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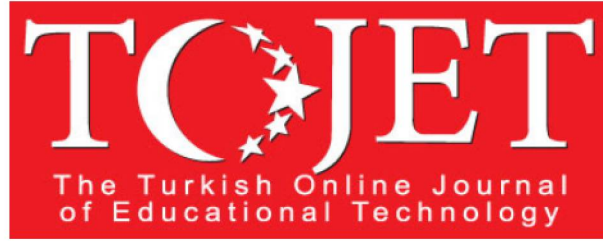
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Table of Contents

21st Century Skills In The Teaching Of Foreign Languages At Primary And Secondary Schools <i>Mário CRUZ, Edite ORANGE</i>	1
A Comparative Analysis Of Emoticon Functions And Forms In First And Second Language <i>Hilal BOZOGLAN, Duygu GOK</i>	13
A Comparision Between Solar And Wind Energy According To Different Locations <i>Mine SERTSÖZ</i>	21
A New Approach for Teaching Accounting Based On Technology <i>Adalmino PEREIRA, Helena Costa OLIVEIRA</i>	31
A Research on Self-Efficacy and Future Expectations of Students in Vocational High Schools <i>Ata PESEN</i>	34
A Study Of Malaysian Students Adaptation From A Dependent Learning Environment To An Independent Learning Environment <i>Jane Jeevamoney DAVIES</i>	44
Accountability in Local Public Administration: A Case Study <i>Sandrina TELXEIRA, Amélia SILVA, Maria José Angélico GONÇALVES</i>	49
Adoption And Implementation Of Information And Communication Technology Into Geography Teaching: A Systematic Review <i>Filomena FAIELLA, Antonina PLUTINO, Maria RICCIARDI</i>	58
An Analysis Of Vocabulary Teaching In Turkish Courses In Terms Of Creative Language Acquisition <i>Gözde GÜZEL, Tülay SARAR KUZU</i>	66
An Exploration Of Arab Students Opinions On Higher Education System In Romania <i>Sorin IONESCU, Florin DĂNĂLACHE, Iuliana GRECU</i>	74
Assessment Of Usage Efficiency of Information Technologies In Educational Institutions <i>Behcet ÖZNACAR</i>	80
Bilfen Learning Awareness Scale High School Form Validity-Reliability and Standardization Study <i>Mustafa OTRAR, A.Nilgün CANEL</i>	92
Cavit Orhan Tütengil's Contributions To The Field Of Communication Studies <i>Elif Küçük DURUR</i>	107
Cinema and Geography: A Theoretical – Practical Model (From Film To Lesson) For Learning Geography <i>Antonina PLUTINO, Filomena FAIELLA, Mariagrazia IULIANO</i>	112
Comic Strip And Science Communication Scicom Narratives <i>Aquiles NEGRETE</i>	123
Comparative Study On The Engagement Of Students With Autism Towards Learning Through The Use Of Mobile Technology Based Visual Schedule <i>Nurdalilah Mohd RANI, Siti Humaira RAMLI, Rafeah LEGINO, Mustaffa Halabi Haji AZAHARI, Muhamad Fairus KAMARUZAMAN</i>	132

Conceptions of Learning in Accounting <i>Anne ESKOLA</i>	139
Design Of Open Content Social Learning That Increases Learning Efficiency And Engagement Based On Open Pedagogy <i>Benmeaser JOHN, Jayakumar JAYARAJ, Thavavel MURUGESAN, Muthukumar ARUMUGAM, Poorna KJ</i>	147
Detail In Architecture: Between Art And Craft <i>Juraj Dulencin</i>	157
Development Of Project-Based Blended Elearning Courseware Model For Enhancing Teachers' Ict Skills In 21st Century <i>Narong SOMPONG, Nattaphon RAMPAI, Yaowaluk PIPATJUMROENKUL</i>	162
Discussing The New Audience In Turkey In The Example Of University Youth: An Area Study <i>Adem YILMAZ</i>	168
Distance Education In Work Life:The Case Of Turkey <i>Elif Yuksel OKTAY</i>	179
Effect Of Education To Society Culture In The Digital Age <i>Ziya ŞAHİN, Nergüz BULUT SERİN</i>	198
Effectiveness Of Behavioral Strategies Training (Bst) For Mothers In Reducing Anxiety And Conduct Problems Of Children With Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Adhd) <i>Zahra AZEMNIA, Shahrbanoo GHAAHARI</i>	205
Effects Of Dynamic Geometry Software Integrated Workshops On Mathematics Teachers' Beliefs <i>Ümit KUL</i>	211
Efficiency Of Matrix Protocol (Mp) On Relapse Prevention And Improvement Of Quality Life In Methamphetamine Abusers(90 Days Follow Up) <i>Siamak GHASEMNEJAD, Shahrbanoo GHAAHARI</i>	215
Enhancing Students' Vocabulary Knowledge In Thai Studies Through Lexicographical Process <i>Kasidit WATCHARAPHAN</i>	225
Environmental Attitudes and Awareness Of Turkish, Libyan And Northern Cyprus University Students On Water <i>Şerife GÜNDÜZ, Fidan ASLANOVA</i>	234
Eurimages Membership And Turkish Cinema <i>İrfan HİDİROĞLU</i>	243
Evaluating Competitiveness Using Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process: A Case Study Of Port Enterprises in Turkey <i>Ednan AYYAZ, Mehmet ÖZBİLGİN, Fatma KÖŞ AYDIN</i>	248
Evaluation Of Language And Speech Materials For Language And Speech Disorders: A Study Of Meta-Synthesis <i>Serkan DİNÇER, Özgül AKIN ŞENKAL</i>	255
Evidence-Based Mental-Health Promotion For University Students – A Way Of Preventing Drop-Out <i>Klára TARKÓ, László Lajos LIPPÁI, Zsuzsanna BENKŐ</i>	261

