



Motivation to Study Social Services in Higher Education

Case: Laurea University of Applied Sciences

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Laurea University of Applied Sciences

**Motivation to Study Social Services in Higher
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The objective of the Bachelor Thesis was to determine relevant contributing factors towards students' motivation for applying to a Bachelor's Degree programme in Social Services at Laurea University of Applied Sciences. Students' motivation during studies was explored as well. The aim of this research was to isolate key factors in student motivation and wellbeing, which would be useful for Laurea, as they could further develop their services.

Motivation theories and established factors for holistic student wellbeing are used in this thesis to substantiate the conducted research and to warrant relevant results. These theories include Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory and Alderfer's ERG Theory. Furthermore, the theoretical framework introduces contemporary motivation theories on learning.

Focus group interviews were chosen as the qualitative research method for this thesis. Electing the use of qualitative research methods over quantitative research methods proved crucial in the data collection process, as additional emphasis was placed on students' unique experiences and wishes, rather than conglomerated statistics about students as a demographic. Eight participants in total were involved in the data gathering process, seven during focus group interviews, and one through an e-mail questionnaire.

Results were summarized into three major categories: Firstly, influencing factors in study motivation, secondly, students' perception of their ongoing studies, and lastly, the effect of these studies on students' professional development. The data gathered in the focus group interviews suggested that students generally have a prior interest in the field of social services before choosing to apply for the study degree. Furthermore, the students' individual perception of their studies seems to be tied to interpersonal connections between fellow students and teachers. Additionally, students' plans after graduation do not generally seem to change during their studies and are more closely tied to family relations. The research conducted is of benefit to the Laurea administration, as they will better understand relevant influences in student choice, and Laurea students themselves.

Keywords: Motivation, higher education, studying, student choice, career planning

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Opiskelijoiden motivaatio opiskella
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Opinnäytetyön tavoite oli selvittää tekijät, jotka vaikuttavat opiskelijoiden motivaatioon hakea Laurea-ammattikorkeakoulun sosionomikoulutusohjelmaan. Lisäksi opinnäytetyö käsittelee opiskelijoiden opiskelu- ja oppimismotivaatiota opintojen aikana. Tavoitteena oli kartoittaa avaintekijöitä liittyen opiskelijoiden motivaatioon ja hyvinvointiin, joita Laurea voi hyödyntää palveluidensa kehittämisessä.

Tehtyä selvitystä tukevat motivaatioteoriat ja opiskelijoiden kokonaisvaltaiseen hyvinvointiin liittyvät tekijät. Näihin motivaatioteorioihin lukeutuvat Maslow'n Tarvehierarkia, Herzbergin Motivaatio-hygienia teoria, ja Alderferin ERG teoria. Teoreettinen viitekehys esittelee myös eri näkemyksiä liittyen oppimismotivaatioon.

Laadulliseksi menetelmäksi tähän opinnäytetyöhön valikoitui fokusryhmähaastattelu. Valinnan kohdistuminen laadulliseen tutkimukseen määrällisen sijasta osoittautui tärkeäksi aineiston keruun edetessä, sillä sen avulla saatiin tietoa opiskelijoiden yksilöllisistä kokemuksista ja toiveista, eikä vain koottuja tilastoja opiskelijoista väestöryhmänä. Selvityksen tiedonkeruuprosessiin osallistui yhteensä kahdeksan Laurean sosionomiopiskelijaa. Seitsemän heistä haastateltiin kahdessa erässä fokusryhmähaastatteluissa, yksi vastasi sähköpostikyselyyn.

Tulokset voidaan tiivistää kolmeen kategoriaan: Oppimismotivaatioon vaikuttavat tekijät, opiskelijoiden näkemys heidän opinnoistaan ja opintojen vaikutus opiskelijoiden ammatilliseen kehitykseen. Fokusryhmähaastatteluista kerätty aineisto osoittaa, että opiskelijat omaavat aiemman kiinnostuksen sosiaalialaa kohtaan jo ennen hakupäätöstä. Opiskelijoiden yksilöllinen näkemys omista opinnoistaan on kytköksissä heidän suhteeseensa muihin opiskelijiin ja opettajiin. Lisäksi opiskelijoiden urasuunnitelmat valmistumisen jälkeen eivät näytä merkittävästi muuttuvan opiskelujen aikana. Selvityksen tuomaa ymmärrystä opiskelijoiden koulutusvalintojen kannalta oleellisista vaikutteista voivat hyödyntää Laurean hallinto ja opiskelijat.

Avainsanat: Motivaatio, korkeakoulutus, opiskelu, koulutusvalinta, urasuunnittelu

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1 Introduction

Institutions of higher education have always strived to better understand why students choose them. There are of course many factors that may influence a potential student's decision in this regard. Their desired career path in life, the reputation of the school or university they apply to, as well as their gender are all important influences in a student's decision-making progress when they make their decision. Numerous studies have been published over the years, in different countries, analysing students as a broad demographic.

There is, however, a surprising lack in studies detailing the motivational factors and influences for an individual student to begin studying. This is especially true for studies using a qualitative research approach. Young adults have a variety of factors to consider when choosing their path in life, such as career aspirations, family wishes, economic standing, and social ramifications. It is very important for academic researchers to better understand the confluxes of these issues that individual students contend with. It is not enough to consult statistics about students as a demographic, and draw conclusions about their hopes, fears and circumstances from there.

Especially for institutions of higher education understanding the inner workings of these processes better can help them to adapt their environment further to the needs of students. It is not only in their interest, but also imperative from an ethical standpoint, to facilitate student well-being holistically. Being aware of factors that might influence students in a positive or negative way and adapting the studying environment is proven to reduce stress and positively affect student performance. (Mushtaq & Khan 2012, 5-7)

This Bachelor Thesis research is conducted at Laurea University of Applied Sciences. While it can be assumed that similarities with other institutions of higher education exist, this Bachelor's Thesis provides an overview over Laurea's history and operations, to put the results of the research into context and increase their validity.

Special consideration has been taken into account of the fact that this thesis research is conducted by Bachelor's degree students, gathering data on students within the same degree. This dichotomy has been considered in the research process and delicate care has been applied in the evaluation of the findings to warrant objectivity.

In this bachelor's thesis two focus group interviews were conducted with 2nd year bachelor's degree students in social services at Laurea University of Applied Sciences. The first of these interviews involved 5 participants, while the second interview involved two. These interviews sought to answer questions concerning students' motivation, the affect their current studies have on their well-being, and how their studies have shaped their future aspirations. The theoretical framework of this thesis explores motivational theories and established factors for

student wellbeing. Through the lens of these methods the interviews were analysed applying qualitative research methodology. This research will also serve as a stepping-stone towards more diversified topics in this field in the future.

2 Motives for Applying to Higher Education

To answer the question “What motivate students to choose the English degree programme in social services at Laurea”, it is crucial to understand the general motives behind the decision to study in the first place. This chapter attempts to explain the different reasons people have for acquiring a higher education degree, and what goes into choosing a study institution.

Enrolling into higher education can be life-changing to an individual on many different levels, which is one reason why the decision processes affecting the enrolment can be complex and time-consuming. Studies on student choice have pointed out various reasons people tend to have for attending higher education. Kusumawati (2013) refers to multiple studies that stress the parents influence on student’s choice of university, as well as other influential people in the individual’s life, such as siblings, friends, teachers and peers. Other researched factors influencing student choice include personal factors and preference, location, reputation of the education institute, quality of teaching and facilities and job prospects. Furthermore, Kusumawati underlines the fact that while previous studies shed a light on the influencing factors on students’ choice of higher education, they each carry a different weight and level of importance depending on who you ask and where they are from. (Kusumawati 2013, 315-317)

Students’ higher education choice can be viewed from multiple angles. From a sociological point of view, it is a process leading up to status attainment, while from a psychological angle it is about the experiences and wellbeing. Economically, student choice is essentially an investment. (Paulsen 1990, 6)

In the light of our research we hypothesize that an individuals’ main motives for studying social services in Laurea include getting certified for a profession, the possibility of a higher salary, interest for the field, new friends and networks, improving oneself, location and convenience, teaching languages available (English/Finnish) and the low unemployment rate of social service professionals.

