

Research Paper

Pathway to academic well-being: The role of institutional social capital in the well-being of academics in five Central and Eastern European countries

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between institutional social capital and the emotional well-being of academics in Central and Eastern European higher education systems. Building on Pusztaï's conceptual framework, this study distinguishes between intragenerational social capital, referring to collegial cooperation and communicative exchange, and intergenerational social capital, referring to informal interaction with students beyond formal teaching. The analysis draws on survey data collected in 2023 from academics in five countries (Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine) (N ≈ 800). Institutional social capital is operationalised through indicators capturing the frequency and diversity of interactions, while emotional well-being is measured using Warr's Affective Well-being Scale. The results show that intragenerational social capital is a significant positive predictor of well-being, whereas intergenerational social capital has no independent effect. The findings suggest that collegial relational embeddedness constitutes a relevant, albeit limited, resource for emotional well-being in academic work.

Keywords: academic well-being; institutional social capital; intragenerational and intergenerational relationships; higher education; Central and Eastern Europe

Introduction

Academic well-being has emerged as a significant concern in higher education research, particularly given the intensifying pressures associated with contemporary university work environments that faculty members face. Academics operate within increasingly complex institutional contexts marked by growing administrative demands, research productivity pressure, and evolving student expectations (Li, 2018; Mathey et al., 2024). In this context, social relationships embedded in the university workplace represent a potentially vital yet underexplored resource for sustaining academic emotional well-being. While considerable attention has been devoted to students' social integration and its effects on persistence and well-being, comparatively little research has examined how academics' institutional social relationships shape their affective states.

Existing scholarship on academics' well-being has focused on institutional support structures, organizational climate, and the availability of collegial support (Kinman & Wray, 2013; Vigoda-Gadot & Talmud, 2010). These studies consistently demonstrate that positive social environments within the university—particularly supportive relationships with colleagues—act as a buffer against occupational stress and contribute positively to the well-being of academic staff. However, much of this work conceptualises social support primarily in terms of emotional or instrumental assistance provided by peers and supervisors, while

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leaving the broader network of social relationships that academics cultivate in their day-to-day professional lives—including, crucially, their interactions with students—relatively unexamined. The relationship between academics and students is constitutive of academic life; however, its significance for academics' well-being has rarely been studied directly.

Research conducted specifically in Central and Eastern European (CEE) higher education has begun to document the regional dynamics of academic well-being. A qualitative study drawing on focus group interviews with academics from five CEE countries (Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, and Serbia) found that interpersonal relationships and institutional trust are among the most important workplace resources for well-being, while performance-based evaluation systems—increasingly prevalent across the region—were found to exert negative pressure on collegial ties by generating competition and mutual mistrust (Kovács et al., 2024). A subsequent quantitative study using the same five-country dataset ($N = 821$) confirmed that emotional exhaustion is the strongest negative predictor of affective well-being among CEE academics, while work engagement and management support function as key positive predictors; Romanian academics scored consistently higher on well-being than their counterparts in other countries (Kovács, Borbély, et al., 2025). Managerial and peer support also exert a positive influence on well-being through work engagement (Kovács, Bălătescu, et al., 2025). Similar indirect relationships were identified by Mudrak et al. (2018) in their study conducted among Czech academics. Their findings suggest that resources such as influence over one's work and support from institutional leadership are positively associated with work engagement and job satisfaction. Within the examined model, work engagement emerged as the strongest predictor of well-being, whereas job-related demands (e.g., quantitative demands, work–life conflict, and job insecurity) were primarily associated with stress (Mudrak et al., 2018). Furthermore, among Slovak academics, the lack of managerial support has been shown to reduce psychological well-being (Michulek et al., 2024). These findings establish that in the CEE context the quality of social relationships within the university—with colleagues, with management, and with students—constitutes a central determinant of academic well-being, yet the specific role of structured institutional social capital as a predictor of affective well-being has not been systematically examined.

Building on Pusztaï's (2015, 2019) interpretation of institutional social capital in higher education, we adopt a two-dimensional framework that distinguishes between intragenerational social capital—referring to the frequency and depth of cooperation and communication among academic colleagues—and intergenerational social capital—referring to the quality and frequency of academics' interactions with students beyond formal instructional contexts. While Pusztaï originally developed this framework to understand the determinants of student persistence, the underlying logic applies with equal force to academics: meaningful, repeated social exchanges within the institution generate shared norms, trust, and a sense of belonging that may sustain emotional well-being. In our research, these two dimensions of institutional social capital were operationalised using scales adapted from Pusztaï's (2015) student research instrument, modified to reflect the academic workplace context.

