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Academic Self-Efficacy, Learning Motivation, and Subjective Well-Being among Chinese University Students: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Academic self-efficacy and learning motivation are potentially important correlates of university students' subjective well-being. This study examined the associations of academic competence self-efficacy, academic behavior self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation with subjective well-being among Chinese undergraduates.

Materials and Methods: A cross-sectional questionnaire survey was conducted among 247 undergraduate students at a public four-year university in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China. Measures assessed the two dimensions of academic self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and subjective well-being. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlations and hierarchical multiple regression.

Results: All four academic and motivational dimensions were positively correlated with subjective well-being. In the final regression model, academic competence self-efficacy, academic behavior self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation remained significantly and positively associated with subjective well-being. Extrinsic motivation showed no significant independent association. The final model explained 44% of the variance in subjective well-being.

Conclusion: Academic self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation were independently associated with subjective well-being in this sample. The findings identify academic confidence and internally driven engagement as potential considerations for university well-being initiatives. However, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, and the single-university sample limits generalizability. Longitudinal and multi-institutional studies are needed to clarify the direction and broader applicability of these associations.

Keywords: Academic Self-efficacy; Learning Motivation; Subjective Well-being; Chinese University Students

Introduction

University education is an important period in individual development. During this period, students gradually become more independent and are expected to manage their academic work, interpersonal relationships, personal life, and future career plans. Compared with secondary education, university learning usually provides students with greater freedom, but it also requires stronger self-management. Students need to decide how to organize their study time, how to respond to academic difficulties, and how to deal with uncertainty about their future. These changes may influence not only academic outcomes but also students' psychological well-being.

Subjective well-being has become an important concept in psychological and educational research. It generally refers to how individuals evaluate their lives and how frequently they experience positive and negative emotions. Diener described subjective well-being as including cognitive evaluations of life as well as emotional experiences (Diener, 1984). Later research further emphasized that subjective well-being reflects several aspects of people's daily psychological experiences rather than a single emotional state (Diener et al., 1999; Kahneman et al., 1999). For university students, subjective well-being may be related to academic experiences, interpersonal relationships, personal development, and the way students understand their own lives.

The university period can provide many opportunities for personal development. At the same time, students may experience academic competition, examination pressure, financial concerns, interpersonal problems, and uncertainty about employment. These factors may reduce students' positive feelings when students do not have sufficient psychological resources to manage them. Previous research has shown that university students' well-being is related to both external social conditions and internal psychological

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characteristics. Therefore, understanding individual psychological factors associated with subjective well-being may provide useful information for university education and student support.

Academic self-efficacy and learning motivation are two psychological factors that may be associated with subjective well-being. Academic self-efficacy refers to students' beliefs about their ability to complete academic tasks and manage learning activities, while learning motivation refers to the reasons that encourage students to engage in learning. These factors may be related because students who believe they can succeed academically may be more willing to engage in learning, while interest in learning may support continued effort. However, the literature reviewed in this paper does not yet provide a clear comparison of how different dimensions of academic self-efficacy and learning motivation are associated with subjective well-being among Chinese university students. This study addresses this question by examining these relationships in a sample from one Chinese university and identifying which dimensions show unique associations with subjective well-being in the regression model. Its contribution is context-specific and does not assume that these relationships have not been studied before.

The study examines the relationships among academic self-efficacy, learning motivation, and subjective well-being. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationships among continuous variables, followed by a two-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Demographic variables were entered in the first step, followed by academic competence self-efficacy, academic behavior self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation in the second step. Comparisons between the upper and lower quartile groups were treated as exploratory because they did not include students in the middle of the score distributions. The main conclusions are based on the continuous-variable analyses rather than on these group comparisons.

The study was conducted at one university in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China. Including students from different academic years and disciplinary areas provides information about students within this institution, but the sample may not represent university students across China. The findings should therefore be interpreted in the context of this institution, where local academic, social, and institutional conditions may influence students' experiences. Future studies could recruit students from multiple universities and regions to examine whether similar relationships are found in other settings.

Based on the above discussion, three research questions were proposed:

Research Question 1: Do university students with high levels of academic self-efficacy and learning motivation differ in subjective well-being from students with low levels?

Research Question 2: What are the relationships among academic self-efficacy, learning motivation, and subjective well-being among university students?

Research Question 3: Which dimensions of academic self-efficacy and learning motivation significantly predict subjective well-being among university students?