Examination Of Perception Of Communication Skills Of The Secondary School Teachers In Terms Of Various Variables <i>Songül ŞAHİN, Nergiz BULUT SERİN</i>	268
Examination Of Social Media Usage In Teacher-Parent Communication: Whatsapp Example <i>Nesrin ÖZDENER, Öznur TANRIVERDİ, Nagihan DÖNMEZ</i>	277
Findings Of Social Gender Inequality In Counseling Process <i>Azize Nilgün CANEL, Demizhan ÇETİN</i>	285
Implementing Open Source Platform For Education Quality Enhancement In Primary Education: Indonesia Experience <i>Marsudi Wahyu KISWORO</i>	295
Importance Of Practical Lessons For Students Of Technical And Engineering <i>A. Ramirez-LÓPEZ, D. F. Muñoz-NEGRON & S. Romero-HERNANDEZ</i>	302
Improving Nos Understanding Through History Of Science Instruction: Contextualized Explicit And Reflective Approach <i>Mustafa CANSIZ, Semra SUNNGUR, Ceren ÖZTEKİN</i>	307
Increasing Undergraduate Students' Exam Performances In Statistics Course Using Software Socrative <i>Nuri BALTA, Selim GÜVERCİN</i>	314
Integration Of Technology-Based Resources In Adult Learning And Teaching Contexts: A Literature Review <i>Seda KHADIMALLY</i>	322
Interactive Learning By Using Augmented Reality Technology: The Development Of Electronic Publication Course For Education In Thailand <i>Paitoon SRIFA</i>	331
Intercreativity and sMOOC. The importance of the Collective Intelligence in the ECO European Project <i>Sara Osuna ACEDO, Lucia Camarero CANO</i>	335
Investigation of Anger Expression Styles Of The Secondary School Students Through Picture Drawing Method <i>Müge Yukay YÜKSEL, Hacer YALÇINTAŞ, Beyza ÖZOĞLU, Ferit GÜNEŞ</i>	345
Investigation Of Mobile Assesment Environment Design Studies <i>Melih KARASU, Tarık KIŞLA, Jale İPEK</i>	355
K-12 Teachers' Perceptions Of Barriers And Benefits In Technology Usage <i>Carol TODD, Lin B. CARVER</i>	362
Mobile Learning Adoption by Language Instructors in Taibah University <i>Sabah Sadiq Hussain BAKHSH</i>	370
Model Mediated Higher Education Course <i>László Horváth</i>	396
On The Use Of Euklid Dynageo In Geometry Lectures At The High Schools Or Universities <i>Engin CAN</i>	407
Online Learning Is A Process, Not Finesse <i>Riad S. AISAMI</i>	411