Our study draws on survey data collected in 2023 from academics in five CEE countries (Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine), allowing us to examine the cross-national variation in both forms of institutional social capital and their relationship with academics' affective well-being. The CEE regional context is particularly relevant, given that universities in this region have undergone substantial transformation since the Bologna reforms, exposing academic staff to a distinctive combination of legacy institutional cultures and new performance pressures (Curaj et al., 2018). The affective dimension of subjective well-being was measured using Warr's (1996) Affective Well-being Scale, which assesses the balance of positive and negative emotions experienced at work. Two novel aspects distinguish our study from prior research: first, we examine the role of academics' relationships with students, a dimension largely absent from existing studies on academic well-being; second, for collegial relationships, we measure not the level of social support received but the frequency and diversity of collaboration and intellectual exchange, capturing a more active and generative dimension of institutional social capital.

Theoretical background

The concept of social capital provides a theoretical foundation for our study. As Coleman (1990) argued, social capital resides not within individuals but in the structure of relationships among them. Unlike physical or human capital, social capital enables individuals to gain access to resources, including information, trust, shared norms, and mutual obligations, that are embedded in social ties and facilitate goal-oriented action. In educational settings, Pusztaï (2015) extended this framework to university contexts, demonstrating that the density and

quality of social ties within the institution—both among peers and between students and staff—function as social capital that sustains academic engagement and reduces the likelihood of students' dropout. Empirical research in educational organisations further confirms that internal social capital among colleagues—characterised by trust-based cooperation and shared professional norms—constitutes a significant predictor of collective and individual performance outcomes (Leana & Pil, 2006). In our research, we transpose this logic to the academic workforce: the social ties that academics maintain within their institution—with colleagues and students—constitute a form of institutional social capital that may similarly serve as a resource for well-being. In contrast to James S. Coleman's functionalist emphasis on social capital as a resource embedded in relational structures that facilitates action, Pierre Bourdieu (1986) understands social capital to be the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to durable networks of institutionalised relationships, whose value is contingent upon their convertibility into other forms of capital and their positioning within structured fields of power.

Pusztai's (2015, 2019) framework distinguishes two analytically separate dimensions of institutional social capital in higher education: intragenerational ties (relationships among peers of the same generational position, such as colleagues or fellow students) and intergenerational ties (relationships crossing generational boundaries, such as between students and faculty members). For academics, we conceptualise intragenerational social capital as the frequency and diversity of cooperative and communicative exchanges with fellow academic staff—co-authorship, collaborative teaching, research discussions, and informal professional interactions. Conversely, intergenerational social capital refers to the quality and regularity of academics' interactions with students beyond formal instructional settings, such as discussing students' personal and professional plans, providing informal academic guidance, or engaging students in research activities. Both dimensions are expected to contribute to a sense of institutional belonging, mutual recognition, and purpose—psychological resources that the literature consistently links to well-being (Li, 2018; Vigoda-Gadot & Talmud, 2010). The sense of group belonging and shared professional identity generated by sustained collegial interaction constitutes a recognised pathway to psychological well-being, acting through mechanisms of mutual support, social control, and the reinforcement of purpose and meaning (Haslam et al., 2009; Thoits, 2011).

