







Article

The Quality of Life among University of the Third Age Students in Poland, Ukraine and Belarus

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Citation: Kobylarek, A.; Błaszczyszki, K.; Ślósarz, L.; Madej, M.; Carmo, A.; Hlad, L.; Králik, R.; Akimjak, A.; Judák, V.; Maturkanič, P.; et al. The Quality of Life among University of the Third Age Students in Poland, Ukraine and Belarus. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 2049. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14042049>

Academic Editors:

Arantzazu Rodríguez-Fernández,
Arantza Fernández-Zabala and
Eider Goñi-Palacios

Received: 20 December 2021

Accepted: 7 February 2022

Published: 11 February 2022

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Abstract: The aim of this research was to compare the quality of life among University of the Third Age (U3A) students in Poland, where a novel method of educating seniors is being developed, with the quality of life among students at newly established U3As in Belarus and Ukraine, which have copied the Polish model. The research was also conducted to connect a range of socio-demographic variables with two explanatory ones: satisfaction with participation in U3A activities and the overall quality of life. A total of 515 U3A (N13) students from three Eastern European countries—Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus—took part in the research. The overall quality of life of U3A students was researched and expressed in the form of three components: stress level, sense of self-efficacy, and level of satisfaction with life. The following tools were used: PPS10 (Perceived Stress Scale), GSES (General Self-Efficacy Scale), and SWLS (Satisfaction with Life Scale). The research showed a statistically significant difference between the country of residence and the level of satisfaction with life, sense of self-efficacy, and the overall indicator of the quality of life. Polish seniors obtained higher results in all these areas when compared to their counterparts in Ukraine and Belarus.

Keywords: quality of life; seniors; U3A students; general self efficacy scale; satisfaction with life scale

1. Introduction

1.1. Literature Review

After retirement, people often face a crisis [1], which may have two aspects: positive, because of new opportunities (time and area for fulfilment), and negative, because of new

challenges (losses and changes). Firstly, some seniors acutely feel the excess of free time and, in an attempt to make positive use of that time, they turn to the passions they had abandoned during their working lives [2,3]. Secondly, regarding losses, there are differences between men and women.

The necessity to concentrate on professional life and earn money to support oneself and the family are among the most common reasons for giving up passion and self-fulfilment. In such cases, retirement brings a sense of a lost life, regret, and resentment, even retrotopia [4]. Sometimes an attempt to “justify” oneself and reduce the acute sense of missed opportunities is made by explaining that there was no other choice [5].

This sense of lacking, and the feeling of permanent dissatisfaction which results from it, are compounded by an accumulation of losses in several different spheres of life [6].

Men who had hitherto been focused on their professional work especially feel pain, primarily from the losses related to losing their professional status [7]. If work has been the primary source of their life satisfaction and prestige, resulting from experience and the attainment of professional status, then its loss will have a particularly negative impact on one’s personal life [8]. The post-retirement period is so stressful for men that it causes an increase in the number of deaths in the population [9,10].

In the case of women, a subjectively perceived loss of physical attractiveness and beauty is of great importance [11], which, in turn, may contribute to withdrawal from social contacts, resulting in further losses or weakening of bonds [12].

Financial loss can affect everyone because retirement means a lower income, uncertainty, the deterioration of health, weakened immune resistance, and decrease in vitality [13].

Additionally, a loss or limitation of social contacts may, in turn, also lead to an increased sense of marginalisation and an intensification of depressive states [14]. In such a situation, it is necessary to look not only for new opportunities for self-fulfilment (well-being), but also for pretexts to rebuild or re-create social networks and relationships, especially friendships and support [15]. These new contacts give people strength to live because the sense of meaning, usefulness, and purposefulness of activities increases. A feeling arises that there is something to live for and that a lot can be achieved with a little goodwill.

