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Life Quality of University Students: A Qualitative Meta-Synthesis[a]

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Abstract

Quality of life among students is considered an important contributor to academic success. Quantitative assessments of students' life quality have identified it as a risk factor for academic procrastination and higher drop-out rates. Nevertheless, subjective investigations into university students' life quality remain underexplored. In the present meta-synthesis, we identified six qualitative studies and implemented Critical Appraisal Skills Programme as an assessment tool. Three main themes emerged from our synthesis: pressures on students, social psychological barriers, and hierarchy. Our findings support the consensus that certain academic tracks such as medical and health sciences can act as a risk factor for life quality. We propose an integration of both quantitative and qualitative assessment to reach a more holistic perspective into students' life quality.

Keywords: university students, subjective well-being, quality of life, meta-synthesis

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Introduction

University dropout rates have been a growing problem all around the world (Lodi et al., 2017). For instance, one out of five college students in the US terminate their education after their first year in school (Ryan, 2004). A similar pattern can be observed in European countries such as Italy, as four out of ten university students eventually quit school before they could graduate (Turri, 2014). In Türkiye, more than 2.3 million students left university between the years 2015 and 2022 (Turkish Higher Education Quality Council, n.d.). Since these numbers present a serious problem, determining the factors that can facilitate undergraduate students to pursue their education is therefore of utmost importance for educational researchers (Pike et al., 2006). Quality of life is one factor that determines students' academic success (Kandemir, 2014; Lodi et al., 2017). To explore students' quality of life, it is essential to investigate student well-being because quality of life and well-being are two interconnected concepts. Social scientists have defined quality of life as subjective well-being, an emotional state. In this regard, life satisfaction and well-being are a set of universal criteria, against which life quality is assessed. (Shin & Johnson, 1978). According to Bradburn (2015), happiness and subjective well-being are defined as a state which consist of more positive feelings and less negative feelings. Life satisfaction and life quality can then be defined as living up to the standards set by individual objectives and demands (Chekola, 1974).

The academic quality of life is one factor that improves academic performance (Bailey & Miller, 1998; Cheung, 2006; Gilman et al., 2000; Hong & Giannakopoulos, 1995), especially in the context of reduced procrastination (Kandemir, 2014; Lodi et al., 2017). University students' life quality is influenced by many factors such as burn-out, the nature of interpersonal relationship and personality traits (Azizli et al., 2015; Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Bettencourt et al., 2010; Çapri et al., 2012; Li et al., 2018; Schlarb et al., 2017). For example, when students feel overwhelmed by various curricular factors such as long contact hours and exam anxiety, they suffer from stress (Bergmann et al., 2019; Veal, 2020). As a result, students' life quality is adversely affected and student

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retention decreases (Berger & Milem, 2000; Chen, 2012). To prevent high dropout rates, it is important to explore the underlying reasons for low life quality.

Recent studies on quality of life are mainly quantitative and based on the scale developed by World Health Organization (Çapri et al., 2012). World Health Organization defines quality of life as: "individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns" (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024, Tools and Toolkits section). As for quantitative studies on Turkish students' quality of life, the Turkish version of World Health Organization Quality of Life Scale (Turkish_WHOQOL-BREF) was mostly preferred as a tool for data collection. The Turkish version of this scale was developed by Eser et al. (1999). The dimensions in this scale are comprised of physical dimension, psychological dimension, social relationships dimension and environmental dimension. Toker and Kalıpçı (2021) used this scale in their study to assess the quality of life of university students in Mediterranean University in Türkiye. They found a positive correlation between the psychological and environmental dimensions on students' general life quality. Therefore, they concluded that universities should improve the physical conditions of their study halls and buildings to increase the life quality of students. In addition, according to them it is important for universities to offer quality health counselling services to their students.

It is apparent that there is a gap in research studies in literature which investigate students' life quality at a deeper level. Our aim is to explore university students' life quality based on their university life experiences by conducting a meta-synthesis analysis involving university students in several European countries (i.e., England, Germany and Sweden).

Literature Review

Up until 1960's happiness and life satisfaction were associated with such personal attributes as being pious, ethical, and wise (Diener, 2009). This definition was in line with Aristotle's concept of "eudaemonia", which is a set of criteria used to make judgements as to how one should lead their life. However, recently quality of life was associated more with the following definition "individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns" (WHO, 2024, Tools and Toolkits section). Therefore, it can be said that today in addition to physical well-being, life quality refers to psycho-social well-being as well (Li & Zhong, 2022). The dimensions of quality of life in World Health Organization Quality of Life Questionnaire (WHOQOL) are as follows: physical well-being, mental well-being, interpersonal relationships, and environmental dimensions. Therefore, it is fair to say that research conducted on student quality of life has revolved around factors that affect these four dimensions.