Opinions And Recommendations about the Interaction Improvements of Environmental Education And Technology <i>Emete GERÇEL, Fidan ASLANOVA</i>	418
Practice-Based In Service Teacher Training In Health Promotion And Mental Health Promotion On The Basis Of Antonovsky's Theory <i>Zsuzsanna BENKŐ</i>	425
Predictors Of Student Preferences For Blended Learning: An Empirical Investigation <i>Gheorghe MILITARU, Anca-Alexandra PURCAREA, Olivia-Doina NEGOITA</i>	431
Processes of the School Management, Usage of Information Technologies in Adolescents and Aggression Relation <i>Emete GERÇEL</i>	437
Psycho-Social And Educational Aspects Of Development Of Financial Literacy In Adults <i>Jaroslav VETEŠKA</i>	447
Pupils' Mathematical Self-Concept In The Beginning Of The Sixth Grade <i>Päivi VALLI, Päivi PERKKILÄ, Raine VALLI</i>	451
Smart Development And Educational Technology In Rural Areas: Lessons From Two Case Study Regions <i>Michael STEINER, Johannes MOSSBÖCK</i>	459
Social Intelligence Of Teachers And Coping With Demanding Situations In Teaching Practice <i>Miroslav FRANKOVSKÝ, Zuzana BIRKNEROVÁ, Lucia ZBIHLEJOVÁ, Anna LELKOVÁ</i>	464
Some Characteristics Of E-Learning Materials In Secondary Technical Education In Slovenia <i>Damijan ŠTEFANC, Mojca Kovač ŠEBART, and Jasna MAŽGON</i>	471
Student Perception Of Technology Use In Maritime Education <i>Cheah Phaik KIN</i>	479
Students' Perception Of Computer Assisted Instruction In Hong Kong Higher Education <i>Hon Keung YAU, Sin Yi CHONG</i>	484
Students Understanding Of Mathematics Using From Prototypical Examples: Analyze In Linear Algebra <i>Sinan AYDIN, Yaşar AKKAN</i>	502
Study On Developing The Assisting Program For Customized Housing Design For The Elderly <i>Jumu HEO, Jae Hee CHUNG, Jong KIM</i>	506
Syllabus or Silly-Bus? A Suggested Technology, EQ And Performance-Based Non-Native ELT/EFL Teacher Training Syllabus (TTS) <i>Hidayet TUNCAY</i>	514
Teacher Education Through Ict. Moocs: New Learning Environments <i>Alberto FORNASARI</i>	527
Teaching And Learning Accounting In An Innovative Business Simulation: Portuguese Case Study <i>Helena COSTA OLIVEIRA, Manuel SÁ, Teresa BARROS, Vânia ARANTES</i>	533
Teaching And Learning Advanced Calculus Using The Web <i>Marta G. CALIGARIS, Georgina B. RODRIGUEZ, Lorena F. LAUGERO & José E. VALENTINI</i>	539
Technology In Education <i>Dilek ÜNLÜ</i>	545

The Achievement And Satisfaction Of Undergraduate Students Of Phranakhon Rajabhat University Through Multimedia Learning On Environmental And Natural Resources Management <i>Hattaya NETAYARAKS</i>	548
The Application Of Smart Devices In Teaching Students With Special Needs <i>Hüseyin GÖKSU, Tolgay KARANFILLER, Kamil YURTKAN</i>	552
The Development Of Online Mobile Classroom Using Power Generated From Solar Cells <i>Sunchai PATTANASITH</i>	557
The Impact of an Augmented Reality System in Teaching Machine Dynamic Course for Engineering Students <i>Ali ALMUSAWI, Adhraa Al.RESHEIDI, Maisaa Al.JADEEDI, Abdulrahman ALSAADI, Halima Al.RIYAMI</i>	562
The Information And Communication Technology Learning Package For Enhance Graduated Students' 21st Century Skills <i>Nattaphon RAMPAI</i>	565
The Lea's Box Project As A Pratical Implementation Of Educational Data Mining Algorithms <i>Lenka FIRTOVA</i>	569
The Reevalue Statistical Results Of Aproach About Pedagogy Of Anatolian In Parents, Lived In One Anatolian City Using Artificial Neural Network And Multivariate Regression Analysis. <i>Esma UZUNHISARCIKLI, Vesile ŞENOL, Erhan KAVUNCUOĞLU, Raziye PEKŞEN AKÇA, Fevziye ÇETINKAYA</i>	573
The Use Of Kinect In Teaching And Learning Environment <i>Hakan YÜKSEL</i>	585
The Use Of Learning Objects In Teaching Linear Algebra <i>Marta G. CALIGARIS, Maria Elena SCHIVO, María Rosa ROMITI & Matias MENCHISE</i>	590
Two Different Methods Usage In Multi-Digit Numbers Subtraction With Borrowing And Success Results <i>Engin CAN</i>	595
Universities And Globalization Processes. The Study "Young Universe" By The Generational Observatory Of The University Of Bari Aldo Moro <i>Giovanna Da MOLIN, Alberto FORNASARI</i>	598
Unpdating Of Programming Lessons For Students Of Computer Engineering <i>A. Ramirez-LÓPEZ, D. F. Muñoz-NEGRON, S. Romero-HERNANDEZ</i>	603
Use Of Interactive White Board For E-Learning: An Innovative Better By Far Idea <i>TELLA, ADEYINKA</i>	608
Use Of Technology In The Application Kitchens Of Vocational Education Schools <i>Mutlu DOĞAN</i>	627
Using Touchscreen Technology To Support Basic Numeracy Learning Process For High Functioning Children With Autism <i>Muhamad Fairus KAMARUZAMAN, Harrinni Md NOR, Mustaffa Halabi Haji AZAHARI</i>	632
Video Games, Computers, Mobile Phones & Social Network Use Among Immigrant and Native Adolescents in Southern Spain <i>Soriano Ayala, Encarnación; González-Jiménez, Antonio José, and C. Cala, Verónica</i>	640

