



The personal life situation versus identity behaviours manifested by university students from cultural borderlands – a socio-pedagogical comparative study

Abstract: In the pedagogical analysis undertaken in this study, some theoretical and methodological conceptualizations were applied, referring to the model of youth's quality of life, developed on the basis of qualitative material collected in the course of international comparative studies – Tadeusz Lewowicki's Theory of Identity Behaviors and Harold J. Noah's model of comparing the quality of academic education. The basis for outlining the relationship between students' life satisfaction and their sense of identity in the local, regional, national, European and supra-European dimension was the comparative research conducted in 2019–2021 in the Polish-Czech-Slovak borderland. The analysis and interpretation of the collected empirical material show that – although the neighbouring countries have undergone political changes, they belong to the European Union, and they collaborate in many areas – the living standards, but above all the influences in the educational sphere, the models and social values, as well as in lifestyles, are significantly different.

Keywords: sense of life quality, identity behaviours, university students, Polish-Czech-Slovak cultural borderland, comparative study

Introduction: The sense of life quality as a function of developmental quality in university students' cycle of life

The assessment of their own life situation by young adults is associated with such cognitive categories as satisfaction, happiness, a sense of mental well-being, satisfaction with life or quality of life. As emphasized by many psychologists – researchers into these issues, the above mentioned terms

are not identical, but they all refer to an individual's general attitude to life, thanks to which they actively struggle with adversities and consistently strive to achieve values that are important to them (Reber, 2000; Czapiński, 2004, 2004; Bańka, 2005; Daszykowska, 2007; Wnuk and Marcinkowski, 2012, pp. 21–26; Kanasz, 2015; Dębska, 2017, pp. 55–63). It is also worth stressing that the assessment of one's own life situation can be treated as a cognitive-affective process that comprises an analysis of one's own situation and its assessment in terms of the implementation of internalized standards or as a process involving the evaluation of life as a global project stretched in a temporal perspective (Şimşek, 2009, pp. 505–522; Suchodolska, 2017). Currently, a specific dynamism and evolution can be observed, alongside some tendencies to expand the scope of the understanding of these categories. They have entered the language of public discourse, have become an object of reasoning and the goal of planning the life and activities of almost every human being. In social sciences, quality of life is quite often identified with the feeling of happiness, satisfaction with life, freedom from coercion, and complete well-being (Dębska and Komorowska, 2007, p. 56).

When considering the criteria for assessing academic youth's own life situation, it is worth drawing attention to the specificity of the period of late adolescence and early adulthood (age: 18–25), as well as to the developmental tasks in this period. They refer to the set of skills and competences acquired by individuals during their contacts with the environment. Taking up and solving developmental tasks entails changes in motor, cognitive, emotional and social skills. Success in fulfilling developmental tasks in later periods depends on how the individual has coped with earlier tasks (Brzezińska, 2000, pp. 227–228; Malina, 2015, pp. 559–572). The following are often mentioned as the most important developmental tasks of this period:

- achieving emotional independence from parents and other adults,
- achieving economic security and independence,
- choosing and preparing for a profession / occupation,
- launching a professional career,
- preparation for marriage and family life,
- choosing a life partner and learning to live with a partner,
- starting family roles,
- developing intellectual skills and concepts necessary for civic competence,
- assuming civic responsibility,
- acquiring a set of values and an ethical system as a behavior guide,

- finding a right social group (Havighurst, 1981; Brzezińska, 2000, pp. 234–235).

