

**Students' happiness and well-being at
the University of Algarve, Portugal**

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Abstract

Due to the rising problems that affect youth and the risks that occur in this age group, which is most vulnerable, their concerns assume an important question for public policies for most governments in the European Union.

The importance of conducting a research on happiness and well being at the university level is, in our opinion, justifiable by the rising sense of globalisation, standardization and uncertainty over the future. Today, teenagers face this question earlier. Universities are organizations that deal with large numbers of individuals during an important period of their lives. So Universities should be engaged with their problems and well acquainted with their aims – needs, desires and expectations – in order to facilitate them to achieve their goals. According to this idea, besides the traditional role of transmitting knowledge and cultural opening, the universities should be co-responsible and conducting the process in order to assure high levels of happiness amongst their student community.

This research was based on a survey conducted at national level on happiness. Some adjustments were carried out considering this specific target: undergraduate students of the University of Algarve. One of the most important outcomes reveals that most of the students consider themselves happy persons, although only few of them believe that total happiness can be achieved. Results allowed us to identify a happiness itinerary for the students of University of Algarve. We can also compare some ideas and typologies of happiness identified at the university with others identified at national level.

Key words: happiness, university students, subjective well being, public policies.

Introduction

In the recent years, concerns on well being, happiness and life satisfaction have become a central issue to researchers. Since more people began to recognize that economic prosperity is not a synonymous with well being.

Universities are social labs of the most importance to develop competences knowledge and values. These will be decisive for thousands of young people who dedicate some years of their lives to the prosecution of a personal development project in these institutions. Thus in a changing world they should look for a better relationship with their environment and as much as possible, be aware of new roles that enable them to meet their customers' needs, questions and expectations.

Most of the Portuguese Public Universities have assumed a management philosophy based on a "production optics", which means that they have focused on the productive process and on other aspects of organizations' internal functioning. The private universities for survival reasons have been developing management strategies based on "selling optics". Both referred optics don't emphasize the concerns of the customers.

In the meantime and essentially due to deep changes in the surrounding environment there are signs that the Portuguese Universities are changing in how they see their students. As a consequence, management models based on "marketing optics" have been adopted. In this context, the University of Algarve is a paradigmatic case study. Therefore, to have a better understanding of what the students see as well-being and happiness is a starting point for the decision-making policies.

It has been verified that the public policies aren't always conceived according to the bottom-up planning process in order to encompass the stakeholders' participation. This situation may lead to conflicts.

This exploratory research conducted at University of Algarve is a first approach to this issue in the educational policy context in Portugal. We hope the same may be conducted in other universities and that the respective results will contribute towards better decisions making in this subject.

Literature review

Aristotle reinforced the idea that happiness is the highest aim for human being. For this Greek philosopher, nobody asks for happiness as a mean for something more.

In the last years, several studies on topics such as life satisfaction and happiness have had an important contribution to the growth of the knowledge about subjective well

being. Well-being is the field of behavioural sciences in which people's evaluations of their lives are studied (Diener et al, 2003: 188). Happiness is nowadays a topic of growing interest for philosophers, policy makers, poets and economists. The interest of this is mainly due to the interest at large extent from economics (Osvald & Powdthavee, 2006) and positive psychology (Diener 2000). The increasing importance of subjective well-being in comparison to other measures has been reviewed by Diener and Suh (1997: 189), who concluded, "Subjective well-being measures are necessary to evaluate a society, and add value to the economic indicators that are now favoured by policy makers".

The pursuit of happiness is becoming ever more global, as people seek to realize the promises of capitalism and political freedom (Freedman, 1978, Diener et al, 1995).

According to Coleta & Coleta (2006) it was during the last two decades that literature on subjective well being, happiness and life satisfaction has spread. From this multidisciplinary point of view, the central concern of academic research on these topics, is to know how and why persons conduct their lives in a positive way (Snyder & Lopez, 2001 ; Swanbrow, 1989)

For most of the people, "a good life is an happy life". Besides this statement, it is fair to claim if quality of life is dependent on how happy one person is (Brülde, 2006:1).

