



Article

The Pursuit of Happiness in Academia:

Motivational Foundations of Student Well-Being

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Keywords

Happiness; motivation; subjective well-being; life satisfaction.

Abstract

Understanding the interplay between motivation and subjective well-being is essential for optimising academic outcomes and promoting holistic development in higher education. This paper reviews the theoretical underpinnings of motivation, with a particular focus on Self-Determination Theory, which categorises motivation types into intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation. Drawing on a broad range of empirical studies, we examine how intrinsic motivation correlates with positive affect, life satisfaction, and academic success, whereas extrinsic motivation and amotivation are associated with less consistent and, at times, adverse outcomes. In addition, the literature highlights the importance of fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness in educational settings to enhance both academic performance and overall well-being. By integrating insights from both motivation and subjective well-being research, this paper offers guidelines for developing autonomy-supportive educational environments and provides recommendations for future research in diverse cultural and demographic contexts.

1. Introduction

When surveyed in 2016, 13%¹ of students in third-level education in the Republic of Ireland agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they “don’t belong in higher education.” By 2022, this figure had risen to 22%.² This growing concern is further amplified by the fact that, during the same period, the total number of third-level students increased by more than 15%.³ The decline in students’ sense of belonging raises concerns about potential reductions in motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, which is consistently associated with academic engagement and well-being.⁴

This paper aims to synthesise existing research on motivation and well-being within higher education to clarify how motivational quality influences students’ sense of belonging and long-term academic success. In doing so, we highlight the need for further empirical and experimental studies that test the effectiveness of proposed interventions prior to large-scale implementation. Our overarching goal is to inform strategies that can both enhance students’ feelings of belonging and support their sustained success in higher education and beyond.

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT)⁵ categorises motivation into three distinct types: intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation. This distinction between motivational types is evident in academic settings. For example, intrinsically motivated students are more likely to autonomously prioritise tackling challenging problems, test their understanding of the subject, and adopt deeper learning strategies.⁶ Beyond this, learning activities based on intrinsic rather than extrinsic goals, when provided in autonomy-supportive rather than controlling contexts, have been shown to produce greater deep processing and higher test performance.⁷ In contrast, students who are primarily extrinsically motivated rely on external pressures or rewards such as

1. David Harmon and Stephen Erskine, *Eurostudent Survey VI Report on the Social and Living Conditions of Higher Education Students in Ireland 2016* (Dublin: Higher Education Authority, 2016), <https://hea.ie/resources/publications/eurostudent-survey-vi-report-on-the-social-and-living-conditions-of-higher-education-students-in-ireland-2016>
2. Stephen Erskine and David Harmon, *Eurostudent Survey VIII Report on the Social and Living Conditions of Higher Education Students in Ireland 2022* (Dublin: Higher Education Authority, 2022), <https://hea.ie/statistics/datafordownload-and-visualisations/institutes-performance/eurostudent-survey/>
3. Central Statistics Office, *Measuring Ireland’s Progress 2022: Education* (23 February 2024), <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-mip/measuringirelandsprogress2022/education/>
4. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2017), 162–175, <https://doi.org/10.1521/978.14625/28806>
5. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, “Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being,” *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 68–78, <https://doi.org/10.1037//0003-066X.55.1.68>
6. Fauzi, Muna W. M. et al., “Intrinsic Motivation, Life Satisfaction and Happiness: Students at Higher Learning Institution in Malaysia,” *Environment-Behaviour Proceedings Journal* 9 (2024): 137–143, <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v9iSI19>
7. Maarten Vansteenkiste et al., “Motivating Learning, Performance, and Persistence: The Synergistic Effects of Intrinsic Goal Contents and Autonomy-Supportive Contexts,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 87, no. 2 (2004): 246–260, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.87.2.246>

striving for high grades to avoid failure.⁸ Such regulation has been linked to a higher dropout risk: in a one-year longitudinal study of 68 Italian students, Biasi et al.⁹ found that higher levels of amotivation and external motivation were associated with an increased risk of dropping out. Nevertheless, not all forms of extrinsic motivation are maladaptive. Identified regulation, a subtype of extrinsic motivation in which students personally value academic success, can promote persistence and achievement.¹⁰

The type and quality of motivation that students experience play a significant role in shaping their subjective well-being (SWB). SWB refers to the study of how people evaluate their lives¹¹ and encompasses three key components: life satisfaction, positive affect (PA), and negative affect (NA), with PA and NA often collectively described as happiness.¹² Bailey and Phillips¹³ hypothesized that intrinsic motivation toward university enhances subjective well-being. To investigate this, they conducted a study involving a series of questionnaires assessing motivation, well-being, and other academic outcomes. Among 184 first-year undergraduate psychology students (ages 17–25), they found a positive correlation between intrinsic motivation and PA. In contrast, extrinsic motivation yielded few significant results, while amotivation was, as expected, positively correlated with NA.

