

The Understanding of Life Quality by Students Nowadays

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Abstract: Taking into account the importance of the human resources and potential of young students in the future of the country and the relevance of life quality, the main aim of the article is to clarify the perceptions of Latvian students on the quality of life, its promoting and limiting aspects. In order to get a better insight in students' understanding of life quality in today's situation, questionnaires with incomplete sentences were created. 249 students from four institutions of higher education were surveyed. The main categories that have an impact on students' quality of life are as follows: students themselves and their own personality traits, interpersonal relationships, family and friends, material support, personal development and education, as well as time. According to students, the contributors to a good quality of life are often different from the restrictive aspects. Besides financial problems, students mention an existential problem, namely, lack of time as one of the problematic categories of life quality. Students' quality of life is promoted by the learning environment, if it is open to change, innovation, and is characterized by a positive attitude.

Keywords: students, quality of life, personal understanding, incomplete sentences, higher education.

Introduction

As from the beginning of the 21st century, the topic on life quality has been addressed in the politics of many European Union countries. European Council of the General Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage has put forward the support of the quality of life as the main goal for the society (Eiropas Padomes..., 2006). The need to improve and harmonize the life quality of a human being and society is accentuated also in the Memorandum on lifetime learning by the European Commission work group. Also in Latvia, the topic on life quality has become more relevant with the rapid economic growth, which was followed by an even more rapid decline. It is referred to as a priority in the Latvian National development plan – “life quality for every one of us” (Latvijas Nacionālais..., 2012, 13). At the start of the market reforms, the social priorities were replaced by pragmatic approach to obtain maximum profits. At the end of the century, government efforts were primarily focused on the formation and development of market economy institutions. As a result, the economy improved, but the quality of life for most people did not, if not worsened. The social gaps enlarged. More students and labour force emigrated abroad. As shown by studies of economists, approximately one half of the Latvian population live below the poverty line (Saksonova, Solovjova, 2015). Hence, one can conclude that the improvement of life quality is not very successful.

In this context, the studies on the life quality of Latvian population has become one of the central motives of both social and political documents. Authors of Latvian economy guidelines, for example, as one of the first and main objectives mention “ensuring stable and rapid economic growth while also contributing to the increase in life quality of Latvian population” (Ancāns, Birznieks, 2007, 47). However, the country's economic growth is closely linked to the scientific and technological progress. This means that the economic development is related to the potential of the population, including their education levels and the increase of those levels. For Latvia, a country with limited natural resources, the largest national treasure is its population, human resources. Hence, it is understandable that the future of the country is dependent on the education of the population. Following a permanent increase in number of students during the national independence years until 2006 when Latvia was ranked second in the world by number of students per 10,000 inhabitants, the decrease in number of students has begun and is still underway. The decrease in number of students is not proportional to the decline in the birth rate, respectively, to the decrease in number of school pupils. Instead it has declined even more. This can be explained with the emigration trend – more secondary school graduates wish to continue their studies abroad in order to receive better quality and better treatment. This is confirmed by, for example, the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (Gruntmanis, 2012).

Quality of life is undeniably a vast, multidimensional concept that includes all aspects of life and is used in various fields: geography, philosophy, medicine, social sciences, health (Oort, Visser, 2005). There is still no agreement neither on the number of the dimensions of the concept, nor on the diversity. There is no universally accepted definition of the concept “quality of life” – these definitions are extremely heterogeneous in the social literature. There is also no standard form for the measurement of the quality of life. And it is not related to the lack of creative ideas. For example, *R.A. Cummins* has identified more than 100 different definitions of quality of life and approximately 800 different measurements for it (Cummins, Lau, 2006).

In the first half of the 20th century, the quality of life in many countries was measured only by the level of material well-being, e.g., the higher the country’s GDP, the higher the quality of human life. It is believed that the concept of quality of life in its modern sense was first expressed by *L. Johnson* who in his 1964 speech emphasized that the achievements of public goals “cannot be measured with our savings in bank accounts. They can be measured only by our people’s quality of life” (McCall, 1975, 229).

R. A. Cummins performed an analysis of the 27 widely used definitions on the quality of life and concluded that 85% of these include the emotional well-being, 70% - health, 70% - issues related to one’s private life, and 56% - work and everyday activities (Cummins, 1996, 304). The concept of life quality in Latvia covers the physical and mental health, leisure time and its usage, work and link with the society, the ability to make independent decisions and realize these, as well as the material support (COMMIN Baltic..., 2015).

