




Student's Quality of Life at the University: a Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Since the end of the XX century the university has enlarged its traditional role focused on the production and reproduction of scientific knowledge, thus becoming a social institution, an academic reference for those whose lives are developed within its walls (Tonon 2012b, p. 4). For more than a decade, we have worked in this thematic field, and the development of three former research projects (2005–2013) has allowed us to identify a direct and positive relationship between the person's access to university studies and their quality of life. This has reinforced the idea that access to the university is a strategy which improves people's quality of life, generating an enhancement of their sense of well-being (Tonon 2005). The pilot study we are about to put forward has been conducted during the years 2018 and 2019, with students of different courses of study in the Faculty of Social Sciences of Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora, Argentina, with the object of examining their opinion regarding their quality of life at the university. It is a pilot study which provides the university authorities with a situational analysis for the construction of an institutional agenda of higher education. Furthermore, it is the first step toward generating the construction process of a new indicator development on the study of quality of university life. The abovementioned research study was conducted by the qualitative method, and carried out on the basis of a sample of 200 university students between the ages of 18 and 20.

Keywords Quality of life · University · Students · Qualitative method

Context

Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora (UNLZ) is a national university of Argentina; it is important to point out that national universities in this country are free,

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which implies that people are not required to pay fees of any kind in exchange for tuition. The UNLZ was founded in 1972 and became the first and only National University in the Buenos Aires Conurban¹ in response to the population growth rate that took place in the region (51% between 1960 and 1970). The intention was to create nontraditional programs and the first three being: Rural Engineering, Administration, and Social Communication. Today it is organized into different Schools: Economics, Social Sciences, Agricultural Sciences, Engineering, and Law. It has a population of 45.000 students and an average of 9000 new students per year. https://www.unlz.edu.ar/?page_id=1938

State of the Art

Though other studies have been developed on the topic during the last decades of the XX century, Witmer and Sweeney (1982); Benjamin (1994); Clifton et al. (1996); we have taken into consideration the research studies on this thematic field which were conducted in the XXI century. An overview of former scientific studies on the topic related to satisfaction with university studies and quality of university life, has led us to discover the research work carried out by Sirgy et al. (2007, p.346) who define quality of college life in terms of the students' feelings of overall satisfaction with life at these institutions. The authors studied two types of college experiences: students' satisfaction with its academic level, on the one hand, and with its social aspects on the other (Sirgy et al. 2007, p. 345). They used the spillover approach, which considers that satisfaction in one area of life may exert an influence over satisfaction in the other (Sirgy et al. 2001). Sirgy et al. (2007) studied the impact that the services offered by the university have on the people's quality of life. These services have been classified into three extensive items: educational services (quality of the professors and their classes); administrative services; and services related to university facilities (buildings, equipment, open spaces, social welfare, cultural, and sports activities, among others). This issue was also approached by Yu and Kim at Yonsei University in South Korea, in 2008, through a research study on the effect that the university has on quality of life, on the students' level of satisfaction, and on the sense of loyalty which the former develop toward the institution.

Later, Sirgy et al. (2010, pp. 376–377) identified three types of studies involving college students and quality of life: (a) studies examining relationships between students' QOL and factors such as personality, health, and the environment (Makinen and Pychyl 2001; Smith et al. 2004; Vaez et al. 2004), (b) studies developing QOL measures specifically adapted to college students (Disch et al. 2000; Maggino and Shifini D'Andrea 2003, and (c) studies developing indicators measuring students' quality of college life (QCL) (Sirgy et al. 2007; Yu and Kim 2008; Yu and Lee 2008).

We have further identified other research studies, namely, those by Blázquez Resino et al. (2013) who published their research work in Spanish under the title: *Calidad de vida universitaria: Identificación de los principales indicadores de satisfacción*

¹ The Buenos Aires Conurban is a geographical area which surrounds the country's capital district. It is composed by 24 districts with a population of over 10.000.000 people, particularly characterized by its social, urban and cultural heterogeneity and inequality.

estudiantil (Quality of University Life: Identification of the Main Indicators of Student Satisfaction), in which they measured the quality of university life of the students of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Talavera de la Reina, Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, España, during the 2010–2011 academic term, their focus being placed on three dimensions: resources and facilities, teaching aspects, and social aspects. All their research work was developed by using the quantitative method, applying the Likert scale.