3 Benefits of Education for an Individual

There are numerous studies concerning the social benefits of education, a large part of them focusing on the societal level instead of the individual. This section attempts to explore the benefits of higher education from an individual’s point of view, thus further explaining the motives for studying in the first place and reasons behind choosing a specific study institu-

tion. The effects which higher education has on a person is tightly connected to their wellbeing. Therefore, this chapter explores the benefits of education through two viewpoints, which are economic and social wellbeing. This division has been made in attempt to provide clarity to a complex term in the context of this bachelor's thesis.

3.1 Economic Wellbeing

Whereas employment in a salaried position usually generates wealth for an individual, which, in its most rudimentary sense, generates economic wellbeing, choosing to study may sometimes put an individual's financial situation in jeopardy. (U.S. Department of Education 2016)

According to a U.S. Department of Education statistic from 2018 the tuition for an undergraduate degree had been upwards of 16.000 US Dollars in 2016. Given this figure one can surmise that though an individual may well be motivated to aspire towards a higher education, the more pressing need for economic wellbeing may well inhibit them from doing so.

As full-time Finnish students in Finland are usually entitled to a study grant, student loan, and sometimes housing supplement, one can reasonably assume that for students in Finland the factor of economic wellbeing may prove itself less of an obstacle than for students for, from example, the United States. International students in Finland are entitled to these same student benefits as well, provided they have a permanent Finnish residence and a residence permit whose main purpose is outside studying. (Kansaneläkelaitos 2018)

It is commonly believed that a higher education corresponds with higher pay. Figure 1 shows a report from 2016 from 'The College Board', an American NGO which promotes college success and opportunity. This report showed that completing any sort of upper secondary education leads to a higher average income amongst workers in the United States in 2015. (Ma; Pender; Welch 2016, 17)

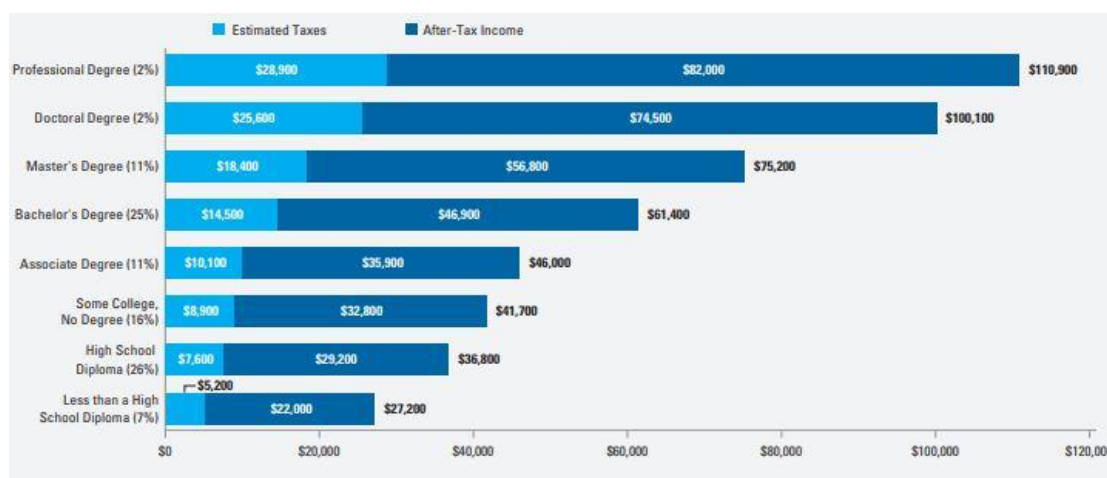


Figure 1: Median Earnings and Tax Payments of Full-Time Workers Age 25 and Older by Education Level in 2015 (Ma et al. 2016, 17)

The Figure above demonstrates that completing upper secondary education does not only lead to a higher income on average, income does in fact increase for every level of education higher than the previous one. (Ma et al. 2016, 17). It is thus reasonable to assume that that these economic factors may be motivating students to strive toward a higher educational study degree.

3.2 Social Wellbeing

Humans are social beings who generally crave companionship and social contacts, as well as community. Over the course of a person's lifespan, they have countless different relationships and connections, which range in length and meaningfulness. Each person has their own needs regarding social wellbeing, but it's safe to say we all need other people in some capacity.

Interpersonal relationships and communality are cornerstones of a person's holistic wellbeing. Human beings want to experience a level of social cohesion and reciprocal dependency, which is why people have the tendency to form communities to answer those needs. Community can be defined as a group of people who share common interests. The number of people in the community can vary greatly, but even a small group of people can be called community, if they have something in common. (Saari 2011, 288-292)

Being part of a community can offer an individual a feeling of safety and sense of belonging. (Saari 2011, 293) Schools are generally a favourable venue for formation of communities, because being part of a class or education programme authentically brings people together by giving them common interests and goals, as well as the physical platform. Therefore, besides being motivated to obtain knowledge and professional competence from higher education, many people also seek meaningful interpersonal connections and sense of community. Connecting and networking with people can be a motive especially for students emigrating from other countries, since it's possible the majority of their social circle didn't move to a new country with them.

In conclusion, higher education has the potential to affect students' wellbeing greatly, increasing their job market value and competence, offering them an opportunity to belong to a community and create meaningful interpersonal connections.

4 Motivation Theories

Motivation is a broad psychological term with numerous theories and models attempting to explain it. In its most straightforward form, motivation stems from wanting something, or wanting to avoid something, making virtually all human's actions and behaviours fuelled by motives. To further understand the phenomenon of motivation and decision making, and to get an increasingly scientific viewpoint to the topic, the following chapter will introduce

some of the most well-known motivation theories fitting in the context of this Bachelor's thesis.

The term motivation is used in defining the complex inner system initiating and guiding human behaviour. Motivation stems from motive, which is a broad concept associated with needs, urges, wishes and inner incentives, as well as rewards and punishments. Motives provide the general direction of individual's behaviour, whether the person in question is aware of their existence or not. The self-attributed motives that a person can name and recognize are called explicit motives, while the non-conscious motives are called implicit motives. (Ruhotie 1998, 36-37)

In this Bachelor's thesis, human motivation is inspected through some of the most established motivation content theories, which are Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Alderfer's ERG theory and Herzberg's motivation and hygiene theory. While the process theories (for example Vroom's expectancy theory and Adam's equity theory) of motivation put emphasis on behaviour and its causes, content theories concentrate on examining the internal factors that guide individual's behaviour. (Kian; Rajah; Yusoff 2014, 96) It is relevant for this work to elucidate the needs that compel human beings to act, so that it is possible to understand the aspects that can motivate people to seek higher education in a specific study institution.

4.1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Perhaps the most well-known motivational theory is Maslow's hierarchy of needs, originally created in 1943 by Abraham Maslow. (Figure 2). The theory is quite old, but it still yields valid information today, and can be seen as a cornerstone when it comes to exploring human motivation. According to Maslow's theory, humans are motivated by unfulfilled needs, and once a human's most fundamental needs have been met, they move onto higher tier needs. The theory is usually depicted as a pyramid, with the most basic needs at the bottom, moving up to the higher-level needs. The order of needs from bottom to top is as follows: Physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs, self-esteem and self-actualization. The needs can also be divided into three larger categories as shown below: Basic needs, psychological needs and self-fulfillment needs. (McLeod 2018, 1)

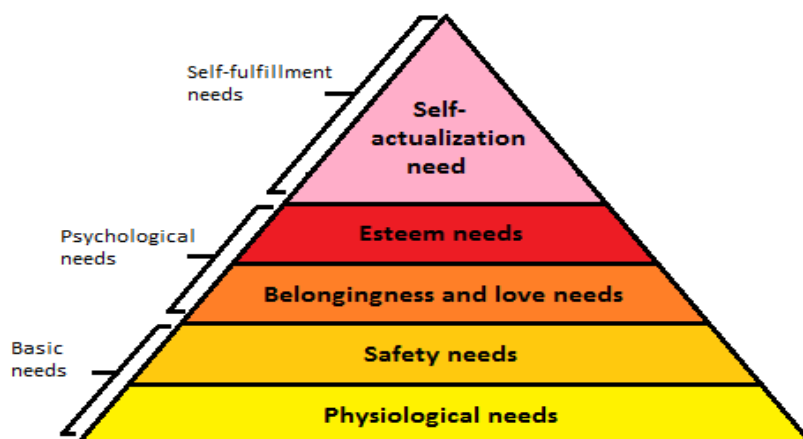


Figure 2: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Adapted McLeod 2018, 1)