Evidence-Based Mental-Health Promotion For University Students – A Way Of Preventing Drop-Out

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ABSTRACT

Our paper reports on the results and consequences of an empirical mental health research fulfilled among 1618 university students at the University of Szeged, Hungary. Results indicated that 46,8% of students could be considered as mentally healthy, 42,1% of them were vulnerable and 11,1% were endangered. Among their general resistance resources (GRR) for coping in mentally demanding situations financial status was a definite negative factor, while mildly positive resources included friends, family, living environment, health status, learning and work. The lack of GRRs leads to becoming mentally endangered, which in turn inhibits the mobilisation of existing resources. There is a strong need for student-targeted mental health promotion actions, programmes, projects and education initiated in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The Physical and mental health status of the Hungarian population is rather unfavourable. Promotion of health culture and creation of a lifestyle that strengthens physical and mental health as well are of high priority in terms of improving the situation. The basic prerequisite of community level intervention is to characterise the actual mental health status of the target population. Empirical data provide a good starting point for the creation of community programmes and setting out the priorities.

The promotion and improvement of mental health and subjective well-being is a very important part of European Union Health Policy (European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being, 2008). This is based on the recognition of mental health being not only an individual value, but an individual and community resource as well that is very important in terms of EU's social and economic success. In accordance with this, the low level of mental health raises not only individual problems but human rights, social, economic and public health issues as well we have to address on Union and member state level also (European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being, 2008).

To define the concept of mental health we started from the WHO approach. According to the World Health Organisation mental health is not only the lack of mental and psychological disorders but it can be considered the state of subjective well-being in which every individual can recognise the inherent possibilities and cope with the natural stress situations of life, can work in a productive and fruitful way and play an active part in his/her own community's life (WHO, 2010).

As an antecedent of the above definition, the Hungarian Ferenc Szakács uses important key words in terms of our thinking. He states, that „...healthy (normal) is the person, who is capable of *independent life*, who *accepts the roles* arising from his/her life situation, *performs a work* sufficient for his/her capabilities, and in the meantime (therefore not at last) is *capable to please* and *lives his/her life* together with other people *in accordance with community and social purposes*.” (Szakács, 1994, pp. 29.).

Mental health is the most sensitive indicator of psychological normality, the capacity for life pleasures, meaning the individual feels safe and well in the world and in his/her “own skin”, is at peace with his/her environment (objective and subjective environment) and with him/herself, and has a feeling of comfort. He/she is able to utilize the sources of pleasure offered by life and is capable to fight for reaching these. This pervades his/her life skills, the organising of his/her lifestyle and the planning of his/her future.

On the basis of its experiences in mental health promotion and psychotherapy, our research group attempted to empirically define and validate three categories of psychological status (Lippai and Erdei, 2014). The starting point of our research was the fact that the psychological status of an individual is largely characterised by the experience of different scale difficulties, complaints during the adaptation to everyday challenges (cf. Generalised Adaptation Syndrome - Selye, 1965; transactionalist approach to stress - Lazarus, 1991).

We have created a short Mental Health Status Questionnaire and validated it on a representative sample of 1839 people from a middle-size Hungarian town called Hódmezővásárhely (Lippai and Erdei, 2014., Benkő et. al. 2013). Validation included comparing our data to national psychological life quality measurements worked out by Hungarostudy research (Kopp and Kovács, 2006). These measurements included elements like a) self-evaluation of subjective psychological well-being, positive life quality and mental health; b) low-spirit, depression, negative emotional states; c) hopelessness; d) lack of life goal and positive emotions; e) vital exhaustion accompanying stress; f) feeling of subjective competence in solving difficult tasks and g) sense of coherence helping to cope with everyday stress situations.

