

William Teesdale

# Improving Students' Quality of Life Seen Through a Content and Process- Oriented Perspective

A qualitative study looking at how students in Trondheim experience quality of life, and the process of trying to understand the underlying issues and promote students' quality of life

Master's thesis in Science in Counselling

Supervisor: Jonathan Reams

June 2022



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Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences  
Department of Education and Lifelong Learning





## Abstract English

Much research looks at students' lack of quality of life; this research has often come in the form of extensive surveys gathering data on how students are feeling. In the research field, there has also been a focus on factors influencing the quality of life, and research on promoting students' quality of life has been lacking. There is also a lack of research that looks at students' quality of life from a more complex and systematic perspective instead of just an individualized view.

In this master thesis, I have looked at how students in Trondheim experience quality of life and how the people involved in the In My Experience workshop processes have gone about understanding the underlying issues better and promoting students' quality of life.

The research question was investigated by observing workshops held by In My Experience to develop interventions to improve students' quality of life. These workshops consisted of participants, facilitators, and consultants.

The literature review chapter of this thesis consists of previous research on students' quality of life. The theory chapter of this thesis consists of theory about students' quality of life and theory about other aspects related to the process of the workshops. The literature and theory were used to discuss and answer the findings observed and analyzed in this research project.

The findings showed that mattering, psychological safety, biases, personas, groupthink, and selection of participants played a key role in the workshop process. The design of the workshops was also essential to bring about these states in the group, further positively influencing the results from the workshop. It's essential to manage time constraints and learning to create a quality process.

Furthermore, it was found that students' quality of life is influenced by a feeling of social mattering, academic mattering, stress, pressure, expectations, and challenges. It's important to regard the representation and influence of students in the process of the project but also focus on the diversity of different students while creating interventions for quality of life.

The factors related to students' quality of life are interrelated and affect each other. Students' quality of life is a complex issue that demands that the involved parties work in a complex way to match the domain.

The interventions that resulted from the workshops were: Social curator, a crash course in the learning environment for lecturers, and first-year student mentors.

## Abstract Norwegian

Det er mye forskning som ser på manglene ved studenters livskvalitet. Disse studiene har ofte blir gjort i form av større kvantitative undersøkelser som har undersøkt hvordan studenter har det. I feltet har det vært et negativt fokus, og manglende forskning på hvordan man skal forbedre studenters livskvalitet. Det er også en mangel på forskning som ser på studenters livskvalitet fra et mer komplekst og systematisk perspektiv.

I denne masteroppgaven har jeg sett på hvordan studenter i Trondheim opplever livskvalitet og hvordan de involverte i In My Experience-workshopene har gått frem for å forbedre studenters livskvalitet.

Forskningsspørsmålet ble utforsket og besvart gjennom observasjon av workshops som In My Experience holdt for å komme frem til tiltak for å forbedre studenters livskvalitet. Til stede i disse workshopene var deltakere, fasilitatorer og konsulenter.

Litteraturgjennomgang og teorikapittelet i denne masteroppgaven består av tidligere forskning og teori om studenters livskvalitet, og teori knyttet til prosessen i workshopene. Den tidligere forskningen og teorien jeg benyttet meg av, hjalp meg å diskutere og besvare funnene mine.

Funnene viste at mattering, psykologisk trygghet, social desirability bias, personas, groupthink, og valg av deltakere spilte en viktig rolle i workshop-prosessen. Hvordan workshopene var designet og gjennomført spilte også en sentral rolle i hvordan resultatene i workshopen ble. Tidsrammen påvirket prosessen i workshopene og hva som ble lært om prosessen.

Funnene viste at studenters livskvalitet blir påvirket av en følelse av sosial mattering, akademisk mattering, stress, press, forventinger og utfordringer. Det er viktig å tenke på hvordan studentene blir representert i prosessen og i skapelsen av tiltak, men også hvordan mangfoldet av studenter blir representert i skapelsen av tiltak for å forbedre studenters livskvalitet.

Faktorene relatert til studenters livskvalitet påvirker hverandre og har gjensidige forhold. Forbedring av studenters livskvalitet er en kompleks utfordring. Det krever at de involverte partene jobber på en kompleks måte som er passelig for domenet.

Tiltakene som kom ut av workshopene var: Sosial kurator, Kræsjkurs i læringsmiljø for forelesere og førsteårsstudentsmentorer.

## Acknowledgements

I was told that it is wise to write a master's about something that's meaningful to me, as that is something that could keep the motivation up in times when finishing the master's seems impossible. I was very lucky when I came across the In My Experience project which presented a golden opportunity for me to write about the quality of life which is a subject, I am passionate about. It also gave me an opportunity to write about something that could add value to the community in some way. The process I have been in has been relatively smooth sailing, nevertheless, there have been challenges and I've learned a lot.

I want to thank everyone involved in my master's program, all my professors and classmates. Together all these individuals have contributed to me truly feeling at home during my master's course. I want to thank the team at In My Experience, especially Siri Bjaarstad and Ann Marit Longva for welcoming me into the project, encouraging me, and being the passionate individuals that they are. I also want to thank my accountability-buddy Fredrik Saanum. Together we decided to have each other's back through the whole master's thesis process, and boy have we been grinding this thesis, day in and day out. I also want to give the biggest thank you to my Supervisor Jonathan Reams. Thank you for being so available, guiding me with extraordinary understanding and generosity of your knowledge and feedback. Also being open to talking about other things not directly related to the thesis writing. I also want to thank everyone else related to the master's program that has given me guidance when I needed it, you guys know who you are.

Even though it can be tough to write a master's thesis I always remind myself of how lucky I am to be able to do this. I also like to think that no matter what happens related to this master, there is no way I could ever lose because almost all experience is valuable in the long run.



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# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Background for chosen theme**

Quality of life is essential for students, not just in terms of benefiting Students' well-being but also to promote their academic success (Bonell et al., 2014, p.1-2). Between 1985 and 2009, quality of life was rising amongst the population in Norway, but since 2009 it has been declining, mostly amongst the age groups 15-39 years old (Sivertsen, 2021; Hellevik & Hellevik, 2021, p.104-105; Støren & Rønning, 2021). What causes this and why this is happening is difficult to answer.

Mordal & Ness (2021) found that the Scandinavian literature focusing on how to improve the quality of life amongst students in literature is primarily focused on the negative aspects of students' quality of life, and individual factors influencing their quality of life and doesn't address societal and network factors. There is a need for studies that look at how to improve the quality of life amongst students, and studies that look at how societal, relational, psychosocial, friendship, belonging, and study environment affect students' quality of life. There is also a need for more transferability within such studies. There are too few studies with too specific student groups to transfer these studies to other contexts regarding students' quality of life. Although there is robust evidence that individual interventions such as mindfulness have positive effects on students' quality of life (Sivertsen, 2021; Hellevik & Hellevik, 2021; Mordal & Ness, 2021; Knapstad et al., 2021). Mordal and Ness (2021) note that there is a lack of research on how to reduce students' feelings of loneliness and what importance social relations can have to the quality of life. Existing research on the quality of life amongst students has focused on individual interventions, such as psychologists and campus therapists. The research has not been very focused on the psychosocial and systematic influences on quality of life such as study environment, social and relational aspects, and what universities and institutions can do to promote quality of life for students. The existing research on the quality of life and promoting quality of life for students is lacking and is not robust enough (Mordal & Ness, 2021, p.1-48).