This study makes a context-specific contribution by examining the relationships of academic competence self-efficacy, academic behavior self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation with subjective well-being among students at one university in China. Rather than testing causal relationships or interaction effects, the study focuses on the associations between these academic factors and subjective well-being. This approach provides a clearer understanding of how different aspects of academic self-efficacy and learning motivation are related to students' overall well-being in this context.

Literature review

Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being is especially important in higher education because university students' psychological experiences may influence their adjustment to university life. A student who feels satisfied with life and experiences positive emotions may be more able to maintain effective learning and social relationships. In contrast, low well-being may be associated with reduced engagement and difficulty adapting to university demands. Understanding the factors that foster high life satisfaction is central to positive psychology and student development (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Seligman, 2002).

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Chinese research has also emphasized the importance of subjective well-being among university students. Ji and Li (2006) developed the College Student Subjective Well-Being Scale specifically for university students. Their study identified eight dimensions, including self-satisfaction, family satisfaction, positive emotion, negative emotion, energy, life satisfaction, social behavior, and interpersonal relationships. This broader structure is useful because university students' well-being is not limited to academic satisfaction.

Recent research on Chinese students has continued to examine factors associated with subjective well-being. For example, Wu (2024) examined the relationship between college students' happiness and individual characteristics and argued that individual differences should be considered when understanding students' happiness. Wu et al. (2026) further examined subjective well-being among art and design students in higher vocational colleges in Quanzhou and identified social support and psychological resilience as important predictors of well-being.

Academic Self-Efficacy

Academic self-efficacy represents students' judgments about their ability to perform academic tasks. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy influences individuals' choices, effort, persistence, and emotional reactions. Students with stronger efficacy beliefs may be more likely to view academic difficulties as challenges that can be managed. Students' underlying beliefs about their intelligence and capabilities shape how they respond to academic challenges and transitions (Blackwell et al., 2007).

In the university context, academic self-efficacy may influence students' daily psychological experiences. Students who believe that they can organize their study and solve academic problems may experience a stronger sense of control. A stronger sense of control may reduce feelings of helplessness and contribute to more positive evaluations of university life.

Academic self-efficacy also has a relationship with learning behavior. Pintrich and De Groot (1990) found that self-efficacy was related to cognitive engagement and academic performance. In higher education settings, academic self-efficacy directly impacts students' adjustment, academic performance, and stress evaluations (Chemers et al., 2001). Although their original sample was younger students, the basic relationship between efficacy beliefs and learning behavior provides an important theoretical foundation for later university research. For university students, this relationship may be especially important because academic activities require greater independent regulation. Students cannot always rely on teachers or parents to organize their study. Therefore, students with stronger academic self-efficacy may be better able to manage their learning activities. Academic self-efficacy may consequently contribute to subjective well-being by helping students manage academic demands. Students who feel capable of handling their academic responsibilities may experience fewer negative reactions to ordinary academic difficulties. This does not mean that academic self-efficacy directly causes happiness, but it may represent an important psychological resource associated with students' well-being.

Academic self-efficacy has been widely studied in higher education. Research has shown that students' beliefs about their academic capabilities are related to academic performance and learning behaviors. A systematic review of university students found that academic self-efficacy had a moderate positive relationship with academic performance, although the relationship was influenced by other motivational and learning factors (Honicke & Broadbent, 2016; Richardson et al., 2012). A later meta-analytic study also suggested that the relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance may be reciprocal, because successful performance may strengthen students' self-efficacy beliefs (Talsma et al., 2018).

For Chinese university students, academic self-efficacy has also received considerable attention. Liang developed and revised an academic self-efficacy scale for Chinese university students, with separate dimensions for students' confidence in their learning abilities and their confidence in managing learning behaviors (Liang, 2000). Later studies have continued to use this scale with Chinese university students. Furthermore, research on Chinese university students has used Liang's scale to examine academic self-efficacy in relation to academic engagement and academic performance (Zhang et al., 2016). Recent

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empirical evidence further indicates that dynamic learning environments and instructional technologies play a key role in shaping students' academic efficacy beliefs, with generative AI-assisted instruction significantly enhancing college students' academic self-efficacy in recent interventions (J. Wu et al., 2026). These findings suggest that academic self-efficacy remains relevant in higher education. Academic self-efficacy may also have implications beyond academic performance. Students who believe that they can deal successfully with academic demands may experience less helplessness when they encounter difficulties. They may also have a stronger sense of control over their daily university life. From this perspective, academic self-efficacy may be associated with students' broader psychological adjustment and subjective well-being.

