

# Predicting the Well-Being of Private University Students in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China: The Critical Roles of Self-Awareness and Responsible Decision-Making

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**Abstract:** As higher education transitions toward quality enhancement, student development evaluations increasingly encompass psychological and adaptive resilience alongside traditional academic metrics. While internal resources are critical for student adaptation, empirical evidence focusing on private university students in regional China remains limited. This is a critical omission because these students frequently face distinct career orientations, intense employment pressures, and unique resource constraints. This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between multi-dimensional internal competencies and subjective well-being among private university students in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, with a specific focus on identifying which specific self-regulatory and behavioral dimensions matter most. Data were collected via convenience sampling from 297 students across application-oriented majors at two private universities in the locality. Descriptive statistics revealed generally favorable internal competencies and moderately high well-being among the participants. Multiple linear regression analysis demonstrated that after controlling for demographic and academic background variables, the overall competency framework served as the strongest predictor of well-being. Crucially, when all five behavioral and psychological dimensions were analyzed simultaneously, only responsible decision-making and self-awareness emerged as statistically significant positive predictors of student flourishing. These findings indicate that student support in regional private higher education must transcend mere vocational training to cultivate core cognitive-behavioral assets. Institutional interventions within similar local contexts should prioritize reflective training and structured decision-making curricula to systematically foster long-term student well-being.

**Keywords:** Subjective well-being; Private university students; Responsible decision-making; Self-awareness; Quanzhou city

## Introduction

As higher education moves away from sheer expansion and toward quality enhancement, the criteria used to evaluate student development are being recast. Grades, graduation rates, and employment outcomes still matter. They no longer tell the whole story. University life also requires students to regulate emotion, build workable relationships, sustain effort under pressure, and shape a plausible sense of future direction. Once that broader developmental task is acknowledged, social-emotional competence becomes difficult to treat as a secondary concern. It refers to the capacity to recognize emotion, manage behavior, relate to others, and act with responsibility. Because these capacities stand between academic performance, psychological health, and social adjustment, they have come to occupy a central position in educational research. Prior work has argued that social-emotional learning is not an auxiliary goal running beside academic development; it forms part of the foundation that supports classroom participation, problem solving, and sustained engagement (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013).

Well-being brings this discussion closer to students' lived experience, the concept reaches beyond temporary positive mood. It includes cognitive evaluations of life, emotional experience, perceived relationship quality, a sense of meaning, and judgments about personal accomplishment. With the rise of positive psychology in higher education research, well-being has increasingly been treated as a major indicator of student development. Fan (2020) describes



subjective well-being as a structure that combines cognitive appraisal and emotional experience, both closely tied to learning adjustment, social connectedness, health, and developmental task completion. Bakker and Mostert (2024) argue that student well-being is shaped through a dynamic balance between study demands and study resources. Pressure, time organization, institutional support, and personal competence work together rather than separately. Li (2025) reaches a similar conclusion, showing that students' well-being is produced through the joint influence of personal characteristics, academic experience, and institutional conditions.

Interest in the link between social-emotional competence and well-being has grown from this line of reasoning, students who can identify emotional shifts more clearly are often better positioned to respond before distress intensifies. Those who handle relationships with greater steadiness may preserve support even when conflict emerges. Students who make more responsible decisions are also more likely to retain a sense of control when academic and personal demands accumulate. Jiang et al. (2022) report that academic performance, family support, and social relationships are all significantly associated with university students' happiness. Thongsri et al. (2024) likewise show that attitude, GPA, and time management shape happiness in higher education learners. The message is consistent: internal resources and external conditions meet within the same developmental process.

Recent studies have pushed this argument further by identifying several contextual pathways, social support can buffer pressure while promoting positive adjustment. Higher self-efficacy is linked to more stable positive emotion and stronger developmental expectations. Perceived learning climate, especially autonomy support and teacher support, predicts multidimensional well-being among university students (Cobo-Rendón et al., 2024). A kinder university climate is also associated with longitudinal growth in well-being (Datu & Lin, 2022). Evidence from intervention research points in the same direction. Yang et al. (2024) found that a PERMA-based positive psychology intervention improved subjective well-being and reduced social interaction anxiety among vocational nursing students in China. Pan et al. (2025) showed that physical activity can improve subjective well-being through social support, self-esteem, and resilience. Furthermore, recent empirical findings on regional higher education institutions demonstrate that targeted psychological and environmental support strategies significantly elevate subjective well-being among specialized college cohorts (Wu, Kong, & Lv, 2026). Well-being, then, is not a fixed outcome. It can be shaped by educational settings, relationship networks, and competence-building efforts.