Quality of life, well-being, and meaning has always been a personal area of interest. When figuring out the theme for the master thesis project, it was about finding a theme that carried some personal meaning. The thesis started with wellbeing and coaching as central themes, but through meetings with inspirational people, the theme for the thesis changed to addressing the quality of life amongst students. The In My Experience project, focusing on improving the quality of life amongst students in Trondheim, eventually became central to the thesis. Writing about something close to the heart that could influence the quality of life amongst students added emotional depth to this thesis.

## **1.2 The purpose of the study and actualization of the research question**

In this master thesis, I will investigate how students in Trondheim experience quality of life and the IME process of promoting quality of life for students in Trondheim. The thesis will address other questions, like what is essential for students to have a high quality of life, what influences students' quality of life, and how students experience the quality of life.

This research theme is important as it is a field, especially in Norway, that lacks research. Gaining knowledge on how students in Trondheim experience quality of life can have significant impacts (Mordal & Ness, 2021, p.1-48). The gained knowledge from this thesis and results from the In My Experience project can if implicated benefit universities, students, municipalities, governments, professors, counselors, and research fields, nationally and internationally. Learning about and improving students' quality of life can lead to more academic success and motivation and create individuals who can be great resources for society and the collective in future generations to come.

Based on this, the research question is:

*How do students in Trondheim experience quality of life and how was the process of trying to understand the underlying issues and promote students' quality of life?*

### **1.3 Description of In My Experience**

Aiming to make systematic changes and increase the knowledge about the positives of students' quality of life is the important core of this thesis. This is also an important aim and theme for In My Experience. In My Experience is a project tracking what quality of life means to students. The project collaborates between StudyTrondheim, the Student Association (SiT), Trondheim municipality, and research departments at NTNU. The project gets funding from the Norwegian Directorate of Health (InMyExperience, 2022). In My Experience aims to figure out more about what it is like to be a student in Norway today and what creates good student lives. They believe that we know enough about the struggles, symptoms, and psychological problems of students through surveys such as the SHoT survey. Knowing more about what is good and what gives mastery and meaning in students' lives is essential, yet lacking. To prevent the low quality of life and mental health issues amongst students in the future we must look at students' everyday lives, the positives, and negatives, and understand what promotes students' quality of life (InMyExperience, 2022).

IME has engaged students in their process right from the start. To gain knowledge about students' quality of life and mental health In My Experience has gathered data through a qualitative and quantitative-based data collector built on the foundation of the sensemaking tool. They have gathered almost 600 stories from different students in Trondheim. To answer the data collector tool one writes and shares a story about a neutral, positive, or negative experience as a student, then selects different sections about how meaningful the experience was, how often it happens, and so on. Through this approach to data gathering, In My Experience has been able to gather rich data to understand student life through the lenses of students. Such rich data that can genuinely contribute to understanding the quality of life amongst students will be the foundation for the interventions that will eventually be implemented to promote students' quality of life (InMyExperience, 2022). In My Experience are eventually planning to implement interventions in Trondheim to promote students' quality of life and mental health. These interventions will actualize through a series of workshops and meetings following the gathering of data through the survey (InMyExperience, 2022).

## **1.4 The structure of the thesis**

This thesis consists of eight chapters. The first chapter presented the background and reason for the theme and research question, why it is essential, personal reasons for writing about it, the purpose of the thesis, and some information about In My Experience. The second chapter also called literature review and theory, is about previous research and theory regarding student quality of life, and theory linked to the process of promoting students' quality of life. The theory that will be presented reflects the findings of the. The third chapter will explain the methodology used to answer the research question. The fourth chapter will present the findings from gathering and analyzing data. Chapter five will discuss the findings in the light of relevant theory to try and answer the research question. The sixth chapter will summarize key findings, reflections about the research project, and possible implications for the project. Chapter seven will be a reference list, and chapter eight shows the appendix.

## 2 Theory and literature review

In this chapter, I will explain concepts and theories that are relevant to my research question "How do students in Trondheim experience quality of life, and how was the process of trying to understand the underlying issues and promote students' quality of life?", and relevant to the findings that emerged through my research. This chapter will be divided into two main sections, one will be previous research related to the students' quality of life and the other section will be about relevant theory for the topic of this study.

Each section of this chapter has relevance to different findings from this study. The findings that came through observing IME workshops revealed truths about the process of coming up with interventions to improve students' quality of life, what's important regarding students' quality of life, and meta meanings of the content in the workshops. Therefore, the literature review and theory will present a theory that can explain these findings. Each section will first give a little overview of the findings related to the theory and then present the relevant theory.

### 2.1 Students' quality of life

This section will explain some of the previous research done on the quality of life in Norway. The workshops were aimed at finding interventions to improve students' quality of life, therefore, finding previous research on this is important.

Subjective quality of life can be defined as how one experiences one's own life and meaning, while the objective quality of life is more about the objective measures of quality of life such as safety, health, belonging, and freedom. Objective and subjective quality of life can be influenced by the environment around a person as well as their perception of the objective experience they encounter (Støren & Rønning, 2021). Quality of life is defined as a cognitive overall evaluation of one's own life, perception, and objective state of important aspects of one's life (Diener, 1994, p.214; Sivertsen, 2021, p.35; Helsedirektoratet, 2015, p.54).

In 2021 the latest Shot report was released; this report is released every 4<sup>th</sup> year to track students' mental health state. The shot report from 2021 where the results have been influenced by the societal effects of the corona pandemic, showed a reduction in quality of life amongst students, an increase in loneliness, exclusion, psychological illnesses, and feelings of isolation, compared to previous reports. The report exposes negative and less negative trends in terms of students' physical, psychological health, and other factors. There is also an increasing trend in the general population in terms of loneliness, psychological problems, sleep problems, and health problems from 2020 to 2021. The younger generation report having a lower quality of life than the older generation. It's important to note here that younger people report better physical health, and more giving social relations than older people. Social relations, work, school environment, living conditions, economy, salary, employment, societal circumstances, leisure time, negative life events, education, traumas, discrimination, anxiety, depression, loneliness, sexual harassment, threats, and violence all have an impact on quality of life (Sivertsen, 2021, p.2-3; Støren & Rønning, 2021).

Øya & Vestel (2014, p.99-133) write that today's youths aged 17-20 years old are better behaved, less rebellious, exercise more, use less drugs and substances, are less criminal. They live actively where friends, family, school, exercise, and digital leisure are central. Youth today also spend more time in educational systems than before, have grown up with better financial security and value consumption and materialism more than previous generations. Despite all this there has been an increase in mental illnesses the last couple years. There is some evidence that negative self-image and performance related stress are factors causing this (Haugseth, 2020). Worries about future is also a concern for younger people, especially concerns surrounding future career and economic situation. Other major issues are dissatisfaction with social relations, health, and physical appearance (Hellevik & Hellevik, 2021, p.104; Knapstad et al., 2021, p.67; Sivertsen, 2021, p.35).

## 2.2 Mattering

In the IME workshops, it was apparent that mattering stood out as a central theme in many issues. A sense of mattering seemed to be influential in many aspects of students' quality of life and played a key role in the workshop process itself.

A lack of mattering is linked to depression and suicidal tendencies (Flett et al., 2019, p.1). Mattering means to feel that one has meaningful social connections with others and feels important and significant to other people. It can be described as a feeling but also a motive. It's about feeling that others depend, rely on us, pay attention, and are emotionally invested in us, that we would be missed if gone, feeling that one's actions are noticed by others, is considered special by others who regard us like this (Flett, 2018, p.32; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.670).