Applications of SDT in academia provide a foundation for fostering intrinsic motivation.¹⁴ Establishing diverse, interactive, and collaborative learning environments has been shown to cultivate this motivation,¹⁵ supporting both subjective well-being and academic success.¹⁶ Furthermore, leveraging autonomy-

8. Zikai Zhou and Yuanyuan Zhang, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation in Distance Education: A Self-Determination Perspective," *American Journal of Distance Education* 38, no. 1 (2023): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2023.2177032>
9. Valeria Biasi, Conny De Vincenzo, and Nazarena Patrizi, "Cognitive Strategies, Motivation to Learning, Levels of Well-Being and Risk of Drop-Out: An Empirical Longitudinal Study for Qualifying Ongoing University Guidance Services," *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 8, no. 2 (2018): 79–91, <https://doi.org/10.2478/jesr-2018-0019>
10. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 25, no. 1 (2000): 54–67, <https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1020>
11. Ed Diener, Christie Napa Scollon, and Richard E. Lucas, "The Evolving Concept of Subjective Well-Being: The Multifaceted Nature of Happiness," in *Assessing Well-Being: The Collected Works of Ed Diener*, ed. Ed Diener (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 67–100, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-2354-4_4
12. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being," *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (2001): 141–166, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.141>
13. Thomas Hamilton Bailey and Lisa J. Phillips, "The Influence of Motivation and Adaptation on Students' Subjective Well-Being, Meaning in Life and Academic Performance," *Higher Education Research & Development* 35, no. 2 (2015): 201–216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2015.1087474>
14. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation from a Self-Determination Theory Perspective: Definitions, Theory, Practices, and Future Directions," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 61 (2020): 101860, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101860>
15. Nick Zepke and Linda Leach, "Improving Student Engagement: Ten Proposals for Action," *Active Learning in Higher Education* 11, no. 3 (2010): 167–177, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787410379680>
16. Christopher Niemiec and Richard M. Ryan, "Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness in the Classroom: Applying Self-Determination Theory to Educational Practice," *Theory and Research in Education* 7, no. 2 (2009): 133–144, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878509104318>

supportive strategies,¹⁷ such as gamification,¹⁸ can enhance intrinsic motivation and, by extension, students' subjective well-being.

2. Motivation

Motivation plays a fundamental role in shaping human behaviour. Although defining this complex theoretical construct has remained a challenge for decades,¹⁹ it is generally understood as the driving force behind human actions. Motivation influences behaviour in multiple ways, including its nature, intensity, and persistence.²⁰ The American Psychological Association describes motivation as an impulse that provides purpose or direction to behaviour, operating at both conscious and unconscious levels.²¹

Motivational drives can be categorised into primary (biological) and secondary (psychosocial) motives. Primary motives, such as hunger, thirst, and the search for warmth, stem from basic physiological needs.²² These fundamental drives ensure survival by maintaining homeostasis; the body's optimal internal balance.²³ However, motivation extends beyond survival needs. Secondary motives, which can be personal or social in nature, arise from individual goals, affiliation, and societal influences.²⁴ A key distinction exists between intrinsic motivation, which is driven by internal satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation, which is influenced by external rewards or pressures. Recognising these motivational forces offers deeper insight into human behaviour across various domains.

Due to the complexity of human motivation, numerous theories have been proposed to explain its mechanisms, including evolutionary,²⁵ instinct, arousal, incentive, intrinsic, extrinsic, attribution, expectancy, expectancy-value, the ARCS model, SDT, social-cognitive, and goal orientation theories.²⁶ This paper primarily focuses on the

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17. Michelle Low, Ronnel B. King, and Imelda S. Caleon, "Positive Emotions Predict Students' Well-Being and Academic Motivation: The Broaden-and-Build Approach," in *The Psychology of Asian Learners: A Festschrift in Honor of David Watkins*, ed. Ronnel B. King and Allan B. I. Bernardo (Singapore: Springer, 2016), 485–501, https://doi.org/10.1007/978981-287-576-1_30.
 18. Joy Xu et al., "Psychological Interventions of Virtual Gamification Within Academic Intrinsic Motivation: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 293 (2021): 444–465, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.06.070>
 19. S. P. Grossman, "The Biology of Motivation," *Annual Review of Psychology* 30 (1979): 209–242, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.ps.30.020179.001233>
 20. G. Neil Martin and Neil R. Carlson, *Psychology*, 6th ed. (London: Pearson, 2019), 532, <https://www.pearson.com/en-gb/subject-catalog/p/psychology/P200000004935/9781292201993>
 21. American Psychological Association, "Motivation," *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, accessed April 9, 2026, <https://dictionary.apa.org/motivation>
 22. Martin and Carlson, *Psychology*, 532.
 23. Kent C Berridge, "Motivation Concepts in Behavioral Neuroscience," *Physiology & Behavior* 81, no. 2 (2004): 179–209, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.physbeh.2004.02.004>
 24. American Psychological Association, "Motivation."
 25. Larry C. Bernard et al., "An Evolutionary Theory of Human Motivation," *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs* 131, no. 2 (2005): 129–184, <https://doi.org/10.3200/MONO.131.2.129-184>
 26. Din Bandhu et al., "Theories of Motivation: A Comprehensive Analysis of Human Behavior Drivers," *Acta Psychologica* 244 (2024): 104177, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2024.104177>

