

## Lecturers' Subjective Well-being: A case study

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### Abstract

The aim of this study was to show the level of lecturers' subjective well-being at Vietnam National University of Agriculture and the differences in their subjective well-being levels according to the variables of gender, education, income, and teaching experience. The study used the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) designed by Hills and Argyle (2002). The questionnaire included 29 items and has been widely used as a scale for the assessment of personal subjective well-being. The results showed that most lecturers at Vietnam National University of Agriculture were quite happy. There were significant differences in the level of subjective well-being according to some variables investigated.

### Keywords

Subjective well-being, lecturers, Vietnam National University of Agriculture

### Introduction

People of any era have a common goal: the pursuit of a happy life. When people feel happy, they are more harmonious and compassionate, can contribute more to society, and work more effectively. On the contrary, when feeling distressed, frustrated, or depressed, they easily become aggressive, work ineffectively, and have anti-social behaviors. Over the past several decades, research on well-being has received much attention and has become an important part of the field of psychology (Diener *et al.*, 1999; Van Horn *et al.*, 2004; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Aeltermann *et al.*, 2007; Deaton, 2008). Well-being is always the driving force of life for everyone. Well-being can be defined as being physically and mentally healthy. It includes the response of human emotions, satisfaction, and global appreciation of life satisfaction (Diener *et al.*, 1999). This concept is a multidimensional structure comprising the complex of perception, influence / emotion, society, and behavior (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Van Horn *et al.*, 2004). Well-being is also related to positive emotions (Aeltermann *et al.*, 2007).

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In general, the concept of happiness mainly focuses on distinguishing between two ways of understanding: hedonic happiness and true-authentic happiness (eudaimonic happiness). From the perspective of hedonic happiness, subjective happiness is defined as the balance between pleasant and unpleasant events in one's life. This means that those with this view believe that the ultimate goal of life is to experience maximum pleasure. However, from the perspective of eudaimonic happiness, an individual's subjective happiness is determined by the degree to which a person lives with his potential and the process that the person establishes to achieve valuable goals and to live a meaningful, purposeful, and virtuous life rather than the quality of his sensory and emotional experiences (Truong Thi Khanh Ha *et al.*, 2020).

In a nutshell, well-being is a person's positive emotional state when they feel satisfied with life elements (family relationships with one's spouse, children, and parents; self-confidence; good income; good health; positive social relationships; and a good job).

Well-being is assessed based on different factors. According to Seligman (2011), there are five factors that make up human well-being, each of which is independent of each other, and each with its own goals, aims, and benefits: (i) positive emotions (P); (ii) engagement and participation (E); (iii) positive relationships (R); (iv) meaning of life (M); and (v) achievement (A). Diener (2009) stated that there are three components of subjective well-being, namely positive emotions, negative emotions, and life satisfaction.

Regarding the manifestation of well-being, Robinson and Godbey (2010) stated that well-being is expressed in every moment of life, and everyone cherishes the value of their time with joy every day. Expression of well-being is also assessed by laughing a lot, being satisfied with everything in life, feeling relaxed, always creating fun for others, feeling meaningful, and having a warm feeling about almost everything (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Hills & Argyle, 2002).

In Vietnam, happiness is a familiar concept to every citizen. In the Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of

Vietnam in 1945, former president Ho Chi Minh restated the immortal statement in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776 that: "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." (Demers, 2018). "Independence - Freedom - Happiness" has become the national motto. However, research on happiness has not really received adequate attention in academia. There are two directions of research on happiness in Vietnam: research based on personal experiences and research using surveys.

In the first direction, researchers and authors are interested in commenting on philosophical issues about happiness, how to have happiness, or how to nurture happiness in the family. Thich Nhat Hanh, a world-famous Vietnamese Zen master, has written many books about happiness through the lens of Buddhism. With these books, he helps people better understand happiness and how to live better and happier lives through meditation and right mindfulness. In the book "Cau chuyen Phat trien va Hanh phuc" written by scientists, researchers, and culturalists, including Hoang Tuy, Tran Van Tho, Vu Quang Viet, Nguyen Van Trong, Bui Van Nam Son, Nguyen Ngoc, Nguyen Tuong Bach, Nguyen Tung, Nguyen Nghi, Tran Huu Quang (2012), the authors commented on philosophical issues related to good deeds, beliefs, and happiness.