Research on Chinese students also suggests that self-efficacy can vary across learning domains. Dong and Soransataporn (2012) examined self-efficacy in English learning among Chinese students, highlighting the importance of distinguishing subject-specific self-efficacy from general confidence. Although their study did not directly examine subjective well-being, it provides relevant background for understanding academic self-efficacy as a belief related to a specific learning context. In Chinese higher education, students' self-efficacy and learning motivation may also be influenced by examination demands, family expectations, academic competition, and institutional learning conditions. As these factors were not measured in the present study, future research could examine their relationships with academic self-efficacy, learning motivation, and subjective well-being.

Learning Motivation

Learning motivation describes the reasons and psychological forces that encourage students to engage in learning. Motivation influences why students begin learning activities, how much effort they are willing to invest, and how long they continue when difficulties occur. Amabile et al. (1994) distinguished intrinsic and extrinsic motivational orientations in their Work Preference Inventory. Intrinsic motivation is associated with interest, enjoyment, curiosity, competence, and involvement in the task itself, whereas extrinsic motivation is related to evaluation, recognition, competition, rewards, and external demands.

Learning motivation has also been examined among Chinese university students. Chi and Xin (2006) revised a learning motivation scale based on the work of Amabile and colleagues and examined its reliability and validity among 270 university students. Their findings supported the use of the revised measure for examining intrinsic and extrinsic learning motivation in Chinese university students. Their study also showed relationships between learning motivation and self-efficacy, suggesting that motivation and efficacy should not be considered completely separate psychological processes.

Intrinsic motivation may be particularly relevant to students' psychological experiences. When students study because they are interested in the subject, enjoy learning, or want to improve their competence, learning itself may become a positive experience. Self-determination theory also suggests that autonomous motivation is related to psychological functioning because people tend to experience more positive outcomes when they feel that their behavior is self-endorsed and meaningful (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Extrinsic motivation may have a more complex relationship with well-being. External rewards, evaluation, and competition can encourage students to complete academic tasks. However, when academic behavior is strongly controlled by external pressure, students may experience less autonomy. Therefore, it is useful to examine learning motivation together with academic self-efficacy rather than treating academic motivation as a simple positive factor. The present study therefore examines learning motivation as a second predictor of subjective well-being. It is expected that students with stronger learning motivation will report higher subjective well-being, although the strength of this relationship may differ between motivational dimensions.

Integration of Academic Self-Efficacy, Learning Motivation, and Subjective Well-Being

Academic self-efficacy and learning motivation may be closely connected. Students who believe they can perform academic tasks successfully may be more willing to engage in learning. At the same time,

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students who are interested in learning may invest more effort and gradually develop stronger confidence in their academic abilities.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on three related ideas. First, academic self-efficacy may be associated with students' confidence in managing academic tasks. Second, intrinsic motivation reflects students' interest and enjoyment in learning, whereas extrinsic motivation relates to external goals, such as grades and recognition. Third, academic self-efficacy and learning motivation may be associated with students' overall evaluation of their lives. These ideas provide possible explanations for the relationships among the study variables but do not establish causal mechanisms. As the study did not examine interaction effects, academic self-efficacy and learning motivation were treated as related predictors of subjective well-being rather than as variables in a moderation model.

The relationship between motivation and well-being may also depend on the learning environment. Students who have clear goals and sufficient confidence may be more likely to experience academic tasks as manageable. In contrast, students who have low confidence but face strong external academic demands may experience greater psychological pressure. Thus, academic self-efficacy and learning motivation may work together in shaping students' subjective experiences. Positive academic emotions and cognitive appraisals play a crucial role in broadening students' psychological resources and well-being (Fredrickson, 2001; Pekrun, 2006).

The combination of academic self-efficacy and learning motivation may therefore provide a more complete explanation of students' subjective well-being than either variable alone. Academic self-efficacy represents students' confidence in their academic ability and behavior, whereas motivation represents reasons for engaging in learning. Subjective well-being, however, is broader than academic performance. A student may perform well academically but still experience low well-being because of interpersonal problems, financial concerns, loneliness, or dissatisfaction with university life. Therefore, examining subjective well-being as an outcome provides a broader perspective. The present study addresses this issue by examining academic self-efficacy and learning motivation as two individual academic factors related to subjective well-being.

Methodology

Participants

A cross-sectional questionnaire survey was conducted at a public four-year university in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China. Data were collected from May to June 2026. Students from different academic years and disciplinary areas were invited to participate.