Self-Determination Theory, a macro theory of human motivation²⁷ which has been extensively applied in psychology.²⁸

The foundation for SDT was set over seven decades ago, when White²⁹ observed that individuals engage in tasks not only for external rewards, but also for the intrinsic satisfaction of developing competence and exerting control over their surroundings. This underscores the significance of intrinsic motivation and the fundamental psychological need for competence, one of SDT's three core elements, alongside autonomy and relatedness.³⁰ Autonomy is defined as a sense of control of one's actions and choices, while competence concerns the feeling of mastery, and relatedness refers to a sense of belonging.³¹ SDT posits that these basic psychological needs are essential for optimal functioning, social development, and well-being,³² making it a key factor in students' academic success.³³

Research guided by SDT has had an ongoing concern with the conditions that influence positive human potential.³⁴ Ryan and Deci noted that motivation is not a unitary concept, but rather multifaceted, emphasising that people differ not only in the levels of motivation (how much motivation), but also in its orientation (what type of motivation). According to SDT, motivation can be perceived as a continuum,³⁵ varying between three distinct types, intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation, each based on the different reasons or goals that drive a person's actions.³⁶

2.1 Intrinsic Motivation

Humans have a natural tendency to seek novelty, explore, and learn. From birth, children exhibit innate curiosity through play, even in the absence of external rewards.³⁷ This intrinsic drive to engage in activities for their inherent satisfaction, rather than for tangible outcomes, defines intrinsic motivation.³⁸ In infancy, intrinsic

27. Zhou and Zhang, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation."

28. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Chapter Four: Brick by Brick: The Origins, Development, and Future of Self-Determination Theory," *Advances in Motivation Science* 6 (2019): 111–156, <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.adms.2019.01.001>

29. Robert White, "Motivation Reconsidered: The Concept of Competence," *Psychological Review* 66 (1959): 297–333, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0040934>

30. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory," in *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*, ed. Filomena Maggino (Cham: Springer, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69909-7_2630-2

31. Ryan and Deci, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation."

32. Ryan and Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation."

33. Zhou and Zhang, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation."

34. Ryan and Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation."

35. Richard M. Ryan et al., "Building a Science of Motivated Persons: Self-Determination Theory's Empirical Approach to Human Experience and the Regulation of Behavior," *Motivation Science* 7, no. 2 (2021): 97–110, <https://doi.org/10.1037/mot0000194>.

36. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions."

37. Laurel S. Morris et al., "On What Motivates Us: A Detailed Review of Intrinsic v. Extrinsic Motivation," *Psychological Medicine* 52, no. 10 (2022): 1801–1816, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291722001611>

38. Edward L. Deci, "The Effects of Externally Mediated Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 18 (1971): 105–115, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0030644>;

Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory: When Mind Mediates Behavior," *The Journal of Mind and Behavior* 1 (1980): 33–43, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43852807>

motivation is evident in exploratory behaviours, as children instinctively investigate new objects. Similarly, adults voluntarily engage in activities without external incentives, driven by personal interest and enjoyment.

The concept of intrinsic motivation emerged from observing animals displaying playful, inquisitive behaviours without external rewards.³⁹ For instance, monkeys repeatedly solved puzzles solely for the challenge,⁴⁰ suggesting not all actions stem from tangible rewards.⁴¹ Intrinsically motivated individuals engage in activities for enjoyment, challenge, or fulfilment rather than external pressure or avoidance of punishment.⁴²

Understanding motivation has become a central focus of contemporary educational research, as intrinsic motivation is consistently linked to student engagement, academic success, deeper learning, and overall well-being. Students who are intrinsically motivated perceive learning as inherently meaningful, actively seek knowledge beyond curricular requirements, and display greater persistence and sustained engagement.⁴³ The widely recognised Academic Motivation Scale⁴⁴ categorises intrinsic motivation into three distinct subtypes: (1) motivation to know, (2) motivation to accomplish things, and (3) motivation to experience stimulation. Intrinsic motivation-to-know refers to the innate drive to learn, explore, and satisfy curiosity, such as when a student reads a book purely for the joy of acquiring new knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. Intrinsic motivation-to-accomplish things involves engaging in tasks for the pleasure of achievement, evident in students who go beyond mandatory requirements for personal improvement and mastery.

Lastly, intrinsic motivation-to-experience stimulation is driven by the enjoyment of sensory or aesthetic experiences, such as students' excitement during an intellectually stimulating or collaborative classroom discussion or exchange.⁴⁵ These distinctions later contributed to the development of the tripartite model of intrinsic motivation.⁴⁶ Intrinsic motivation is not only a key determinant of student

39. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions."

40. White, "Motivation Reconsidered."

41. Morris et al., "On What Motivates Us."

42. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions."