Turning to well-being, we measured academics' affective well-being using Warr's (1996) scale, which captures the balance of positive emotions (such as enthusiasm, contentment, and calm) against negative emotions (such as worry, tension, and depression) experienced in the recent past. This affective dimension of well-being has been widely adopted in occupational health research and is particularly suited to capture the emotional consequences of the quality of workplace social environments. Longitudinal validation of Warr's scale has confirmed its four-factor structure—capturing anxiety, comfort, depression, and enthusiasm—as a reliable and stable measure of job-related affective states across occupational contexts (Mäkikangas et al., 2007). Kinman and Wray (2013) demonstrated that peer support in academia acts as a protective factor, alleviating occupational stress, while Vigoda-Gadot and Talmud (2010) showed that positive collegial relationships moderate the negative effects of organisational politics on job outcomes. More broadly, systematic reviews of the academic burnout literature document that work-related sources of social support are particularly closely associated with emotional exhaustion, the most prevalent dimension of occupational strain in higher education settings (Halbesleben, 2006; Watts & Robertson, 2011). Mathey et al. (2024) further confirmed that the formation and leveraging of social capital in professional careers is closely tied to subjective evaluations of career and personal well-being. The job demands–resources model offers a complementary theoretical lens: collegial relationships and cooperative networks constitute job resources that buffer against demands and sustain engagement and well-being in educational workplaces (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Hakanen et al., 2006). Crucially, qualitative studies conducted directly within the academic context lend additional support to this mechanism. Garbett and Thomas (2020) showed that inter-collegial friendships—characterised by mutual recognition, intellectual exchange, and shared professional challenges—are not peripheral to academic life but central to sustaining well-being in the face of institutional demands. Their work highlights how collaborative relationships with peers provide emotional affirmation, buffer against the constant pressure of evaluation, and help academics maintain a sense of professional identity and purpose. Similarly, de Villiers Scheepers et al. (2023) found that purposeful collegial groups create a therapeutic and safe space that mitigates burnout risks, particularly during periods of institutional disruption. More broadly, Keshavarzi et al. (2023), in a qualitative study of faculty members across medical universities, identified organisational identification—grounded in interpersonal trust, a sense of group belonging, and shared academic discourse—as a key condition for building social capital; their findings underscore that both empowerment through collegial interaction and institutional support for collective activities are necessary for social capital to translate into organisational and individual well-being. Aharonian (2024) extended this insight to writing communities, demonstrating that structured peer

collaboration fosters both agency and well-being among teacher educators. The structural context of Central and Eastern European universities is particularly salient here: post-Bologna reforms have intensified workloads and accelerated the pace of academic life, creating conditions in which the boundary between professional and personal time becomes increasingly blurred and in which relational resources acquire heightened importance for sustaining well-being (Dobbins & Knill, 2009; Ylijoki, 2013). Taken together, these findings suggest that the richness and reciprocity of workplace relationships translate into positive affective states—a process we expect to be observable among academics in the CEE universities of our study, notwithstanding the specific institutional pressures of the regional context.

The most important question of our research concerns the relationship between the two forms of institutional social capital and academics' well-being, controlling for the role of demographic and workplace characteristics. A secondary question addresses cross-national and cross-group differences in both dimensions of social capital, which were examined previously in a companion study (Kovács, Bălăţescu, et al., 2025). On the basis of the theoretical arguments above, we formulate the following hypotheses:

- H1: Intragenerational social capital (frequency and diversity of cooperation with academic colleagues) is positively associated with the emotional well-being of academics in the CEE region under investigation.
- H2: Intergenerational social capital (frequency and quality of interaction with students outside formal teaching) is positively associated with the emotional well-being of academics in the CEE region under investigation.

Methodology

Data collection

The hypotheses were tested using data from the CEETHE 2023 survey. Our detailed questionnaire survey examined the factors that characterise academics' teaching and research work, working conditions, workplace outcomes, health, lifestyle, and institutional, family, and social backgrounds (over 300 items). The questionnaire was translated into Serbian, Slovakian, Ukrainian, and Romanian and sent, with the permission of the head of the institution, two or three times via the university's online learning system to all teachers of the institutions surveyed in the spring of 2023. Data were collected from higher education establishments in two disadvantaged regions in Hungary, the Northern Great Plains Region (the University of Debrecen, the Debrecen Reformed Theological University, and the University of Nyíregyháza) and the Southern Transdanubia Region (the University of Pécs). When examining cross-border institutions in Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, and Serbia, we targeted minority Hungarian institutions and sent out the survey in the language of the majority.

Participants

The average age of the respondents was 46 (SD = 10.71), and the average amount of years worked in higher education was 17 (SD = 11) years. All the important demographic and work-related characteristics of the sample are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Background and Work-Related Characteristics of the Sample

Variable	Value	Percentage	N
Country	Hungary	62.8	514
	Ukraine	14.1	115
	Romania	13.8	113
	Serbia	4.9	40
	Slovakia	4.4	30
Gender	Male	43.7	351
	Female	56.3	452
Age	<29	5.4	43
	30–39	24.2	193
	40–49	35.2	280
	50–59	23.2	185
	60–69	10.3	82
	>70	1.6	13
Academic degree	I do not have	21.1	173
	PhD/DLA	44.6	365
	Candidate of Science (CSc)	5.7	47
	Habilitated doctor	17.1	140
	Doctor of Science (DSc)	11.4	93
Discipline	Humanities and arts	32.4	264
	STEM and agriculture	23.1	188
	Medicine, health and sport	27.9	227
	Society and economy	16.7	136
Position	Senior lecturer or lower	58.8	483
	Associate professor or higher	41.2	338
Leader position	No	69.3	569
	Yes	30.7	252

Note. Source: CEETHE 2023.

