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# **A STUDY ON THE MENTAL WELL-BEING OF NEPALESE SOCIAL SERVICES STUDENTS IN FINLAND**

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## ABSTRACT

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A study on the mental well-being of Nepalese Social Services Students in Finland

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This thesis is a study of mental wellbeing experience of Nepalese social services students in Finland from a sheer subjective perspective. The study deals with the experiences shared by the students that what factors played a significant role to affect their mental wellbeing and how they deal with the challenges they face as a student in order to continue their lives smoothly in a foreign land.

This qualitative research study used semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection where five Nepalese students participated to share and reflect on their mental wellbeing experiences. The interviews were recorded, transcribed into English version as the interviews were conducted in Nepali language and analysed using thematic analysis.

The findings of the study revealed that the factors that affected the Nepalese students' mental wellbeing were language barrier and discrimination, finances, learning pedagogy, longing for home, cultural differences and fear of the future. The experiences of the students unveiled that they astutely employed coping strategies such as self-care techniques, communication with friends, family and seeking help, and religion and spirituality to manage their stresses in life. Despite various factors that affected the students' mental wellbeing, they have been able to lead their everyday lives with hope, positivity and optimism in a foreign country, which is a positive sign for other international students. Overall, this study has provided an insight into the life of Nepalese students, their issues and their understanding of mental wellbeing and mechanism to cope with the problems.

**Keywords:** Mental wellbeing, international students, subjective wellbeing, coping mechanisms, Nepalese students.



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## 1 INTRODUCTION

As the present World is considered to be a global village due to the presence of new inventions, technology and internet, people from all around the world with different background, race, religion, ethnicity, culture and nationality encounter for different purposes. One of the significant purposes is to pursue new academic ambitions and explore a new horizon in life. It is argued that one of the apparent inspirations of travelling abroad is a curiosity for life somewhere else. Basically, every individual is in quest of happiness in life and for procuring that we should identify ourselves with deeper purposes in life (Maninen 2019, 55). Perhaps it will not be paradise, but excitingly different it shall be. Yet, being prepared to face differences is not the same as being ready to cope with the actual differences encountered – many of which may be totally unexpected (Besamusca 2011, 8).

Our thesis explores the mental well-being of the international students, specifically, Nepalese students who are studying Social Services in Finland who aspire to become future professionals in Social Service sector. The international students might have issues when coming to the new country, experiencing a new culture, new learning pedagogy and most likely to have financial and social problems (Davey 2008). Hence, it is important to study the factors that affect their mental well-being and the coping mechanism they incorporate from their perspective.

The purpose of the study is to reveal the mental well-being of the Nepalese students who are studying Social Services in Finland. Due to the cultural differences, there may arise problems and challenges to overcome in a foreign land. However, day in day out many foreign students are leaving their home country to accomplish international degrees. In this context, it is interesting to know how the students carry out their studies and survival in relation to their subjective wellbeing. The study also attempts to examine the aspects that help to strengthen their mental wellbeing and the aspects that obstruct. The research examines the challenges faced by the students and their coping strategies to maintain their subjective wellbeing. In general, we aim at giving information on mental well-being experience of international students in Finland. To explore and reveal the mental wellbeing

experiences of the Nepalese social service students in Finland, the following research questions were formulated.

1. What are the factors affecting the mental wellbeing of Nepalese students in Finland?
2. What coping mechanisms do they use in difficult situations in their daily lives?

The research questions identify the objectives the study addresses. These questions led a foundation throughout the research process and guided the research methodology, data collection and data analysis.

The study stresses the existing problems and facilitates the discussions for the possible measures that could be taken into consideration to address the problems. The study would be beneficial to international students or students who come to study in Finland, specifically from the developing countries. The study intends to help students to know about the challenges they face while studying abroad and help them prepare better for challenges. The study will suggest coping strategies and steps to be taken in different situations of life in a foreign land. Similarly, the research will also be useful to the concerned bodies to work towards more flexible plans and policies can create better opportunities for foreign students. Limited researches have been conducted on international students and our study may be different and new in a sense that no research has been done about Nepalese students in Finland. Furthermore, the study will generate suggestions for such subjects in future research.



## 2 BACKGROUND AND WORK-LIFE PARTNER

In this chapter, the context for this research study is briefly discussed and the introduction and the role of the work-life partner are explored. Furthermore, the chapter includes the recent international students' statistics in Finland, the reason behind choosing Finland as a study destination, a brief background of Nepalese students and the relevance of the topic to social service.

### 2.1 Background of the study

Immigration in Finland for study purpose has granted an opportunity for international students to get quality education but at the same time, immigrants, in general, are facing complex cultural problems as they try to settle in an unfamiliar environment (D'Souza et al. 2016, 908). For many international students, Finland has become an attraction for study and work as Finland is considered as one of the internationally well recognized to give high-quality education. The universities of applied sciences provide more practice-oriented than that offered by universities (Info Finland 2020). This might be the reason behind the growing number of international students every year despite the education is now subject to tuition fees. Social service is one of the popular and feasible courses in university of applied sciences (UAS) in Finland which is taught in English as well as in Finnish. The course has been able to attract people from all over the globe creating a cosmopolitan atmosphere in the classroom.

Above all Nepal is a very small landlocked country in South Asia which is categorized as Third World country. Third world country is defined as the nation with high poverty rates, economic instability, and lack of basic human resources compared to the rest of the world (World population Review 2020.). The experience of students who comes from within Europe might obviously have different experiences from those who come from Asia, and the like. It might be because of cultural differences. The measures of life satisfaction are often culturally biased. (Suh et al. 2004.). Thus, it is interesting to study the experiences of the students who come from a country like Nepal. Besides this, the participants we choose will be from social service students that might help to attain different insight for our study. Although there are many kinds of research carried out on international students

and their mental wellbeing, there are very few researches conducted on international students in Finland in relation to their mental well-being. Moreover, research about different issues on Nepalese students looks negligible. The study might be beneficial to international students or students who come to study in Finland. The study further intends to help students to know about the challenges they face while studying abroad and help them prepare better for challenges. The study will suggest coping strategies and steps to be taken in different situations of life in the host country. Similarly, the research will also be useful to the concerned bodies to work towards more flexible plans and policies to create better opportunities for international students.

Social service work is challenging in many ways as the professionals in the field deal with the complex needs of different individuals with different social, cultural, economic, religious, and ethnic background (Satka et al., 2016; Salo et al., 2016) and with the political and societal requirement that keep on changing (Health and social services reform, 2017). In this context, our study might be useful for professionals in the social service field since it will provide useful information about the mental wellbeing of Nepalese students who are studying social service in Finland. Meanwhile, the students themselves are the future professionals in social service sectors. Thus, it is also important to study their experience in relation to the learning environment and practices in a social service degree program. Moreover, studying their mental wellbeing experiences from a subjective perspective would add one more brick to the academic field of social services and be helpful to the new researchers.

## 2.2 Work-life partner

Our work-life partner is the non-resident Nepali Association, Finland (NRNA FINLAND). The office is in Helsinki. The association was formally registered in Finland in February 2009. The organization aims to contribute the economic, social, and cultural development of Nepal. The NRNA community also helps to promote the wellbeing of the Nepalese population residing in Finland. Furthermore, the purpose of the organization is to promote cultural, academic, and social interaction between the Finns and Nepalese people as well as friendly and confidential relations between Finland and Nepal. The association also plays a bigger role to unite Nepalese people living in Finland and help them

adapt to the Finnish society. The NRNA is an active organization in Finland that motivates the Nepalese community by organizing cultural events, discussions, meetings, celebrations, displays and other educational events. Apart from the social and cultural activities, it engages in research and advisory activities.

NRNA was interested in our thesis as it studies the mental wellbeing of the Nepalese students and had supported us throughout the thesis process. The association provided mentorship and guardianship in our research study. It has provided much-needed context, relevance, and connection to the field. After our collaboration with the NRNA, our horizon for participants searches expanded. The organization monitored our research process closely and helped us forming interview questions as well. They gave feedback on the result of our research. They will use our thesis for enhancing their services to Nepalese students and organize events to strengthen their mental wellbeing based on our findings. Our collaboration with NRNA has given meaning and purpose for our research study and a professional point of view.

### 3 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THE KEY CONCEPTS

In this chapter, relative theories, literature, the key concepts as well as the previous studies done in the topic will be discussed. This section provides contextual background information to better understand our research study.

