


# Psychological Well-Being of Exchange Program Students

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<p><b>Revised:</b> 2025-04-02</p> <p><b>Published:</b> 2025-04-12</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Psychological Well-Being, Exchange Program, Students</p> <p><b>Copyright holder:</b> © Author/s (2025)</p> <p><b>This article is under:</b></p>  <p><b>How to cite:</b> Asri, D. N., Wardani, S. Y., &amp; Lestari, S. (2025). Psychological Well-Being of Exchange Program Students. <i>Bulletin of Counseling and Psychotherapy</i>, 7(1). <a href="https://doi.org/10.51214/00202406898000">https://doi.org/10.51214/00202406898000</a></p> <p><b>Published by:</b> Kuras Institute</p> <p><b>E-ISSN:</b> 2656-1050</p>	<p><b>ABSTRACT:</b> The objectives of this study are (1) to describe the psychological well-being conditions of students who participated in the university student exchange program; (2) to determine the differences in psychological well-being of students who participate in exchange programs based on gender, and (3) to determine the differences in psychological well-being of students participating in exchange programs based on each dimension of psychological well-being. The study subjects comprised 39 students from 21 universities across 11 regions in Indonesia, excluding the Java Island region, who participated in an in-person student exchange program at Universitas PGRI Madiun, Indonesia. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Data collection was conducted using Ryff's Psychological Well-Being scale, consisting of 18 items. The results of the reliability test using the Cronbach coefficient test obtained a value of 0.84. The data analysis technique used descriptive statistics. The Mann Whitney test formula was used to determine the difference in psychological well-being in terms of gender. The analysis of variance, was used to determine the differences in each dimension of psychological well-being. The results of the study showed that self-acceptance has the highest level of dimension in psychological well-being.</p>
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## INTRODUCTION

Student exchange programs at universities provide students with the opportunity and freedom to gain knowledge and science at universities according to their competencies through programs developed by partners outside the campus. Through learning in student exchange programs, it provides challenges and opportunities for universities to design innovative and adaptive learning processes so that students can achieve learning outcomes that cover aspects of attitude, knowledge, and skills (general and specific) optimally, relevant for the present and the future. In Indonesia and other countries, the phenomenon of student exchange at the national and international levels is not a new thing (Naully & Fransisca, 2020). In a student exchange program, participants must interact with diverse groups, engage in group learning, and integrate into their temporary community. This requires them to understand the local culture and adapt by embracing tolerance and multiculturalism (Haj-Yehia & Erez, 2018; Quintana, 2007; Normadaniyah et al., 2019). On the other hand, students have academic and socio-cultural challenges. These challenges include language barriers, cultural differences, homesickness (C. Cao et al., 2016), lack of social support, lack of self-efficacy, and excessive stress (Zhang & Goodson, 2011); acculturation stress; psychological adjustment; social belonging; depression; and anxiety (Brunsting et al., 2018).

The student exchange program is a development of academic culture that requires cooperation with university partners (Insani et al., 2021). In realizing the student exchange program,

fellow universities collaborate to improve student competency so that, they are competitive at the national and international levels. The Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia has established a policy on the Independent Learning Independent Campus Program (MBKM), One example is the Independent Student Exchange Program (PMM). The PMM program offers students the opportunity to study at a different campus for one semester, allowing them to expand their knowledge and broaden their perspectives. Participants are required to choose a university located on a different island from their home institution, providing them with a deeper understanding of Indonesia's cultural diversity.

A preliminary study, based on interviews with students who participated in both inbound and outbound exchange programs at Universitas PGRI Madiun, revealed that students need time to adjust to their new environment. This adaptation process involves adjusting to a new academic setting, understanding the local language, interacting with dormitory peers and the local community, adapting to unfamiliar food, and coping with different weather and climate. These adjustments also involve psychological aspects, such as anxiety, self-confidence, and culture shock, which can impact students' overall quality of life. The experience of adapting to life at a new university as part of the Student Exchange program can, therefore, affect students' psychological well-being.