Beginning from 1990's research findings of the investigation on life quality of students involved the factors affecting student well-being. These include age (Hong & Giannakopoullos, 1994), stress (Chang, 1998; Makinen & Pyschyl, 2001; Simons et al., 2002), physical health (Pilcher, 1998), study style (Cheung, 2006), parenting style (Seibel & Johnson, 2001), lifestyle (Bailey & Miller, 1998) and personal characteristics (Cha, 2003; Yetim, 2003). In addition, social support was reported to influence student well-being in many studies. For example, in a study conducted by Coffman and Gilligan (2002), the stress levels of junior students with high social support scores were found to be low and their quality of life was reported to be high. The primary reason for why students quit university education was found to be resulting from failure to interact effectively with their peers (Ostrow et al., 1986; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979). Social support was found to be a recurring aspect which influences students' life quality in many other research findings (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Demakis & McAdams, 1994). Strong ties with family and peers were reported to have an impact on life quality (Newland & Furnham, 1999; Halamandaris & Power, 1999). These research findings, for example, could help explain why first year students might struggle with adaptation and thus suffer from high stress levels (Demakis & McAdams, 1994). Another factor associated with stress is burn-out. When students fail to cope with stress, it is likely that they will suffer from burn-out (Chow, 2005; Çapri et al., 2012). When students' life satisfaction was reported to be low, they were found to be more likely to suffer from burn-out (Chow, 2005; O'Neill, 1981).

Academic procrastination and low academic performance are the outcomes of low student quality of life (Betz et al., 1971; Elliott & Shinn, 2002; Lent et al., 2007; Nauta, 2007; Schimitt et al., 2008; Staats & Partlo, 1990). According to researchers, when students' quality of life is high, so is their academic success. Procrastination rates of students were observed to be low when their life satisfaction levels were high. This means that when the student has poor well-being, they will be struggling with their academic studies and thus they might

be more likely to leave school. Consequently, it can be said that there is a positive correlation between students' well-being and their academic life experiences (Bailey & Miller, 1998; Cheung, 2006; Gilman et al., 2000; Hong & Giannakopoulos, 1995).

Another outcome of low life quality is low life satisfaction. Life satisfaction of university students is associated with the social-cultural environment in which the student is living, department or faculty in which the student is studying, financial and psychological support provided by the university which the student is affiliated with (Arbues, et al., 2022). For example, in a study conducted in Spain, physical dimension was identified to be the highest score, and the lowest score was found in the psychological dimension. However, in a different study conducted in Canada, general life quality of students was found to be high, especially in the interpersonal relationships dimension (Chow, 2005). These differences in quality of life could be resulting from the factors affecting life satisfaction of university students such as social-cultural environment, the subject they are studying and the extent of the financial and social support they receive from the university administration (Arbues et al., 2022).

Apart from WHOQOL, there have been other scales developed by various researchers to assess students' life quality (Köse & Akyürek, 2022). For example, Köse and Akyürek (2022) developed "Life Satisfaction Survey" based on the data collected from 629 high school and 904 undergraduate students. Based on research findings, they concluded that undergraduates had a rather pragmatic approach to university education. The reason for why they were attending university was found to be to gain an income, rather than receiving quality education. Researchers concluded that university administrators and professors could devise a strategic plan that emphasizes self-actualization and such values as being a productive member of society.

In many different studies it was reported that medical and health sciences students are the ones with the lowest quality of life scores (Cai et al., 2021; Opoku et al., 2017; Saul et al., 2021; Yorks et al., 2017) Therefore, it is fair to say that most of the recent studies on students' life quality revolve around health sciences and medical school students. The results of these studies are similar to each other in that the well-being of medical school students was found to be low (Li & Zhong, 2022). Veal (2020) for example, asserted that due to exposure to elevated levels of stress and burn-out, medical school and health sciences students were more likely to suffer from depression. For this reason, he suggested restructuring of medical school curriculum to address psychological needs of the students. He added that it was crucial to create mental well-being awareness programs. As a result, it can be concluded that the faculty in which the students are studying also has an impact on their well-being.

The recent change of focus from investigating more objective indicators such as academic performance and material well-being to subjective factors such as interpersonal relationships, psycho-social factors, personality and individual experiences inform the current synthesis. By synthesizing qualitative studies conducted with medical and health sciences students, we aim to inquire how university students view their individual experiences at school and what factors play a role in their life quality. To answer the research question, qualitative meta-synthesis method was utilized to a selected dataset of six studies out of twenty studies. We reckon that this meta-synthesis will contribute to the existing literature on students' life quality.

