

FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL/COGNITIVE MOTIVES FOR STUDYING IN RIGA AND SMOLENSK SAMPLES

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Abstract. *For a successful pedagogical process, university teachers need to know the learning motivation of students, monitor it, and take into account its peculiarities while developing learning materials and choosing educational strategies. Especially great attention should be paid to the motivation of first-year students, as in the first months of studies freshmen face increasing difficulties sometimes negatively affecting their motivation. The paper presents some results of an international study of students' motivation and focuses on one group of learning motives of first-year students, namely, on their Educational/cognitive motives. The aim of the study is to analyse and compare the Educational/cognitive motives of the first-year students at the universities of Riga and Smolensk, as well as to study the interrelationship between this kind of learning motives and the psychological atmosphere in the student group. In the survey carried out in December 2019, 129 students from EKA University of Applied Sciences (Riga, Latvia) and Smolensk State University (Russia) participated. The technique of diagnostics of learning motivation by 7 content scales was used for data collection. For studying the psychological atmosphere in the student group, the technique of 10 bipolar scales was chosen. Table method, descriptive statistics, analysis of statistical indicators, method of comparison, correlation analysis were used in the data processing. The data analysis shows that a few months after the start of studying, the learning motivation of the first-year students is at an average level. However, for successful training, it could and should be improved. In the Latvian sample, indicators for both the general learning motivation and Educational/cognitive motivation are slightly higher than in the Russian one. The correlation analysis reveals statistically significant correlations between the psychological atmosphere and motivation of students. The results of the study are useful for further investigation of students' motivation and search of the ways to increase it.*

Keywords: *first-year university students, group of Educational/cognitive motives, learning motivation, psychological atmosphere in student group.*

Introduction

There are many types of classification of motivation. In relation to the individual it can be classified as intrinsic (aimed at achieving the individual goal) and extrinsic (influenced by other people or other sources); by direction, it can be positive or negative; by the level – strong, weak or average; by the area of

activity – professional, educational, creative, communicative, etc. (Richard, 2019; Il'in, 2002; Cofer & Appley, 1964). Motivation is of a dynamic character, it can be stable, it can increase or decrease as well. The importance of having an intrinsic (deeper) motivation is emphasized by E. Deci and R. Ryan (1985; 2000). However, extrinsic motivation can also be important. In the case students do not see the subjective value of learning at the beginning of their study, it can keep them working and eventually, if they experience success, the intrinsic motivation is being developing in students (Peklaj & Levpušček, 2006).

The student's learning motivation is expressed in their involvement in educational activities and is aimed at achieving a certain result which may be different for each student (McClelland, 2015). This result depends on the prevailing motivation of the student. For example, for some students it is important to engage in scientific activities, for others the creative component of motivation is most important, while some others are primarily focused on communication.

Many authors indicate the importance of motivation for the outcome of learning process and argue the necessity of improving learning motivation (Boekaerts, 2010; Lamb, 2017; Safronova & Klyukina, 2019). Working on student motivation increase is essential for the well-being of both students and the academic staff, as well as the society as a whole (Korb, 2014).

Especially great attention should be paid to the motivation of first-year students, as in the first months of studies freshmen face increasing difficulties sometimes negatively affecting their motivation. In recent decades, an increase in the number of freshmen who are psychologically, socially and academically unprepared for higher school has been noticed: they show inappropriate behaviour such as being late for classes, alienation attitude to teachers and administration of the university, unrealistic expectation of high grades, and others (Howey, 2008). In this case, the only thing that can keep a student at the university is increasing their motivation. According to D. Kelly (1988), "When students have both a lack of academic skills and lack motivation, the greater problem is motivation". Moreover, even the students who are well prepared to study at the university do not sometimes reach a high level of knowledge and competence in case of lack of motivation.