43. Yasuhiro Kotera et al., "Motivation of UK Graduate Students in Education: Self-Compassion Moderates Pathway from Extrinsic Motivation to Intrinsic Motivation," *Current Psychology* 42, no. 12 (2023): 10163–10176, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02301-6>;

Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs*.

44. Robert J. Vallerand et al., "The Academic Motivation Scale: A Measure of Intrinsic, Extrinsic, and Amotivation in Education," *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 52, no. 4 (1992): 1003–1017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013164492052004025>.

45. Vallerand et al., "The Academic Motivation Scale."

46. Noémie Carbonneau, Robert J. Vallerand, and Marc-André K.Lafrenière, "Toward a Tripartite Model of Intrinsic Motivation," *Journal of Personality* 80, no. 5 (2012): 1147–1178, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2011.00757.x>

engagement,⁴⁷ but also an important component of psychological well-being supporting both personal growth and academic achievement.⁴⁸

2.2 Extrinsic Motivation

Although intrinsic motivation is ideal, not all tasks align with an individual's intrinsic aspirations. Many activities must be undertaken for reasons beyond inherent enjoyment, a process explained by extrinsic motivation. Extrinsically motivated behaviours stem from external rewards or pressures, such as financial incentives, social recognition, status, or the avoidance of failure and punishment.⁴⁹ In academic settings, extrinsic motivation is linked to poorer outcomes and less effective learning compared to intrinsic motivation.⁵⁰ Since many educational tasks are not inherently enjoyable, a key challenge for educators is fostering extrinsic motivation in ways that enhance student autonomy and engagement.⁵¹ Although often seen as a non-autonomous and less desirable form of motivation, SDT proposes that extrinsic motivation exists on a continuum with varying degrees of autonomy. It identifies four types, ranging from least to most autonomous:⁵²

1. External regulation is the least autonomous form, where behaviour is driven solely by external demands, rewards, or punishments.
2. Introjected regulation involves internal pressure to act, often to avoid guilt, anxiety, or to maintain self-worth, rather than from genuine personal commitment.
3. Regulation through identification occurs when an individual recognises the value of a behaviour and personally endorses it, fostering greater autonomy.
4. Integrated regulation is the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation, where external motives are fully internalised and aligned with personal values. Although it closely resembles intrinsic motivation, the behaviour remains extrinsically driven as it is performed to achieve a specific outcome.

Recognising these varying degrees of extrinsic motivation underscores the importance of fostering autonomy-supportive environments. By encouraging more self-determined forms of extrinsic motivation, educators and practitioners can enhance engagement, persistence, and overall well-being.⁵³

47. Zhou and Zhang, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation in Distance Education."

48. Kotera et al., "Motivation of UK Graduate Students in Education.";

Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, "Facilitating Optimal Motivation and Psychological Well-Being Across Life's Domains," *Canadian Psychology* 49 (2008): 14–23, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0708-5591.49.1.14>

49. Ryan and Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation."

50. Kotera et al., "Motivation of UK Graduate Students in Education."

51. Ryan and Deci, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations."

52. Ibid.

53. Zepke and Leach, "Improving Student Engagement."

2.3 Amotivation

Beyond intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, Self-Determination Theory identifies a third category: amotivation. Ryan and Deci⁵⁴ emphasised the need to consider this state, characterised by a complete absence of motivation.⁵⁵ Amotivation arises when individuals lack the intention to act, often due to perceived incompetence, disinterest, or the belief that their efforts will be futile.⁵⁶ In academic settings, motivated students may disengage entirely, seeing little connection between their actions and potential outcomes.

Motivation plays a fundamental role in shaping human behaviour, influencing everything from academic engagement to personal growth. SDT provides a framework for understanding motivation along a continuum with varying degrees of autonomy. While intrinsic motivation has been consistently associated with the most positive academic and affective outcomes, fostering self-determined forms of extrinsic motivation can also enhance persistence and engagement.⁵⁷ Understanding these distinctions is therefore important for educators seeking to create learning environments that support autonomy, promote well-being, and encourage long-term academic success.⁵⁸

3. Subjective Well-Being

The age-old question of what constitutes happiness and a “good life” has sparked centuries of philosophical debate and decades of psychological research, ultimately giving rise to the positive psychology movement.⁵⁹ Positive psychology expands the field’s focus beyond dysfunction to fostering positive qualities. At the subjective level, it examines well-being across three temporal dimensions: satisfaction with the past, flow and happiness in the present, and hope and optimism for the future.⁶⁰ A major shift in psychology occurred with the transition from defining well-being solely as the absence of mental illness⁶¹ to recognising the role of positive strengths and qualities that enable individuals to flourish.⁶²

Subjective well-being explores how and why individuals experience life positively.⁶³

54. Ryan and Deci, “Self-Determination Theory: When Mind Mediates Behavior.”

55. Vallerand et al., “The Academic Motivation Scale.”

56. Ryan and Deci, “Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations.”

57. Ibid.

58. Niemiec and Ryan, “Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness in the Classroom.”

59. Sonja Lyubomirsky, “Why are Some People Happier than Others? The Role of Cognitive and Motivational Processes in Well-Being,” *American Psychologist* 56, no. 3 (2001): 239–249, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.239>

60. Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “Positive Psychology: An Introduction,” *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 5–14, <https://doi.org/10.1037//0003-066X.55.1.5>

61. Ed Diener, “Subjective Well-Being,” *Psychological Bulletin* 95, no. 3 (1984): 542–575, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.95.3.542>;

Ryan and Deci, “On Happiness and Human Potentials.”