At the University of Pretoria in South Africa, Prof. Irma Eloff has been developing a multi-methods research study of the well-being of university students since 2017, with the aim of probing more deeply into students' well-being at University.

In the light of the research studies carried out in different Latin American countries, we have been able to identify two, which are related to this thematic field; namely: those developed by Malinowski (2008), and Murcia Peña (2009). The research study conducted by Malinowski in Mexico is focused on the enrolment process of university students and territorial acknowledgement at institutional and intellectual levels. On the other hand, Murcia Peña's research work (Murcia Peña 2009) is devoted to university life and its social imaginaries.

In the case of Argentina, a Research Program on Quality of Life was created at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora, in 2004. From that moment onward, we have made progress in the development of research projects, by qualitative methods, centered in the quality of life of university students. The first project took place during 2005 and was entitled "*A strategy in the improvement of the quality of life: the university as a space for the social integration of students*". The results showed that students greatly valued their access to university, whether to acquire knowledge, as an anticipatory mechanism of a possible future source of employment, or as a stage in the improvement of their quality of life. Quality of life has been associated to vital satisfaction, to enjoyment, to "doing what I like" and, in doing so, with the possibility of personal fulfillment. (Tonon 2015, p.11). Subsequently, and during 2010–2011, the second project was developed under the name of *Images of the future and quality of life of young university students of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora*. The results showed that students related quality of life to satisfaction with life, i.e., with enjoying what they like doing, and therefore, acknowledged it as something that makes their lives meaningful. University studies were perceived as a distinctive value related to social mobility, in its broad sense, that is, not reduced to economic status but also regarded as an improvement of the "person", in other words, of quality of life in general. The expectation of making a living on the chosen professions came up as an improvement of their quality of life, thus relating access to university to the empowerment of their quality of life, both in objective and subjective terms (Tonon 2015, p.12–13). The third project was *Quality of life and satisfaction with post graduate studies: a study from the person's perspective* which took place during 2012–2013. The definition of quality of life appeared in the students' discourse as associated to family life, housing and environment, leisure time, health, jobs, education, and politics; but it is mainly defined as good living, satisfaction with their activities, personal fulfillment, happiness, and harmony. One significant fact is that the definition of quality of life is not preeminently associated to money or economic welfare, it is only related to the money earned at work, but only as a contribution to personal and family well-being (Tonon 2015, p.14–18) These

research projects allowed an identification with the existing projects on higher education and its effect on university students' level of life satisfaction, which showed a direct and positive relationship between their possibility of taking up university studies and their self-perception of quality of life.

Conceptual Framework

The University

The university has been traditionally conceived as an institution which transmits knowledge, therefore holding formal power. It was born in the Western World in the XII century, as a unified association, initially unrelated to any physical location, yet anchored to a group of persons acting as a corporation (Tonon 2012a p.33). In Argentina, the XXI century has introduced us to a new reality in which the university is required to expand its traditional role of producer and reproducer of scientific knowledge, to adopt a leading role; namely, a space for social interaction (Tonon 2009) thus becoming a social institution, a scenario in which persons develop their daily lives – the use of the term “person” implies acknowledging that each person is unique and unrepeatable, and it is on this premise that we conceive that access to university opens new roads to the improvement of quality of life (Tonon 2012a, p.33).

Quality of Life

We conceive quality of life as a concept which involves the person's participation in the assessment of their own afflictions, therefore acquiring political significance, for it considers that the construction of a democratic society demands an active participation of all its members, Casas (1996). Quality of life had originally been defined by the description of people's life events, rather than by their reaction to the aforementioned events; though Diener (2006, p.154) pointed out that quality of life may also be defined by the consideration of people's perceptions, thoughts, and reactions to those events. Thus, quality of life may finally be defined by the levels that distinguish desirability from undesirability in social interaction. Nowadays, quality of life is conceived as a multidimensional concept, comprising a number of dominions regarded as weighing more or less strongly, depending on each person, i.e., according to the importance he/she attach to each of the aforementioned (Tonon 2015). Quality of Life presents a new theoretical possibility that has led us to work on prioritizing people's potentialities rather than their shortcomings, from the point of view of a community that includes a socio-political analysis of the context. In this scenario, the person traditionally considered as “an object of the study” becomes a “protagonist of the study”, thus establishing a social and political reality based on respect for human rights, thus allowing us to work in a context of integration. (Tonon 2003).