Mattering consists of two parts which are feeling and adding value. Feeling valued is about being respected appreciated and recognized while adding value is about making contributions to others, the world, the community, and the collective. Feeling and adding value plays a part in many domains in life such as work, relationships, leisure, community, the self, and school. Feeling valued and adding value is essential for individual and collective wellbeing, purpose, health, autonomy, mastery, growth, self-acceptance, and quality of life. It can create positive and negative cycles based on if there is a feeling of adding and feeling valued. Balancing feeling and adding value also creates a healthier society where people report higher satisfaction with society (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021, p.4). Mattering can also influence self-esteem, social self-esteem, and people's motivation for seeking Mattering contexts (Flett, 2018, p.52-71). Individuals are generally motivated to seek inclusion and matter while also avoiding devaluation, rejection, and exclusion (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021, p.14).

There is a belief that shifting from a "me culture" where everything is about the individual to a "we culture" where it's about the collective can have big positive effects on individuals and societies' quality of life. To achieve mattering on a significant scale it's also important to promote wellness and fairness in society (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021). One can belong to a group but feel like one doesn't matter if for example our voice there isn't heard (Flett et al., 2019, p.670). Individualized cultures promote values that contrast with mattering and collective values, this can influence the societal quality of life. Although it is important to balance individual and collective values (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021). The pursuit of certain extrinsic, self-enhancement values linked to cultural individualistic values has a negative effect on wellbeing, prosocial behavior, and caring for the

environment. While intrinsic and self-transcendent values have positive effects on well-being, prosocial behavior, and caring for the environment (Kasser, 2011).

Research links lack of mattering to negative effects on society, students, and individuals, such as depression, narcissism, devaluation, anxiety, lower self-esteem, self-criticism, increased stress, self-perfectionism, violence, increased social phobia, and loneliness (Flett et al., 2014, 2016a, b; Taylor and Turner, 2011 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.673; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021; Dixon & Robinson Karpus, 2008; Flett et al., 2012; Joeng and Turner, 2015 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.673-674; Rosenberg & McCollough, 1981 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.674) Feeling mattering is associated with lower suicidality, and fewer thoughts and plans about suicide in students (Flett et al., 2018b; Holden et al., 2018; Elliot et al., 2005; Joiner et al., 2009 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.674).

It's reported that 1 in 3 students feel depressed (Ibrahim et al., 2013 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.667). 22.3% of students have had suicidal thoughts (Mortier et al., 2018 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.667). Depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts might be more prone to the students that feel like they don't matter (Flett et al., 2019, p.668). Promoting mattering and thereby students' mental health and well-being will also lead to them completing university programs, being more engaged, and reaching further in their academic striving according to Flett et al., (2019, p.668). Schlossberg (1989 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.669) mentions that first-year students might feel like they struggle to fit in, feel marginalized, and don't matter to the university or in social contexts. Mattering here would be extremely important. Vice versa students who feel that they do matter, are encouraged, and appreciated don't feel marginalized, and succeed to a bigger degree socially and academically (Schlossberg, 1989 as cited in Flett et al., 2019).

Universities and colleges can contribute to students feeling a sense of mattering (Flett et al., 2019). Dixon & Tucker (2008, p.123-125) believe mattering should have a central part in school counselling for students. The simplest way counselling can help students matter is through classroom, individual, or small group counselling, where the counselor acts in a way towards the students that shows that the student matters to the counsellor, university, and to each other. Allowing students to have a positive influence by using their strengths and encouraging them to contribute to the school, others, and volunteer (Pilivan and Siegl, 2007 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.676). Counselling can also promote mattering by targeting staff, parents, and stakeholders of the university. To promote mattering amongst students it's important to reach out, listen, and act to concerns. Incorporating mattering in the university context can have tremendous positive effects on wellbeing, motivation, loyalty to the university, dropouts, academic performance, and involvement from students, stakeholders, and parents. Mattering can also be promoted in the university through student-centered programs, learning environments, lectures, and policies (Schlossberg 1989 as cited in Tovar et al., 2009, p.174). It's important to see things through the eyes of students to promote mattering (Tinto 2017 as cited in Flett et al., 2019). Furthermore, it's important to show the students that they are cared for, valuable, and have an influence of what happens at the university. (Di Placito-De Rango, 2018 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.676).



## 2.3 Psychological safety

In the workshops there seemed to be a feeling of psychological safety which led to the participant's ability to express themselves honestly and openly, disrupt and disagree.

Psychological safety refers to when members of a group or working environment feel safe to voice ideas, seek feedback, give feedback, be honest, take risks, disrupt the process, and experiment with new ideas. Psychological safety can promote learning, performance, and growth in groups. It also counters the fear of standing out, saying, or doing something wrong, failure, embarrassment, and challenging the status quo. The feeling of safety in the group comes from the belief that they won't be ridiculed and criticized for expressing themselves honestly (Edmondson, 1999, p.350-375).

States that can look like or accompany psychological safety but are not desired in a group are social desirability bias, false consensus, and groupthink. Social desirability bias happens when participants act and answer in ways, they think are more socially desirable and acceptable than what is their honest opinion (Chung & Monroe, 2003, p.292). False consensus is when people see their own behavior choice and judgments as appropriate to the circumstances. This can happen when one thinks that one's own standpoint is the right one when others in the context are like oneself, and when the focus is directed to a specific position and not alternatives (Jones & Roelofsma, 2000, p.1134). When members of a group share common knowledge, one might also be vulnerable to groupthink (Jones & Roelofsma, 2000, p.1142). Groupthink happens when the need to be part of the group and group pressure overrides reasonable decision-making (Jones & Roelofsma, 2000, p.1141). All these biases affect team decision-making processes (Jones & Roelofsma, 2000, p.1148).

## 2.4 Expectations, stress, and mastery

Through the workshops and discussion of the sensemaker data, it was evident that students experience stress related to academic and social life. But they can also experience mastery and growth if they are able to overcome challenges. Expectations to self, study program, and social life play a role in determining the levels of stress and mastery students feel.

We can distinguish between the stressor itself or the stimuli that cause stress, and our cognitive interpretation and stress reaction to the stressor. A scientific explanation is that a stress response appears when the homeostasis in an organism is threatened or imbalanced. The stress response works as a sort of an alarm to the system in the individual and happens in the form of a neurophysiological activation from one level of arousal to another (Ursin & Eriksen, 2004, p.567). Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p.131) defined coping with stress as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person". Lazarus & Folkman (1984, p.190) also mention challenging stimuli and good stress which can increase motivation and bring a sense of mastery once coped with. Challenges can trigger stress but also bring about an opportunity to grow and master the surrounding environment and the self (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p.634).

Ryan & Deci (2000) suggests that we all have underlying needs that need to be fulfilled to be able to grow and have well-being. These needs are the need for autonomy, competence,

and relatedness to others. Together they make up the self-determination theory. Perceived competence is important for people to feel like they will be able to master things in life such as example stressors. A sense of autonomy means that people feel as if their behavior is self-determined. All these factors can enhance intrinsic motivation in individuals (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p.58).