The survey link and QR code were distributed through online student networks and campus communication groups. The questionnaire was administered using Wenjuanxing (https://www.wjx.cn). A total of 260 responses were received. Before analysis, responses were screened according to predefined data quality criteria. Responses were excluded if the completion time was less than two minutes, the same response option was selected for all items, or the questionnaire contained incomplete entries. After screening, 247 valid responses were retained for analysis, representing 95.0% of all submitted responses.

Participation was voluntary. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the study purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, the protection of their confidentiality, and the academic use of the collected data. Informed consent was obtained before questionnaire completion. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, 136 participants were female (55.1%) and 111 were male (44.9%). Participants came from the first, second, third, and fourth academic years. First-year students accounted for 29.1% of the sample, second-year students for 25.5%, and third-year students for 24.7%. The remaining participants

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were fourth-year students. The sample included students from social sciences, humanities and education, business and management, and science and technology.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 247)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	111	44.9
	Female	136	55.1
Academic year	First year	72	29.1
	Second year	63	25.5
	Third year	61	24.7
	Fourth year	51	20.6
Academic area	Social sciences	92	37.2
	Humanities and education	61	24.7
	Business and management	48	19.4
	Science and technology	46	18.6
Age	18–19 years	69	27.9
	20–21 years	111	44.9
	22–23 years	54	21.9
	24 years or older	13	5.3

Measures

Measured using Liang's (2000) 22-item scale, assessed on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Subscale scores were calculated by averaging the response values of items in academic competence self-efficacy (11 items) and academic behavior self-efficacy (11 items), with higher average scores indicating higher efficacy. Confirmatory factor analysis supported the two-factor structure for this scale with acceptable goodness-of-fit indices (χ^2/df = 1.77, CFI = .924, TLI = .915, RMSEA = .056 [90% CI: .047, .065], SRMR = .048), and standardized factor loadings ranged from .58 to .81.

Evaluated using Chi and Xin's (2006) revised scale, scored on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Average composite scores were calculated for intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation, where higher scores reflected stronger motivational intensity. The correlated two-factor model demonstrated satisfactory structural validity (χ^2/df = 1.67, CFI = .931, TLI = .921, RMSEA = .052 [90% CI: .041, .063], SRMR = .051), with standardized factor loadings ranging between .52 and .79.

Assessed with Ji and Li's (2006) College Student Subjective Well-Being Scale (41 items across eight subdimensions). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Negatively phrased items were reverse-coded before analysis. Dimension scores and a total subjective well-being composite index were calculated using item mean scores, with higher scores representing higher levels of subjective well-being. Additionally, confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the construct validity of the 8-factor structure in this sample (χ^2/df = 1.71, CFI = .908, TLI = .901, RMSEA = .054 [90% CI: .048, .059], SRMR = .055), with standardized factor loadings ranging from .50 to .83.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for all measures. An independent-samples t-test was used to explore differences between the upper and lower quartile groups.

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This analysis was treated as exploratory. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationships among continuous variables. Before conducting regression analyses, the data were checked for normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity. A two-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationships of academic self-efficacy and learning motivation with subjective well-being and to assess their additional explanatory power. In Step 1, gender, academic year, and academic area were entered as control variables. In Step 2, academic competence self-efficacy, academic behavior self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation were entered simultaneously. The results included unstandardized coefficients (B), 95% confidence intervals (CIs), standardized coefficients (β), adjusted R^2, changes in R^2 (ΔR^2), and F statistics with their degrees of freedom. Regression diagnostics included the Durbin-Watson statistic and variance inflation factors (VIFs).

Statistical power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1.9.7 to ensure the sample size provided sufficient power for testing the multiple regression model. With N = 247, α= .05, and k = 7 predictors (3 demographic controls and 4 focal predictors), the study achieved a post-hoc statistical power (1 - β) greater than .99 to detect the observed variance explained (ΔR^2 = .42, equivalent to an effect size f^2 = 0.75). Furthermore, an a priori power calculation indicated that a minimum sample size of N = 103 was required to detect a medium effect size (f^2 = 0.15) at α = .05 with 80% statistical power (1 - β = .80), confirming that the sample size of 247 was more than adequate.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

The descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of the Main Variables

Variable	M	SD	Cronbach's α
Academic self-efficacy	3.47	0.56	.89
Academic competence self-efficacy	3.52	0.61	.87
Academic behavior self-efficacy	3.42	0.58	.84
Learning motivation	2.91	0.43	.82
Intrinsic motivation	3.04	0.49	.85
Extrinsic motivation	2.78	0.46	.77
Subjective well-being	3.38	0.52	.91

The results showed acceptable internal consistency for all major measures. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the total academic self-efficacy scale was .89. The coefficients for academic competence self-efficacy and academic behavior self-efficacy were .87 and .84, respectively. The total learning motivation scale showed an alpha coefficient of .82, while the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation dimensions showed coefficients of .85 and .77.