#### 3.1 Mental well-being

According to the World Health Organization (WHO 2015), mental health is a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. When we care about ourselves, love ourselves, not hate ourselves, look after our physical health like, eat well, sleep enough, exercise and enjoy ourselves and then feel responsible to our families, community and the society then, it is very obvious that our mental well-being is well balanced and sound. Mental well-being is an important factor in human being. It is equally important for the students to have an environment for sound mental well-being. Our research study intends to explore the subjective well-being of the Nepalese student from their perspective and highlight the issues that impact and affect their mental well-being.

Feeling low or despondent is natural especially when we bid farewell to one phase of life and confront the task of finding new paths in life. People at some point in their lives ask themselves some questions, such as: What is the purpose of my life? What shall I concentrate on? How relevant I am in doing things that I do? What is the worst thing that can happen? Life stages and paths which may trigger despondency can include the situation like leaving the parental home, choice of partner, reaching the mid-years (30–40 years old), menopause, unemployment, retirement etc. (Wasserman 2011, 4). While studying mental wellbeing of foreign students, it is also important to learn about the possible factors that might impact on the mental wellbeing. The difficulties in the students' life and the situations will be studied during this research study.

The international students go through various transformations when they come to a new country. The adjustment stress in the foreign environment manifests itself in a variety of symptoms (Thomas and Althen 1989). According to Mori (2000, 139), because psychological disturbances in some cultures are associated with immoral thoughts (Flaskerud 1986), such disturbances can be severely stigmatized (Aubrey 1991). According to Altinyelken (2019, 187), along with the interpersonal problems, international students are exposed to the financial and academic challenges, that enhance additional stress and anxiety. The language barrier emerges as one of the most significant problems. It has negative consequences, as it is closely related to students' academic performances and overall integration (Arthur 2017; Heng 2018). Altinyelken (2019, 187) further says that compared to domestic students, international students experience more anxiety regarding making decisions about their future. This decision-making process not only involves the future but also concerns their sense of identity, cultural values, and beliefs (Jiang 2017). In addition to these problems, international students encounter with discrimination that is a threat to their emotional well-being (Brown and Jones 2013). Mental disturbances in some cultures are associated with immoral thoughts and actions (Flaskerud 1986), such disturbances can be highly stigmatized (Aubrey 1991). On the other hand, Disclosure of personal problems to the counsellors and seeking help in such cultures may be regarded as highly disgraceful and considered as a clear sign of immaturity and weaknesses (Uba 1994). This can lead to diverse symptoms such as depression, frustration, isolation as well as physiological conditions (Mori 2000).

Altinyelken (2019,188), referring to Keyes, Shmotkin and Ryff (2002), has concluded that mental well-being is crucial to students' quality of life, happiness, personal growth, self-esteem, self-acceptance, positive relationships and autonomy, therefore our study is relevant and will be helpful to international students in general regarding the subject of mental being. Mental well-being is a broad topic. We intend to focus on the subjective well-being of the Nepalese students from their own experiences and perspectives. The students are encouraged to be independent and no prejudice or any ideas are imposed on them. The study will be completely done on their terms and their perception regarding their mental wellbeing. Mental wellbeing does not mean people are always happy or unaffected by their experiences. We intend to study how students feel and how well they are coping with daily life. Our research takes into account mental well-being as "subjective".

### 3.2 International students

We can find many definitions of international students by many organizations, scholars and think tanks. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has defined international students as “students who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purposes of education”. There were 20,237 students in 2017 and 20,362 in 2018 in Finland as international students. Even after Finland decided to introduce tuition fees in 2017, the actual drop in enrolment seems marginal from a high of 21,061 students in 2016/17 (Pie News 2019). According to Tilastokeskus (2017) most of the international students come from Vietnam, China, Russia, and Nepal. The total number of populations of International students in Finland in 2017 is 45,424. As the number of international students grows every year, it is important to have an ethnically sensitive and thorough study of this population (Li et al. 2014).

As soon as the international students step on the foreign land they start to face and experience many problems and difficulties in everyday lives. Davey (2008) in *The International Students’ Survival Guide: How to Get the Most from Studying at a UK University*, suggests the international students not to get surprised if they have initial difficulties in adjusting with the cultural values of the country. It can be quite stressful to leave their home and settle in a new country and environment. The climate, food, language, culture, and social traditions may at first, seem strange, confusing, and incompatible. This problem is common and is known as ‘culture shock’ (Davey 2008). This happens when the habits, lifestyle, and customs in a new country conflicts with the cultural values in the foreign students or foreigner (Davey 2008, 37).

One of the main important issues the students face is the language barrier which creates difficulty in adaptation (O'Reilly et al. 2010). If students want to have a successful career abroad, they must adjust rapidly and learn fast. It has been argued that several studies have found that international students who have higher language proficiency have done much better adjustment. (O’Reilly, Ryan and Hickey 2010.) According to O’Reilly et al. (2010) referring to (Abe and Zane 1990; Poyrazli and Lopez 2007) findings from several studies have proclaimed that international students experience more adjustment problems

than their domestic counterparts and have limited resources to deal with the problems they face.

Universities of applied sciences and traditional research universities provide social work-related education in Finland. In a Finnish context, a bachelor's degree in social services is an attractive educational choice. (Manninen 2019.) This might be also an impetus that international students are increasing every year in Finland. Bachelor's degree program in social services has been offered at universities of applied sciences in Finland for more than twenty years (Mäkinen et al. 2011). Yet research on Nepalese or international students who pursue this academic career appears to be rare. Taking about a bachelor's degree in social services, it takes three and a half years of full-time study and requires earning 210 credits. The social service program in UAS is implemented in collaboration with real-life working experiences. social services students take part in three practical education programs that last from four to twelve weeks, depending on a student's year of study. stress among international students can come from their working environment or practical training placements.

Another major challenge for international students concerns their academic performance abroad (Mak, et al. 1999). International students have also reported experiencing problems relating to differences in study techniques, test-taking, or classroom instruction (Poyrazli and Grahame, 2007). International students often report feeling pressure to do well when studying abroad. Immigration regulations limit international students' opportunities for employment due to which international students' monetary problems are difficult to resolve. (O'Reilly et al. 2010.) Similarly, several studies have found that international students often experience isolation since they report that they find difficult in making host national friends (Fritz et al., 2008; Zheng and Berry, 1991). While adjusting to life in university, international students also face the additional challenges of coping with sociocultural differences. For instances, students travelling abroad may find it difficult to adjust to a new food, adapt to a different climate or to understand the norms, values, and attitudes of host nationals. As a result, international students often feel very confused and depressed. Experiencing such difficulties and challenges can have significant consequences for the mental wellbeing of students. International students often aspire to high expectations and report psychological crises or social dysfunctions when their expectations are not met (Leong and Chou 1996).

Many research and anecdotal evidence from international students supports the view that successful coping strategies result in positive adaptation, the reduction of psychological distress, a sense of psychological or emotional wellbeing, life satisfaction and better academic performance (Grey 2002; Struthers et al. 2000). Hence, based on this idea and considering it to be significant in the context of international social service students we posed research question regarding coping strategies to explore the coping mechanism applied by Nepalese social service students which are not carried out by other researches.

### 3.3 Coping mechanisms

The coping mechanism is the constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/ or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, 141). Lazarus (1991), proposes the most prominent conceptual model of coping, that used logical grounds to distinguish between problem-focused coping and emotional focused coping. Problem-focused coping addresses the problem and emotional focused problem attempts to manage the emotional reactions to the stress (Gretchen M. Reevy and Erica Frydenberg 2011, 5). Our study explores how Nepalese students cope with their problems and stresses that affect their mental well-being. College students are vulnerable to stress and poor coping habits (Jennings et. al. 2018, 248). When people face stress, they typically use some form of coping mechanism to combat and lower their stress, but the successful coping involves an accurate understanding of the level of control over the stressor as well as selecting an appropriate coping mechanism to handle the stressor (Coiro, Bettis and Compas 2017). Therefore, it is important that college students not only are selecting the appropriate coping mechanisms to use but that they are also assessing their stress and ability to handle it on their own. Coiro et al. (2017, 177) described that the coping mechanisms “have been identified as a key mechanism linking perceived stress and stressful life events to the development of mental health problems”. Thus, a coping mechanism among the students affects their mental wellbeing. Students who have high levels of psychological stress were more likely to cope negatively with the use of tobacco, physical inactivity, and poor diet, including an increase in the consumption of convenience foods (Deasy et al. 2015, 82).



