

Title:

Happiness among first year students, does orientation programmes make a difference?¹

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Abstract

The last few decades has seen a significant increase in research on the individual's subjective experience of well-being. The subjective well-being of university students has received less attention. This is important given the widespread concern over the high dropout rates at institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Macfarlane (2005) estimates this to be as high as 50% on average.

The aim of this paper is to explore possible factors that have an impact on the overall subjective well-being of students. An exploratory enquiry into the possible determinants of subjective well-being of first year Economics students at a comprehensive university will be used as a case study. The paper offers a unique contribution to the existing body of literature through an exposition of the possible effect of a targeted first year orientation programme on the overall subjective well-being of first year Economics students.

The study follows a mixed method research approach. Available demographic data is supplemented by a purposefully developed survey instrument. The survey component was developed with the assistance of the academic development and support centre at the institution. The envisaged research population will consist of 130 first year students majoring in Economics. All ethical considerations were strictly adhered to and ethical clearance was obtained before the research commenced. Qualitative and quantitative analyses of the data will be utilised to explore the role of the orientation program for first year students in the Economics Department in terms of students' subjective well-being. The hypothesis is that the program played a positive role in the subjective well-being of the students. Students may well feel more in control of their destiny through this continued interaction with the Department. The paper presents the empirical results pertaining to the analysis, laying the foundation for future studies on the subjective well-being of students.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND AIM OF THE PAPER

There was a time when the study of well-being was at the periphery of the study field of economics, mainly as a result of the disciplinary paradigm of logical positivism. The last three to four decades saw a significant turnaround as the notion of happiness and its application in economics came more and more to the fore. The (re)introduction of subjective well-being into economics is seen by many to coincide with the seminal work of researchers like Richard Easterlin (1974; 2001). The field of study gained impetus in the 1980s, especially as the result of the formative work of Diener and his colleagues and co-researchers (Dave, Tripathi, Singh, & Udainya, 2011).

The comprehensive body of literature on subjective well-being over the last decade revealed that the concept is connected with a range of social, economic, and cultural characteristics of nations (Diener et al., 2009a). A first-rate overview of the factors emerging from known research is offered in Diener et al. (1999). Frey and Stutzer (2002) and Dolan, Peasgood and White (2008) provide further excellent reviews on the large economics literature on the determinants of the well-being concept. South African studies on subjective well-being include important recent work by Booysen and Botha (2011) and Ebrahim, Botha and Snowball (2011). This was preceded by shaping work in a South African context by Valerie Møller and a number of co-researchers over a period of twenty years and more. The body of literature include Møller and Schlemmer (1989), Møller (1998), Møller and Saris (2001) as well as Møller and Dickow (2002).

International literature on the well-being of university students specifically suggests that university students all across the world regard happiness as a key element in their lives (Diener, Diener & Diener, 1995). University students in theory are young, dynamic and count among the well educated population of the society and they are bound to be the adults, employees and parents of the future (Türkdoğan & Duru, 2012). The question as to how students perceive their well-being is an important subject in terms of reaching their potential.

This is an important issue in South Africa as well, given the widespread concern over the high dropout rates at institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Macfarlane (2005) estimates this to be as high as 50% on average. However, unlike in the international research landscape, the subjective well-being of university students received less attention in the South African literature up to now. This research is an exploratory endeavour to start opening up this research avenue.

The aim of this paper is to explore possible factors that have an impact on the overall subjective well-being of students. An exploratory enquiry into the possible determinants of subjective well-being of first year economics students at a comprehensive university will be used as a case study. The paper offers a unique contribution to the existing body of literature through an exposition of the possible effect of a targeted first year orientation programme on the overall subjective well-being of first year Economics students. The hypothesis is that the program played a positive role in the subjective well-being of the students. Students may well feel more in control of their destiny through this continued interaction with the Department.

The paper will explore the available literature on the topic, followed by an exposition of the research methodology employed in the research. The empirical analysis, discussion of the results and the conclusions follows in chronological order.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW – SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AND STUDENTS

The study of well-being for the most part falls into two strands of research. The first is the hedonic approach and the second is termed the eudaimonic approach (Negovan, 2010). The *hedonic* approach sees and defines well-being in terms of happiness and of the experience of pleasure combined with

the absence of pain. This is where the literature on subjective well-being fits in (Negovan, 2010).

The eudaimonic approach on the other hand describes well-being as human potential. When potential is realized, it leads to a person being able to function optimally (Negovan, 2010). The literature on psychological and social well-being reflects this. This study falls within the first stream of the literature. Subjective well-being is generally defined as the individual's cognitive and affectionate evaluation of his life (Dave et al., 2011).