The subjective well-being scale showed the highest internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .91. These results indicated that the measures had acceptable internal consistency for the present analysis.

Differences in Subjective Well-Being According to Academic Self-Efficacy and Learning Motivation

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To examine whether subjective well-being differed according to academic self-efficacy and learning motivation, participants were divided into high and low groups according to their total scores. Participants were categorised into high and low groups based on the 25th and 75th percentiles of total scores.

Table 3: Differences in Subjective Well-Being According to Academic Self-Efficacy and Learning Motivation

Variable	Group	n	M	SD	t
Academic self-efficacy	Low	61	3.05	0.47	-5.78***
	High	62	3.59	0.48	
Learning motivation	Low	59	3.12	0.49	-4.62***
	High	61	3.55	0.46	

****p < .001*

As shown in Table 3, students with high academic self-efficacy reported significantly higher subjective well-being than students with low academic self-efficacy, t = -5.78, p < .001. The mean subjective well-being score of the high academic self-efficacy group was 3.59, compared with 3.05 for the low academic self-efficacy group.

A significant difference was also found between students with high and low levels of learning motivation. Students with high learning motivation reported higher subjective well-being (M = 3.55, SD = 0.46) than students with low learning motivation (M = 3.12, SD = 0.49), t = -4.62, p < .001.

These results indicate that both academic self-efficacy and learning motivation were associated with differences in subjective well-being.

Correlations among Academic Self-Efficacy, Learning Motivation, and Subjective Well-Being

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the variables.

Table 4: Correlations among Academic Self-Efficacy, Learning Motivation, and Subjective Well-Being

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Academic competence self-efficacy	1				
2. Academic behavior self-efficacy	.61***	1			
3. Intrinsic motivation	.46***	.51***	1		
4. Extrinsic motivation	.28***	.32***	.39***	1	
5. Subjective well-being	.57***	.49***	.45***	.25***	1

****p < .001*

As shown in Table 4, subjective well-being was positively correlated with academic competence self-efficacy, academic behavior self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation. The strongest relationship was found between academic competence self-efficacy and subjective well-being (r = .57, p < .001).

Academic behavior self-efficacy was also positively related to subjective well-being (r = .49, p < .001). Intrinsic motivation showed a moderate positive relationship with subjective well-being (r = .45, p < .001), while extrinsic motivation had a smaller but still significant positive relationship (r = .25, p < .001).

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The two academic self-efficacy dimensions were positively correlated with each other ($r = .61$, $p < .001$). Intrinsic motivation was also positively associated with both academic competence self-efficacy and academic behavior self-efficacy.

Predictors of Subjective Well-Being

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether academic self-efficacy and learning motivation were associated with subjective well-being after controlling for demographic variables. Continuous scores were used for all predictors and the outcome variable. Regression diagnostics showed no major violations of the assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, and residual independence. The Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.94, suggesting that the residuals were independent. VIF values ranged from 1.28 to 1.76, indicating no serious multicollinearity among the predictors. Post-hoc statistical power analysis using G*Power (version 3.1.9.7) for the final linear multiple regression model ($N = 247$, $k = 7$ predictors) indicated that with an observed R^2 of .44 ($f^2 = 0.79$) and $\alpha = .05$, the achieved statistical power ($1 - \beta$) was > .999. This indicates that the sample size was sufficiently sensitive to detect the observed main effects of academic competence self-efficacy, academic behavior self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation on subjective well-being.

As shown in Table 5, Step 1 included gender, academic year, and academic area as control variables. This model explained 2% of the variance in subjective well-being, but the result was not statistically significant ($R^2 = .02$), adjusted ($R^2 = .01$, $F(3, 243) = 1.65$, $p = .178$). In Step 2, academic competence self-efficacy, academic behavior self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation were entered simultaneously. The four predictors explained an additional 42% of the variance, and this increase was statistically significant ($\Delta R^2 = .42$, $\Delta F(4, 239) = 44.12$, $p < .001$). The final model was statistically significant ($F(7, 239) = 26.82$, $p < .001$) and explained 44% of the variance in subjective well-being ($R^2 = .44$, adjusted $R^2 = .42$).