Taking up by individuals the most important tasks at this stage of development in three basic dimensions: social interactions, educational and professional activity, and building the own worldview, determines their sense of life quality. In the context of the above mentioned developmental tasks, the study of the life quality of academic youth must therefore take into account everything that this group defines as important for the assessment of their own life situation. This condition was fulfilled, among other things, in the course of developing the model of life at the University of Washington in Seattle (*Seattle Quality of Life Group*). The qualitative material collected in the international comparative studies shows that the quality of life of young learning adults is determined by: friends, family, being oneself, university/education, financial resources, participation in social life, commitment, social environment, care for others and support from adults, future, personal security, physical and mental health, freedom and spirituality. On this basis, a model of the youth's quality of life was developed, which covers the most important areas of life quality in late adolescence and early adulthood:

I. Self-sense – self-confidence, being oneself, physical and mental health and the spiritual sphere;

II. Social relations – contacts with others, relations with the family, social support, freedom, friendship, participation in social life;

III. Environment – opportunities and obstacles in the social and cultural dimension, i.e. engagement and activity, education, neighborhood, financial resources, personal security and future prospects;

IV. General satisfaction with life – reflects how good life is in the perception of the respondents, to what extent it is a source of joy and it provides a sense of meaning.

The areas of assessing of one's own life situation comprised in this model can be treated as empirically distinguished important criteria and indicators of life quality of academic youth (The KIDSCREEN Group Europe, 2006; Oleś, 2016, p. 124).

The most recent psychological studies on the process of undertaking adult social roles and on the development of personality have been largely influenced by Jensen Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood, which was put forward nearly two decades ago. The stage of emerging adulthood occurs in the countries in which the knowledge-based economy dominates and in which the people aiming at satisfying social positions have to devote many

years to gain education and experience and – therefore – they postpone the adulthood tasks until they acquire an appropriate (in their opinion) social and professional position (Arnett, 2000, pp. 470–479; Arnett, 2004; Piotrowski, 2010, p. 14; Wysocka, 2013, pp. 69–96). Such a situation takes place in Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where many young people aged 18–29/30 (especially until 25) complete the consecutive levels of education (after graduating from secondary school) and collect their first experiences at work. This will bring effects not earlier than in the next years.

The cases of these countries point to the occurrence of similar social transformations which result in putting off the moment of entering the adulthood and in prolonging the time for shaping the basic competences, such as responsibility for the own acts, the acquisition of autonomy, or building the own – open, flexible, but at the same time clear and stable – identity. In contrast to the beginning of the transformation period in the 1990s, currently – the number of Polish, Czech and Slovak young adults who continue education at university has increased three times and constitutes 50% of the whole population at the age 19–24. Similarly to most of the EU countries, they also get married for the first time later and later decide to have children. There is no doubt that contemporary university students – living in a complex (multi) cultural reality – are in a special situation, because they are subjected to socialization experiments in history, they experience the phenomena of exclusion, freedom, identity disintegration and integration. Their identities and biographies are shaped by current macrosocial and macroeconomic trends.

Theoretical and methodological assumptions

In the pedagogical analysis of the issues related to the assessment of their own life situation by young adults living in the Polish-Czech-Slovak borderland, some theoretical conceptualizations were applied, referring to the above mentioned **(1) model of life quality** of young people, developed on the basis of the qualitative material collected in the course of international comparative studies. In the four most important areas of the sense of life quality, due attention was paid to:

- I. Self-sense – health condition, emotional life;
- II. Social relations – family life, friendship and friends, participation in social life;
- III. Environment – university studies, professional prospects after graduation, ways of spending free time, financial situation;

IV. General satisfaction with life – life and educational achievements, economic and political situation in the home country.

In the context of the applied model, it should be emphasized that high quality of life does not mean the complete lack of difficulties, negative emotions or experiences, but the way/ways in which a young person deals with the surrounding reality by making choices.

Another significant perspective in the search for some regularities which determine identity shaping in the changing environment of cultural diversity is Tadeusz Lewowicki's **(2) theory of identity behaviours**. It has made possible to provide a holistic but simultaneously comparative approach to the processes and phenomena taking place in multicultural environments. In this theory, six fields (elements) of identity are distinguished: the first comprises history and identification with a particular territory and social group; the second is indicated by the unlikeness of culture, language, transmission of tradition, and the knowledge of spiritual and material output of a particular community; the third is associated with a specific historical genealogy and some particular features of the group(s) and the stereotypes which function within it; the fourth concerns the economic condition and the group's living standards; the fifth is connected with the needs, life aims, and axiological preferences; and the sixth takes into account the political, ideological, social and economic context. All these fields of identity are important determinants of identity behaviours (Lewowicki, 1995a, pp. 51–63; Lewowicki 1995b, pp. 13–26).