University life is a unique micro-cosmos of society as a whole. The typical first year student faces a variety of social and emotional challenges that may impact on his/her subjective well-being (Negovan, 2010). Both international and in the South African context university students are continuously facing the risk of poor academic performance. This must be seen in the context of their broader perception as to what is important to young people in general.

The perceptions of young people and students themselves must be evaluated in any study of subjective well-being. Eckersley (2011) reports on the Australian Government's 'National Conversation' with young people. The results clearly indicate the importance of health and wellbeing in the lives of the youth, particularly mental health, body image, sexual health, and drug and alcohol problems. The individual's own perceptions are seen in relation to the strength of self-esteem and self-knowledge, coupled with the individual's ability to think positively or negatively (Cron Dahl and Eklund, 2012). Complementary issues mentioned were stress, personal expectations of the future and health behaviour (diet, smoking, drug- and alcohol use, etc.). Coupled with this, is the importance of other exogenous factors.

The factors identified in the literature, which possibly affects students' subjective well-being, starts with the fulfilment of their basic needs. The key assumption of need theories is that happiness is felt only if human needs can be fulfilled sufficiently (Türkdoğan and Duru, 2012). Furthermore, Türkdoğan and Duru (2012) show the basic needs of students significantly predicts

subjective well-being. This applies to all dimensions of basic needs. The needs for freedom, fun and power came out as stronger predictors of subjective well being in university students than the other basic needs (Türkdoğan and Duru, 2012).

Theory suggests that issues such as achievement or impaired social functioning must be viewed in the context of basic needs such as their financial and accommodation problems. In addition, the specific demands and pressure of the academia is also important, especially the fear of non-completion (Negovan, 2010; Longden, 2008). Additional problems that may accentuate the underlying risk of non-completion are insufficient ex-ante information about the programme and/or the institution, and concerns regarding the financing of studies, accommodation and transport (Longden, 2008).

An interesting and almost unexpected problem found to complicate the seemingly idyllic life of students is, in fact, 'over-engagement' (Eckersley, 2011). Eckersley (2011) quotes a recent Australian study which found that 48% of university students were psychologically distressed. In fact many had a significant risk of developing or having a mental disorder of some kind. Results of national surveys of American college students reveal similar characteristics. Many (30 to 90%) American students report that they experienced a sense of feeling overwhelmed by all they had to do, feeling exhausted, anxiousness, anger, and depression. All of this makes it difficult to function (Eckersley, 2011).

Türkdoğan and Duru (2012: 2444) sums up the issue of subjective well-being of students as follows: *"It can be said that the students who have the ability to make choices and to express themselves freely, who have an attempt to fun with their interests, who feel themselves worthy and successful, who have enough safety and shelter conditions, and who have good relationships with special people in their lives, are more close to happiness than the others."*

The aspects identified in the literature above will constitute the backbone of the investigation into the possible factors impacting on the first year economic students at a comprehensive university. The research method employed in order to conduct the investigation is discussed next.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study follows a mixed method research approach. This implies that qualitative and quantitative analyses of the data will be utilised to explore the role of the orientation program for first year students in the Economics Department in terms of students' subjective well-being.

Available demographic data on the first year economic students is supplemented by a purposefully developed survey instrument. The survey component was developed with the assistance of the academic development and support centre at the institution. After the development of the questionnaire, it was tabled to the chairperson of the faculty ethics committee. Permission was granted to deploy the survey instrument. All accompanying ethical considerations were strictly adhered too during the administering of the study.

The envisaged research population consists of 130 first year students majoring in Economics. The senior tutor was trained and assisted in the collecting of the data in the various tutorial classes of the first year students. A pilot run of the study was conducted and the results discussed in order to identify any ambiguous questions and other possible problems in the survey instrument. The fieldworker asked the students whether they are willing to participate in the study and the aim and objectives of the study was explained to them.

The data was collected during the month of August 2013. The data was captured and then cleaned in order to provide a fit for sample data set for the empirical analysis. The final sample size of the research consisted of ...

completed questionnaires completed in good order. This represents ...% of the research population.

The quantitative analysis was supplemented by a qualitative thematic analysis (content analysis) of the open ended questions of the survey instrument. The following section provides the results and discussion of the results.

4. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Under construction – will be presented at ESSA conference



5. CONCLUSIONS

One of the suggestions flowing from the study is the need to identify at risk students and then determine what interventions can be instituted that specifically target aspects that may impact negatively on their well-being and indirectly on their chances of completing their studies successfully. There are however no quick fix solutions. Each institution of higher learning must unearth ways of growing the chances of individual students' success, depending on their unique circumstances.

An important area for future studies emerging from the research is the differences that may exist in the perception of subjective well-being between first generation and second generation students as well as the urban / rural origin of the students.

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