62. Susan Antaramian, “The Importance of Very High Life Satisfaction for Students’ Academic Success,” *Cogent Education* 4, no. 1 (2017): 1307622, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2017.1307622>

63. Diener, “Subjective Well-Being.”

Its defining feature is subjectivity, as it relies on personal evaluation rather than predetermined criteria established by researchers.⁶⁴ Initially, SWB was viewed as three distinct elements: (1) life satisfaction, (2) positive affect, and (3) negative affect, with the latter two often summarised as happiness.⁶⁵ Later, Diener⁶⁶ proposed a hierarchical model of happiness, introducing “domain satisfaction,” which encompasses specific life aspects such as marriage, work, health, and leisure. This evolving understanding of SWB underscores the importance of examining its key components, namely happiness and life satisfaction, which capture distinct yet interconnected dimensions of well-being.

3.1 Happiness

Happiness is widely considered a fundamental element of a “good life.”⁶⁷ The pursuit of happiness has long captivated researchers and philosophers alike,⁶⁸ with some viewing it as the ultimate purpose of human existence.⁶⁹ Research has shown that PA and NA function independently, suggesting that happiness is at least a two-dimensional construct.⁷⁰ Krasko⁷¹ expanded on this by developing the Happiness Goal Orientations scale to explore how different domains relate to well-being. Among various measures, the Subjective Happiness Scale by Lyubomirsky and Lepper⁷² remains one of the most widely used for assessing subjective happiness.

Researchers have identified multiple pathways to well-being and fulfilment. The hedonic approach defines well-being as the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, while the eudaimonic perspective emphasises meaning, self-realisation, and optimal psychological functioning.⁷³ Braaten et al.⁷⁴ further refine the hedonic model by distinguishing between hedonic enjoyment (seeking pleasure and fun) and hedonic comfort (seeking relaxation and ease). Notably, all three traditional

64. Ed Diener et al., “The Satisfaction with Life Scale,” *Journal of Personality Assessment* 49, no. 1 (1985): 71–75, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4901_13;

Ed Diener, Shigehiro Oishi, and Louis Tay, “Advances in Subjective Well-Being Research,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 2, no. 4 (2018): 253–260, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0307-6>

65. Diener, Oishi, and Tay, “Advances in Subjective Well-Being Research”

66. Diener, Scollon, and Lucas, “The Evolving Concept of Subjective Well-Being.”

67. Ibid.

68. Diener, “Subjective Well-Being”;

Sonja Lyubomirsky and Heidi S. Lepper, “A Measure of Subjective Happiness: Preliminary Reliability and Construct Validation,” *Social Indicators Research* 46 (1999): 137–155, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006824100041>

69. Lyubomirsky, “Why are Some People Happier Than Others?”

70. Diener, Scollon, and Lucas, “The Evolving Concept of Subjective Well-Being.”

71. Julia Krasko, Vera M. Schweitzer, and Maike Luhmann, “Happiness Goal Orientations and Their Associations with Well-Being,” *Journal of Well-Being Assessment* 4, no. 2 (2020): 121–162, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41543-020-00029-x>

72. Lyubomirsky and Lepper, “A Measure of Subjective Happiness.”

73. Ryan and Deci, “On Happiness and Human Potentials.”

74. Arthur Braaten et al., “Hedonic and Eudaimonic Motives Toward University Studies: How They Relate to Each Other and to Well-Being Derived from School,” *Journal of Positive Psychology and Wellbeing* 3, no. 2 (2019): 179–196, <https://journalppw.com/index.php/jppsp/article/view/92>

components of SWB are considered hedonic in nature.⁷⁵

Diener⁷⁶ examined predictors of happiness in a study of 222 undergraduate students, considering factors such as personality, social relationships, psychopathology, religiosity, and exercise. Comparing the happiest 10% of participants to average and unhappy groups, results showed that “very happy people” had stronger relationships, were more social and extroverted, and exhibited lower neuroticism. Interestingly, the happiest individuals reported consistently positive, though not ecstatic, emotions, indicating that very happy individuals experience a balanced range of emotions rather than an exaggerated state of elation.

Educational settings play a vital role in fostering subjective well-being, which is associated with higher academic achievement, greater persistence, enhanced self-esteem, and a stronger internal locus of control, as well as lower levels of anxiety and depression. By promoting positive emotions and meaningful engagement, educators can support both academic performance and personal development, cultivating resilience and adaptive coping strategies.⁷⁷ Beyond transient emotional states, well-being involves broader cognitive evaluations of one’s life, such as life satisfaction, as well as affective experiences.⁷⁸ In educational settings, this may translate into assessing students’ well-being through their personal judgments of life quality and academic journey over time, rather than solely focusing on momentary moods.