The development of students' motivation is a process that is influenced by many factors: the personality of the student, the personality of the teacher, the organisation of training, the content of individual subjects, the psychological atmosphere in the student group and at the university as a whole, and others. The task of a teacher-researcher is to identify such factors, analyse their relationship with motivation and, based on this analysis, suggest ways to improve the situation.

It is good if a first-year student has come to the university with an initial internal motivation to learn and master the profession. But if this does not happen, then teachers, the university administration, and even – despite the fact that usually a student comes to the university as an adult – parents should be involved

in the development of motivation. It is important for parents that their children develop intellectually, gain knowledge and become professionally successful people in the future. Teachers want the student to be an interested participant in the educational process, to show a high level of mastery of educational material at exams, to participate in scientific events. The administration of the educational institution is interested in ensuring that the first-year student does not leave the university, but successfully continues their studies and receives a diploma, and they increase the prestige of the university and participate in various forms of university life (educational, scientific, volunteer, sports, cultural and others). Thus, the issue of increasing educational motivation is relevant for all participants in the educational process of the university: for students, their parents, teachers and administration. For teachers and the university administration, working to increase the motivation of students is an important professional task.

A comprehensive study of learning motivation is a prerequisite for the effectiveness of this work. The diagnostics of motivation is one of the main directions in its study. Diagnostics includes three consecutive stages: 1) the choice of diagnostic tools that correspond to the specific task set by the researcher, 2) the diagnostic procedure itself, 3) the interpretation and analysis of the results obtained. It is especially important to diagnose the motivation of first-year students; the results of the diagnostics allow teachers and university administration to achieve a better understanding of how to work more effectively with students, what forms and methods of conducting classes to choose, what extracurricular activities can contribute to increasing the learning motivation of students. Such factors as the psychological sense of university membership and positive perception of the psychological climate in the student group may be important for students' involvement into studying, their motivation and learning success (Ofoghi, Sadeghi, & Babaei, 2016, Chaikovska & Onufrieva, 2019; Ferreira, Cardoso, & Abrantes, 2011; Dişlen-Dağgöl, 2019).

This study presents some results of the Latvian-Russian research project on the learning motivation of university students and its relationship with psychological atmosphere in student groups. The project is carried out by researchers from two universities: Riga EKA University of Applied Sciences (EKA) and Smolensk State University (SmolSU). The project started in 2018; at the first stage, the learning motivation of graduate students has been studied. At the present stage, the learning motivation of the first-year students is in the centre of research.

This article focuses on one group of learning motives of first-year students, namely, on their Educational/cognitive motives. These motives are a fundamental incentive for becoming a highly qualified specialist with a broad theoretical and practical outlook. *The aim of the study* is to analyse and compare the Educational/cognitive motives of the first-year students at the universities of Riga and Smolensk, as well as to study the interrelationship between this kind of learning motives and the psychological atmosphere in the student group.

In the survey carried out in December 2019, 129 freshmen from EKA University of Applied Sciences (Latvia) and Smolensk State University (Russia) participated.

Methodology

For collecting the data, the two techniques were used.

1) The method of diagnosing the learning motivation of students by N. Badmayeva (Badmayeva, 2004) adapted by the authors for Latvia (Jermolajeva, Silchenkova, & Turusheva, 2020). The respondents received a questionnaire with 34 statements (implicitly for the students, the statements represented 7 motivation groups/scales) and were asked to rate them from 1 point (the minimum importance of the motive) to 5 (the maximum). The motivation scales are listed in Fig. 1.