According to the WHO, the quality of life in the case of elderly people consists primarily of the individual perception of their situation [16]. One of the indicators of thusly understood quality of life may be a subjective sense of psychological well-being. Some gerontologists understand it as learning old age, becoming used to it, and changing behavioural patterns [17], while others see it as achieving fulfilment, and the realisation of oneself, one’s passions, and one’s dreams [5]. The second approach seems to be more appropriate in the context of the educational activity of the elderly. To some extent, fulfilment, well-being, mental balance, and a sense of happiness can be used synonymously to describe a high quality of life; so can the low level of stress and the high level of life satisfaction.

1.2. Institutional Background

Many people employ various personal strategies to combat boredom and a lack of fulfilment [18,19]. The simplest solution seems to be a return to the interests abandoned in earlier life and achieving well-being through hobbies [20]. Many institutions also propose various forms of involvement in cultural and community centres [21].

There are also solutions in such forms as senior clubs or Universities of the Third Age, which have been experimenting with educational activities adapted specifically to the needs of older students for half a century [22]. In particular, U3As offer various forms of activities and the rebuilding of emotional ties in a peer environment that is relatively stable and safe for seniors [23]. Educational centres of this type are thought to be distinguished by their attention to adapting classes to the expectations of older students [24]; this could also strengthen their well-being, understood as mental balance, which has been damaged by a feeling of age-related losses, and result in satisfaction with life [25].

Universities of the Third Age are currently the most popular form of education for seniors in the world [26–28]. Their popularity in Poland grew significantly after the collapse of the communist system in 1989, when it became possible for non-governmental organisations to come into being, complementing and aiding local government through their activities [29,30]. It should be borne in mind, however, that the first Polish U3As were established before the political upheaval, and they were among the first in the world [31]. The role of the University of the Third Age is viewed as supporting the activities of local government by stimulating seniors into action at the local community level [32].

Among the different means through which Universities of the Third Age have been established, two models deserve attention. The first model is the traditional U3A; they were established before the political system changed and were generally connected (either directly or indirectly) with education institutions, whose groundwork they used in their educational work. In other words, they used the so-called academic style of education from the beginning [33]. They engaged the staff of state universities, and made use of (and some still do) their lecture rooms, equipment, and personnel [34]. The way in which the first Polish U3As functioned was the result of grafting onto the Polish base the original French model, in which the U3A was part of the university, as in the world's first U3A in Toulouse [35].

The second model is based on the creation of non-governmental organisations (foundations and associations), whose basic aim is to assume the role of the provider of educational and cultural activities for the elderly. This approach makes use of experience of the English model of educating seniors, where U3As organise everything on the principle of self-help and rarely work in conjunction with universities [36].

Universities of the Third Age currently operating in Poland attempt to combine the merits of the French and English models by creating a new standard of a holistic approach to the education of seniors [37]. On the one hand, the U3As aspire to gain professional academic staff, which guarantees an appropriate level of education; on the other hand, they try to be independent and look for new ways of obtaining funds for their activities. Their management is very often based on representative bodies instituted by regular elections, and the students' council generally has a considerable influence on the decisions of a chairman or manager.

1.3. New Opportunities for Active Ageing

Similarly organised institutions operate in almost all Central and Eastern European countries, for example, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Czechia [38]. Some of them arose independently of each other, some in affiliation; sometimes they join each other to establish a federation, creating a stronger co-operative network for a number of independent bodies. Unfortunately, they rarely undertake research activities, despite their statutory aims in this field. Most often the obstacle to research is the lack of suitable staff who would be appropriately prepared and motivated to conduct their own studies [39]. Such activities are usually undertaken by university staff who act in close co-operation with the U3A—for example, staff from research universities [40,41].

Thanks to the educational programmes instituted by the University of the Third Age at the University of Wrocław, within the framework of the Polish-American Freedom Foundation and the Education for Democracy Foundation, several new U3As were established simultaneously in Ukraine and Belarus in the 2010–2012 time period. This type of institution, which had been established earlier in those countries, was connected with the Polish diaspora and had a fairly ephemeral character (meetings were rare and irregular). The newly established U3As represented the same holistic model of education, and were distinguished by precise and clearly defined educational objectives, which responded to the educational needs of local communities of seniors (analysis of needs constituted the first stage of the project). The University of the Third Age at the University of Wrocław provided the know-how and experience, whereas organisational support and project stability

after their completion were guaranteed by the local institutions—universities, independent non-governmental organisations, and religious organisations.