Physiological needs include the rudimentary requirements for survival, such as nourishment, water, rest and suitable temperatures. If these needs are not met, or they are only partially satisfied, a person cannot function properly. For this reason, physiological needs take precedence over the following needs in Maslow's theory. If a person is starving, they will generally use all their recourses and capacities for acquiring food, forgoing other needs that are not as essential in that situation. (Maslow 1943, 374)

When physiological needs are met, the safety needs emerge. As the name suggests, safety needs are related to security and safety. This can mean financial stability and insurance, good health, law and order, freedom from fear, and general stability. (McLeod 2018, 3)

Belongingness and love needs, also called social needs, rise to the surface after the physiological and safety needs have been gratified in a satisfactory manner. A person starts to long for companionship and community in its many forms, wanting to find their place and be able to give and receive affection and love. (Maslow 1943, 381-382)

Maslow states that all people generally crave to have the respect of others, and to have self-respect as well. Esteem needs can be divided into two categories. The first one includes self-esteem and confidence, the desire for personal achievements and independence. The second category represents the need for prestige and status, feeling that other people value you and hold you at high esteem. (Maslow 1943, 382-383)

The self-actualization need is the highest level in Maslow's hierarchy. A person thriving to become self-actualized is aspiring to reach their full potential, and to be the best version of themselves. These needs are characterised by varying from person to person, depending on each of their skills and aptness. (Maslow 1943, 383-384)

It may initially seem that Maslow's hierarchy system requires complete satisfaction of the basic needs before it is possible to be motivated to fulfil higher level needs. Maslow does however state that it might not be so black and white, and that most people experience partial satisfaction as well as dissatisfaction in all need levels at the same time. (Maslow 1943, 389)

Though the theory is widely recognized, it is not without its limitations. The hierarchy of needs is criticized for slightly simplifying the motivational processes, bypassing the fact that the order of needs might not be as definitive as presented. The need levels have also been said to overlap with each other, most notably the social needs and esteem needs. In his ERG theory of motivation, Clayton Alderfer addresses these issues, and provides a slightly different view on the origins of motivation processes. (Alderfer 1969, 147)

4.2 Alderfer's ERG Theory

The theory of existence, relatedness and growth, known as the ERG theory of motivation, was created by Clayton Alderfer in revision of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. As Figure 3 below demonstrates, ERG theory resembles Maslow's theory in the division of human needs, albeit having only three categories as opposed to Maslow's five. The first category, existence needs, coincide with Maslow's theory's physiological and safety needs. The second sectioning of needs according to Alderfer's theory is relatedness needs, which resemble Maslow's love and belongingness needs. The third category of ERG theory, growth needs, encompasses esteem and self-actualization needs from Maslow's hierarchy of needs. (Alderfer 1969, 145-147)

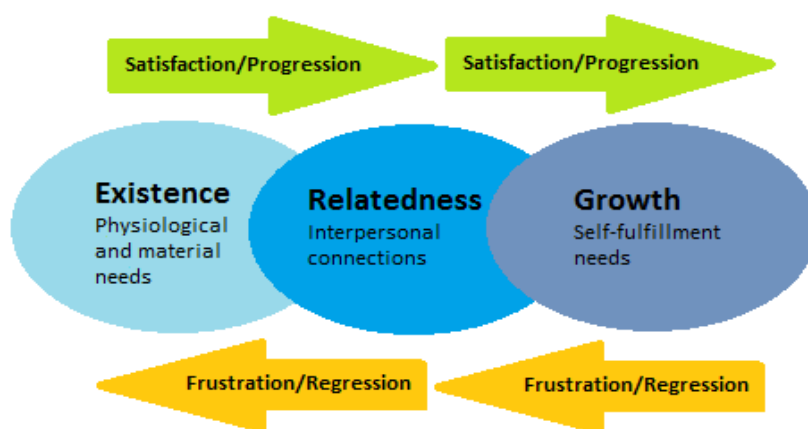


Figure 3: Alderfer's ERG Theory of Human Motivation (Adapted Johnstone 2013)

Besides the count of the needs, ERG theory of motivation varies from Maslow's original hierarchy of needs by recognizing the possibility of being motivated by multiple need levels concurrently. Therefore, ERG theory categorizes the needs but doesn't place them in strict order. (Alderfer 1969, 154)

However, some of the needs can be seen as more concrete, such as the existence needs, which have to do with the physiological and material needs, as opposed to for example relatedness needs, that largely depend on peoples' perception of each other and their relationship. That leaves growth needs as the least concrete set of needs, because of its highly individualistic nature. (Alderfer 1969, 151)

The ERG theory introduces the frustration-regression principle, which argues that an unsatisfied need on a certain level can lead a person to become frustrated and turn their attention towards satisfying more attainable needs, the increasingly concrete needs. For instance, if a person is unsuccessful in meeting a growth need, they get frustrated and regress to attempt to fulfil a relatedness need, which is perceived as a lower level need for its more concrete nature. (Alderfer 1969, 151)

The ERG theory is commonly utilized to study organizational behaviour and as a mean to improve workplace motivation and job satisfaction. Furthermore, it is applicable to school environment to research student motivation as well. (Caulton 2012, 1)

4.3 Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory

Frederick Herzberg's motivation and hygiene theory, also known as two-factor theory, indicates that satisfaction and dissatisfaction at work are caused by separate factors. According to Herzberg's theory, satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not the opposites of each other. Rather, as demonstrated below in Figure 4, the opposite of satisfaction is no satisfaction, and opposite of dissatisfaction is no dissatisfaction. The job factors are divided into two non-correlating categories: Motivation factors and hygiene factors. (Dartey-Baah & Amoako 2011, 2)

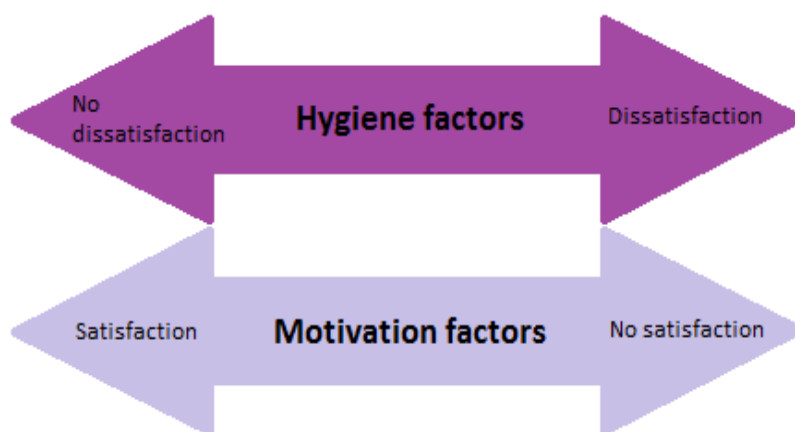


Figure 4: Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Adapted Balogh 2015, 55)

Motivation factors are related to what individual does in his work and how he performs. Sense of achievement, growth and promotional opportunities, recognition, responsibility and meaningfulness of the work are motivation factors. When the motivation factors are present, the job is more gratifying, leading to satisfaction. However, according to Herzberg's study, the absence of the motivation factors does not lead to dissatisfaction. It leads to absence of satisfaction, no satisfaction. (Dartey-Baah & Amoako 2011, 2-3)

Hygiene factors won't lead to satisfaction, but if they are well executed, they prevent dissatisfaction. Hygiene factors, also called maintenance factors, are outer variables describing the job environment. These factors include for example benefits, job security, salary, physical working conditions, status and company policies. (Dartey-Baah & Amoako 2011, 2-3)

Though Herzberg's theory has most commonly been applied to the work place environment to study employee satisfaction and motivation, it is applicable to school environment as well, to examine motivation in students. The factors affecting satisfaction are largely the same for students in higher education and people in working life. For example, if an individual perceives their current or future study degree as meaningful, they will obtain increased level of satisfaction from studying the subject, and therefore they will be more motivated to continue the education. Furthermore, if the school has adequate facilities and otherwise well-rounded policies and services, the student is likely to be in the state of "no dissatisfaction".