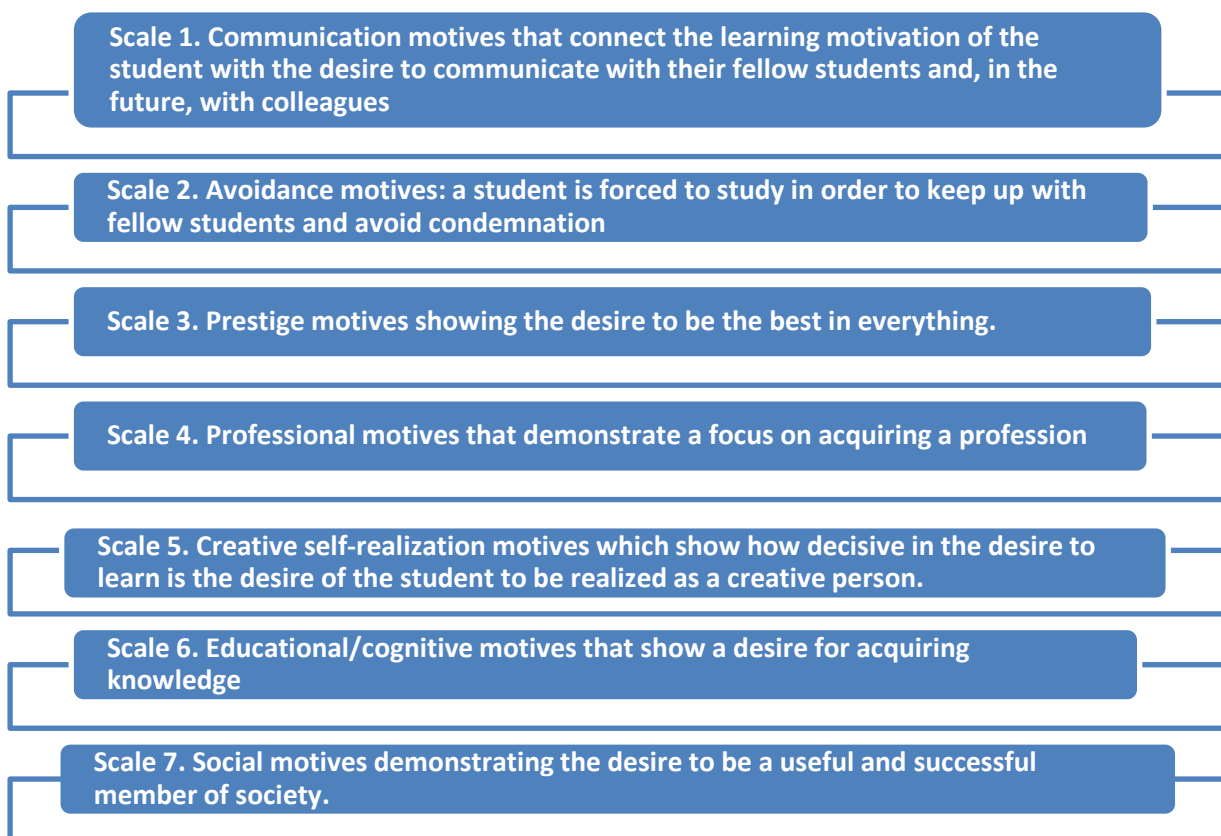


Figure 1 The scales of learning motivation by N. Badmayeva

Analysing the data, the following motivation levels were determined: the low level of motivation is from 1 to 2.3 points, the average one – from 2.4 to 3.6 points, the high level from 3.7 to 5 points.

2) The “Diagnosing of the psychological atmosphere in the team by A.F. Fidler” based on the method of semantic differential (Fetiskin, Kozlov, & Manujlov, 2002) adapted by the authors for Latvia (Jermolajeva, Silchenkova, & Turusheva, 2021). The corresponding questionnaire contains 10 bipolar scales

representing different aspects of the psychological atmosphere: Friendliness – Hostility; Consent – Dissent; Satisfaction – Dissatisfaction; Fascination – Indifference; Productivity – Unproductivity; Warmth – Coldness; Cooperation – Lack of cooperation; Mutual support – Unkindness; Attraction – Boredom; Success – Failure. According to respondents' internal perception of the psychological climate in the group, they rated each bipolar scale from 1 (the most positive score) to 8 (the most negative one). Scores 1 - 4 show a positive perception of the psychological atmosphere, 5 - 8 indicate a negative perception.

