Wellbeing in universities and Romanian quality assurance requirements; possible university strategy

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Abstract. *The contemporary context of Romanian universities is neither a clear nor a stable one: a lot of pressure is put from different external entities, such as ministries, quality assurance institutions, rankings, employers, students and staff. Wellbeing is not a new concept, but it is not yet considered useful and manageable for higher education institutions struggling with scarcity of resources when priority always means research visibility. Scientific literature include more studies dedicated to wellbeing in schools, mainly kindergarten and primary school. This paper will prove that even Romanian universities can develop and implement a wellbeing services strategy. The research methodology is based on the literature review as well as a comparative study on the status of different high ranked universities, according to some wellbeing dimensions; it is also based on the results of a questionnaire-based research on students' perception about the current institutional situation and the possibility of improving the existing state. The research questions are: What do we understand by wellbeing service? Do Romanian universities need a wellbeing strategy to improve the students' services? What are the main elements to build such a strategy? The research is based on the following objectives: understanding the wellbeing concept in general and in Romanian university context, describing the gap between students' services already provided and needed students' services, identifying the main elements for building a wellbeing strategy. Main results of the paper refer to a draft of strategy model and practical solutions/measures to implement it.*

Keywords: wellbeing, strategy, student experience, student service, quality assurance.

Introduction: Understanding New Challenges for Universities; Theoretical and Practical Importance of Wellbeing

Universities, all over the world are important entities acting in different societal characteristics and difficult times; political changes and new policies, environmental issues and challenges, economic crisis and many more have determined higher education institutions to become aware and evolve with the society dynamism. Granados (2018) states that the contemporary context is one of the welfare state crisis, including the impact of globalization and many crisis, also of democracy, when people do not have anymore confidence neither in the system nor in their capacity of influencing the political decisions. The author explains the need for a new type of university and tries to plead for a reformulated education, an empowering education, where changes should consider the knowledge creation process towards interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, the educational model, towards more creative and critical thinking, as well as changes defined by social responsibility and knowledge transfer.

At the beginning of 2018, some challenges have been internationally discussed. Allaire (2018) mention five issues facing higher education, referring to increasing cost of education, rising drop-out, increasing private funding to public universities, shifting from old-passive teaching to new teaching models, such as team teaching and peer-led model, developing a

campus civic engagement; the author is optimistic in the sense that no matter the challenges for higher education institutions are, they will always be able to look for solutions, being a general recognition that learning matters, universities facing a double role of educating and enlarging people's minds. The explanations provide a clear insight for the American universities. In different national context, these challenges may have different particularities, but the main idea is still kept. In Romanian case, many universities have tried to maintain the tuition level unchanged for a long time, but other educational cost increased, such as the access to resources. At the same time, drop-out is determining universities to identify procedures to fight against this, but there is still a long way to follow. Universities have been looking for private cooperation to complete the public less and less funding through sponsorships and other bilateral agreements.

According to Twenge (2018), colleges and universities face one big challenge – distraction during classes due to the preference for digital devices, generating a poor students' focus; the solution suggested would be a step by step approach where students might be working together from 10 minutes forgetting about the smartphones, and then, more and more. O'Brien (2019) identifies for the UK universities ten challenges: Brexit, international reputation decreasing, global competition increasing, higher student's fees, research funding diminish, university costs exceeding, difficulties in providing value for money, difficulties in recruiting people, student welfare preoccupation, free discourses. Therefore, student wellbeing is considered one of the most important issue university leadership has to address to. In other cases, students wellbeing is associated with happiness explained by level of satisfaction towards different services. Chan et al. (2003) identifies three most important influences on students' happiness – university work, time management and capacity of establishing relationships, from a list of many others, also including grades, university facilities, teaching quality, extracurricular activities.

The *Student Academic Experience Survey* in 2018 (first began in 2006, including more than 14000 respondents in 2018) reports that all the four dimensions of students' wellbeing decreased since 2016: life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness, anxiety; the study also demonstrate that internationalization bring more benefits to local students than losses as Neves and Hillman (2018) write. In other words, there is still a lot of research needed to clarify the difference between wellbeing, happiness and satisfaction, on one hand, as well as to understand if the students' perceptions are dependent on cultural characteristics, case in which some countries might have happier students than others, as some countries are considered happier than other countries; in fact, according to the latest World Happiness Report, the happiest country is Finland, Romania being ranked as 52 (Helliwell et al. 2018).