In the second direction of research, research on happiness through surveys of the current situation, many studies have investigated the happiness of different cohorts, such as students, the elderly, officials, and farmers. The general goal of this research direction is to find the level of life satisfaction as well as the relationship between satisfaction level and other aspects such as education, income, and gender (Phan Thi Mai Huong, 2014; Hoang Thi Trang, 2015). In this direction, some studies have been done on professional happiness/subjective well-being (see Bui Van Van and Nguyen Thi Hang Phuong, 2018; Do Thi Le Hang *et al.*, 2017). However, it seems that the authors did not clearly separate satisfaction from happiness. Therefore, the

measure still does not really reflect the nature of subjective feelings of happiness or is still too biased towards quantitative data. Also, to the best of our knowledge, there has been no research on Vietnamese lecturers' subjective well-being in particular. This study contributes to this important research direction.

It is important to note that some literature suggest that happiness is only one component of well-being (Raibley, 2012; Ruggeri *et al.*, 2020). Because of the multiplicity of "happiness", researchers often avoid the term (see Diener *et al.*, 2009). Some researchers prefer to use subjective well-being, although in some research, "subjective well-being" and "happiness" are used interchangeably. Diener *et al.* (2009) also stated that subjective well-being emphasizes ones' own assessment of their lives, including satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect. In the present study, we were interested in lecturers' subjective well-being and the "Oxford Happiness Questionnaire" was used as the data collecting instrument because it is designed to assess participants' subjective well-being based on what level they are happy with their lives in terms of life experiences, relationships with others, positive emotions, etc., which are also measures of well-being. Therefore, in this article, we used the term subjective well-being instead of happiness, except for some part when we refer to the different levels of subjective well-being (e.g., "not happy" and "too happy").

## Methods

This study used the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ), which was derived from the Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI). OHI testing has been used in both the UK and the USA. Also, it has been used in cross-cultural research to compare Australian, American, and British students. It has been translated and used in Israel, Taiwan, and China (Hills and Argyle, 2002). The OHQ contains similar items to those of OHI presented as single statements, so it is more compact and easier to administer (Hills and Argyle, 2002). This scale was standardized and applied in the Happiness Project of Oxford Brookes University, USA. The OHQ has also

been translated and used to study the subjective well-being of university staff and lecturers in Vietnam (Bui Van Van & Nguyen Thi Hang Phuong, 2018). Therefore, we selected the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire because of the moderate volume of questions and the appropriateness of the questions to assess the subjective well-being of Vietnamese university lecturers.

The OHQ contained 29 multiple-choice items with answers ranging in value from 1 point to 6 points, and the final point average was grouped into 7 subjective well-being levels (Hills & Argyle (2002). The scale had 6 options, from "totally disagree" (1 point) to "totally agree" (6 points). Twelve of the questions had negative meanings, which were then graded by reverse conversion (i.e. 1 point became 6 points; 2 points became 5 points; 3 points became 4 points, and so on). The subjective well-being score was the average of the points of the 29 questions after suitable conversion of the negative ones. The subjective well-being scores were grouped into 7 levels, from level 1 – "not happy" to level 7 – "too happy".

Previous studies have shown that demographic variables affect subjective well-being in different ways (Diener, 1996; Truong Thi Khanh Ha *et al.*, 2020). The most commonly studied demographic variables are income, age, gender, education level, ethnicity, and occupation. Therefore, in this study, we investigated the effects of demographic variables, namely gender, age, education level, income, and teaching experience on the subjective well-being of the participants.

The questionnaire was translated from English into Vietnamese. After that, we consulted two other lecturers of psychology at our university to make minor changes to the expressions. Next, we piloted the Vietnamese questionnaire on 10 lecturers to make further changes to ambiguous sentences. When inputting, analyzing, and reporting data, we used the English language for all the items.

We delivered both Google forms and paper questionnaires to the lecturers who voluntarily took part in the study. After that, some of them were also invited to take part in a follow-up

interview. All participants were informed that their responses were anonymous, and all the information would be kept confidential.