Quality of Life at the University

When making reference to quality of life at the university, Sirgy et al. (2007) describe two types of experiences students may have at university: the first one refers to their

satisfaction with purely academic aspects, while the second one is concerned with social aspects. In both cases, the authors point out that these (academic/social) aspects will be influenced by the facilities and services offered by the university. In our research work we focus on the study of the so-called social aspects of university life, though it is worth mentioning that, in the abovementioned model, the reference to social aspects disaggregates indicators related to: university campus lodgings, recreational activities, religious activities, and international exchange programs - in other words, all the typical daily requirements of the universities in the Northern Hemisphere. More precisely centered in the peculiarities of Argentine state universities, our focus will differ from the abovementioned research studies, developed in different socio-cultural contexts. This differentiation is based on the major role played by the university in the students' lives, for it is a scenario of social interaction, a source of new friendships, and of the construction of citizenship. The possibility of attending university free of charge shows respect for the right of democratization of knowledge, thus generating in the students, a sense of identity and belonging with regard to the institution. In general lines, most students also have jobs; this implies having to comply with long hours of activity involving work and study. Considering the theoretical focus by Sen (2000) which regard education as a social opportunity (an egalitarian starting point), we might venture to assert that the university thus becomes an institution which facilitates the process of construction of citizenship (Tonon 2009). According to Sen (2000) the role of social opportunities is to expand both the realm of human agency (in other words, that the person acts and produces change), and freedom as ultimate principles, thus conferring significance to the expansion of freedom. The new characteristics described above, allow a further construction of new indicators representing the social aspects of college life at Argentine state universities.

Youth

Since the students who took part in this research study are young people between the ages of 18 and 20, it is deemed appropriate to make a theoretical reference to the concept of youth. Young people do not form a homogenous group therefore in this regard it is not possible to generalize about youth. The concept of youth is a social construction built conjointly by all members of society in the context of the historical moment they are living in. Today, they are living in a state of uncertainty, with limited perspectives for future action, assigning their own interpretation to events and facts, according to their fundamental concerns - which are significantly different from those of their parents' generation. Young people who do not feel they belong in their families or neighborhoods; or who have lost their families or become estranged from them; or, furthermore, those who are out of a job and do not see even a remote possibility of getting one, may find the social space offered by the university as a place of belonging (Tonon 2005, p. 89).

Social Support and Friendship

On analyzing social aspects our research work identifies two major concepts, namely: social support, and friendship. In the early days Lin et al. (1985, quoted by Rosa-Rodríguez et al. 2015, p. 35) defined social support in terms of the strength of social

bonds, and the individuals' tendency to socialize and relate to their peers. On the other hand, Sherbourne and Stewart (1991) identified five types of support: emotional support, related to positive shows of affection, to empathetic understanding, and the stimulation of exteriorized feelings; informational support, which involves counseling, i.e., advice and information offered; tangible support, which makes reference to offered and received material help; positive social interaction, related to the disposition to carry out pleasant and fun activities with others; affective support, which involves loving, and affectionate attitudes toward other people. Likewise, two kinds of help may be identified: concrete support, and perceived support. In this respect, the abovementioned authors attach more importance to the latter.

As regard friendship, we sustain that the social category of friendship became increasingly significant in the lives of human beings throughout the interconnectedness of our contemporary world (Brandt and Hauser 2011). Friends provide a number of benefits and fulfill various functions. A friend can act as a role model (Tokuno 1986), a reference group, a listener, an individual who understands, a critic, an adviser, and a companion (Richey and Richey 1980; Tokuno 1986). A new friendship helps individuals to adjust to a new social environment and this is the case during the transition to university, where there is a change in social support networks. The process of making new friends begins as soon as students arrive at the university and new friendships contribute to their adjustment (Buote et al. 2007, p. 680 and 683). Yet the definition of friendship is polysemic, thus according to Vaccarino and Dresler-Hawke (2011) there are various definitions of friendship, according to the different cultures. For Pahl (2000, quoted by Vaccarino and Dresler-Hawke 2011, p.187) "friendship is becoming an increasingly important "social glue" and many cultures, communities, and societies are held together by extremely different social bonds". The research work we have been conducting shows a close relationship between friendship and social support, as well as with the importance of friendship on people's quality of life (Tonon and Rodriguez de la Vega 2014). In this regard, it must be pointed out that friendship has always been a cultural symbol of significant value in Argentina and in different research projects developed with young people in Greater Buenos Aires (2003–2004 and 2005–2006). By using the PWI-A we were able to notice that the variable that scored the highest level of the scale was the one labeled as "satisfaction with friends".