Measurements and variables

In order to measure well-being, Warr's (1996) Affective Well-being Scale was used; we asked teachers how often they felt various positive and negative emotions in the last few weeks (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.879$, KMO = 0.908, $p \leq 0.001$, explained variance = 75.773%, $M = 59.75$, $SD = 18.89$, $N = 797$).

Based on Pusztai's previous works (2015), institutional social capital was measured in two dimensions. The statements were adapted to the academic context. In the first question block, the frequency of different types and topics of conversations were asked with students (6 items, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.784$, KMO = 0.792, $p \leq 0.001$, explained variance = 49.289%, $M = 55.14$, $SD = 18.7$, $N = 807$), in the second block the frequency of types of different collaboration with the colleagues (8 items, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.832$, KMO = 0.830, $p \leq 0.001$, explained variance = 59.935%, $M = 57.6$, $SD = 18.97$, $N = 795$). Because the scales utilised different values (1–5, 1–7), to standardise the values, the factor and component scores were recoded into a 0–100 degree scale, in which 0 represented if the main component was not at all characteristic of the respondent, and 100 if it was completely typical of the respondent.

The demographic background variables we viewed are age, gender, and country of origin; among the work characteristics, those variables are academic degree, workplace position, leader position, and academic field of expertise.

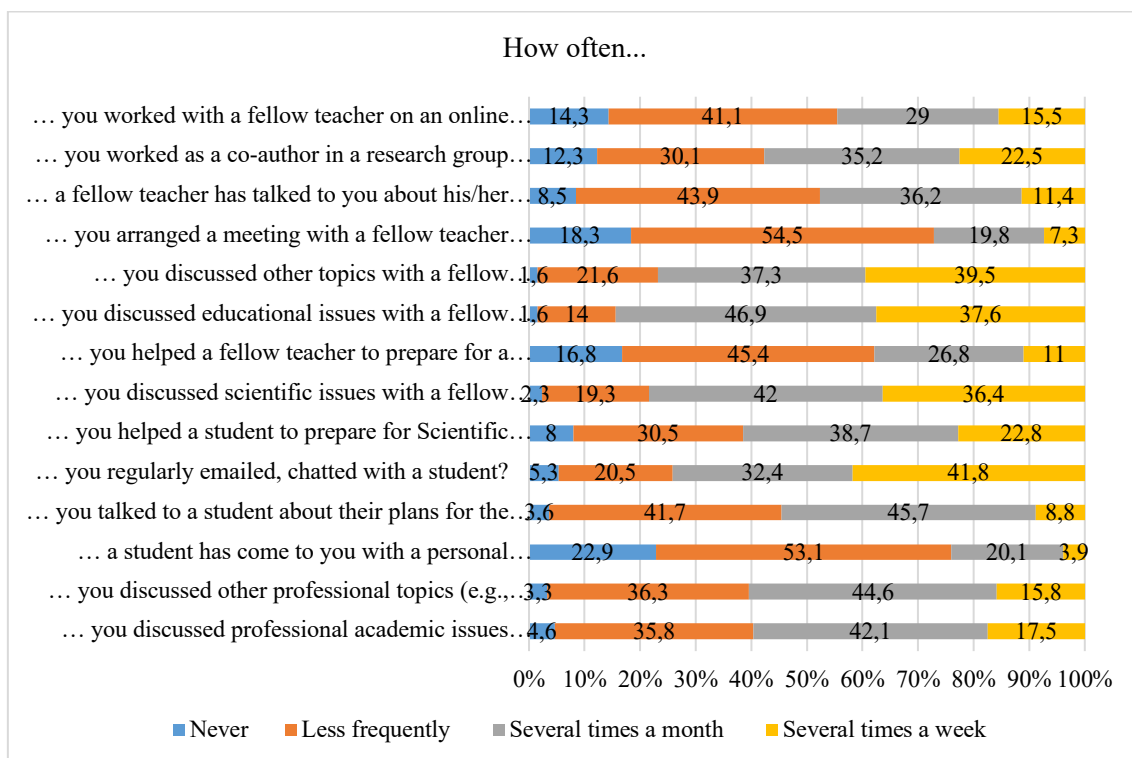
Results

Related to intergenerational social capital academics in our sample, the highest proportion emailed and chatted with a student more times a week (41.8%) or helped a student prepare for Scientific Students' Associations, a

talent management program (22.8%), while 8% never did that. In addition, 45.7% of the respondents talked to a student about their plans for the future, and 44.6% discussed other professional topics (e.g. research) with a student outside the course several times a month. While 53.1% of the academics said that students came to them with personal problems less frequently than several times a month, 21% indicated that it never happened. 4.6% never discussed professional academic issues with students outside class.

