

# SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

*Susana Imaginário  
Luís Sérgio Vieira  
Saul Neves de Jesus*

## ABSTRACT

The student's transition from secondary school to higher education consists of a series of changes that can have serious consequences if not satisfactorily overcome, including academic failure and college dropout.

There are many variables that can influence this process of adjustment to higher education, with a particular emphasis given to social integration, especially because, often, this transition involves a change of residence.

Using a sample of 339 students from the University of Algarve, this study aims to deepen our understanding of the relationship between student's subjective well-being and their social integration in higher education.

The results show that the variables of social integration in higher education, interpersonal relationship, personal well-being and emotional balance are predictors of the level of subjective well-being experienced by the students. On the other hand, a significant relation between socio-demographic variables and the student's happiness was not obtained.

Keywords: Students, Higher Education, Social Integration, Subjective well-being.

JEL Classification: I23

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last 30 years there has been a noticeable growth of candidates in higher education (Fernandes & Almeida, 2005), while the rates of academic failure and college dropout have been growing worse in the developed countries (Almeida, Soares & Ferreira, 2002).

Therefore, there are several variables that can promote or constrain the student's academic adjustment and their transition from the secondary school to higher education, and consequently their happiness. These include, for instance, the student's integration and adjustment to the new institution and its characteristics (e.g. Quintas & Gonçalves, 2010); their necessity to move from home and far away from family, friends and peers (Costa & Leal, 2006); their absence of life goals (Oishi, Diener, Suh & Lucas, 1999; cit in Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2000); and even the developmental changes required by the transition from adolescence to early adulthood (Diniz & Almeida, 2006; Soares, Almeida, Diniz & Guisande, 2006).

This transition, and adjustment, needs to be solved in the most adaptive way, in order to minimize the effect of negative consequences for the students. These consequences can occur on different levels (Costa & Leal, 2004), such as academic (low academic performance and/or academic failure, change of course and/or university and even the abandonment of the

course attended and subsequent college dropout), physical, psychological and behavioural (e.g. clinical pathologies such as depression and anxiety disorders).

On the other hand, according to Faria and Carvalho (2006), there are several college students that manage to successfully develop on a personal, academic and professional level, students that the authors describe as “Super-Higher Education Students”. These students are able to manage their stress in a positive way, reconciling their academic lives with their social lives, handling their finances and their academic work. Additionally, they are also adapted to the separation from their family, friends and peers and, when necessary, deal adequately with the required public displays. On the other hand, when these students are confronted with problems regarding their academic life, they express a good behavioural organization, a willingness to make an assertive change and a perception of self-control, as well as an academic and professional independence, professional knowledge and career goals.

Therefore, these students often need to adopt creative and individual strategies, and even innovative techniques (Sousa, Monteiro & Pellissier, 2009), on their higher education attendance to be able to adjust, as well as possible, to these changes and challenges, as in any other strategy. This personal motivation, as well as the attempt to successfully overcome the challenges arising from transitioning from secondary education to higher education, promotes, as Almeida, Faísca and Jesus (2009) argue, not only a sense of belonging to the institution attended but also the development of personal skills, the versatility of skills, the availability to perform different functions/papers, and the ability to respond to changes and deal with them successfully.

## **2. SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION**

From this perspective, the evaluation the student make of their subjective well-being while attending a higher education institution seems to have an important role on their adjustment to the institution attended. On the other hand, the academic adjustment also seems to play an important role in the evolution that the students experience in their lives.

The concept of subjective well-being, also known as happiness and satisfaction (Giacomoni, 2004), was used for the first time by Wilson in 1960 (Galinha & Pais-Ribeiro, 2005a) in an economic context and with the denomination of Material Well-Being, the evaluation that the individual makes regarding well-being related to goods and services that can be acquired with their earnings. Therefore, according to this author (Wilson, 1967; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2000) a happy person is an individual who is young, male or female, healthy, well educated, well paid, extroverted, optimistic, worry-free, religious, married, with high self-esteem and realistic aspirations.

The use of the concept of subjective well-being in Psychology went through two distinct phases (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2000). The first phase was more focused on the construction of evaluation instruments of happiness and satisfaction, resulting in several descriptive studies. The focus of the second phase was on the testing of theories about the changes on subjective well-being in different individuals.