The researchers of quality of life emphasize that the reason for so many different approaches to defining the concept is related to the fact that life quality is associated with both objective indicators (e.g., the human living conditions), as well as subjective indicators (e.g., human life satisfaction) (Borthwick-Duffy, 1992, 52). So, in a broader sense, quality of life includes both objective indicators and subjective satisfaction and evaluation. In Latvia, in previous studies on subjective satisfaction, a significant correlation has been established: the more people feel in control in a situation, the more they are satisfied with the situation. It is interesting that fields which are related to work and income (opportunities to find a job, salary, work environment and conditions, income, family well-being) are the ones where people do not feel in control (Bela, 2006, 42).

Nowadays, a lot of research is performed on how a particular life dimension, e.g., health, physical activities, etc., is linked to the quality of life. In the US and many European countries, special social indicators are used to measure and operationalize the quality of life (Noll, 2004, 153). The main advantage of using social indicators is the objectivity. These indicators can be relatively easily defined and their impact – calculated, without reliance on the individual’s subjective opinion on quality of life (Diener, Suh, 1997, 190). Nevertheless, many authors conclude that quality of life cannot be assessed with external measurements only, because the basis for quality of life is an individual’s life experience (Wilk, 1999, 91). This means that the objective indicators alone cannot reflect whether a person feels good or not.

When prioritizing the indicators of quality of life, it is important to take into account the prioritization of the individual – which area is more important or less important for the individual. For example, when evaluating the quality of life of a person, one of the indicators might be very low. This, however, might not have a significant impact on the quality of life, if the respective area is not important for that person. And the other way round – a low indicator can significantly impact the life quality of a person, especially if it is related to an area that is very important for that person (Carver, Scheier 2001, 355). Therefore, if the life quality of a certain group of people is determined without taking into account their own personal comprehension of it, one can obtain results that are far from the actual situation.

According to the EU objective indicators, Latvia, when compared to other countries, has lower salaries, minimum wage and pension, which is one of the reasons for the labour emigration to Western European or Scandinavian countries. At the same time, the strength of Latvia in the field of human resources is the formal education level of a relatively high proportion of the employed population. An interesting finding is the ambiguous link between the level of education and the assessment of the quality of life. As was shown in the research on the quality of life of Latvian population, the graduates of secondary school are less satisfied with their life quality than the ones who have obtained basic elementary school

diploma (Bela-Krūmiņa, Eglīte, 2006, 24). Also, the relatively low assessment of lifelong learning on the increase of life quality points out to the lack of understanding in society. This raises the question on the importance of education on the life quality of the young generation and adults.

Until now it has been researched that young people are attracted to Latvia thanks to family and friends. These are the most important groups for the young people and these form their link with own country. In the age category of 20 - 25 years, important aspects of quality of life are associated with a stable circle of friends and leisure time, education and a good job in the future (Trapenciere, 2006, 151).

Hence, the quality of life includes not only the objective indicators, but also the subjective satisfaction of individuals, their experience, assessment and notion of good life. People's satisfaction with life is subjective and it is relatively independent of the objective circumstances. It has been found that by using different standards for the comparison, satisfaction with life quality can vary considerably (Wrosch, Scheier, 2003). Therefore, it is meaningful to take into account the individuals' subjective understanding of the quality of life. Also, the level of education does not only affect the objective indicators of life quality (e.g. education opportunities, quality, accessibility), but also the subjective indicators (e.g., the motivation to improve one's level of education). Regardless of which university or type of studies the student has chosen, he / she learns to be responsible for the formation of one's own life.

Taking into account the importance of the human resources and potential of young students in the future of the country and the relevance of life quality, the author puts forward the research aim: to determine the comprehension of life quality and its contributing factors among the students in Latvia nowadays.

Methodology

In order to determine the comprehension of life quality among students nowadays, a questionnaire was created with 3 incomplete sentences: 1) "I believe that the human life is of good quality if...", 2) "The quality of my life is promoted by...", 3) "The quality of my life is limited by...". Students were asked to complete these sentences according to their own preconceptions. The questionnaires were distributed at the beginning of the lecture and students needed 3-7 minutes to fill in the questionnaire. All of the distributed questionnaires were filled in and returned. All of these were valid.