Method

Qualitative meta-synthesis was adopted in this research. Qualitative research has the potential to inform policies and practices (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Qualitative meta-synthesis can be employed by researchers who intend to draw novel conclusions from a collection of qualitative research findings (Thorne et al., 2004). The reason why this method was selected was because "meta-syntheses […] offer novel interpretations of findings. These interpretations will not be found in any one research report, but rather, are inferences derived from taking all of the reports in a sample as a whole" (Thorne et al., 2004, p.1358). Therefore, it can be said that since they have the potential to inform policy and make room for deeper understanding of the phenomena, meta - syntheses can provide valuable sources of information (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Because our aim in this research is to explore the life quality of university students, these procedures have the potential to provide invaluable insight into current higher education research and practice. Therefore, we believe we could explore our research question through this current meta-synthesis.

Search and Selection Process

Initially, we tried to identify all qualitative studies of university students' life quality and well-being all around the world published in Scopus, BMC Medical Education and Science Direct. Table 1 demonstrates Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flow diagram. Search and selection process followed the guidelines outlined in PRISMA 2020 Statement (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA Statement was devised for reporting of quantitative and mixed-methods studies as in systematic reviews and meta-analyses, however when "addressing the presentation and synthesis of qualitative data", the use of PRISMA is highly recommended (Page et al., 2021, p. 2). Therefore, to present the studies used in the search and selection process in a systematic way, we decided to use the flow diagram shown in Table 1.

We selected Scopus, BMC Medical Education and Science Direct databases because they include journals which publish rigorous research and high-quality studies in the field of health, social sciences and humanities (Elsevier, 2024). Initial search terms that were used are as follows: "life quality", "quality of life", "well-being", "stress", and "university students". Certain criteria were applied to select studies to include. Our initial inclusion criteria were as follows: 1) included undergraduate students as participants 2) focused on life quality and/or well-being of students 3) used qualitative methods 4) met the criteria for peer-reviewed journal article. It is apparent from Table 1 that 13 articles were identified in our initial database search. In order not to miss any qualitative studies which met our criteria and to identify more relevant articles, we also conducted a Google Scholar search. The same search terms and the same criteria were employed in our Google Scholar search. Following these steps above, we adopted a quality check method by evaluating the rigor of the selected articles against Critical Appraisal Skills Program ([CASP], 2018). During the evaluation process, the following questions were used:

(1) Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?

(2) Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?

(3) Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?

(4) Is the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?

(5) Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?

(6) Has the relationship between researcher and participants been considered?

(7) Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?

(8) Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?

(9) Is there a clear statement of findings?

(10) How valuable is the research?

During our search we realized almost all qualitative studies revolved around almost exclusively life quality of medical school and health sciences students. Therefore, almost all studies which met our search and selection criteria were conducted with medical school and health sciences students. The studies that were maintained for analysis can be found in Figure 1. As studies on student well-being and life quality differ greatly in terms of context, we eliminated 14 studies out of 20 and continued our analysis with six studies. The geographical regions involved in these six studies were three European countries, namely England, Germany and Sweden. Therefore, in our meta-synthesis, we decided to include studies conducted in England, Germany and Sweden. It is also important to note that the reason for restricting the scope in this way is that "the sample must be homogenous enough to confirm the findings and at the same time heterogeneous enough to ensure abstraction but not too abstract to be meaningless" (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010, p. 250). These studies were found to meet all 10 criteria in CASP (2018) checklist. As part of enhancing validity, all the other studies which did not meet the quality criteria were excluded from the synthesis. It is important to note that other databases such as Web of Science and ProQuest included mainly quantitative quality of life studies. We found one PhD dissertation on medical students' subjective well-being, but it was conducted in the United States of America. Therefore, the dissertation we found in ProQuest was excluded from this review. Therefore, we continued the search process in Scopus, BMC Medical Education Database and Science Direct.

Table 1

*PRISMA Flow Diagram for Qualitative Research on the Life Quality of University Students**

	Scopus	BMC Medical Education Database	Science Direct
Identification	Documents identified by initial Scopus research *n* = 27	Documents identified by initial BMC Medical Education Database research *n* = 801	Documents identified by initial Science Direct research *n* = 18
Screening	Books, book chapters, review articles, conference abstracts, editorials etc. excluded *n* = 5	Books, book chapters, review articles, conference abstracts, editorials etc. excluded *n* = null	Books, book chapters, review articles, conference abstracts, editorials etc. excluded *n* = 11
Eligibility	Articles assessed for eligibility *n* = 22 Articles excluded based on eligibility criteria *n* = 19	Articles assessed for eligibility *n* = 801 Articles excluded based on eligibility criteria *n* = 793	Articles assessed for eligibility *n* = 7 Articles excluded based on eligibility criteria *n* = 5
Include	Selected articles *n* = 3 Additional articles identified via Google search : 7 Total number of articles included: 20	Selected articles *n* = 8	Selected articles *n* = 2

Note:* Search was conducted in December 2023.