Almost 40% of the academics discussed scientific issues (36.4%), educational issues (37.6%), or other issues not related to academic work (39.5%) with a fellow teacher several times a week. Of the respondents, 54.5% arranged a meeting with a fellow teacher outside of work, 45.4% helped a fellow teacher prepare for a doctorate, habilitation, or tender, and 43.9% reported that a fellow teacher had talked to an academic staff member about his/her plans for the future less frequently than several times a month. Almost one-fifth of the academics never helped to prepare for a doctorate or arranged a meeting with a fellow teacher, 12.3% never worked as a co-author in a research group, 14.3% never worked online with a fellow teacher, and 41.1% worked less frequently several times a month (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Frequency of Responses to Items on Institutional Social Capital



Note. Source: CEETHE 2023 (N = 812–819).

Significant differences were found in five variables within the intergenerational social capital component. In terms of demographics, Ukrainian and female academics were found to be the most likely to maintain close contact and cooperation with students, while Serbian academics were found to be the least likely to do so. In terms of academic qualifications, those without a degree achieved the lowest average score in the overall indicator, while those with a CSc degree or habilitated doctors achieved the highest. Academics in higher positions reported closer relationships than their colleagues in lower positions did. Academics working in the humanities, arts, and social sciences achieved higher scores than those working in medicine, health, and sports science. (Table 2).

Table 2. Differences in the Component of Intergenerational Social Capital by Demographic and Work Characteristics (Means and SDs)

Background variable		Mean	SD	F	p	N
Gender	Male	52.87	18.91	8.596	0.003	790
	Female	56.8	18.52			
Country	Hungary	53.55	19.72	7.262	<0.001	804
	Ukraine	62.57	15.91			
	Romania	57.7	16.54			
	Serbia	49.07	14.31			
	Slovakia	53.67	14.98			
Academic degree	None	50.35	19.31	5.782	<0.001	803
	PhD/DLA	54.75	18.54			
	CSc	60.96	16.02			
	Habilitated doctor	58.81	18.97			
	DSc	57.74	16.99			
Position	Assistant professor or lower	52.56	18.97	21.846	<0.001	806
	Associate professor or higher	58.76	17.73			
Discipline	Humanities and arts	58.86	17.13	10.691	<0.001	800
	STEM and agriculture	53.47	18.57			
	Medicine, health and sport	50.12	20.61			
	Society and economy	57.98	18.68			

Note. Source: CEETHE 2023.

Examining intragenerational social capital reveals that younger academics have closer relationships with their colleagues and that the frequency of collaboration decreases with age. Slovakian academics cooperate most frequently, and Serbian and Romanian academics cooperate least frequently. Although small, we found a significant difference in the total intragenerational social capital component according to the academic degree. Habilitated doctors and those with a DSc degree achieved the highest scores, while those with a CSc degree and academics without an academic degree achieved the lowest scores. Those in leadership positions achieved above-average results compared to academics without leadership positions (see Table 3).