It is widely agreed that happiness plays a central role on quality of life. From this point of view, happiness is on of the most important "prudential value" (Haybron, 2000, cit in Brülde, 2006:1). Some investigators, however, add other final values like friendship, self-knowledge, human development or meaningful work. So the question arises: what exactly is the role of happiness in the good life or there are other final values besides happiness?

Philosophers have formally defined the notion of the good life (well-being, or quality of life) in terms of what has final value for a person. This definition may involve three aspects: if it is a purely evaluative question; if it is value-for (the person itself); or if the relevant prudential values are final or instrumental values from the point of view of each individual (Brülde, 2006:2)¹.

Most of the modern discussion about well-being is based on Parfit's (1984: 493) distinction between three kinds of conceptions of the good life: Hedonistic Theories

¹ Like Brülde (2006:12) noted "the circumstances which are only of instrumental value for the final human good can be called 'quality of life determinants', and once we have decided what a person's well-being consists in, the question of what these determinants are can be investigated empirically".

(“what would be best for someone is what would make his life happiest”²), Desire-Fulfillment Theories (what would be best for someone is what ... would best fulfil his desires”³), and Objective List Theories (“certain things are good or bad for us, whether or not we want to have the good things, or to avoid the bad things”⁴).

Lyubomirsky *et al* (2005) recently advanced with a new model of longitudinal well-being where this investigator has identified three major determinants of well-being: the person’s genetic set point - personality and temperament (this set point remains constant across the lifespan. It is stable, so it has little or no impact on variations in well being over time); the person’s current circumstances (demographic, geographic and contextual, health, income, the region where the person lives); and the person’s current intentional activities (behavioural, cognitive and conative). For example, in his investigation, Brülde (2006) is concerned about what really matters when we think about what is good for the person himself.

According to Borooah (2006) subjective well being is increasingly being measured by simply asking people about how happy they are. Diener (1984), Pavot (1991) and Watson and Clark (1991) agree that these subjective responses do reflect the respondents’ substantive feelings of well being. There is strong evidence that, in spite of the differences between cultures, people in different countries essentially want the same things: good family and social life, good personal and family health, standard of living and a good job (Campbell, 1981; Cantril, 1965). Borooah (2006) concluded that 1) “while people may find it difficult to define happiness, they know clearly and unambiguously, when they are happy or unhappy; 2) people from different backgrounds are made happy or unhappy by the same things; 3) if we knew what these were, and their relative strengths, we could fashion policy so as to influence these happiness inducing factors”.

The link between happiness and good life may be related with two main aspects: a) what conception of happiness we accept and b) whether we have a pure or modified happiness theory in mind. A person’s quality of life is dependent on how happy that person is. Nothing but happiness has final value for a person.

For Democritus, one of the earliest thinkers on the subject of happiness, the happy life was enjoyable, not because of what the happy person possessed, but because of the

² According to this theory, the good life is identical with the pleasant life. The only thing that has positive final value for a person is pleasant experiences.

³ According to this theory, a person has a good life when she has the kind of life that she wants to have. The only thing that has positive final value for a person is that her intrinsic desires are fulfilled.

⁴ According to this theory, there are objective values (besides pleasure or happiness) that make a life good for a person. “Contact with reality”, “friendship”, “love”, “freedom”, “personal development”, “meaningful work” and “rational activity” are some examples of alleged objective values pointed out by the author (Brülde, 2006:4).

way the happy person reacted to her life circumstances. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle worked on Eudemonia definition of happiness in which happiness consisted of possessing the greatest goods available. For the hedonists, happiness was simply the sum of many pleasurable moments. From utility theory point of view, whose roots are in hedonism, happiness was equated with both the presence of pleasure and absence of pain. Sometimes the term *subjective well-being* is used synonymously with happiness and it emphasizes an individual's own assessment of a person's life and includes satisfaction, pleasant affect and low negative affect. In the 20th century scientists tried to understand happiness trying to find out answers to questions like: what is happiness? Can it be measured? What causes happiness? (Diener, 2003: 188-190; Tatarkiewicz, W., 1976).