These newly established U3As have survived and, through their inspiration and with their support, new ones are being established, which means that the patterns of education for seniors developed earlier by the University of Wrocław have proved themselves. For this, great credit should be given to the leaders of the local and scientific communities who, through their charisma and dedication, have managed to overcome a lack of funds and the opposition of local authorities. In this respect, the Polish U3As were privileged because they could count on the local government for support and the partial financing of their education programmes. The success in popularising the U3As in Belarus and Ukraine results partially from the specifics of the environment, to which this innovative educational practice was addressed. It is worth emphasising that, although specialists from the U3A in Wrocław performed the role of experts and consultants, the very idea of establishing such institutions, just as in Poland, came independently from the leaders of organisations in Belarus and Ukraine, who had a very good knowledge of the needs of the local communities of seniors, and who perceived the value of a new strategy in the development of their institution [42].

Universities of the Third Age are often cited as examples of institutions that aid successful ageing [43], which results from the fact that they are typically institutions helping the elderly to become socially active. This can be derived from the reasons for participation declared by the students themselves [44].

1.4. Purpose of the Study

Among the most important features of U3As, seniors generally list the possibility of mixing with peers, “getting out”, and conquering loneliness. Active participation in a U3A is capable of counteracting one of the most important losses characteristic of old age—the lack of social contact. On such basis, it is also possible to put forward the hypothesis that the University of the Third Age is capable of raising the quality of life among its students, as long as it meets their needs. It is also possible to hypothesise that as an educational institution created by the local environment with regard to the needs thereof, the University of the Third Age should be well appreciated and should enjoy great success, with new centres being continually established.

When planning this research, we wanted to answer the following questions:

Main question: Do seniors from the newly established U3As differ in terms of the quality of life and the assessment of classes in comparison to U3A students in Poland?

Specific questions:

- Do the seniors in newly established U3As differ in the assessment of the classes in which they participate in comparison to students in Poland, where U3As have been operating much longer?
- Can satisfaction with classes be mediated by socio-demographic variables, such as age, gender, economic status, and education?
- Does the country of residence differentiate the U3A students in terms of their perceived quality of life?
- Do students differ from one country to another with regard to the components of the overall quality of life and, if yes, which components differ?

Data on the mediation of demographic variables in the perceived quality of seniors' life indicate that this quality may be lowered by, among others, higher age, lower socioeconomic status, and place of residence (e.g., village/city), with the strongest predictor being socioeconomic status [45,46]. Another demographic variable may be gender, which often appears to be a variable differentiating some areas of the quality of life, such as those related to health; for example, women exhibit more health-related behaviours [47], which may be important both for the subjectively perceived quality of life and for objective measurements. In our research, we also took into account the above-mentioned variables, adding education, which may be significant due to the educational nature of the investigated institution.

The literature devoted to the Universities of the Third Age generally indicates their key role in improving the quality of life [48–50]. The practitioners (instructors, managers, and students) also point out the value of the U3A classes to their well-being [26]. However, there is not sufficient research that could indicate the relationship between the quality of life of older students and participation in classes [51]. The lack of such international research is particularly visible from a comparative perspective; the existing reports are of a contributory nature. However, our observations indicate that, despite the use of the same functioning model of the U3A, Polish seniors enjoy a more varied educational offer than their counterparts from across the eastern border. This mostly concerns the possibility of trips and the implementation of European projects. These opportunities result primarily from Poland's membership in the European Union, as well as the higher economic status of Polish seniors, which is also a factor differentiating the studied countries. Therefore, it can be assumed that the country of residence will differentiate the groups of seniors also in terms of the perceived quality of life.