The research question is whether universities in general, the Romanian ones in particular are prepared to face wellbeing issues related to students' population. Main hypotheses considered in this research are the following: 1. external factors contribute a lot to the wellbeing state of students 2. professors' wellbeing is the main driver of increasing students' happiness. The objectives of this paper are: to provide a clear understanding of the wellbeing concept in universities; to identify the determinants of the students' happiness; to provide a wellbeing strategy model for higher education.

Literature review

Wellbeing – theoretical approach

Wellbeing is not unanimously defined. Tov (2018) explains it as a multifaceted concept, with two components – affective wellbeing, including, valence, frequency, intensity, arousal and interpersonal engagement, on one hand, and cognitive wellbeing, meaning life satisfaction, life evaluation and domain satisfaction, on the other hand; he states that research in the area proved that optimism and positive beliefs are associated to higher satisfaction and happiness and contribute to the decrease of the stress level and even depression. In many studies wellbeing is considered a subjective issue equal to happiness. Boniwell (2008) explains that objective wellbeing cannot be real since no factor is objectively determining happiness, since this is most cases a subject-related state; therefore, subjective wellbeing is substitute to happiness, based on cognitive (meaning life satisfaction) and affective explanations (meaning positive emotions).

There are also cases, when the difference between wellbeing and happiness is accepted. In Table 1, the differences between the two concepts are separating the concepts from the causes determining them.

Table 1. *Understanding wellbeing and happiness – literature review*

Crt No.	Literature review	Issue explained	Well-being	Happiness
1.	John Templation Foundation http://www.happinessandwellbeing.org/wellbeing-research-faq-2/	Conceptual understanding Determinants/causes Theories	Value Judgment – effects that make you better off or worse off. A way of being – like healthy satisfaction+positive or negative feelings -hedonism - mental state -desire – achieving goals - list – things that are valuable -nature-fulfillment – maximizing your potential	State of mind – life satisfaction, or being positive from emotional point of view Good relationships, great career development - hedonism - pleasure or misery - emotional state - positive or negative emotionally - life satisfaction perception about life
2.	Bronson, R. (2018) https://thriveglobal.com/stories/the-relationship-between-happiness-and-wellbeing/ined&section=undefined	Relationship	Well-being influence happiness (state of being well). It cannot exist in the absence of happiness	Happiness can be present without well-being. (state of emotional well-being)

Source: Author's own research.

Bronson (2018) states that wellbeing and happiness complete each other, the real meaning for both of them being beyond theories, since every individual is its own wellbeing and happiness author.

Studying wellbeing in higher education, Giusta et al. (2017) demonstrate that student-wellbeing can bring value to universities and identify several determining factor of student wellbeing - academic and non-academic ones. In Figure 1, a combination of such factors to objective and subjective approaches generate several sets of wellbeing determinants.

Subjective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' experiences • Students' expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' emotions • Individual optimism
Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching and learning environment • Students' performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' health • Financial autonomy • Extracurricular activities • University links
	Academic	Non-academic

Figure 1. Wellbeing determinants

Source: Author's own research.

Therefore, the university context is very important from both academic and non-academic wellbeing factors, at the beginning from the objective side of it, without neglecting the influences of all institutional conditions towards the subjective students' states. In many cases, learning environment is easily to convert into a wellbeing generator if teaching methods are providing social connectivity. Figure 2 shows the well-being components in learning environments.

Figure 2. Wellbeing components in learning environment

Source: Author's own research (adapted from: Simon Fraser University https://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/healthycampuscommunity/WLE-Tools/WLE-Printouts_v5.pdf).

The above diagram illustrates the fact that professors have a huge role in generating a wellbeing state for their students. New teaching methods are the effective solution for improving the students' well-being. In fact, the 2019 *Teaching and Learning Forum* of the *European University Association* is focusing on successful learning for which professors must develop skills and opportunities to exchange, must develop new portfolios and profiles and also rethink the process of teaching and learning evaluation.

Students' services understanding

All higher education institutions are evaluated based on quality assurance standards. The *European Standards Guidelines* (2015) mention the role of student-centred learning and teaching, by accepting diversity of students, the need of using different pedagogical methods, the importance of the learner autonomy, of mutual respect between professors and students, and many other issues. In the Romanian methodology for external evaluation, students' services are associated with social services and extracurricular activities, and correlate the quality of different institutional processes with student services, including: the importance of providing financial and human resources for efficient services, for generating a proper learning and a quality students' life; describing the necessary services, the national standards consider different level of indicators as described in Table 2.