Characteristics of the Reviewed Studies

The participants in the reviewed studies were all comprised of medical and health sciences students studying in England, Germany and Sweden. The studies were published between 2014 and 2019. In the reviewed studies data collection tools were interviews with focus groups and questionnaires with open-ended questions. According to Finfgeld-Connett (2010), in meta-syntheses, "triangulation involves the use of findings from topically related qualitative research studies which have been triangulated a priori as part of the original research investigation" (p.249). This current meta-synthesis was carried out with qualitative studies conducted with triangulated data to ensure generalizability and transferability of findings.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis followed the six steps suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis. The analysis began by familiarization of the data. The initial ideas were annotated after immersion to the texts in the data set. In addition to the "findings" section of the studies, we decided to extract information from all relevant sections of the studies. Therefore, we did not rely only on the "findings" section of the selected studies. In this way, to create novel conclusions, we tried to avoid limiting our synthesis to "summarizing themes reported in primary studies" (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005, p.47). Key ideas extracted from the data set were transformed into codes and initial codes were generated systematically in this way. After this second step, researchers searched for themes based on codes. Common interesting features in the data set were analyzed to form themes. To extract themes from the data set, we used R Studio 4.2.1. software program to generate a thematic map of the analysis. Our initial thematic map was based on a sample data extraction as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data extraction and codes can be found in Table 2. According to Finfgeld-Connett (2010), trustworthiness "is enhanced by triangulation" (p.249). To ensure reliability, the researchers were also "attuned to personal perspectives that could introduce bias, and they carefully considered alternative interpretations". (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010, p. 249). Next, these codes were collated to form themes. For reliability purposes, the themes were checked by an evaluator in the fields of education and psychology in relation to the coded extracts to evaluate whether they fit the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There was one disagreement on one sub-theme out of 12 theme categories. Disagreements were resolved between the two authors at this stage and the proportion of agreed judgements was calculated to be 91% (11 out of 12 themes). After this process, names were generated for each theme as a final step before the write-up. After several revisions, the analysis was finalized. Figure 1 demonstrates the finalized version of "descriptive themes" and sub-themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

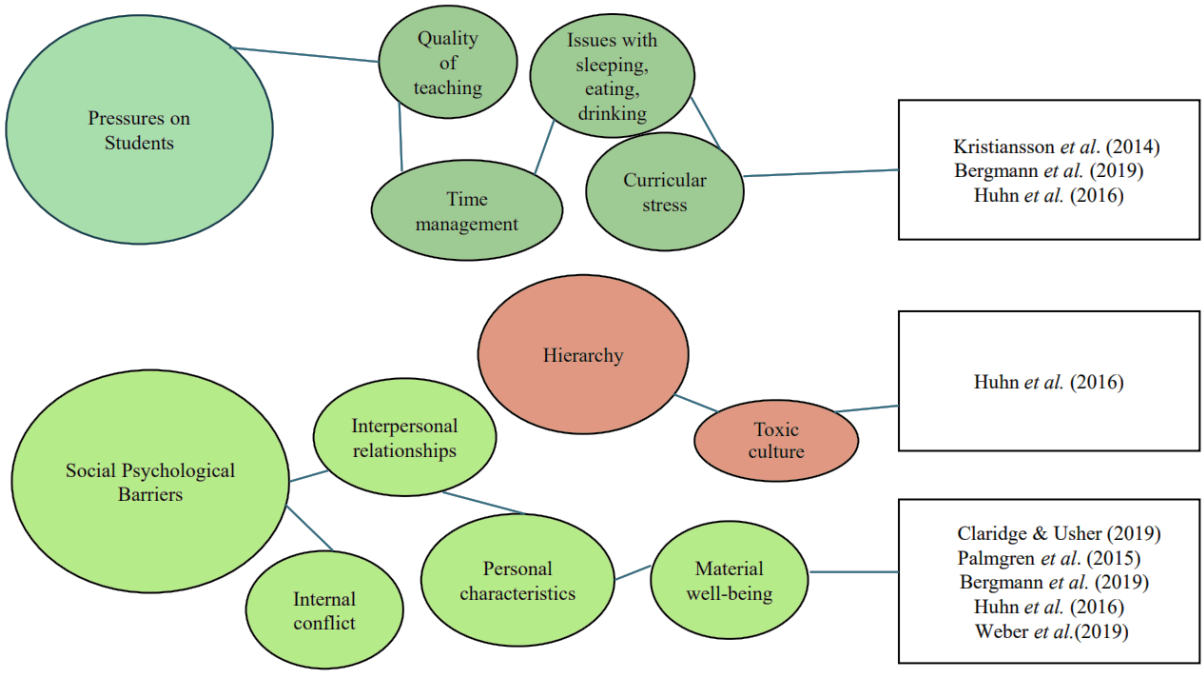
Table 2

Data Extracts with Codes

Data Extracts	Coded for
"Well, you're not really appreciated here. They rush you through	lack of appreciation
it and, uh, when you don't function, you'll be punished."	fear of failure
"In the week before the exam I have at least one nervous breakdown	curricular stress
because when I talk to friends who are more	stressful social interactions
advanced I see that there are so many things I still have to do.	anxiety and stress
You have no idea."	need for support

Figure 1

Finalized Themes and Sub-Themes



Note. Figure 1 shows the six reviewed studies of students' life quality including the finalized three main themes and the corresponding sub-themes.