Due to the comparative character of the research, some references were made to Harold J. Noah's **(3) model of qualitative comparison of academic education** (Noah and Eckstein, 1988, pp. 165–192; Marshall, 2014). This referred to the case of Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia and took into account a description of the traditions and latest tendencies in higher education of these countries, the analysis of university curricula, socio-economic and cultural contexts, some interpretations of the educational phenomena which might become change predictors, and statistical methods (Malach, Kostolánová, Chmura, Ogrodzka-Mazur and Szafránska-Gajdzica, 2016, pp. 41–58).

The main problem raised in the author's own research is comprised in the following questions:

- What feeling of satisfaction with their own life situation do students from the Polish-Czech-Slovak borderland show?
- Is there a relationship (and what kind is it) between the satisfaction

with the life of Polish, Czech and Slovak students and their sense of identity in the local, regional, national, European and supra-European dimension?

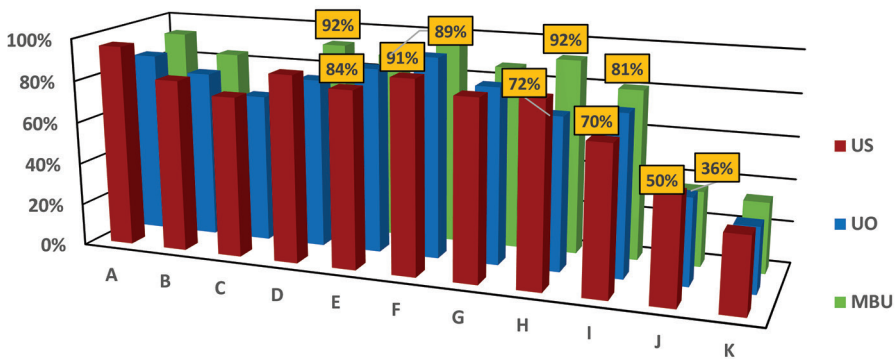
Compliantly with the applied methodological standpoint, in the conducted research activities, a quantitative-qualitative approach was used, as well as some specific research tools, developed on the basis of research procedures recognized within them. Their choice and/or construction (in the case of the author's own tools) were determined by the adopted theories and the research assumptions resulting from them. In the analysis of empirical materials, both the reducing and developing data processing was applied. Moreover, the assumptions of the interpretative approach to the analysis of utterance senses were taken into consideration, in the context of understanding respondents' thoughts, critical reasoning, and theoretical understanding (Kvale, 2004, pp. 213–231; Miles and Huberman, 2000; Denzin and Lincoln, 2009). For a full description of phenomena, the phenomenological approach was applied as well, which involved the transition from the individual textual-structural relations between senses and the essence of respondents' experiences towards a synthesis – in the form of a universal description of cultural experiences, representing a group (groups) as a whole (Moustakas, 2001, pp. 147–149). The comparative studies were carried out in three stages. Stage I included monographic (field) studies aimed at getting to know the inherited and currently created sociocultural capital of the Polish-Czech-Slovak borderland. In stage II, quantitative (questionnaire) research was carried out with the use of standardized authorial tools. In the final stage III, qualitative research was conducted with the use of ethnographic observation, individual interviews and document analysis in order to deepen the obtained data concerning the examined areas of the sense of life quality.

The research carried out in 2019–2021 comprised 504 students, including 164 in Poland (97% women and 3% men), 166 in the Czech Republic (72.3% women and 27.7% men) and 174 in Slovakia (90.8% women and 9.2% men). 51.7% of the respondents were aged 19–22, 24.3% of them were aged 23–26, and 24% of students were 27 years old or older. The examined group is representative of pedagogy students educated at the 1st and 2nd degree studies at the University of Silesia in Cieszyn, the University of Ostrava and the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica.