Knowledge Acquisition

Since knowledge acquisition plays a major role on research studies on university life, we have quoted Schutz and Luckman who sustain that "knowledge acquisition is the sedimentation of actual experiences into meaning structures, according to their signification and typification" (Schutz and Luckman 2003, p.126). Van Dijk (2002) recognizes different types of knowledge based on two criteria, namely: the knowledge shared by people – individual, group, social, cultural; and the knowledge related to objects, i.e., knowledge about specific or historical events, and about social and political structures. Van Dijk defines knowledge as Common Ground; in other words, "the knowledge or shared beliefs which those engaged in communicative interaction must have in common, in order to understand each other (van Dijk 2002, p. 46 quoted Clark 1996)".

The Future

When analyzing students' university life, their visions for the future stand out as a significant topic. People's conception of the world affects their assessment of their life's circumstances and prospectively defines certain visions for the future (Savio 2009). Vision for the future conditions people's behavior in the present, thus producing concrete effects on their current circumstances (Tonon et al. 2011, p. 26). People have images of their future which, according to Bleger (2007) are generated in their perception of the present, biased toward an attraction effect that places the present and the future in a circular relationship. This explains the utmost importance of the study of images of the future, in times of transition and development, such as the initial process of university studies (Tonon et al. 2011, p. 18). It is likewise interesting to remember that, in the intercultural studies developed by Trommsdorff (1983), evidence was obtained that adolescents, of different ethnic groups and nationalities, generated their images of the future with relation to the domains of education, courses of study, and family (Savio 2009, p.67).

Academic Stress

Among the situations that students must go through in the course of university life, we have identified a significant problem known as academic stress, i.e., a type of stress originated in response to the demands of the academic field, which may be defined in various ways. In an article written by Berrío García and Zea (2011) they identified three explanatory theories which have of late been applied to define academic stress, namely: the stimulus-based theories, stress response theories, and those based on stress interaction. Martínez and Díaz (2007) defined academic stress as a wide range of experiences such as nervousness, tension, exhaustion, uneasiness, among other feelings, particularly experienced within the university space. These authors state that "It is the discomfort experienced by students as a result of physical and emotional factors – inter-relational, intra-relational, or environmental – which may exert significant pressure on the individual competence to cope with the scholarly context in academic performance" (Martínez and Díaz 2007, p.14). According to Requena Santos (1998, p. 235) friendship networks may constitute a significant support to enhance the students' teaching tolerance and, therefore, improve their chances of success in the academic field.

Political Activity at University

We shall finally make reference to the relationship between political activity and university life – taking into account the significance of politics in our region. In Latin America the university has historically played an important role in politics. In the case of the history of Argentine universities, as stated by Buchbinder (2012), they have been built on the basis of a close interaction between the projects of ruling élites, the scientific and pedagogical trends of the university members, and social demands. Though politicization of the university is not an exclusive Latin American phenomenon, we coincide with Brunner (2007, p. 16) who claims that, in Latin America, it has reached its own particular nature and intensity since only this region

has given rise to (and maintained) a project of militant or politically committed university designed to play a strategic and revolutionary role in social and national transformation. This state of affairs is not restricted to the university's relationship with the State, but further relates to the place occupied by the university in the civil society and to its unstable relationship with the social forces which operate in society.

Methodology

This is a descriptive pilot study that draws on qualitative methods, which consider the person as the protagonist of a research process and, at the same time, recognizes how important context and meanings are to the actors (Tonon 2015). The results of this study show a preliminary situational diagnosis which enables the faculty authorities to construct an institutional agenda that takes the students' opinions into consideration.

Although there are other Academic Faculties in UNLZ, this study has only been developed in the Faculty of Social Sciences, as a starting point in the development of a further study (through the quantitative method) which will be extended to the University as a whole. This first study is expected to enable the discovery/construction of new indicators which will be included in the questionnaire to be eventually applied.

According to Maxwell (2009, pp. 221), the particular intellectual goals for which qualitative studies are especially useful are, namely: understanding the meaning participants in the study attach to the events, situations, and actions they are involved in, as well as the accounts that they give of their life experiences; understanding the particular context within which the participants act and the influence this context has on their actions; identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences, furthermore, generating new, grounded theories about the latter, and understanding the processes by which events and actions take place.

