WELL-BEING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND POSSIBILITIES FOR ITS IMPROVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

From numerous researches and different theoretical approaches, well-being is considered as an umbrella term that covers different aspects. According to the World Health Organization, "Well-being is a state in which the individual realizes their potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to their community." (cited in Wistoft, 2012:1) Due to its multidimensional nature, literature speaks about the emotional, social, pedagogical and psychological well-being. In the educational context, students' well-being is important, since it contributes to students' overall positive perspective of life, feelings of joy and optimism, but it also has a positive influence on achieving better academic results.

The aim of this paper is to examine the level of the psychological subjective well-being among university students in regards to six different dimensions and to explore students' opinions about the possibilities that the university can offer for the purpose of improving students' well-being. The survey was conducted on a sample of 106 students at International Balkan University in Skopje, North Macedonia.
Results have shown that students have a moderate level of psychological subjective well-being, with the highest score in the Personal growth and the lowest in the Positive relations with other subscales. Based on their opinions, recommendations for improvement are given. They refer to four main aspects: Curriculum interventions, Leisure activities, Social activities and Counseling services.

Keywords: *Pedagogical well-being, Psychological well-being, university students*

INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, there has been an increased interest and body of research on the topic of well-being, especially in the period after the 1960s'.
According to the Center for Disease Control and Preventation, well-being is a positive outcome that is meaningful for people and for many sectors of society, because it tells that people perceive that their lives are going well. Good living conditions (e.g., housing, employment) are fundamental to well-being (CDC, 2021). According to PISA reports, well-being is defined broadly as the "quality of people's lives and standard of living" (cited in Courtney et al., 2023).
Tov (2018) considers that the term well-being encompasses all the ways in which people experience and evaluate their lives positively in terms of how people perceive the quality of life, the state of feeling good and functioning well in life and the sense of satisfaction, happiness, effective social functioning, a disposition of optimism, openness and resilience. (Tov, 2018)

Although focused mainly on positive perspectives and feelings, the stress and regular difficulties people face throughout their life are not omitted from this concept. According to the World Health Organization "well-being is a state in which the individual realizes their potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to their community (cited in Wistoft, 2021: 1). It is not a positive-negative dichotomy, but a complex interplay between internal (subjective wellbeing) and external factors, and how individuals respond to these (OECD, 2014).

In this regard, Rugger et, al. (2022) believe that well-being is more than happiness and life satisfaction.The lack or excess of concerns, high or low levels of anxiety and other conditions, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the lifestyle, successes or failures, do not determine a healthy well-being, but the presence of all of these and the ability for coping, for healthy adaptation in different situations and conditions, are indicators of a healthy well-being.
Wistoft (2021) speaks about two approaches: The health-professional and The Educational-scientific or health-pedagogical approach.

- The health-professional approach sees well-being as the absence of failure, or a state in which the risk of distress or sickness is minimal. Accordingly, the potential sources of failure or 'risk-behaviors' should be identified, which means that primarily the 'worrying tendencies' are addressed. In order to promote well-being, the risk-behaviors should be eliminated or prevented.
- The educational scientific or health-pedagogical approach understands well-being positively, as the presence or sense of pupils' optimism, hopes, confidence and trust in their surroundings, and the influence of these factors on their well-being, as well as feeling of personal drive, learning and pleasure of being with others (Wistoft, 2021: 2)

These two approaches offer a significant shift in the concept of well-being, from absence of negative conditions to prevalence of positive attributes (Fraillon, 2004) and from languishing toward flourishing, seen as a state in which the individual experiences high psychological and social functioning level (Keyes, 2002: 208)

La Placa et al. (2013) explained the concept of well being from the educational scientific or health pedagogical approach believing that it tends to integrate subjective states of the individual and objective elements such as family, community and the environment. In the structural framework they offer for defining well-being, the focus is on how wider structural domains impact upon psychological development and influence individuals' active ability to cope, thrive and build resilience on the subjective level. With this, it is recognized that the wider circumstances influence on the individual's subjective well-being, like family, community and society, as well as a range of environmental, geographic, socio-economic and political forces. While the individual is included in the model, the individual perspective does not dominate, but rather the framework considers all aspects of well-being. The four domains of this framework are: individual well-being, family well-being, community well-being and societal well-being (La Placa et al, 2013: 118).

