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## Life Plans and the Strength of Efforts to Achieve Them Shown by Students – Future Teachers from Selected Countries of Central and Eastern Europe – Noticeable Effects of the Transformation

#### **Abstract**

The study presents the results of team-based, interdisciplinary comparative research on young learners' life plans and choices – students of full-time academic pedagogy courses and future teachers in selected Central and Eastern European countries. In their life planning model, students considered specific properties of designing and implementing plans: the degree of orientation towards goals, telic orientation, richness of life contents, productivity, social orientation, and emotional and motivational involvement. Our research also met the most important preliminary conditions for data comparability – conceptual, statistical, and interpretative. The comparison of the declarations of students from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Ukraine reveals significant differences in all preferred life goals, except for a life that commands respect and is pursued under moral values.

**Keywords:** young learners – future teachers, goals and life plans, strength of aspirations, culturally diverse environments, social change, comparative analysis in international research

## **Introduction. The Problem Formulation**

People's life plans and choices are determined by many personality, socio-economic and pedagogical factors influencing a particular socio-educational environment. They are modelled by changing trends and cultural patterns. In attempts to characterise and interpret them, a broad socio-civilisational context was considered, particularly the political transformation processes that began in Central and Eastern Europe in and after 1989. They caused many profound changes in the sociocultural sphere and the value systems of individuals. They changed behaviour patterns as well. The announcement of radical changes in the economy increased optimism - people expected a "better" future resulting from the restructuring of the state economy and the introduction of free market mechanisms. At the same time, technological and economic progress has made it necessary to constantly learn, adapt to changes, and improve qualifications. The changes also co-occurred with the European unification, and in 2004, with the accession to the European Union by other European countries, including Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. In 2022, Ukraine also obtained the status of a EU candidate country.

After a turbulent transition from real socialism to real democracy, contemporary academic youth is becoming a continuator of social changes, participating in and partly shaping them. How young people perceive a particular country and society and the changes taking place in them, what criteria they use in making assessments, how they would like to build their private and social lives, what they consider worthy of imitation and what they firmly reject – largely results from the impact of various directions and thought trends that clash in the environments in which young people exist and learn.

The observed changes in Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Ukraine and their dynamics prompted us to undertake collective, interdisciplinary comparative research on the life plans and choices of full-time university students in pedagogy. Selecting research groups from these countries is intentional and purposeful for several important reasons.

First of all, these are people in the so-called phase of emerging adulthood. This phase occurs in countries where the knowledge-based economy dominates, in which, in order to gain a satisfactory social position, people have to devote many years to education and to gain experience, postponing the tasks of adulthood until they obtain an appropriate (in their opinion) social and professional position (Arnett, 2000, pp. 470–479; Tanner et al., 2008, pp. 34–67; Arnett, 2011, pp. 255–275). Such a situation is dealt with also in Poland, Slova-

kia, the Czech Republic and Ukraine, where many young people aged 18-29/30 (and especially under 25) achieve further stages of education (after graduating from secondary school) and gain first professional experience that will bring results only in the following years.

Secondly, emerging adulthood is characterised by significant demographic diversity and instability, reflecting young people's attitudes towards exploration and change. Changes conditioned by a specific sociocultural, economic or political situation in a given country/society reduce the motivation of young people to engage in adult social roles. At the same time, they contribute to postponing the moment of entering adulthood and extending the time needed to develop competencies fundamental for further functioning, such as responsibility for one's own actions, gaining autonomy or building one's own identity – open, flexible, but at the same time expressive and stable.

Thirdly, academic youth are a barometer of changes and social moods. As Szafraniec emphasised over a decade ago, young people are the lens through which various problems and tensions of the system are focused. Their situation, way of perceiving the world, aspirations, and life goals measure the changes that have already taken place and the distance that is still to be overcome (Szafraniec, 2011, p. 11).

Fourthly, these are people who, due to their profession, soon should responsibly raise and educate young generations living every day in culturally diverse environments. Especially in the current geopolitical situation, future educators should become self-critically committed intercultural guides and interpreters, focused in their professional role on helping students strive to define their subjective and cultural identity.

## The Theoretical and Methodological Research Assumptions

The scientific literature on pedagogy, psychology, and sociology widely describes the complex issue of aspirations and life plans. These terms are identified with such ambiguous concepts as plans, life perspectives, desires, expectations, ambitions, intentions, wishes, and dreams. Researchers notice numerous discrepancies in the contents of these concepts and some consistency, as they all concern the goals one strives for and the directions of one's further actions. The competence of planning one's own future, developing the construction of general goals, and reflecting on actions aimed at them are considered the most important in the context of developing forms of one's activity in early adulthood. The acquisition of planning skills is the basic condition of adulthood (Horney, 2001; Pettit et al., 2009, pp. 217–223). The model of life planning by

young learners adopted here takes into account specific properties of designing and implementing plans, namely the degree of orientation towards goals, telic orientation, richness of life contents, productivity, social orientation, and emotional and motivational involvement (Marsh et al., 2020, pp. 180–202).