In this research work we have followed Maxwell (2009) who makes reference to contextual framework. Conceptual framework is the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs the research; it is a formulation of the way the researchers' regard the phenomena under study, a tentative theory of what is happening and why (Maxwell 2009, pp. 222–223). The conceptual framework is constructed, not merely found.

Our hypothesis is that a qualitative research study which gathers feedback from students' quality of university life, provides the faculty authorities to carry out a situational assessment which will enable the decision-making required for the construction of an institutional agenda - further allowing for the identification/construction of new indicators to be applied in other research studies developed through the quantitative method.

The objectives of the research are:

- Describe the students' opinions regarding whether they choose to study at UNLZ.
- Describe the students' opinions regarding whether attending university improves their quality of life or not, and why.

- Identify the positive elements that students acknowledge in university life.
- Identify the negative elements that students acknowledge in university life.

The research sample is composed of students of the different courses of study of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora: Social Work, Public Relations, Advertising, Social Communication, Journalism, Letters, Education, and Psycho-pedagogy. We use simple random sampling for qualitative studies, which requires the researcher to make a list of the essential attributes necessary for each selected unit – in this case, the priority has been to select students of both sexes between 18 and 20 years of age, who have taken up different courses of study. Out of 200 students who were consulted, it turned out that 11 students who had handed in their completed questionnaire did not meet the age requirement; therefore, those 11 responses were excluded.

We applied the research technique, which requires free composition writing, followed by a guide of open questions which were answered individually, and in written form. We had no difficulties with the students' written production for they showed fluency; nevertheless, we would have held an individual interview with those students who might show any difficulty in writing.

This work further contains information on basic identification data: age, sex, neighborhood the students live in, course of studies they are taking, year of admittance and number of promoted courses. In this article data are not analyzed in depth, only the themes for reflection organized in open questions, such as the following:

Why have you chosen UNLZ? (Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora).

Do you think that university studies at UNLZ improve your quality of life? YES/NO (Encircle the option of your choice). Why?

What aspects of university life do you consider positive?

What do you consider to be the negative aspects of university life?

The data analysis was carried out through the methodological strategy called Thematic Analysis, defined by Braun and Clarke (2012, p. 57) as

“a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set. Through focusing on meaning across a data set, TA allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences”.

Thematic Analysis is a methodological strategy used in qualitative studies to identify, analyze and inform about topics and structures thus revealing not only the experiences but also the meaning and realities of the persons as well as examining the ways in which events, realities, meanings, and experiences are the discursive effects of a

society. One of the benefits of thematic analysis is its flexibility (Braun and Clarke 2006).

In qualitative studies, analysis is the process through which the researcher transcends the information in order to gain access to the comprehension/interpretation of the phenomenon under study; it is the process through which the researcher expands the data beyond the descriptive narrative (Mieles Barrera and Tonon 2015). Thematic analysis has been carried out on the basis of the data obtained, without pre-coding. At a semantic level, the themes are identified according to their meaning – taking into account “what the person said”. The former lead to description, which is progressively organized until the interpretation of its meaning is reached keeping the theory in mind (Braun and Clarke 2012).

Braun and Clarke (2012) proposed six phases of thematic analysis: (1) familiarization with the data, which implies that the researchers must become immersed in the data obtained from the participants by reading and re-reading it; (2) coding, which is not simply a method of data reduction; it is also an analytic process, so codes capture both a semantic and conceptual reading of the data; (3) searching for themes, considering that a theme is a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data, relevant to the research question; moreover, searching for themes is an active process as themes are not hidden in the data waiting to be discovered by the researcher, for they construct the themes themselves; (4) reviewing themes involves checking that the themes “work” in relation to both the coded extracts and the full data-set; (5) defining and naming themes, require the researcher to conduct and write a detailed analysis of each theme, identifying the “essence” of each one and constructing a concise name for each; (6) producing a report, which is an integral element of the analytic process, contextualizing it in relation to existing literature.

The version of TA we have developed provides a robust, systematic framework for coding qualitative data, and then using that coding to identify patterns across the dataset in relation to the research question. The question regarding what level patterns are sought, and what interpretations are made of those patterns, is left to the researchers’ discretion (Braun and Clarke 2014, s/p).

Since coding is one of the paths that may be used to relate our data to our outlook on that data, we have implemented theoretical classification (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 12) which is defined by taking into account the researchers’ specific theoretical interests.