When it comes to students' well-being in the educational context, this concept is also important. One of the reasons is because students' well-being is often regarded as one of the priorities of education systems and is closely related to the general aim of education, i.e. developing students who are "knowledgeable, responsible, healthy, caring, connected and contributing". (Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004).

Also, it's been emphasized that students' well-being contributes to better academic achievements and overall positive school experiences (Australian Catholic University, 2008; OECD, 2018).
In this paper, the focus will be on examining students' well-being and exploring the way in which education institutions, specifically at university level, can contribute in creating an environment and an education context that will promote and improve students' well-being.

The meaning of students' well-being

Students' well-being is important since it influences to the overall feeling and perception students have related to the school environment. It can also be an important factor in the academic achievements of the students. It is defined as "a sustainable state of positive mood and attitude, resilience, and satisfaction with self, relationships and experiences at school" (Australian Catholic University, 2008).
Through analyzing different definitions of well-being, authors of the Scoping study into approaches to student well-being (2008), identified that well-being includes the following components: 1) Cognitive - refers to Satisfaction with relationships and other dimensions of one's life; 2) Performance – related to effective functioning and the maximizing of one's potential; 3) Emotional – in regards to positive affect; and 4) Coping component or the resilience of the individual. (Australian Catholic University, 2008).

In student's everyday experiences in school, the level of well-being can be manifested through the overall satisfaction with the life at school, the engagement in the process of learning and the social-emotional behaviour of the student. This points to the multidimensional nature of the concept of well-being. Namely, in the literature we may find explanations of emotional, social, pedagogical and psychological well-being.
Emotional well-being reflects the presence or absence of positive feeling about life (Keyes, 2002: 208) and it refers to the way a person thinks and feels about themselves, including being able to adapt and deal with daily challenges (i.e. being resilient and possessing coping skills) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare AIHW, 2012).
Social well-being is related to a broader social criterion, like social coherence, social integration, acceptance and social contribution. based on which the individual evaluates his/her functioning in life. Thereby, individuals function well when they see society as meaningful, have potential for growth, feel that they belong to and are accepted by the society (Keyes, 2002). In terms of students, it considers how the individual characteristics of the student facilitate positive interactions with their family, school and community. (AIHW, 2012)
Pedagogical well-being is defined as "a sense of autonomy, relatedness, competence, and belonging or a lack of these elements generated for pupils and teachers in the everyday interactions of school." (Pyhalto, Soini & Pietarinen, 2010). It is constructed through the everyday experiences students have in school, positive and negative, related to the process of studying, classroom activities, interaction with peers, teachers etc., and how the student deals with them. These experiences, which are closely related to the school environment, help students to adapt strategies and practices which can improve their resilience and coping skills, and contribute to students' pedagogical well-being. In this regard, they explain pedagogical well-being through the interrelated nature of learning and well-being (Pyhalto et al. 2010).

Psychological well-being, according to Ryff and Keyes (1995), includes six dimensions: self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others and environmental mastery and autonomy. These dimensions they have translated into subscales, aimed to measure the psychological well-being. The main characteristics of the subscales are described as follows:

1. The Self-Acceptance – refers to the positive evaluation of one-self and one's past life. People who score high in this dimension acknowledge and accept both positive and negative qualities and have positive attitude toward self and feel positive about past life. On contrary, those who score low, are disappointed of self, wish to be different of what he/she is, and are not satisfied of their past life.
2. The personal growth – is the sense of continued growth and development as a person. High scorers see themselves as growing, are focused on improving and have sense of realizing own potentials, and are able to see improvements over time. Contrary, low scorers feel bored, uninterested, see themselves as unable to develop new behaviors and attitudes, lack sense of improvement over time and have a sense of personal stagnation.

3. The purpose in life – is related to the belief that one's life is purposeful and meaningful High scorers have goals in life, sense of direction and hold beliefs that give a purpose to their life. The low scorers, lack these aspects, i.e. lack he sense of meaning in life and sense of direction and have no beliefs that give meaning in their lives.
4. The Positive relations with others – is about having quality relations with others. People who score high have warm and trusting relationships with others, are able of empathy and affection, understand importance of giving and taking in relationships, while low scorers find difficult to be warm and open, are isolated and frustrated in interpersonal relationships, are not willing to make compromises in order to sustain relationships.
5. The environmental mastery – is related to the capacity to manage effectively one's life and surrounding world. High scorers have a sense of competence in managing the environment, know how to use the surrounding opportunities and are able to choose or create context according to their needs and values. Low scorers have difficulty in managing the environment, lack sense of control of the surrounding and feel unable to change or improve it.
6. The autonomy – refers to the sense of self-determination. High scorers are independent, regulate and evaluate their own behavior by personal standards and are able to resist the social pressure, whereas low scorers are concerned about the expectations and judgments of others, rely on them when making important decisions and conform to social pressure about how to think and behave. (Ryff & Keyes, 1995)