The research participants were from the following faculties: English Philology, IT Management and Computer Science, Graphic and Interior Design, Law, Mathematics, Medicine, Psychology, Sociology, Business and Economics. The age group was 20-24 years. The students were selected from four higher education institutions, using the cluster random sampling method. The total number of respondents – 249, 64% of these were women (according to the Central Statistical Bureau data, over the last years in Latvia 62% of all students are females) (Centrālās statistikas..., 2015).

When performing the substantive analysis of the questionnaire, the categories of life quality and the frequency of mentioning these were determined.

Results and Discussions

Comparing the frequencies of the life quality categories, the χ^2 test did not show statistically significant differences between the different faculties ($p=0,02$) and gender ($p=0,01$).

When finalizing the first sentence: "***I believe that the human life is of good quality if...***", most of the students (e.g., 54% or more than every second student) mentioned the importance of the inner human potential or one's personality traits (Figure 1). The following traits were evaluated: the assessment of what one has, satisfaction with the surroundings and the resulting ability to enjoy life and its small details (19% respondents), harmony with oneself and the surrounding world, e.g., arranged spiritual life (8%), self-realization, namely "when a person does not live only for oneself", "giving joy to others", "participating in helping to improve the lives of other people", "using one's potential", etc. (6%), as well as the student's independence from external factors (social negativity, physical looks, work, etc.), consciousness, completeness, and openness to the new. Another subcategory is purposefulness (13%). Half of the students, who mention purposefulness, state it only – "a person knows what he/she wants", "one has found their aim in life", "there is a goal to strive for", etc., while the other half of these students

also mention the importance of the ability to achieve these objectives (e.g., the existence of willpower, capacity).

The second most frequently mentioned category is interpersonal relationships and relatives (30%). Most often students simply note the existence of family and friends (16%), while others highlight the support they provide (7%), especially – the support with positive emotions and reliability, as well as good relationships and understanding (7%).

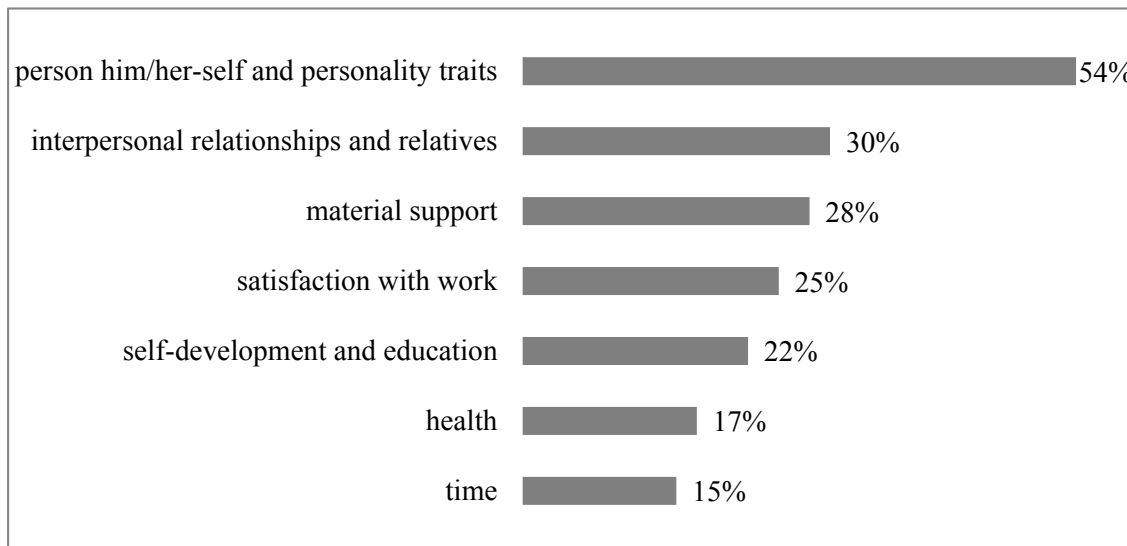


Figure 1. Most frequently mentioned life quality categories when completing the sentence “I believe that the human life is of good quality if...” (statistically significant differences between the frequencies, according to the χ^2 test with $p < 0,001$).

Relatively less often (28%) the following category is named: material support, e.g., sufficient financial means for food, clothing, utilities, recreation, etc. Moreover, one fourth of those students, who do mention material support, refer to the role of time, namely, a condition for life quality is not only having enough money, but also enough time for private life and entertainment, not using all the “free time” on earning money.