Till now, the nature of happiness has not been defined in a uniform way. It can mean *pleasure, life satisfaction, positive emotions, meaningful life* or a *feeling of contentment...*

Happiness may be understood in terms of frequent positive affect, high life satisfaction and infrequent negative affect, which are, according to Diener (Diener, 1984, 1994), the three primary components of subjective well-being. Happiness is primarily a subjective phenomenon that is concerned for "whoever lives inside a person's skin" (Myers and Diner, 1995:11; Diener, 1994).

Anecdotal and survey evidence alike suggest that happiness is one of the most salient and significant dimensions of human experience and emotional life (Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith, 1999) and is critical to understand the cognitive process that might serve to maintain or enhance it (Lyubomirsky, Tucker e Kasri, 2001).

How far may we be happy? According to Lykken and Tellegen (1996) happiness has a genetically determined set point. From this point of view the "heritability of well-being may be as high as 50% or 80%" (cit in Sheldon, K and Lyubomirsky, S., 2006: 56). For others (Brickman and Campbell, 1971; Frederick and Loewenstein, 1999, Kahneman, 1999 and Scitovsky, 1976), the happiness is something that it is never totally achieved: "gains in happiness are impermanent, because humans so quickly adapt to change" (Sheldon, K. and Lyubomirsky, S., 2006: 56). This belief raises the question of facing happiness like a permanent challenge in our daily life. For some researchers quoted by Sheldon, K and Lyubomirsky, S. (2006: 57), happiness may be enhanced by "practicing certain virtues such as gratitude, forgiveness and self-reflection". According to Lykken (2000), despite a genetically determined baseline for well being, humans are capable of increasing their happiness.

It is possible to identify in the literature four main conceptions of happiness: 1) the cognitive or attitudinal view (according to this, “happiness is regarded as a cognitive state or as a positive attitude towards one’s life as a whole”. In this sense, good life is “a kind of mental state theory that attributes final value to other mental states besides pleasure”. It is sufficient that one’s life is going the way he wants it to go (Brülde, 2006:9); 2) the hedonistic view (“happiness is best regarded as a favourable balance of pleasure over displeasure” - this is the point of view of hedonism (*qua* theory of well-being); 3) the mood view or emotional state theory (to this theory “happiness is a certain kind of positive mood state ... about anything in particular”. Certain kind of pleasant experiences are more conducive to happiness than others; 4) and the hybrid view (happiness is regarded as a “complex mental state, in part cognitive and in part affective”. So, a person’s happiness is a function of how cognitively she evaluates her life as a whole in a positive manner and how that person feels good. This concept is sometimes called the *life satisfaction view*. According to this, a person’s level of well-being depend directly on how satisfied she is with her life: “happiness is a complex mental state consisting both of an affective and a cognitive component” (Brülde, 2006:9-10).

Martin (2005) argues that happiness is a mental state composed by tree different elements: Pleasure (pleasant emotions and spiritual feelings like pleasure, joy, contentment exaltation or affection), “lack of unpleasure” (lack of or no unpleasant emotions and spiritual feelings like, anxiety, fear, rage, guilt, envy or shame) and satisfaction (satisfaction with life or with some particular aspects of one’s life – personal connections, work, physical performance).

According to pure affective view, happiness is a kind of affective state – “to be happy is (roughly) to feel happy” (Brülde, 2006:9). Regarding to this, “happiness has no cognitive component” (so, it doesn’t involve any evaluation of one’s life as a whole).

We assume that “the quality of a person’s life is wholly dependent on the person’s mental state and not at all on the state of the world (except in casual sense)” (Brülde, 2006:10).

Besides the view of how far happiness contributes to a good life is a controversial matter between authors. Everyone agrees that happiness is an important and crucial component in the good life (Brülde, 2006:11; Diener et al, 2003: 188).

The main findings of the study carried out by Borooah (2006) are the identification of the most important sources of happiness: an absence of health problems (mainly

mental health problems), freedom from financial worries, and the quality of the area in which one lived.