They believed that individuals are functioning well when they like most parts of themselves, have warm and trusting relationships, see themselves developing into better people, have direction in life, are able to shape their environments in order to satisfy their needs, and have a degree of self-determination (cited in Keyes, 2002:208) In his research Ryff has focused on examining differences in the dimensions regarding the age (comparing young, mid-life and old-age adults) and gender. He found that there was an increase regarding the Environmental mastery and Autonomy with age, particularly from young adult to mid-life, and decreasing regarding the Purpose in life and Personal growth component, particularly from mid-life to old-age. (cited in Ryff & Keyes, 1995)

The importance of the educational environment

Students' well-being is closely related to academic achievement (OECD, 2015; Baik, 2017). Namely, when the learning environment is intentionally designed to support academic achievement; it also has positive influence on students' well-being. Baik et al. (2017) point 5 essentials in this regard:

- Autonomous motivation – teaching process should be organized in a manner that will allow the students possibilities to engaging in intrinsically satisfying activities and allow them to define and work towards achieving goals which they see as valuable for them as learners.
- Belonging within the social group – when students feel that they are accepted and valued by other, they are more motivated to learn more, to achieve better results and feel better about themselves.
- Relationships – within the school environment students to be able to experience positive relationships of mutual trust and care, with peers and teachers. Autonomy – students can experience autonomy when are allowed to have sense of control and freedom to make decisions and choose their actions.
- Sense of competence – can be experienced when students are given possibility to manage tasks and cope with challenges, which will strengthen their sense of competence and belief in oneself. Baik et al. (2017)

Baik et al. (2017) consider that experiences of belonging, positive relationships, autonomy and competence are essential to psychological well-being, since they provide the psychological 'nutriments' or 'resources' that sustain and enhance autonomous motivation and the engagement, persistence and effort that flow from it.

METHODOLOGY

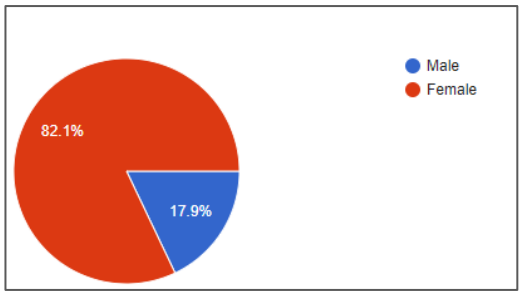
The purpose of this paper is to explore students' well-being from the educational scientific perspective. Two aims were defined: 1) To examine the level of the psychological subjective well-being among university students; and 2) To explore students' opinions about possibilities that the university can offer with the aim of improving students' well-being.

For the purpose of this survey, we used the revised short version of Psychological Well-being scale developed by Ryff and Keyes (1995). The scale is composed of 18 items on a 7-point scale and measures six aspects or components of well-being: Autonomy, Environmental mastery, Personal growth, Positive relations with others, the Purpose of life and the Self-acceptance. For the second aim, additional open-ended questions were used.

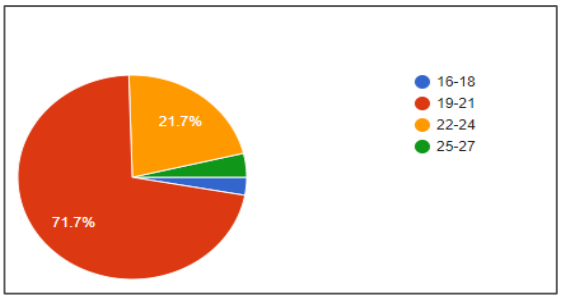
This survey was conducted on a sample of 106 students of International Balkan University in Skopje, North Macedonia, including students of all study years. The study was conducted during the 2021/2022 academic year. For collecting the data, Google forms was used, which was shared with the students. The obtained data were analyzed using the basic statistic operations, whereas for the open-ended questions, a qualitative analysis was conducted.