Almost as often (25%), students mention the satisfaction with their work – human life is of good quality if the student likes their job. Fifth of these 25% students added that they should earn enough money when carrying out this work.

Somewhat less frequently, when completing the first sentence, students refer to self-development and education (22%). This category can be divided into self-development and growth *opportunities* (8%), the *willingness* to learn and develop oneself mentally and physically (7%), the *existence* of education, knowledge, intelligence or experience (7%).

The sixth most frequently mentioned category, when completing the first sentence, is health (17%).

Time dimension can be extinguished as a separate category in students’ statements. Often high quality of life is linked to successful time management (the possibility of combining work with studies and leisure), appropriate use of time (8%). If one takes into account the fact that additional 7% of all students consider material support to be important conditional upon having time also for private time and leisure, it can be assumed that time dimension is important for 15% of students, who were completing the first sentence.

Other quality of life aspects that are mentioned include no outside restrictions, e.g., “when one can do what he/she wants”, “when wishes can be satisfied without any worries” (7%), to love and to be loved (6%), hobbies and non-work related interests (5%). Less often the following aspects of life quality are mentioned – the confirmation of reality with one’s expectations, recreation, opportunity to travel, having a life full of various events, safe environment, safe sex and the absence of anxiety.

It should be noted that 11% of respondents associate quality of life with happiness, that is, they have completed the sentence “*I believe that the human life is of good quality if...*” with “he/she is (feels) happy”.

The endings of the second and the third sentence specify the content and importance of the life quality aspects mentioned in the first sentence. Moreover, these indicate the potential solutions for improving the life quality of students.

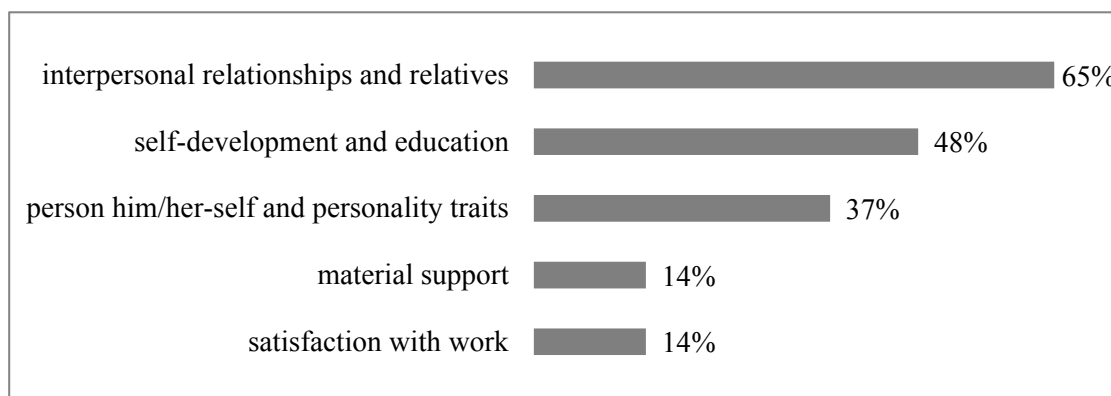


Figure 2. Most frequently mentioned life quality categories when completing the sentence „*The quality of my life is promoted by...*” (statistically significant differences between the frequencies, according to the χ^2 test with $p < 0,001$).

Almost two thirds (65%) of all students mentioned interpersonal relationships and their relatives, when completing the sentence “*The quality of my life is promoted by...*” (Figure 2). Furthermore, half of this group emphasize socializing, interacting with friends, meeting important people for themselves, in some cases, also conversations and discussions with intelligent and open people. Approximately, one fourth of these students mentioned the help and support received from their family and relatives. On the contrary, 3% of the respondents stated that for them more important is giving support rather than receiving it, e.g., making happy and taking care of the relatives.

Almost every second student mentioned self-development and education (48%) as a promoter for their life quality. Most frequently, students mention the *possibility* to study and obtain a good education (14%), self-development (physically and mentally) and having a growth overall (11%). Respondents highlight the merit of school, teachers, and interesting lessons (7%), knowledge (5%), skills (5%), as well as the positive and negative *personal experience* (6%).