129 students of the first year of study took part in the international survey. They represented EKA University of Applied Sciences (Riga, Latvia) and Smolensk State University (Russia). The survey was conducted in parallel in the two countries in December 2019. 62 students of SmolSU were studying in economics and management areas of training, 67 freshmen of EKA – in the areas of economics, management, culture management, information technology, and design.

The procedure of sampling was carried out in accordance with the principle of randomness of getting people into the samples that prevents systematic errors (Bashina & Spirin, 2018). The representativeness of the general population (first-year students of the EKA and SmolSU) by the two random repetition-free national samples was ensured by fulfilment of the following requirements: A) each member of the general population had approximately equal probability of getting into the sample. The questionnaires were randomly distributed between students; it was not known in advance who would receive the questionnaire. B) The respondents were selected from the general population independently of the analyzed features. The researchers could not know in advance the specific survey indicators; moreover, the survey was carried out by other people (assistants). C) The selection was carried out from homogeneous students groups. In the Smolensk and Latvian samples, there are freshmen of different ages and gender.

The Alpha Cronbach coefficient was calculated for the received data. For the first-year students of the Riga sample it is 0.974, for Smolensk – 0.968. The high value of this indicator shows the reliability of the samples and high internal consistency of the data.

In the data processing, table method, descriptive statistics, analysis of statistical indicators, method of comparison, correlation analysis (the *Statistica* program) were used.

Results and Discussion

Before proceeding to the group of Educational/cognitive motives, it is necessary to mention general results. Table 1 shows the statistics on the learning motivation of the first-year students of Riga and Smolensk by all the 7 motive scales and in general on the questionnaire. The following indicators of descriptive

statistics are shown: the average value, the mode, the dispersion, and the coefficient of variation (CoV).

Table 1 The learning motivation of the first-year students of Riga and Smolensk by groups of motives and in general on the questionnaire

Scale of learning motivation	EKA				SmolSU			
	Mean	Mode	Dispersion	CoV (%)	Mean	Mode	Dispersion	CoV (%)
Communication motives	3.46	3	1.51	35.52	3.51	4	1.35	33.10
Avoidance motives	2.40	1	1.64	53.36	2.47	1	1.57	50.73
Prestige motives	2.93	1	2.02	48.51	3.1	4	1.56	40.29
Professional motives	4.30	5	0.76	20.27	3.70	4	1.48	32.88
Creative self-realisation motives	3.66	5	1.48	33.24	3.25	4	1.34	35.62
Educational/cognitive motives	3.65	5	1.25	30.63	3.38	4	1.24	32.95
Social motives	3.13	3	1.54	39.65	3.52	5	1.31	32.52
General motivation	3.38	5	2	41.84	3.3	4	1.77	40.32

Source: *Jermolajeva et al., 2021.*

The level of the general learning motivation among the first-year students is average. The freshmen of EKA score it by 3.38 points; this indicator for the Smolensk sample is 3.3. The most common assessment in Riga and Smolensk is 5 and 4, relatively. But the high value of CoV in both samples (more than 33%) indicates a high variability of the answers and an atypicality of average values. The verification of the data by the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney criterion did not reveal any significant difference between the two samples in the averages on all 34 items (the significance level $p < 0,05$). However, there are some differences between the samples. The most striking difference concerns the students' assessment of the Educational/cognitive motives.

Table 2 shows the students' ranking of the motivation scales importance.

In both samples the highest rates are obtained for the scale of Professional motives. As for the scale of the Educational/cognitive motives, its importance has been differently assessed by the Latvian and Russian respondents. While for the freshmen in Riga it is in the 2nd most important place (at once after Professional motivation), the students of Smolensk put it in the 4th place (after Professional, Communication and Social motives). The detailed consideration of the respondents' answers on this motivation scale follows.