Findings from Lyubomirsky et al (2005) revealed that happy people gain tangible benefits in many different life domains from their positive state of mind, including larger social rewards: higher odds of marriage and lower odds of divorce, more friends, stronger support, and richer social interactions (Harker & Keltner, 2001; Marks & Fleming, 1999; Okun, Stock, Haring, & Witter, 1984), superior work outcomes: greater creativity, increased productivity, higher quality of work (Estrada, Isen and Young, 1994; Staw, Sutton and Pelled, 1995), and more activity, energy, and flow (Csikszentmihalyi and Wong, 1991). Happy people are more likely to evidence greater self-control and self-regulatory and coping abilities (Aspinwall, 1998; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Keltner & Bonanno, 1997), to have a bolstered immune system (Dillon, Minchoff & Baker, 1985; Stone et al, 1994) and even to live a longer life (Danner, Showdon & Friesen, 2001). The literature suggests that happy persons tend to be relatively more cooperative, pro-social, charitable and “other-centered” (Isen, 1970, Kasse & Ryan, 1996; Williams & Shiaw, 1999). Happy individuals use to think relatively more positively about themselves (Campbell, 1981) and about others (Matlin & Gawron, 1979), feel more personal control (Larson, 1989), and recall more positive events from their past (Seidlitz & Diener 1993; Seidlitz, Wyer & Diener, 1997). Happy people also have been found to react more positively and intensely to favourable life outcomes and positive events, to show shorter drops in affect in response to negative life events, and to interpret remembered life experiences more positively, than have unhappy people (Lyubomirsky & Tuucker, 1998; Seidlitz & Diener, 1993; Seidlitz et al, 1997).

Thus, we argue that enhancing people’s happiness levels may indeed be a worthy scientific goal, especially after their basic physical and security needs are met. Unfortunately, however, relatively little scientific support exists for the idea that people’s happiness levels can change for the better.

Research psychologists have identified many predictors of people happiness or subjective well being. For example, well being has been shown to be associated with a wide variety of actors, including demographic status (Argyle, 1999; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smiyh, 1999; Myers, 2000), personality traits and attitudes (Diener & Lucas, 1999) and goal characteristics (McGregor & Little, 1998).

According to Borooah (2006) it is possible to suggest ways of raising the level of happiness in society. As Borooah (2006: 428) noted, public policy usually has its focus

on raising national income. However, it may not be what people really want to be happy. From this point of view, the aim of public policy should be to maximize people's happiness (Layard, 2002). For this reason, there is a growing restlessness among social scientists about the wisdom of harnessing economic policy to the yoke of economic performance (Frank, 1997, Layard 2002, 2003). Diener (2004) argued that well-being should "become a primary focus of policymakers", and that "its rigorous measurement is a primary policy imperative".

The study

The main objectives of this study were: to know the opinion of the students from the University of the Algarve on happiness and measure their happiness regarding given metrics. By carrying out this study, we hope to contribute to reinforce both dean's office and the students to value a new role of social contract between them.

This study was based on a survey conducted at national level about happiness of consumers. Based on literature review and keeping in mind the research aim and the population target (the students of the University of Algarve) adjustments were done.

The University of Algarve had a total of 8.420 enrolled students in the academic year of 2005/06. Based on the criteria of gender and school/faculty, a stratified sample of 320 students was defined, for a significance level of 95% (Table 1).

Table 1 – Universe and sample characteristics

Gender	School/Faculty	Nh		nh	
		n.º	%	n.º	%
Male	Natural Resources	191	2	7	2
	Economics	351	4	13	4
	Sea and Environment	187	2	7	2
	Human and Social Sciences	149	2	6	2
	Tecnologic Sciences	524	6	20	6
	Technology	1121	13	41	13
	Health	115	1	5	2
	Management, Hosp. and Tourism	710	8	27	9
	Education	191	2	8	3
Female	Natural Resources	298	4	11	4
	Economics	357	4	13	4
	Sea and Environment	329	4	12	4
	Human and Social Sciences	540	6	20	6
	Tecnologic Sciences	366	4	14	4
	Technology	467	6	17	5
	Health	509	6	19	6
	Management, Hosp. and Tourism	1152	14	42	13
	Education	863	10	32	10
Total		8420	100	314	100

After a pre-test, a 16-question interview, plus demographic data, was built and applied to the defined sample, during May 2006. The interviewers were students that attended marketing classes in the Faculty of Economics and to whom instructions were given in order to minimize eventual errors during data collection.