Hence, it is important to study the coping mechanisms of the Nepalese students with regard to their mental well-being in our study.

There are various ways an individual manages the stress. Coping responses such as thoughts, feelings and actions that can be used by an individual are unlimited. At the most basic level, coping responses have been divided into two fundamental aspects, those which involve approaching the problem, being attentive, and seeking a solution, and those which involve avoiding the problem and withdrawing (Gretchen M. Reevy and Erica Frydenberg 2011, 4-5). Whereas Greenglass et. al. (1999) has mentioned different form of coping strategies. They are reactive, reflective, preventive, problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidance coping and religious coping mechanisms. The reactive coping is the initiative to face a past or present stress factor to accept or compensate the pain or the loss by compensating loss, wound soothing, goal adjustment, identification of the benefits and the search for the meaning. For reactive coping, one needs resilience, optimistic beliefs, or the capacity to overcome obstacles. Reflective coping means that the person still deals with a possible future stressful situation by replicating and contemplating multiple behavioural alternatives and visualizing their effectiveness. This process includes activities like brainstorming, hypothetical action planning, analysing problems, and resources. Preventive coping is used to face potential stressors that are likely to be encountered by anticipation and preparation before the stressors develop fully. The anticipated pain or stress may come from prior knowledge of the issue of anticipation. Problem-focused coping involves using different strategies to solve the problem to deal with it. And emotion-focused coping involves expressing emotions while dealing with the problem. The person might also appeal to others for seeking emotional support. Avoidance coping is staying away from the reach of the potential stressors. And finally, religious coping means dealing with the stress in the form of belief that may also involve the rituals to access the coping ability. Practice such as laughter can be used to concentrate on the funny aspects of stress and pain. (Greenglass, Schwarzer, Jakubiec, Fiskensbaum, and Taubert 1999). This shows there are various coping methods that people use to encounter the stresses and pains in life. Our study's primary focus will be to study the Nepalese students coping methods regarding their mental well-being issues in life.

Mukaka and Kosgey (2018, 2) refer to (Ward, Bochner and Furnham 2001) that there are many complex challenges facing students travelling to other countries to undertake

university or other educational courses, particularly if their home country culture is strikingly different from the host country culture and therefore, it is not surprising that the physical and mental well-being of students, as well as their academic performance, can be affected by these adjustment challenges. Hence, it is important to study what coping mechanisms students use to encounter the mental-well beings issues they face in their daily life. Mukaka and Kosgey (2018, 2) further refer to (Burger 2000) that the coping mechanisms depend upon the personality, the situation in the surroundings, one's own personal preferences and the mental capacity of an individual. Therefore, our study intends to achieve knowledge on how each student reacts to various situations in their life in Finland and focus on their possible expectations from the school and authorities.

### 3.4 Subjective well-being

As our thesis studies the mental wellbeing experience of the Nepalese social service students from their perspective, it is important to discuss on subjective wellbeing (SWB). The field of subjective well-being (SWB) involves the scientific analysis of how people evaluate the life moments they already lived and the recent moment they are experiencing. These evaluations embrace people's emotional reactions to different incidents, their moods, and judgments they form about their life satisfaction, fulfilment, and satisfaction with life events such as marriage, academic career, and work. (Diener, et al. 2003.) Thus, SWB comprises the study of what general people might call happiness or satisfaction they find in their lives. Furthermore, Diener et al., (2009) put an idea that SBW includes positive and negative evaluations regarding work and life satisfaction and affective reactions to life events, such as joy and sadness. SWB reflects an overall evaluation of the quality of a person's life from her or his own perspective (Diener, E., et al 2018). And, therefore, the idea of SWB suits best to our research to describe the mental wellbeing of the international students.

SWB incorporates three major components which are emotional reactions to events including positive affect and negative affect, cognitive evaluation of fulfilment and life satisfaction and in the meantime, it offers a way of assessing the results of stress on a student's functioning beyond illness outcomes and offers a measure equal to happiness (Diener and Lucas 2000). It is essential to understand the wellbeing of people in any

society that how people feel and think about their own lives that give importance not just to the thoughts and views of experts or leaders, but to all people in the society (Diener, et al. 2003). So, it encourages and motivates a community or a society to become more inclusive giving equal importance to all the people around. SWB is established by nice effect, undesirable effect and life satisfaction choices and subjective well-being's high relying on the situation that the individual's nice effect is magnified than his/her undesirable effect and thus his/her cognitive opinion about his/her life is positive (Tuzgöl Dost 2005b). Similarly, Research on psychopathology has found that positive attributes within individuals may help to counter the effects of adversity (Tuzgöl 2005b).

Generally, research on mental well-being is based on two main perspectives; objective and subjective perspective (Obi et al. 2018). According to the Psychiatric Research Unit in Denmark (BECH), objective perspective involves clinical analysis and pharmacotherapy in ensuring mental well-being. On the other hand, the subjective perspective considers mental well-being to be an individual ideology which is sheer personal and influenced by a wide variety of factors. (BECH 2012.) Hence, the individual meaning of mental well-being in our daily lives is studied under subjective mental wellbeing. Our study considers mental wellbeing as "subjective" with an aim to describe the Nepalese social service students' mental wellbeing from their own perspective aiming to draw a more precise dimension on mental wellbeing.

Carver and Scheier (2001) discuss optimism theory in relation to dispositional optimism as a generalized positive outcome expectancy. Individuals who have positive expectations about future conduct are believed to get good outcomes in future and focus on goal-oriented efforts (Carver and Scheier 2001). There is another theory like optimism known as hope theory which is equally concerned with an individual's perceived capability to grow a pathway to attain a goal (Snyder and Lopez 2005). Therefore, Students with high hope are motivated, persistent, and focused on reaching goals which contribute to the mental wellbeing of the students. Chang (1998) found students with high hope have greater problem-solving abilities for coping with stress and challenges. Research has shown that hope is positively associated with SWB particularly with life satisfaction (Park, Peterson, and Seligman 2004). Optimism was predictive of higher academic success (Yates 2002) and was related to greater SWB (Chang and Sanna 2001). The ideas are all based on the way how one thinks of his or her life to bring about success and satisfaction in life.

These above-stated ideas make a baseline to study the experience of the Nepalese social service students' experience in relation to their mental well-being from their own perspective and help to figure out the coping mechanisms they apply during their difficult situation and challenges from their individual level as mental well-being is subjective i.e., people experience and evaluate their lives individually.

### 3.5 Previous studies on related topic

In this part, we have briefly discussed the similar studies done in the past related to our thesis topic. There was an Australian study on Loneliness and international students by Erlenawati et al. (2008). The study revealed that international students experience both personal loneliness because of the loss of contact with families and social loneliness because of the loss of networks. Both forms of loneliness are at times worsened by their experiences in institutional sites. The study discussed the coping mechanisms that students use and identified a third kind of loneliness experienced by international students, cultural loneliness, triggered by the absence of the preferred cultural and/or linguistic environment. Rahman (2018) carried out a study that examined the relationship between sociocultural adjustment and psychological well-being of the international students in Thai universities which basically focused on several variables that may have effects on the adjustment process of the international university students in Bangkok, Thailand.

Another research which was done in metropolitan university in Melbourne, Australia covered different ways of adapting, based on patterns of well-being in their study (Russel, et al. 2009). Kipkoech studied international students taking courses of Social Service and Nursing, intended in finding out how they experienced their everyday life in a new culture (Kipkoech 2016). Gunawardena & Wilson (2012) worked within the framework of cultural sensitivity that explains the experience of the international students from the Indian subcontinent who come to Australia for academic growth. And Montgomery did research on seven international students' experience from six different nationalities: Nepalese, Chinese, Indian, Dutch, Indonesian and Italian in a UK university where the primary focus of the study was at the social networks of the international students and the

relationship international students have with their social and learning environment (Montgomery 2010).

Another study on the prevalence of mental health needs in international graduates, their knowledge of mental health services, and their use of on-campus and off-campus counselling services was carried out in the United States. All the registered graduate students in spring 2004 were sent an email invitation to take part in the web survey. Of the 3,121 completed surveys, 551 completed surveys were from international graduate students. This large scale of the study found out that there was an unmet mental health need amongst international graduate students. The study concluded that special mental health outreach efforts should be directed at international graduate students, with particular attention on the relationship between students and their advisors and on adequate financial support for students. (Dr Hyun, et al. 2007). However, the study does not focus on the coping mechanisms that the students use. Our study focuses on the Nepalese students' mental well-being as very few pieces of research has been done on the topic.