Table 2 Ranking of motive groups in the samples of the first-year students of Riga and Smolensk

Rank	EKA	SmolSU
1	Professional motives	Professional motives
2	Educational/cognitive & Creative self-realisation motives	Social & Communication motives
3	Communication motives	Educational/cognitive motives
4	Social motives	Creative self-realisation motives
5	Prestige motives	Prestige motives
6	Avoidance motives	Avoidance motives

Source: Jermolajeva et al., 2021.

The scale of the Educational/ cognitive motives consists of 7 statements. Table 3 shows statistics on all the statements and on the group as a whole.

Table 3 Statistical indicators of the Educational/cognitive motives (first year students of Riga and Smolensk) (created by the authors)

Motives of the Educational/cognitive scale	University	Mean	Mode	Dispersion	CoV (%)
I want to study successfully to pass exams for “4” and “5” (SmolSU), “8” – “10” (EKA)	EKA	3.28	3	1.48	37.04
	SmolSU	3.83	5	1.4	30.82
Just like to learn	EKA	3.24	3	1.34	35.69
	SmolSU	3.02	3	1.34	38.35
Be constantly ready for the next classes	EKA	3.72	3	1.09	28.03
	SmolSU	3.05	3	1.17	35.42
To continue further studies in subsequent courses, to provide answers to specific learning questions	EKA	3.75	5	1.19	29.15
	SmolSU	3.42	4	1.47	35.46
To gain deep and solid knowledge and competencies	EKA	4.15	5	0.89	22.69
	SmolSU	3.93	4	0.94	24.71
Because I have an ambition to do some scientific activity in the specialty	EKA	3.10	3	1.85	43.84
	SmolSU	2.37	2	1.42	50.40
Any knowledge will be useful in the future profession	EKA	4.31	5	0.89	21.81
	SmolSU	4.07	5	0.98	24.32
<i>Indicators on the scale as a whole</i>	<i>EKA</i>	<i>3.65</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>1.25</i>	<i>34.2</i>
	<i>SmolSU</i>	<i>3.38</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>1.25</i>	<i>36.9</i>

In this group of motives, the respondents of both samples give the first place to the statement “Any knowledge will be useful in a future profession” (4.31 points in Riga, 4.07 in Smolensk). The corresponding *CoVs* are less than 33%, which indicates the typicality of the average values and a small fluctuation of students’ answers. Both samples give the second place to the motive “I am studying to acquire deep and solid knowledge” (4.15 in the Riga sample and 3.94 in the Smolensk one). The *CoVs* say also that the students are generally unanimous on this statement.

Compared with these two motives, there is a higher variation in responses to other statements. Most freshmen in Smolensk are motivated to study successfully, to pass exams for "4" and "5". This statement is highly rated (4 and 5 points) by 66% of the respondents. In the Riga sample the proportion of similar answers is 42%. Although this motive is quite important, the desire to gain knowledge, rather than grades, seems to be a more adequate disposition in educational/cognitive activity.

The students of Riga are more motivated to prepare for classes than the students of Smolensk: 55% of the first-year students in Riga give high scores (4 and 5) to this statement, while in Smolensk the most often scores are 3 (39%) and 2 (23%).

Riga first-year students are slightly more motivated to continue their studies than Smolensk ones: 60% assess the statement "I want to continue further studies in subsequent courses, to provide answers to specific learning questions" at 4 and 5 (50% in the Smolensk sample).

There are quite many students who do not like to study. 33.9% of SmolSU respondents rate the statement "I just like to learn" by 1-2 points. At the same time, the Smolensk sample has about the same number of people who like the learning process (35.5%). In the Riga sample, this ratio is 25.4% (though, it is also quite a lot) versus 40.3%.