RESULTS

The sample in this study included 106 participants, of which 82.1% were female (Graph 1), and majority 71.7% aged from 19-21 years (Graph 2).



Graph 1. Sample distribution according to gender



Graph 2. Sample distribution according to age

The first aim of the survey was to examine the level of the psychological subjective well-being of the students. For this purpose, the Psychological well-being scale was used. On this scale, the maximum score that can be obtained is 126, and higher score indicates higher levels of psychological well-being.
In our study, the lowest obtained score is 68, while the highest score is 116. The average score of the sample is 89.75.

Regarding the gender, female students have an average score of 89.34, while for male students is 91.58 (Table 1). From this, we may conclude that male students have a slightly higher score. However, taking into consideration the disproportion of the sample in both categories, i.e. significantly more female than male participants, a test for determining statistically significant differences was not applied.
When it comes to age, results have shown that highest average score have students younger than 19 years (96.7), followed by 19-21 years (90.16), 25-27 years (88.25) and 22-24 years (87.74) (Table 2).
The conclusion is that younger students have higher average score. Here also, due to the unequal distribution of participants in different categories, no conclusions about statistically significant differences can be made.

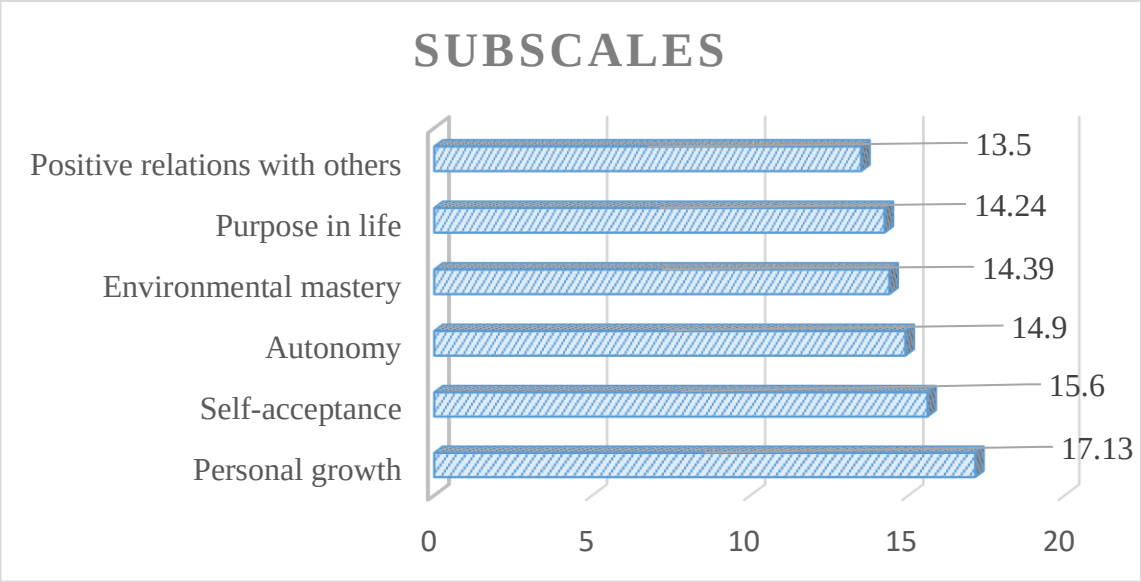
Gender	N	Average
Male	19	91.58
Female	87	89.34

Table 1. Average score according gender

Age	N	Average
Younger than 19	3	96.7
19-21	76	90.16
22-24	23	87.74
25-27	4	88.25

Table 2. Average score according age

When it comes to the examined components of psychological well-being, the applied instrument measures six dimensions, each through the previously explained subscales. On each subscale, the maximum score can be 21. In Graph 3 are presented the results, which have shown that participants have the highest average score on the Personal growth subscale (17.13), followed by Self-acceptance (15.6), Autonomy (14.90), Environmental mastery (14.39), Purpose in life (14.24), and lowest score on the Positive relations with other subscales (13.50).



