A Survey of Sustainable Mental Health Among Students at Higher Education Institutions of Economics in Budapest

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In recent years, there has been a lot of research on the sustainability of our environment and economy. The results of the aforementioned research are widely available. However, less is said about social sustainability and, in particular, about the managers and employees of the future farming organisations, who are still at school or university at the moment. Yet, today's students will be tomorrow's leaders and employees. But what are the characteristics of these young people? What are their expectations and ideas for the future? How anxious are they? How happy are they? What stable network of relationships do they have? How many of them can see themselves running a business and what are they doing about it? How conscious are they of their actions or do they just go with the tide? Our research questions will be answered by using the results of a survey – which has been running since 2019, and which is based on the second semester of 2022/23 including 609 subjects – regarding students studying at higher education institutions of economics in Budapest. We are hopeful that our results can contribute to the field of sustainable mental health by focusing on global well-being, resilience, self-regulation and peer efficacy.

1   Introduction

Contrary to popular belief, sustainability attitudes and behaviour only slightly reduce the subjective well-being derived from material goods. However, they greatly increase positive mental health and the resulting subjective well-being. This state is called sustainable positive mental health. (Fajzi – Erdei, 2015).

Countries committed to sustainable development see education as a catalyst and driver for achieving the SDGs (Benavot et al., 2023). This is why we felt it important to study university students in this area. Students, during their years in higher education, spend nearly half of his or her waking hours on campus. During this time, they attend lectures, work individually and in groups. The years spent in higher education have a significant impact not only on students' knowledge, but also on their self-esteem, happiness and self-image, which affects their mental health and coping skills. In our study we wish to explore this.

2   Theoretical Background / Literature Review

Sustainability, as a complex set of objectives, can be interpreted in many ways. In our study, we focus on a small slice of social sustainability and one of its main actors: the managers and employees of future farming organisations who are currently at school or university. Today's students will be tomorrow's managers and employees, facing a number of challenges. One such challenge is to reduce inequalities (Szigeti et al., 2023), creating the conditions for green human resource management (Szabó et al., 2023, Joshi et al., 2023, Amrutha and Greetha, 2020) or operating social responsibility at a high level. (Szczuka, 2015).

To ensure that future generations can adapt to the many challenges they face, it is vital that they enjoy good mental health. We talk more and more about mental health, but what does it really mean? "Mental health is an integral part of health. It is a state of well-being in which individuals realise their own abilities and can cope with the stresses of life and contribute to community life. Mental health is a precondition for a productive economy and inclusive society and better mental health is both a social and an economic imperative." (EC, 2023, WHO, 2022).

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It may be affected by emotions, thoughts, behaviour or the ability to manage interactions with others. It can also be influenced by social, cultural, economic, political and environmental factors such as national policies, social network, living standards, working conditions and community social support (Livingstone et al., 2022).

Good mental health is essential for living a fulfilled life, for realising our full potential and participating more effectively in our communities, and for building resilience to stress and adversity. But what is resilience? Resilience is a popular term these days: it is used in a wide range of fields from child psychology to social sciences, from ecology to security studies, from political science to government strategy (Szokolszky – V. Komlósy, 2015).

The reason for linking ecological and psychological approaches is that the interrelationships between the fields are becoming clearer.

There are several definitions of resilience. In relation to individuals, one of the most common definitions is that resilience is a dynamic process over the course of life in which an individual accesses internal and external resources that lead to positive adaptation in the face of adversity. (Connor and Davidson 2003)

Today, extremely rapid technological changes, climate change, wars, economic crises and environmental disasters, or the lingering effects of COVID-19, pose extraordinary challenges to human beings (UN, 2023). For this reason alone, the psychological aspect of the concept of resilience is an important factor.

In our study, we will present the partial results of an ongoing study using a validated questionnaire from the field of positive psychology.

3   Methodology

In our study, we present the partial results of a research project that has been running since 2019. The focus of the research is on students studying at three higher education institutions of economics in Budapest.

We investigate the students' mental health, future goals and competences to be developed. The research is based on a questionnaire consisting of nearly 80 questions. The sample is always selected from first-year students, as they are the ones who undergo the biggest change: they start a new phase in their lives after high school and not only change schools, but also go through a life stage transition.

In this paper, we present the results for the second semester of 2022/23, based on a validated psychological questionnaire (EPOCH questionnaire).

The questionnaire was completed between February and April 2023.

The founder of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, defined 5 pillars of wellbeing, PERMA (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment), which were adapted by Margaret L. Kern and colleagues (2016) into the EPOCH (engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, and happiness) model.

The Hungarian adaptation is by Láng (2019). His research supports that the adapted (EPOCH-H) questionnaire offers an age-appropriate measure, well aligned with international mainstream theoretical models for researchers who wish to investigate adolescents' well-being using a self-report instrument and along multiple dimensions.

Number of respondents: 609. In presenting the results, we use the contexts defined by the researchers of the EPOCH questionnaire (the meaning of each category is presented in Table1).

4   Results

For first-year university students a door gets opened to a new world: for many of them, successfully applying and starting university is one of the defining moments of their lives.

After leaving secondary school, young people enter a new phase in their lives. It is also an important stage during the journey to adulthood, which is not experienced in the same way by all young people.

