Critical perspectives

The impacts of self-efficacy on academic performance: An investigation of domestic and international undergraduate students in hospitality and tourism

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ABSTRACT

The substantial development of the tourism industry in Asia has resulted in growing international demand for tourism and hospitality higher education in Australia. Using a pre-and-post study design, the results indicate that after a semester of teaching and learning, the improvement in self-efficacy was only evidenced among high performing students. While self-efficacy was significant in predicting the performance of domestic students, this positive relationship was not found among international students. The results of this study bridge the knowledge gap identified in the literature and highlight a need for further understanding international students in English-based tourism and hospitality education.

1. Introduction

The Asia Pacific region has a population of more than two billion people and is home to several important economies, such as Japan, China, and South Korea. At present, Asia has significantly more outbound tourists than any other emerging region (Cohen & Cohen, 2015). As a major employer on the continent, the tourism industry offers economic stability as well as a wide variety of jobs. However, as the industry continues to expand and develop, the lack of well-trained researchers and skilled industry managers is becoming a major concern. In particular, developing countries in Asia have a growing need for industry managers who meet international standards. Consequently, given their proximity to Asia, Western countries like Australia and New Zealand are facing an increase in the demand by Asian students for quality tourism and hospitality higher education (Hobson, 2008).

East Asia has been the largest buyer of English-based courses (World Tourism Organisation, 2008). Young Asians' desire to learn English-based courses entails the intersection of two major factors. One factor is the appeal of an association with the "imagined West," believed to enable one to become more cosmopolitan and often representing high living standards and trendy lifestyles in contemporary Asia (Bui, Wilkins, & Lee, 2013; Kwek & Lee, 2013). The other factor is the relatively poor English education at home (Yoshino, 2002). Therefore, an increasing number of international students have enrolled in English-based institutions in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia.

The rapid growth of international student enrolment in these English-speaking universities has generated the need to better understand cognitive factors that influence students' learning behaviours. Arriving from Asian countries such Mainland China, South

Korea, and Hong Kong, these students have received a relatively poor English education at home and lack preparation for encountering the culture of Western countries. As a result, they face numerous challenges in coping not only with their new living environment but also with a culturally diverse learning environment (Barron, 2002; Kember, 2000; Niles, 1995; Ramsay, Barker, & Jones, 1999; Rynne, Kwek, & Bui, 2012). Adjusting to this new life can be difficult and stressful and can require these students to become more independent and self-regulated (Bryde & Milburn, 1990). With English as their second language, these students experience English language proficiency issues that have been widely identified as problematic, undermining their efforts to achieve better academic performance (Briguglio & Smith, 2012; Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). Research suggests that possessing confidence in one's own ability strongly influences success in negotiating this transition and may lead to positive academic outcomes and performance (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001).

As an emerging area of study, research on Asian students studying tourism and hospitality in Australia is still relatively limited in scope, with previous investigations focusing mainly on topics such as learning approaches (Biggs, 1996; Smith, Miller, & Crassini, 1998), the academic adjustment process (Ramsay et al., 1999), and common misconceptions about these students (Chalmers & Volet, 1997, 1992; Samuelowicz, 1987). More general research shows that students with high self-efficacy are better equipped to successfully complete their education (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001; Lane & Lane, 2001). Conversely, students with low self-efficacy appear to face a higher likelihood of academic failure and tend to perceive learning tasks as more difficult and daunting than they actually are. Notably, Bandura (1997, 2006) argues that self-efficacy measures should be specific to the context where they are to be used and be able to reveal the factors required to deliver that performance. Given specific context and differences in the process of adjustment of Asian students in English-speaking education system, attention should be focused on the question of how do self-beliefs of international students (especially from Asia) influence their academic performance.

In consideration of the large increase in international enrolments from Asia, this paper empirically examines how self-efficacy of international students in Australia affects their academic performance in comparison with domestic students. While previous studies in educational settings have investigated the effect of self-efficacy on academic achievement among primary, secondary, and tertiary students in general (Devonport & Lane, 2006; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; van Dinther, Dochy, & Segers, 2011; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005), few studies have focused on first-year international undergraduate students in tourism and hospitality higher education degree programs, when adjustment to the new academic environment and outcome expectations are among the most difficult tasks to overcome (Chemers et al., 2001; Kwek, Bui, Rynne, & So, 2013; Lane, Hall, & Lane, 2002). Whilst students differ in the areas in which they cultivate their efficacy and in the levels to which they develop it (Bandura, 2006) over the course of tertiary education, contingence of self-efficacy to specific context warrants further investigation.

The current study extends previous research regarding differences between domestic and international students in academic performance. A recent investigation predicted differences between domestic and Asian tourism and hospitality students in types or approaches to academic motivation (Rynne, Kwek, & Bui, 2012), but did not find the expected relationship between academic motivation and academic performance (i.e., when a student is highly motivated, he/she is expected to perform well academically). Another study provided important insights into the relationships between self-esteem, resilience, and academic performance of both domestic and international students in Australia, extending current knowledge of the role of these two important psychological factors in determining the academic performance of first-year tourism and hospitality students (Kwek et al., 2013). To better understand the unexpected outcomes of attempts to explain academic performance among first-year undergraduate students, this study utilised the Self-efficacy Towards Statistics Questionnaires (STSQ) developed by Lane et al. (2002). Bandura (2006), however, contends "there is no all-purpose measure of self-efficacy. The "one measure fits all" approach usually has limited explanatory and predictive value because most of the items in an all-purpose test may have little or no relevance to the domain of functioning" (p. 307). Therefore, beyond testing the STSQ in a new context of tertiary education in Australia, the current study also explores the scales in a research methods course that included both qualitative and quantitative analysis, a different task from original efficacy towards statistics of STSQ specified by Lane et al. (2002).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews prior literature on the concept of self-efficacy and particularly its influence on academic performance. The subsequent section describes the research method adopted in this study. The ensuing two sections present the results and a discussion of the findings, and the final section offers concluding thoughts.

2. Literature review

Self-efficacy is a significant variable in the thought-processing capability of individuals. Described as the "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3), self-efficacy is a form of self-referent thinking with which people evaluate and regulate their own experiences, thoughts, and behaviour. In turn, this self-belief influences how people behave and make decisions, as well as the level of effort they expend on the task (Bandura, 1977; van Dinther et al., 2011; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992).

Self-efficacy affects people's choice of activities and behavioural settings (Bandura & Adams, 1977). Empirical tests have confirmed that different treatment approaches alter expectations of personal efficacy, and the more dependable the source of efficacy information, the greater the changes in self-efficacy (Bandura, Adams, & Beyer, 1977). Repeated observation of successful performances increased by a substantial amount the level (44%) and strength (38%) of self-efficacy, which in turn was accompanied by similar large increments in performance (35%) (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy proved to be a superior predictor of the amount of behavioural improvement.

Self-efficacy is of particular importance in an academic setting. Academic self-efficacy has been defined as the "personal judgments of one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated types of educational performances"