There are still two major research gaps at present. Firstly, most of the existing evidence comes from public universities, comprehensive colleges, or sample groups outside of China, and empirical research on Chinese private university students is still insufficient. This limitation is crucial because private university students often face more distinct career orientations, more urgent employment pressures, and unique institutional and family resource allocation patterns, and their sense of happiness may differ significantly from that of public university students. Secondly, although many studies have confirmed the important value of social emotional competence at the overall level, there is still a lack of in-depth exploration into which specific dimensions have more critical impacts. In specific educational contexts, which of the dimensions of self-awareness, interpersonal relationship management, self-regulation, social cognition, and responsible decision-making has the strongest explanatory power is still a question that needs to be further explored. To address these gaps, the present study establishes a direct transition from the overarching role of social-emotional competence to the specific empirical investigation of private university students in regional China.

Quanzhou offers a useful site for addressing these issues, private higher education is active in the city, and the two sampled institutions show a degree of representativeness in their program offerings and student composition. Examining students in this context makes it possible to capture how social-emotional competence and well-being are patterned among learners in

practice-oriented private universities. It also provides evidence that can inform student support services, curriculum reform, and mental health education in private higher education. Against this background, the present study reexamines the relationship between social-emotional competence and well-being among students from two private universities in Quanzhou and compares the predictive roles of different competence dimensions.

## **Research Objectives**

The study aims to examine the relationship between social-emotional competence and subjective well-being among university students in private higher education. The focus does not rest on overall association alone. Equal attention is given to the relative contribution of different competence dimensions. Using student samples from two private universities in Quanzhou, the study pursues three objectives: to describe the overall levels and dimensional profiles of social-emotional competence and well-being, to test whether a significant association exists between the two constructs, and to compare the predictive effects of the five competence dimensions after relevant background variables are controlled.

Specifically, the following research questions guide the investigation:

1. What are the general levels and dimensional profiles of social-emotional competence and subjective well-being among private university students?
2. Which specific dimensions of social-emotional competence significantly predict subjective well-being after controlling for relevant background variables (age, gender, academic performance, and major)?

Research on public and comprehensive universities is already more established. Evidence from private higher education remains thinner. This study seeks to extend that evidence base and to provide a more precise foundation for student development support in private institutions.

## **Research Methods**

### **3.1 Participants**

Participants were recruited from two private universities in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China, identified here as University A and University K. Convenience sampling was adopted. The field survey was conducted in March 2026. A total of 314 questionnaires were distributed, 309 were returned, and 297 valid responses remained after cases with logical inconsistencies or incomplete answers were removed. Regarding ethical considerations and data screening: Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, outlining the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and data anonymization. Institutional ethical approval was secured from the respective university research ethics committees. To ensure data integrity, questionnaires with completion rates below 90% or exhibiting straight-line response patterns were excluded during the data cleaning procedure.

### **3.2 Instruments**

Participants' social-emotional competence was assessed with the Social Emotional Competence Questionnaire (SECQ), adapted from the CASEL framework (2020) and validated in the Chinese population by Zhou and Ee (2012). The scale contains 25 items distributed across five distinct dimensions: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making. All items are answered on a 6-point Likert scale, where 1 refers to "not at all true of me" and 6 refers to "very true of me". The total score of the scale ranges from 25 to 150, with higher scores indicating more favorable social-emotional competence. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.95, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Participants' well-being was assessed with the PERMA Well-being Questionnaire for College Students, adapted from Seligman's (2011) PERMA model and validated in the Chinese college student population by Zhang et al. (2023). All items are answered on a 6-point Likert scale,

where 1 refers to "never experiencing the state" and 6 refers to "experiencing the state almost always". The total score of the scale ranges from 5 to 30, with higher scores indicating more favorable overall well-being. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.89, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted in SPSS. Descriptive statistics were first used to summarize demographic characteristics and scale scores. Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) were calculated to describe the overall patterns of social-emotional competence and well-being. Pearson correlation analysis was then applied to test the linear association between the two constructs. In the regression stage, overall social-emotional competence was entered first to predict well-being, after which the five competence dimensions were entered simultaneously to compare their relative explanatory power. All tests were two-tailed, with the significance level set at 0.05.