A literature review and many years of observations made by the researchers allowed for the formulation of the following hypotheses:

Main Hypothesis (HM). *The country of residence differentiates a general sense of the quality of life of seniors, and is also important for the perceived satisfaction with the U3A classes in which they participate.*

Hypothesis (H1). *Due to the longer-established history of Polish U3As, students from Poland will have higher satisfaction with the classes in comparison to the students from Ukraine and Belarus.*

Hypothesis (H2). *Satisfaction with classes can be mediated by demographic variables, such as age, gender, economic status, and education.*

Hypothesis (H3). *Due to the higher economic status of Poland (higher pension, travel opportunities, financing of educational projects), students of Polish U3As will have more favourable results in all components contributing to the quality of life.*

The aim of the research was to compare the quality of life among students at the University of the Third Age in Poland, where a novel method of educating seniors was developed, with the quality of life among students of the newly established U3As in Belarus and Ukraine, which duplicated the Polish solutions. The research also inquired as to how seniors evaluate the classes in which they participate. Additionally, the goal was to establish whether (and if so, which) socio-demographic variables differentiate the assessment of activities.

2. Method

The research was conducted during the completion of the same projects carried out simultaneously in various regions of the three countries. The research period was September 2015 to September 2016. Active students at the Universities of the Third Age in Poland (the Lower Silesia region), as well as in Western Ukraine (Lwów, Ivanofrankowsk, Stryj, Łuck) and Belarus (Grodno, Kobryń, Brześć, Mińsk) participated in the study. Hence, the research embraced all the known active U3As in Lower Silesia, Belarus, and Ukraine that, more importantly, were all using the same model.

The overall quality of life among U3A students was researched and expressed in the form of three components: level of stress, sense of self-efficacy, and level of satisfaction with life. The connection between specific components of the quality of life, the assessment of courses, and fundamental demographic data, such as gender, age, education, and satisfaction with participation in U3A activities, was also researched. The research was conducted in written form. In all countries, a researcher from the team handed out the questionnaires in person and collected them after completion.

The following tools were used in the research:

- Perceived Stress Scale (PSS10) (Authors: S. Cohen, T. Kamarcki, R. Mermelstein) [52]. This scale contains 10 questions relating to feelings connected with personal problems and events, behaviours, and methods of coping. This tool measures (5-point scale: Never–Always) the stress felt by adults concerning their own life situation [53]; Example of an item:
How often were you nervous because something unexpected happened?
- General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES). This scale (4-point: No–Yes) comprises 10 statements relating to the individual’s general conviction of his or her efficacy in coping with difficult situations and obstacles [54]. Example of an item:
I can solve all the problems if I try enough.
- Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Authors: Ed Diener, Robert A. Emmons, Randy J. Larson, Sharon Griffin). This scale (7-point: I definitely do not agree–I definitely agree) comprises 5 statements, resulting in a general indicator of the feeling of satisfaction with life [55]. Example of an item:
My life is ideal on various levels.
- The authors wanted to combine all test results in order to create a Global Life Quality Scale (GLQ) that would be the most general representation of the satisfaction with life of the individual. In order to do so, scores were converted into standard ten scores and summed up, forming a GLQ scale.

The analysis of reliability, conducted using Cronbach’s α test, revealed that PPS 10 ($\alpha = 0.783$), GSES ($\alpha = 0.820$), and SWLS ($\alpha = 0.785$) were, according to the standards proposed by Taver (2018), sufficiently reliable [56].

- The response rate of the participants was 100%. Out of 515 distributed sets of tests, 515 were gathered. After coding, the gathered data were analysed in order to explore the missing data and the questionnaires with incomplete qualitative data, which were not included in the analysis. Missing data from the tests were less than 5% and were, therefore, substituted using the median imputation method.

3. Results

Satisfaction with courses and life quality components.