3.2 Life Satisfaction

While happiness reflects affective experiences, life satisfaction offers a broader appraisal of one’s well-being over time. Life satisfaction is a global, cognitive, subjective evaluation of one’s overall quality of life based on personally chosen criteria. It reflects an individual’s assessment of how well their life aligns with personal standards of a “good life” and is shaped by comparisons between their current circumstances and their aspirations.⁷⁹ While well-being models typically comprise multiple components, some researchers argue that SWB is best represented by life satisfaction alone.⁸⁰

The most common approach to measuring well-being combines affect and satisfaction assessments, typically using self-report scales such as the Satisfaction

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75. Robert Lent, “Toward a Unifying Theoretical and Practical Perspective on Well-Being and Psychosocial Adjustment,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 51 (2004): 482–509, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.51.4.482>
76. Ed Diener and Martin E. P. Seligman, “Very Happy People,” *Psychological Science* 13, no. 1 (2002): 81–84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9280.00415>
77. Braaten et al., “Hedonic and Eudaimonic Motives Toward University Studies.”
78. Ed Diener et al., “Subjective Well-Being: Three Decades of Progress,” *Psychological Bulletin* 125 (1999): 276–302, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.125.2.276>
79. Diener, “Subjective Well-Being”;
- Diener et al., “The Satisfaction with Life Scale.”
80. Lent, “Toward a Unifying Theoretical and Practical Perspective.”;
- Tick Ngee Sim and Zhi Jing Lui, “Positive Affect, Self-Efficacy, Goal-Related Variables, and Life Satisfaction: the Role of Goal Attainment and Domain Value,” *Applied Research in Quality of Life* 17, no. 1 (2020): 57–69, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-020-09873-8>.

With Life Scale⁸¹ and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS).⁸² A meta-analysis suggests directional relationships among the three components of subjective well-being, indicating that life satisfaction may predict future well-being, supporting the idea of a reciprocal relationship between these factors.⁸³ Subjective well-being is a multidimensional construct encompassing both affective experiences and cognitive evaluations of life. While happiness reflects momentary emotional states, life satisfaction offers a broader, long-term perspective on well-being. Research in this field has “grown enormously,”⁸⁴ highlighting the significance of fostering well-being in education. As our understanding of SWB continues to evolve, integrating its principles into academic settings may not only enhance student resilience but also contribute to overall life fulfilment.

4. Motivation and Subjective Well-Being

This section reviews the literature examining the relationship between subjective well-being and motivation in academic settings, with the aim of elucidating how these insights can be leveraged to optimise student performance. Investigating the interplay between motivational drivers and subjective well-being is essential for understanding their impact on overall happiness, life satisfaction, and academic achievement.

As outlined in previous sections, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are central to Self-Determination Theory,⁸⁵ which posits that psychological growth, integrity, and wellness are supported by the fulfilment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.⁸⁶ SDT links motivation with well-being by suggesting that satisfying these needs contributes to overall life satisfaction and psychological health. The theory places well-being at the heart of its framework, integrating both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives, and highlights the motivational foundations of student well-being.⁸⁷

Bailey⁸⁸ found that intrinsically motivated students reported greater life satisfaction, higher PA, lower NA, and better academic performance, consistent with the findings of Datu et al.⁸⁹ This highlights the role of intrinsic motivation in fostering both

81. Diener et al., “The Satisfaction with Life Scale.”

82. Lent, “Toward a Unifying Theoretical and Practical Perspective.”

83. Mohsen Joshanloo, “Thirteen Years of Subjective Well-Being: Within-Person Association Between Positive Affect, Negative Affect, and Life Satisfaction,” *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-023-01223-7>.

84. Diener, Oishi, and Tay, “Advances in Subjective Well-Being Research.”

85. Ryan and Deci, “Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation.”

86. Ryan and Deci, “Chapter Four: Brick by Brick.”

87. Alicia Breva and María Paz Galindo, “Types of Motivation and Eudemonic Well-Being as Predictors of Academic Outcomes in First-Year Students: A Self-Determination Theory Approach,” *PsyCh Journal* 9, no. 5 (2020): 609–628, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pchj.361>

88. Bailey and Phillips, “The Influence of Motivation and Adaptation on Students’ Subjective Well-Being.”

89. Jesus Alfonso D. Datu, Ronnel B. King, and Jana Patricia M. Valdez, “The Academic Rewards of Socially-Oriented Happiness: Interdependent Happiness Promotes Academic Engagement,” *Journal of School Psychology* 61 (2017): 19–31, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2016.12.004>

well-being and academic success. In contrast, extrinsically motivated students exhibited no significant correlation with higher grades, while amotivation was linked to increased NA. Moreover, lower levels of autonomous motivation have been associated with heightened dropout risk over time.⁹⁰

Fauzi et al.⁹¹ also found that life satisfaction and intrinsic motivation were crucial factors influencing happiness among higher education students. Their study concluded that elevated intrinsic motivation and life satisfaction correlate significantly with increased happiness, indicating that students who are more intrinsically motivated and satisfied with their lives tend to experience greater overall happiness.