Today, we are in a sophisticated phase (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2000), resulting in the combination of process approaches with the evaluation theories of subjective well-being, aimed at inferring the psychological processes that interfere with this process. This phase is composed of several elements, such as longitudinal studies, experimental manipulation and multiple assessment measures.

Generally speaking, the concept of subjective well-being refers to the assessment that individuals make of their own lives at all levels (Diener, Suh & Sapyta, 1998), including happiness, pleasant emotions, life satisfaction and lack of humour and/

or unpleasant emotions (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2000). Therefore, this is a multidimensional construct (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2000; Diener, Sapyta, & Suh, 1998; Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997; Oishi, Diener, Lucas & Suh, 1999), relatively stable (Compton, 2005), and composed of two dimensions: one cognitive (life satisfaction) and the other affective (distributed by two independent factors: positive affect and negative affect) (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2000; Diener, Oishi & Suh, 1997; Oishi, Diener, Lucas & Suh, 1999).

According to this perspective, subjective well-being influences and can even interfere with all dimensions of our life and, therefore, with social integration, even being conditioned by the individual's culture, values, life goals and personality (Diener & Lucas, 2000; cit in Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2000). For college students, social integration is a sensitive subject, especially for those who need to move away from their family, friends and peers to attend their courses (Ferraz & Pereira, 2003).

In a study developed by Zheng, Sang & Wang (2004), the authors concluded that college students who were dislocated from their habitual residences showed higher values of subjective well-being when they felt socially integrated at the attended institution.

The support of peers, family, faculty and staff is crucial for the students' personal and interpersonal adjustment to the attended institution (Costa & Leal, 2004). However, more importantly than the quality and dimension of the social network, the way that the student perceives their social support plays the most important role in their social integration (Pinheiro & Ferreira, 2005).

In fact, social integration is one of the most important key-problems that the students need to overcome when they enter the higher education system; that is why, for the first months of their college attendance, students are more focused on the establishment of interpersonal relations, then later shifting their focus to the responsibilities of higher education attendance (Diniz & Almeida, 2006; Ferreira, Almeida & Soares, 2001).

Moreover, social integration in college education also presents a close relation with the student's well-being; in fact, according to Diniz and Almeida (2005), personal well-being can be considered as one of the dimensions of this adjustment.

The theory developed by these authors (Diniz & Almeida, 2005) assumes that the social integration of college students is influenced by three variables: interpersonal relationship, emotional balance and personal well-being. The interpersonal relation refers to the establishment of all type of relations along with higher education attendance, including peers, colleagues, faculty members, and staff members. On the other hand, emotional balance relates to the emotional equilibrium showed by the students while they interrelate with other persons. Finally, personal well-being refers to a general evaluation that students conduct of their own welfare, regarding positive and negative emotions.

Therefore, this study aims to deepen the knowledge about the relation between social integration in higher education and the student's subjective well-being.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Sample**

A total of 339 students from the University of Algarve participated in this study; 67% (N=226) of those were female. The mean age of the sample was 21.83 years old (M=, SD=5.794), ranged between 18 and 62 years old. Most participants attended the 1st grade (N=194, 57.2%) or the 3rd grade (N=80, 23.6%), while only 19.2% (19.2%) were from the 2nd grade.

Although a large number of students are natives from the Algarve region (57.9%, N=197), for the majority, entrance to the University of Algarve required the displacement from their usual residence (50.7%, N=172).

### **3.2. Measurements**

The subjective well-being was measured through two different and complementary instruments: Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985; validated for Portuguese by Simões, 1992) and Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988; validated for Portuguese by Galinha & Pais-Ribeiro, 2005a; 2005b).

The Satisfaction With Life Scale evaluates the cognitive dimension of subjective well-being, namely, the global assessment of life made by adults, youth and seniors (Giacomini, 2004). This scale is composed of five items evaluated on a 7 point Likert Scale.

On the other hand, the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule measures the individual's positive and negative affect, being composed of 20 items evaluated on a 5 point Likert scale.

The evaluation of social integration in higher education was accomplished through the use of the Escala de Integração Social no Ensino Superior (Social Integration on Higher Education Scale), EISES (Diniz & Almeida, 2005), developed especially for Portuguese college students. This scale is composed of 14 items evaluated on a 5 point Likert scale and divided into three variables: interpersonal relationship, emotional balance and personal well-being.