By comparing our data to data obtained along all the above dimensions of psychological life quality we found, that results of *mentally healthy* people were significantly more favourable than that of the *vulnerable* and the *endangered* group (Lippai and Erdei, 2014). Let us now see how can these three categories be characterised.

Mentally healthy people were characterised as those possessing appropriate self-power, self-evaluation. When they get to strongly stressful – loaded by emotional trauma and relationship conflicts – life situations, they are able to react in a structured way and actively cope with challenges. Their own resources are enough to fulfil everyday activities, they are also capable of controlling negative feelings and tensions resulting from stress situations. Adaptation problems can occur in this group also, but relatively rarely and on a temporary basis.

In case of people in the *vulnerable* group we can assume considerably different reactions in stress situations. The individual's response to actual stress situations is less active and can be characterised with parrying the problems and difficulties. In the background there is mostly the devaluation of oneself or his/her environment (self-evaluation problems). In case of the vulnerable person there are explicit adaptation disorders, typically in the form of some pronounced complaints or many smaller – but by and large with a significant effect – difficulties. That is why to be able to face problems and to handle everyday stress situations more effectively he/she has to *change*, in a way like acquiring a novel application of his/her existing resources.

The person characterised as *endangered* can not effectively handle everyday stress situations, emotional traumas, social conflicts and relationship difficulties, he/she is paralysed when confronted with a problem (serious decision dilemma). His/her existing external and internal resources are not enough for coping with the challenges of everyday life. The severe adaptation disorders appear in the form of serious complaints. That is why an external help is needed in learning new ways of coping, conflict management techniques and get support in their adaptation.

In case of all three groups for the sake of effective intervention there is a need to set different mental health promotion targets and apply different methods. That is why the recognition of these three groups and their empirical characterisation is an important step in the preparation of community level health promotion intervention (Benkő, 2009).

THE STUDY

Research aim

We aimed at researching mental health among university students in Szeged. Information referring to mental health is especially important in case of the university student population as this is the area where student related health promotion needs the most improvement.

Research tool

The research tool was an assisted structured questionnaire interview administered by well-prepared interviewers. The research was carried out within the framework of grant TÁMOP-6.1.5-14-2015-0004 – *One step towards our health – The complex health promotion programme of County Csongrád*. Our questionnaire contained 10 socio-demographic questions and 8 topic-related questions in the following composition:

1. *socio-demographic questions*: gender, age, place of living, university faculty, major, term, education level of father and mother, financial status and academic performance.
2. *Indicators of mental health status*.
3. *Resources playing a role in the development of mental health*: social integration, social support, culture in the wider sense among others.

Data were processed by SPSS20 statistical programme.

Research Sample

The sample consisted of the students studying at the University of Szeged. The University of Szeged is the biggest service-provider in the Southern-Great Plains Region of Hungary. It has 12 faculties and more than 20 000 students study here at the moment. 1618 students were asked during the research, among which 1565 students provided suitable answers for setting up the three categories of mental health. 464 students came from County Csongrád, where the university is located (29,1%) and 1129 students (70,9%) came from all over the country. Students of 10 faculties could have been reached. The profile of four faculties include teacher training also (see in *italic*). Evaluable amount of responses came from the Faculty of Medicine (FM - 37%), Faculty of Health Sciences and Social Care (FHSSC - 25,9%), *Juhász Gyula Faculty of Education* (JGYFE - 20,6%), the *Faculty of Natural Sciences and Informatics* (FNSI - 13,4%) and the Faculty of Dentistry (FD - 1,9%). The rest of the students came from the *Faculty of Arts* (FA - 0,3), Faculty of Economics (FE - 0,2%), Faculty of Pharmacology (FP - 0,2%), Faculty of Law (FL - 0,2%), and the *Faculty of Music* (FM - 0,1%).

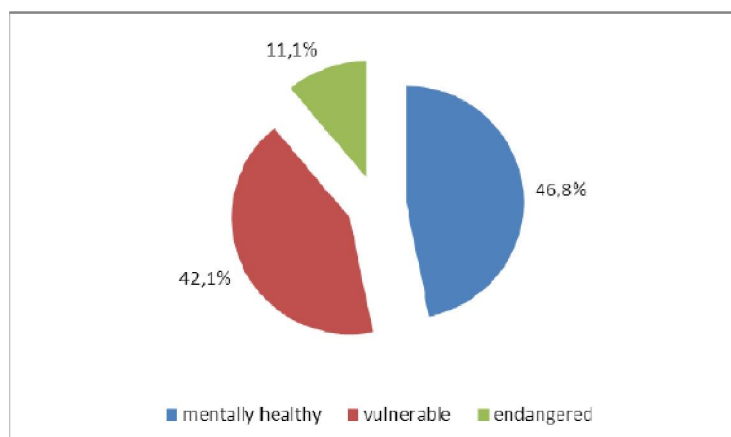
25,5% of respondents were male and 74,5% were female. We have created age-groups according to psychological categories. 94,3% were between 18 and 25 (adolescence), 5,5% were between 26 and 45 (young adult), 2,0% were between 46 and 65 years (age of upkeep). None of the respondents were above 66 years, which is the age of decline.