Psychological well-being is a feeling of comfort with oneself and life, having positive relationships, and having the ability to manage and overcome life's problems and challenges (Gündüz, 2022; Luo, 2022). The most influential psychological well-being model was proposed by Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000), who defined psychological well-being as the result of two dimensions, namely positive emotion and engagement in meaningful activities. Referring to this model, individuals who frequently experience positive emotions and are actively involved in meaningful activities tend to have high levels of psychological well-being. Several studies have revealed aspects of psychological well-being. Psychological well-being includes six characteristics, namely self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal progress, and pleasant connections (Ryff & Singer in Dhanabhakya & Sarath, 2023; Diener et al., 2009; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Kilgo et al., 2018).

Self-acceptance describes the extent to which individuals accept their strengths and weaknesses and accept their past. Positive relations with others describe the social relationships of individuals with others who give and receive and are warm. Autonomy leads to the freedom of individuals to act according to their will and the ability to deal with stressors. Environmental mastery relates to the individual's belief in managing the surrounding environment and utilizing existing resources. Personal growth relates to the individual's perception of their own development. Meanwhile, purpose in life is related to how individuals interpret their lives now and in the present. According to Su et al. (2022), psychological well-being includes positive feelings, self-value, self-confidence, goals of life, engagement, and a sense of belonging. Seligman, (2011) conceptualized psychological well-being into 5 contributing factors called the PERMA model: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. Based on studies that discuss psychological well-being, this study specifies students' psychological well-being into 6 aspects, namely (1) autonomy; (2) environmental mastery; (3) personal growth; (4) positive relations with others; (5) purpose in life; and (6) self-acceptance.

Psychological well-being is an important concept that individuals have regarding mental health, especially students who participate in student exchange programs. Being away from family and having to live in a new environment for a certain period of time requires very heavy adjustment. Several experts state that psychological well-being is associated with an individual's ability to operate properly in maximizing their abilities both in personal and social life (Malkoç & Mutlu, 2019; Tunç, 2020). Individuals who have high psychological well-being show high intrinsic motivation, have the ability to interact, and have life satisfaction, which includes quality of life, purpose in life, feeling

comfortable, and having meaning in life. High levels of psychological well-being in individuals indicate self-acceptance, high control, the ability to adapt well to student demands, and low levels of stress. Conversely, individuals who have low psychological well-being tend to avoid conflict and have feelings of anxiety and restlessness (Houltberg et al., 2018; Kaspoglu & Didin, 2022; Z. Luo et al., 2019; Kaya & Çenesiz, 2020; Bhat, 2021).

Psychological well-being is a person's subjective experience of their psychological state, including pleasure, satisfaction, and purpose in life. Psychological well-being includes mental health as indicated by positive relationships, self-acceptance and self-esteem, and responsibility for one's life. Although research on psychological well-being has been conducted for decades, along with the implementation of the Independent Learning Independent Campus Program by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. Especially, the student exchange program, many students have participated in the program so that the psychological well-being of students who participate in the student exchange program needs attention and has not been widely researched.

### **Study Aim and Hypothesis**

These study aims (1) to describe the psychological well-being conditions of students who participate in student exchange programs at Universitas PGRI Madiun, (2) to determine the differences in psychological well-being of students who participate in exchange programs in terms of gender, and (3) to determine the differences in psychological well-being of students participating in exchange programs based on each dimension of psychological well-being. The hypothesis are that (1) exchange program students have high levels of psychological well-being, (2) there is differences in psychological well-being of students who participate in exchange programs based on gender, and (3) there is difference in the psychological well-being of students who participate in exchange programs based on each dimension of psychological well-being.

## **METHODS**

### **Design**

This study uses a quantitative descriptive method to describe the psychological well-being conditions of students who participate in student exchange programs, to find out the differences in psychological well-being in terms of gender, and to find out the differences in psychological well-being in each dimension.