Luhmann and Hennecke⁹² examined the relationship between life satisfaction and motivation, demonstrating that motivation can arise not only from discrepancies between one's current and desired state but also from the pursuit of personal growth. They emphasised the importance of distinguishing between affect and life satisfaction as distinct drivers of motivation and volition. Although their research was not limited to student populations, it supports the view that overall well-being influences both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, aligning with SDT's emphasis on the role of well-being in sustaining autonomous motivation and psychological development.

Breva and Galindo⁹³ found that students who attended university for intrinsic or identified extrinsic reasons reported higher PA compared to those motivated by less autonomous forms (e.g. introjected extrinsic motivation), who experienced lower overall well-being and increased NA. Similarly, Latorre-Coscolluela et al.⁹⁴ found that intrinsic motivation was positively associated with elevated academic expectations, enhanced perceived utility of assignments, deeper cognitive processing, active classroom engagement, and improved anticipated job performance. They also reported that intrinsic motivation contributes to emotional well-being, life satisfaction, prosocial behaviour, and a sense of community, while emotional well-being in turn reinforces intrinsic motivation, creating a reciprocal relationship that promotes both academic and personal growth.⁹⁵

Ozer and Schwartz⁹⁶ conducted a study on Danish students that further supported SDT's theoretical assumptions. They observed that autonomous motivation was

90. Biasi, Vincenzo, and Patrizi, "Cognitive Strategies, Motivation to Learning."

91. Fauzi et al., "Intrinsic Motivation, Life Satisfaction and Happiness."

92. Maike Luhmann and Marie Hennecke, "The Motivational Consequences of Life Satisfaction," *Motivation Science* 3, no. 1 (2017): 51–75, <https://doi.org/10.1037/mot0000048>

93. Breva and Galindo, "Types of Motivation and Eudemonic Well-Being."

94. Cecilia Latorre-Coscolluela et al., "Emotional Well-Being and Social Reinforcement as Predictors of Motivation and Academic Expectations," *International Journal of Educational Research* 115 (2022): 102043, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2022.102043>.

95. Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs*.

96. Simon Ozer and Seth J. Schwartz, "Academic Motivation, Life Exploration, and Psychological Well-Being Among Emerging Adults in Denmark," *Nordic Psychology* 72, no. 3 (2019): 199–221, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19012276.2019.1675088>

positively associated with hedonic well-being, whereas controlled motivation was linked to negative outcomes such as stress. Notably, controlled motivation also displayed a relationship with eudaimonic aspects of well-being, suggesting that policies or teaching practices emphasising external pressures may undermine students' psychological health, while those fostering autonomy are more likely to enhance life satisfaction and overall well-being.

However, research on female students in Japan⁹⁷ challenges the universal applicability of SDT in academic contexts. Their findings indicated that the expected link between internalised (intrinsic) motivation and well-being or academic success was not observed in their sample. Instead, high levels of confidence did not translate into greater internalised motivation, with many students appearing driven by obligation or introjected motivation rather than by personal values. Interestingly, Low et al.⁹⁸ also observed a positive association between positive emotions and extrinsic motivation (particularly introjected regulation) in Asian students, which is inconsistent with other studies mentioned above. They speculate that positive emotions can be associated not only with autonomous, but also controlled forms of motivation, and that it can be explained by Asian cultural traditions that may be viewing education differently compared to Western populations. These findings suggest that cultural context may substantially shape how the principles of SDT manifest across different populations.

Other factors, such as age and gender, are also important considerations when applying SDT. LeFebvre and Huta⁹⁹ assessed motivation for pursuing well-being across the lifespan by examining eudaimonic and hedonic pleasure and extrinsic motivation, while also investigating gender differences. Their findings revealed significant age fluctuations and some gender differences, emphasising the need to consider these variables, and potentially culture, when applying SDT.

Age differences among students may be particularly apparent in the distinction between mature and traditional students. A UK study¹⁰⁰ examining the interplay of intrinsic motivation and well-being among mature students in private educational institutions found a significant positive correlation between intrinsic motivation and mental well-being. The results suggest that higher intrinsic motivation in the classroom is associated with more positive emotions, greater academic satisfaction, and, consequently, enhanced overall well-being compared to students with less

97. Megumi Nishimura and Abhay Joshi, "Self-Determination Theory and the Happiness and Academic Achievement of Students at a Women's University," *Psychological Studies* 66, no. 2 (2021): 139–153, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12646-021-00617-8>

98. Low, King, and Caleon, "Positive Emotions Predict Students' Well-Being and Academic Motivation."

99. Andrea LeFebvre and Veronika Huta, "Age and Gender Differences in Eudaimonic, Hedonic, and Extrinsic Motivations," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 22, no. 5 (2021): 2299–2321, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-020-00319-4>

100. Fayyaz Qureshi et al., "Exploring Intrinsic Motivation and Mental Well-Being in Private Higher Educational Systems: A Cross-Sectional Study," *Systems* 12, no. 8 (2024): 281, <https://doi.org/10.3390/systems12080281>

autonomous motivational profiles.