In conclusion, the three motivation content theories presented in this chapter offer a comprehensive overview of human needs and motivation that stems from it. It assists the reader to get acquainted with the large concept that is motivation, laying the theoretical framework that is relevant for understanding the research presented in this bachelor's thesis.

5 Motivation Theories on Learning

Much like other concepts mentioned before in this thesis, study motivation is not unambiguous. It is, however, necessary for successfully starting and completing any education or degree, thus making it an important term to address in this work. Motivation, or as Barnett (2007) puts it, 'will', is arguably the most crucial aspect in education. Regardless of the level of education, a student can't enable learning and development whilst lacking the will to commit. (Barnet 2007, 15)

The current research on learning motivation is diverse with multiple pivotal theories. The theories discuss self-image and personal preferences, as well as other people's influence on individual's motivation. Furthermore, emotions and their impact to motivation come forth in the current field of learning motivation. (Salmela-Aro 2018, 10)

Numerous motivation theories on learning put emphasis on intrinsic motivation. This is coherent with today's developed societies such as Finland enabling increased amounts of possibilities and options regarding higher education. The inner motives of individuals are emphasised when the choices can be made not only from the point of view of survival, but also according to personal preferences.

Individuals are motivated to study and learn by various reasons. This Bachelor's thesis strives to uncover some of the general motives, as well as explore the ways an individual can approach learning. This chapter attempts to provide a more focused context regarding motivation, for it is a very broad concept. The following sections present concise definitions of contemporary motivation theories regarding learning.

5.1 Self-Determination Theory

According to Salmela-Aro (2018), currently the most renowned motivation theory of learning is self-determination theory by Ryan and Deci (2017). It argues that students are motivated by autonomy, which means the motives are created by their own inner processes, rather than compulsions and rewards coming from outside. In other words, self-determination theory implies that students are being motivated by being able to influence and make decisions about their own actions. Furthermore, the theory introduces the terms competence and relatedness as core motivational factors, with meaningfulness considered as a fourth factor in recent years. (Salmela-Aro 2018, 11)

Individual people have different levels of interests towards tasks and behaviours, in addition to possessing different factors motivating them. Two people can be executing the same thing for very different reasons, for example, one person might be going to the gym to stay in good health, and other one could be doing it simply because they enjoy working out. Both are motivated, though the motives are different. Self-determination theory considers the origin of the motivation or quality of the motives more crucial than the amount of motivation, which is why the theory differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, in an effort to research their influence on individual's development. (Salmela-Aro & Nurmi 2017, 54-55)

5.2 Expectancy-Value Theory

Eccles' (2004; Eccles, Midgley 1989) expectancy-value theory theorizes that the basis of student's learning is created by the individual's personal values and the expectations for success. Values refer to the personal experience of how meaningful, interesting and useful the task at hand is, while expectancies are connected to individual's self-image and how they perceive their ability to manage a task. (Salmela-Aro 2018, 11) Typically a person would attempt to avoid jobs or tasks that hold no value to them, and that they feel they will fail at. Consequently, it is probable for a person to commit to a task they believe to succeed in, and that they perceive to be valuable in some way. (Salmela-Aro & Nurmi 2017, 67)

Expectancy-value theory ties well into the research questions at hand. “What motivates students to choose degree programme in social services at Laurea”, can be examined through this theory, even though it is not sensible to inspect every individual’s exact perceptions in this particular work.

5.3 Achievement Goal Theory

Salmela-Aro (2018,11) states that achievement goal theory further developed by Dweck (2006) divides students into two categories of learners. According to the theory, a person is either task involved learner, or ego involved learner. A task involved learner is interested in the task itself and believes in being able to grow and develop their abilities. Task involved learners tend to accept mistakes and challenges as part of the learning process, that enable the acquiring of new skills and knowledge. An ego involved learner thrives to prove themselves and show their skills and superiority by completing a task. They differ from task involved learners in that they tend to consider a person’s skills to be pre-determined. This mindset often has negative effects on motivation and can be harmful for personal development and learning. (Salmela-Aro 2018, 11-12)

Achievement goal theory, together with theories previously introduced, lays out a comprehensive picture of different kinds of learners. Learning is a part of everyone’s life in one way or another and recognizing the patterns that hinders or benefits an individual, can result to a better and more effective learning experience. Besides understanding the motives behind pursuing a higher education degree, it is relevant to examine the motivation that aids students to reach their ultimate goal which is graduation.

6 Laurea University of Applied Sciences

Since this bachelor thesis focuses on Laurea students’ motivation for studying it is important to be familiar with Laurea ammattikorkeakoulu, at least on a general level. While the findings developed during the research part of this thesis may be applicable to students at other schools or universities, it can’t be denied that the specific institution where a student studies is an important factor which warrants, at the very least, acknowledging.

Laurea ammattikorkeakoulu or, in English, Laurea University of Applied Sciences was established in 1992 and operates across seven campuses. It has formerly been known as “Espoo-Vantaa University of Applied Sciences”. Laurea proclaims itself to specialize in service innovations and regional development in the Uusimaa area, where Laurea operates. Having previously offered only polytechnics degrees, Laurea nowadays includes studies specializing in, among others, Tourism and catering, Social, Health and Sports sciences, as well as Business. Laurea operates as a limited liability company, or “osaakeyhtiö” in Finnish. Its teachings are based on the Learning by Developing model of education. (Laurea 2018a; Laurea 2018b)

7800 students study at Laurea, which makes it one of the biggest Universities of Applied Sciences in Finland. 7000 of these students study towards a bachelor's degree, and 800 towards a master's degree. Of these 7800 students roughly 650 are international degree students and 300 are exchange students. (Laurea 2018c; Laurea 2018a)

6.1 Bachelor's Degree in Social Services

Laurea offers English Degree Programmes in Social Services, which are set to take the student 3.5 years to complete by accumulating a total of 210 credits, completing three work placements, and delivering a degree thesis.

The goal of this degree programme is to prepare its graduates for working life in the social sector. Laurea aims to achieve this by helping students develop a skillset suited for various situations and applications regarding clients' overall well-being. This includes, according to Laurea itself, education, rehabilitation, preventive work and maintenance of functional ability.

The studies themselves are divided into core competences, which compromise 150 credits, and courses worth a total of 60 credits, which are chosen by the students themselves, so called complementary modules.

6.2 Competence-Based Curriculum

These core competence courses prepare students for customer work in Social Services, the workings of service systems and how to navigate them, inclusion, professional methods used in social services and workplace development. More precisely, these core competences prepare students toward working life with customers in social services. They also aim to teach students about the established Finnish service systems, the history of the welfare state, as well as values such as inclusivity and the drive to aspire towards a better society.

To prepare students better for their role as social service graduates and scholars, Laurea also includes core-competence studies about work methodology, development of the research field surrounding social services, and innovation in the workplace. Laurea aims to equip its graduate students for a wide variety of jobs in the social services sector. According to their own website graduates commonly go on to become social welfare supervisors, instructors, family workers or project workers. (Laurea 2018d)

7 Research Plan and Conduction

The following section concerns itself with the implementation of this thesis. This includes the defining of our research goals and the questions used, the chosen qualitative research method, as well as our reason for selecting it. Under this heading we will also establish an

overview of previous research and established research theory that is useful in the context of this thesis.

7.1 Research Goals and Questions

During the thesis writing process, especially while looking for relevant sources, it became clear most previous research in this area was concerned with market research, demographics, and statistics. Finding research from a social work viewpoint, which was to be the focus, was rather difficult as these publications proved to be remarkably scarce. Research about why an individual would feel the need and choose to study in the first place, and the benefits for that individual, understanding their motives for this 'basic endeavour', are in our opinion quite overlooked in social work research today. It can be argued that attempting this research deliberately with a social work and social science framework sets it apart from similar research and gives its result relevance today.