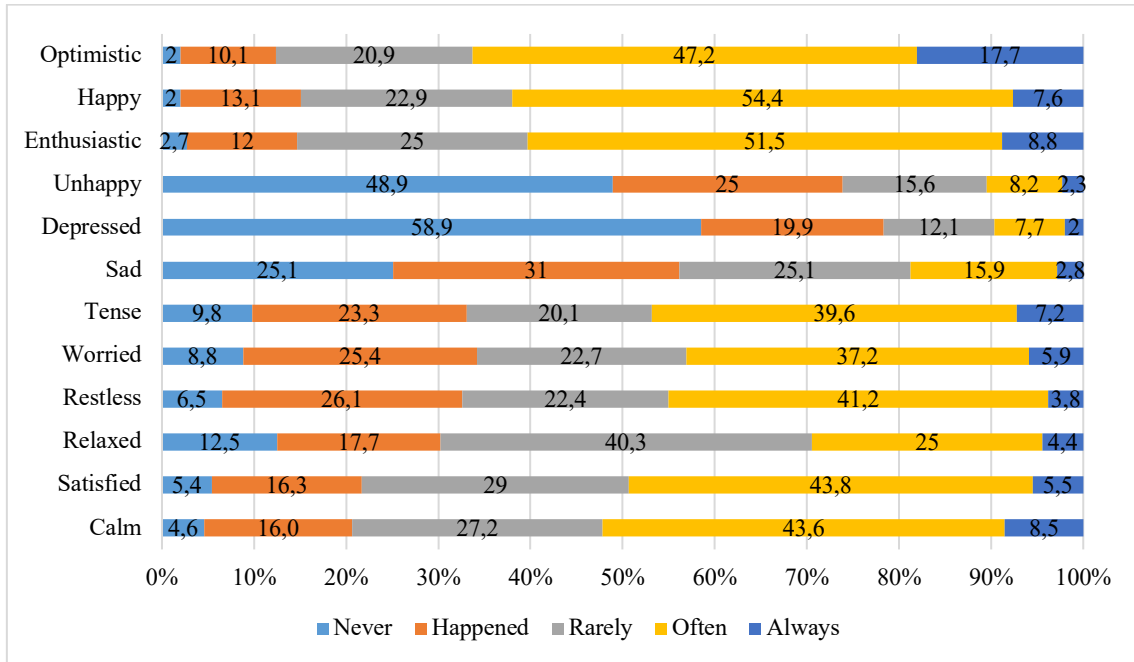
Table 3. Differences in the Component of Intragenerational Social Capital by Demographic and Work Characteristics (Means and SDs)

Background variable		Mean	SD	F	p	N
Age	<29	65.15	20.09	3.286	0.006	769
	30–39	60.7	18.53			
	40–49	55.57	18.23			
	50–59	56.56	19			
	60–69	56.64	19.73			
	>70	53.65	22.78			
Country	Hungary	58.61	19.53	5.645	<0.001	804
	Ukraine	59.9	17.01			
	Romania	50.98	17.85			
	Serbia	52.64	17.47			
	Slovakia	63.02	15.41			
Academic degree	None	55.54	19.46	4.166	0.002	803
	PhD/DLA	56.34	18.83			
	CSc	55.55	18.04			
	Habilitated doctor	62.11	17.88			
	DSc	62.52	19.6			
Leader position	No	56.36	19.16	3.027	0.005	806
	Yes	60.46	18.27			

Note. Source: CEETHE 2023.

The background of academics' emotional well-being

To examine the well-being of academics, we asked them how frequently they experienced various emotions over the past two weeks. More than half of the academics reported feeling happy and enthusiastic, and 47.2% felt optimistic. A total of 48.9% of the respondents stated that they had never felt unhappy, 58.9% had never felt depressed, and 25.1% had never felt sad. Only 12.5% of the participants reported feeling relaxed. One-quarter of the respondents rarely felt enthusiastic, and approximately one-third reported feeling satisfied and calm. Forty percent of academics rarely felt relaxed, and one-quarter reported feeling sad. Approximately one in four respondents indicated that they had felt worried, tense, restless, or unhappy during the past weeks, while one in five reported having felt depressed (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Frequency of Various Emotions Experienced by Academics Over the Past Few Weeks

Note. Source: CEETHE 2023 (N = 816–819).

There is a linear increase in academics' well-being with age; the youngest cohort reports the lowest levels of well-being, while the oldest group reports the highest. Romanian and Serbian teachers had the highest level of well-being, while Slovak teachers had the lowest. Those with a higher academic degree were characterised by higher well-being, followed by those with PhDs, and the lowest well-being was attributed to those with a CSc degree. Those in associate professor positions have higher levels of well-being than adjuncts or someone in a lower position. We could not find any significant connection to other demographic and workplace factors or teacher characteristics (Table 4).

Table 4. Differences of Demographic and Work Characteristic Natures in Wellbeing (Means and SDs)

Background variable		Mean	SD	Kruskal-Wallis H	p	N
Age	<29	56.29	19.12	23.857	<0.001	773
	30–39	56.79	20.43			
	40–49	58.24	18.03			
	50–59	63.71	18.13			
	60–69	62.98	18.24			
	>70	72.03	14.28			
Country	Hungary	59.11	19.75	10.248	0.036	794
	Ukraine	58.76	17.87			
	Romania	64.55	16.5			
	Serbia	60.31	19.11			
	Slovakia	56.96	14.88			
Academic degree	None	57.82	19.63	12.492	0.014	794
	PhD/DLA	59.16	19			
	CSc	55.89	18.3			
	Habilitated doctor	61.79	18.29			
	DSc	65.24	17.14			
Position	Assistant professor or lower	58.24	19.55	6.060	0.014	797
	Associate professor or higher	61.87	17.72			

Note. Source: CEETHE 2023.