Another qualitative research study was done on the mental wellbeing experiences of International nursing students in their bachelor's degree thesis, in Lahti University of Applied Sciences. The study concludes that the students are threatened by insufficient resources to deal with school-related stress, nature of school curriculum, insufficient social support, issues with acculturation as well as individual psychological disturbances present in the personal life of the student. (Obi, et al. 2018) And there was a case study conducted in Finland in 2019 on Social Services Students' Education and Purposes in Life. The study examined the students' life purposes and their experiences of purpose in life. The findings showed that the most important life goals for the students were close relationships and hedonistic goals, such as leading an exciting life (Manninen 2019).

Most of the above studies focused on cultural sensitivity, purpose in life, social networking, socio-cultural adjustment, loneliness, and patterns. However, these studies do not specifically study the coping mechanisms that the students used to confront the mental well-being issues. Most of the above researches focused on one problem regarding the mental well-being but our study intends to not only focus on one issue but study the subjective wellbeing of the Nepalese students and the coping mechanism they use from their perspective. Above studies suggest that there are various issues that affect the mental

well-being of international students and hence, our study aims to explore the issues from the perspective of Nepalese students studying social services in Finland.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research method was applied in the study. Qualitative research is referred to as any type of research where findings are not measured through statistical procedure or other means of quantifications as it deals with the people's life experience, feelings, emotions, behaviours, cultural phenomena, social movements, etc. (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The researcher makes use of the shared thoughts, feelings, stories and experiences by Nepalese social service students to understand and explore the situation of international students in general.

According to Denzin and Lincoln's (2005), qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012, 5)

Our study aims to research the mental well-being of students and their coping mechanism from their perspectives. The subject such as mental wellbeing and coping mechanisms are comprised of human emotions, experiences, attitude and behaviour, expectations and all about the quality of life that are very subjective in nature. The response of the participants is interpretive in nature. These human emotions cannot be quantified or measured in numbers. Thus, qualitative research is the best for our research study.

### 4.1 Procedure

Snowball sampling technique was employed to approach the participants. Although the work-life partner did not help us find the participants, our horizon got expanded by meeting them. We came to know more Nepalese students through NRNA. We intended to include six participants in the beginning but later limited to five as it was difficult to find

Nepalese students who are studying social service. The two participants were female, and the rest were male. The researcher approached one participant and requested if he/she knew more participants from their study circle or Nepalese friends. Three participants were contacted via e-mail and two via Facebook. The interview questions were forwarded prior to the interview day through email and Facebook so that they could familiarize themselves with the topic and issues of the interview. Among the five participants, three of them were interviewed via phone and the rest in the park. The interviews were carried out on the first and second week of July 2020. Both the researchers were present in all the interviews. The approximate time for each of the interview was more than an hour. All the interviews were audio-recorded along with some significant notes.

#### 4.2 Data collection

The semi-structured interview was used as a data collection method. The total number of Nepalese students were five including male and female. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed and interpreted using thematic analysis. Semi-structured interviews often contain open-ended questions (Bernard 1988) and the discussions may digress from the interview guide, it is good to tape-record interviews and later transcribed for analysis. There is always a guide or instruction for a semi-structured interview so that it ties the interviewee and interviewer around the subject matter or the topic. The semi-structured interview guide provides a clear set of instructions for interviewers and can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data (Bernard 1988, 212). We used a semi-structured interview because questions could be prepared prior to the interview. It helped the interviewer to be fully ready and the interviewer could work smoothly during the interview. Beside this, it allowed participants the freedom to convey their opinion in their own words that help to draw the subjective wellbeing from the students' perspective. The advantage of this kind of technique is that the researcher can interview either in person or over the telephone or using virtual platforms which is more relevant during this pandemic situation. On top of that, no other methods could help to gather first-hand information in the research process than interview method. Similarly, it granted the us a great opportunity to plunge into the issues that dealt with mental wellbeing and gave a room for discussion yielding better outputs.



### 4.3 Participants

Five Nepalese Social Service students living in Finland participated in the study. Three were male and two were female. Two male participants live alone where the rest of the three live with their families. The researchers used code names such as N1, N2, N3, N4 and N5 instead of the real names as per the preferences of the participants. The descriptions of the participants are presented in a table below:

Table 1: Descriptions of the participants.

Participants	Gender	Study year	Marital status
N1	Female	Third	Married
N2	Female	Final	Married
N3	Male	Third	Married
N4	Male	Second	Single
N5	Male	Second	Single

### 4.4 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data that we got from the semi-structured interviews. In our qualitative research, textual data were generated from the in-depth interviews with the Nepalese student. The data were transcribed from audio recordings and textual forms. “Thematic analysis requires more involvement and interpretation from the researcher. The thematic analysis moves beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes. Thematic analysis is the most useful in capturing the complexities of meaning within a textual data set. It is also the most used method of analysis in qualitative research” (Guest, MacQueen and Name 2012, 10-11). Themes provide a framework for organizing and reporting the researcher’s analytic observations. TA can be used to study patterns within and across data in relation to participants’ lived experience, views and perspectives, and behaviour and practices and helpful for experimental research which

seeks to understand what participants think, feel, and do. (Clarke and Barun 2017). According to them, the analysis is carried out in six phases which are familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing the report. This analysis method provided us with the basic ground to underline the themes of the answers that we collected from the interviews.

Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis technique that allows the researcher to interpret the collected data by developing themes and principal categories to compress content into key ideas (Marshall and Rossman 1999). First, the data were organized and read multiple times in an interpretive manner to gain familiarity with and to understand the content better. During the readings, the important ideas or patterns were noted down with active listening and by focusing on shared experiences of the interviewees (Calikoglu 2018). In the second phase, codes are generated by identifying recurring patterns. Codes are “the most basic segment, or elements, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis 1998, 63). In general, reliability is of greater concern with thematic analysis than with word-based analyses as more interpretation goes into defining the codes as well as applying the codes to the transcribed group of text and this issue works very well when working in teams with multiple analysts. (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012, 10-11)

We were concerned with addressing our research questions and analysed data keeping the questions in mind. Thus, we used a theoretical thematic analysis. Theoretical thematic analysis views the data through theoretical lens so that the existing theoretical concepts inform coding and theme development (Smith 2015). We had presumed themes based on our research questions, existing literatures and theories. We read all the notes and transcriptions multiple times for a detailed understanding and the notes and the transcriptions were compared. After the comparison, more notes were taken to make the coding phase easier and retrieved the data that were relevant to the research questions. Then we examined and searched for emerging themes and patterns that were recurrent. After that, themes were created by amalgamating the codes which fitted to the very research questions. Then the themes were defined and notable quotes from the participants were drawn to justify the elements of the themes. Afterwards, the results are addressed each theme in turn. It is described how often the themes come up and what they mean, incorporating examples or excerpt from the data as evidence. Eventually, the conclusion is explained

with the pivotal takeaways and is shown how the analysis has dealt with the research question followed by a recommendation. This analysis method best suited for our research.

Braun and Clarke (2006,16-23) have divided the process of thematic analysis into six phases. We studied these six phases thoroughly and have incorporated them in the data analysis. The phases of thematic analysis which the researchers have undergone are presented in the table below.

Table 2: Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; 16-23).

Phases	Explanation of the process
Familiarising yourself with your data	This was the first phase of our data analysis. We read all the notes and transcriptions multiple times for a detailed understanding and the notes and the transcriptions were compared. After the comparison, more notes were taken to make the coding phase easier and retrieve the data that was relevant to the research questions.
Generating initial codes	In this phase, we produced and identified initial codes that appeared interesting across the data set. The answers that were of similar and specific characteristics, recurring and repetitive nature from the data set were listed. The initial generation of codes was guided by research questions, existing theories and literatures and presumed themes. For instance, feeling neglected, not taken seriously at the placement place were some initial codes. Moreover, culture shock, homesickness were other initial codes that fitted to our research questions and represented our themes.