Huuse (2021, p.13) found that students had high expectations to study life but were instead met with unexpected loneliness and challenges. Students experienced expectations from themselves and society to be social, by then feeling a sense of loneliness students didn't feel like they were living up to these expectations. Not meeting expectations in social life can be painful and can increase loneliness (Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021, p.243). Prilleltensky & prilleltensky (2021, p.258) also found that a big gap between people's perceived ideal and reality can lead to depression and anxiety. There is also a stigma around not meeting society's expectations and this can be felt by students in a feeling of shame (Hemberg et al., 2021, p.46). Colombo et al., (2020, p.1) found that the ability to hold a biased optimistic view of the future also called positively biased forecasting was associated with higher resilience, wellbeing, optimism about dealing with stress, coping, and lower levels of stress. Positive expectations, but an accepting and open attitude towards all future happenings, positive and negative were central. Positive biased forecasting helped individuals deal with stressful events.

A sense of belongingness to the university and others influences academic success, performance, and stress. Also, inclusiveness and engagement in university and learning can predict a sense of belongingness (Hausmann et al., 2007, p.805; Osterman, 2000, p.359; Glass, 2012, p.108) Finding meaning in university studies and life was also efficient to deal with stress for students, increased students' optimism, and resilience (Krypel & King, 2010, p.421; Pan, 2007, p.747).

## 2.5 Personas

During the workshops the use of designed personas was central. The personas first made an appearance in the second workshop and played a key role in the process of coming up with interventions to improve students' quality of life in Trondheim.

Personas are fictional representations of a target group with a made-up name, picture, and narrative that enables product designers to visualize what the average target of their product is like. For example, if one wants to improve students' quality of life, made-up personas would be a representation of an average student. When making personas it's extremely important to understand and have the personas reflect the needs of the user group (Miaskiewicz & Kozar, 2011, p.417-418). The goal of personas is to make it seem like a real person and to create a story about the needs and goals of the persona related to the product that's being designed.

The benefits of using personas are a better understanding of the needs of the population the product is aimed at. Personas can also be used efficiently for marketing to have outsiders understand the product, and why the product is needed by others. Personas can contribute to making good assumptions about users, making better product decisions, and increasing engagement and empathy amongst the design team towards the users (Cooper, 1999; Adlin & Pruitt, 2010, p.155, p.643). Personas also have disadvantages in that all the detailed work that goes into making and presenting the personas can be distracting for the

team working on the design product. It can be hard for designers to understand what information about the persona is important to focus on and which details are less important (Adlin & Pruitt, 2010, p.505).

A similar approach to the personas is the person base approach which can be used to enhance the acceptability and feasibility of interventions. It involves the designers of interventions to imagine how the users will take use of the intervention, the intervention's feasibility, and how the intervention will be implemented. In this approach, the designers look at how the intervention can be made more persuasive what elements of the intervention are effective and what aren't. This can be done by matching the design of the intervention to the goals of users and looking at how users might respond to the intervention (Yardley et al., 2015, p.6-7).

## **2.6 Interventions and complexity**

One of the main points of the workshop process was to come up with interventions to improve students' quality of life. But aside from this, it was also important to learn from the process that happened. This section will describe theory related to interventions, and the complexity of the workshop process.

Studying processes in organizational interventions, Nielsen (2013, p.1030) found that the employees in a company where interventions are being implemented play a key role in the process of the intervention and in whether the intervention for improving wellbeing amongst the employees is successful. These participatory organizational interventions improve the target groups' autonomy, social support, and employee wellbeing (Landsbergis & Vivona-Vaughan, 1995; Mikkelsen, 2005; Nielsen and Randall, 2012a as cited in Nielsen, 2013, p.1034).

Aside from the importance of involving the target group in the design of interventions, creating such interventions can be a very complex task to comprehend. The Cynefin framework helps to address complex challenges and provides a conceptual framework that helps to choose the appropriate action for the appropriate context (Van Beurden et al., 2011, p.73; Snowden & Boone, 2007, p.2). There are issues in society such as improving the well-being of a population that can't be solved by reductionism, prediction and order, and scientific methods. Many challenges are complex and ruled by unpredictability, and non-linear causal relationships, and have many right answers. The Cynefin framework allows for the exploration of challenges and issues that are uncertain. The framework helps to categorize challenges and actions to attack these challenges. The framework can assist in the next step and which direction to act in (Van Beurden et al., 2011, p.74-76). In the complex domain, non-linear relationships exist between cause and effect and have unpredictable patterns. Here one cannot just repeat patterns, as similar actions can give different results in different contexts. In the complex domain, one wants to sense, analyze, welcome diversity, be open-minded, collaborate, explore patterns, get an understanding of what's useful and then respond. The Cynefin framework helps us understand that the project we are involved in is constantly changing and needs new approaches to reach desired outcomes. In the Cynefin framework, it's also important to recognize when and how issues flow between simple, complicated, complex, and chaotic stages to recognize what is appropriate to do. Cynefin framework can help to understand the relationships between dynamic systems, collaboration models, and decision-making processes. The framework also promotes reflection on the benefits and consequences of actions. It gives

the people involved a more meta-view of their own actions and influence in the given context (Van Beurden et al., 2011, p.76-81; Snowden & Boone, 2007).

Many projects are compromised in content because they take a too long time to complete and can't meet deadlines (Umble & Umble, 2000, p.27-32). In project management, it's important to consider time and cost constraints (Atkinson, 1999, p.337). It's also important in projects to learn from the process so that one can implement this learning in future projects (Fuller et al., 2010, p.120). One of the main barriers to project-based learning is time pressure. When time is short there is not enough time for project teams to reflect and evaluate their own experience and learn from the process of a project (Keegan & Turner, 2001, p.1). Due to tight deadlines, mistakes can be repeated, and projects don't learn from previous projects (Keegan & turner, 2001, p.20). Developing insight, knowledge, and associations of past actions, effectiveness, and potential future actions are important in project learning (Fiol & Lyles 1985 as cited in Keegan & Turner, 2001, p.4).

Due to tight deadlines that keep people from learning about the project process while it's ongoing, processes of retention in organizations are important to be able to capture what has been learned and then leverage that knowledge to create something good out of it. Alternatively, the team can sit down and talk about what has been learned after a project is finished so that it can be used in the future (Keegan & Turner, 2001, p.17).

Deferral in learning from projects is a barrier to learning, as many projects often wait until the end of the project before trying to learn instead of learning and documenting as the process is going (Keegan & turner, 2001, p.22). The process of learning from projects is often new for people but education happens in the moment and can easily be forgotten after the project is finished (Keegan & Turner, 2001, p.23). Taking the time to learn from processes and failures is relevant for delivering quality products (Keegan & Turner, 2001, p. 26).

## 3 Methodology

Scientific research is about finding new insights into important questions by reviewing existing research and knowledge on the topic and it has rigorous principles to make sure what we find out is true (Silverman, 2020, p.4). Its where science and research make up the study object while there also is a research question, problem, or theme guiding this search for knowledge (Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2019). One formulates a research question, topic, or problem to solve, and references previous theories and concepts in the field. The methodology is the instrument used to acquire new knowledge instead of just replicating what has already been found in the field (Silverman, 2020; Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2019).

In this part of the paper, I will explain what qualitative research is, then I will address and explain all the methodological choices I made. First, I will write about what qualitative research is, what a case study is, and why I chose a case study. Then I will write about my sample, then I will explain how I gathered data using observation as a method, why I chose observation, and how I completed it. Then I will explain how I analyzed the data. Then I will say something about how I assured quality in my research in terms of reliability and validity. I will also write about my role as a researcher before I finally write about the consent and ethical standpoints of the study.

### 3.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena and human experience in its depth. It involves verbal descriptions of real-life happenings, phenomena, and situations. Qualitative research is interpretive of processes and meanings of phenomena and uses theory-based concepts (Silverman, 2020, p.6). In qualitative research, one is interested in studying things in their natural setting, trying to understand and interpret phenomena based on the experience and interpretations that other people give the phenomena. The researcher must also here interpret, what the data says and means as it is not enough to just retell data (Ryen, 2017, p.18).