FINDINGS

Mental health status indicators of students at the University of Szeged

When analysing our data, the following student distribution among the developed three categories of mental health was found (Figure 1.)

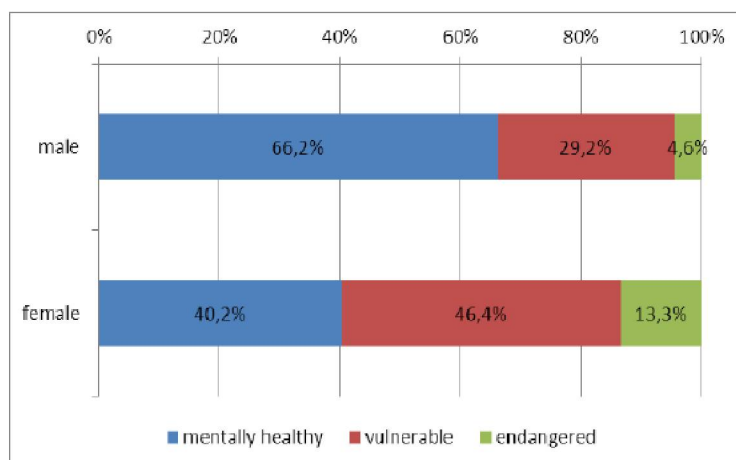
Figure 1. – Mental health status of the student sample at the University of Szeged (N=1565)



Our results show, that 46,8% of students could be considered as mentally healthy, 42,1% of them were vulnerable and 11,1% were endangered.

We have studied the observed categories along socio-demographic variables. Figure 2. shows the differences by gender.

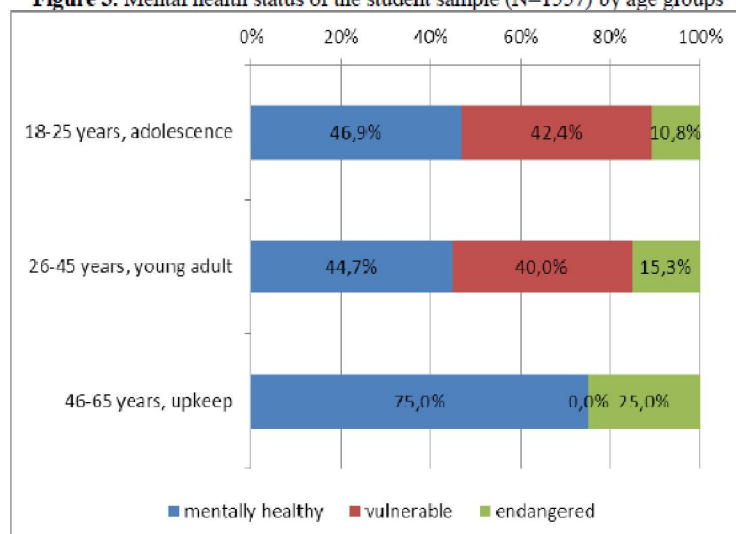
Figure 2. Mental health status of the student sample (N=1553) by genders



We can see, that 66,20% of male respondents could be considered mentally healthy, while only 40,20% of female respondents belonged to the same category. 29,20% of male respondents were in the vulnerable and 4,60% of them were in the endangered group, compared to the corresponding 46,40% and 13,30% of female respondents. It can be stated, that data referring to female respondents were considerably unfavourable than those referring to male respondents.