Young adults' assessment of their life situation – research results

Assessing their own life situation, the surveyed university students expressed their opinions on a scale from 1–7: from extreme, big and moderate dissatisfaction, through moderate, big and extreme satisfaction to „Not applicable in my case“. The declarations formulated by the respondents created four characteristic subsystems (cf. Figure 1).

Figure 1. Polish, Czech and Slovak students' feeling of satisfaction at their own life situation (percentages)



Legend: A – family life; B – emotional life; C – financial situation; D – health condition; E – studies; F – friends; G – way of spending free time; H – own life and educational achievements; I – professional prospects after studies; J – economic situation in the home country; K – political situation in the home country

US – University of Silesia, UO – University of Ostrava, MBU – Matej Bel University
Yellow labels indicate statistically significant differences in the examined categories.

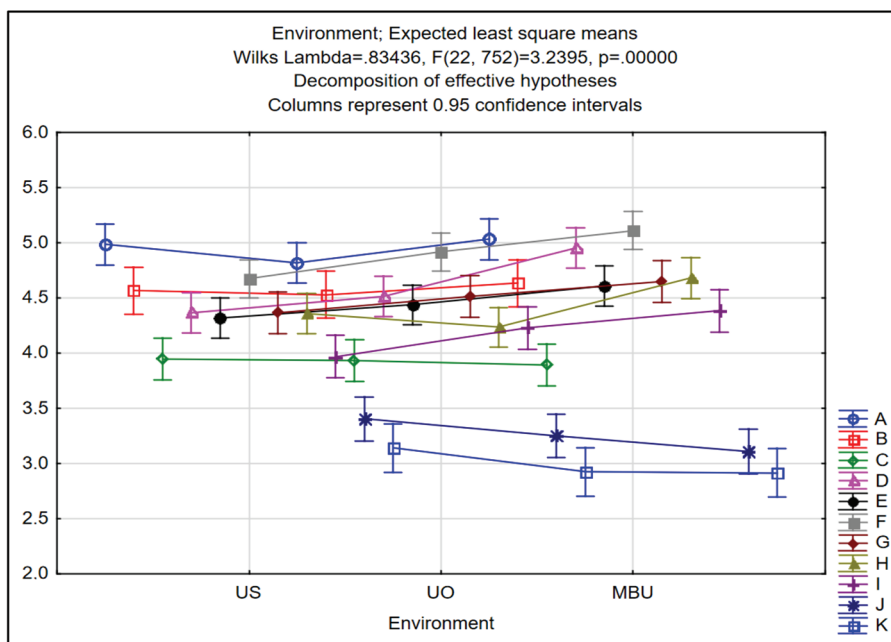
Source: own research

In the first subsystem, there are indications concerning the spheres of life with which academic youth is the most satisfied – the environment of friends (PL – 91%, CR – 95%, SK – 96%) and family life (PL – 96%, CR – 87%, SK – 93%). The students express less satisfaction with their university studies (PL – 84%, CR – 88%, SK – 89%), their own health (PL – 88%, CR – 80%, SK – 92%), the ways of spending their free time (PL – 85%, CR – 83%, SK – 87%), life and educational achievements (PL – 86%, CR – 72%, SK – 92%) and their emotional life (PL – 82%, CR – 80%, SK – 84%). They are also less satisfied with the prospects of employment after graduation (PL – 70%, CR – 76%, SK

– 81%) and their current financial situation (PL – 76%, CR – 70%, SK – 68%). The fourth subsystem comprises the spheres with which the respondents are the least satisfied, mostly the economic situation (PL – 50%, CR – 41%, SK – 36%) and the political one (PL – 36%, CR – 31%, SK – 34%) that are taking place in their countries.