Findings

Figure 1 demonstrates the three analytical themes identified in our analysis. Pressures on students include the stress imposed by the general demands and regulations of the institution, issues with sleeping, eating, time management and material well-being. Social psychological barriers are related to relationships with peers, family and supervisors, feelings of inadequacy, feelings of guilt when engaging in stress relief activities, and personality traits. These traits may affect the perception of stress (Huhn et al., 2016, p.9). Finally, our third theme, a culture of hierarchy, stresses how mistreatment of instructors, supervisors, peers and the demanding nature of the studies may lead to a toxic work culture, which affects the life quality of university students.

Pressures on Students

Our analysis suggests that curricular and academic stress make it hard for the students to manage their time effectively and thus affect their material and psychological well-being adversely. Furthermore, poor physical conditions of the classrooms and buildings such as classrooms lacking chairs were reported to have an influence on students' life quality. According to the reviewed studies, to avoid the adverse effects of stress, students develop certain coping mechanisms, but not all of them are healthy strategies. For example, in some studies it was reported that stressed students may resort to unhealthy habits such as smoking and drinking (Bergmann et al., 2019, p.4).

Curricular Stress

Some students reported that long contact hours affected their life quality. A medical school student in Düsseldorf, Germany said that their previous top-ranking student status could be lost in medical school because of the high demands. Therefore, this leads to feelings of stress and pressure. This situation will eventually lead to "resentment among fellow students due to competition" (Bergmann et al., 2019, p.4). Overall, unfair grading systems, having to pass multiple exams, feelings of being unprepared for exams, and mandatory attendance are what were considered by medical students to be related to curricular stress (Weber et al., 2019, p.5).

Quality of Teaching

Another important aspect that affects students' life quality was found to be the quality of teaching (Huhn et al., 2016; Weber et al., 2019). Among the stressors related to teaching quality were reported to be lack of guidance and supervision, inadequate feedback, "arrogant teachers" viewing teaching as burdensome, unpleasant experiences with teachers showing intimidating behavior (Weber et al., 2019, p.3). Negative experiences as such were reported to be demotivating and counterproductive. Some students voiced their concerns over low quality teaching in medical schools. In addition to all these, concerns over the grading system and exams which test rote recall rather than deep understanding of the subject matter were also raised (Weber et al., 2019, p.5).

Issues with Sleeping, Eating, Smoking and Drinking

Among the reviewed studies, in relation to the curricular/academic stress, issues with sleeping, eating, smoking and drinking were reported as elements that have an influence on university students' life quality. In relation to the emotional distress resulting from excessive workload, many students reported to suffer from unhealthy habits such as smoking, drinking, lack of sleep and skipping meals (Bergmann et al., 2019, p.4).

Time Management

Our fourth subtheme under *pressures on students* is time management. Since time management appeared to be one of the most common themes in the reviewed studies, some students suggested time management strategies. Procrastination was reported to be an issue when it came to time management. Exhaustion and extreme tiredness due to having to balance between academic workload, internships, exams, courses and leisure time were some of the recurring issues reported related to time management and life quality in some of the reviewed studies (Weber et al., 2019, p.6). Another study conducted in Sweden showed that some students try to manage their stress by achieving "a sense of good enough" (Kristiansson, 2014, p.6). They manage to let go of perfectionism for the sake of their well-being. In this way, they could "leave space for private life" (Kristiansson, 2014, p.4).

Material Well-being

Final sub-theme under *pressure* was found to be material well-being. Most medical school students reportedly said they were unable to work part-time due to "unpredictable timetable", which caused increased costs due to relocation and lack of extra income. On the other hand, if they managed to find and maintain a side job related to their studies (e.g., medicine), then this contributed to one's motivation for their studies and career (Bergmann et al., 2019, p.5). Another critical issue that was expressed was related to receiving bursaries. Being a bursary receiver meant that they could stay in residence halls because they would be able to afford the excessive costs. One participant expressed their concern by saying "surviving from day to day is a never-ending difficulty. The financial burden is strongly felt especially by medical students in London considering the length of their program, which lasts 5 years (Claridge & Usher, 2019, p.5). Therefore, international medical students tend to prefer Germany, where the education is less costly compared to America or Japan. One student reported that "studying in Germany is virtually free of charge" (Huhn et al., 2016, p.3). Financial stress is a key factor that affects student

well-being. In addition to tuition fees, one needs to think about the costs regarding the commute between home and university, "the price of textbooks and other working material, as well as the money spent on food" (Weber et al., 2019, p.7). Finally, factors adversely affecting the material well-being of students were found to be the inability to work part-time due to uncertain timetables, difficulty covering the living expenses such as accommodation, textbooks, food and the likewise. In addition to these, a strong link between material well-being and social psychological well-being as well as academic performance were among the findings of the reviewed studies.