Correlation analyses showed only a weak, significant correlation between intergenerational social capital and well-being (Spearman's $r = 0.079$, $p \leq 0.05$), while there was a stronger significant correlation between the two types of social capital (Spearman's $r = 0.370$, $p \leq 0.01$).

Linear regression analysis identified the key predictors of emotional well-being. Multicollinearity was checked, and the values of VIF and tolerance showed that there was no multicollinearity between the explanatory variables in any of the cases. Homoscedasticity was not compromised. The model explained 7.5% of the variance in well-being scores ($F(13, 722) = 4.523$, $p < 0.001$). Emotional well-being showed a significant relationship with four explanatory variables: intragenerational social capital—cooperation with colleagues—($\beta = 0.121$, $p = 0.003$, $CI[0.041; 0.200]$), age ($\beta = 0.220$, $p < 0.001$, $CI[0.241; 0.528]$), working in Romania compared to the reference country ($\beta = 0.112$, $p = 0.036$, $CI[0.399; 11.657]$), and working in medicine, health, or sport sciences ($\beta = 0.120$, $p = 0.011$, $CI[1.168; 8.945]$) predicted well-being positively. Thus, H1 is verified. Intergenerational social capital—interaction with students—was not a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.017$, $p = 0.678$), contrary to H2.

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between institutional social capital and academics' emotional well-being in higher education institutions across Central and Eastern Europe. By distinguishing between intragenerational and intergenerational relational embeddedness, this study contributes to theoretical debates on how social relations shape occupational outcomes in knowledge-intensive organisational settings. In doing so, it builds directly on Gabriella Pusztai's influential work on institutional social capital in higher education, which has significantly advanced the understanding of how relational embeddedness within universities structures

educational trajectories and organisational experiences. Her conceptualisation of intra- and intergenerational social capital provides a valuable analytical framework for examining not only student persistence but also the professional lives of academic staff members.

From a Colemanian perspective, social capital constitutes a structural resource embedded in patterns of interaction that facilitates purposive action by generating trust, shared norms, and access to information (Coleman, 1990). The present findings offer qualified support for this proposition in the following ways. Intragenerational social capital, reflected in collaboration, intellectual exchange, and informal professional interaction with colleagues, emerged as a modest but significant predictor of emotional well-being. Collegial networks thus appear to function as relational infrastructures that mitigate uncertainty and emotional strain within academic workplaces increasingly shaped by performance evaluation, administrative intensification and fragmented career trajectories. Through such interactions, academics may sustain a sense of professional belonging and collective identity, both of which are known to support psychological resilience (Kinman & Wray, 2013; Vigoda-Gadot & Talmud, 2010). This interpretation is also consistent with qualitative evidence showing that collegial relationships provide emotional validation and sustain professional identity in academic contexts (de Villiers Scheepers et al., 2023; Garbett & Thomas, 2020).

Simultaneously, the results can be interpreted through a Bourdieusian lens, which emphasises that social capital is unevenly distributed within fields structured by symbolic competition and institutional hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1986). Collegial cooperation is not only a source of emotional support but also a mechanism for positioning and resource accumulation. Academics embedded in dense collaborative networks may gain privileged access to research opportunities, reputational capital, and career advancement pathways, indirectly enhancing their subjective well-being. The positive association observed between age, academic rank, and well-being is consistent with this interpretation, suggesting that accumulated institutional capital and stabilised professional trajectories shape both relational embeddedness and emotional outcomes. In this respect, Pusztai's (2015, 2019) framework can be seen as bridging Coleman's functionalist view and Bourdieu's field-based perspective, by situating social capital within concrete institutional relational structures.

In contrast, intergenerational social capital—informal interaction with students—did not show an independent effect on well-being in the multivariate analysis. While pedagogical engagement is often portrayed as intrinsically meaningful, the findings indicate that student interaction does not necessarily function as a consistent emotional resource. Such interactions may simultaneously constitute both resources and demands. Mentoring relationships and intellectual exchange can foster professional fulfilment; however, high teaching loads, emotional labour, and time pressures associated with massified higher education may offset these benefits. While meaningful work and psychological resources have been shown to support well-being (Li, 2018), the formation and mobilisation of social capital are embedded in broader career and organisational dynamics (Mathey et al., 2024). In institutional contexts characterised by expanding student populations and limited organisational support, the relational rewards of teaching may therefore be constrained by structural workload conditions.