Results

Out of the 189 students under study, 68.3% were females, and 31.7% males (these percentages bear a close resemblance to the total distribution of the student population).

Regarding the question “Why have you chosen UNLZ?” 60.3% of the students invoked its proximity to their homes, while 39.7% made reference to the curriculum and courses of study that this university offers. At the same time, it is interesting to point out that 26.4% of the students added that they had also chosen it because it is a public national university.

When asked: “Do you think university studies at UNLZ improve your quality of life?” 94,2% answered affirmatively, and only 5,8% gave a negative answer.

Regarding the positive aspects of university life, the students' answers may be organized according to different concepts: learning, personal relationships, and the future.

With regard to learning, three types of knowledge were identified: knowledge contents (theoretical, professional, and socio-political), i.e., those which encourage learning and thinking; and the ones which offer a potential personal growth and interrelation with others.

As to theoretical, professional, and socio-political knowledge, the students' responses were:

“The university offers a greater access to information and knowledge”. *“At the university we learn how to study”.* *“The university allows a daily acquisition of knowledge”.* *“It acquaints us with the social reality of today”.* *“It shows us different perspectives of the present society and culture, thus allowing us to understand where we are and why”.* *“We may become acquainted with different political ideologies”.* *“It allows the possibility to discuss serious issues and their social repercussions”.*

Knowledge acquisition is molded according to the circumstances from which it derives, and is inserted in every person's biography (Schutz and Luckman 2003, p. 129).

As regard learning how to think, the answers were: *“It cracks our brains”.* *“It opens our minds”.* *“We are taught how to be more intelligent”.*

Regarding personal growth and interrelationship with others, they expressed: *“We share the learning process with people of all ages”.* *“It helps us grow up”.* *“Unlike high-school, university allows freedom of expression”.* *“It allows us to learn about things which are unknown in the place where we live”.* *“The most important trait of university life is that it is the path to self-improvement”.* *“We are on equal terms with our peers”.* *“It teaches me to be tolerant with people who are different from me”.*

Concerning personal relationships, they identified the importance of friendship and social support.

Regarding friendship, they emphasized:

- *“The importance of making new friends”*
- *“The diversity we find within the different social groups through interrelationships”*
- *“Sharing with people with a diversity of interests”.*

There was a coincidence with Buote et al. (2007, p. 684) in expressing that “New friends helped reduce stress by giving them encouragement when they were

experiencing difficulties with their school work or when they were experiencing self-doubt about their ability to be successful at university”.

The likewise added: *“We are provided with a “mate” kit.*

Mate was first taken by the Guaraní tribe, a native social group that used mate in order to be able to endure long journeys, or to carry out their daily tasks. A century later, Mate became central in the life of the gaucho (emblem of the Argentine population). The gaucho was the result of the mixture of two civilizations: the European civilization and that of the natives of the Argentine territory of today. The gaucho is characterized by his loyalty and nobility who has turned into a mythical figure and, with the passing of time, has become an archetype of the essential values of the Argentine identity. The gaucho was well-known for being respectful and true to his word. He was also known for his solidarity and his open disposition to do favors (hence, the word *“gauchadas”*, which means “favors”). The famous novel *Martin Fierro* (Hernandez 1872) describes how the gauchos drank mate to start their day at dawn, then after lunch, and finally for supper, and before going to bed. Mate is part of Argentines’ daily lives; they take it at home, at work, with friends, with family, in parks, in their cars, at university. A study carried out by the Yerba Mate Institute shows that mate is present in 98% of the country’s households. Mate connects people with friends and is a symbol of friendship.

In the matter of Social Support, the students stated the following:

- *“Meeting people who may contribute with our process of growing up”.*
- *“Making friends who can help us with our studies”.*

Friendship is highly significant during adolescence and youth as it is one of the intimate relationships recognized as a source of support (Zurco 2011). The social support (Hansell 1985), offered by the people a person interacts with, provides protection, security, welfare and is, furthermore, likely to transmit the necessary strength and trust required to overcome stress and other obstacles undergone by students when sitting for exams.

Regarding the future, the topics we identified were the following: personal development, and creating a career vision. Imaging the future is a way people have of visualizing their future in their minds, and this may be achieved through express and conscious communication.