The image of the students' declared feeling of satisfaction with their life situation in the examined environments is fairly homogeneous. However, a comparison of their opinions indicates a significant differentiation of the three analyzed groups of university students in the answers to the questions concerning the assessment of their health condition, friends, life and educational achievements, and career prospects after graduation.

Figure 2. Polish, Czech and Slovak students' feeling of satisfaction from their life situation (one factor analysis ANOVA)



Legend: A – family life; B – emotional life; C – financial situation; D – health condition; E – studies; F – friends; G – way of spending free time; H – own life and educational achievements; I – professional prospects after studies; J – economic situation in the home country; K – political situation in the home country

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Source: own research

Students from the Matej Bel University in Banska Bystrica, significantly more often than their peers from the Universities of Silesia and Ostrava, express higher evaluations in relation to their (cf. Figure 2):

- health condition (Kruskal-Wallis test: $H(2, N = 487) = 29.26156; p = .00$),
- studies ($H(2, N = 495) = 10.20941; p = .0061$),
- friends ($H(2, N = 477) = 20.58362; p = .0000$),
- own life and educational achievements ($H(2, N = 490) = 12.02786; p = .0024$),
- work prospects after graduation ($H(2, N = 467) = 11.33252; p = .0035$).

Young adults from the University of Silesia are significantly more satisfied with the economic situation in their country than their peers from the University of Ostrava and the Matej Bel University ($H(2, N = 487) = 9.849046; p = .0073$).

The above outlined subjective assessment of their life situation and the level of satisfaction with it, made by students from the Polish-Czech-Slovak borderland, is determined by the individual system of their values and, at the same time, it determines their way of perceiving the surrounding reality.

As the analyses carried out so far show, young learners value their peer environment (including friends, mates and acquaintances) the most in their lives. Family values are also important to them. They are also satisfied with their studies and health condition, undertaking various activities in this area (including regular sport practice, healthy nutrition, healthy lifestyle), which prove their pro-health attitudes. What seems not a surprise is the dissatisfaction with the economic and political situation in the respondents' countries, which determines their financial situation, educational opportunities and career prospects after graduation.

On the basis of the data collected within the 7th edition of the international Eurostudent survey (EUROSTUDENT VII Synopsis of Indicators, 2021, pp. 58–77), it can be concluded that the financial situation of students depends primarily on the income from their own work (PL – 51%, CR – 49%), family or partner contribution (PL – 41%, CR – 47%), and the least from public support guaranteed by the state (PL – 4%, CR – 3%). What therefore seems worth mentioning are the countries where students receiving support from public sources constitute the vast majority of their population (over 60%) – these are: Turkey, France, Sweden, Malta, Norway, the Netherlands and Denmark. In the latter, as many as 91% of students receive public funding and it constitutes 66% of their total budget (ibid., p. 75). In several countries, including Poland, 28% of students admitted that they are currently ex-

perceiving serious or very serious financial difficulties, which is one of the highest scores in Europe (*ibid.*, pp. 185–187). Almost 80% of students in the countries participating in the EUROSTUDENT VII project both work and study. For some, work is a necessary condition to continue education and pay for studies, for others – an additional activity supplementing other sources of income, e.g. scholarships or donations from the family. The most overworked group are students from the Czech Republic, where the majority, i.e. 92%, took up employment in 2018–2021, including 70% both in their non-university time and during the semester. High percentages of employed university students were also recorded in Iceland (89%) and Norway (87%). On the other hand, the lowest percentage of working students can be observed in Luxembourg (59%) and Georgia (46%) (*ibid.*, p. 146; Postrzednik-Lotko, 2019; Eurostat, 2021).

In the authorial studies, an attempt was also made to specify the relation between Polish, Czech and Slovak students' satisfaction at life and their feeling of identity in the local, regional, national, European and supra-European dimension.

