
Title	Investigating the approaches to learning and studying of tertiary students in Singapore: A longitudinal study
Author(s)	Poh Sui Hoi
Source	<i>NIECER Research Bulletin</i> , 4(1), 7-8
Published by	National Institute of Education Centre for the Educational Research, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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Citation: Poh, S. H. (1999). Investigating the approaches to learning and studying of tertiary students in Singapore: A longitudinal study. *NIECER Research Bulletin*, 4(1), 7-8.

Investigating the Approaches to Learning and Studying of Tertiary Students in Singapore – A Longitudinal Study

A/P Poh Sui Hoi, School of Education, NIE

The purpose and objectives of this study are:

1. To chart the studying and learning patterns of tertiary students in Singapore and compare them with those used by overseas students.
2. To identify and study factors that affect the studying and learning process and products of learning so as to promote deep studying and learning approaches.
3. To validate the Biggs' Study Process Questionnaire for local use.

This is a multidisciplinary research project encompassing representatives from all the tertiary institutions in Singapore. The following are members of the research team:

A/P Poh Sui Hoi (Principal Investigator)

School of Education, NIE

A/P Rosalind Mau

School of Education, NIE

Asst. Prof. Cheng Yuanshan

School of Education, NIE

Asst. Prof. Yan Yaw Kai

School of Science, NIE

Mr Qwk Khiok Seng

School of Science, NIE

A/P Ng Yin Kwee

NTU/MPE

A/P Loi Soh Loi

NTU/SAB

A/P Francis Pavri

NUS/FBA

Mr Tan Choi Heng

Ngee Ann Poly/BD

Ms Tay Mui Hua

Ngee Ann Poly/IPD

Mr Yap Ah Keng

Ngee Ann Poly/MSD

Mr Lua Eng Keong

Temasek Poly/IT&App Sc

Dr Uma Devi Ravinthran

Nanyang Poly/Bio Sc

Mrs Linda Lim

Singapore Poly/ESDD

The project started in April 1996, when permission was granted by John Biggs to use his Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) scale in the local context. An initial pilot study showed that students here had no difficulties answering the 42 items in the scale. Minor modifications were made to the scale. Local validation in terms of using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis procedures indicated that the six-factor model was identified, although a four-factor model was more parsimonious. Reliability estimates for all the subscales are generally high and compare very favourably with those reported overseas; Two papers were presented at the 1997 ERA conference, reporting on the validation studies carried out with the NIE and NTU Engineering samples. In addition, the papers also compared the different studying and learning approaches that students in NIE and NTU adopt with those students in Hong Kong and Australia. Generally the students here, specially those at NIE, adopted the deep approach more than the surface and achieving approaches (Poh, S.H., Mau, R., Quek, K.S. & Cheng, Y.S., 1997; Poh, S.H., Ng, Y.K. & Yan, Y.K., Proceedings, ERA 1997).

NIE students were followed up during subsequent semesters in NIE to further chart

the pattern of their studying and learning approaches over time. The longitudinal comparisons over the two semesters showed that the Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) students demonstrated significant increases in deep as well as surface approaches, while the achieving approach showed a slight drop. The Diploma in Education (Dip Ed) students generally showed a slight drop in all the three approaches when compared over the two years of study at NIE. Overall, the students in both the programmes adopted the deep approach more than the other two approaches. When probed further with focused interviews, the PGDE students mentioned that the teaching and learning process, the assessment mode in the modules and the learning environment, all contributed to their approaches to learning and studying. Results from this longitudinal study were reported at the ERA 1998 conference (Poh, S.H., Mau, R., Cheng, Y.S., Yan Y.K. & Quek, K.S., 1999).

This study has validated the Biggs' SPQ for local use. A considerable database has been established of the studying and learning approaches of the NIE students and some other tertiary students in Singapore. The next phase will involve collecting data on the performance of students in other tertiary institutions in Singapore and continuing our research to chart as well as to find the relationship between the students' approaches to studying and learning and their performance in their respective tertiary institutions.