Table 5: Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Subjective Well-Being (N = 247)

Model / Predictor	B	SE	95% CI for B	β	t	p
Step 1						
Constant	3.31	0.12	[3.07, 3.55]		27.58	< .001
Gender	0.06	0.07	[-0.08, 0.20]	.06	0.86	.391
Academic Year	-0.03	0.03	[-0.09, 0.03]	-.06	-0.92	.359
Academic Area	0.02	0.03	[-0.04, 0.08]	.04	0.61	.542
Step 2						
Constant	0.68	0.21	[0.27, 1.09]		3.24	.001
Gender	0.03	0.05	[-0.07, 0.13]	.03	0.52	.604
Academic Year	-0.01	0.02	[-0.05, 0.03]	-.02	-0.41	.682
Academic Area	0.01	0.02	[-0.03, 0.05]	.02	0.38	.704
Academic Competence Self-Efficacy	0.40	0.06	[0.29, 0.51]	.38	6.89	< .001
Intrinsic Motivation	0.27	0.06	[0.15, 0.39]	.24	4.35	< .001
Academic Behavior Self-Efficacy	0.19	0.07	[0.06, 0.32]	.18	2.88	.004
Extrinsic Motivation	0.05	0.06	[-0.07, 0.17]	.05	0.88	.382

Note. Step 1: $R^2 = .02$, Adjusted $R^2 = .01$, $F(3, 243) = 1.65$, $p = .178$. Step 2: $R^2 = .44$, Adjusted $R^2 = .42$, $\Delta R^2 = .42$, $\Delta F(4, 239) = 44.12$, $p < .001$; Overall Model $F(7, 239) = 26.82$, $p < .001$. CI = Confidence Interval; SE = Standard Error.

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In the final model, academic competence self-efficacy was a significant positive predictor of subjective well-being ($\beta = .38$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.29, 0.51]). Intrinsic motivation ($\beta = .24$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.15, 0.39]) and academic behavior self-efficacy ($\beta = .18$, $p = .004$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.32]) were also significant positive predictors. Extrinsic motivation was not a statistically significant independent predictor ($\beta = .05$, $p = .382$, 95% CI [-0.07, 0.17]).

Discussion

The present study examined the relationships among academic self-efficacy, learning motivation, and subjective well-being among university students in China. Three major findings were obtained. First, subjective well-being differed significantly between students with high and low levels of academic self-efficacy and learning motivation. Second, academic self-efficacy and learning motivation were positively correlated with subjective well-being. Third, academic competence self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and academic behavior self-efficacy were significant predictors of subjective well-being.

The main contribution is the joint description of two academic self-efficacy dimensions and two motivation dimensions in relation to a broad well-being measure within one Chinese university. The findings are consistent with the possibility that students' confidence in academic tasks and their interest in learning are related to how they evaluate their lives. However, the design does not show that these factors cause changes in well-being, and the regression model requires confirmation using a theory-driven analysis.

Differences in Subjective Well-Being

The first finding was that students with high academic self-efficacy reported higher subjective well-being than students with low academic self-efficacy. This result is consistent with the view that efficacy beliefs may influence how students understand and respond to academic demands. Sustainable happiness often stems from a combination of intentional activities and positive cognitive mindsets (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Students with strong academic self-efficacy may be more likely to believe that they can complete academic tasks successfully. When they face difficult assignments or examinations, they may be more willing to continue working rather than immediately interpreting the situation as a personal failure. Bandura (1997) argued that self-efficacy influences persistence and emotional reactions, which provides a possible explanation for the present finding.

The finding is also consistent with research showing that academic self-efficacy is related to university students' academic functioning. Honicke and Broadbent (2016) found a moderate relationship between academic self-efficacy and academic performance among university students. Although academic performance was not examined as an outcome in the present study, successful academic management may indirectly contribute to students' broader psychological adjustment.

The results should not be interpreted as evidence that academic self-efficacy causes subjective well-being. Because the present study used a cross-sectional design, the direction of the relationship cannot be established. Students with higher well-being may also be more likely to evaluate their academic abilities positively.

A similar pattern was observed for learning motivation. Students with high learning motivation reported significantly higher subjective well-being than students with low learning motivation. One possible explanation is that motivated students may experience more meaning and involvement in their academic activities.

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Intrinsic motivation may be especially important because students who enjoy learning may experience academic activities as personally meaningful. Ryan and Deci (2000) proposed that autonomous motivation is closely connected with positive psychological functioning. The present findings are consistent with this general theoretical perspective.

Relationships among the Main Variables

The second major finding was that academic self-efficacy, learning motivation, and subjective well-being were positively correlated.