### **Participants**

The study participants were 39 students who took part in the offline student exchange program at Universitas PGRI Madiun, comprising 32 females and 7 males. Due to the small population size, the study used a Saturation Sampling technique, meaning all members of the population were included as samples. Small populations often employ the Saturation Sampling technique due to its ability to yield more comprehensive and representative data (Arikunto, 2012). Students come from various universities across Indonesian regions, namely: (1) Lampung University; (2) State University of Medan; (3) Universitas PGRI Palembang; (4) Syiah Kuala University; (5) Tadulako University; (6) Lambung Mangkurat University; (7) Universitas Muhammadiyah Barru; (8) University of Mataram; (9) STKIP Andi Matappa; (10) Universitas Katolik St. Thomas Medan; (11) Muhammadiyah University of Pringsewu; (12) Ganesha University of Education; (13) University of Samudra; (14) Adzkia University; (15) Hamzanwadi University; (16) Malikussaleh University; (17) Sriwijaya University; (18) Universitas PGRI Sumatera Barat; (19) Univesitas Teknokrat Indonesia; (20) Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara; dan (21) Gorontalo States University.

## Instruments

Data collection was carried out using the Ryff Psychological Well-Being scale, which consists of 18 items consisting of 6 aspects: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989). The psychological well-being scale consists of a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree; 2 = somewhat agree; 3 = a little agree; 4 = neither agree nor disagree; 5 = a little disagree; 6 = somewhat disagree; 7 = strongly disagree). This scale consists of positive and negative statements to measure the consistency of respondents' responses for each subscale. The results of the reliability test using the Cronbach coefficient test obtained a value of 0.84.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis technique used to describe the psychological well-being condition of students who participated in the student exchange program used descriptive statistics. The difference test using the Mann Whitney test formula was used to determine the difference in psychological well-being in terms of gender due to the normal data distribution, and the analysis of variance was used to determine the difference in each dimension of psychological well-being. The research hypothesis was tested using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 for Windows.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

According to the records of 39 students, the participants in the student exchange program came from 11 islands across Indonesia. This includes 4 students from Lampung Province, 9 from North Sumatera, 6 from Aceh, 1 from Central Sulawesi, 7 from North Sulawesi, 1 from Bali, 2 from West Sumatera, and 1 from Gorontalo Province. This distribution aligns with government policy, which requires student exchange participants to come from outside the island where the host university is located.

Based on the results of data analysis on the psychological well-being of students who participated in the student exchange program, it was found that there are 23 students (58.97%) who have a high level of psychological well-being, 12 students (30.77%) who have a moderate level of psychological well-being, and only 4 (10.26%) exchange students who have a low level of psychological well-being. These results mean that most students who participate in the exchange program have a high level of psychological well-being. Furthermore, differences in levels of psychological well-being based on gender are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Differences in Psychological Well-Being Reviewed by Gender

	Psychological Well-Being
Mann-Whitney U	90.500
Wilcoxon W	651.500
Z	-.332
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.740
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.747 <sup>a</sup>
a. Not corrected for ties	
b. Grouping Variable: Gender	

Based on Table 1 above, it shows that there is no difference in psychological well-being between male and female students. This is indicated by the significance value (2-tailed) > 0.05.

Next, Table 2 describes the differences in the psychological well-being of students who participate in exchange programs based on each dimension.

Table 2. Description of the Psychological Well-Being Dimensions of Students Participating in Exchange Programs

No	Dimensions	N	Mean	F	p
1	Autonomy	39	15.86	.019	.892
2	Environmental mastery	39	19.12	.083	.775
3	Personal growth	39	19.96	.414	.524
4	Positive relations with other	39	12.23	.11	.724
5	Purpose in life	39	13.11	.037	.162
6	Self-acceptance	39	20.66	.503	.483

Table 2. outlines the six dimensions of psychological well-being among exchange program students. The results show that self-acceptance has the highest level of psychological well-being, followed by personal growth, environmental mastery, autonomy, and purpose in life. The lowest level of psychological well-being is observed in the positive relations dimension.