Searching for themes	In this phase, we examined the initially generated codes and some of them clearly fitted together into a theme. For example, the initial codes not taken seriously at the placement place and feeling neglected represented a theme of discrimination. Similarly, the codes culture shock, homesickness represented the theme like the cultural difference. We Collected and sorted different codes into possible themes.
Reviewing themes	During this phase, we reviewed, modified, and developed the preliminary themes that we identified in phase three. We gathered together all the data that was relevant to each theme that justified our research questions. We read the data associated with each theme and considered if the data really made sense.
Defining and naming themes	In this phase, we identified the essence of what each theme is about and determining what expect of data each theme captures and organizing them into a coherent and an internally consistent account with accompanying narrative, generating clear names and definitions for each theme.
Producing the report	In this phase, we carried the final analysis and the write up of the report that provides a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive, and an interesting account of the story the data tell by relating it to the research questions and literatures and thus, producing the full-fledged scholarly report of the analysis.

#### 4.5 Reliability and validity

As said by Moule and Goodman (2009), the representation of the participant's experience, view or belief in the research must be believed by the readers. Thus, it is important to maintain the reliability and validity of the study. In this research, the authors and the participants interviewed were of the same nationality. Hence, to be able to share the experiences in their own native language it was quite easy for them and seemed interested to share more information regarding the mental wellbeing issues. Since the researchers are also the Nepalese social service students, the researchers could understand and know the credibility of the data shared by the participants.

The participants are from the Nepalese community and this factor would have influenced our professionalism in carrying out the thesis work. For example, we might not have followed the ethical guidelines properly if we had taken close friends or someone we already knew, it would have influenced the entire essence of the data. Thus, to avoid bias and maintain professionalism, we chose the participants that we did not know already which helped to contribute to the genuine and realistic result.

Discussions with teachers and students, critical feedback from other students and teachers during thesis seminars and the supervisor's guidance on the theoretical background and its' practical implication helped us to a great extent to have good insight and knowledge into the subject matter of the research. Similarly, the librarian from the University also helped us find relevant and relative literature and research works which were very useful for us to have appropriate and good literature reviews. In addition to this the search engines like the university databases, google scholar and research gate added more reliability of our research work.

#### 4.6 Challenges and limitations

There were various challenges in our thesis process. The primary challenges for us were convincing the participants about the interview and confidentiality. The subject of mental well-being and the questions asked in the interviews were of very personal in nature. It was indeed a challenge to get accurate information. Another challenge was the COVID

19 situation because of which the students were hesitant to be involved in the research process in the beginning. Three participants gave an interview online and two were physically available during the interview. And, the other biggest challenge was to transcribe and translate the audio recordings as the interviews were carried out in Nepalese language. This process was very lengthy and time-consuming. As only five participants were interviewed, the results of the data might be very limited. This study does not give any concrete answers, but it tries to relate the findings to the broader field of social services work.

## 5 RESEARCH ETHICS

Ethics is a topic that covers questions relating to what kind of lives we should lead, what counts as a good society, what actions are right and wrong, what qualities of character we should develop and what responsibilities human have for each other and the ecosystem (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, Durham University 2012, 6). In the context of research ethics, it refers to a complex set of values, standards and institutional schemes that help constitute and regulate scientific activity. Research ethics is a codification of ethics of science in practice. In other words, it is based on the general ethics of science, just as general ethics is based on common-sense morality (National Committees for Research Activities in Norway 2006, 5). When conducting research human beings need to be granted autonomy (Israel and Hay 2006). Therefore, only the interested participants were selected for the interviews. Before carrying out research, researcher procured the free and informed consent of research participants (Koster, et al. 2019). Keeping this idea in mind, before interviews, the participants were explained briefly about the topic and the issues we were dealing with it, the purpose of the study and the role of the participants. Then, the participants were sent a consent form to sign in. The researchers approached the participants those who were not from their friend's circle which restricted the interview from getting manipulative. The researchers let them know that even after signing in the form, they have the right to agree/disagree or withdraw at any time if they change their mind. Confidentiality was taken into high consideration while using the names and information of the participants. The researchers used code names such as N1, N2, N3, N4 and N5 instead of the real names and would not do things that would humiliate participants. Similarly, the researchers avoided activities that caused psychological, emotional, physical or social harm to participants during the interviews and even throughout this thesis process and respecting the privacy of the participants and organizing interviews in their preferred time and place were also given utmost preference.

Due to the potential sensitivity of data and the possible impact of their disclosure, even in the condition of anonymized, no access to the raw data can be granted to any other person or institute other than the directly involved researchers and their appointed supervisors if applicable (Koster, et al. 2019). The researchers assured the participants that once the thesis is published, all interview forms, consent forms, and any information

containing personal data from the research participants will be destroyed. As the research has two researchers there were clear ethical guidelines between the two authors, and they are respecting each other's point of view, democratic practice, respecting each other's time and space and equal division of labour. If the equal division of labour was not incorporated, things could have been unfair amongst the researchers and the research process would not have moved forward. As we both authors are social service students and from Nepal, we had challenges not to have prejudices while analysing the data. We forced ourselves to have a neutral position so that we would bring the real experiences of the participants in the result. Our personal background and experiences did not have any impact and influence on our research process and analysis. Moreover, none of the participants was from our immediate social circle. This avoided any sort of pressure and influence on the participants to share their stories, experiences, and opinions.



## 6 RESULTS

In this chapter, the findings from the research are explained. Our research questions involve two main topics which are mental wellbeing and coping mechanism. The first part of the results is the factors affecting the participants' mental wellbeing and the second is a coping mechanism that is used by the participants to cope with their lives' situation as international students.

Before we dived into the main research questions the participants were asked what mental wellbeing for them is. This chapter defines the results following the framework of a thematic analysis of five semi-structured interviews. The main objective of the research was to identify the factors affecting the mental wellbeing of the Nepalese social service students and the coping mechanisms they employed to deal with it. Themes that conveyed the larger influence on the students' lives were coded and brought in the result after analysing the data. Thoughts and experience from research participants have been added to provide narrative accounts and to illustrate the themes that emerged from this study.

### 6.1 Understanding of mental well-being from participants' perspective

At the beginning of the interviews, the participants found it difficult to answer what mental wellbeing for them is. One of the participants expressed, "Mental well-being is such a broad and complicated term. I do not know which part I should focus (N1)". Another participant said, "I am not sure if I am comfortable talking about my personal issues here (N2)". We motivated them to reflect on their experiences. They were given some time to think about it. Later, they started to express their thoughts and experiences about mental wellbeing.

Each participant had their own way of defining their understandings of mental wellbeing. It revolved around coping with stress, thinking creatively and achieving personal growth, maintaining healthy living, seeking for help if necessary, having good relationships with family and friends, focusing on studies, taking care of one's health, eating and sleeping well. One of the participants said, "For me, mental wellbeing is being able to handle stress

and emotions, trying to stay happy and positive, taking care of one's health, eating and sleeping well, look out for help if necessary (N1)". Likewise, another participant said, "As I understand, mental wellbeing is about how do I cope with a different life situation. Every human being is different and their tackling skills with life situation may differ too (N2)". Another participant had focused on feelings like depression and anxiety regarding mental wellbeing as the participants said "When I think about mental health, I mostly think about the depression, anxiety, and stress. For me, my mental wellbeing revolves around my relationship with my friends and family and of course my studies (N5)". From the participants' definition, the presence or absence of depressive tendencies is mental wellbeing whereas for some participants coping with different life situation, having good relationships with friends and families, taking good care of one's health, studies are essential for mental wellbeing.

## 6.2 Factors affecting mental wellbeing of the Nepalese students

In this chapter, we explained the answers from the participants regarding the factors that affect their mental wellbeing. The most striking experiences of the participants are highlighted and illustrated below.

### 6.2.1 Language barrier and discrimination

Language barrier and discrimination have emerged as one of the main themes from the data. Majority of the participants felt language barrier as huge factor that influenced their mental wellbeing. And mostly because of the lack of sufficient Finnish language, the students faced discrimination in the workplaces, placement places and while receiving services such as social assistance and health services.