Moreover, the modest explanatory power of the regression model highlights the need to interpret academic well-being as a multilevel and multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interplay of relational resources, organisational arrangements, and individual career trajectories. Institutional social capital represents only one component of a broader ecology of working conditions that includes job security, research autonomy, governance practices, and the availability of material and symbolic rewards. This interpretation is consistent with broader research on subjective well-being, which emphasises its complex and context-dependent nature (Diener et al., 1999; Pavot & Diener, 1993). The cross-national differences identified in the study further point to the significance of macro-institutional environments in shaping both the formation of social capital and its consequences for emotional well-being, particularly in the transforming higher education systems of Central and Eastern Europe (Curaj et al., 2018).

Taken together, the findings suggest that collegial relational embeddedness contributes to emotional sustainability in academic careers, but its effects are mediated by structural positioning within the institutional field and by the balance between occupational demands and available resources. This nuanced pattern reinforces sociological and organisational perspectives that treat social capital not as an inherently beneficial asset but as a context-dependent mechanism whose outcomes vary across organisational and career contexts. At the same time, extending Vincent Tinto's (1993, 2015) model of institutional integration, the results suggest that relational embeddedness operates differently for academic staff than for students, with collegial rather than student-related ties playing a more central role in shaping well-being.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. First, the cross-sectional design limits the possibility of drawing causal conclusions regarding the relationship between institutional social capital and emotional well-being. Reverse causality remains plausible, as academics experiencing higher well-being may be more inclined to participate in collaborative networks. Longitudinal and panel-based research would be required to clarify these reciprocal dynamics.

Second, the operationalisation of institutional social capital focused primarily on the frequency and diversity of interactions, without capturing network structure, relational quality, or power asymmetries within academic organisations. Future research could employ social network analysis, qualitative inquiry, or mixed-method designs to better understand how different configurations of relational embeddedness influence occupational outcomes.

Third, the sample composition—including the strong representation of Hungarian institutions and minority-language academic environments, but mainly its nature of convenience—constrains the generalisability of the findings to the broader CEE higher education landscape. Comparative studies using balanced representative national samples and multilevel modelling approaches would help disentangle individual-, institutional-, and country-level effects.

Finally, the relatively low proportion of explained variance indicates that important determinants of academic well-being were not included in our specification. Future studies should integrate variables related to workload intensity, job insecurity, organisational justice, research funding conditions, leadership styles, and work–life balance, as well as psychological resources such as professional identity, coping strategies, and career expectations. Such integrative frameworks would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the structural and relational foundations of sustainable academic careers.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the growing literature on academic well-being by demonstrating that institutional social capital constitutes a relevant, though not dominant, factor shaping the emotional experiences of academics in CEE higher education systems. Specifically, collegial collaboration emerged as a meaningful predictor of well-being, highlighting the importance of professional communities and cooperative academic cultures in sustaining emotional resilience. In contrast, informal interaction with students does not appear to have an independent effect, suggesting that pedagogical engagement alone is insufficient to offset the structural pressures associated with contemporary academic work.

These findings have important implications for higher education policy and institutional management. Universities seeking to improve staff well-being should prioritise organizational conditions that facilitate collegial cooperation, such as interdisciplinary research groups, mentoring schemes, and spaces for informal intellectual exchange. Strengthening institutional cultures of trust and collaboration may be particularly valuable in post-transition academic systems, where competitive funding regimes and performance evaluation mechanisms weaken social cohesion.

Simultaneously, the modest explanatory power of social capital variables underscores the need for holistic approaches to academic well-being. Institutional reforms aimed at reducing administrative burdens, ensuring transparent career progression, and supporting work–life balance are likely to have a greater impact than isolated relational interventions. Therefore, future research should adopt longitudinal and multilevel designs to examine how social capital interacts with organisational structures and individual psychological resources over time.

In summary, the study highlights that the emotional sustainability of academic careers in the CEE region depends not only on individual resilience but also on the relational architecture of universities. Strengthening collegial ties represents a promising pathway to improving well-being; however, it must be embedded within broader institutional strategies that address the structural challenges of contemporary higher education

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