Graph 3. Average scores on subscales

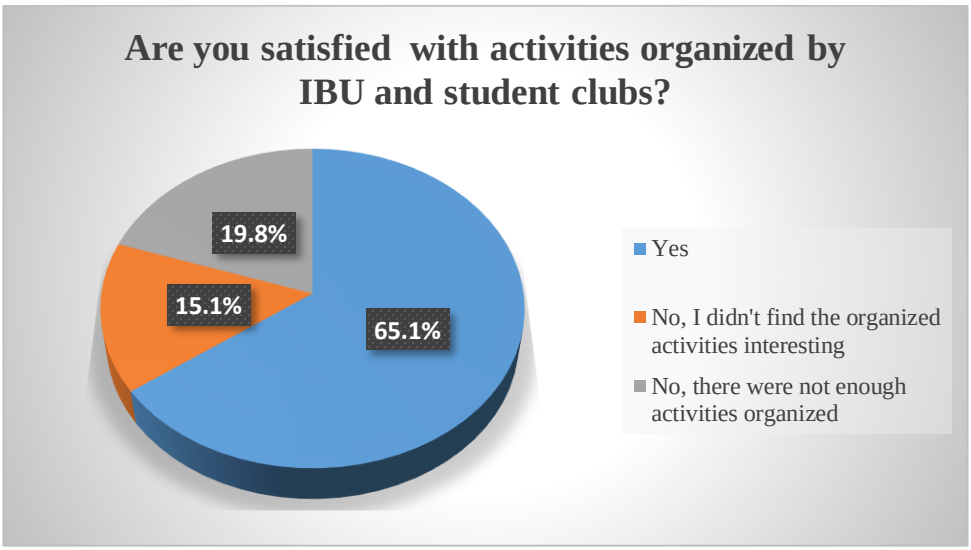
The conclusion drawn from this is that the average score on all subscales is not very high and is in moderate range. Also, it can be noted that the subscales with higher average score are more related to the individual self, i.e. personal growth and self-acceptance, which can be justified with the age of participants. Namely, participants are at the age when they are mainly focused on improvement in the field of studies, learning about self, accepting oneself as he/she is and aim at improving their qualities. Therefore, personal growth, self-acceptance and autonomy in making decisions about ones' own life can be considered as being the focus of young adults' lives. Still, concerns appear on the relatively moderate average score on the subscale of Positive relations with others.

Taking into consideration that the survey was conducted during the 2021/2022 academic year, which was a pandemic period when part of the teaching process was done online, the assumption is that this result may have been influenced by the fact that the face-to-face interaction between the students was restricted and most of their activities were online. Still, further research would be needed in order to confirm or reject this assumption.

Based on the presented results, it can be concluded that the students, participants in this survey, have a moderate level of psychological well-being, which was shown by the overall score as well as the score on the subscales. The highest average score is seen on the Personal growth subscale, while the lowest on the Positive relations with others.

The second aim was to explore students' opinions about possibilities that the university can offer for the purpose of improving students' well-being.

Firstly, the students were asked if they are satisfied with the activities which are organized by the University and different student clubs. Results (Graph 4) show that more than half of the students or 65.1% are satisfied, 15.1% said that organized activities were not interesting for them, whereas 19.8% consider that there were not enough activities. From this, follows the conclusion that almost 35% of the students are not satisfied with the offered activities.



Graph 4. Students' opinions about organized activities

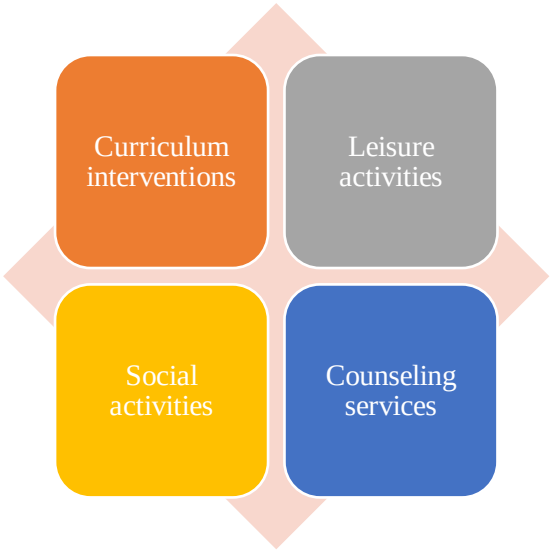
In order to have better and clearer information about the needs of the students, in terms of activities that the University can offer and that would contribute toward students' well-being, students were asked what kind of activities would they like to be organized in the future. This was an open-ended question and after the analysis, the gathered answers were grouped, according to the type of activities in the following categories:

- Activities related to the field of study (i.e. workshops, debate clubs, guest lectures, presentations, research activities, movie analysis clubs etc.);
- Leisure activities - Music fest, art exhibition, ecological activities, visit of museums;
- Activities for developing new skills - 'Skills labs', course for painting, theatre club;
- Activities related to students' mental health – Counselling services, psychological testing;
- Sport activities - Tennis, swimming, volleyball, organized outdoor activities and tournaments;
- Social activities - which will contribute in improving student's interaction and connectedness;
- Traveling – visiting other cities and countries and
- Cooperation with other universities - that will allow students to visit other universities and exchange experience.