The data was analysed using frequency and descriptive statistics. These were obtained through the statistic program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences – SPSS, version 14.0 and Microsoft Excel 2003.

The outcomes show to us some differences in opinions due to gender differences.

Similarly to the universe, the students interviewed were mainly female (57%), 59% had between 21 and 25 years and 31% were younger than 20 years of age.

During school time, 99% live in Algarve region, but during holidays 34% return home, to another region of the country.

It was possible to acquire interviews from students that were in different degrees: 29% were in 2nd year, 25% in 1st year, 24% in 3rd year and the remaining in 4th and 5th years⁵.

Regarding twenty five given activities/situations that may contribute to happiness, students were invited to rate from 1 to 10 (1 – “completely unhappy”/ 10 – “completely happy”) how would they see them before them. “Be with the family/friends” (8,78), “travel” (8,69), “go to parties” (7,75) and “rest” (7,73) were the main sources of happiness for the students of the University of the Algarve (table 2).

Table 2 – Sources of happiness

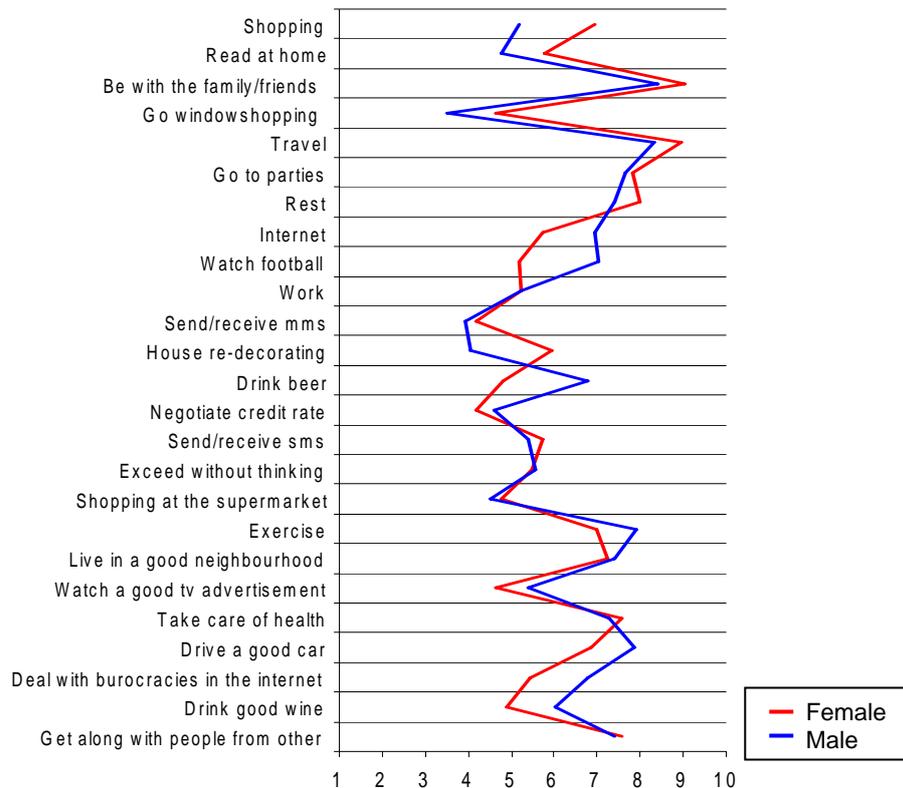
Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Shopping	6,18	2,152	,121
Read at home	5,35	2,341	,132
Be with the family/friends	8,78	1,446	,082
Go window-shopping	4,14	2,154	,122
Travel	8,69	1,637	,093
Go to parties	7,75	1,831	,103
Rest	7,73	1,918	,108
Internet	6,26	1,827	,103
Watch football	5,99	2,649	,151
Work	5,23	2,242	,127
Send/receive mms	4,08	2,065	,117
House re-decorating	5,13	2,464	,139
Drink beer	5,66	2,957	,167
Negotiate credit rate	4,35	2,515	,142
Send/receive sms	5,59	2,109	,119
Exceed without thinking	5,52	2,282	,130
Shopping at the supermarket	4,64	2,066	,117

⁵ At the University, only a few courses have night schedules and the interviews obtained from these represent 8%.