Table 2. *Student services – Romanian quality assurance perspective*

Standard category - ARACIS methodology	Issue explained	Standard description
Students services	Minimum level	Minimum number of social, cultural and sport services, such as accommodation provided for 10 % of students, sport conditions, counseling. Students are well informed and they provide feed-back on the level of these services. Institutions have a multiannual strategic plan for developing students' services.
	Referential indicator 1	A variety of services are provided. Special programs are offered to improve the quality of student life. Periodical evaluation is assured. National and international best practices are disseminated.
	Referential indicator 2	Best practices are analyzed and changes are proposed. Different student categories are identified and special programmes are provided for them, special designed (such as for student-mothers, if the case).

Source: Author's own research (based on

http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Proceduri/2018/Metodologie_Mof_25_2018.pdf).

Therefore, according to quality assurance standards, the only connection with the students' wellbeing is the level of different students' services. In fact, the existing institutional context for all accredited universities is one where at least the minimum level of standards is provided, which does not mean the activities are effectively carried out. Many more deliverable should be provided and activities should be more visible.

The current context of higher education institutions is a very different one in terms of implemented wellbeing. On one hand, there are the traditional and high internationally

ranked universities where wellbeing is not a declarative concept, but a way of providing proper services to students, and special centers are established in order to develop and organize events on regular basis for students. On the other hand, there are the universities with less resources and no experience in proving wellbeing services to students, where sporadic events might take place, but there is no coherent programme to integrate actions into a clear wellbeing practice.

In fact, student services have a huge role in improving the student experience in their academic life, as Ciobanu (2013) states; they are relevant for new institutional policies meant to generate not only diversification of services, but service quality, as well, while Platis (2018) demonstrates that learning experience is correlated to excellent teaching and proper resources. In the Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice (2019), topics cover a large variety of themes, such as: student trauma, use of drugs, family support, psychological wellbeing, social marginalization.

Methodology

Wellbeing in universities – practical approach

In many universities, wellbeing is not a new issue. In others, many things must change. A simple website research conducts to practical clarifications, as a matter of institutional actions. Table 3 shows that wellbeing is managed in many ways at different higher education institutions.

Table 3. *University practices of students' wellbeing*

University	Practices	Comments
University College London, UK	Student Centre provides support and wellbeing – mental health, suicide prevention, awareness, crises support, take care of yourself, health care etc	Student wellbeing in the UK is very different defined from one university to another – from individual care and awareness, to team play and group sessions. These services are separate from those related to career and work experience, to academic support and financial services.
University of Kent, UK	Services – accessibility, autism, disability, learning difficulties, emergency support, crisis drop during exams, managing stress, managing anxiety, get active, stay safe etc.	
Nottingham Trent University, UK	Online support, face-to-face meetings, fitness, sports playing, therapy sessions, mindfulness, chalk drawing etc.	
University of Stanford, USA	Wellness Living Laboratory – 10 domains: social connectedness, lifestyle behaviors, stress and resilience, emotional health, physical health, meaning and purpose, sense of self, finances, spirituality or religiosity, exploration and creativity.	In USA, wellness is very much studied and clearly defined. It is considered a research area with many implications on service development. A huge accent is put on dealing with emotions.
University of Sydney	Health, wellbeing, personal development and success – stay fit and healthy, faith and religion, counselling and mental support, link to mentoring programs etc	In Australia, wellbeing services are connected to student personal development and success. It also provides connection to other student services, such as counselling and mentoring.

Source: Author's own research (based on institutions' websites).

Examples can easily continue. Best practices are easy to be found, since guides, centers and administrative offices have been created in order to better perform in providing qualitative students' services. The experiences of other universities are an important starting point for other higher education institutions to create an integrative programme or a strategic plan in the area of wellbeing services.

Wellbeing – students' perception on wellbeing – importance and practical measures

The research is based on students' perception on the wellbeing concept related to their student experience. A questionnaire was addressed to undergraduate and graduate students from a Romanian university, including two parts: one of open questions and one of questions asking the respondents to express their agreement related to specific topics.

The questionnaire was designed based on the three dimensions *Rodawell* project has revealed as important for the child well-being – autonomy, quality relationship and learning environment; this project is managed in a cooperation between Romania and Denmark, at university level and relates wellbeing to learning, learning environment being connected to a social dimension. In other words, the project refers to the wellbeing of children and defines a child wellbeing by the state of an autonomous person able to develop qualitative relationships and get actively involved in social environment. In fact, the same is valid to students – they become autonomous when they are free to express themselves, to be who they are, to act without any mask, able to gain more and more, but true friends, and really active in relationship to the environment.