Due to the comparative nature of the study, references were also made to comparative analysis in international research, which means the process of selecting research samples in different countries and conducting an analysis of the investigated phenomena under appropriate criteria to determine the same, similar or different degrees of intensity of the studied features (Cowen & Kazamias, 2019). Moreover, the most important preliminary conditions regarding data comparability were met: conceptual comparability – measurements refer to the same concepts and categories, statistical comparability – data collection methods accepted in statistical studies were used for all categories, and interpretative comparability – the examined categories were interpreted similarly in all surveyed countries, but at the same time they took into account the conditions existing only in selected countries (Kordos & Szulc, 2020, pp. 15–34).

The main problem addressed in our own research is contained in the questions:

- What goals and life plans are declared by academic youth from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine studying full-time in the investigated culturally diverse environments?
- · What strength of aspirations do students and future teachers demonstrate to achieve their intended goals and life plans?

Compliantly with the adopted methodological position, the conducted research activities used a quantitative-qualitative approach and specific research tools developed based on well-recognised research procedures. Their selection and construction (in the case of our own tools) were guided by the theories adopted in the study and the resulting assumptions for the discussed issues.

The comparative research was carried out in three stages. Stage I included monographic (field) studies to learn about the Polish-Czech-Slovak-Ukrainian borderland's inherited and currently created sociocultural capital. In stage II, quantitative research (survey) was carried out based on standardised authored tools. In the final stage III, qualitative research was conducted using ethnographic observation, individual interviews, and document analysis to deepen the data obtained in the investigated areas.

In analysing the empirical material, reducing and expanding the data transformation method and the interpretive approach's assumptions were used to analyse the statements' senses. It was done to understand the respondents' thoughts, critical common sense, and theoretical understanding (Denzin &

Lincoln, 2011; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). In preparing a complete description of the phenomena, the phenomenological approach was also used, consisting of moving from individual textural-structural relations of senses and the essence of the respondents' experiences to a synthesis in the form of a universal description of cultural experiences, representing the group(s) as a whole (Moustakas, 1994; Greening, 2019, pp. 88–92).

The research, conducted in 2019–2021 and 2024¹, covered a total of 729 students, including 169 in Poland (97% women and 3% men), 171 in the Czech Republic (72.3% women and 27.7% men), 179 in Slovakia (90.8% women and 9.2% men) and 210 in Ukraine (85% women and 15% men). 7% of the respondents are aged 17-18 (48 people, including 46 in Ukraine), 46% are 19-22 years old (334 people), 27% (203) are 23-26 years old, and 20% are 27 years and over (144 people). The surveyed group is representative of students of pedagogy studying full-time at the first- and second-degree studies at the University of Silesia in Katowice (Poland), the University of Ostrava² (Czech Republic), the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (Slovakia) and the Ivan Franko State University in Zhytomyr (Ukraine).

# Research Results – Life Plans and the Strength of Future Teachers' Efforts to Achieve Them

Designing the future life of academic youth is a difficult but necessary process. It is primarily associated with setting life plans built around life goals that are important for a particular individual. They express a desired change that may affect a person or their environment. Achieving them requires action, and the fact that they result from the individual's needs is motivating. The subject of aspirations – a goal and a plan – is conscious, realistic, and subject to evaluation. Their implementation usually requires time and effort (Saukh & Saukh, 2015, pp. 483–495; Halman et al., 2022).

The declarations of the surveyed students from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine made it possible to isolate three qualitatively similar subsystems of preferred life goals (cf. Figure 1), determining the current and future life plans.

 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm 1}$   $\,$  The research activities co-financed by the funds granted under the Research Excellence Initiative of the University of Silesia in Katowice.

 $<sup>^2\,</sup>$  The research conducted in the Polish-Czech borderland was presented in more detail in the publication by Ogrodzka-Mazur et al. (2021).

The first, clearly dominant subsystem includes the most appreciated life goals – family life (98.25%), the goals related to exciting work and professional career (97.25%), implementation of moral values and a life that commands respect (94.5%), knowledge and education (92 %) and a comfortable problem-free life (90.25%).

The second, lower evaluated subsystem includes choices concerning the implementation of a life full of changes, adventures and attractions (80%), participation in culture and artistic activity (70.75%), involvement in social affairs and civic activity (69.25%), and possessions and acquiring a fortune (69%).