As such, this research question concerns itself less with a business or marketing viewpoint but attempts to shed light on this question from a psychosocial point of view. Students' individual aspirations, expectations and struggles, as well as what motivates them, and facilitates their social well-being are a core focus for this thesis research. Another goal is to isolate their impetus for study this specific degree at Laurea. Furthermore, it is of interest to know their preconceptions, and if they have been validated or not thus far. Their social well-being and altogether thoughts about their studies up until this point, and what they would like to learn more about is to be discovered as well.

Conducting the research under this focus will be of use to future researchers, who may choose to investigate more diversified areas, using the groundwork laid in this research about the subject of motivation.

7.2 Qualitative Research Methods

An often-cited flaw of qualitative research is that it might not generally be hypothesis-driven, objective or neutral, as researchers put themselves in the position of the participant to understand how the world is perceived from the other person's perspective'. (Hammarberg; Kirkman; de Lacey 2016, 498)

It is important for this research to be approached from a qualitative point of view deliberately. During research and the familiarization process with relevant literature, it was alarming how much focus was spent on the statistical aspect of why students choose to study what they study. While of course this research is important, it can be argued that especially as social service students it is imperative to understand the decision-making process and the psyche of a student in this field on a more personal level. The lack of popularity for this approach is concerning.

Hammarberg, Kirkman & de Lacey (2016) urge in their article 'Qualitative research methods: when to use them and how to judge them', qualitative research not to be considered 'light-weight' when compared to its quantitative counterpart. They argue this occasional belittling of qualitative research to be due to, among others, a smaller average sample size, less objectivity due to the researchers' possible subjective interpretation, and the possibility of bias towards a certain premeditated outcome. In their eyes qualitative research lends itself better to psychosocial research, when questions about a person's, or a group of people's, unique point of view about their own experience and sense of purpose are to be answered. (Hammarberg et al. 2016, 498-501)

In other words, when the desired research data does not lend itself well to tallying or concrete measurement, is when one should consider conducting qualitative research over quantitative research.

In 2008 Kitto, Chesters and Grbich defined seven key terms, by which Qualitative Research can be assessed. These terms are shown in Figure 5. Their goal was to improve the transferability of findings and, in doing so, improve the likelihood of qualitative research being published. They argue that when using qualitative research. It is imperative to establish as many of these factors as possible, provided the allotted space allows for an overview of all these aspects. (Kitto; Chesters; Grbich 2008, 243-246)

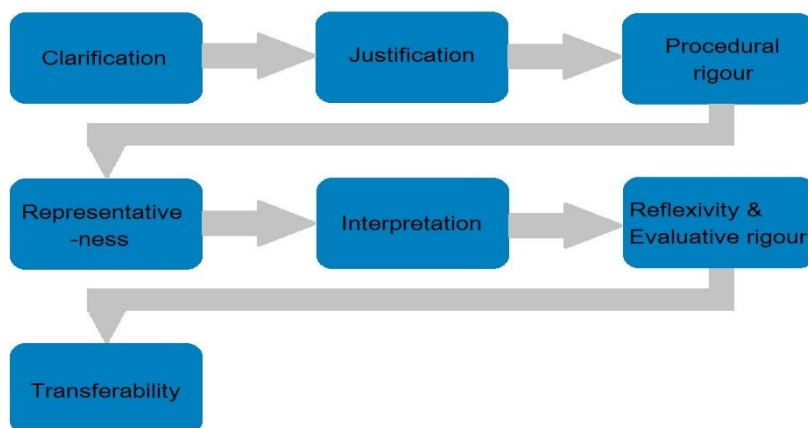


Figure 5: Qualitative Research Assessment Criteria (Kitto et al. 2008, 243-246)

The research question must be clear and connected to the goal of the study, for the results to be interpreted and evaluated accurately after the completion of the study. The research question must be the best possible fit for this. In addition to this the chosen methods must be justified to the reader. (Kitto et al. 2008, 243)

Procedural rigour refers to a detailed, or explicit, description of how data was gathered and analysed. Clarity about research methods, participants, specific procedure and management of data must be established. The applied sampling strategy must be mentioned, whether it be Maximum variation sampling, homogenous sampling, or convenience sampling. Kitto, Chesters and Grbich note that simply stating which method has been used would not be sufficient, and the chosen method must be justified, since these sampling methods have a non-negligible effect on data gathered. (Kitto et al. 2008, 244)

The gathered data must be presented as holistically as possible. To ascertain that data collected would be as objective as possible, the gathered data can be triangulated between different researchers, thereby increasing the reliability of the study. Whereas in Quantitative research multiple researchers provide scrutiny, in Qualitative research this allows for discussion and reflection between the researchers to objectify their findings. (Kitto et al. 2008, 244)

Another, albeit more limited approach is 'respondent validation'. This allows the subjects of the study access to transcripts and data gathered based on their answers to be checked by them. This is done to prevent error on the researchers' part, is however not without ethical limitations. (Kitto et al. 2008, 244)

Reflexivity refers to the effect that research topic, the participants and the relation between the researchers themselves effects on the research. Researchers must demonstrate their awareness of this and how their individual values have shaped their applied methods and data evaluation. (Kitto et al. 2008, 245)

Evaluative rigour describes how political and ethical aspects are understood and assessed by the researchers. Self-reflection on the researchers' part is necessary to be aware of their own subjectivity and be able to produce accurate data. Being able to generalize and transfer study design and findings are imperative to make sure the study holds scientific merit and is accurate. During the construction of this thesis these seven main principles were used to guide the research process and to present the final iteration of the thesis in a form that satisfies scientific rigour and presents its results in a meaningful and robust manner. (Kitto et al. 2008, 244-245)

7.3 Focus Group Interview and Selecting Participants

The approach most well-suited for data collection about the research topic proved to be conducting a number of focus group interviews. Focus group interviews are able to create an atmosphere in which participants feel comfortable to discuss shared experience. Historically, focus group interviews have been used in situations where topics of a sensitive nature are to

be discussed, or when interview participants share themselves in a way that makes them feel vulnerable. (Rosalind & Holland 2013, 38)

While this research doesn't aim to discuss topics of an inherently sensitive nature, it can be argued that through the use of this method more honest and discerned insights from our participants can be gained, due to focused group interviews strength in creating a pressure-free environment.

The optimal number of participants for these interviews lies between six and ten participants per session. This is the number generally suggested for focus group interviews, being both small enough to not become disorderly, and large enough to allow for a multitude of perspectives and opinions. (Rabiee 2004, 656)

Especially in qualitative research used by social science researchers focus group interviews have been a popular tool to gain data from multiple individuals at the same time. The informal discussion, or discussions, help create a relaxed atmosphere for participants to discuss delicate topics such as own perceptions or their own opinions without fear of ostracization. Another benefit of focus groups is their low cost-factor, their efficiency in obtaining a large amount of data and the relative speed with which they can be planned and set up. (Krueger & Casey 2000, 4-8)

To evaluate the data gained from conducting these focus group interview transcript-based analysis will be used. This process describes the transcription of audio- or video recordings, resulting in upwards of 40 pages of text, depending on the interview. Indeed Krueger (1994) believes the transcription process to lead to a number of pages between 50 and 70. This number however is in reference to multiple sessions with upward of 15 total participants and multiple hours of recordings. Though this may be one of the most time-intensive methods of data analysis, it will be employed here to make sure no data which may be relevant towards this research will be lost. A complete transcription also allows researchers to gain a better understanding of the interview over time, even after the interview has been completed.

Beyond the transcription our, the researchers, presence in the interview as moderators and researchers is of no little importance. Especially our assessment regarding non-verbal communication may shed more of a light into the true meaning of a participant's statement, better than the use of raw transcribed text would allow us to. This data can then be presented alongside the verbal data and should, if there is opportunity, be collected in as large a quantity as possible. (Denzin & Lincoln 2005, 696-697)

While focus group advocates typically suggest upwards of 10 participants in a focus group interview, this number may simply be too high for the purpose of this research. Including too many participants, giving them all space to voice their individual opinions, and making sure a

holistic research setting can be facilitated, may simply take too much of the participants' time. Increasing the number of participants would mean to increase the duration of the individual interview session, possibly to a degree where a number of participants may find it too bothersome to attend at all. Secondly, in a focus group interview session with too many participants interviewees might be fearful to go too in-depth into any topic due to a fear of taking up too much time and may rush through their arguments to give the next speaker their turn.