## Discussion

Based on demographic data, the results show that the student exchange program was attended by 39 students (32 female and 7 male) from 11 islands across Indonesia. These students came from both state and private universities outside Java. Students' strong motivation to participate in the exchange program was driven by their desire to study in a new environment, gain new experiences, develop personal skills, expand social networks, explore regional cultural diversity, and become more independent while living away from home. Cultural differences, both academic and social, required students to adapt throughout the acculturation process. They developed various adjustment strategies, such as adapting to language differences, forming connections with friends and study groups, integrating with dormitory peers, and adjusting to different food menus and tastes.

The level of psychological well-being of students who participated in the exchange program obtained data that the majority (58.97%) had a high level of psychological well-being. This shows that students who participate in the exchange program tend to have a sense of comfort even though they are in a new environment, far from their place of origin. Students with high psychological well-being are shown by high intrinsic motivation, able to interact with new environments, and able to accept challenges in their lives. This is evidenced by students' participation in student exchange programs with different academic and social cultures. This aligns with Ryff's (1989) view, which states that individuals with high psychological well-being have a positive attitude towards themselves and others, are capable of making their own decisions, are independent, can develop their potential, and have goals they strive to achieve. High psychological well-being positively impacts daily life, as it fosters a positive attitude, the ability to interact effectively with others, independence, and a strong sense of determination (Huppert, 2009). On the other hand, individuals who have low psychological well-being show feelings of unhappiness, in living their lives to the point of suicidal behavior (L. Cao, 2012; Utami, 2016).

Exchange students with high psychological well-being demonstrate strong adaptation skills. Throughout the one-semester program, they are able to connect with students from various regions and integrate well with peers from the host campus. They are able to face challenges such as language differences, which are sometimes difficult to understand because they are not used to listening and not understanding sentences in Javanese. Based on the interview results, students who encounter this issue tend to ask their friends or lecturers for clarification on the meaning of sentences they don't understand, especially when Javanese is used. Students who have high psychological well-being also feel that students from their hometowns are very helpful in their adjustment process to introduce food from their hometowns and introduce tourist attractions in

the area. This creates a sense of security and happiness in students who participate in the exchange program. This condition is in line with Bowman, 's statement (2010) that students who have high psychological well-being are shown by their ability to manage and direct themselves well and are able to adapt and be skilled in facing challenges.

On the other hand, data obtained showed that only four students (10.26%) had low psychological well-being. Several studies have shown that factors that influence low levels of psychological well-being are due to students' inability to manage time, low self-esteem, feeling unsafe and uncomfortable, and feelings of lack of support (Gonzalez et al., 2015; C. Cao et al., 2016; Utami, 2016).

In general, in terms of gender, the results showed that there was no difference in the level of psychological well-being between male and female students. This is in line with previous studies, which showed that there was no difference in the level of psychological well-being between male and female students (Astuti, 2024; Poudel et al., 2020; Habe et al., 2023; Matud et al., 2019). On the other hand, previous research shows that there are differences in psychological well-being in terms of gender. The result showed that women were lower in positive relationships with others (Ryff, 1995; Ahrens & Ryff, 2006; Karasawa et al., 2011). On the other hand, compared to men, women are lower in self-acceptance (Ahrens & Ryff, 2006; Karasawa et al., 2011). In general, differences in these dimensions depend on other factors, such as age, culture, and other roles (Ahrens & Ryff, 2006; Karasawa et al., 2011). However, differences in psychological well-being in terms of gender have not produced consistent results (Vitters, 2016).

Based on descriptive analysis to determine the determination of the level of psychological well-being in six dimensions (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, self-acceptance), the results show that the highest level of psychological well-being is in the self-acceptance dimension, followed by personal growth, environmental mastery, autonomy, and purpose in life, and the lowest level of psychological well-being is in the positive relations dimension. The high level of self-acceptance in the psychological well-being dimension of students who participated in the exchange program was demonstrated by the students' ability to recognize their strengths and weaknesses and their ability to face challenges. Individuals who are able to recognize their strengths and weaknesses and behave well will increase their high fighting spirit in facing all of life's challenges (Bali-Mahomed et al., 2022; Crosswell et al., 2022; Faustino et al., 2020; Seden & Gyamtso, 2022). The self-confidence they have can develop their psychological well-being so that they are able to adapt and communicate in all environments and challenges faced. Individuals who have self-confidence and develop psychological well-being will have an impact on intrinsic motivation, proactive attitudes, and optimism about the future so that they can achieve academic success (Allobaney et al., 2022; Casino-García et al., 2021; Gündüz, 2022; Mikus & Teoh, 2021). Therefore, self-confidence plays a key role in supporting the self-acceptance of students participating in the exchange program, helping them feel comfortable and function optimally, allowing them to fully benefit from the experience at the host campus.