A total of 515 U3A students from three Eastern European countries—Poland ($n = 234$), Ukraine ($n = 178$), and Belarus ($n = 103$)—took part in the research (Table 1). They represented altogether 13 Universities of the Third Age ($n_{\text{Poland}} = 5$; $n_{\text{Ukraine}} = 5$; $n_{\text{Belarus}} = 3$). Among the respondents, there were 49 men and 466 women, which generally reflects the gender split among U3A students (10% men, 90% women). They were divided into three age groups ($n_{\geq 60} = 49$; $n_{61-70} = 431$; $n_{70 <} = 35$), with a decided majority in the 60 to 70 age group, which is also characteristic of this type of educational institution. A majority of the respondents had received higher education ($n_{\text{Vocational S}} = 31$; $n_{\text{High S}} = 120$; $n_{\text{University}} = 364$) and had a stable level of income ($n_{\text{Poor}} = 209$ with income below the average state pension; $n_{\text{Stable}} = 306$ with income above the average state pension). There were both those who had been studying at the U3A for a short period ($n_{<1 \text{ year}} = 201$) and for a long period ($n_{1 \text{ year} <} = 314$). A decided majority of seniors in all three countries expressed dissatisfaction with participation in the courses proposed by the U3A ($n_{\text{satisfied}} = 29$; $n_{\text{unsatisfied}} = 486$).

Based on the analysis of satisfaction with U3A courses in all three compared countries (Table 2), we arrived at two interesting observations. Firstly, the data suggested that there were significant ($p < 0.001$) differences between seniors who were satisfied with the courses and those who were not. Secondly, the data suggested that ($X^2 = 1.80$, $p = 407$) there were no significant differences between countries with regard to the group size of seniors who were satisfied and unsatisfied with the courses. The scores indicated that seniors were surprisingly universally unsatisfied with the courses. This observation was verified using an independent sample Chi-square test. The obtained results, therefore, did not confirm our first hypothesis.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics regarding age, education, income, and gender, based on country of residence.

	Age (n)			Education (n)			Income (n)		Satisfaction (n)		Gender (n)	
	>60	61–70	70<	VS	HS	U	Poor	Stable	Sat.	Unsat.	M	F
PL	9	207	18	16	82	4	57	177	10	224	23	211
UKR	22	147	9	11	25	13	80	98	11	167	19	159
BLR	18	77	8	4	13	86	72	31	8	95	7	96
Sum	49	431	35	31	120	103	209	306	29	486	49	466
	Mean	SD		Mean	SD		Mean	SD				
PL	2.91	1.05		3.51	0.62		3.68	1.60				
UKR	2.63	1.10		3.74	0.57		3.04	1.50				
BLR	2.54	1.20		3.80	0.49		2.25	1.44				

Source: own research. Legend: PL—Poland; UKR—Ukraine; BLR—Belarus; VS—Vocational School; HS—High School; UNI—University; Sat.—Satisfied; Unsat.—Unsatisfied.

Table 2. Group frequencies: comparison between the satisfaction with courses and country of residence.

	Country (n)			
	Poland	Ukraine	Belarus	Total
Satisfied	10	11	8	29
Unsatisfied	224	167	95	486
Sum	234	178	103	515

Source: Own research.

In order to verify whether there were differences between the distribution of test scores among the countries, the raw scores were converted into a standard ten scale (Table 3). Using the rule of thumb, we divided the score into three levels: low (1–4), average (5–6), and high (7–10). To approach the data more insightfully, we calculated the popularity of the obtained levels in all the tests and among the compared countries using the percentage representation of the scores. From the obtained results (Table 2), it emerges that mediocre (5–6) levels of life quality, stress, self-efficacy, and life-satisfaction dominated among all the participants, which was considered to be normal. Further, a higher level of global life quality was displayed by the Polish seniors. Close similarities were detected between Polish, Ukrainian, and Belarusian seniors in stress levels. Self-efficacy and life satisfaction were visibly lower in the Ukrainian seniors. A dominating mediocre level of self-efficacy was also distinctive in the Polish seniors; the levels of mediocrity and high levels of life satisfaction were almost equal.