7.4 Test Interview

On the 3rd of December 2018 a test interview with five participants randomly selected from a pool of Laurea social service bachelor's degree students in their 2nd year was conducted. In preparation for this interview a set of relevant questions to guide the overall course of this interview was prepared. It was however important to remain flexible and react to topics participants would broach into naturally, opting to moderate the conversation as little as possible, while remaining focused on the research goals.

The objective of this test interview was to familiarize ourselves with the techniques applied in focused group interviews, as well as to test the prepared questions and to ascertain whether they provided enough room for discussion or would be able to spark a conversation. In order to review the gathered data, the conversation was audio- and videotaped for later analysis. Before doing starting the recordings, written consent was received from the participants. The form used to gain consent can be viewed in Appendix 1.

The questions concerned themselves with the specific reasons why the participants had interest in the Social Services Degree Programme and Laurea and how their experiences thus far had been. Their goals after graduation and their well-being as a student at Laurea were discussed as well.

Due to the rich input of the test interviewees and their insightful answers it could be assumed that with minimal adjustments to the original questions a group of between four and six people would be able to discuss these questions for about an hour, while still providing relevant input toward the research question.

One possible flaw that became apparent during this interview was that conversation during occasionally dipped into too broad a discussion about study life at Laurea, which, while interesting, was not necessarily relevant to the core of the research. To improve the gathering of relevant data, more effort would have to be put into keeping the topics of discussion more focused on the original questions.

This test interview provided valuable insight into the focus group interview research process as a whole. It became apparent that in a focus group interview with multiple participants it

would be very important to pick up on certain nuances in conversation. These nuances could be found for example in the tone of voice of a participant, their body language, use of certain words and a level of openness towards discussing certain topics.

Had there not been at least a singular test interview there may have been a chance that we as researchers would not have consciously been aware of how to interpret the subtext of a conversation. Without a certain level of alertness toward the existence and interpretation of this subtext, there may have been a risk that not enough relevant research data may have been gathered during the course of the focus group interview, even despite conversation going seemingly well.

This test interview also served as a reminder that interviews are a far more personal tool of research than, for example, questionnaires. Interviewers must be aware of the effect their person has on interviewees. Not influencing the answer of an interviewee is a skill in and of itself, which must be consciously applied and remembered during the interview process.

After listening to and transcribing the test interview it became clear that video recording the conversation would have little to no benefit to evaluating the gained research data. Keeping in mind that focused group interviews may produce better results in a calm and personal environment, it could be argued that a video camera might be distracting or intimidating to some interviewees. Because of this it was decided to rely on audio recording alone. (Stewart, Shamdasani 2015, 122)

Based on the results and conduction of the test interview, the 2nd interview was shaped in a way to phrase questions for the interviewees in a way that made their answers lend themselves better toward the research question and an efforts were made to warrant the interview atmosphere would be as informal and calm as the situation could permit.

7.5 Contents Analysis

Many methods of analysing scientific data gained from Qualitative research exist today. Many of them lend themselves particularly well to a specific preconceived mission, which the researchers have in mind. These methods promote different angles of by which different scales of data should be measured, and as such it is important for researchers to pick the ones that lend themselves well towards their goals.

A plethora of methods were consulted to help analyse the data gained from the focus group interviews. Multiple different techniques were employed in an effort to interpret the focus group interview data in a meaningful way, and to cover individual weaknesses some approaches might have. The techniques used in this content analysis include analytical induction and the use of quasi-statistics.

Analytical induction is an older, but well-established method in data analysis. It is conducted by first crafting a hypothetical statement. In this case it could be: 'Students choose to study at Laurea due to Laurea's good reputation'. Then this hypothesis can be compared to the research data to check, whether it fits this statement or not. If it does not, the hypothesis is revised, and the process repeated. The goal is to eventually create a hypothesis that can be applied to all cases. (Hammersley 2013, 45-56)

Quasi-statistics is a tool to further substantiate the data previously analysed using different methods. It is accomplished by keeping a tally of how often specific things are mentioned in an interview or similar method. It can help not only validate importance of certain data aspects by correlating them to a high mention of them, but also put into a critical light the things that interview participants don't mention often. This helps researchers evaluate which logical conclusions they are realistically able to draw based on their data. (Maxwell 2010, 476-478)

8 Findings

In addition to the test interview from the 3rd of December 2018, a second focus group interview was conducted on the 16th of April 2019, starting from 15:30 at Laurea campus in Tikkurila in Helsinki. Six interested social work students had previously been sought out and contacted. Conflicting scheduling and last-minute cancellations led to the final interview being first rescheduled to 14:30, then delayed again until 15:30, involving only two participants. One of these was a second-year social service students bachelor's degree student, the other a first year.

In this interview the interviewees were asked six main questions. These questions were: 'What motivated you to start studying towards a higher education?', 'What made you decide to apply to a degree programme in social services at Laurea?', 'What are you enjoying most about your studies?', 'What are your goals after graduation?', 'What would you like to learn about in your studies at Laurea', and 'Have you faced any challenges during your studies at Laurea?'. Interspersed with these main questions the discussion was guided using follow-up questions and conversation between the participants was encouraged.

Despite the low number of participants at the interview, enough data to analyse, as well as the unique perspective of our interviewees, could be gathered. Nevertheless, we opted to contact several other Laurea social service bachelor's degree students, who had previously shown interest, by e-mail. We addressed them in a cover letter (Appendix 2) and asked them to answer the same six main questions we used during our interview on the 16th. Only one Laurea student replied to the cover letter, albeit in a very detailed manner.

In addition, we decided to include the results of the Test Interview from the 3rd of December 2018 into our findings, due to the success of the interview and the high quality and relevance of the data it produced. We took these actions to further substantiate our findings and give our qualitative research data more scientific significance.

Combining the five participants from the first interview, the two participants from the second interview, and the one e-mail respondent, eight participants were involved in the data gathering process altogether. In the following subheadings we will analyse the findings of our interview, test interview and e-mail questionnaire grouped by recurring themes displayed in conversation with our interviewees.

8.1 Motivation to Begin Studying

Interviewees were asked what motivated them to start studying towards higher secondary education, and more specifically, Laurea University of Applied Sciences. Leaving the interviewees enough time to answer they were able to tell about not only the main impetus but also about smaller motivating factors that may have influenced their decision.

8.1.1 Prior Working Experience in Social Sector

Most participants had previous experience in Finland's social sector in their working life and wanted to expand their knowledge, while another participant had already undergone training to become a practical nurse and wanted to aspire towards a higher degree in social services. Yet another interviewee already had a Finnish vocational school degree, but felt that 'with a higher diploma, it would open more doors in the field.'

8.1.2 Recommendation by Word of Mouth

Four out of seven participants affirmed they were more interested in studying at Laurea than at other schools of Applied Sciences. When asked to explain their rationale some students referred to friends who had provided positive feedback about courses and teachers at Laurea. Similarly, five out of seven participants claimed that studying towards a degree in English had heavily influenced their decision, with some participants stating that they would not have applied at all, had there not been the option of studying in English.

The participants who preferred Laurea over other universities of applied sciences claimed they did so mainly because word of mouth. "Many of my friends are already studying at Laurea and they all say I would like it here", one of the interviewees explained. Another participant simply stated that she lives close to a Laurea campus, which made her more inclined to apply there, rather than to another institution.

8.1.3 Studying in Multicultural Environment

The reasons for students preferring studies in English were more differentiated. These students unanimously agreed that improving on their individual English-speaking skills was a big bonus in addition to attaining their degree. At least two participants felt that had there not been a study offering in English they had not chosen to apply at all. Two first generation immigrants to Finland in the interviews claimed they feared not being able to successfully finish a bachelor's degree in Finnish due to lack of Finnish speaking skills. Another interviewee theorized that the English degree programme might be easier to enrol into than the Finnish one. In their opinion Finnish students would apply to the International degree programme for a higher chance of being accepted.