**Figure 1.** Life goals declared by students from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine (data in %)

Legend: a – comfortable, problem-free life; b – life among family and friends; c – popularity, fame, success; d – exciting job, professional career; e – knowledge, education, scientific achievements; f – high position, supervising people, decision making; g – fortune, high living standards; h – implementation of moral values, respectable life; i – social engagement, civil activity; j – participation in culture, artistic activity, creativity; k – life full of changes, adventures and attractions.

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CZ – Czech Republic; SK – Slovakia; PL – Poland; UA – Ukraine Source: own research

All surveyed students attach the least importance to life goals, forming the third subsystem, related to holding high positions and managing people (56.5%) and to popularity, fame and achieving success (52.25%).

The comparison of the surveyed future teachers' declarations reveals significant differences in all preferred life goals, except for a life that commands respect and is pursued under moral values.

Ukrainian students, significantly more often than their peers from Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, indicate higher importance of life goals related to:

- popularity, fame and success (Kruskal-Wallis test: z = 4.23; p = 0.00),
- · holding high positions, managing people and making decisions (z = 6.97; p = 0.00),
- having large fortune and high standards of living (z = 8.81; p = 0.00),
- a life full of changes, adventures and attractions (z = 4.5; p = 0.00).

Yet, they attach significantly less importance to life with family and friends (z = 3.01; p = 0.02).

University students from the Czech Republic – when compared to Polish students – declare significantly higher ranks for life goals related to exciting work and professional career (z=3.16; p=0.01), but to a significantly lower level than their peers from Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine, they are interested in:

- · a comfortable problem-free life (z = 5.87; p = 0.00),
- · knowledge, education and scientific achievements (z = 4.51; p = 0.00),
- involvement in social issues and civic activity (z = 5.15; p = 0.00),
- participation in culture, artistic activity, and creation (z = 3.90; p = 0.001).

In the so-called emerging adulthood, in their statements provided in 2024 during interviews, just like their peers in most EU countries, the surveyed students attach the greatest importance to life plans related to starting a family. However, they declare that they will marry later or decide to have children (women – at 28–29; men – at 30–31). It depends primarily on the economic, political or sociocultural situation of the country of residence, which most often reduces their motivation to engage in adult family roles and leads to their postponement. This attitude is demonstrated primarily by Ukrainian students, explaining the change and postponement of their life plans with the ongoing war in their country caused by Russian aggression. Most of them are currently studying in remote systems in Ukraine or abroad and are struggling with serious (e.g., financial) life problems. While the number of young people studying in 2019-2023 in Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia remains at a similar level or has a minimal upward trend, in Ukraine, in the comparable years, it decreased by over 300,0003. This process is primarily caused by the war in Ukraine and the related migration of Ukrainian students to European countries. However, the assessment of the status of people with completed studies in pedagogy is the highest in this country.

 $<sup>^3</sup> https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDUC\_UOE\_ENRT01/default/table?lang=en\&category=educ.educ\_part.educ\_uoe\_enr.educ\_uoe\_enrt; http://www.ukrstat.gov.ua$ 

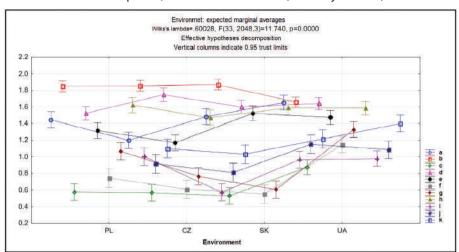
Work and professional careers related to the education of the young generation are also highly ranked among the life goals declared by future teachers. Such a high position of this group of goals may indicate the proper implementation of the developmental tasks of early adulthood. Starting a professional career determines, to a large extent, success in achieving other goals emerging in a particular period of a person's life, at the same time leading to satisfaction and success in fulfilling goals in later stages. In the opinion of 94.5% of the respondents, the appreciation of teaching work and professional career is conditioned by a moral attitude and a life that commands respect, as well as knowledge and education (92%). The obtained research results are also similar to the values preferred by young people created based on the research conducted over a decade ago in seven European countries (Great Britain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Greece, and Sweden). The set includes tradition (recognising the importance of family and parental authority), individuality (sense of autonomy and independence), honesty (expressed by the attitude of friendship and loyalty to others), effort (attributing importance to work ethic and focus on success) and optimism (positive thinking as the key to success and happy life)4.

An important qualitative category related to developing life goals is the strength of efforts to achieve them. Currently, examining the strength of aspirations demonstrated by academic youth from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine, a scale of 0-2 was adopted: "I rather want to achieve" -2 points, "I rather do not want to achieve" -1 point and "I do not want to achieve" -0 points, which enabled determining high, medium and low intensity of striving to achieve life goals or no striving at all.

All surveyed students want to achieve goals aimed at a peaceful life with family and friends, performing exciting work in the future combined with a professional career, and realising moral values and living a life that commands respect (Figure 2).