## Results

### 4.1 Sample Characteristics

The analytic sample included 297 students from application-oriented majors such as social sports, art and design, computer application technology, and preschool education. Of these participants, 164 were male (55.2%) and 133 were female (44.8%). The mean age was 19.2 years. Most students reported a GPA in the "good" range or above, while only 4.0% fell at the "average" level (2.0 / 4.0 scale) or lower. Taken together, the sample provides a reasonable picture of gender composition, disciplinary distribution, and academic standing among students in private universities in Quanzhou.

### 4.2 Social-Emotional Competence among Students in Private Universities

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the five dimensions of social-emotional competence among the participants.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Dimensions of Social-Emotional Competence Among Students at Private Universities

| No. | Dimension of Social-Emotional Competence | M    | SD   |
|-----|------------------------------------------|------|------|
| 1   | Self-awareness                           | 4.47 | 0.81 |
| 2   | Self-management                          | 4.19 | 0.95 |
| 3   | Social awareness                         | 4.31 | 0.87 |
| 4   | Relationship management                  | 4.46 | 0.82 |
| 5   | Responsible decision-making              | 4.57 | 0.77 |
| 6   | Overall social-emotional competence      | 4.40 | 0.72 |

As shown in Table 1, mean scores for the five dimensions of social-emotional competence ranged from 4.19 to 4.57, all above the midpoint of the scale. The pattern suggests that the sample displayed a generally favorable level of competence. Responsible decision-making had the highest mean ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ), indicating that many students showed a clear sense of responsibility and consequence judgment when dealing with academic and everyday choices. Self-awareness ( $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ) and relationship management ( $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) followed closely, suggesting relatively stable performance in self-monitoring and interpersonal interaction. Self-management had the lowest score ( $M = 4.19$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ). The result points to a weaker area: emotional regulation, impulse control, and sustained execution remain in need of support. The overall mean for social-emotional competence was 4.40.

### 4.3 Well-Being among Students in Private Universities

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for subjective well-being and its constituent dimensions.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Well-Being and Its Dimensions Among Students at Private Universities

| No. | Dimension of Well-Being | M    | SD   |
|-----|-------------------------|------|------|
| 1   | Positive emotion        | 4.07 | 1.42 |
| 2   | Engagement              | 3.97 | 1.43 |
| 3   | Relationships           | 4.11 | 1.46 |
| 4   | Meaning                 | 4.19 | 1.39 |
| 5   | Accomplishment          | 4.27 | 1.34 |
| 6   | Overall well-being      | 4.12 | 1.31 |

As detailed in Table 2, the mean overall well-being score was 4.12 (SD = 1.31), indicating a moderately high level. Accomplishment ranked highest among the PERMA dimensions (M = 4.27, SD = 1.34), which suggests that students reported relatively strong positive experiences in task completion, goal attainment, and self-affirmation. Meaning (M = 4.19, SD = 1.39) and relationships (M = 4.11, SD = 1.46) followed, indicating that many students perceived value and support in campus life. Positive emotion scored 4.07, whereas engagement was the lowest dimension (M = 3.97, SD = 1.43). Students were not devoid of satisfaction. What appeared less stable was sustained concentration, immersive learning, and consistent psychological energy.

#### 4.4 The Relationship between Social-Emotional Competence and Well-Being

Table 3 presents the correlation matrix between subjective well-being and the examined demographic/competence variables.

Table 3. Correlations Between Well-Being and Each Variable

| Variable                    | <i>r</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-----------------------------|----------|----------|
| Social-emotional competence | 0.428    | 0.000    |
| Academic performance        | 0.118    | 0.042    |
| Gender                      | 0.021    | 0.721    |
| Age                         | 0.067    | 0.249    |

Table 3 presents the correlations between well-being and each variable. There was a moderate and statistically significant positive correlation between social-emotional competence and well-being ( $r = 0.428$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that higher levels of social-emotional competence were generally associated with higher student well-being. GPA was weakly positively correlated with well-being ( $r = 0.118$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), suggesting that students with better academic performance tended to report slightly higher well-being. Neither gender nor age showed a statistically significant relationship with well-being at the bivariate level. In addition, age showed weak negative trends with both GPA ( $r = -0.091$ ,  $p = 0.117$ ) and social-emotional competence ( $r = -0.108$ ,  $p = 0.062$ ), although neither reached statistical significance.

Table 4 presents the results of the linear regression analysis between social-emotional competence and well-being.