The response rate was high (95%). Cronbach's alpha showed the questionnaire reached a high reliability,  $\alpha(100) = 0.92$ , which was similar to Hills and Argyle's (2002) study ( $\alpha(167) = 0.91$ ).

One hundred lecturers from Vietnam National University of Agriculture (aged 25 to 55) participated in this study from April 2020 to June 2020. The sample and characteristics of the participants are presented in **Table 1**.

## Results

The results of the study showed that none of the lecturers were unhappy (level 1) or too happy (level 7). Only 2% of the lecturers were somewhat unhappy (level 2) and 2% of lecturers were somewhat happy or moderately happy (level 4); 20% of lecturers had the subjective well-being level of being not particularly happy or unhappy (level 3); 62% of them were rather happy (level 5), and 14% of them were very happy (level 6) (**Figure 1**).

By analyzing the 29 questions of the subjective well-being scale designed by Hills and Argyle (2002), we found that the 10 manifestations in **Table 2** had the highest mean scores among the participants.

**Table 2** shows that "I feel that life is very rewarding" received the most positive responses among the ten subjective well-being manifestations ( $M = 5.22$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ); while "I have particularly happy memories of the past" ( $M = 5.06$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ) and "Life is good" ( $M = 5.03$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) were the second and the third most common ones, respectively.

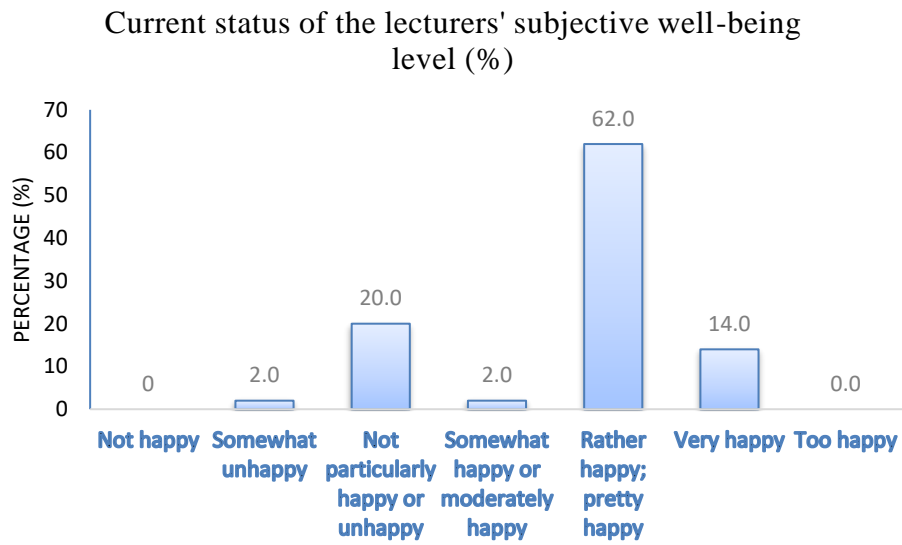
We investigated the difference in subjective well-being levels according to each variables of gender, age, education, teaching experience, and income with one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) (**Table 3**).

**Table 3** shows the test of homogeneity of variances with  $\text{Sig.} > 5\%$ , and since there were no differences between groups, they were eligible for ANOVA analysis.

There were no statistically-significant differences in subjective well-being levels

**Table 1.** Participants' characteristics

Variables		N	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	61	61
	Female	39	39
Age	25-35	48	48
	36-45	40	40
	46-55	12	12
Education/Degree	MA	65	65
	PhD	29	29
	Assoc. Prof. and Prof.	6	6
Teaching experiences	Less than 5 years	12	12
	6-10 years	43	43
	11-15 years	21	21
	More than 15 years	24	24
Income	Less than 5 million VND	2	2
	5-10 million VND	69	69
	10-20 million VND	23	23
	More than 20 million VND	4	4
	Missing	2	2



**Figure 1.** Lecturers' subjective well-being levels at Vietnam National University of Agriculture

**Table 2.** Subjective well-being manifestations of lecturers at Vietnam National University of Agriculture

Variables	Mean	SD
1. I feel that life is very rewarding.	5.22	0.98
2. Life is good.	5.03	1.14
3. I have particularly happy memories of the past.	5.06	0.96
4. I have a particular sense of meaning and purpose in my life.	4.87	1.20
5. I have fun with other people.	4.86	1.04
6. I find beauty in some things.	4.78	1.23
7. I feel fully mentally alert.	4.61	1.08
8. I am intensely interested in other people.	4.52	0.97
9. I have very warm feelings towards almost everyone.	4.45	1.07
10. I have a great deal of energy.	4.40	1.07