Exercise	7,38	2,049	,116
Live in a good neighbourhood	7,31	2,034	,115
Watch a good tv advertisement	4,98	2,453	,139
Take care of health	7,44	1,859	,106
Drive a good car	7,30	2,379	,136
Deal with bureaucracies in the internet	6,03	2,418	,136
Drink good wine	5,38	2,834	,160
Get along with people from other countries	7,51	1,827	,103

These variables, presented some differences according to gender (Annex 1). The variables “be with the family/friends”, “travel”, “go to parties” and “rest” had great significance to female students. It is also interesting to notice that the variable “exercise” has higher values within the male students, such as others like “surf in the internet”, “watch a football game”, “drink a beer”, “drive a good car”, “deal with bureaucracies through the Internet” and “drink a glass of wine”. On the other hand, the average of female students’ answers is higher regarding some variables such as “shopping”, “read at home”, “go window-shopping”, “thinking about house re-decorating” and “go to parties”.

Picture 1 – Sources of happiness - means of the variables, by gender



The aspects that the students gave higher importance when considering the height in their personal life, in a scale 5 point scale (1 – “Extremely important” to 5 – “Nothing

important”) are: “have a happy family” (1,46), “have a group of friends” (1,68), “enjoy the good things of life” (1,78) and “be constantly learning” (1,79). All of these can be considered human and supporting aspects, that contrast with the ones that got lower importance, such as “be famous” (3,91), “be a leader” (3,60) and “be rich” (3,11) (table 3).