Table 4. Linear Regression Results for Social-Emotional Competence and Well-Being

| Variable                    | <i>B</i> | $\beta$ | <i>t</i> | <i>Sig.</i> |
|-----------------------------|----------|---------|----------|-------------|
| Constant                    | 0.679    | -       | 1.804    | 0.072       |
| Social-emotional competence | 0.781    | 0.428   | 8.238    | 0.000       |

$R = 0.428$ ,  $R^2 = 0.183$ ,  $F = 67.864$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

As shown in Table 4, social-emotional competence significantly and positively predicted well-being ( $\beta = 0.428$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The model explained 18.3% of the variance in well-being, suggesting that social-emotional competence is an important factor associated with the well-being of students at private universities. The unstandardized regression coefficient  $B = 0.781$  indicates that for every one-unit increase in the total social-emotional competence score, well-being increased by an average of 0.781 units on the 6-point scale.

Table 5 presents the multiple linear regression model controlling for background variables.

Table 5. Multiple Linear Regression Results for the Independent Variables and Well-Being

| Variable                    | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | $\beta$ | <i>t</i> | <i>Sig.</i> |
|-----------------------------|----------|-----------|---------|----------|-------------|
| Constant                    | -2.390   | 1.147     | -       | -2.084   | 0.038       |
| Social-emotional competence | 0.791    | 0.085     | 0.436   | 9.348    | 0.000       |
| Age                         | 0.119    | 0.057     | 0.097   | 2.085    | 0.038       |
| Gender                      | 0.085    | 0.140     | 0.028   | 0.609    | 0.543       |
| Academic performance        | 0.163    | 0.094     | 0.081   | 1.737    | 0.083       |
| Major                       | 0.025    | 0.026     | 0.045   | 0.953    | 0.341       |

Table 5 presents the results of the multiple linear regression analysis between the independent variables and well-being. The findings show that after controlling for age, gender, academic performance, and major, social-emotional competence remained the most significant predictor of well-being ( $\beta = 0.436, p < 0.001$ ). The positive effect of age was relatively weak but reached statistical significance ( $p = 0.038$ ), indicating that older students reported slightly higher well-being after controlling for the other variables. Gender, academic performance, and major did not reach statistical significance in this model, suggesting that these background variables had relatively limited explanatory power for well-being. Overall, the explanatory power of social-emotional competence was clearly stronger than that of the general background variables. To compare the relative effects of different dimensions of social-emotional competence, all five dimensions were entered into the regression model simultaneously. Table 6 displays the results of this regression analysis.

Table 6. Multiple Linear Regression Results for the Components of Social-Emotional Competence and Well-Being

| Independent variable        | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | $\beta$ | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | Tol.  | VIF   |
|-----------------------------|----------|-----------|---------|----------|----------|-------|-------|
| Constant                    | 0.247    | 0.371     | -       | 0.667    | 0.505    | -     | -     |
| Self-awareness              | 0.317    | 0.106     | 0.206   | 3.000    | 0.003    | 0.452 | 2.214 |
| Self-management             | 0.071    | 0.089     | 0.053   | 0.792    | 0.429    | 0.454 | 2.201 |
| Relationship management     | 0.164    | 0.113     | 0.107   | 1.457    | 0.146    | 0.386 | 2.588 |
| Responsible decision-making | 0.439    | 0.125     | 0.264   | 3.498    | 0.001    | 0.344 | 2.903 |
| Social awareness            | -0.151   | 0.109     | -0.103  | -1.379   | 0.169    | 0.362 | 2.761 |

F = 20.884, Adj R<sup>2</sup> = 0.226,  $p < 0.001$ .

Table 6 shows that among the five dimensions, self-awareness ( $B = 0.317, p = 0.003$ ) and responsible decision-making ( $B = 0.439, p = 0.001$ ) had significant positive predictive effects on well-being, with the latter showing a higher standardized coefficient, indicating that responsible decision-making is a key dimension in explaining differences in well-being. Self-management, relationship management, and social awareness did not reach statistical significance in this model. The multicollinearity test results showed that the VIF values for all variables ranged from 2.201 to 2.903, which is within an acceptable range, indicating that the model did not suffer from serious multicollinearity. Therefore, self-awareness and responsible decision-making can be regarded as the two core social-emotional dimensions that promote well-being among students at private universities.

## Discussions

The findings show that students in the two private universities reported generally favorable social-emotional competence and moderately high well-being, and that the two constructs were significantly related. One implication follows immediately. Student development in private higher education cannot be reduced to knowledge acquisition and vocational training alone. The quality of campus life is also shaped by whether students can steady emotion, maintain workable relationships, and respond to pressure without losing direction. This interpretation fits the broader literature on social-emotional learning, which treats social-emotional resources

as part of the internal conditions that sustain adaptation and long-term development (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013).