One of the participants stated, "Lack of Finnish language skills poses a big problem for foreign students or foreigners in Finland. It is difficult to communicate with people, receive services, for example, KELA or health services (N2)". Some participants highlighted that even the English language posed an immense challenge to them. The way English was spoken in their home country and the way it is spoken in Finland is different

because of the accents and cultural differences. That makes them hard to sometimes catch up with it in school and it leads to stress and shyness while communicating with the teachers and fellow students as one of the participants stressed “Especially in the placement place I have faced such a hard time not knowing the language. Everybody tends to speak Finnish and you feel left out and isolated. Even English spoken by teachers and students from different countries are hard to follow. I find awkward and hesitant to speak to some of my classmates whose English I cannot follow nor he or she follows mine (N3)”. The students faced difficulties during their study placements because of the language barrier and hence they felt regrets of not utilizing the opportunity to enhance their learnings and building connections.

All the participants responded that they have faced discrimination in Finland one way or the other. Most of the discrimination took place outside of school. One of the participants said, “I felt discriminated and left alone especially during my study placement. Because I am a foreigner and do not speak the language, I was never taken seriously in the placement (N5)”. Another participant said “I am a cleaner in one shopping centre. When I would go to my workplace, I would say *Moi* to the customers I met and most of them seldom replied. Even fellow workers in the mall would ignore me, I feel discriminated (N4)”. The students felt discrimination or the racists behaviours in the workplaces, placement places and while accessing the bureaucratic services. They said these issues have a long-term effect on their mental well-being and are severely demotivating in nature.

### 6.2.2 Finances

International students, especially the non-EU nationals are not part of all the KELA benefits in Finland (KELA 2020). The participants said that when they come to Finland, they have a certain amount of money that they must bring with them. When the money starts getting low, they cannot afford to ask for help from the parents back home and they must find a job because each year they need to renew their residence permit which is influenced if they do not have means to support livelihood. One of the interviewees said “I had brought around six thousand Euros with me when I came to Finland to study. Then I felt reluctant to ask parents for money back home as it is a huge burden for them. So, I must work to make my ends meet which had made me difficult to focus on my studies as the nature of my job is physically too demanding (N3)”. Getting a job is difficult for the

students and even if they get a job, it is physically demanding as, without the adequate Finnish skills, it is impossible to get a less physically demanding job. This has made challenging for them to concentrate on studies as they tend to get extremely tired by the nature of the job they do.

Another participant said, “Often work schedule and my study schedule clashes and it gives me immense pressure (N1)” And this has been the biggest stress for some of the participants. Whereas, one of the respondents explained that because if they do not earn a certain amount of money, they are not eligible for Kela card which is the National health insurance card and they are in the constant worry because the insurance policy they have might only cover their health expenses after a certain amount of money is spent. Most of the participants said living cost is very high in Finland and on top of it, immigration policy limits them from making money after a certain amount which leaves immense stress for the students.

### 6.2.3 Learning pedagogy

Another common theme of the data collected was new learning method that the students had to encounter. Most of the participants were concerned about their school performances as they must incorporate the new techniques of study compared to their home country. “Finnish universities use advance learning tools and technology. I had a limited knowledge of technology. My computer skills were not very good. I faced some problems in the beginning (N1).”

Some students found group work and project work quite challenging as they have been used to with the old technique where the students depend on the theory classes and the exams at the end of the semester is practiced. One participant insisted “Back home the study method was theory-based, and exam based. All my life I have been used to a different way of studying and catching up with the learning technique here in Finland is difficult for me. I have doubted myself many times and it has given me hard times a lot. (N4)”. According to the participants, the difficulties that come with the learning pedagogy have given them a lot of stress and sleepless nights for some of them.

#### 6.2.4 Longing for home

All the participants said missing family back home is undeniably rampant in their lives in Finland. They miss their family back home and as a result, it has a huge impact on their mental wellbeing. One of the participants said, “Living away from family is the most difficult thing for me. Often, I feel lonely (N5)”. Likewise, another participant shared similar experience of missing family. The participant expressed “It was my choice to come to study in Finland, but I cannot ignore the feeling of missing family and the impact of being away from home has of course affected my mental wellbeing (N3)”.

All the Nepalese students who participated in the interview said that the climate in Finland is quite harsh to cope with. Hence, weather was also one of the main factors that affected their mental wellbeing. They said the climate back home doesn't have long and dark winter and they are not used to the temperature below zero degrees. One of the interviewees said “Weather has an immense effect on me. Though there is not much I can do about the weather, but this is the main reason why I am upset and sad most of the time and in the long run, it has affected me so much (N3)”. Similarly, another participant confessed “If you let yourself feel bad, the climate will be the most influential factor in your wellbeing. No matter How hard I try not to get affected, it has repeatedly affected my wellbeing (N5)”. These participants' worse mood seemed to correspond with less sun, dark days and much snow.

There were also some participants who were rather positive in their approach towards the harsh weather and they mentioned that there is no other way than accepting the reality and moving on. One participant opined, “As weather is harsh over here, it is better to accept it as early as possible and try to find out the ways to deal with it (N4)”. The important thing is to be aware of the effect of the weather on mental wellbeing and find effective ways to cope with it. Most of the students recommended to exercise and have a hobby during the dark winter days. These results show that the weather in Finland and missing family back home have contributed to longing for home in the lives of the students. One student recommended for the Nepalese students or international students, in general, to keep in touch with the diaspora in Finland and participate in the cultural gatherings if there are any so that the students would not miss home or culture that much. The

student expressed, “I actively take part in cultural gatherings organized by the diaspora where I get to meet people who have same cultures and language. This helps get close to my culture and beat my worries and stresses. I strongly recommend attending these kinds of gatherings if at all possible (N1)”.

#### 6.2.5 Cultural differences

The participants expressed their difficulties in adjusting to the cultural differences that had an impact on their mental wellbeing. They had to encounter various aspects of cultural differences and they had talked about the food, habits, and introvert nature of Finnish people. N4 found it very difficult to get adapted to the Finnish food culture. N4 expressed “I usually eat self-made food no matter wherever I go. I do not like food available in the campus cafeteria, so I carry my own food every time I go to school.” While another participant wished that she had many friends here in Finland but unfortunately making friends has not been easy for her. She said, “making friends here is not that easy for me because Finnish people are so shy, and I have felt lonely most of the times (N1)”. These two participants had challenges encountering the food habits and shy nature of people of the host country.

Some of the participants had positive impact of the cultural differences. One participant said, “Back home you could see hierarchy in every place and certainly in the school and at workplaces. Although I do very low-profile job, but I do not feel inferior to my superior as there is not any hierarchy in the relationship. And this is the thing that I have learnt and has helped in my personal development (N2)”. Similarly, another participant said, “Finnish people are punctual and keep low profile of themselves. Now working and studying in the Finnish environment, I have become punctual and this have increased effectiveness on my studies too (N3)”. The cultural differences had impacted in both positive and negative ways. Some students have faced difficulty in adapting to the food culture, making friends and fight loneliness whereas some students got chance to learn new things and developed new skills. The results showed that the cultural differences can be both challenge and an opportunity for the students.

### 6.2.6 Fear of the future

All the participants said that fear of future regarding career and jobs has a huge influence on their mental well-being. This has been the biggest worries for the participants, and they are in the constant fear that they will not get the jobs in their field of expertise. “I will invest my precious years studying what I liked the most. But at the same time, I am in this constant fear of not getting the job in this field. This feeling is so stressful. One of my closest friends who already has the same degree from my college is now working as a cleaner in some company. This is so depressing and demotivating (N3)”, said one of the interviewees. Social service education requires Finnish language fluency to get the job in the market, as another participant said, “I am always worried regarding my future because in the social field, language is the most and it is super difficult to learn the language (N2)”. The participant further recommends international students to learn the Finnish language if they are to work in the field of social work in Finland.

Some participants expressed the concerns over the pressure to prove themselves to their family about their decision to come to Finland to study and make a career out of it. At the same time because of the job market’s tough requirements, they have feelings such as self-doubts and demotivation. One participant added, “I come from a poor country where family members are interdependent on each other, and my parents have already invested a lot on me. They are dependent on me as they are growing old. I am worried about my job prospects after the completion of my studies (N4)”.

## 6.3 Coping mechanism used by the students

The participants shared their experiences and reflections regarding coping mechanisms they incorporate in the most difficult of times. These coping mechanisms are discussed in this section.

### 6.3.1 Self-care techniques

Most of the participants' coping mechanisms pattern showed a high focus on self/care techniques such as sleeping well, exercising, staying active, following hobbies etc. They said it helps them to keep the good state of mind. One participant said, "You are away from your family and you are solely responsible for your mental health. Especially during the dark and harsh wintertime, exercising regularly helps me release unnecessary stress for me (N4)". Most of the participants recommended that exercising is the best way to encounter stress in one's life. Another participant stressed, "For me, mental wellbeing is being able to handle stress and emotions, trying to stay happy and positive, taking care of one's health, eating and sleeping well, look out for help if necessary. (N1)".