Table 3. Sten comparison of PSS10, GSES, SWLS test results, and GLQ indicators by country of residence.

	Poland			Ukraine			Belarus			Overall		
	1–4	5–6	7–10	1–4	5–6	7–10	1–4	5–6	7–10	1–4	5–6	7–10
Sten	1–4	5–6	7–10	1–4	5–6	7–10	1–4	5–6	7–10	1–4	5–6	7–10
PSS10	25%	41%	34%	23%	49%	28%	33%	38%	29%	31%	43%	26%
GSES	14%	60%	26%	33%	25%	29%	29%	44%	27%	26%	50%	24%
SWLS	23%	39%	38%	45%	20%	31%	31%	42%	27%	29%	42%	29%
GLQ	25%	44%	31%	35%	43%	22%	26%	51%	23%	29%	45%	26%

Source: own research.

An analysis with the univariate ANOVA test (Table 4) revealed statistically relevant differences between the place of residence (country) and the perceived level of self-efficacy, sense of satisfaction with life, and the overall indicator of life quality. Compared to seniors in Belarus and Ukraine, Polish seniors achieved better results in all of these areas.

Table 4. The differentiation of PSS10, GSES, and SWLS test results from the perspective of the country of residence.

Scale	Country												p
	Poland			Ukraine			Belarus			General			
	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	
PSS10	234	21.59	4.21	178	21.61	3.29	103	21.24	4.09	515	21.50	3.88	0.721
GSES	234	28.73	3.80	178	27.49	5.17	103	27.88	4.38	515	28.10	4.46	0.017
SWLS	234	22.33	5.21	178	19.78	4.82	103	20.53	5.59	515	21.10	5.28	<0.001
GLQ	234	17.20	3.78	178	15.70	3.89	103	16.3	4.08	515	16.50	3.93	<0.001

Notes: Significant intergroup differences found on post hoc testing: GSES- $p = 0.020$: Poland vs. Ukraine; SWLS- $p < 0.001$: Poland vs. Ukraine; $p = 0.016$: Poland vs. Belarus; GLQ- $p < 0.001$: Poland vs. Ukraine. Source: own research.

The results obtained confirm the predicted association between the place of residence (country) and the sense of the quality of life. Both at the level of overall quality of life and at the level of its components (i.e., sense of self-efficacy and satisfaction with life), the place of residence essentially differentiates the results when it comes to the perceived quality of life among seniors. Generally, very positive indicators were recorded among the Polish seniors, indicating that Polish economic, social, and cultural conditions may be more conducive to improving seniors' perceptions of their quality of life. The obtained results fully confirmed our first hypothesis, and partially confirmed our third hypothesis, because the only level in which Polish seniors did not excel was stress level.

Satisfaction with Courses and Socio-Demographic Factors—Exploratory Statistics

The research also aimed to explore the association between socio-demographic variables (such as gender, age, education, and level of income) and two clarifying variables: satisfaction with participation in U3A courses and the overall quality of life and its components.

Firstly, the effect of socio-demographic variables on the perception of satisfaction with U3A courses was investigated (Table 5). An analysis with the aid of polynomial contingency tables and based on the χ^2 test with Yates's adjustment revealed the lack of influence of gender, education, or age on the differentiation of levels of satisfaction with U3A courses. However, it also revealed a significant connection between the "income" variable ($X^2 = 8.31$, $p = 0.013$) and the level of satisfaction with U3A courses among the seniors in Belarus, which may indicate that a decided majority of seniors in Belarus who expressed dissatisfaction with courses suffered from poor material conditions. As a result, the analysis did not confirm our second hypothesis.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of gender, age, income, and education differences based on the country of residence and the satisfaction with U3A courses.