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Table 1: Results of the EPOCH questionnaire based on the responses of students studying at higher education institutions of economics in Budapest in spring 2023 (sample size: 609 students)

	Average	Median	Std. Deviation
Engagement: *being absorbed, interested, and involved in an activity or the world itself. Very high levels of engagement are known as a state called "flow"*	**3,92**	-	-
When I do an activity, I enjoy it so much that I lose track of time.	3,89	4	0,949
I get completely absorbed in what I am doing.	4,27	4	0,817
I get so involved in activities that I forget about everything else.	3,64	4	1,031
When I am learning something new, I lose track of how much time has passed.	3,89	4	0,949
Perseverance: *having the tenacity to stick with things and pursue a goal, despite any challenges that occur*	**3,96**	-	-
I finish whatever I start.	4,05	4	0,822
I keep to my schoolwork until I am done with it.	3,86	4	1,033
Once I make a plan to get something done, I stick to it.	3,82	4	0,975
I am a hard worker.	4,11	4	0,888
Optimism: *having a sense of hope and confidence about the future.*	**4,09**	-	-
I am optimistic about my future.	4,13	4	0,911
In uncertain times, I expect the best.	3,70	4	1,061
I think good things are going to happen to me.	4,30	**5**	0,837
I believe that things will work out, no matter how difficult they seem.	4,21	4	0,894
Connectedness: *feeling loved, supported, and valued by others.*	**4,49**	-	-
When something good happens to me, I have people who I like to share the good news with.	4,68	4	0,654
When I have a problem, I have someone who will be there for me.	4,10	4	1,043
There are people in my life who really care about me.	4,63	**5**	0,747
I have friends that I really care about.	4,54	**5**	0,860
Happiness: *a general feeling of happiness, cheer, and contentment with life*	**4,09**	-	-
I feel happy.	3,86	4	0,932
I have a lot of fun.	4,12	4	0,913
I love life.	4,28	4	0,879
I am a cheerful person.	4,12	4	0,924

Source: own research

As with all life transitions, the period after leaving secondary school can be a time of crisis (quarter-life crisis). In general, the process of becoming independent from the family is accelerated and an independent self-image is developed. The familiar friends and peers from secondary school no longer offer security: new relationships and alliances are formed in the new, unfamiliar environment, and a new way of life

becomes dominant (Leist Balogh - Jámbor, 2016, Bonnie et al., 2019, Vágány – Erdeiné Késmárki-Gally, 2022).

Riggs and Han (2009) found that a period of worrying in early adulthood can lead to a decline in mental health, but can also strengthen the individual when coping successfully.

More resilient students find it easier to overcome obstacles both on and off campus, adapting better to changing situations. A social supportive environment can be of considerable help in this.

Fostering students' social emotional development, skills and competences at universities also develops students' coping skills both on and off campus (Alderby et al, 2023).

Students were asked to rate 20 statements on a 5-point Likert scale (almost never/ not at all like me = 1; almost always/ very much like me = 5), as in the original questionnaire. Scores are computed for each domain as the average of the four items, and results can be presented as a profile across domains. After receiving the responses, responses were assessed using SPSS 25. The descriptive statistics, which are most relevant to our topic, are presented below (Table1).

5   Discussion

When analysing the results of the survey, we can see that the students who responded to the survey gave relatively high scores in all five aspects.

In terms of category averages, the lowest scores were given to Engagement (3.92), although the median for all responses was 4. (The standard deviation is around 1 for almost all categories.)

The highest score was for Connectedness (4.49), which was outstanding. It should be noted here that two statements in this range ("There are people in my life who really care about me." and "I have friends that I really care about.") also have a median of 5, which is encouraging because it means that the students in the sample have a social network that helps them cope with their everyday difficulties.

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The situation is somewhat nuanced by the results of our focus group research following the questionnaire survey, which involved students who completed the questionnaire and volunteered to participate in groups of 6. Here, several of them indicated that their response to the questionnaire was significantly influenced by the proximity of their high school.

A recurring response from focus group participants was that, in many cases, they had not yet developed the close relationship with their cohort mates that they would have liked to have once they had entered university. Many also noted that they hardly knew their peers, which made them feel lonely. This is certainly something that needs to be addressed by the university's mental health advisers and student organisations.

6   Conclusions

In our study, we looked at a small slice of social sustainability and two of its main actors: the managers and employees of future farming organisations, many of whom are still at school or university. Our study involved students from three business schools in Budapest and conducted a questionnaire survey on their mental health.

The results of the survey (EPOCH-H questionnaire) are encouraging, as the responses indicate that the students surveyed gave relatively high scores to the statements in the questionnaire, which suggests a favourable level of resilience and a healthy mental state.

In all cases, however, it is important to look beyond the averages and also to explore the situation of students with extremely low scores, so that universities do not lose, but indeed support these students by activating their external and internal resources to successfully adapt to uncertain situations.

We must not sit back seeing the results. New areas need to be included in the research that goes beyond the focus of the EPOCH-H questionnaire and looks more broadly at the situation, mental well-being and coping skills of the next generation. In addition, methods need to be developed or existing good practices adopted to help a mentally healthy generation carry the torch from us, and be capable of coping with the difficulties they face.

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