### **3.3. Procedures**

Faculty members from different schools and faculties were contacted through e-mail explaining the purpose of the study and asking for some time for the application of the instruments. They were applied collectively and self-administered in a period of time, between 10 and 20 minutes in length.

For the statistical treatment of the data, we used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 17.0.

## **4. RESULTS**

In order to analyze the influence of the students' subjective well-being and their social integration in higher education, we present the obtained results in the following order: descriptive analysis, correlation analysis and regression analysis.

The results from the descriptive statistics are presented in table 1. According to the analysis of this table, it is possible to notice that the students present good indicators of social integration (Interpersonal relationship  $M=11.91$ , Personal well-being  $M=14.51$  and Emotional Balance  $M=11.26$ ), as well as subjective well-being ( $M=.00$ ,  $SD=2.08$ ).

It is also important to relate these variables (subjective well-being and social integration in higher education) with the socio-demographics variables (sex, attended year and change of residence).

Regarding the sex variable, a significant difference regarding personal well-being was found, favouring the male students ( $M=15.11$ ,  $DP=3.25$ ;  $F=5.47$ ,  $p=.020$ ), while the female students had a mean of 14.22 ( $SD=3.33$ ), as well as for emotional balance, also favouring the male students ( $M=11.97$ ,  $SD=2.70$ ;  $F=12.33$ ,  $p=.001$ ).

Regarding the year attended, the only significant difference obtained concerns subjective well-being, whereas the students present higher values when they advance through their academic course ( $F=2.784$ ,  $p=.041$ ). For the 1st year, the students present a subjective well-

being mean of .07 (SD=2.17), while those attending their last year demonstrate a mean of 0.34 (SD=1.81).

Finally, the students that did not have to change from their habitual residence to attend higher education present higher values of personal well-being (M= 14.91, SD=3.16; F=4.896, p=.028), while the students who had to change report lower values (M=14.12, SD=3.44).

Through the analysis of the relation between variables, it is possible to notice that all of them are positively correlated at a significance level of .01. Furthermore, the correlations obtained oscillate between .390 (between the variables interpersonal relationship and personal well-being) and .603 (between the dimensions personal well-being and emotional balance).

**Table 1: Minimum, maximum, average and standard deviation of variables and correlations among them**

	1	2	3	4
Minimum	-8.06	4.00	4.00	3.00
Maximum	5.90	15.00	20.00	15.00
Mean	.00	11.91	14.51	11.26
Std. Deviation	2.08	2.23	3.32	2.69
1. Subjective Well-being	1			
2. Interpersonal Relationship	.412**	1		
3. Personal Well-being	.394**	.390**	1	
4. Emotional Balance	.509**	.580**	.603**	1

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

In order to deepen the relations between the variables evaluated, we resorted to the performance of hierarchical multiple regression with the enter method (table 2). In the regression equation, we consider the subjective well-being as the dependent variable and the other variables as predictors and introduced by blocks.

As the first step, we insert the socio-demographic variables assessed, including sex, attended year and change of residence. For the second step, we used the dimensions of social integration in higher education (interpersonal relationship, personal well-being and emotional balance).

**Table 2: Variables socio-demographics and social integration predictive of subjective well-being (values  $\beta$ , t and significance)**

Dependent variable	Predictive variable	$\beta$	t	Sig.
Step 1 Subjective well-being	Sex	-.026	-.479	.632
	Attended year	.026	.477	.634
	Change of residence	-.016	-.297	.767
R2 adjusted .007 (F=.174, p=.914)				
Step 2 Subjective well-being	Sex	.061	1.291	.197
	Attended year	-.028	-.600	.549
	Change of residence	.012	.254	.800
	<b>Interpersonal Relationship</b>	<b>.163</b>	<b>2.845</b>	<b>.005</b>
	<b>Personal Well-being</b>	<b>.135</b>	<b>2.290</b>	<b>.023</b>
	<b>Emotional Balance</b>	<b>.346</b>	<b>5.195</b>	<b>.000</b>
R2 adjusted .281 (F=23.037, p=.000)				

Table 2 shows the regression coefficients of the equations. Through analysis of this table, it is possible to notice that none of the variables from the 1st step has statistically significant predictive power on the student's positive affect.