The third most frequently mentioned category in the second sentence was the student him/herself and his/her personality traits (37%). This category included endings of sentences not related to the student’s knowledge and skills (as previously), but with him/herself and their attitude, e.g., “personal attitude”, “my perception of life”, “being satisfied with what one has”, “I, myself”, “my (spontaneous) ideas”, “getting to know oneself, one’s values”, “has a conscious place in life”, as well as a number of own personality traits: good faith, willpower, patience, optimism, “the willingness not to be a vertical puddle” (slang for a pessimist), etc. Another subcategory is also related to oneself – purposefulness and the ability to realize one’s goals (17%). Examples of this category include purposeful activity, self-motivation, determination, ambitions, and interest to achieve one’s goals, “knowing that I can”.

Only half of those respondents, who mentioned material support when completing the first sentence, mentioned it as an aspect that would enhance their quality of life (14%). Students state, for example, financial resources, financial stability, opportunity to earn some money during summer, career at work.

Just as often students mention their pursuits in own profession, resp., their satisfaction with own work (14%). In this category, statements about success at work, rather than the financial gains, were grouped, e.g., one’s sense of satisfaction with the progress made, satisfaction with work itself.

As other life quality enhancers students state physical activities, e.g., sports or dancing (9%), hobbies (7%) (sometimes students indicate that these help to reduce everyday stress – among these could be physical activities, but it is not specified), health and taking care of it (7%), leisure, recreation (entertainment, going to museums, exhibitions, etc.) (5%), positive emotions and feeling good (5%). Less often respondents mention their environment (house, place of residence), possibility to travel, enough time (for oneself and other people, for leisure and work / studies), ability to receive social security, reputation, respect and praise, nature (also rural areas), balance and stability which gives a sense of security (at work, at school, in relationships), love, diversity and God.

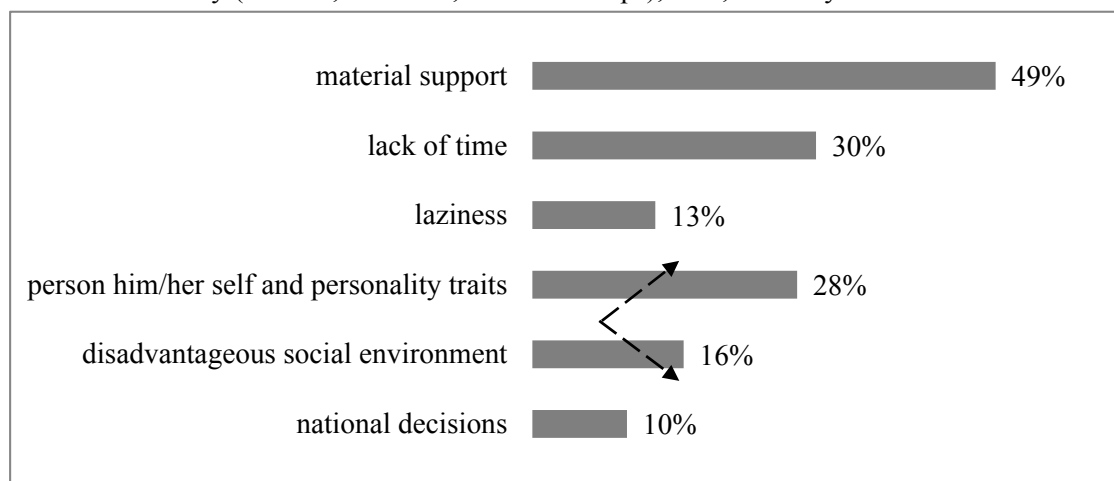


Figure 3. Most frequently mentioned life quality categories when completing the sentence „The quality of my life is limited by...”...” (statistically significant differences between the frequencies, according to the χ^2 test with $p < 0,001$).

A different picture can be observed when reviewing the most frequently mentioned categories that have been used to complete the third sentence “*The quality of my life is limited by...*” (Figure 3). If the most frequently mentioned categories among aspects *promoting* life quality were interpersonal relationships, own relatives, self-improvement and education, then as the main *limiting* quality of life students most frequently mention material support. This is stated by every second student (49%) citing, e.g., lack of money, economic situation in the country, inadequate remuneration for work, living conditions. 5% of these respondents see limited job opportunities for people with no previous experience.