Social Psychological Barriers

Our analysis suggests that social psychological barriers are linked to interpersonal relationships, internal conflict and personality traits. Research suggests that when students establish healthy connections to their peers and professors, they are less likely to suffer from burn-out (Byrnes et al., 2020). However, due to the high demands of the medical program, students fail to find a balance between those duties and their private life. When they engage in leisure activities, they risk feeling guilty and face an internal dilemma. Therefore, their mental health and psychological well-being are adversely affected. Finally, the reviewed studies revealed that personal characteristics are associated with levels of stress that students experience (Bergmann et al., 2019; Huhn et al., 2016; Weber et al., 2019). Each of these subthemes are explained in detail below.

Interpersonal Relationships

Social relationships can have both positive and negative impacts on students' life quality. Some students reported that they deliberately avoided medical discussions and thus preferred to meet with their non-medical friends to avoid stress because they believed "stress is a contagious feeling" (Weber et al., 2019, p.7). One student reported "(when) I talk to friends who are more advanced, I see that there are so many things I still have to do. You have no idea what they're talking about" (Weber et al., 2019, p.7). These students reported communication between fellow students as additional stressors. On the other hand, there are studies revealing friendships are useful especially for medical students because bonding helps them adjust to school (Bergmann et al., 2019, p.6). A study conducted with Swedish chiropractic students revealed that students saw "the amicable atmosphere" and "the small size of the institution" as positive contributors to their life quality (Palmgren et al., 2015, p.8).

Internal Conflict

In some reviewed studies students reported that having to balance between studies and leisure time activities could cause feelings of guilt and dilemma about which area of life they should prioritize. On the one hand, they would like to engage in social activities such as meeting with family and friends to cope with stress, on the other hand when they do, they can find themselves more stressed because they could have spent that time studying. One student emphasized this by saying "when I meet with friends or do something with my family, then I always think in the back of my mind that I could just as well study. You can't enjoy it" (Weber et al., 2019, p.7). These feelings are reported to stem from fear of failure and expulsion from the medical school (Bergmann et al., 2019, p.4).

Personal Characteristics

Some of the reviewed studies pointed to the relation between personality traits in the Big Five Model (i.e. conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience) and life quality (Bergmann et al., 2019; Huhn et al., 2016; Weber et al., 2019). In a study conducted in Germany about medical students' perceptions of stress it was found that except for openness to experience, the other four personality traits in some ways were related to how students perceived stress (Bergmann et al., 2019, p.5). For example, elevated levels of conscientiousness would increase the levels of stress a student might experience. Neuroticism was found to be associated with elevated levels of guilt when students engaged in leisure time activities instead of studying. As for extraversion, these students might be more vulnerable when they must prioritize studies over spending time for social bonding. They are said to "suffer more from social isolation". Finally, students with low agreeableness scores found it hard to cope with academic failure and they fell behind others in rank (Bergmann et al., 2019, p.6). In addition to the association between personality traits and stress levels, another study conducted with international students in Germany revealed that personality attitudes such as "shyness, openness to experience, curiosity" were associated with how well a student would be socially integrated into the host country successfully. These are counted as internal factors affecting students' individual experiences. (Huhn et al., 2016, p.5).

Hierarchy

Abuse culture in medical school stemming from hierarchy was repeatedly reported in some of the reviewed studies. The subtheme under hierarchy culture was found to be toxic culture. Moral abuse such as "servant demands of arrogant teachers", sexist comments from patients against female students in the hospital and problems with grievance procedures due to "the networking culture" are some of the negative experiences affecting students' life quality adversely (Huhn et al., 2016, p.6).

Toxic Culture

A culture of "self-sacrifice" was normalized in medical school. Doctors were reported to put pressure on students and thus this resulted in low life quality. In certain reviewed studies "nepotism" and "corruption" were also among the concepts that appeared under the theme of toxic culture. In a study conducted in Germany with international students, it was found that when choosing a school to study, students strived to find a place in countries where "they are able to progress through personal merit rather than personal connections" (Huhn et al., 2016, p.6). Overall, it was clear that the implications of a hierarchy culture in academia, especially in the medical field, had a role in students' reported life quality and well-being.

Discussion

This synthesis drew novel conclusions from the findings of six studies of life quality of university students to provide an insight into students' individual experiences and feelings within their own unique context. In this section, we discuss the limitations of this study, share the interpretation of our findings and future implications.