In the environment of Polish students, the people who feel significantly more strongly associated with their living place are simultaneously very satisfied with their studies (Mann-Whitney U test: $Z = 2.65$; $p = 0.008$), family life ($Z = 2.35$; $p = 0.02$) and friends ($Z = 2.20$; $p = 0.03$). Yet, they critically evaluate their town or village as regards the economic and political situation of the country ($Z = -2.45$; $p = 0.04$), professional prospects after studies ($Z = -2.19$; $p = 0.029$), the possibilities of spending leisure time ($Z = -2.03$; $p = 0.042$) and their own health condition ($Z = -2.01$; $p = 0.044$).

The significantly strong association with the region is related to students' satisfaction at friends ($Z = 2.97$; $p = 0.003$), studies ($Z = 2.76$; $p = 0.006$), professional prospects after studies ($Z = 2.54$; $p = 0.011$) and family life ($Z = 2.22$; $p = 0.03$).

Young adults assess their feeling of being a citizen of Poland through negative experiences and dissatisfaction at the economic situation of the state ($Z = -2.34$; $p = 0.019$), professional prospects after studies ($Z = -2.40$; $p = 0.017$) and their own emotional life ($Z = -2.03$; $p = 0.04$). Only the students who are satisfied with their family life are at the same time more strongly emotionally related to their homeland ($Z = 2.03$; $p = 0.04$).

Two dimensions of the feeling of identity – the European and supra-European one – are determined by significantly positive evaluations resulting from students' satisfaction with their professional prospects after studies ($Z = 2.67$;

$p = 0.008$), friends ($Z = 2.32$; $p = 0.02$), emotional life ($Z = 2.21$; $p = 0.03$) and family life ($Z = 2.01$; $p = 0.04$).

Satisfaction (or its lack) due to the financial situation and the own life and educational achievements does not significantly differentiate the evaluations of all the surveyed students' feeling of identity. What draws attention in the general image of the respondents' assessment of their own life situation and satisfaction at it is a low evaluation of the feeling of being a citizen of Poland. It can be assumed that the contemporary phenomena (associated with globalization, integration or migration) taking place worldwide are changing the way of thinking about oneself and Others. The choice of the place/country of everyday life, work or education verifies the perception of oneself and of Others and contributes to the change of the feeling of identity and the related behaviour patterns. The surveyed academic youth living in the cultural borderland shape their awareness in complex sociocultural arrangements, which in turn verify their view on and evaluation of the present reality. Therefore, their identity problems, confirmed by the results of other studies (Rembierz, 2008, pp. 47–60; Nikitorowicz, 2013, pp. 29–49; Paleczny, 2017, pp. 63–81), are not surprising.

The community of Czech students is more diversified in their declarations pertaining to satisfaction at life and its relation to the feeling of identity. Only family life does not significantly differentiate the evaluations of all the respondents' feeling of identity. In the remaining cases, both positive and negative evaluations occur. The number of the latter particularly increases in regard to the dimension of the feeling of being a European and a citizen of the world.

Young learning adults in the Czech part of the borderland feel significantly more associated with their town/village, being at the same time satisfied with the way of spending free time there ($Z = 2.55$; $p = 0.011$), their own life and educational achievements ($Z = 2.24$; $p = 0.025$), friends ($Z = 2.22$; $p = 0.0265$) and professional prospects after studies ($Z = 1.99$; $p = 0.047$). Yet, they critically evaluate their residence place as regards the economic situation of the country ($Z = -3.07$; $p = 0.002$), which determines their own financial situation ($Z = -2.12$; $p = 0.034$).

The strong feeling of identity in the regional dimension is determined by both moderate and strong satisfaction with the economic and political situation of the state ($Z = 2.44$; $p = 0.015$), respondents' own life and educational achievements ($Z = 2.25$; $p = 0.025$), and by extreme dissatisfaction at the economic situation of the state ($Z = -2.45$; $p = 0.015$), at the own financial situation ($Z = -2.29$; $p = 0.022$) and the way of spending leisure time ($Z = -2.06$;

$p = 0.039$).