The chosen methodology should fit the research question at hand (Silverman, 2020, p.8). Since the goal of writing this master thesis was to investigate students' experience of quality of life, the underlying issues, and the process of trying to promote students' quality of life it was appropriate to use qualitative research as a research method. Using a qualitative research method would allow me to understand students' quality of life and related processes on a deeper level than a quantitative research method could. On the other hand, if I wanted to gather statistics about what factors make students happy, then a quantitative method would have been more appropriate (Silverman, 2020, p.8). But since I wanted to investigate the depth of the phenomena, qualitative methodology was chosen. Combine this with the fact that there exists statistical data on students' quality of life (Sivertsen, 2021), but not a lot of qualitative data about the theme.

#### 3.1.1 Case study

A case study is defined as a research strategy that investigates and gathers information about a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. This means that one is researching one or a few cases within their given natural context instead of having to replicate the case in an experimental setting (Yin, 2014, p.321). I was observing the three

workshops and the process and happenings within this given context. To decide whether it's appropriate to use a case study one must consider what kind of questions one wants to answer, the extent of control over behavioral events, and what degree of focus on contemporary versus historical events. A case study can be very good at uncovering how and why types of questions (Rowley, 2002, p.16-17).

In my master thesis, I wanted to investigate how students experience their quality of life and how the process of the workshops reached interventions to improve students' quality of life. The specific case I studied consisted of a series of workshops run by IME (and related planning sessions) with the purpose of identifying a set of potential interventions to improve the quality of the students' life and choosing which of those interventions to implement. So, the case study was a fitting research strategy for the project, as it allowed me to answer those how and why questions. This research strategy is also very good to use in instances where the researcher has no control and can't manipulate the ongoing (Rowley, 2002, p.17). This lack of control over variables and ongoing can be a strength in terms of observing things in their organic setting. But it can also be a disadvantage as one can't control and manipulate variables as one wishes. During the observation, I had no control or influence over the ongoing of the workshops because I was conducting observation from a total observer role. From an ethical standpoint, it would also have been inappropriate to try and manipulate the workshops. Case studies can mix qualitative and quantitative data gathering methods and often involves multiple data gathering methods such as observation, interviews, and documentation. Case studies can also involve single or multiple cases being studied (Rowley, 2002, p.18).

### **3.2 Sample**

Within observational approaches there is no concrete formula for discovering the field, participants, how, when, and where you're going to study something. Instead, one allows the place, participants, and time to arise naturally as your approach to the field evolves (Fangen, 2010, p.52). This was how my field developed, I started off with an idea to research students' quality of life, and by contacting people I knew I eventually encountered IME. Fangen (2010, p.67) explains this first meeting with someone central in the field, as meeting the gatekeeper. A gatekeeper is a metaphor for someone who has influence in the field and can give the researcher impasse in meetings with other people and areas of interest. In my case, I sent some emails to a few central gatekeepers in the field of students' quality of life. These gatekeepers then encouraged me to get in contact with IME.

After I first introduced my master's project to IME they suggested that I could observe their workshops and it all uncovered itself from that point. Presenting one's research project is essential for building trust between the researcher and the researched (Fangen, 2010, p.64). I was interested in investigating students' quality of life, and they were interested in learning more about students' quality of life and the process of their workshop from my work. We agreed that I would observe the workshops and meetings between workshops directed at finding interventions to improve students' quality of life. Observing the meetings between workshops was helpful as I got to see the process behind the scenes, and how planning matched reality. I also presented my research project when first meeting all the participants.

The participants in the workshops were pre-selected by IME and a mixture of students and people in relevant positions to understand and interpret students' quality of life. The



participant selection ranged from counselors, lecturers, students, and psychologists. This diversity of participants is something IME had been very conscious of choosing to be able to create a richness and diversity in the workshops and process. The reason I chose this sample was that it was very relevant for me to observe people discussing and finding interventions for improving students' quality of life. The sampling I used is called purposive sampling which is about finding a sample that represents individuals, groups, and settings that fit what the researcher is studying. In contrast to quantitative research, one might use random samples to generalize a phenomenon over as many people and situations as possible (Silverman, 2020, p.63). The weakness of my sample is that there were no randomly selected participants in the workshops. This could for example have been a person or student that wasn't already engaged in IME's process and students' quality of life. This could have brought in new perspectives to the research, although the sensemaker data that the participants worked with in the workshops represented the general student in Trondheim.

I was able to observe this expert panel for three workshops, lasting three hours each. Observing participants over a timeframe enabled me to see the development in the workshop group from idea to intervention and how the process happened for the whole group.

### **3.3 Observation**

An overarching goal of observation is to explain what people say and do without the situation being manipulated by the researcher (Fangen, 2010, p.12). Observation allows the researcher to observe and analyze people in their natural environment and allows for the researcher to see what happens through the eyes of the people being studied (Baker, 2006). This means that one can gain insight into the participants' point of view or understand the phenomena as it is understood by the ones who participate in it (Blumer, 1969; Emerson, 1983 as cited in Gibson & Brown, 2009, p.21). Observation is a great research approach to understanding what people do and why they do it (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p.21).

Baker (2006, p.180-181), mentions in her article the issue raised by many researchers, about training for observation as it is not a simple method to conduct. Before conducting the observations for this project, I trained by taking notes about everything that happened in a movie I watched. I also dived into the theory behind observation and spoke to various professor about how to conduct observations.

#### **3.3.1 Why observation**

The reasons for choosing observation as a data-gathering method were many. First, the IME projects were at a phase in their process where they were conducting workshops to find interventions to improve students' quality of life. This master project being so closely intertwined with the IME project it was agreed between all parties that observing the workshops was most timely. Observing the workshops would give the possibility to capture the process, how they reached interventions, and the most essential factors influencing students' quality of life. Compared with doing interviews which would give a person the ability to make sense of their own experience, the observation gives the advantage of capturing phenomena as it happens in their natural setting and looking at what people are doing (Silverman, 2020, p.248).

Doing interviews instead of observations would have given me more insight into participants' thoughts about students' quality of life. I could then have asked questions about the things I wanted to know more about and learned more about the participants' views. Although I did conduct two short clarifying conversations with participants after the observations when something was a little unclear. Aside from that, the workshops were clear in communication and information. Furthermore, I hadn't applied for conducting interviews through NSD. It could have been an advantage to conduct interviews combined with observations. I chose not to do it due to the time and effort I had available for completing my master thesis. As stated by Denzin (1987) in something like an organization it is very difficult to conduct large-scale observations to capture many people when they are spread by time and place. In such cases, interviews can supplement in that it enables the researcher to study the events that do not directly come under the eye of the researcher in an observation.

### **3.3.2 Completion of observation**

Observation can be difficult to do as the researcher often can take on many roles and must use all the senses to collect data. In terms of the role, the researcher must also keep in mind their relation to the people they are studying so that the researcher is able to remain detached enough to collect objective data (Baker, 2006, p. 172). When I observed I assumed the role of the complete observer which meant that I was present at the scene but did not interact with the participants to any great extent during the observations. My only role was to listen and observe and take notes from that, I was passive.