Limitations

Although there are studies which include graduate students' well-being and life quality, we focused only on studies which included undergraduate students' perceptions and views as young adults (Falk et al., 2019). As a result, our findings are not generalizable for graduate students. A second limitation of the study is concerning the nature of meta-synthesis, which is a method used to draw novel interpretations from a collection of qualitative studies (Thorne et al., 2004). Therefore, generalizability of the research findings remains to be a limitation of this synthesis. A third issue arises from the specific search terms used to locate the most relevant research articles on university students' life quality. We strived to select the most appropriate key concepts related to the life quality of university students. There is ample research in relevant literature that confirms the fact that medical students are those with the lowest quality of life scores (Cai et al., 2021; Opoku et al., 2017; Saul et al., 2021; Yorks et al., 2017) Therefore, it is possible that the views of students from other departments may be underrepresented in this study due to the fact that most of the recent studies on the quality of life revolve around health sciences and medical school students. Finally, the rigor of this research study is dependent on the quality of the articles included in the synthesis. The rigor of the articles used in this synthesis was checked against a checklist that is most commonly and widely used in evaluating the quality of qualitative research. However, the validity of the findings of qualitative studies remains to be a limitation as most of the studies relied merely on interviews and focus groups for data collection.

Interpretation of the Findings

Our synthesis highlights several crucial issues affecting university students' life quality. Our findings are in line with existing literature. First, studies on medical school students dominate current research. This is because existing literature suggests that students studying medicine or health sciences suffer from negative feelings most frequently due to the demands of their faculty (Veal, 2020). Our research findings also highlight similar issues with medical students. Therefore, it can be said that our research contributes to the existing literature on university students' life quality.

Firstly, medical students and health sciences students feel the burden of academic stress resulting from grand expectations of their teachers and family. Some students report struggling with internal conflict and feelings of guilt when engaging in social activities instead of studying (Weber et al., 2019). Overwhelmed by all of these pressures, students resort to unhealthy habits such as smoking or drinking (Bergmann et al., 2019). On the other hand, a study conducted with Swedish students shows that there are those who can "let go of perfectionism" and by using "effective study techniques", they can find a balance between study time and private life (Kristiansson,

2014). Thus, it is suggested that medical school curriculum needs to be updated to fit the needs of students. Kligler (2013) asserts that "shaping a curriculum that incorporates the noncognitive learning process that plays an important role during the 3rd year" (p.539). This is supported by Veal (2020), according to whom mental well-being awareness programs should be incorporated into curriculum. Thus, academic performance pressures such as mandatory full-time attendance, long contact hours, fear of failure in exams contribute to the excessive workload. Finally, all of this could lead to burn out and depression among students, who struggle to manage their time effectively.

Another issue arising from our synthesis is the relationship between students and their teachers, family, and peers. Those who report a positive and healthy relationship with their social circle are less likely to have low quality of life (MacArthur & Sikorski, 2020). Quality of teaching has a role in interpersonal relationships as well (Weber et al., 2019). When there is satisfactory supervision and guidance, students feel less stressed. To the contrary, when professors' attitudes are negative to the extent that there is a toxic learning environment, then students feel uncomfortable and distressed (Colenbrender et al., 2020). Our research reveals that support and the quality of the learning environment play a key role in students' reported life quality. Furthermore, those who can establish healthy ties with their peers are more likely to control their stress levels and therefore less likely to suffer from depression or burn-out (Bergmann et al., 2019).

Financial issues are a prevalent issue in students' reported life quality. Material well-being plays a part in student life satisfaction because financial resources enable students to achieve academic success, to have the time and money for academic studies and social activities. In addition, as campus accommodation provides students with increased social interaction, those who can afford halls of residence on campus are more likely to be satisfied with their lives (Harrison et al., 2018).

Personality appeared to be related to students' perception of stress. For example, an extroverted student might be more likely to struggle with lack of communication and social interaction during stressful examination periods. Therefore, those students could report lower life satisfaction than introverted students. Furthermore, those with high conscientiousness could feel guiltier and they struggle with internal conflict when they spend their free time with their family or friends instead of studying. Therefore, it is also important to note that personal traits could also play a role in students' perceived stress and well-being (Bergmann et al., 2019).

Finally, a culture of verbal and emotional abuse prevalent in medical schools was reported to be an issue among students. Some students felt disrespected and mistreated by their supervisors and teachers. Moreover, those students who experienced abuse were unable to report the issue for fear of being seen as "problem-maker". They thought this label could affect their grades and even pursue them after graduation in their career. Therefore, it is essential that immediate action is taken to avoid such incidents. Overall, the challenges affecting the life quality of medical students can be summarized as excessive workload, time management issues, mediocre quality of teaching, financial issues and a toxic learning environment, where self-sacrifice and mistreatment are normalized. There are several actions that can be taken to lower the level of stress students are facing. For example, updating the curriculum to include programs that increase awareness towards mental health, time management can help decrease the stress levels of students. In addition, providing professional development courses for university instructors might increase quality of teaching. Reviewing grievance procedures and checking whether they are followed to protect vulnerable students could prevent a toxic learning environment. Finally, increasing bursaries and scholarships to cover the expenses of all students who are in need are some of the measures that can be taken to tackle these issues affecting students' life quality.