The respondents declare the average intensity of efforts to achieve life goals in relation to acquiring knowledge, further education and scientific achievements, a life full of changes and adventures, as well as acquiring a large fortune and securing high standards of living in the future. Academic youth indicate low strength of aspirations in relation to getting involved in social issues and taking up civic activity, participating in culture and artistic activity, holding high positions and managing people, and gaining popularity and fame.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The research "Youthopia", conducted in 2009 on the commission of *MTV Networks International*, https://mmponline.pl/artykuly/131285,mtv-mlodziez-jest-dobra



**Figure 2.** Strength of the efforts to achieve life goals by students from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine (one-way ANOVA)

Legend: a – comfortable, problem-free life; b – life among family and friends; c – popularity, fame, success; d – exciting job, professional career; e – knowledge, education, scientific achievements; f – high position, supervising people, decision making; g – fortune, high living standards; h – implementation of moral values, respectable life; i – social engagement, civil activity; j – participation in culture, artistic activity, creativity; k – life full of changes, adventures and attractions.

PL – Poland; CZ – Czech Republic; SK – Slovakia; UA – Ukraine Source: own research

The comparison of the declarations in the four investigated environments reveals significant differences in the strength of striving to achieve particular life goals:

- · Czech students demonstrate lower striving for a comfortable problem-free life (F (3, N=705) = 15.46; p = .00), involvement in social issues and civic activity (F (3, N=705) = 15.61; p = .00) and participation in culture, artistic activity and creativity (F (3, N = 705) = 7.54; p = .00);
- · Ukrainian academic youth show lower striving for life with family and friends (F (3, N=705) = 10.31; p = .00), but higher striving for popularity, fame and success in the future (F (3, N = 705) = 11.12; p = .00), occupying high positions, managing people and making decisions (F (3, N = 705) = 26.51; p = .00) and living a life full of changes, adventures and attractions (F (3, N = 705) = 9.17; p = .00);

- university students from Poland declare lower, and their peers from the Czech Republic higher, the strength of striving for their life goal, which is exciting work and achieving a professional career (F (3, N = 705) = 5.012; p = .00);
- · Slovak students demonstrate lower, and their peers from Ukraine, higher striving to acquire a large fortune in the future and achieve a high standard of living (F (3, N=705) = 40.63; p = .00);
- future teachers from the Czech Republic declare lower and their peers from Slovakia higher striving to acquire knowledge and pursue further education (F (3, N=705) = 11.87; p = .00).

Future teachers demonstrate the cognitive-motivational conceptualisation (typical of their age) of themselves in the future. Their declarations are characterised by reflectivity, specific to the period of early adulthood, shown not only in their choices but also in the behaviour they undertake to implement life plans, especially family and professional ones. The respondents' opinions obtained in interviews also indicate that they are aware they will repeatedly verify their life aspirations, depending on the geopolitical situation in Europe and worldwide and new social challenges. Therefore, it can be assumed (and this is confirmed by previous research on the worldview of academic youth) that the declarations regarding life goals of contemporary students from Central and Eastern Europe are conditioned by "social time", which is the material of their subjective understanding of the world.

## **Conclusions and Research Prospects**

The existing studies on students' life plans in the context of developing future orientation have proven that young people have a largely developed future-time perspective and formulate goals and plans for long periods and their entire life (Klimkowska, 2012, pp. 32–38; Laird et al., 2015, pp. 87–100; Campos & Solano, 2017, pp. 87–92; Ogrodzka-Mazur & Saukh, 2020, pp. 11–23).

In early adulthood, the breadth of the temporal perspective, its content richness, degree of structure and realism increase. The research has also indicated the importance of the family environment in shaping young people's future orientation and attitudes to time. The parenting style was significant in terms of the level of realism and structure of the students' time perspective. Socio-economic factors also influence the temporal perspective and the attitude of young people towards time (Suleimenova & Ivanova, 2018, pp. 44–63; Oleś & Bartnicka-Michalska, 2022, pp. 1–9; Nowosad, 2022, pp. 113–123).

The surveyed academic youth from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine demonstrate diverse life plans and the strength of efforts to achieve them, considering the degree of orientation towards the goal, telic orientation, richness of life contents, productivity, social orientation and emotional and motivational involvement. Although many previous reports, also cited in this study, emphasise the increasing independence and entrepreneurship of the young generation, and others emphasise their conformist and consumerist identity or the sense of loss and rejection of adulthood as the desired status, the problem seems to be more complex, especially for young learners living in culturally diverse environments. Functioning in a multicultural space and having numerous contacts with others increase the subjective attitude of young people to life and thus to the implementation and achievement of their preferred life goals. Students believe they actively cope with the difficult challenges of modern times, setting numerous short and long-term goals for themselves.

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