In the complete observer role, the researcher is present and visible in the field. The complete observer role can have advantages in that the researcher is detached from the group, but also some disadvantages. The disadvantages involve that one doesn't hear or see what happens and can miss out on vital information that's being talked about between participants. Also, the researcher cannot engage with participants to ask for clarification on stuff that's being talked about amongst participants. In a more participatory observer role communicating and asking participants would have been possible (Baker, 2006, p.174). This is something I experienced during the observations where I sometimes found it hard to listen and pay attention to conversations when it was noisy, and the fact that I couldn't listen to everyone or all the groups at once was challenging as well.

The observer affects the natural setting which is being observed. Other problems related to observation were to define the role and figure out the limits of how to stay in the field, but also at the edge of the field which allows for an observation where one doesn't become a member (Flick, 2018, p.328). Although I was quiet in the room, I often had to come very close to participants to see and listen to what was being said. Sometimes the participants looked at me while talking. It was obvious that they were in some way affected by my presence as a researcher. I also struggled in my role to not get involved and reply to discussions the participants were having.

Before conducting the observations, I created an observation guide that acted as a guide for what to focus on during the workshops. This observation guide can be seen in the appendix chapter 8.2.

Fangen (2010, p.38) suggests that it's important to scope what one is looking for in observation. And find the in-between of being guided by hypothesis and not being open to



new hypothesis and data to emerge. It's also important to decide what one is focusing on in the observation and what one will focus less on. It's suggested to start the observation with some very general questions to capture the data. It's also suggested to focus on how things are being done and the social patterns instead of just looking at what individuals do (Fangen, 2010, p.39).

The creation of the observation guide came from meetings with the supervisor and sending emails to a professor that was an expert on observation. Mainly through discussion and self-reflection, I created an observation guide that captured what I wanted to observe in the workshops. The observation guide consisted of a list of tips and things to be aware of while observing. These tips were gathered from relevant literature and previous experience in practicing observation. The key sentences that guided my observation were: *What is done or said that seems important, what results are they trying to fulfill, unpredicted themes, what decisions are made, and own reflections*. Each of these keywords was a section where I could fill in what I observed, so it was a way of categorizing everything I observed into different sections. *What is done or said that seems important*, was a reminder to note down only what seemed important in the observations, as many unimportant things happen in the workshop. Noting down absolutely everything would just distract and exhaust me and wouldn't be of any good use in such a setting.

*What results are they trying to fulfil*, was an important guideline due to the workshop being about trying to figure out interventions to improve students' quality of life. *Unpredicted themes* were a guideline for noting down the unexpected, the unexpected can often form the research in much more profound ways than one is often prepared for. *What decisions are made*, was another important guideline to focus on what they landed on of different decisions and interventions, this would give a good understanding of what eventually ended up being of the most essential to the workshop participant. *Own reflections*, my notes, interpretations, and reflections during the observation were also important to note down as they can be used and form other parts of the master thesis later such as inspiring theory literature and so on. This was also a good place to give outlet to burning opinions about the observations.

When I left the field, I thanked participants and facilitators for the opportunity to observe the workshops. I also spoke to some of the participants and stepped out of my role as a researcher. Due to shared interest in the field, I stayed in touch with some of the participants after the observations were done. According to Adler (1987) the degree of disengagement varies based on what role the observer had. There are also ethical considerations to leaving the field (Baker, 2006, p.181). It was easy to leave the field due to the workshops ending for everyone and me not being part of the workshop the same way the participants had. Before leaving the field, I repeated their rights in terms of contacting me if they had questions or doubts over anything I observed.

### **3.3.3 Documenting observation**

During the observations, I noted down and described the happenings of the workshop and meetings as descriptively and objectively as possible. Field notes are important for a deeper understanding of what's going on aside from just the description of the events occurring (Fangen, 2010, p.103). It's also suggested that the field notes are descriptive, and detailed but also scope what the researcher is looking to find out. This was something I was very cautious of when doing my observations. I had predetermined in my guide what

I was going to focus on and what I was not going to focus on. I kept the notes descriptive and very detailed at the same time trying to avoid unnecessary details. I kept the participants in my notes anonymous and focused more on the group and process instead of individuals. It's important to have very descriptive notes to allow the reader to understand and visualize the event (Fangen, 2010, p.104). Fangen (2010, p.105) suggests that one can note down during or after an observation. It's also important to take interpretive notes next to the descriptive notes from the observation (Fangen, 2010, p.105). I also wrote long reflection blogs after each observed workshop. During my observations, I realized that I was describing what was happening in the workshops, but I was also interpreting what was happening. During these interpretations, my background, biases, and beliefs could have influenced what I paid attention to and how I interpreted the observations. As Baker (2006, p.186) mentions researchers can be quite selective and biased in what information they chose to focus on and how they interpret situations.

According to Polit & Hungler (1987 as cited in Baker, 2006, p.183) taking field notes and logs is the most common type of data collection regarding observation. They also mention the two forms of note-taking that can occur during observation. One is the researchers' personal notes and feelings on what's being observed. The other is the theoretical notes where the researcher is trying to interpret and make meaning of what is being observed. It's important to note down personal feelings and reactions to things as they can come in handy later in the research (Fangen, 2010, p.105). The first thing I did after the observations was to write down all my personal reflections related to the observations on a word document. The reason for doing this was to get all my reflections documented in case I could use them later. It also helped me to start thinking about my data in a different way and cleared my head for all personal thoughts and opinions. It also contributed to my own values and experience could remain separated to some degree from the analysis of the data (Fangen, 2010, p.209).

Other sources such as video cameras and tape recorders can be used to capture the observations (Baker, 2006, p.184). In my observation, I chose not to use any sort of recording or video camera since the participants in the room would work in different groups. therefore, using a tape recorder or video camera wouldn't have been lucrative in capturing the ongoings and communication between the participants due to the background noise that would distort the audio.

The observation was conducted by sitting at a table in the corner of the room where the workshops happened. In this corner, I made notes on my computer of what was happening and followed the observation guide (chapter 8.2). During the workshop, there was sometimes movement in the tasks the participants conducted. This resulted in me having to move around as well to be able to capture what was going on. Sometimes this would be challenging in terms of being able to listen to different individuals and groups talking, and sometimes having to stand while taking notes on my computer to capture the essence of what was going on. My placement in different situations was also a challenge in the sense that I didn't want to disturb the participants.

### **3.4 Analysis and interpretation of data**

This section will be about how the interpretation and analysis of the data were done. There is a small example of this in the appendix chapter 8.2. All the analysis notes were about

40 pages long, due to this extreme length I decided to only include a small section of it in the appendix to just show an example of how I approached the analysis.

The aim of qualitative data analysis is to describe, find explanations, and then develop a theory for the studied phenomenon based on the analysis of the empirical data. It's about processing, making meaning, interpreting, and capturing implicit meanings in the data. The goal is often to arrive at some sort of generalization of what has been studied. (Flick, 2018, p.420; Fangen, 2010, p.208). Analysis in observation should be done parallel while also observing, the analysis process is dynamic and starts already while in the field (Flick, 2018, p.348).

The analysis was conducted after the observations were finished and in between the meetings. And the data material was solely notes taken from the observations. The reason for analyzing after the workshops were finished was due to the short time between the workshops. In my analysis work, I used what Fangen (2010, p.208-235) refers to as first-, second-, and third-degree interpretation.

### **First-degree interpretation**

Kalleberg, (1996 as cited in Fangen 2010, p.208) mentions that in the first-degree interpretation one adds something to what has been observed. Asking the why questions about the observations, why something happened, and trying to describe the happenings as the participants themselves experienced it.