**Table 3.** Differences between subjective well-being levels and other variables

Variables	Test of Homogeneity of Variances (Sig.)	F	Sig.
Gender	0.915	2.477	0.119
Age	0.558	7.346	0.001
Education	0.527	3.073	0.049
Teaching experience	0.644	0.761	0.519
Income	0.255	2.740	0.048

according to gender (Sig. = 0.119) or teaching experience (Sig. = 0.591). We found a statistically significant difference in subjective well-being level according to age (Sig. = 0.001). There were also statistically significant

differences in level of subjective well-being according to education level (Sig. = 0.049), and according to income (Sig. = 0.048). The differences according to each variables are shown in **Table 4**.

**Table 4.** Differences among the variables in subjective in well-being level

	Variables	Mean	SD
Age	25-35	4.45	0.59
	36-45	4.18	0.53
	46-55	4.88	0.60
Education/Degree	MA	4.39	0.60
	PhD	4.29	0.55
	Assoc. Prof. and Prof.	4.95	0.68
Income	Less than 5 million VND	5.13	0.00
	5-10 million VND	4.35	0.57
	10-20 million VND	4.53	0.69
	More than 20 million VND	3.82	0.35

Post hoc analysis was conducted with the groups of variables that were statistically significant. The results showed that there were differences in subjective well-being levels among the three age groups. Specifically, the 46-55 group had the highest subjective well-being level and the 36-45 group had a lower subjective well-being level than the other two age groups. Regarding the variable of educational level/degree, professors and associate professors had a higher subjective well-being level than the other two groups. In regard to income, those with an income of more than 20 million VND a month had a lower subjective well-being level compared to those with incomes of less than 5 million or 10-20 million a month.

To explain the above results, we learned that at Vietnam National University of Agricultural, the lecturers having high incomes of over 20 million were often those with higher positions and higher academic titles. Therefore, their subjective well-being was influenced by many other factors: income not being commensurate with their responsibilities, their workload, life pressure, and their children. In particular, the many responsibilities they have were the factors that caused a lot of stress, which negatively affected their subjective well-being.

## Discussion

Studies on the well-being level of lecturers and staff in Vietnam have shown that most of

them were at moderate levels of subjective well-being (rather happy and somewhat happy) (Bui Van Van & Nguyen Thi Hang Phuong, 2018). The subjective well-being manifestations of lecturers at Vietnam National University of Agriculture were 80% similar to that of the staff at the University of Da Nang, Vietnam, in which the two highest-scored statements were “life is good” and “life is precious”, according to Bui Van Van and Nguyen Thi Hang Phuong (2018). Another study by Do Thi Le Hang *et al.* (2017) on the subjective well-being of 69 staff at a university in Ho Chi Minh City also showed that most of the staff experienced positive feelings (satisfaction, joy, and optimism) rather than negative ones. Three studies in three different regions in Vietnam (Vietnam National University of Agriculture – the North; Danang University – Central region; Ho Chi Minh City Academy - the South) all pointed out that university staff and lecturers had more positive feelings than negative feelings. This can be explained by the fact that these are all multi-disciplinary universities that are in the process of building university autonomy under the leadership of the Ministry of Education and Training and the Prime Minister. Basically, they have the same policies and programs for their staff according to the Higher Education Law in 2012. In addition, the universities also have their own policies to encourage staff to create a friendly, efficient, and quality working environment.