When we introduced the 2nd step in the equation, social integration in higher education, it was observed that all of its dimensions explain 28% of the subjective well-being variability, namely emotional balance ( $\beta=.346$ ,  $t=5.195$ ,  $p\leq.000$ ), interpersonal relationship ( $\beta=.163$ ,  $t=2.845$ ,  $p=.005$ ) and personal well-being ( $\beta=.135$ ,  $t=2.290$ ,  $p=.023$ ).

## 5. DISCUSSION

The entrance and adjustment to higher education is a very emotional moment for students, generating positive emotions, as well as negative manifestations. Thus, it is assumed that the more the students feel integrated and happy in higher education, the more they will try to avoid and to minimize the consequences associated with those negative emotions, which can, in most cases, be the origin of, or contribute to, academic failure and academic dropout, a problem that is affecting more and more Portuguese universities and higher education institutions.

To face this educational problem, it is crucial to deepen the knowledge about the factors that can interfere with the students' adjustment to higher education. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the existent relation between the socio-demographic variables (sex, attended year and change of residence), social integration on higher education and students' subjective well-being.

The results show that the participants present positive indicators of social integration and subjective well-being. However, through our analysis, we found several statistically significant differences regarding the socio-demographic variables, subjective well-being and the dimensions of social integration in higher education.

We found that male students present higher values of social integration than female students, namely on personal well-being and emotional balance, showing that these students are more concerned about their social integration than the women.

On the other hand, the results also show that students' subjective well-being tends to increase over the course of their academic careers, which can be explained by their motivation for the attended course, as well as their setting of personal, professional and academic goals. Contrary to what was expected, the participants did not report significant differences regarding their social integration in higher education. Several authors (e.g. Diniz & Almeida, 2005) argue that the social concerns of the students are different according to their attending year, focusing initially on the establishment of relationships with their peers and colleagues; as they advance in their course, they try to establish relationships with friends, faculty and staff members, while also focusing more on their academic goals.

It was also possible to notice higher values of personal well-being from the students that are still living in their habitual homes. This result shows that these students were able to maintain their previous social relations, not feeling the crucial need to establish new relations with their institutional peers, faculty and staff.

Our results also demonstrate that subjective well-being and social integration in higher education, as expected, are closely related, requiring the development of more research to deepen this relationship. Therefore, our findings suggest that all the dimensions from social integration in higher education (interpersonal relationship, personal well-being and emotional balance) play an important role on the evaluation that the students make of their happiness, especially for emotional balance.

Although significant differences were obtained regarding the evaluated socio-demographic variables of sex, attended year and change of residence, these variables do not seem to influence subjective well-being, as they did not emerge as predictive variables.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The transition from secondary education to higher education and the adjustment to the higher education institution is a very emotional moment for students, generating positive emotions, as well as negative manifestations.

Therefore, it is assumed that the more the students feel integrated and happy in higher education, the more they will avoid and minimize the consequences associated with those negative emotions, which can originate or contribute to academic failure and even to academic dropout.

This study aimed to analyze the relations between social integration in higher education (interpersonal relationship, personal well-being and emotional balance) and the students' subjective well-being, also taking into account some socio-demographic variables such as sex, attended year and change of residence.

Through the analysis of our results, we were able to conclude that male students are more focused on their social integration in higher education, presenting higher values of personal well-being and emotional balance than female students. On the other hand, our findings also suggest that students' happiness tends to increase with the advance of their academic careers, while the students who did not have to change homes for their attendance in higher education present higher values of personal well-being.

All the dimensions from social integration in higher education, including interpersonal relationship, personal well-being and emotional balance, seem to play an important role on the students' subjective well-being, although there was no observed influence of the evaluated socio-demographic variables (sex, attended year and change of residence).

However, it is not possible to generalize the obtained results; therefore, in future researches, data should be collected from students of other higher education institutions, and the analysis should take into account other socio-demographic variables, such as attended course and institution and type of education, as well as other relevant variables, such as coping strategies, motivation and life goals.

On the other hand, our sample did not take into account the students' nationalities; therefore, a similar study should be developed with the students that come to the country for a specific semester, or several semesters, from the ERASMUS programmes or other similar programmes.

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