obligation to provide high levels of support. Hence, at times of low stress, perceived demands from significant others may result in diminished well-being.

In Jay and D'Augelli's (1991) study, discussed earlier with regard to academic achievement, perceived adequacy of social support and availability of social support were associated with enhanced psychological and physical well-being. Demakis and McAdams (1994) investigated personality, social support, and well-being with a sample

of 63 first year college students. They found that greater perceived available support was associated with greater satisfaction with life and experienced lower levels of psychological distress.

With a sample of 57 students Cohen and Hobberman (1983) investigated the role of both perceived and available support in relation to negative and positive life events and depressive and physical symptomology. Greater received support was associated with increased physical symptoms and was unrelated to depressive symptoms. In contrast to this finding, greater available support was associated with reduced depressive symptoms and was unrelated to physical symptoms. However, as Viswesvaran et al. (1998) point out the low statistical power associated with such a small sample size means that the probability of identifying an effect was diminished.

Zea, Jarama, and Bianchi (1995) in a study with an ethnically diverse sample of 357 students examined social support and psychosocial competence as predictors of adaptation to college. 'Psychosocial competence' referred to the use of active coping techniques and 'college adjustment' referred to academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal/emotional adjustment, and general institutional attachment. Both satisfaction with social support and active coping were significant predictors of college adjustment.

In sum, while much progress has been made in understanding the possible mechanisms that may determine relationships between social support and well-being, the literature still presents a collection of fairly inconsistent findings. Again, this may to some extent be attributed to the many different measurement models, both of general well-being and social support, that have been utilised by researchers to date.

### **Experienced Difficulties**

As was the case with academic achievement, research associating experienced difficulties with well-being have typically come from stress research. For example, Lu (1994) measured experienced difficulties and psychological well-being with a sample of 102 Taiwanese first year university students. Psychological well-being was measured by the presence of depression, anxiety, and somatic symptoms. Greater experienced

difficulties had a positive relationship with each of depression, anxiety, and somatic symptoms. Lu also assessed the experience of 20 major life events using an adaptation of Holmes and Rahe's (1967) social readjustment rating scale. Major life events were also predictive of diminished psychological well-being.

Tyrrell (1992) investigated experienced difficulties - in this case presented as sources of stress - and general well being with a sample of 94 undergraduate students. The most frequently reported difficulties were, fears of falling behind with coursework, finding the motivation to study, time pressures, financial worries, and concern about academic ability. Remarkably Tyrrell assessed and discussed both experienced difficulties and general well-being without investigating or discussing any relationships between the two.

Jou and Fukada (1996) assessed the experienced difficulties of 175 Chinese students studying at Universities in Japan. Five dimensions of experienced difficulties were measured including, interpersonal problems, academic problems, health/living problems, financial anxiety, and environmental problems. Regression analyses indicated that all dimensions of experienced difficulties, other than financial anxiety, were predictive of depression. Interpersonal problems and financial anxiety were predictive of somatic symptoms. Measures of experienced difficulties showed no relationships with a measure of happiness. Solberg and Villarreal's (1997) study also assessed experienced difficulties. Results indicated that greater experienced difficulties were associated with diminished social adjustment and personal adjustment.

As has been discussed earlier, the literature investigating general well-being is characterised by great variation in how this variable has been operationalised. This is associated with variation in findings relating to the influence of experienced difficulties on well-being. Different measures of well-being, as well as different dimensions within single measures, show different interactions with measures of experienced difficulties. This issue is further complicated by the fact that measures of experienced difficulties are unlikely to be generalisable across populations (Crandall, Preisler, & Ausprung, 1992). Despite such issues greater experienced difficulties, overall, appear to be associated with diminished well-being.



## Self-efficacy

Research investigating the relationship between self-efficacy and general measures of well-being is particularly sparse. An example of such research is presented by Solberg and Villarreal (1997). The authors set out to assess the relationships between self-efficacy, social support, and stress and how these predict levels of psychological and physical distress of Hispanic college students. Well-being was operationalised using the Brief Symptom Inventory which assesses the frequency of a variety of physical and psychological symptoms within a defined time period. Self-efficacy was measured using Solberg, O'Brien, Villarreal, Kennel, and Davis' (1993) 'College Self-efficacy Inventory', developed using items describing different behaviours that are required to succeed with college study. Self-efficacy emerged as a significant predictor of well-being, with increased levels of self-efficacy being associated with greater well-being.

A body of research has accumulated that links self-efficacy with factors that may be considered indicators of diminished general well-being. Predominant among these is depression. Kavanaugh (1992) found that improvement of self-efficacy expectations accounted for 50% of the variance in subsequent improvements in depression. Similarly, with a sample of 186 undergraduate students, Oliver and Paull (1995) set out to investigate associations among self-esteem, self-efficacy, several socialisation variables, and several personality variables with the outcome variable of depression. Self-efficacy was operationalised as a general construct measuring participants' beliefs in their abilities to cope in a broad range of situations. Both self-esteem and self-efficacy were negatively related to depression.

Enhanced self-efficacy has also been associated with reduced anxiety and phobic disorders (Williams, 1992), reduced addictive behaviours (DiClemente, Fairhurst, & Piotrowski, 1995) and enhanced health promoting behaviours (Maddux, Brawley, & Boykin, 1995). Such research has been based on very specific measures of self-efficacy and very specific measures of the associated outcome variables. However, as general self-efficacy represents a cumulation of self-efficacy across multiple domains (Shelton, 1990), and general well-being is an indicator of overall physical and psychological

health, the above research may indicate similar relationships among more generalised constructs.

In sum, while available research would suggest an association between higher levels of general self-efficacy and general well-being, there is inadequate research to draw any clear conclusions.

### **Conclusion**

The primary function of this introduction and literature review has been to present the broad context in which the current study was conducted and to outline past research that has investigated the role that social support, experienced difficulties, and self-efficacy play with regard to the outcome variables of academic achievement and general well-being in student populations. This body of research clearly indicates negative relationships between experienced difficulties and academic achievement and experienced difficulties and general well-being, positive relationships between self-efficacy and academic achievement, and between English language ability and academic achievement. Findings with regard to the other variables are less consistent. Primarily these inconsistencies are due to varying measurement models and in some cases an insufficient body of research from which to draw clear conclusions.

### **Research Aims**

The primary aim of this study is to investigate English language ability, experienced difficulties, self-efficacy, received social support, and demographic variables as antecedents of the academic achievement and general well-being of undergraduate students at the Albany campus of Massey University's College of Business.

To assess these relationships significant correlations will be identified between the variables and the extent to which English language ability, experienced difficulties, self-efficacy, and received social support are predictive of academic achievement will be investigated. In addition significant differences between demographic subgroups will be

identified. This information will highlight factors with which intervention may enhance academic achievement and general well-being, and will indicate the position of demographic subgroups with regard to these variables.