By analysing the answers of the students, it can be noted that some of the suggested activities are closely related to the previously explored dimensions of well-being through the subscales. Namely, most often listed were activities that will allow the students to improve their skills and knowledge, which is in close connection to the subscale of Personal growth. Also, students pointed to the need of social activities, aimed at improving their interaction and connectedness to peers, which points that students are aware on the importance of this aspect, for which previously it was noted with lower score on the subscale of Positive relations to others.
Here, we also need to note that the students have given a plethora of different activities that can be organized by the University, and that will, directly or indirectly, contribute for students' better well-being.

Recommendations for further activities

Based on the analyzed theoretical foundations and obtained results from this survey, a framework for future activities can be proposed. Our opinion is that the activities should be focused on and include 4 main aspects:



- Curriculum interventions - this refers to the need of making improvements in terms of how the learning environment and curricular activities are organized and how much they are perceived by the students as engaging. According to Baik et al (2017), allowing the students to have feeling of belonging, autonomy, competence and positive relationships can improve the academic achievements, which can influence positively on overall well-being. This can be achieved through planning and introducing activities different from regular ex-cathedra teaching, like debates, workshops, presentations, project assignment etc, which can be more engaging and intrinsically motivating for the students. Allowing greater flexibility in activities and in the assessment process can reduce the unnecessary stressors and can affect positively on students' psychological state.
- Leisure activities – participating in different activities in the free-time allows the students to explore and expand interests in areas that are not necessarily related to their field of study and give opportunity to develop a variety of skills. By offering and organizing activities like student clubs, exhibitions, music performance, sport activities etc. students will have opportunity to engage in and try some new activity, find a new hobby, develop some skill etc., which in turn can enhance the well-being.

- Social activities – allow students to be socially proactive, to interact with others, make friends etc, which can have a positive influence on improving their socio-emotional and interpersonal skills. In this regard a variety of activities can be organized, such as social events, festivals, competitions, volunteering and many more, which can boost the perception about self, bring better quality in social relationships, and enhance social responsibility.
- Counseling services – organizing counseling and guidance services within the frameworks of university life, can strengthen student's mental health and help them cope with different psychological issues. As noted before, well-being is not an absence of obstacles, but rather having the skills and abilities how to manage, cope with and overcome them. Counseling and guidance services can offer significant support in this regard, by helping the students to learn how to be more resilient, adaptable, how to cope with uncertainty, to develop stress management, conflict-resolution, decision-making skills etc.

Our opinion and belief is that the broad array of ideas in the presented aspects can significantly improve the efforts of the university as an education institution toward creating an environment that will support and improve students' well-being.

CONCLUSION

In this paper was emphasized the multidimensional nature of well-being, with the aim and main focus to point that in educational setting, students' well-being should be emphasized as one of the important aspects and even as one of the priorities.
The results from the survey have shown that students have a moderate level of psychological well-being, which was also confirmed with the results on the different subscales. Students have highest score on the Personal growth subscale, whereas lowest score on the Positive relations with others. Regarding their opinion about activities undertaken by the University, almost 1/3 of the students are not satisfied, and have given suggestions for different activities, ranging from organizing workshops, sport and social events, travelling, learning about mental health, seminars for developing different skills etc. They suggest additional activities related to the fields of study and various free activities, as well as organizing social activities that will improve student' connectedness and interaction.

Based on all abovementioned, our recommendations regarding the actions that can be undertaken by the University with aim of improving students' well-being, refer to activities in 4 main aspects: curriculum interventions, leisure activities, social activities and providing counseling services.
With this we would like to emphasize that education institutions, within the complexity of their work, which is aimed not only on acquiring knowledge, skills and competences, but also on the need for personal growth and development of the students as individuals, has the responsibility to take care of students' overall well-being. This means that all dimensions of well-being (i.e. social, emotional, pedagogical and psychological), should be considered, and appropriate actions to be taken.

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