Merkle et al.¹⁰¹ reviewed studies identifying factors that predict intrinsic motivation and SWB among students, including personality traits and study-related circumstances such as perceived academic control, social support, and time pressure. In their own study, Merkle et al. found that when prospective students anticipated higher future well-being, they tended to exhibit increased intrinsic motivation, positive affect, and satisfaction with their study major. Notably, these effects were observed beyond the influence of students' long-term subjective well-being.

In summary, the literature reveals complex interactions between motivation and subjective well-being. Intrinsic motivation consistently relates to positive academic and personal outcomes, while the effects of extrinsic motivation and amotivation appear more variable and often depend on contextual, cultural, and demographic factors. Understanding these distinctions is essential for developing educational environments that can support academic performance while fostering psychological well-being. Integrating insights from Self-Determination Theory into educational practice therefore provides a promising pathway that may promote both student achievement and holistic development.¹⁰²

5. Conclusion

This paper highlights the crucial role of autonomous motivation in fostering students' subjective well-being and academic success. Drawing from theoretical frameworks and empirical findings, we review several strategies associated with enhancing intrinsic motivation in students, which may promote greater happiness, life satisfaction, and overall well-being. Integrating subjective well-being principles into the curriculum may equip students with essential emotional regulation skills that contribute to improved academic experiences across personal, social, and cognitive domains. Furthermore, adopting autonomy-supportive teaching practices has been shown to strengthen the foundation of intrinsically motivated learning.¹⁰³ Educator training and continuous professional development remain critical, as teachers play a central role in cultivating student engagement. As noted by Ryan and Deci,¹⁰⁴ when educators experience autonomous motivation, students are more likely to internalise this motivation for learning. Providing educators with training in social and emotional intelligence could also enable them to foster students' positive affective

101. Belinda Merkle, Laura Aglaia Sophia Messerer, and Oliver Dickhäuser, "Will I be Happy in this Major? Predicting Intrinsic Motivation and Subjective Well-Being with Prospective Students' Well-Being Forecast and Interest-Major Fit Forecast," *Social Psychology of Education* 27 (2023): 237–259, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-023-09835-6>

102. Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs*;

Niemiec and Ryan, "Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness in the Classroom."

103. Ibid.

104. Ryan and Deci, "Chapter Four: Brick by Brick."

states, thereby supporting well-being and intrinsic engagement.¹⁰⁵ Consistent with this, Lozano-Jiménez et al.¹⁰⁶ observed that autonomy-supportive teaching promotes students' satisfaction of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, enhancing their motivation, academic involvement, and participation. They further reported that when teachers employed a motivating interpersonal style oriented towards autonomy support, students displayed greater satisfaction of these needs and higher motivation to attend and engage with academic activities.

Future research should continue to examine the dynamic nature of motivation over time, particularly through longitudinal designs that capture how motivational quality evolves across different stages of study. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as focus groups and interviews, could yield deeper insights into students' lived experiences that quantitative data alone may not reveal. Given the prevalence of self-reported measures in this field, it is equally important to include behavioural or physiological indicators of well-being to strengthen methodological validity. Building upon the largely correlational work reviewed here, forthcoming studies should prioritise empirical tests of these hypotheses.

Experimental approaches, including randomised controlled trials, would provide a more definitive assessment of whether interventions grounded in Self-Determination Theory genuinely improve motivation and well-being. For instance, Knoll et al.¹⁰⁷ demonstrated that learners' subjective impressions of effectiveness can diverge markedly from objective outcomes, highlighting the need to evaluate educational strategies through empirical measures rather than perceived benefit. Similarly, Deslauriers et al.¹⁰⁸ found that students' perceptions of their own learning can be anticorrelated with their actual learning under well-controlled comparisons of active and passive instruction. Together, these findings illustrate how subjective impressions of learning and actual performance can differ substantially, reinforcing the importance of rigorous experimental validation before new pedagogical practices are implemented at scale. Replicating such evidence-based approaches across diverse educational and cultural contexts will be crucial to identifying which practices most reliably enhance motivation and well-being in higher education.

105. Patricia A. Jennings and Mark T. Greenberg, "The Prosocial Classroom: Teacher Social and Emotional Competence in Relation to Student and Classroom Outcomes," *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 1 (2009): 491–525, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693>.

106. José Eduardo Lozano-Jiménez, Elisa Huéscar, and Juan Antonio Moreno-Murcia, "Effects of an Autonomy Support Intervention on the Involvement of Higher Education Students," *Sustainability* 13 (2021): 5006, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13095006>.

107. Abby Knoll et al., "Learning Style, Judgements of Learning, and Learning of Verbal and Visual Information," *British Journal of Psychology* 108 (2016): 544–563, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12214>.

108. Louis Deslauriers et al., "Measuring Actual Learning Versus Feeling of Learning in Response to Being Actively Engaged in the Classroom," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 39 (2019): 19251–19257, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1821936116>.

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