In previous studies, there has been found a correlation between subjective well-being and age. Mroczek and Spiro (2005) found that those aged from 40 to under 65 were the happiest and that life satisfaction actually increased between the ages of 40 and 65, and only declined after 65 until the end of life. Another study by Truong Thi Khanh Ha *et al.* (2020) showed that adults (aged 26-70) had a higher level of subjective well-being than adolescents. In contrast, it was found that life satisfaction decreased with age but did not change significantly (Diener *et al.*, 1999). In the study of Bui Van Van and Nguyen Thi Hang Phuong (2018), the 35-40 age group was the happiest, while the under 35 age group was the least happy. Deaton (2008) investigated the well-being of people in different countries. He found that there was no correlation between age and well-being level and there were different increases and decreases in target groups and countries. Studies from 15 years ago and recent studies with different age groups yielded mixed results on the relationship between age and subjective well-being. Thus, the research to date has shown that age is not a predictor of subjective well-being. The present study also showed that the subjective well-being of the eldest group of lecturers was higher than the other two age groups, and those in the youngest age group had higher well-being levels compared to the middle age group.

Some studies have also revealed a correlation between education levels and subjective well-being. Bui Van Van and Nguyen Thi Hang Phuong (2018) pointed out that the doctoral degree group was happier than the master's degree group. In the present study, there was no correlation indicating that the doctorate group was happier than the master's group. The present study only affirmed that the professors and associate professors group was happier than the group with a doctoral or master's degree. Witter *et al.* (1984) also pointed out that after removing other factors, educational level can predict 1-3% of the changes in perceived subjective well-being. Other studies have also shown that there is no correlation between intelligence as measured by intelligence tests (IQ test) and subjective well-being, whereas, there is

always a positive correlation between emotional intelligence (EQ) and high levels of subjective well-being (Truong Thi Khanh Ha *et al.*, 2020).

Earnings and feelings of subjective well-being are correlated. Whereas the present study showed that the high-income group (more than 20 million Vietnam dong) was less happy than the low-income group (less than 5 million or 10-20 million Vietnam dong), the study of Bui Van Van and Nguyen Thi Hang Phuong (2018) showed that participants earning 3-5 million Vietnam dong were those with the highest subjective well-being scores. This meant it was not the case that the more money a person has, the higher their subjective well-being level is. On the other hand, some studies have shown that people with a high level of subjective well-being often make more money than others, regardless of their jobs, and they often enjoy their work more than others (Diener *et al.*, 2002). Studies on the relationship between income and subjective well-being indicate that money has a positive effect on subjective well-being, but the effect diminishes as more money is earned. While rising incomes have a major effect on the subjective well-being of those living in poor or in underdeveloped countries, the correlation between wealth and life satisfaction decreases in countries with higher incomes. This is consistent with what economists refer to as "reducing marginal benefits". This effect has been demonstrated by a number of studies (Diener *et al.*, 2002). Kasser and Kanner's (2004) study showed that people who appreciate material wealth and investments tend to feel unsatisfied with their lives and they experience more negative emotions than positive emotions. Recent studies have found that other factors may also better predict subjective well-being than income. According to Diener and Ryan (2009), society and psychology are the two best predictors of a nation's subjective well-being. Thus, while income does not affect the level of subjective well-being, psychosocial factors can significantly change people's perception of well-being.

The difference in subjective well-being between genders has received much attention by many researchers. In the present study, women

had a higher mean of subjective well-being than men, but we found no significant differences in subjective well-being levels according to gender. Therefore, it cannot be simply concluded that women are happier than men. This result was quite similar to some other research results which showed the mean score of subjective well-being in men and women is fundamentally no different. However, women appear to be more prone to experiencing stronger emotions (extreme happiness, or extreme sadness). For example, in an international sample of 40 countries, Diener and Suh (1998) found that there was little difference in subjective well-being between men and women, but women outnumbered men at very low or very high levels of balance of health. According to the researchers, the gender variable only accounts for less than 1% of the change in subjective well-being.

## Conclusions

Subjective well-being involves mental health, positive emotions, and good psychosocial functions. The present study showed that lecturers at Vietnam National University of Agriculture had different levels of subjective well-being with adverse manifestations. In addition, there were correlations between subjective well-being and age, education level, and income. However, we acknowledge that these are preliminary findings and further research is needed to investigate the different dimensions of subjective well-being of university lecturers. Future studies on lecturers' subjective well-being should be conducted in other public universities as well as at private and international universities in Vietnam, on the basis of which subjective well-being of lecturers could be better enhanced in the context of educational globalization and internalization. It is also necessary for future studies to involve a larger number of participants and to use other research instruments.

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