Most of the participants stressed the importance of having hobbies and taking active participation in leisure activities. They have been active in the outdoor and social activities to avoid unnecessary problems regarding mental wellbeing. One participant said, "Hanging out with friends, connecting with others/family and peer groups, spending time in nature as Finnish nature is clean and beautiful. There are beautiful lakes, sea, beaches, forests, and parks here. Being out in nature is indeed a stressbuster for me (N1)". Another participant recited, "If I am too stressed out, I try to take a break from work or from my daily routine. It could be a few days or an hour or a few minutes, depending on my situation. I go out into the woods or parks for a walk, or read books, or watch my favourite show on TV (N3)".

### 6.3.2 Communication with friends, families and seek help

Most participants stressed upon the fact that they have a strong family bond back home and it is very important for them to talk with the family members frequently. All the participants experience the stress in their lives being an international student and recommended to talk to friends and family and seek for help if something goes wrong. One participant spoke, "While own family members are away, here being connected with Nepalese people/ group may make you feel secure and comfortable. If possible, follow some hobbies, that may keep you busy and connected. Talk to people, parents (call/video call) whenever you feel low. Mostly my family is my support system. I discuss the matter with my husband. I call my mom for advice or just to share my feelings (N3)".



As the participants are social service students, some of them were aware of the services available for mental health issues in Finland. Another participant added, “If you think you have problems related to mental health, there are medical experts to help you out. You can reach out to them, for example, the school nurse or counsellor can help. We can also contact the local health stations. There are social workers employed by the municipalities who can give advice and help us get access to medical support. In addition to these, there are different organizations working in the field of mental health. These organizations organize different kinds of activities like a peer support group, story cafes, activities like sports and yoga (N1)”. All the participants strongly recommended international students to constantly be in touch with their family and friends and they stressed the importance of talking to people about their problems which would lessen the burden and stress.

### 6.3.3 Religion and Spirituality

Religion and spirituality practices were a common coping strategy for some of the participants. They said religion plays an important role in their lives and their belief on the god that everything will be fine has been the biggest way to feel hopeful in difficult situations. One participant said, “My family and my religious values are my strength. These are the people or things I turn to when I am in trouble or problems. Whenever I have trouble, difficult situations and confusion, I perform religious rituals which include worshipping god and goddesses, which gives me peace of mind and positive vibes. (N2)”.

Some participants took part in various religious and cultural activities within the diaspora. Another participant recited, “I actively take part in festive and religious programs organized by the fellow Nepalese which helps release my stress. (N1)”. One participant highlighted spirituality as one of the feasible coping strategies that the student used in life. Some students recommended Nepalese students to pray and conduct daily worshipping routine. For international students, some of the participants recommended meditation and yoga to encounter stress and mental health issues. N4 added, “I practice meditation and yoga; it might be because it an important part of my family culture and religion up to some extent (N4)”. The results show that religion and spirituality positively correlated with coping with stress.

## 7 DISCUSSION

The main aim of this research study was to learn about the factors that affect the mental wellbeing of Nepalese students who are studying social services. Hence, our research questions covered the definition of mental wellbeing from the participants' perspective, what affects their mental wellbeing and how do they cope with issues that affect their mental wellbeing. In this chapter, the results of the research are compared with the existing literature and the aim of the research questions are discussed.

From the results of the interview, participants' view on mental wellbeing, the factors that affect their mental wellbeing, a coping mechanism that they use to encounter difficult life situations and some recommendations for international students were acquired. Upon the question about the mental wellbeing from participants' perspective, the answers from the participants are mostly similar that were related to coping with stress, thinking creatively and making use of brain for personal growth, maintaining healthy living, seeking for help if necessary, having good relationships with family and friends, focusing on studies, taking care of one's health, eating and sleeping well. However, one student who lived alone talked about depression and anxiety in relation to mental wellbeing. This is in line with the definition of WHO (2015), that mental wellbeing is psychological and entails feelings, emotions, and thoughts. Hence it can also be related to the theory by Diener, E., et al (2018) that SWB reflects an overall evaluation of a person's life from his or her own perspective.

Upon the questions regarding what were the factors that affected participants' mental wellbeing, one of the key findings was that the participants' faced difficulty because of the language barrier and lack of communication skills. As O'Reilly et al. (2010) concluded that the language barrier is one of the main important issues that the students face which creates difficulty in the adaptation, the pattern of the answers showed the similarity with the theory. And also, the chapter concludes to the opinion of (Arthur, 2017; Heng, 2018) that the language barrier emerges as one of the most significant problems and it has negative consequences, as it is closely related to students' academic performances and overall integration. The findings also showed that participants faced discrimination

mostly because of the language barrier. This proves the theory of Brown and Jones (2013) that international students encounter with the discrimination that is a threat to their emotional wellbeing. Similarly, weather and living far away from home have contributed to longing for home for the participants. Davey (2008) said that among many other factors, the climate is one of the main reasons that at first seems very strange, confusing, and incompatible to the international students. However, some of them said the climate is something that they cannot change, and it is better to accept it and try to find proper ways to deal with it which shows the positive attitude of some participants towards things which they cannot change. The findings exhibited that living away from home has affected students' lives in the host country. This corresponds to Davey's (2008) theory that it can be stressful to leave home and settle in a new country and environment. The participants agreed that missing family back home and feeling worried about simple things are mainly because of the new culture and lifestyle.

Cultural differences posed a challenge as well as opportunities for the students. The results showed that difference in the habits such as eating, and socialising can have adverse impact on the mental wellbeing. This happens when the habits, lifestyle, and customs in a new country conflicts with the cultural values in the foreign students or foreigner (Davey 2008, 37). However, the cultural differences not always have a negative impact because the results also orchestrated that the students were able to learn, improve, develop, and enhance their studies and lifestyles. The punctuality and modesty were the things that some of the students learned from the conflicting culture. This has been a learning experience for us, as the authors of this study as well.

The other theme that emerged was the financial problems that lead to harm mental the wellbeing of the participants, as Altinyelken (2019) said that the international students are exposed to the financial challenges that enhance additional stress and anxiety. All the participants said that the financial issue is one of the biggest factors that affect their mental wellbeing. According to O'Reilly et al. (2010), remark that immigration regulations limit international students' opportunities due to which international students' monetary problems are difficult to resolve. Similarly, another main theme manifested how learning pedagogy caused problems for the participants as Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) has reported that international students also experience problems relating to differences in study

technique, test-taking, or classroom instruction. Likewise, students admitted that they sometimes self-doubted their ability and mental capacity as a learner.

Another major finding was the fear of the future amongst the participants. There are mostly two main reasons for fear which are Language and uncertainty. It proves the point by O'Reilly et al. (2010) that if the student wants a successful career abroad, they must adapt to the environment fast where language proficiency plays a pivotal role. And, Abe & Zanel (1990); Poyrazil and Lopez (2007) described that the international students face more adjustment problems than their domestic fellow students and at the same time, they do not have enough resources to deal with it, the pressure and fear of career enhancement have been felt immensely by the Nepalese students which have led them to take a toll on their mental wellbeing.

Upon the questions regarding how the participants cope with the difficult situation in their lives, taking care of their body was one of the major coping mechanisms that all the participants incorporated. This can be considered as reactive and preventive coping among many other coping strategies explained by Greenglass, Schwarzer, Jakubiec, Fiskensbaum, and Taubert (1999). The participants stressed the importance of having hobbies and involving in creative activities to encounter stress in life. This shows the preventive coping strategy and shows how the students are alert about the negative effects of the stress. It also talks about the avoidance coping strategy and how important it is to involve in leisure activities to avoid the unnecessary mental health issues. Likewise, participants willingness to deal with the problems presented the emotion-focused coping strategy. Seeking help is another important aspect of this coping strategy. Similarly, the findings illustrated the religious coping strategy that involved participants' experiences in dealing with the problems with the belief and religious practices.

