

Online Seminar: A Potential Mental Health Support Tool for International Students

Tran Hoang Nam, Inosaki Atsuko, Jin Cheng Hai

Tokushima University, Japan

Abstract

Since 2020, university students in Japan are exposed to the impacts of Covid-19 pandemic. Data from a survey had shown that over 50% of international students had been experiencing some kind of stress (Tran, unpublished). For supporting international students in the prolonged pandemic period, we conducted a series of Stress Prevention Seminars during 2021. These seminars were designed for students to learn simple skills that could help them to cope with various stresses. Records of the seminars, including students' interactions, Q&A, feedback, emotion score (Ogawa, 2000) and final evaluation were analyzed. This presentation is aiming to show: (1) preliminary results of the seminars conducted; and (2) potential of these events for strengthening mental health status of international students during pandemic. The results showed high understanding level and satisfaction rate, as well as increased positive emotion score. The results suggested that providing these stress prevention seminars to international students is potentially to be an effective strategy, in addition to providing individual counseling and other activities, to improving stress resilience of international students for long term.

Keywords: international student; Japan; online seminar, stress prevention; support

1. Introduction

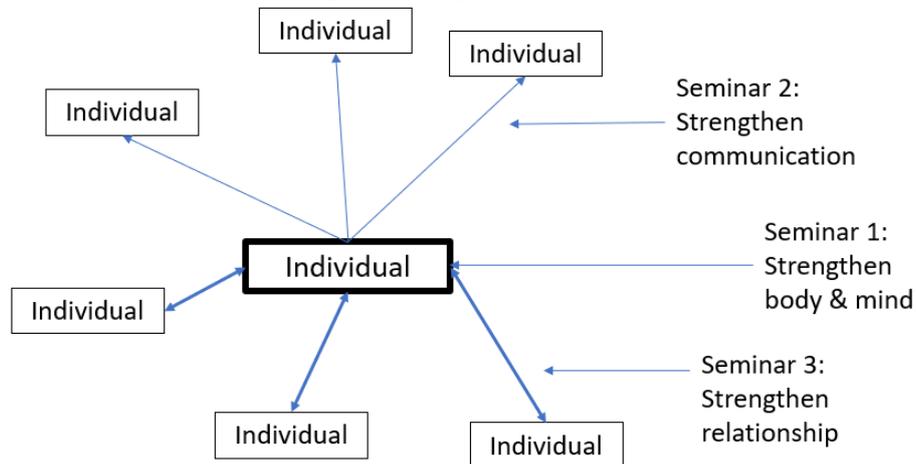
University students in Japan, as anywhere in the world, must face many challenges during their campus life, including stress. Short-term stress can help students to raise a grade, complete a paper, or pursue a career opportunity. On the other hand, long-term stress, if left unaddressed, can lead to unfavorable conditions (Broderick, 2021). How international students can cope with stress during their studying abroad has been in the focus of many studies so far (Sovic, 2008) but seems still in the spotlight. Since 2020, university students in Japan are exposed to the impacts of Covid-19 pandemic (Tanno, 2020). Together with unprecedented transformation of higher education, we have observed international students to become prone to the impacts of the pandemic in terms of physical and mental health (von Keyserlingk et al., 2021); Yulong et al., 2021). So far, institutions and organizations in Japan have designed (Kondo, 2020) and implemented numerous schemes for supporting international students in Japan to cope with COVID-19, including providing daily life support, consultation, information (Nishiura, 2021). It has been reported that international students need more life skills and enhancing the activities experience of international students studying in Japan would lead to improved life skills (Chen et al., 2021).

At Tokushima University, data from a survey conducted in November 2020 had shown that 70% of the international students cited anxiety about economic conditions, on the other hand, 20% of the international students reported current mental state is not well-function (Tokushima University, 2021). Another survey had shown that over 50% of international students had been experiencing some stress (Tran, data unpublished).

For supporting international students to strengthen their mental health status and increasing their motivation in the prolonged pandemic period, we conducted a series of Stress Prevention Seminars. The concepts of these seminars were based on the idea that any individual may need a comprehensive support starting from the inside (body and mind), moving outwardly (communication) towards other people (relationship). This conceptual framework was summarized in Figure 1. Seminar 1 was themed “Strengthening immune function of mind and body”, Seminar 2 was focused on “Assertion training for effective communication”, while Seminar 3 was titled “Building Human Relationships for Stress Prevention”. The seminars’ content has been designed to be simple to understand yet highly applicable in daily life situation. Each seminar was conducted within a class hour including main lecture, quizzes, drills, and Q&A. These seminars were designed for students to learn simple skills that could help them to cope with various stresses.

This presentation is aiming to explore: (1) preliminary results of the seminars conducted; and (2) potential of these events for strengthening mental health status of international students during pandemic.

Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework (by authors)



2. Method

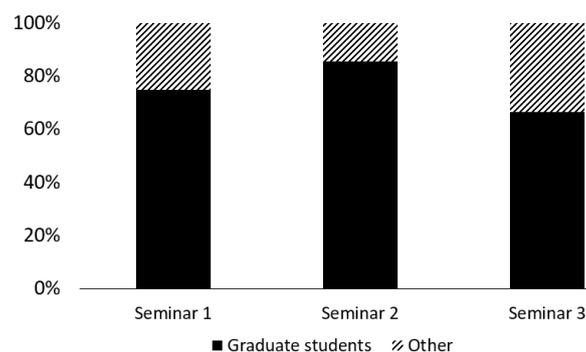
This paper analyzes some data obtained from a series of online seminars on stress prevention for international students conducted at Tokushima University from May to October 2021. These seminars were conducted using Microsoft Teams. Participants were recruited by public announcement. Any international student, including undergraduate, graduate, research students, exchange students were eligible to join. Every time announcement was made independently, and participants could join each seminar separately. We made analysis out of the records of the seminars, including students' interactions, Q&A, feedback, emotion score (Ogawa et al., 2000) and final evaluation were analyzed. Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS Statistics version 27.0 for Windows (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA).