Perhaps those who do not like to learn initially had no motivation as they entered the university at the insistence of their parents. There is a high probability that in the future they will be expelled from the university at their own request or according to the results of exams. Nevertheless, they are not hopeless university losers, but only the teachers should make every effort to change their negative perception of the learning process and increase their motivation.

In both samples, the highest *CoV* was obtained for the statement "I learn because I have an ambition to do some scientific activity in the specialty". In the Smolensk sample, only 22.6% of the first-year students rate it 4 or 5; in the Riga sample, 38.8% plan to do research in the chosen profession. Of course, first-year students do not yet know how their life, including their studies, may turn out in a few years. Many plan to get a job as soon as possible, while others are unsure of their abilities in research. Some may have the opinion that doing research is not very profitable in material terms; it is a too long path to success.

In general, it can be noted that compared with the Smolensk freshmen, the students of Riga show slightly higher average scores both in the assessment of the motive group as a whole (3.65 versus 3.38) and in the rates for separate statements. This indicates a more conscious and responsible attitude to their studies. In part, this difference in motivation may be due to the fact that the average age of students in the Riga sample is higher than that of the Smolensk one. Usually, older students approach their studies more consciously, understand their significance better, and study harder than their younger classmates. Perhaps in the Smolensk sample there are more freshmen who did not choose their

university consciously, but rather did it randomly, or on the advice of friends or parents. In addition, there might be suggested some other factors responsible for the SmolSU students' lag in motivation, for example, the compulsory military service in Russia, or less elaborated system of professional orientation at Russian schools. The issue requires an additional research.

For studying the interrelationship between motivation and the psychological atmosphere in the student group, the A. Fidler's questionnaire with 10 bipolar scales was used. Fig. 2 shows the average scores for 10 aspects of the psychological climate in the groups of first-year students in Riga and Smolensk (the lower the score, the more positive the respondents' assessment of the psychological atmosphere).

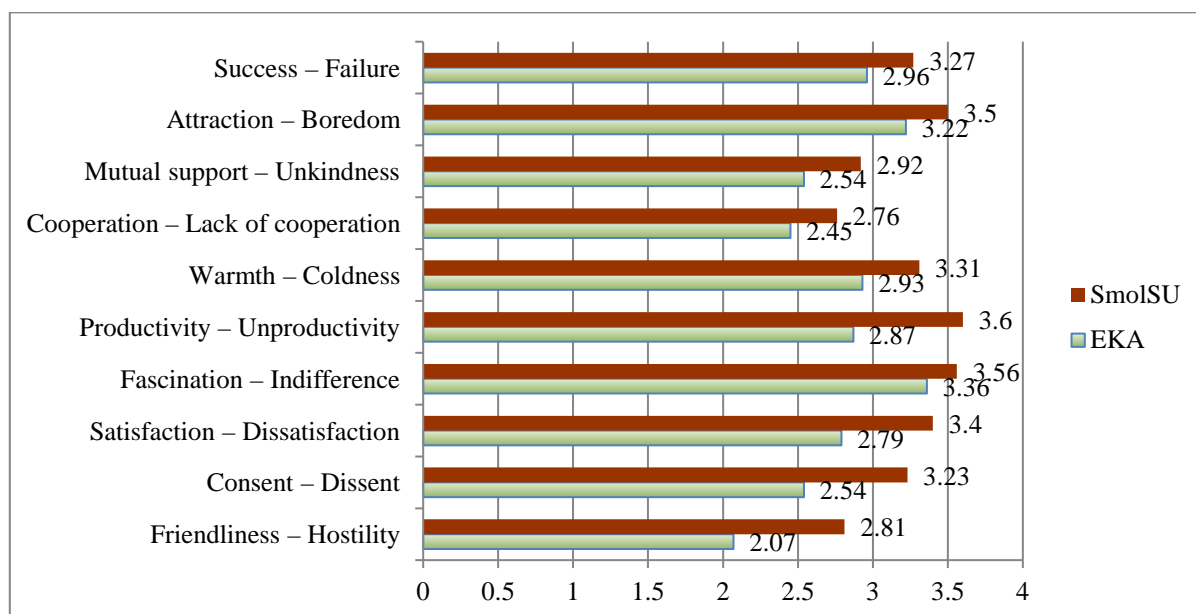


Figure 2 The average rates of the aspects of the psychological atmosphere in the student group (first-year students of Riga and Smolensk) (created by the authors)