The dimensional pattern is equally instructive, responsible decision-making, self-awareness, and relationship management scored relatively high, whereas self-management was comparatively weak. That contrast suggests that students may be more able to judge choices and sustain interaction than to regulate emotion and behavior over time. The structure of well-being echoes this point. Achievement and meaning ranked relatively high, but engagement lagged behind. Students appear able to see value in their efforts and to recognize concrete goals. Remaining consistently absorbed, however, is another matter. Pressure, uncertainty, and uneven resources can drain sustained attention. Robotham and Julian (2006) described higher education stress as persistent and composite in nature. Bakker and Mostert (2024) later framed student well-being as the product of a shifting balance between study demands and study resources. Stronger social-emotional competence may help students keep that balance from collapsing.

The regression results sharpen the argument, even after demographic and academic variables were controlled, social-emotional competence remained the strongest predictor of well-being. It should be explicitly noted that 'prediction' in this statistical context refers to accounting for variance in cross-sectional data rather than demonstrating a direct causal trajectory. This suggests that competence is closer than background indicators to the psychological core of how well-being is formed. For private universities, the point is practical as much as theoretical. If student development is assessed mainly through grades and employability, the support system may focus on outward performance while leaving the internal mechanisms of adaptation untouched. Emotion understanding, behavioral regulation, peer collaboration, and responsible choice are not decorative additions to education. They form part of the operating base that allows students to function well under ordinary campus pressures.

Two dimensions stood out in particular: self-awareness and responsible decision-making. The significance of self-awareness suggests that students who can recognize emotional change, understand their own limits, and identify their developmental needs are more likely to maintain realistic plans and more stable self-evaluations. Responsible decision-making showed even stronger explanatory power, which may reflect the practical demands facing students in private universities. Choices about major pathways, internships, postgraduate options, employment, financial strain, and daily self-management often arrive early and carry direct consequences. Better decisions can reshape pressure, accomplishment, and future expectation at the same time. Wu and Kong (2024) argue that self-efficacy and well-being strengthen one another. Read together with the present findings, these studies suggest that students who know themselves more clearly and decide more responsibly may also be better able to seek support and make better-fitting choices, thereby strengthening their sense of control.

Contextual influences should also remain in view, Cobo-Rendón et al. (2024) found that learning climate significantly predicts university students' well-being. Datu and Lin (2022) showed that a kind university climate is associated with gains in well-being over time. A fuller picture therefore emerges: social-emotional competence is not a private trait produced in isolation. It takes shape through teacher-student interaction, peer relationships, and institutional arrangements. If private universities hope to improve student well-being in a sustained way, the response cannot stop at individual intervention. Class management, project-based learning, faculty mentoring, career guidance, and a supportive campus culture all need to be brought into the same developmental design. Intervention studies by Yang et al. (2024) and Pan et al. (2025) support this direction by showing that student well-being can be improved through targeted courses and activity programs.

## Conclusions

Using data from 297 students enrolled in two private universities in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, this study examined the relationship between social-emotional competence and well-being. The findings show that students reported generally favorable social-emotional competence and moderately high well-being. A significant positive association was observed between the two constructs, and social-emotional competence remained the most important predictor of well-being after age, gender, academic performance, and major were controlled.

Further analysis indicated that self-awareness and responsible decision-making were the two dimensions that best explained differences in well-being. For private universities, the implication is clear. Efforts to improve student well-being should not begin only when difficulties have already become visible. Social-emotional learning needs to be woven into everyday educational practice through developmental advising, reflective training, decision-making courses, peer support mechanisms, and a more supportive campus culture. Strengthening social-emotional competence is therefore not simply a way to help students feel better in the short term; it is a practical route toward building a more stable basis for long-term development.

Several limitations should be acknowledged, the study used a cross-sectional design, which prevents direct causal inference about the direction of the association between social-emotional competence and well-being. The sample was drawn from only two private universities in Quanzhou. Although the institutions offer a meaningful case, caution is still needed when extending the findings to other regions or institutional types. The analysis also focused on social-emotional competence and a limited set of background variables. Factors such as family economic pressure, dormitory relationships, social support intensity, and internship experience were not entered into the same model. Future research that incorporates richer contextual variables and longitudinal or intervention-based designs would provide a clearer account of how well-being develops among students in private higher education.

### Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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