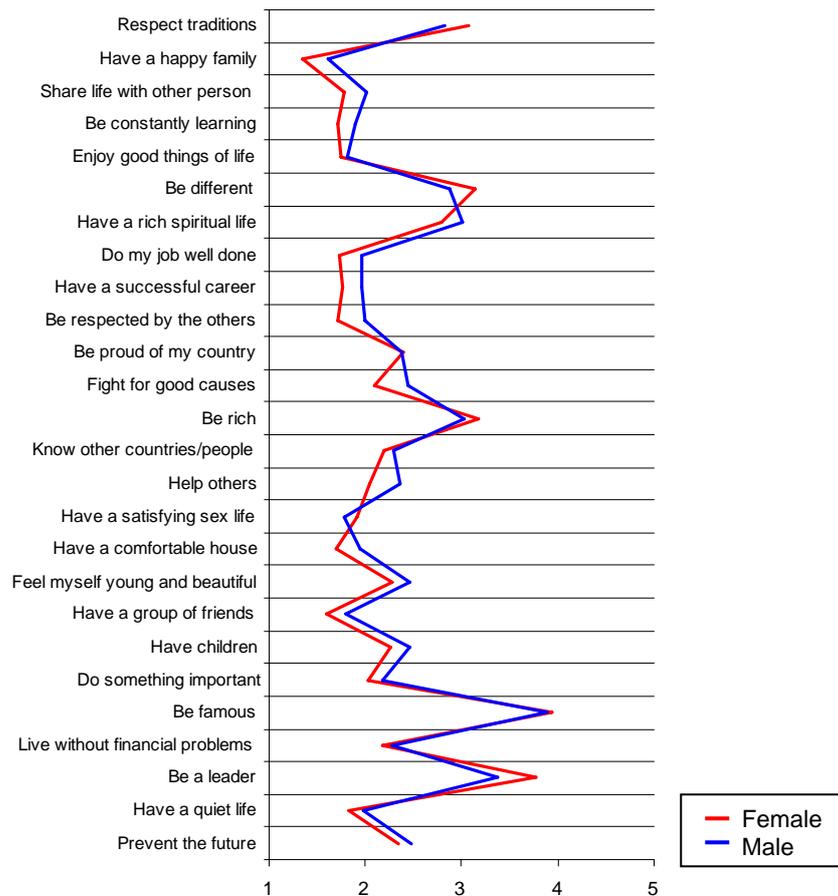
Table 3 – Life objectives

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Respect traditions	2,96	,938	,053
Have a happy family	1,46	,703	,040
Share life with other person	1,88	,837	,047
Be constantly learning	1,79	,790	,045
Enjoy good things of life	1,78	,789	,045
Be different	3,03	,967	,055
Have a rich spiritual life	2,89	1,132	,064
Do my job well done	1,83	,773	,044
Have a successful career	1,85	,780	,044
Be respected by the others	1,84	,855	,048
Be proud of my country	2,39	,976	,055
Fight for good causes	2,25	,857	,048
Be rich	3,11	1,004	,057
Know other countries/people	2,25	,890	,050
Help others	2,18	,831	,047
Have a satisfying sex life	1,85	,896	,051
Have a comfortable house	1,81	,814	,046
Feel myself young and beautiful	2,36	,892	,050
Have a group of friends	1,68	,800	,045
Have children	2,35	,988	,056
Do something important	2,09	,929	,053
Be famous	3,91	,933	,053
Live without financial problems	2,22	,907	,051
Be a leader	3,60	1,008	,057
Have a quiet life	1,89	,894	,051
Prevent the future	2,40	,951	,054

Some differences were found when analysing this question by gender (Picture2 / Annex 2): female students gave more importance to “have an happy family”, “share life with other person”, be constantly learning”, “do my job well done”, “have a successful career”, “be respect by the others”, “fight for good causes”, “help the others”, “have a comfortable house”, “have a group of friends”, “have children” and “do something important”.

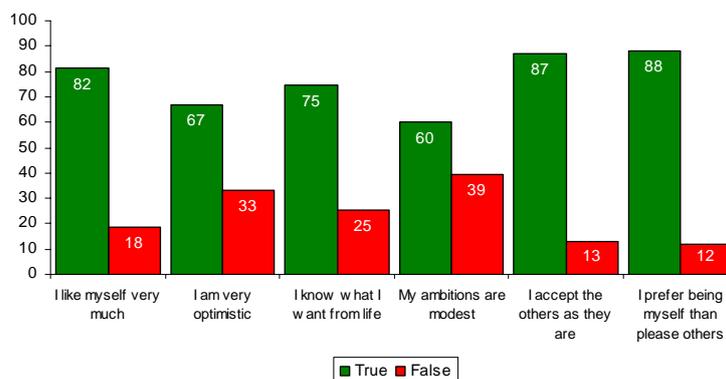
On the other hand, the only aspect that male students gave a higher rate is “have a satisfying sex life”.

Picture 2 – Life objectives - means of the variables, by gender



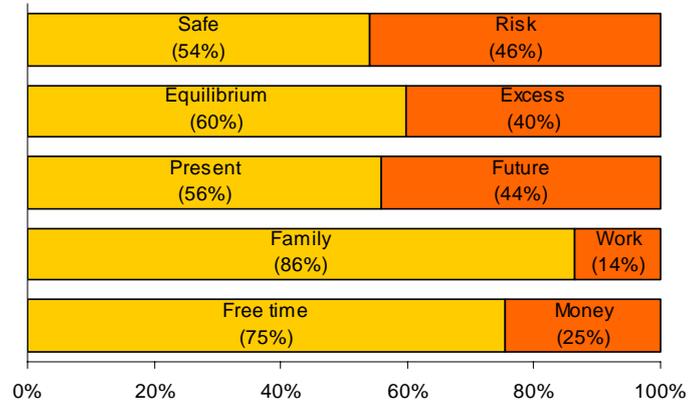
Six sentences were read during the interview and the respondents were invited to say if they would consider them true or false, according to their own beliefs (picture 3). A general analysis allows us to conclude that 82% of the students were auto-confident, 63% considered themselves optimistic, 75% were determinant and 39% had higher ambitions. Regarding the relationship with the others, about 88% considered themselves as tolerant persons regarding the acceptance of each individual personality.