Once I had all my data written down, I started my analysis process. I then read through my data material several times to familiarize myself with it. Then I created a column system in my word document. In the middle column, I had all the data material written down, on the left side of the column I had the codes to explain reoccurring sections of the data material, and on the right side of the column, I had themes. The codes were more descriptive and general to explain different sections in the data material in a simpler way and see how often these phenomena occurred. Here I tried to remain as neutral as I could in terms of what I was referring to. Then I went through the data again and compressed all these codes into more overarching themes to cover more of the patterns in the data. This analysis involved me just reading through the material many times creating codes and compressing codes to themes. In this first stage of the analysis, I used codes and themes that were identical or closely related to the words the participants had used in the observations to describe the phenomenon (Fangen, 2010, p.209). The themes were then categorized into different main themes. I finally wrote a section where I just explained the completion of the workshops and meetings in a short, summarised way.

During this initial stage of coding and creating themes I wanted to remain as unbiased as possible. I didn't want preconceived beliefs to influence the way I was coding and categorizing. I knew that I had observed workshops that were about the quality of life of students, but I tried to be aware of and not determined by categories I thought could be important such as mattering and academic pressure. I tried to explain the phenomenon as close to the participants' experience as possible. Eventually, my background, beliefs, predetermined convictions, experience, and theories influenced the way I interpret the data, this was something I had to be aware of to not let it dominate my analysis (Fangen, 2010, p.209).

The main themes and themes that were created here were solely based on the observation data. These themes and main themes were not colored by any predetermined theory or assumptions. Pre-determined theory did not influence any of the analyses that happened, the analysis of the data was determined by the focus on students' quality of life. The theory I eventually decided to use would be determined by what the analyzed data told me. This was sort of like an inductive grounded theory approach, where theory is generated through data compared to the analysis being determined by the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 as cited in Fangen, 2010, p.210).

### **Second-degree interpretation**

Second-degree interpretation is about giving more rich descriptions of why the participants do as they do, and why things happen as they do. It's about the researcher giving their own interpretation of events and trying to explain what participants meant by what happened (Fangen, 2010, p.212).

In this part of the analysis, I wrote down all the themes and they provided the foundation for the material found in chapter four. The themes were explained richly, why they happened, what effect they had and how they happened. These descriptions were more experienced-distant compared to the first-degree analysis which was more about describing things closely to how the participants described them (Fangen, 2010, p.211). In this part, I would again look through the data to find examples from the workshops and meetings to explain the main themes and themes.

The main themes were built up by themes and the themes were built up by subthemes. In this part of the analysis, I created the subthemes based on the data material to better explain the themes.

### **Third-degree interpretation**

Third-degree interpretation is interpreting hidden interests and drivers, and critically interpreting the data material. One doesn't just interpret the happenings but also interpret the hidden meanings and remains critical to the happenings and interpretations (Fangen, 2010, p.222).

Fangen (2010, p.234) also mentions that the boundaries between different types of analysis will be floating. As well as that the analysis process itself is not always easy to remember in complete detail as it can last for so long and always be ongoing.

The third-degree interpretation of the data floated somewhat in between the second-degree interpretation of the data. As I explained and interpreted the main themes, themes, and subthemes I also included the interpretation of the hidden interests, and drivers and critically evaluated the data. A further interpretation of the data linked to theory will be done in the discussion chapter of the paper.

## **3.5 Quality in research**

This section is about how the quality of the research was ensured. This is something that all researchers must address, and there are different ways researchers can ensure that quality is maintained (Baker, 2006, p.185).

### **3.5.1 Reliability**

Reliability is strong if the findings appear repeatedly over varying conditions (Baker, 2006, p.186). Reliability deals with whether a study can be replicated in the future (Silverman, 2020, p.89). One can increase reliability by being transparent and detailed about how the research was done and by being explicit about the theoretical stance and why one excluded some interpretations and included others. Reliability can be a problem in observation as the published data is brief and persuasive. There is also critique surrounding qualitative research's focus on few cases and the lack of representing deviating cases and data (Ryen, 2017, p.20). In my research, I focused on a few cases and there weren't a lot of deviant cases, in the presentation of the data I also left out the showing of complete field notes. The reason for this is due to the time and space constraints in the thesis. I also felt that my themes and descriptions of observations were good enough to give the reader a good understanding. I also remained transparent with how I conducted all the research.

### **3.5.2 Validity**

Validity is about how accurately the research findings represent the phenomenon that's being studied (Silverman, 2020, p.95). Within research, there is always a threat to validity in that the researcher can be biased. The researcher can make subjective selections of observation, what the researcher chooses to focus on can be subjective and how the researcher interprets the data can also be subjective. To counter these things a researcher can be reflexive and look for negative cases to disconfirm their own biases. Reflexiveness involves the use of critical self-reflection, asking oneself as a researcher "am I interpreting this because of preconceived beliefs, or can it be the objective truth?" and looking for negative cases involves finding things that disconfirm the expectations and beliefs of the researcher (Johnson, 1997; Adler & Adler, 1994 as cited in Baker, 2006, p.185). I always kept my biases in the back of my mind while observing and analyzing. It was important for my project to not let my biases control the direction the study went. Before conducting the research, I had a belief that belonging, and loneliness were the main factors influencing students' quality of life. Although that might be true to some degree, it was far from the only factor influencing students' quality of life. I had to be aware of this belief and open my mind to discover new findings of students' quality of life.

### **3.5.3 My role as a researcher**

My role as a researcher was quite challenging throughout the whole master thesis. First, I am a student myself so conducting research on students' quality of life was challenging, as I was emotionally invested in it. Second, I had previously researched and learned a lot about the quality of life, wellbeing, mental health, and these sorts of topics which also made me more biased towards being driven by my pre-existing understanding and thoughts on these issues.

The role as an observer was challenging as I didn't know when I could talk and not talk. During and after the workshops, some people including myself wanted to talk about the themes in the workshop. What was okay to say and what should not be said was difficult here as I didn't want to influence any of the participants with my thoughts on the ongoing project. Influencing participants' views and thoughts would have been unethical and could have influenced the process of the workshop.

Also being asked directly in the workshop to share my thoughts was hard, I had to say no on several occasions to speak my mind when I was asked to. Also being an outside observer of a workshop where everyone was having fun and becoming part of a group felt strange. I felt like I was in some way part of the workshop but also in some way, not part of it, which also influenced my own sense of belonging and mattering to the workshop process. Many times, during the workshop I really wanted to state my opinion, I even observed things that I thought were wrong and that I thought I would have a better understanding of myself. Keeping quiet during those moments was essential to not conduct unethical research and destroy the quality of the research.

### **3.6 Ethics**

Ethics is an important aspect of any research method. Observation is seen as one of the least intrusive data collection strategies. Nevertheless, it's important to keep in mind how one as an observer might break ethical codes and be intrusive toward participants (Adler & Adler, 1994; Jorgensen, 1989 as cited in Baker, 2006, p.184). Spradley (1980 as cited in Baker, 2006, p.185) suggests that researchers follow the APA guidelines for ethics. These guidelines include that the study participants come first, that their rights, interests, and sensitivities need to be safeguarded, that they have the right to know the intention of the researcher, their privacy is protected, that they are not exploited or harmed, reports are made available for sponsors, the participants, and the public.

Before I conducted my observation, I stated the participants' rights to all of them in a presentation, there I presented my aim of the project, that it would be available to them, that I would respect their privacy and anonymity, and if they had any questions or concerns, they could contact me, and we would take care of it. When presenting my research project, I didn't go into detail about what I was going to look for as I didn't want to influence the participants' behavior during the workshops.