		Gender		Age			Income		Education		
		Male	Female	>60	61–70	70<	Poor	Stable	VS	HS	UNI
PL	Sat.	1	9	0	9	1	2	8	1	5	4
	Unsat.	22	202	9	198	17	55	169	15	77	132
UKR	Sat.	0	11	0	11	0	7	4	1	0	10
	Unsat.	19	148	22	136	9	73	94	10	25	132
BLR	Sat.	0	8	0	8	0	2	6	0	0	8
	Unsat.	7	88	18	69	8	70	25	4	13	78

Legend: PL—Poland; UKR—Ukraine; BLR—Belarus; VS—Vocational School; HS—High School; UNI—University; Sat.—Satisfied; Unsat.—Unsatisfied. Source: own research.

Further tests in the area of perceived satisfaction with life and a sense of self-efficacy, conducted with the aid of post hoc tests, revealed significant differences between seniors

living in Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus. An analysis of the strength of the effect of these differences, supported with the Cohen test, revealed that the effect for gender and age was modest ($d < 0.01$). Therefore, the differences detected form only a contribution to further exploratory research on a more balanced sample, but do not provide the basis for formulating unambiguous conclusions.

The obtained data allowed us to answer the question relating to the connection between fundamental socio-demographic variables (such as gender, age, education, and level of income), satisfaction with participation in courses, and quality of life. In the case of satisfaction with U3A courses, a significant statistical difference concerning the Belarusian seniors was discovered, which may indicate that their satisfaction with the courses was modified by their material situation. On the other hand, it is difficult to indicate a connection between other socio-demographic variables and the quality of life of U3A students. Gender and age constituted exceptions in the area where there was a noticeable statistical difference between groups, yet it should be stressed that the strength of the effect was weak.

4. Discussion

On the basis of all the obtained scores, it is justified to state that there are significant differences in the life quality of the Polish, Ukrainian, and Belarusian seniors, with the higher life quality characterising Polish seniors more often. Highlights that constitute that superiority manifest themselves in a higher sense of self-efficacy and life satisfaction. In regard to the satisfaction with courses, no significant differences between the countries were noted on a general level. When demographic variables were taken into account, only income proved significant for Belarusian seniors. Therefore, although Polish seniors have better material conditions as well as a higher sense of self-efficacy and life satisfaction, they have a very similar level of satisfaction with U3A courses, which is equally poor in all three investigated countries.

The main hypothesis, which assumed that “The country of residence differentiates the general sense of the quality of life of seniors, and is important for the perceived satisfaction with the U3A classes in which they participate”, was only partially confirmed. Further, the hypotheses regarding satisfaction with the classes were not confirmed at all. The subject literature indicates that activeness, as an element of an active ageing process, can also increase the quality of life [57–61]. In turn, educational activeness can have a particularly positive influence on the well-being of seniors [62]. Universities of the Third Age, as institutions constituted to satisfy cognitive needs, should therefore be effective, raising standards and increasing the comfort of life [63], as well leading to successful ageing [32,64]. Here, however, the conclusions are not so obvious. The research has shown that, in all investigated countries, students were dissatisfied with the classes.

Therefore, we may arrive at the conclusion that courses at the Universities of the Third Age do not directly cause the quality of life for seniors to increase, although they can be a means of reducing uncertainty [65]. Seeing that satisfaction with life among seniors has, despite prevailing suppositions, no connection with the quality of U3A courses, for which they have considerable demands, we may suppose that it is not the cognitive needs of seniors which are satisfied [20,66], but others, such as affiliation or cultural needs; this, however, requires verification with further research.

5. Conclusions

Polish seniors feel a greater sense of self-efficacy, satisfaction with life, and overall quality of life than their Belarusian and Ukrainian counterparts.

The data show that longer-functioning universities (in this case, Polish ones) provide seniors with greater chances of achieving life satisfaction and well-being. Presumably, there could be two potential causes of this phenomenon: either the specificity of a given type of university, or a higher level of income and the associated standard of living. No relationship existing between income and the general level of quality of life has been confirmed, so the reason could be the specificity of the U3As in a given country. The only noticeable

difference seems to be the time scale of operation. Polish U3As have been functioning for a relatively long time and, therefore, they have developed specific educational programmes, which are better adapted to the needs of older students. This, in turn, is contradicted by the conclusions that follow. Hence, it seems that a higher standard of living in a given country is generally conducive to a feeling of a higher quality of life.