An interviewee concerned about future employability remarked that 'I don't know if it's true, but a lot of people say that if you apply for a position in English, they still want you to speak Finnish too. So, I'm happy they also teach us Finnish here'. When asked in a follow-up question other students either shared the sentiment that learning both Finnish and English language would be a beneficial factor or had no strong opinion on the matter one way or the other.

8.2 Students' Perception of Studies

While discussing about their motivation to study, interviewees opinions seemed to streamline themselves towards similar sentiments, when shifting the conversation towards their enjoyment of current studies, their opinions seemed to diverge from one another, for many different reasons.

8.2.1 Satisfaction on Study Offer

Four students reported a high level of satisfaction with their current study situation, higher than they had anticipated, with the remaining interviewees claiming their level of satisfaction seemed to follow preconceived notions they had about Laurea before beginning their studies, or simply their level of satisfaction not changing in a relevant manner one way or the other.

Those who reported higher level of satisfaction since beginning their studies at Laurea reported a positive atmosphere at campus, the easy accessibility of these campuses and a large amount of flexibility when choosing elective courses.

8.2.2 Teachers' Influence on study satisfaction

Although it hadn't been the main focus of the interview, the subject of teachers at Laurea campuses proved to be a topic which interviewees seemed particularly keen to share their views over. Most students either agreed or had no strong opinion one way or the other, that

teachers were encouraging students to learn, were knowledgeable in their areas of teaching, and willing to compromise for the sake of the students, if the students' schedule might have become an issue when, for example, certain deadlines were involved.

When talking about the subject of teachers, interviewees often interjected in a way that showed a remarkable amount of understanding or even benevolence towards Laurea staff, even when critiquing possible shortcomings. Though not forthrightly said this pointed towards a close and healthy relationship between students and teachers.

8.2.3 Students' Perception of Teacher's English Level

As discussion shifted towards enjoyment of individual courses most of the interviewees mentioned the teachers in charge of the course as an important factor for study enjoyment. When asked directly whether the choice of teacher was important to students, when choosing elective course studies, they unanimously strongly agreed. One interviewee elaborates that courses taught by different teachers could feel very different from another due to, for example, experienced passion of the teacher for the subject, ease or difficulty of bureaucratic proceedings, such as for example answering to e-mails or grading students' work, or the fluidity of the teachers spoken English. One participant puts it like this: "I had expected the teachers' English level to be a bit higher than it actually is. I remember in this one course the students saying it is easier to understand the teacher speaking Finnish than English."

8.3 Effect of Studies on Students' Professional Development

When asking interviewees about the future, they chose to interpret this as their upcoming studies at Laurea, rather than their post-graduate life. We attribute this to students' interest in developing working life skills and learning with the goal to develop oneself, rather than merely for a degree.

8.3.1 Competence Development

While students unanimously agreed they enjoyed learning about social service concepts in theory, some students expressed the worry they might not be learning enough hands-on knowledge for the working life. "When I'm done and I'm going to be working as a social worker, I really won't know how to help them", one student explains. Other students in the same interview were split about this issue. Around half of them expressed they felt similarly, while the other half tried to relax this student by reassuring her that much of applied knowledge would be learned on the job, and that it was often like this. It is important to note that most of the students who were less worried either had prior degrees or had been working in a field related to their current studies.

Half of the participating students wished they had the opportunity to specialize their curriculum further, being mostly interested in studies that would benefit them primarily in their

working field of choice after graduation. They expressed that they did not have an avid interest in several of their core curriculum courses and would show more interest in their studies when being able to choose their courses themselves.

8.3.2 Employment and Career Plans

Most students preferred to stay in the social sector after graduation, either to continue studying in the same field, or in a profession. There were only a few outliers. One interviewee explains having studied psychology in his home country, now having switched over to social services due to it being the closest related thing he could study in English in Finland. When asked directly many 1st generation immigrants affirmed having worked or aspiring towards a career in the social sector, making their move to this study degree deliberate and premeditated.

Students generally shared the sentiment of planning to stay in Finland after graduation, commonly citing the importance of Finnish and English language skills for their career options. 1st generation immigrants unanimously agreed being very satisfied with their personal life and working life in Finland and being happy to spend the foreseeable post-graduate future in Finland. Students who were born in Finland either responded having no strong opinion about where they would most like to work or study after degree or wanted to try to work in a different country. Many Finns cited their curiosity as a major reason for aspiring towards a career abroad. "If it doesn't work out, I can then still say 'alright, time to come home.'", one Finnish student remarks.

9 Discussion

This chapter addresses the ethicality of our work and findings, as well as the reliability and validity of the research. In addition, this section provides suggestions for future research. Finally, we will elaborate on our bachelor's thesis process and reflect on our professional growth.

9.1 Research Ethics, Reliability and Validity

Ethics are a part of everyday life and decision making. Ethical thinking means being able to consider multiple angles while concluding what is right and what is wrong in a situation. Furthermore, it requires one to take into account other people's values, as well as their own to reach a conclusion. Research ethics are outlined by laws and ethical norms, but the final responsibility lies always within the conductor(s) of the research, especially considering that some issues won't always have a definitive answer. (Kuula 2011, 21-26)

The ethical norms binding researchers can be seen as fairly general in the sense that they are open to interpretation in a concrete situation. It is nevertheless important to abide by them to the best of one's ability. Ethical norms such as honesty, diligence, valuing human dignity, avoiding danger, accepting social responsibility, and advancing the professional practice are

considered to be aspects that an ethically competent researcher carefully considers in their study. Furthermore, an authentic interest towards the research is expected from the researcher. (Kuula 2011, 30-31)

During our bachelor's thesis process, we aspired to pay special attention to objectivity. Our main concern was to remain in the role and perspective of a researcher, while recognizing that our bachelor's thesis deals with subjects we have personal experiences in. Being impartial is crucial to an ethically sound study. Major consideration for this research was to be attentive of our professional conduct during the group interviews. As stated earlier in section 7.3, interview as a research method can be a delicate tool, and the interviewers must practice great care in order to produce as authentic results as possible. For us this meant guiding the group interview situation using well-placed questions, making sure to be mindful of our own opinions and biases.

An important part of any research is to address its reliability and validity. Reliability of a study means that the results are repeatable, and validity means that the chosen methodology is suitable for measuring and researching the subject at hand. While discussing reliability and validity of a research, it is crucial to consider the gathering and archiving of data. Making sure the information has been gathered responsibly can ensure the repeatability of the study. (Hirsjärvi; Remes; Sajavaara 2007, 226-227)

We gathered data for our study utilizing qualitative methods. The pivotal approach used was focus group interview, and in addition, a questionnaire was sent via email to attain increased amount of information to analyse. Even though we didn't receive as many answers to our email survey as we initially expected, using two different methods can increase the validity of a research. Furthermore, the reliability of a qualitative study is strengthened by precise description of the research process. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2007, 227-228). The chosen research methods of this bachelor's thesis are presented in chapter seven, followed by the data analysis implementation. The results of our research can be viewed in chapter eight, categorized comprehensively by the themes that arose during the interviews.

9.2 Recommendations for Further Research

Our research concerned itself mainly with student motivation, specifically for students in Laurea University of Applied Sciences, and specifically for social services English degree students. Using an approach grounded in social work theory and motivational theory, producing meaningful scientific data was not difficult. For this there are two main reasons.

Firstly, while students' choices in different areas of life may be a well-research topic, it is often done through the lens of statistical analysis or similar quantitative research methods. Dur-

ing the preliminary research process for this thesis, research tackling the area of student motivation and their choices could hardly be found attempted from a different school of research. This makes it clear that research like the research conducted in this thesis could yield interesting and relevant findings not just at Laurea University of Applied Sciences, but in many other learning institutions as well.