The average scores on all 10 scales are below 4, which indicates both university freshmen's positive perception of the psychological atmosphere in their group. The students of Riga are somewhat more positive about it (the average on 10 scales is 2.77, mode 2) than those of Smolensk (3.24 and 3, relatively). In both samples, the top three most positive assessments relate to Friendliness, Cooperation, and Mutual support. That is, from the beginning of their studies students collaborate, friendly communicate, and create a positive atmosphere for learning.

To check the correlations between the learning motivation of students and the psychological atmosphere in the student group, the Spearman correlation coefficient was used, with $p < 0.05$.

For the Smolensk students, statistically significant dependence of general motivation on the general atmosphere in the group was revealed. At the same time,

no statistically significant correlations were found between the Educational/cognitive motives and the psychological climate in the group or its individual aspects. This partly explains the third place of the Educational/cognitive motives in the Smolensk sample ranking: the lack of correlations indicates these motives' relatively less importance for students, compared, for example, to Social and Communicative motives.

In the Riga sample, a moderate correlation was found between Educational/cognitive motives and the Fascination aspect ($R = -0.36$). In general, the atmosphere of fascination is the most frequent aspect that affects the various learning motives of the first-year students in Riga compared to other aspects of the psychological climate. Probably this is due to the specifics of the EKA University: many students of this university are studying in the programmes connected with culture.

A more detailed description of the results of the correlation analysis can be seen in another paper (Jermolajeva, Silchenkova, & Turusheva, 2021a). It should be noted that the number of statistically significant correlations between the general learning motivation and separate motive groups, on one hand, and general psychological atmosphere and its separate aspects, on the other, turned out to be not as large as the authors initially believed. However, in both samples certain results were obtained. The revealed dependencies make it possible to suggest that improving the psychological climate in the student group may be a tool to influence motivation. The correlations found (as well as their absence) offer material for further research and reflections on how to increase learning motivation.

Conclusions

- The level of general learning motivation of the first-year students in Riga and Smolensk is average; students of Riga are slightly more motivated than students of Smolensk. Riga freshmen are more purposefully focused on Educational/cognitive development; the respective group of motives occupies the second place by importance (immediately after Professional motives). The Smolensk first-year students are more motivated to communicate and socialize than to gain knowledge. When ranking motivational groups, their Educational/cognitive motives are in the fourth place
- Students of both countries believe that any knowledge will be useful in their future profession, while deep and solid knowledge is less important for them, which indicates their somewhat cool attitude to studying. Some students are not in the mood to fully immerse themselves in their studies and devote a lot of time and effort to it.

- A negative phenomenon is the presence of freshmen who do not like to learn in principle; there are more such students in the Smolensk sample. Perhaps they initially had no motivation to study, because they entered the university at the insistence of their parents or for other external reasons. The teachers should make every effort to increase the motivation of such students.
- The analysis of the correlations between the psychological atmosphere in the group and the learning motivation of students shows the presence of a statistically significant dependence of the general motivation on the atmosphere in the group for Smolensk students and the dependence of the Educational/cognitive motives of Riga students on the fascination of the educational process. Thus, improving the psychological atmosphere of the pedagogical process and in the student group can be an additional tool of increasing student motivation. Teachers should strive to ensure that the training is interesting, modern, productive, and full of positive emotions.
- The research has the following limitations: the experimental base is limited to two universities from two countries (further research could include at least one more country); the correlation analysis is limited to one method (in future other methods of multivariate analysis will be included).

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