In the national dimension – the feeling of being a citizen of the Czech Republic – students also declare extreme evaluations. They are both extremely satisfied and dissatisfied with their professional prospects after studies ($Z = 2.71$; $p = 0.0067$; $Z = -2.35$; $p = 0.019$) and their own financial situation ($Z = 2.41$; $p = 0.016$; $Z = -2.33$; $p = 0.02$). Only their strong satisfaction at life and educational achievements is positively related to the feeling of identity in this field ($Z = 2.47$; $p = 0.014$).

A similar phenomenon takes place in the case of the feeling of being a European. University students in the Czech environment, satisfied with their professional prospects after studies ($Z = 3.38$; $p = 0.0007$), with studies ($Z = 2.77$; $p = 0.006$) and their emotional life ($Z = 2.64$; $p = 0.008$), significantly feel the most strong associations with Europe. However, they also formulate extreme assessments of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction at the way of spending leisure time ($Z = 4.13$; $p = 0.00004$; $Z = -2.04$; $p = 0.042$), their own life and educational achievements ($Z = 4.65$; $p = 0.00003$; $Z = -2.76$; $p = 0.0057$), financial situation ($Z = 3.82$; $p = 0.0001$; $Z = -2.41$; $p = 0.016$), health condition ($Z = 2.74$; $p = 0.006$; $Z = -2.78$; $p = 0.005$) and economic situation of the state ($Z = 2.08$; $p = 0.038$; $Z = -2.03$; $p = 0.043$).

The respondents express the weakest intensity of the feeling of being a citizen of the world, which is mostly manifested in their dissatisfaction at many aspects of their own life, mostly at the economic situation of the state ($Z = -2.75$; $p = 0.006$), the way of spending free time ($Z = -2.25$; $p = 0.024$), studies ($Z = -2.13$; $p = 0.033$), their life and educational achievements ($Z = -2.07$; $p = 0.038$) or their own financial situation ($Z = -2.00$; $p = 0.047$).

The environment of Slovak students is the least diversified in their declarations of satisfaction with life and its relation to the sense of identity. The factors significantly differentiating this feeling in the distinguished dimensions are satisfaction or lack of it at the financial situation and studies.

The people very satisfied with their financial situation significantly more often show a high sense of being a resident of the region ($Z = 2.23$; $p = 0.026$) and a citizen of Slovakia ($Z = 2.024$; $p = 0.043$), while those moderately satisfied feel significantly more often citizens of the world ($Z = 2.10$; $p = 0.036$). On the other hand, young learning adults who are moderately dissatisfied with their financial situation significantly more often show a low sense of being a resident of their town ($Z = -2.60$; $p = 0.009$) and of the region ($Z = -3.11$; $p = 0.0019$). Yet, the academic youth very satisfied with their studies feel significantly least connected with Europe ($Z = -1.98$; $p = 0.047$).

Referring to the aforementioned model of youth's quality of life developed on the basis of qualitative material collected in the course of international comparative studies, it can be concluded that the surveyed students from the Polish-Czech-Slovak borderland very consciously and objectively assess the most important areas of their quality of life in terms of: self-sense, social relationships, the environment, and general life satisfaction. The obtained research results seem to confirm that the academic youth present two clearly different approaches – on the one hand – to the evaluation of the feeling of satisfaction at their own life situation, and – on the other – to the feeling of identity, especially in the European and supra-European dimension, which is determined by the former. Although these both neighbouring countries have undergone political transformations, they belong to the European Union and they collaborate in many fields, it turns out that the conditions of life, particularly the influences in the educational sphere, models and socially recognized values or lifestyles are significantly different.

What seems to be confirmed as well is Arnett's standpoint, formulated in his theory of emerging adulthood. According to it, the stage of emerging adulthood occurs in the countries in which the knowledge-based economy dominates and people – to achieve a satisfying social position – have to devote many years to education and collecting experience, so they postpone the tasks of adulthood to the moment of achieving an appropriate social and professional position (Arnett, 2000, pp. 470–479).

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