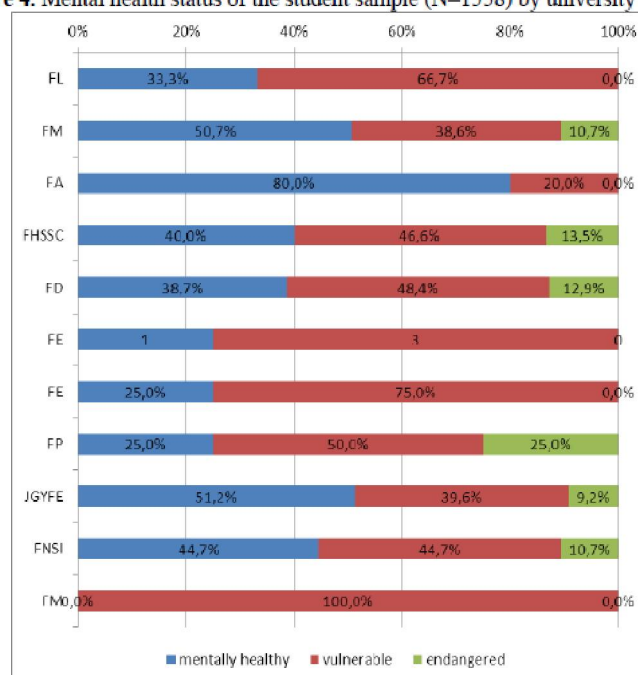
Age-group differences are shown on Figure 3. When creating the age-group categories, we have used the classification of the Hungarostudy researches (Kopp and Kovács, 2006).

Figure 3. Mental health status of the student sample (N=1557) by age groups



It is clearly visible, that almost half of the adolescent (18-25 years) and the young adult (26-45 years) group (46,90% and 44,70%) belonged to the mentally healthy category. Their respective ranking in terms of vulnerability was 42,40% and 40,00%, for endangerment it was 10,8% and 15,30%. There were only 4 respondents above the age of 46 years that is why a statistical statement can not be provided. To some up, by age the proportion of the mentally healthy was decreasing, while the proportion of those becoming vulnerable and endangered was increasing. Data was also processed according to the university faculty students belong to. As it was already indicated, only 5 faculties provided statistically enough number of students to our research, so results should be treated with this restriction in mind (Figure 4.).

Figure 4. Mental health status of the student sample (N=1558) by university faculties



Compared to the complete sample results of the subsamples of the Juhász Gyula Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Medicine show slightly more favourable tendencies. At the Faculty of Education 51,2% of the subsample were mentally healthy, 39,6% were vulnerable and 9,2% were endangered. In case of the Medical Faculty the proportion of those mentally healthy were 50,70%, 38,6% were vulnerable and 10,7% were endangered.

The distribution of students in the 3 mental health categories at the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Informatics were as follows: 44,7% mentally healthy, 44,7% vulnerable and 10,7% endangered.

Less favourable results were obtained in case of the Faculty of Health Sciences and Social Care and for the Faculty of Dentistry. For both faculties the ratio of the mentally healthy were lower (FHSSC – 40,00%, FD – 38,70%), and the proportion of the vulnerable (FHSSC – 46,60%, FD – 48,4%), as well as of the endangered group (FHSSC – 13,50%, FD – 12,90%) was higher.

Resources of students at the University of Szeged

It is widely accepted in health promotion, mental health promotion literature, that the strength and number of General Resistance Resources (GRR) and their subjective Sense of Coherence define the success of coping with stressors. General resistance Resources are those biological, material and psychosocial factors which make it easier for individuals, groups and sub-societies to observe their life as consistent, structured and comprehensible (Antonovsky, 1987). Typical examples of GRRs are money, knowledge, experience, self-esteem, health-conscious behaviour, devotion, social support, cultural capital, intelligence, traditions, life-philosophy etc. The higher a person is on the continuum of resources, the more probable it is to obtain life experience that supports a strong sense of coherence. The lower is one positioned on such a continuum, the more likely it is to obtain experiences that support a weak sense of coherence.

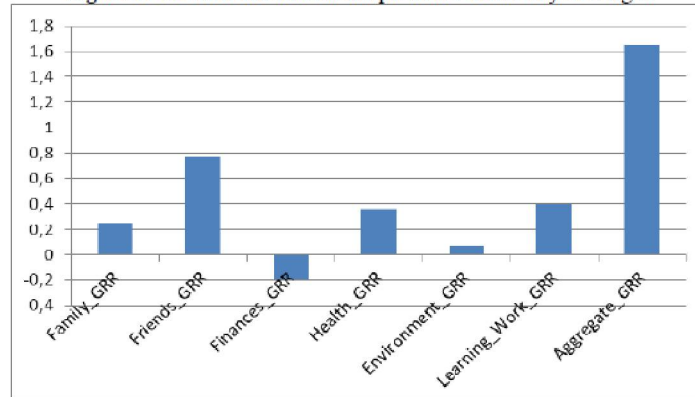
On the basis of subjective sensing, the following GRRs were studied among the students of the University of Szeged:

1. *Social relationships - Family.*
2. *Social relationships – Friends*
3. *Financial status*
4. *Health status*
5. *Learning and work*

6. Environment

We have generated a GRR index for all domains with the minimum value of -2 and the maximum value of +1. Figure 5. shows the distribution of GRRs in the whole sample.