Through the exercise of forethought, people motivate themselves and guide their actions in anticipation of future events. When projected over a long period of time, on matters of value, a forethoughtful perspective provides direction, coherence, and meaning to one’s life..... People construct outcome expectations from an observation of the correlation between environmental events, and the outcomes produced by such actions (Bandura 2001, p. 7).

Furthermore, the students acknowledged a positive relationship between attending university and the possibility of obtaining a degree, getting a job, and improving their quality of life. In this respect, they stated the following:

- *“It allows me to obtain a degree”.*
- *“It improves my quality of life in the future”.*
- *“It offers me the opportunity of being somebody in life”.*
- *“It opens the door to employment”.*

The negative aspects of university life pointed out by the students were: stress, expenses, and institutional organization. As regard the stress generated by attending university, it was related to nerve-racking situations derived from the anxiety generated by exams and their possible failure, which would render them unable to make progress in their studies, with the consequent waste of time this would imply. The aspects which the students regarded as negative were the following:

- *“Stress caused by constant worry and the teachers’ demands”.*
- *“The stress caused by the impossibility to study thoroughly enough for an exam”.*
- *“The fatigue or stress generated by the students’ own expectations”.*
- *“Nervousness playing a negative role during exams”.*
- *“The pressure of passing or having to repeat the exam, which implies time loss”.*

At this point, we should establish the difference between academic stress and tolerance in education. According to Bidwell and Friedkin (1988), success or failure at college depends, among other things, on *tolerance in education*, which implies the student's capacity to undergo the pressure and unpleasantness that derive from schooling; therefore, the aforementioned emotional effects that might determine the students' willingness to go on studying, and benefitting from this, will depend on their degree of tolerance. In this regard, the students expressed the following:

- *“The university demands much time and sacrifice, which might make life complicated”.*
- *“Not feeling up to university standards and being unprepared to incorporate new knowledge”.*
- *“Failing exams and the subsequent frustration this produces, due to lack of experience”.*

The students further commented on their limited amount of time both to study and enjoy free time, which had caused them to give up pleasurable activities when they began attending university. Thus, they regarded the following as negative aspects of university life:

- *“Getting little sleep and being unable to do the things I like”.*
- *“Being compelled to set aside aspects of my daily life in order to study”.*

In this context, it ought to be pointed out that research studies developed by Cini et al. (2013) reported the positive effects of leisure activities on people's quality of life. The authors point out that leisure activities provide opportunities for self-determined behaviors that exist when people freely choose to engage in some activity out of a sense of interest, or mere enjoyment of the activity itself, which is important in coping with stress and enhancing well-being (Cini et al. 2013, p. 46). Lechner (2004) further expresses that society today is oriented toward spontaneous satisfaction, and the time devoted to social life is organized according to available free time.

Regarding the cost of attending university, the negative aspects mentioned by the students are related to commuting expenses, the price of text books and other working material, as well as the money spent on food. This is what they say: *The reading material is too expensive*. *The prices at the university buffet are high*. *It takes me very long to get there, though I live nearby*. *The area is dangerous at night*. *The student bus tickets have not yet been implemented*.

With reference to institutional organization, the students raised objections to Schedules and Buildings: *Scheduling becomes less flexible as you advance in your course of study*. *There are hardly any morning or Saturday shift schedules*. *At times there are not enough seats*. *The number of students exceeds classroom capacity*. *The building conditions are inadequate*.

It must be pointed out that, since 2018, the new authorities have undertaken the Faculty's building restoration in order to comply with the students' needs.

The issue of political activity at university is a different question for, when tackling the topic, the students expressed opposing views: some criticized an excessive political activity in university life, while others criticized the students' disinterested attitude in the matter. Yet, we must not overlook the fact that at the beginning of the XXI century, political activity has come to play a leading role in university life, especially in national public universities.

There are students who have a positive outlook on political activity at university. *Acquaintance with different political trends*, *The availability of student centers* On the other hand, they consider it negative "that certain students should be indifferent toward politics". At the same time there are some students regarding it as negative: *The fact that some professors air their political and ideological views, to the point of taking up time which ought to be devoted to the classes*. *The repeated visits of the members of student organizations during classes*. *When only a single line of thought prevails and this affects the development of the classes*. *When universities overlook their central purpose, i.e. to study, and impose political views instead*.

Brunner (2007, p. 79) makes reference to the university's political potential. This author expresses that the aforementioned potential depends, not only on the student's component – students taking up studies with political aspirations who find in the university the appropriate channels to satisfy these aspirations – but also on the academic components, some of whom form part of each country's group of intellectuals.; The author further points out that politicization is carried out by both scholars and students and requires certain external conditions. (Brunner 2007, pp.80–81) (Table 1).