Personal growth is a dimension of psychological well-being possessed by exchange program students at a high level. According to (Ryff, 1989), personal development is defined as an individual's ability to develop their potential to grow and develop. The results of the analysis show that both male and female students have high personal growth. Despite having different cultural backgrounds and different skills, each student is able to improve their learning experience, develop new insights, and help to grow and develop as a professional adult individual. This is in line with Bueker et al. (2018), who stated that high psychological well-being can increase motivation and improve academic achievement.

Students exchange program are able to demonstrate good adjustment to the campus environment they are going to, even though there are significant cultural differences compared to their home region. However, these students are able to manipulate and respond to the environment

they face with all the advantages and skills they possess. Páez-Gallego et al., (2020) stated that environmental mastery is very important, which involves the capacity to choose an environment according to personal needs because it can influence a person's decision-making. The results of the study showed that exchange program students were actively involved in participating in campus activities and felt something new that was fun. The existence of support from the target campus, such as getting comfortable learning, comfortable interaction, and friendly campus residents who care about students from outside the region. This is supported by research by Seden & Gyamtso, (2022), which states that the target university has various expertise in various fields of science, so it will help students to grow and develop and gain experience in improving competence in various fields of science on the campus.

Autonomy is one of the dimensions of psychological well-being of exchange program students whose level is lower than other dimensions. According to Ryff, (1989), autonomy refers to the ability to make decisions and independence in living life. Individuals who have a high level of autonomy are able to determine goals and interests that can improve psychological well-being. The results of this study indicate that the low autonomy dimension in exchange program students is likely due to the age factor of students who are mostly 19-20 years old. Although according to Hurlock, (1998), the age of 19-20 years is an age that is in the adult category, the results of this study indicate that exchange program students are still less independent in their independence of life. On the other hand, the dimension of positive relations with others also has a lower level in psychological well-being. Positive relations with others lead to emotional support, togetherness, and happiness. The results of the study showed that exchange program students have low positive relations with others. This is because the short duration of time, namely one semester, is not enough to form positive relationships with others, even though all functions involved in student exchange activities on campus, such as lecturers, administrative staff, and students, have provided support, care, friendliness, and attention. This is supported by Seden & Gyamtso, (2022), who stated that students who participated in the exchange program had not developed well because they needed enough time to develop, while the implementation time of the student exchange program lasted for one semester.

The results of the study show that students have a low level of purpose in life. A sense of purpose leads to feeling like one has a reason to live, which contributes to overall satisfaction and happiness. Despite receiving support from lecturers, gaining knowledge and experiences, and receiving guidance during the student exchange program, these factors have not been sufficient to increase the students' sense of purpose in life. This is in line with the research of Awang et al., (2014), which states that support, attention, and assistance from lecturers and the campus have not been able to strengthen the purpose of life of students who participate in the exchange program.

## CONCLUSION

A high level of psychological well-being is possessed by 58.97% of students who participated in the student exchange program. These findings indicate that exchange program students have high intrinsic motivation, are able to interact with new environments, accept challenges in life, have a positive attitude towards themselves and others, are able to make their own decisions, are independent, and develop their potential so that they can achieve their desired goals. Based on gender, in general, compared to male students, female students have a higher level of psychological well-being. The high level of psychological well-being is especially in the self-acceptance dimension, followed by personal growth, environmental mastery, autonomy, and purpose in life, and the lowest level of psychological well-being is in the positive relations dimension.

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