Picture 3 – Personality traces - characteristics (%)



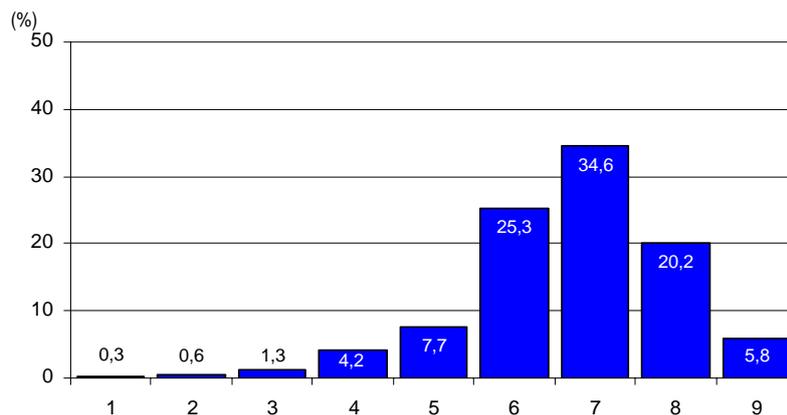
When faced up to choose between one of two given aspects that would make themselves happier, 86% of the students choose the family in alternative to work and 75% choose free time instead of money (picture 4).

Picture 4 – Personality traces – options (%)



In a 10 points scale (1 – “Very unhappy” / 10 – “Extremely happy”), the interviewed students were asked to rate their overall happiness. As the results pointed out, we may conclude that the students from the University of the Algarve consider themselves happy persons. However, nobody pointed out the maximum of the scale (10); this can be faced as an outcome of the following question.

Picture 5 – Do you consider yourself happy?



It is curious to state that only 30% of the students truly believe that someone can be totally happy. Most of them believe partially in happiness (58%). This may be viewed as a more positive attitude before life, as literature review suggested.

Table 4 – Is it possible to be truly happy?

Sentence	Percentage
I truly believe	29,6
I believe partially	58,3
I don't believe	8,3
I don't know if I believe it or not	3,8
Total	100,0

Regarding the personal happiness compared to the other's happiness, most of the people (74%) agree with the sentence "I feel as happy as the others around me". About 19% of the students consider themselves happier than the others (table 4).

Table 5 – Own happiness versus other's happiness

Sentence	Percentage
Most of the times I feel much happier than the others	18,8
I feel as happy as the others	74,4
Most of the times I feel less happier than the others	6,7
Total	100,0

Conclusion

The data analysis allows identifying a whole range of variables and situations that, in the student's opinion, contribute to improve their well-being, happiness and quality of life during their undergraduate study at University of Algarve.

Social activities/situations are the one's to which the students gave higher rates, when analysing the sources of happiness. Regarding the life objectives, the importance of having a happy family gets the highest rate. Other human and social aspects that balance between family and work are also very important and are reinforced when choosing between opposite situations, such as family/work and free time/money.

The overall happiness is positive, with most of the answers between 6 and 8, in a 10 item scale. Although, only 30% of the students stated that believe in being be truly happy.

This research highlights two points: a) happiness is seen differently by men and women's; b) in general, the students from University of Algarve consider themselves happy, although most of them feel that complete happiness is unachievable.

We expect that this research could be used as a support for decision making in the future at the University of the Algarve in order to help students in their nowadays and future life. The outcomes can support the development of some activities within the university reality, in order to improve and reinforce the human-family-work triangle. Seminars, workshops, outdoor activities (rally-papers, sports, ...), support to human and social associations, and similar actions that may involve the academic, family and professional worlds can be viewed as a first platform to improve the well-being of the students and a bet in the development of happier people in the future.

It is our opinion that if this wide range of solutions could be considered by the dean's office, it could be faced as an excellent opportunity to stress the university concern with its student's needs, desires and expectations.

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