In the Global Happiness Report (2018), the authors reveal the concept of visible wellbeing explained by professor Lea Waters as a school framework that consist of six areas to be considered – strength, emotional management, attention and awareness, relationship, coping, habits and goals; he also states that visible well-being must have three goals: building student well-being, enhancing student learning and building wellbeing for staff and faculty.

The distribution of the respondents is described in Table 4. and Table 5.

Table 4. *Distribution of the respondents – students*

Level of study/ Structure	Female	Male	Total
Undergraduate level	46	30	76
Graduate level	56	32	88
Total	102	62	164

Source: Author's own research.

The responses are revealed in Table 5.

Table 5. *Wellbeing understanding - students' perceptions*

Crt. No.	Question/Sentence	Lickert score – undergraduate and graduate students
1.	I am happy for being a student.	4.39
2.	The way how teaching and learning is done stimulates me.	3.48
3.	I like I can be myself and that I have the freedom to express.	4.13
4.	I am happy I have developed friendship relationships.	4.05
5.	My happiness state has nothing to do with the university.	3.17

6.	You cannot be happy without a professional fulfilled life .	4.26
7.	My study area is exactly the one I want to build a career in.	4.39
8.	Student happiness is not equal to his/her satisfaction related to services provided by the university, but includes it.	4.09
9.	A satisfied student is not necessarily a happy student.	3.04
10.	Happiness can be increased by qualitative services offered by the university.	3.67

Source: Author's own research.

At the same time, two sets of responses are relevant for the research: responses to which are the most important three determinants of the student wellbeing, where students had to choose among 10 factors having the freedom to add any other factor and responses to open questions referring to what kind of services could be provide in the university to contribute to increase the well-being state of students, as well as extracurricular activities.

Therefore, in the area of determinants of the student well-being, the responses included:

- Self-confident 73%
- Health 70%
- Successful career 59%
- Wealth 53%
- Positive thinking 51%
- An active life 46%
- Social relationships 36%
- Student's achievements 27%
- A family fulfilled life 15%

The suggested activities (services and extracurricular activities), many respondents did not answer; only 92 respondents provided some answers, meaning 56% of the respondents wanted to provide some feedback. The relevant answers included as services areas that relate to learning environment and activities related to environment:

- Interactive courses
- More flexibility in attendance
- Student trips
- Summer schools
- Advanced technology
- Part-time studies
- Creative group activities
- Innovative teaching methods
- Free time activities such as: sport, painting, music, lecture clubs.

Results and discussions

Main findings demonstrate that students are aware of their needs even if they study in a learning environment where there is no culture oriented to the well-being of people. In higher education institutions, less attention has been put at least in Romanian universities towards student well-being, compared to kindergarten and primary education.

From a theoretical point of view, well-being is differently understood, from one author to another, but it is a clear connection between wellbeing – happiness and satisfaction. In addition, there is a clear differentiation from internal, individual state of wellbeing and an external, environmental generated state to individual, but there is a common understanding that both are important. Many practical activities have been managed in business industry for the wellbeing of the employees, and universities in developed economies have also moved towards applied wellbeing for the academic community benefit. Dedicated centers were established and many awareness events organized.

From the results achieved point of view, there is clear that students in Romania are not familiar with this applied concept, but they know what they need and they integrate their need into two areas: learning area and environmental area, which together refer to a learning experience, where curricular activities combine harmoniously with extracurricular ones.

First hypothesis has been confirmed. The responses proved that most relevant determinants of wellbeing are external ones. The second hypothesis was confirmed only by the literature review, but not by the respondents, in a direct way. In fact, in an indirect way, it was confirmed by the respondents, since they agreed that determinant for their well-being are related to the learning environment, which cannot be improved with unhappy staff and teachers.

A possible wellbeing strategy should start from the leadership interest and support. In Figure 3, a wellbeing strategy model is proposed.

Figure 3. A well-being strategy model

Source: Author's own research.

Important is that students get involved. In other words, awareness activities, will not make any difference if students do not take part. Therefore, what is to be done is to find methods to increase students' engagement in such activities, like in many others. A solution

for current context would be to start awareness programme on wellbeing through partnership which will bring confidence in the debates and will demonstrate professionalism.

Conclusion

The importance of the wellbeing of students is unquestionable. For the current state of the Romanian universities, a possible application is based on the quality assurance framework, universities to develop student services in the area of their well-being. Little by little, they will become a way of life. In addition, several times, different studies mentioned the importance of the well-being of the staff and faculty, not only of the students. In future research, this is to be studied. This paper has some limitations, such as the number of the respondents and the category of the respondent, being only students. The leadership and academics perception on wellbeing in general and on a possible wellbeing strategy will be helpful for a real and effective strategy.

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