Further, seniors are not satisfied with the courses provided by the U3As; nevertheless, they participate willingly, which may indicate that needs other than cognitive are being satisfied.

The presumption that U3As offer classes ideally suited to the needs of seniors has not been confirmed, and the research results can be interpreted in two ways. General dissatisfaction may result from the low quality of the activities themselves—which seems unlikely—or from a wider dissatisfaction. In the light of the foregoing conclusions, the reasons should rather be sought in the differences between the needs and expectations of seniors themselves and the educational offer of U3As [67]. This means that the educational programmes offered by these institutions should be constantly updated and supplemented, and the educational needs of studying seniors regularly diagnosed and analysed [68].

A connection between financial status and the level of satisfaction with the courses can be perceived in the sample collected in Belarus: the majority of the Belarusian seniors who were dissatisfied with the courses had poor material conditions.

The case of senior students in Belarus confirms the assumptions resulting from the previous conclusions. One may dare state that the standard of living in a given country is a factor for determining the level of life satisfaction and overall quality of life more than educational activity. This is in line with the findings to date, which indicate that health and financial security are the basis for well-being, understood as mental stability in late adulthood. At the same time, this conclusion could become an inspiration for further research on the quality of life for seniors in U3As.

6. Implications and Limitations

Correlation methods were used in the research, which, firstly, do not allow for the identification of the impact, but only indicate the coexistence of variables and, secondly, do not permit the identification of specific causes. At this stage, therefore, we are unable to identify which aspects related to the economic status of the country contribute to an increase in the perceived quality of life for seniors.

There is the necessity of conducting further research on satisfaction with U3A courses among the students. If participation in the courses is not satisfying for them, then there must be other factors that draw them towards this type of educational institution. This could be verified by, for example, testing the degree to which their needs are satisfied, or by analysing the declarations of U3A candidates and students. In further research, it would be worth comparing the quality of life of U3A students to that of seniors who do not take part in such institutions.

The research results refer only to U3A students in three Central and Eastern European countries. It would be worth conducting a similar exploration of U3As in other geographical areas, where other models of education for seniors have been developed.

Despite the limitations indicated, this research has an important practical imposition for adult educators and researchers. First of all, the research can be treated as a preliminary diagnosis of how activities are adjusted to the needs of seniors. It is worrying that, in none of the investigated countries, there were students satisfied with them. This may be a guideline for people who plan and organise classes for U3A students and strive to meet the expectations of students in this area by refining their programmes. Secondly, the research results indicate the need to work on improving the quality of life of seniors in Belarus and Ukraine. For this purpose, however, it would be necessary to identify what—apart from the economic status of a country, or elements thereof—is associated with lowering the perceived quality of life of people from these countries.

Despite their wide offer of activities, Eastern European U3As require further work on the improvement of the education model. Further research on the quality of life of older students and the possibility of increasing it by adjusting the activities to the needs of seniors is recommended. The presented results have the potential to become an inspiration to further research on other problems, such as the relationship between critical thinking, locus of control or needs, and the quality of life and sustainability.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.K. and K.B.; methodology, L.Ś. and M.M.; software, A.C.; validation, L.H., R.K. and L.P.; formal analysis, A.A. and V.J.; investigation, B.T.; resources, Y.B.; data curation, P.M.; writing—original draft preparation, A.K.; writing—review and editing, K.B.; visualization, L.P. and J.G.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The article was published with the support of International Scientific Research Project: Pastoral practice, psychology and philosophical-theological-social fragments in the light of the 21st century (contract number: 010-2021). Cooperation among: Sociedad Hispánica de Amigos de Kierkegaard (Spain) and College of Applied Psychology in Terezín (Czech Republic), 2021–2022.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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