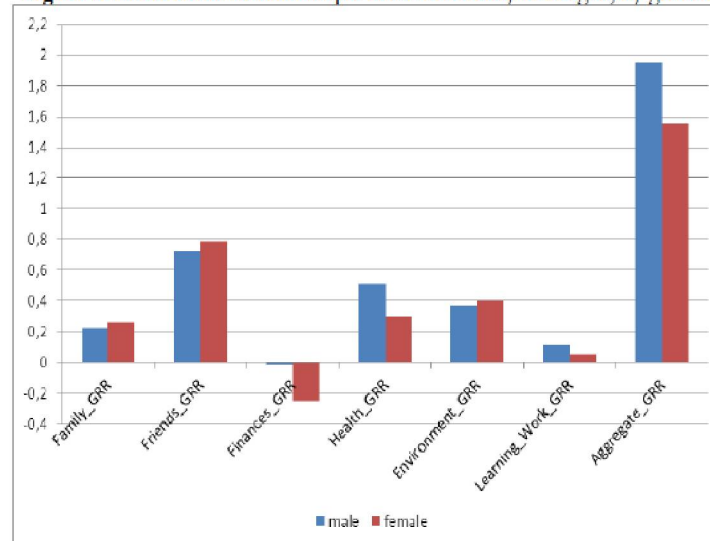
Figure 5. GRRs of the student sample at the University of Szeged



It is visible, that financial needs were evidently not satisfied. Mildly positive resources included friends, family, living environment, health status, learning and work. An aggregate GRR index was also generated out of the six separate domains (Aggregate_GRR), the minimum value of which was -12, the maximum value was +6. This aggregate value was in the positive range, though not very strong.

Let us observe the gender differences in the development of GRRs (Figure 6.).

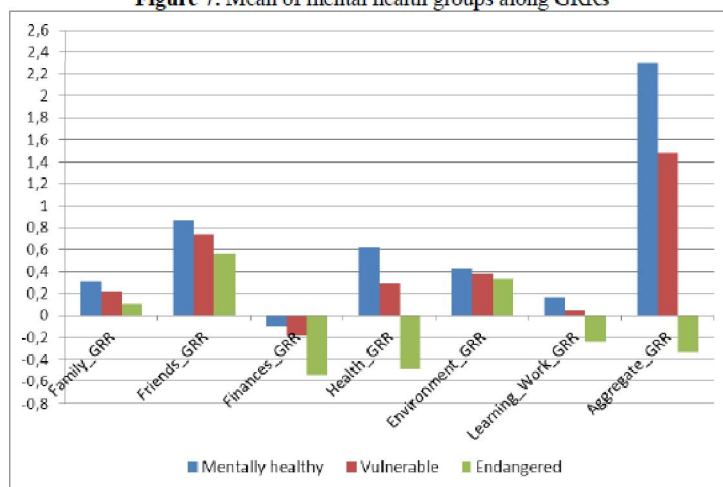
Figure 6. GRRs of the student sample at the University of Szeged, by genders



Female students were in a visibly worse position concerning the aggregate GRR value (1,55). Compared to the male respondents, they had a slight advantage only in case of family, friends and the environment. When analysed by age, young adults, that is those between the age of 26 and 45 years had the least aggregate GRR value (1,40).

Let us compare the GRRs along the 3 groups of mental health (Figure 7.).

Figure 7. Mean of mental health groups along GRRs



There seems to be a clear relationship between GRRs and mental health status. In case of each GRR domains, the mentally healthy group possessed the highest set of resources, followed by the vulnerable ones, and the least resource belonged to the endangered group.

Student expectations

It was an important question whether students would like to receive support in a hard life situation or in case of a crucial decision. 96,7% of all respondents indicated they would. So students needed and were willing to receive expert help. The expressed need was greater in case of female respondents (97,8%), while male respondents indicated 'yes' in 93,3%. Analysed by age groups, adolescents, that is those between the age of 18 and 25 years needed help the most (96,8%).

CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of our research it can be stated, that the observed university students possessed low level or resources and the ratio of those in the vulnerable and in the endangered groups were high. That is why there is a need within the higher education system for processes, programmes and projects aiding social integration and social relationships, as well as focusing on establishing the relevant prerequisites. The lack of resources leads to becoming mentally endangered, being mentally endangered would in turn prevent the individual from mobilizing existing resources.

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