The interview results have shown that there are various factors that affect the mental wellbeing of these 5 Nepalese students. It has also illustrated the coping strategies that they use to encounter difficult situations in their lives. It is seen that all the participants have been able to lead their student life with positivity regardless of the difficulties that they have faced as an international student. This can help spread positive impression to other international students. This proves Grey (2002), Struthers et al. (2000) theory that various research and evidence from international students underpin the view that

successful coping strategies result into positive adaptation, reduction on psychological distress, a sense of mental wellbeing and life satisfaction and better academic performances.

## 8 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, a summary of the research process, findings and analysis of the research is briefly described. Our professional development from this research study and the recommendations for future research are discussed.

In our research, we studied several related pieces of literature and research work. However, there have been limited studies on the mental wellbeing of the Nepalese social service students, the factors affecting their mental wellbeing and the coping mechanism they employed during difficult life situations. Therefore, our research was designed to explore the mental wellbeing experiences of the students from their perspectives. During the research interviews, before moving on to actual research questions, the participants were asked what mental wellbeing meant to them. And the participants answered that mental wellbeing for them is all about the ability to cope with stressful life situations, staying healthy, having a good relationship with the loved ones and opportunity for personal growth. Thereafter, the first research question dealt with the factors affecting the students' wellbeing. It was revealed that the significant factors that affected their wellbeing are communication, weather, discrimination, finances, learning pedagogy in schools, homesickness and culture shocks and fear of future. Subsequently, the second research question queried for techniques and strategies the students applied to cope with the different life events.

According to the participants, despite various challenges, difficulties, and stresses in life; they were able to manage their life situations. The coping strategies the students applied are enough rest and exercise, participation in creative activities and following hobbies, communication with family, friends and seeking help, religion, and spirituality. Doing this research on mental wellbeing experiences of the Nepalese social service students, we came to know that the students we interviewed are resilient and persistent towards their future. Hence, they have been able to lead their everyday lives with hope, positivity and optimism in a foreign country which is a positive sign for international students who aspire to become professionals in social service sectors in future. Yet no concrete conclusion can be drawn from this research study as only five Nepalese students were

interviewed, and the results might not necessarily address the whole Nepalese student's community. But having said that, this research study can present a small picture of the issues of Nepalese students when it comes to their mental wellbeing and can help in knowing their issues concerning their studies and lives outside of schools.

The results from this a thesis can be used by professionals working in social service and health care sectors as a knowledge and information to provide better care and services to the students and the entire society in general. In addition to this, our work-life partner, student unions, and the universities itself could also use this knowledge by offering more support to the students, prepare more information and tips about studying and working in Finland. Similarly, we hope that our result will help the government, universities and our work-life partner understand how the mental wellbeing of the foreign students, especially those who come from developing countries is affected and what helps them to strengthen their mental wellbeing. For example, YLE (2020) writes, "While Finnish students get grants, housing allowance and government-backed loans, these so-called "third country" students have to fund their living costs and shell out hefty tuition fees. Left with little choice, many students like Tran have travelled back to their home countries after losing summer jobs or opportunities early in the lockdown." During this pandemic (COVID-19) situation considering the situation and the students' mental wellbeing, the universities and the government could have brought some more flexible rules and policies for them. But it was declared that there were no grounds for reducing the tuition fees. Therefore, it is recommended that all the concerned bodies like social service sectors, universities, and the government itself to study this type of research and we believe that it will help them to think of better plans and policies that support the mental wellbeing of international students.

### 8.1 Professional development

Our thesis process was a great learning experience for us. Our research study had two authors, thus working in tandem was a learning process. We learned how to appreciate each other's effort, give constructive feedback, formulate, and follow the timetable and deadlines, share ideas, and divide the workload. This research process made us a good listener and respect the ideas of the peer. We developed interview skills and skills to

approach people. We learned how to conduct interviews in a professional manner which is so valuable for us to work as a professional social worker in future. We had to encounter the challenge of COVID-19 during our thesis process. The challenge taught us the skills to review our plans, amend and change schedules and to start again from scratch at any time. Because of COVID-19, we also learned how to work virtually and use online platforms to approach work-life partners and interview participants. We learned to implement theories into practice during this research study process. We developed professional academic writing skills, referencing and technical aspects of writing.

During our thesis process, reading of several research works, articles, textbooks and journals widened our knowledge and perspectives on mental wellbeing. This thesis has been a precious work experience for us which we can use in future research works. We have realized that working in a pair, getting to know the participants, working with the work-life partner and being an opponent to other peer students have contributed to improving our skills like giving constructive criticism, self-reflection, professional development, and self-confidence. While conducting interviews, listening to the experiences of different participants and their viewpoints regarding factors affecting their mental wellbeing and the strategies they used to cope with it has helped us look at the same issue from various perspectives and angles. Our interviews aimed to discover the experiences of the students who shared different life experiences and events during their stay in Finland which has helped our thesis get enriching data that the research questions demanded. But we could not insist or manipulate them to make them say what we demanded. Thus, we always put ourselves inside the frame of ethical values. This has helped us to not to cross the boundary and work professionally as a professional. Concisely, the overall experiences that we have gained writing this thesis on mental wellbeing have bestowed us with salient skills and knowledge for our future career in the social sector.

The information produced in the study widened our knowledge and insight regarding mental wellbeing in general. In addition to this, since the concept of mental wellbeing is a broad term and vexed issue, the thesis helped us to have a bird's eye view on it and helped us know about how to raise awareness around issues related to mental wellbeing.



## 8.2 Recommendations

As it is said that nothing is perfect in the world, we are also in the same line though we think we have accomplished our research successfully. Therefore, future research about mental wellbeing on international students can be developed in various ways. The study is limited to Nepalese students with a small number of participants. Similarly, the number of male participants is greater than female participants. So, similar research in future may include the wide variety of different nationalities along with a larger and equal number of male and female participants. This study used a small sample size. To come up with more accurate results and test the validity of this research, larger sample size is recommended. Furthermore, as the findings are based on narratives that are translated from Nepalese to English and therefore subject to bias, it is recommended that the research design be revised to involve quantitative measures.

We have realized that we could have given more time for the study to get richer data from a larger number of participants. The pandemic situation did not let us do as much as we wished for. Further research can be conducted on a comparative study about the mental wellbeing of native students and international students. Topics such as the health and wellbeing of international students in Finland, everyday life of international students in Finland, mental health issues amongst social service students in Finland, etc. can be researched upon in future. Above recommendations are for the future researchers, University of Applied Sciences, NGOs, and our work-life partner to study on the issues of the mental well-being of students.

As the thesis is mental wellbeing study of Nepalese students, it provides knowledge about the way the Nepalese people think, the way they speak and so on. In another word, it provides a knowledge of Nepalese culture in general. Thus, our thesis can be useful to those working in a multicultural environment and to the professionals working in social service sectors as the service users should be treated as an individual. Meanwhile, the thesis speaks about the mental wellbeing of international students. Thus, it can be used by international students, social service professionals and future researchers.

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## APPENDIX 1. Interview questions

### Interview questions for the participants

When did you come to Finland?

What is the reason behind choosing Finland as your destination country and reason for choosing social service?

How is your study going on?

What are you doing beside your study? Note: if you are working what is the nature of job? If you don't want to tell, it's up to you?

How are you managing your study and work?

How satisfied and happy are you with your life living in Finland?

What is mental wellbeing for you?

Normally what makes you happy? why?

What you do to keep yourself happy and healthy?

What makes you sad? Why?

What challenges have you gone through as an international student in Finland?

How did you handle it?

What are the factors in your opinion that most likely would affect Nepalese students' mental wellbeing?

What are your recommendations to the social service students regarding mental well-being issues?

Are there any things in general that you want to say to the international students in terms of being mentally well equipped in Finland in terms of living and studying?

## APPENDIX 2. Consent letter

Name (Research participant): \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

This form is to be completed by the individuals being asked to participate in the research,  
A STUDY ON MENTAL-WELLBEING OF THE NEPALESE SOCIAL SERVICES  
STUDENTS IN FINLAND.

I hereby grant my consent to interview and use my interview/experiences for the purposes of research as a part of researchers' study in Diaconia University of Applied Sciences for bachelor's Social Services. Furthermore, I am also aware that the research material will be used in Diak's research and development work. I understand that during the research process, I have right to withdraw my consent at any time if I am not interested. Although the thesis will be made publicly available, all information will remain known only to the researchers and no names or identifying characteristics will be used in the publication.

Signature of person

Signature of Researcher(s)/Student

Giving consent

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_