3. Results

3.1. Characteristics of participants

Number of participants who are graduate students were higher than non-graduate students (Table 1), and the number of participants who listened in English were higher than in Japanese (data not shown).

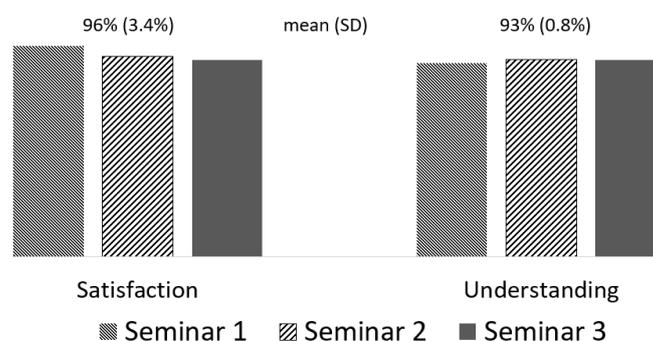
Figure 2: Participants' Characteristics



3.2. Satisfaction rate and understanding level

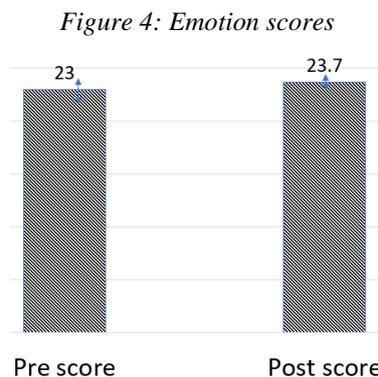
International students had shown special interests in the contents of the seminars. The overall satisfaction rate is very high (Figure 3). About the reasons for satisfaction, most of the participants stated that they could gain a new knowledge about psychology and mental health, the content was interesting, the techniques/ skills presented were simple but practical and could be applicable in daily life. Participants mentioned that these seminars helped them to communicate with new people, to gain confidence in communication especially with older or higher position people, and to help them to solve difficulties in daily situations. Participants have shown interest to participate in the future events. The final reflection shown that more participants prefer online over offline mode. The most suitable time for participating is weekday, in the early evening.

Figure 3: Final evaluation



3.3. Scores of Emotion Scale

The Seminar 3 had used the Emotion Scale (Ogawa et al., 2000) to measure positive emotion scores of participants before and after the event (Figure 4). The positive emotions of the participants increased after this seminar. (T-test, $p > .05$). The average value of the positive emotions of the participants is quite high (~11 in Ogawa's study) (One-Sample T-test, Test value = 11, $p < .05$).



3.4. Challenges

Regarding participant involvement, taking the capacity of the online mode which may host higher number of participants, however actual participation was not reach over 10% of the total number of international students. It seems difficult to make the students who may have a real stress problem to participate. It may need a different strategy to target these non-participants.

Regarding the seminar content, although the topics was carefully selected, some of the concepts may need more elaboration for being applicable to international students. Considering these seminars to be systematically implemented may become a worthful but challenge task in the future. Finally, follow-up of improvement of mental health and overall impacts on resilience may also pose a challenging task.

4. Discussion

This paper shows the progression of implementing the seminars according to the conceptual framework. The impact of these seminars could be maximized if any participant could join all the events consecutively as a program, and the impact could be best measured that way. Some universities provide a training program on wellness in order to support students in need (Medlicott et al., 2021). However, due to fluctuation and busy schedule of students themselves, it is difficult to recruit students who are committed to join a full program. In our project we decided not to implement a full program and let the participation goes randomly. In fact, the repeater rate in our seminars (data now shown) was low. Worldwide, many universities also offer single-session workshops on a range of topics from sleep, anxiety, nutrition, and community resiliency each semester (USC Student Health, 2021).

Moreover, the fact that there were more graduate students among participants, who preferred to listen in English could be explained by higher percentage of graduate students enrolled.

In one of the events, we tried to use emotion scales (Ogawa et al., 2000) to measure changes of emotion scores before and after participating to a seminar, however due to the time constrain we could use only one of three scales for emotion measuring. In this paper, we have found the average value of the positive emotions of the participants is much higher than the value reported in previous studies in Japanese students. It may need more investigation to confirm this phenomenon.

5. Conclusion

Since almost two years from the first breakout, the Covid-19 pandemic continue to make impacts on the higher education. Along with the transformation of learning and online study, the students are forced to adapt with prolonged staying at home, lockdown, lack of face-to-face communication and insufficient social activities, isolation, and uncertainty. In this situation, some international students may become prone to stress and anxiety. To support international students to cope with potential stress, a series of seminars for stress prevention have been conducted during 2021. In addition to counseling service, where students can discuss their problem on individual basis, these seminars could give international students an alternative platform to improve wellness, resilience, communication, and relationship building. By applying practical approach and hand-on techniques for improving wellness of mind and body assertive communication, and maintaining human relationship, the students were introduced to methods for coping with stress during Covid-19. The results showed in the presentation suggest that providing seminars to international students may be an effective strategy, in addition to providing individual counseling and other activities, to improving stress resilience of international students for long term.

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