Secondly, during the focus group interview sessions that provided the scientific data for this research, it became clear that the interviewees were surprisingly eager to share their study experiences and compare them to one-another. It was not possible to use all the subjects the interviewees touched upon as relevant data for this research, but for researchers with a different goal these findings could have been very meaningful. In more precise terms, apart from the findings discussed above, students were also very eager to talk about:

- English degree programmes compared to Finnish ones
- The influence of having a domestic partner on individual student choice
- Personal ethics as a factor in choosing a study degree
- Social bonds between students and teachers which develop during studies

It is reasonable to assume that students would have touched on more interesting subjects, had they been given room to do so. We ascribe this phenomenon mainly due to the focus group interview approach used in this thesis. The informal atmosphere it excels at creating lent itself particularly well for the exchange of ideas between students. The topics mentioned above would each be interesting areas to see researched using qualitative research methods in the future.

9.3 Bachelor's Thesis Process and Professional Growth Reflection

As a whole, the bachelor's thesis process has been the most demanding scientific task either of us has conducted so far. It was challenging, yet an interesting project which continued to shift shape as the work advanced. Therefore, one of the most important lessons we learned, was to accept the bachelor's thesis work as a learning process, which cannot be perfected or concluded overnight. We honed our skills in process writing and academic language, continuously editing and improving our text, keeping in mind our research goals and questions.

During our social service studies, we have participated in and conducted multiple group assignments with various different people, so co-operating on the bachelor's thesis was a natural choice for us. While working together provides its own challenges, we managed to make use of our individual strengths. Having more than one person committing to the work made it

possible for us to have constant peer reflection available, which was invaluable in addition to the guidance we received from our bachelor's thesis instructors.

Executing this bachelor's thesis has amplified our professional competence, defined by Social professional field's universities of applied sciences national network (Sosiaalialan ammattikorkeakoulujen kansallinen verkosto). (Mäkinen; Raatikainen; Rahikka; Saarnio 2009, 18-19) The specific aspects we feel we have improved in are understanding the relation of individual and society and being able to structure and examine them from multiple angles. We have also developed a more research-oriented manner of processing and producing information.

In conclusion, executing the bachelor's thesis has taught us perseverance and patience, as well as increased our understanding about research process and methodology. It has verified our choice of profession and increased our competences within the field of social services. Finally, our ability to independently plan, implement, report and evaluate a research has considerably increased.

10 Conclusion

It is vital to deepen our understanding of the factors that contribute to a holistic student well-being, which not only draws them to a higher upper secondary educational degree such as this one, but also to command these factors in a way to create a positive and effective study environment for the good of students, teachers and society at large.

Close cooperation between the student union and Laurea teachers and administration is essential nowadays, if a healthy intake of students into social service education, coupled with holistic training of these students, while realizing their multifaceted study needs, regardless of possible dividing factors such as differing cultural backgrounds or language barriers, is to be facilitated.

This research has explored questions of motivation, students' perception of studies and how students are affected by their studies for Laurea University of Applied Sciences Social Service bachelor's degree students. Through applied qualitative data analysis methods, we have, together with our student participants, discovered both beneficial and problematic factors. Being aware of these factors and their implications will surely lead towards an improved study experience for students at Laurea University of Applied Sciences.

This thesis' central idea was improving understanding of students' motivation and, by logical extension, choice. The information provided by the participants will be valuable to Laurea University of Applied Sciences' administration, if students' choices and motivations are to be understood, and students' satisfaction and ongoing engagement during studies is to be maintained at a high level.

It is common sense that a student, who would find himself in an environment they feel misunderstood in, or alienated by, or that they simply are misrepresented by, would feel dejected. This feeling of not being understood could translate into other feelings such as frustration and lack of motivation, not only to study, but to engage with other students and teachers as part of a community.

The data gathered from the interviewees and being presented through the lenses of qualitative research data analysis is to be understood not as statistical data, describing a certain demographic of students, but rather as unique experiences, which certainly overlap for many students, and who have expressed the desire to be regarded not merely as a group, but as individuals with differing motivations and aspirations.

Having shed light into students' unique motivational factors and their own unique holistic assessment of their study life and self, Laurea, as well as similar providers of upper secondary educational degrees, will be able to improve student life and well-being on their campuses.

The findings of the research we conducted reveal students' pre-established interest in the social sector to play an important role for their aspirations towards enrolling into the bachelor's degree program in social services at Laurea University of applied sciences. Students who decide to embark on this study path do so because of conscious decision towards a working life career in this area. Our findings demonstrate they do so to further their economic wellbeing. They also have interest in the social sector as a future career path.

Two main reasons manifested for students electing to study in English rather than Finnish. Firstly, students believe a degree in English language to be attractive in the job market. They feel the same way about the practice in written and spoken English and their inevitable improvement in this area due to their studies. Secondly, around half of the participating students felt they would not be able to obtain the degree in Finnish due to lack of Finnish language skills. It is of note that these students were first-generation immigrants.

Our findings show students to be likely to fall into one of two groups regarding study perception after beginning to study at Laurea. The first group reports a higher level of satisfaction than they anticipated, due to positive atmosphere at campus and self-reported healthy learning environment. The second group reports the beginning of their studies at Laurea not to have a significant impact on their social wellbeing or overall of happiness. It is of note, that while students brought up criticism of studies at Laurea, none of the interviewees described their experience as unsatisfactory.

Noteworthy was interviewees reported factors which can be described as minor to have significant influence on their enjoyment of studies. These factors included for example short commute to Laurea campuses and cheap food at the cafeteria.

Most participants expressed worry about not learning enough hands-on working life knowledge in favour of social work theory in their curriculum. All interviewed students reported the desire to stay in the social sector post-graduation, either for additional studies or a working life career in the field. No clear consensus could be established about students' aspirations regarding living and working in Finland versus living abroad.

The focus group interview had less participants than anticipated, and a previous test interview had to be utilized to substantiate findings and analyse data using qualitative focus group interview data analysis methods.

Participants were informed about the research goals and their role as focus group interviewees. They were informed about the data collection method and the platform of publication for the final thesis. To guarantee confidentiality and the anonymity of the interviewees, they were assured their names would not be mentioned by name, and their likeness be obscured, in the final thesis. Before beginning our focus group interview sessions participants were informed about the video and audio recording of the sessions. These recordings were to be deleted, as stated in Appendix 1. Those interested in attending our interview sessions signed date and name on the permission slip.

The interviews yielded a plethora of qualitative research data which proved relevant toward the original research question. Interviewees were remarkably willing to discuss issues concerning their motivation and student life at Laurea campus. The discourse with them proved useful not only toward our thesis research, but also put students into a dialogue with one another towards facilitating a healthy student life.

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Appendix 1: Video and Voice Recording Consent Form

Video and Voice Recording Consent Form

I agree to participate in the study conducted and recorded by Lila Parikka and Philipp Brodka.

I understand and consent to the use of the recordings in Lila Parikka's and Philipp Brodka's thesis. I understand that the information and recording is for research purposes only and that my name and image will not be used for any other purposes.

I understand that participation in the study is voluntary and I agree to immediately raise any concerns or areas of discomfort during the session with the study administrator.

Please sign below to indicate that you have read and you understand the information on this form and that any questions you might have about the sessions have been answered.

Date: _____

Please print your name: _____

Please sign your name: _____

Thank you!

We appreciate your participation 😊

Appendix 2: Cover letter for students participating by e-mail

Dear Laurea social service students,

our names are Lila Parikka and Philipp Brodka. We are social service students at Laurea currently in the process of writing our bachelor thesis. This thesis seeks to answer questions such as 'What motivates people to study towards a social service bachelor's degree at Laurea?'

We have already conducted a few interviews with a number of fellow Laurea students, but we would like to ask you, too, to please take a look at the following short questions and answer them as you see fit.

- 1) What motivated you to start studying towards a higher education?
- 2) What made you decide to apply to a degree programme in social services at Laurea?
- 3) What are you enjoying most about your studies at Laurea?
- 4) What are your goals after graduation?
- 5) What would you like to learn more about in your studies at Laurea?
- 6) Have you faced any challenges during your studies at Laurea? If so, could you elaborate?

We would like to thank those of you who already took part in our interviews. Please do consider forwarding this email to other interested Laurea social service students.

Your answers will be handled confidentially and you will remain anonymous in our final thesis. Please submit your answers as a reply to this e-mail address directly. Please do not hesitate to ask us any questions you have about this matter.

Thank you for your time and we hope for your support!

Lila & Philipp