Table 1 Results of the Thematic Analysis of student's answers

POSITIVE	TO LEARN	Contents	Professional Theoretical Socio-political
		How to think	Opening minds and heads Exchanging ideas
		Growing up	Acquire freedom Assumes responsibility Get organized Incorporate new values
	PERSONAL RELATIONS	Friendship	Meeting other people Meeting new friends
		Social support	Help from teachers Help from classmates
	THE FUTURE	Career prospects	Obtaining a degree Open doors Offer opportunities Job Prospects
		Personal development	Enhances future expectations Improves quality of life in the future The possibility of becoming influential Of having better prospects for the future
NEGATIVE	STRESS	Academic stress	Being unprepared for university life Being nervous about exam performance Frustration in failure Having insufficient time to study The thought of not being qualified for the studies chosen
		Fatigue	Insufficient sleep
		Leisure time	Giving up pleasurable activities in order to devote time to study Serious difficulties in combining work and study
		Expenses	Transport Reading matter (books, photocopies, etc.) Meals
		Schedules and building	Few alternative class schedules Hardly any class schedules in the morning shift/Saturdays Insufficient equipment Not enough chairs/classrooms Poor conditions of the building
POLITICS-UNIVERSITY		Positive	Become acquainted with different political trends The availability of student centers
		Negative	When universities overlook their central purpose- to study – and impose political activity. Teachers who choose to air their political views rather than teach Political groups that interrupt the classes The fact that students are indifferent to political activity

Conclusions

In our research we have devoted ourselves to the study and development of the features which, after 30 years of observation and personal experience, we have succeeded in identifying in the daily life of our universities – to be more precise, of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora. Hence, we enclose a summing up of the following conclusions derived from our research study:

- This pilot study provides a situational diagnosis which allows the Faculty authorities the construction of an institutional agenda which includes the students' opinions.
- This research study coincides with the spillover approach which considers that satisfaction in one area of life may exert an influence over satisfaction in another (Sirgy et al. 2001).
- The novelty found in the results of this descriptive research study is the emergence of new categories of analysis which allow the construction of new dimensions/indicators to be included in a further questionnaire for the development of a quantitative research study, namely: social support, personal development, academic stress, career prospects, role of politics in college life, in addition to the importance of friendship. It is worth pointing out that the latter indicator has already been included by Witmer and Sweeney (1982) and by Maggino and Shifini D'Andrea (2003), a fact which is considered relevant to our research work.
- A short geographical distance between the university and the neighborhoods where the students live allows a wider access to university studies. Before UNLZ was founded, hardly any of these young people had access to university studies.
- Young people regard the possibility of studying at the university as a form of social mobility, not only by improving their economic status, but also as an improvement in their quality of life and personal status.
- Students are subjected to stress by having to fulfill academic obligations; moreover, they are often weighed down by papers and homework, let alone their teachers' and parents' assessments, as well as their own self-assessment with regard to their performance, all of which fills them with anxiety. These situations may have a negative effect, not only on their academic performance but also on their physical and mental health (Berrío García and Zea 2011).
- Students highly value the possibility of making new friends; gaining access to university networks of friends may become a valuable support to improve tolerance in education, thus enhancing students' probabilities of academic success (Requena Santos 1998), friendship is therefore a source of social support.
- In spite of the historical leading role of politics in Argentine universities, students show opposing opinions in this regard; while some are openly in favor of it others criticize political activity at university.
- In methodological terms we consider the qualitative method to be the most adequate for the research problem posed in this text since it allows the discovery of the protagonists' opinions, perceptions, and sensations regarding their quality of university life. Besides, we coincide with Braun and Clarke (2014) who sustain that Thematic Analysis can be used widely for well-being research, though it ought to be used wisely.

- Students not only wish to gain access to university in order to study, and consequently obtain better jobs; there is a deeper reason that moves them which is to “find their place in the world”. We strongly believe that having access to university paves the way to improving people’s quality of life (Tonon 2005, p. 90).
- We finally coincide with Duderstadt (2000, p.425) who sustains that education is regarded, today, as the hope for a significant and satisfactory life; both education and each person’s abilities, are increasingly being regarded as the keys to a personal quality of life as well as to the quality of life of society as a whole.

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