The second most frequently mentioned constraints that is mentioned is time, namely, lack of time, which is one of the most mysterious aspects of our life today (30%). The problem students cite is “I need to manage things I want to accomplish myself and things that others expect from me”, which results in exertion. In some instances, students mention excessive business, working or writing study papers. In fact, one could consider that time has been stated even more frequently, as 13% of students have completed the third sentence by indicating laziness. And students themselves have in many cases explained themselves laziness as “time spent in vain”. Laziness can also be referred to the student’s personality traits, which is the third most frequently mentioned constraint (28%). Other life quality limiting aspects that students state include: personal imposed boundaries, fear, lack of confidence, disbelief in one’s own efforts, lack of courage, self-esteem and motivation, inferiority feelings. Moreover, respondents mention their attitude, inability to appreciate what they have (“stage in life, which I want to end as quickly as possible”). 5% of students emphasize their own decisions and actions taken, resp., incorrect lifestyle, and harmful habits. All this leads to a negative mood: anxiety, stress, nervousness (7%).

The fourth limiting aspect is the disadvantageous social environment (16%) the student is: negativism in the surrounding environment, hostile attitude of other people towards different processes, change, innovation, society with “stagnant beliefs”, people who “believe that there is only one correct perception of life” and people who “demand others to behave according to the stereotypes”.

On contrary, the fifth limiting category consists of national decisions (10%): the attitude of the country, rules (for example, “I was born in Latvia, but I am not a citizen”), taxes.

Significantly less frequently students mention such limiting aspects as insufficient education (lack of skills and knowledge), lack of experience, inability to achieve one’s goals, take advantage of opportunities, health problems, conflicts with others (e.g., disputes with parents), routine (“dull everyday life”, “I cannot do what I want, I have to do what I don’t want to do”) and low quality of studies. 2% of respondents believe that their quality of life is not limited by anything.

Conclusions

- More than 70% of all respondents believe that overall the human life quality is dependent on the person him/herself (own personality traits, ambition, attitude towards life) and on their aspiration and ability to develop oneself. Moreover, students recognize that these are aspects that *promote* their life quality, which shows the student’s willingness to take responsibility of one’s own life path. Only less than one third of all students linked these aspects to potential *limitations* of their life quality. Furthermore, material support was mentioned as the most limiting aspect of their life quality and only in 14% cases this aspect was stated as promoting their quality of life. This indicates that, according to students, the aspects that promote life quality are different from the ones that limit it, namely, the same things that limit life quality are not the same as the ones that promote it. Lack of financial resources reduces the quality of life at least 3 times more often than having material support that would increase life quality. Self-motivation, interest to achieve one’s goals are categories that are mentioned as promoting life quality 10 times more often than the lack of motivation which could limit life quality... This can be explained twofold. On one hand, there are *necessary conditions* for good life quality (e.g., material support), which are not *sufficient conditions* to experience life as of good quality. On the other hand, one can observe that students have more often stated areas which they feel they can influence themselves as promoting conditions, while as limiting factors – those areas that they feel they cannot influence.
- Most often students experience a good life with their beloved ones – important indicators for life quality are family, friends, and their support. For every second student, life quality promoting aspects are also self-development and learning.
- Lack of material support is often stated as a limiting factor for life quality and self-development. So one can conclude that having sufficient income is one of the most important instruments for improving life quality also for students, both on individual and national level. In this respect, a reform of scholarships based on students’ financial needs would be needed. Moreover, a greater transparency with regards to the income and expenses of higher education institutions and their faculties would be necessary.
- Besides lack of material support, another existential problem arises – lack of time. On one hand, it is a modern problem for the nowadays’ world that is oriented on dialectical materialism. A human being has a sense of existential finality that makes the individual live in an endless hurry and anxiety, while not letting him/her realize why and where they are rushing to. On the other hand, lack of time is related to lack of financial resources in a relatively poor country. A lot of students try to realize this issue themselves by working part-time in addition to their studies. In this way, the balance of recreation and work is dismantled, which results in burnout, health problems, disconnection from family and emigration.
- Taking into account the importance of interpersonal relationships and education for students, one should pay attention to such life quality limiting aspects as other people’s negative attitude and a society closed to change and innovation. This implies that a very important aspect also is the social environment that has developed in each higher education institution and the Latvian higher education system as a whole. If this system is closed and there is a vertical management style, then it can become a serious hindrance for the life quality of a student and his/her decision to seek a more human treatment in another country.

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