Implications

Our findings reaffirm that there are several factors affecting students' life quality such as stress (Chang, 1998; Makinen & Pyschyl, 2001; Simons et al., 2002), personal characteristics (Cha, 2003; Yetim, 2003) and social support (Coffman & Gilligan, 2002). Depending on how much social support they have, for example, students' perception of stress and therefore their likelihood for burn-out may differ. We found that some students could be more resourceful and deal with stress more effectively than others by using certain coping mechanisms such as effective study techniques to manage time more effectively (Kristiansson, 2014). Also, so far studies done with medical and health sciences students dominate the existing research on university students' life quality. Therefore, we argue that more studies involving students from different faculties should be conducted to address their needs and voice their concerns over their life quality. It is of crucial importance to have a multidimensional perspective towards studies focusing on university students' life quality. Finally, to better the quality of universities worldwide

and improve the living conditions of university students as young adults, it is recommended that action is taken not only by university administrators but also by governmental bodies on a larger scale.

Pedagogical Implications

One of the themes which emerged from this synthesis is the quality of teaching and a culture of hierarchy. Many medical students complained about the lack of guidance and supervision. Some students felt that teachers were more interested in their own research than teaching and that teachers could be intimidating due to a culture of hierarchy pervasive in medical school. Therefore, some reported that this affected the relationship between teachers and students adversely. More research is needed to explore the underlying reasons behind this negative view. It might be that teachers' well-being and life quality could be affecting their daily teaching practices. Another qualitative study which focuses on teachers' working conditions might be conducted to shed light on their perspective. It is apparent from this current study that quality of teaching is an important factor which affects students' life quality. In addition, quantitative studies have shown that university culture has a significant effect on teacher-student relationship and quality of teaching (Argon & Köşterelioğlu, 2009; Erdem & İşbaşı, 2001). In these studies, it was found that students preferred interactive lessons which focused on critical thinking rather than rote learning (Argon & Köşterelioğlu, 2009). In this current synthesis, it was found that some students reported similar concerns regarding quality of teaching. They complained about lectures focusing on rote recall rather than deep understanding of the subject matter. Therefore, it can be concluded that lectures could be planned in a way that foster critical thinking and higher order thinking skills. In addition to quantitative studies, it is important to conduct more qualitative studies to explore and understand the individual stories of students so that measures could be taken to improve the life quality of young people who will make significant contributions to the development of a country.

Conclusion

This current meta-synthesis focuses on university students' life quality. By synthesizing six qualitative studies conducted with medical and health sciences students, we identified three main themes, namely pressures on students, social-psychological barriers and hierarchy. It can be concluded that there are several stressors which cause anxiety and lower the motivation of students. Some of them are specific to the demands of the medical school, but some can also be faced by students studying in other faculties such as quality of teaching and teacher-student relationships as well as a culture of hierarchy (Argon & Köşterelioğlu, 2009; Çalışkan & Zhu, 2019; Erdem & İşbaşı, 2001).

Some of the measures to tackle challenges affecting students' life quality might be updating the curriculum to include programs that increase awareness towards mental health. In addition, providing professional development courses for university instructors to increase the quality of teaching can be considered by university administrators. Finally, increasing bursaries can also help students focus on their studies and increase their economic well-being. It is important to conduct more research with university students studying at different faculties to explore the challenges faced by students and address their needs so that they could have an improved quality of life.

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Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Yaşam Kalitesi: Bir Metasentez Çalışması

Öz

Yaşam kalitesi, öğrencilerin akademik başarısında önemli bir role sahiptir. Alan yazında, öğrencilerin yaşam kalitesine yönelik yapılan birçok nicel çalışma sonucunda, yaşam kalitesindeki olumsuzlukların akademik erteleme ve okul terk oranlarında bir artışa yol açtığı gözlemlenmiştir. Fakat, üniversite öğrencilerinin yaşam kalitelerini inceleyen nitel çalışmalara pek rastlanmamaktadır. Bu meta sentez çalışmasında, Kritik Değerlendirme Becerileri Programı (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) kriterleri göz önünde bulundurularak altı makale seçilip incelenmiştir. Sonuç olarak, öğrenciler üzerindeki baskılar, sosyo-psikolojik engeller ve hiyerarşi olmak üzere üç tema ortaya çıkmıştır. Aynı zamanda, alan yazın ile paralel olarak tıp ve sağlık bilimleri alanlarında öğrenim görmekte olan üniversite öğrencilerinin yaşam kalitesi bağlamında daha büyük bir risk altında olduklarına dair bulgular elde edilmiştir. Bu alanda yapılacak çalışmalarda karma yöntemlerin kullanılarak daha bütüncül bir bakış açısı getirilmesi önerilmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: üniversite öğrencileri, öznel iyi oluş, yaşam kalitesi, meta sentez