Academic competence self-efficacy had the strongest relationship with subjective well-being. This finding suggests that confidence in one's academic abilities may be particularly important for university students. University education requires students to deal with complex academic tasks, independent study, examinations, and long-term projects. When students believe they can manage these tasks, they may have a stronger sense of control.

Academic behavior self-efficacy also showed a positive relationship with subjective well-being. This finding is understandable because university students must manage their own learning behavior. They need to plan study time, complete assignments, prepare for examinations, and maintain learning routines.

The relationship between intrinsic motivation and subjective well-being was also relatively strong. This result supports the view that learning can become a positive experience when students are interested in what they study. Intrinsically motivated students may experience greater enjoyment and personal involvement during learning.

Amabile et al. (1994) described intrinsic motivation in terms of interest, enjoyment, challenge, and involvement. These characteristics may overlap with experiences that contribute to positive daily functioning. Therefore, the relationship between intrinsic motivation and subjective well-being is theoretically reasonable.

Extrinsic motivation also showed a positive correlation with subjective well-being, although the relationship was weaker than that of intrinsic motivation. This result suggests that external academic motives are not necessarily harmful. Grades, recognition, and future career goals may provide students with clear reasons to study.

However, the weaker correlation suggests that external motives may not provide the same psychological benefits as intrinsic motivation. When students learn mainly because of external pressure, the activity may be less personally satisfying. Therefore, universities should not focus only on external rewards when attempting to increase students' learning motivation.

The positive relationship between academic self-efficacy and learning motivation is also important. Students who believe that they are capable of learning may be more willing to invest effort. At the same time, successful learning experiences may strengthen confidence in academic ability. Talsma et al. (2018) reported evidence for a reciprocal relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance, supporting the possibility that academic beliefs and learning experiences may influence each other over time.

Predictors of Subjective Well-Being

The third major finding was that academic competence self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and academic behavior self-efficacy significantly predicted subjective well-being.

Academic competence self-efficacy was the strongest predictor. This result suggests that students' confidence in their academic competence may be more closely related to subjective well-being than their general level of motivation.

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A possible explanation is that academic competence is an important part of university students' daily lives. Students spend a substantial amount of time completing academic tasks, preparing for examinations, attending classes, and completing assignments. If students feel capable in these areas, they may experience greater control and satisfaction.

Academic behavior self-efficacy was also retained in the final model. This result indicates that confidence in regulating learning behavior may provide additional information beyond academic competence. A student may believe that he or she is capable of understanding academic material but may still have difficulty managing study time or maintaining consistent learning behavior.

The significance of academic behavior self-efficacy suggests that universities should not only help students improve academic knowledge. They should also help students develop practical learning behaviors such as time management, study planning, and task regulation.

Intrinsic motivation was the second strongest predictor in the final model. This finding is consistent with the idea that students' personal interest and enjoyment in learning may be related to their psychological well-being.

Students who learn because they are interested in the subject may experience greater personal meaning in academic activities. Their motivation does not depend entirely on grades or external evaluation. This may help explain why intrinsic motivation remained significant after academic self-efficacy was included in the regression model.

The final model explained 43% of the variance in subjective well-being. This is a meaningful level of explanatory power, but it also indicates that more than half of the variance remained unexplained. Subjective well-being is a complex psychological outcome, and academic factors are only part of students' broader lives.

Previous Chinese research supports the importance of non-academic factors. Wu et al. (2026), for example, found that social support and psychological resilience were important predictors of subjective well-being among art and design students in higher vocational colleges in Quanzhou. This suggests that academic self-efficacy and motivation should be considered together with social and psychological resources. Wu (2024) also emphasized the relevance of individual characteristics when examining college students' happiness. This supports the need to examine multiple dimensions of students' experiences rather than relying on a single academic factor.

Educational Implications

The findings have several implications for university education. These suggestions are intended to guide future practice rather than describe interventions tested in this study. Universities should evaluate any new programs using appropriate outcome measures and, where possible, comparison groups or follow-up data before concluding that they are effective.

First, universities could develop programs to strengthen students' academic self-efficacy. Rather than simply encouraging students to feel more confident, these programs could provide achievable academic tasks, clear feedback, opportunities to experience success, and practical learning strategies.

Second, academic advisors and teachers could help students develop effective learning behaviors. Training in time management, examination preparation, academic planning, and task organization may help students manage their studies and build confidence in their academic abilities.

Third, universities could pay greater attention to intrinsic learning motivation. Teachers could connect course content with students' personal interests and future goals. Learning activities that encourage

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curiosity, independent thinking, and appropriate academic challenges may help students find greater meaning in their studies.

Fourth, academic support and student well-being services could work more closely together. The findings suggest that academic self-efficacy and learning motivation are associated with subjective well-being. Universities could therefore improve coordination among academic advising, learning support, and psychological services to address students' academic and personal needs.

Finally, universities should consider both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation when designing learning activities. Grades and recognition can provide useful external incentives, but teaching practices should also encourage student autonomy, personal interest, and active participation. This approach may help students develop a more sustained interest in learning.

Relationship with Previous Research

The present results are broadly consistent with previous research on self-efficacy and learning motivation. Pintrich and De Groot (1990) found that self-efficacy was associated with cognitive engagement and academic performance. Although the present study focused on subjective well-being rather than academic performance, both studies indicate that students' beliefs about their academic capabilities are important for understanding their educational experiences.

The results are also consistent with the research of Chi and Xin (2006), which found meaningful relationships between learning motivation and self-efficacy among Chinese university students. The current findings extend this perspective by examining subjective well-being as an outcome.

The results also support the importance of examining subjective well-being as a multidimensional construct. Ji and Li (2006) developed their scale because university students' well-being includes not only life satisfaction and emotional experience but also social behavior and interpersonal relationships. The present study therefore treats subjective well-being as broader than academic satisfaction alone.

Research among Chinese university students has also increasingly considered psychological resources. For example, studies of academic self-efficacy, social support, resilience, and positive thinking suggest that students' psychological resources may influence their adaptation to university life.

This broader perspective is important because academic performance alone cannot fully describe university students' quality of life. A student may achieve high grades while experiencing low satisfaction, social isolation, or emotional difficulties. Therefore, educational success and psychological well-being should be considered together.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationships among academic self-efficacy, learning motivation, and subjective well-being among university students in China. The results showed that students with high academic self-efficacy and learning motivation reported higher subjective well-being than students with lower levels of these variables.

Academic self-efficacy and learning motivation were also positively related to subjective well-being. Among the examined dimensions, academic competence self-efficacy showed the strongest correlation with subjective well-being. Academic competence self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and academic behavior self-efficacy were significant predictors of subjective well-being.

The results suggest that academic beliefs and learning motivation may be useful topics for further research on student well-being. Universities may consider connecting academic support with student

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support services, but the present study did not evaluate any intervention. Future work should test these approaches with stronger designs and samples from more than one institution.

Academic self-efficacy should be strengthened through practical learning support and successful academic experiences. Learning motivation should be supported through meaningful learning tasks and opportunities for students to develop personal interest. These approaches may help universities create learning environments that support both academic development and student well-being.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, this study used a cross-sectional design. Therefore, causal relationships among academic self-efficacy, learning motivation, and subjective well-being cannot be established. Future studies could use longitudinal designs to examine how changes in academic self-efficacy and learning motivation are related to changes in subjective well-being over time.

Second, the participants were recruited from one university in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China. The findings may therefore not represent students from other regions or universities in China. Future research could include students from several universities and different provinces.

Third, all variables were measured using self-report questionnaires. Self-report data may be influenced by participants' response styles and social desirability. Future studies could combine questionnaire data with academic records, teacher evaluations, or behavioral indicators.

Fourth, the present study focused on academic self-efficacy and learning motivation. Other factors may also explain students' subjective well-being. Social support, psychological resilience, academic stress, interpersonal relationships, financial conditions, and family support may provide additional explanatory power.

Declaration — Author Form

1. Conflict of Interest

State any conflicts of interest. If none, declare that no conflict exists.

Statement: The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

2. Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies

State the AI tool used and its purpose. If none was used, state accordingly.

AI tool: Gemini

Purpose: Grammar checking and proofreading, text optimization, and language polishing.

3. Data Availability Statement

State the availability and source of the data or materials used in the study.

Statement: Due to confidentiality requirements of the host institution, the datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available. Data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to approval from the institution and its research ethics committee.

4. Ethics Statement

State the ethics approval and approval number, if applicable. If not applicable, provide a brief explanation.

Statement: Ethical oversight for this study was provided by the laboratory's internal research ethics committee, the Higher Education, Psychology, and Policy Analysis Laboratory Research Ethics

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State each author's contribution according to the CRediT roles.

Author(s) and role(s): Yundong Wu: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration. Jiani Wu: Investigation, Data curation, Validation, Resources, Writing – review & editing.

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