The facilitators of the workshops were aware of my intention of observing. Consent with participants was reached verbally. The consent form can be found in the appendix chapter 8.1. At the very start of the first workshop, I presented myself and my project to all the participants. I also reminded them that I was conducting a verbal consent at the moment and told them about their rights and things involved in the consent. After this I said if anyone is not comfortable participating or has questions they can tell me at any time, aside from that I interpreted the silence as verbal consent which I was very clear about.

During my observations, I made sure to not document personal stories or anything that would violate participants' and facilitators' rights and interests. In my observations, I also decided to focus more on the workshop group instead of having to focus on individuals. So, my data material and the analysis would be more about the content and process and a group level and wouldn't make individuals stand out. When addressing participants, I just coded every individual as a participant when addressing the consultants and facilitators I addressed them as Admiral one, two, three, and four.

To be able to conduct research in Norway one must apply and be approved to conduct the research by Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelige Datatjeneste (NSD). The application to NSD contained all the necessary information about my project. The NSD confirmation form can be found in the appendix chapter 8.3. I anonymized all the participants and facilitators of the workshop and didn't include any personal stories from the workshops that could identify

participants. I also told the participants they could contact me to delete data if they had done or said something they didn't want me to include in the material.



## 4 Findings

This chapter of the thesis will present the findings from the workshops, meetings, and observation of the IME process in general. First, I will give an overview describing the workshops and meetings as they occurred. Then I will present and elaborate on the main themes, secondary themes, and subthemes that emerged from the workshops, the meetings, and the IME process.

### 4.1 Description of meetings and workshops

In the first meeting before the workshops, the two Study Trondheim facilitators and two consultants presented the plan for all the workshops and the Study city conference. The goal was for participants in the workshops to choose three interventions to improve students' quality of life. Then these interventions would be presented at a conference called "Study City Conference" where 50-100 people would be involved in choosing one additional intervention.

In the second meeting before the first workshops, the "Study Trondheim" facilitators showed the detailed plan for all the workshops and the Study city conference, including funding and development of the interventions. Each workshop would be around 3 hours, there would be a diverse mix of 12-16 participants with varying backgrounds. In the final meeting before the workshops the intention of "personas" was discussed, and this was about including participants' emotions in the process of choosing interventions for promoting students' quality of life. The "personas" would be introduced as a concept for workshop two. The "personas" comprised of four fictional students with stories reflecting a summary of data on students' quality of life. Thereafter it was planned to look at what actions could meet the "personas" needs in the workshop. Each "Persona" had a poster with information about their background, struggles, and challenges.

The workshop area consisted of chairs where everyone sat in a circle facing each other, tables, posters, whiteboards, and screens for different tasks during the workshops. Ws one started with an introduction, a check-in where everyone introduced themselves, and what they hoped to get out of the workshops. Then the Study Trondheim facilitators gave a presentation about students' quality of life and IME. The participants had been given homework consisting of going through data material or stories regarding students' quality of life. This data material came from the sensemaker data which IME has gathered over the last three years. The first workshop task was to discuss this homework in pairs.

The next task was for the participants in groups to write notes with reflections related to the stories. They were then going to stick their notes on a whiteboard to match their note to one of three predetermined themes: belonging, mattering, and challenge and mastery. These three themes came from a previously written Master thesis by Coward (2021) and were considered central to students' quality of life. Then there was a general ws discussion surrounding this matching, where participants felt some of their notes didn't match any of or all the predetermined or were interrelated to many of the themes. The next group task was to discuss what made them curious about the content on the notes, then this was discussed with the whole ws. Then the group members mixed into groups to share their thoughts about the whiteboard notes with other groups. Furthermore, the entire ws discussed the result of this. At the end of the ws, there was a checkout where everyone shared what they got out of the day.



In the meeting between workshops one and two, it was discussed how to develop the personas to represent data on students' quality of life but also represent insight from workshop one. During this meeting, it was also emphasized that it was essential to give the participants time to come up with rich collective ideas while at the same time moving firmly towards the outcome.

In the second workshop, the facilitators recapped the previous workshop and talked about the plan for the day. This was followed by a check-in, where everyone got to say what color they felt like. The Study Trondheim facilitators introduced the personas posters and the intention of personas. After this everyone were divided into groups to discuss the personas context, challenges, protection factors, and write these ideas on notes to hang on the persona's posters. The ideas that didn't fit any of the personas were hung on the parking spot whiteboard to be considered for creating an extra persona for the next ws. After this task, there were discussions with the whole ws where many participants questioned how representable the personas were. The following task was for the groups to write possible interventions on notes that could help the personas improve their quality of life. During this task, the importance of thinking systematically about interventions was emphasized.

In the final meeting before ws three, the facilitators talked about adjusting the personas based on the feedback from ws two, and how to lift stuff to a more systematic level based on personas, data, and insight. The 61 potential interventions taken from the whole IME process would be narrowed down to ten to be presented in the final ws. The criteria for the interventions were created. The ritual dissent was planned to make the interventions more robust. Time was limited, and it was important not to rush the process but also to reach conclusions about interventions. The participants would in ws three vote for the best interventions to work on further. A panel of sit and sit labs personnel would be present in ws three to evaluate the interventions.

Going into the third ws, the Study Trondheim facilitators had gone through all notes and previous exp from workshops. They presented the ten compressed interventions and more accurately adjusted personas based on the feedback from ws two. A group task was to discuss and vote on the most liked of the ten interventions. Here the groups were to think of feasibility, development, and considerations regarding the implementation of the interventions.

After the ws group collectively choose three of the most popular interventions, each group got one of these interventions to work on and develop. This was followed by ritual dissent. The ritual dissent was used to address development and feasibility and make the interventions more bulletproof. One representative from each group went to each one of the other groups in the room to present his/her intervention. Then this group would turn his/her back and get honest feedback from the other group. The goal of the other group is to find weaknesses in the idea. After this, the one group member that had their back turned will repeat the process until he/she has gotten feedback from all the groups. After this, the member returns to their own group where they discuss all the feedback that was given on their intervention idea and try to improve their idea based on the feedback that was given.

The next phase was called the Dragons Den, where the name is a popular culture metaphor taken from a tv reality show. Here one member of each group pitched the improved intervention to an expert panel consisting of Sit personnel. The panel gave the groups

feedback on the interventions and gave the whole workshop a reality check on potential funding and how realistic such interventions would be.

The Study Trondheim facilitators then talked about what would happen forward with IME and the interventions. At the Study city conference, around 50-100 people would choose one more intervention aside from the three chosen in the workshops. A group of five people from the workshop were also selected to work on presenting the rest of the possible interventions for the study city conference so it would be presentable, and the interventions would be developed enough to be realistic for the conference.

## **4.2 Presentation and elaboration on themes**

This section will describe and show what themes emerged through the data. The three main themes that will be presented are Process, Content, and meta meanings of Content. Connected to each main theme are themes and subthemes.

### **4.2.1 Process**

The first main theme is called process and is about the process that occurred throughout the workshops. The process illustrates how the workshop went from smaller ideas to concrete interventions to improve the quality of life amongst students. A quality process was important to deliver quality results and interventions at the end of the workshops. This main theme consists of the underlying themes that are belonging to process, depth and learning, and personas effect. The participant's facilitators and consultants were central in the workshop process.

#### **Mattering to the process**

Mattering to the process is related to the participants feeling like they were part of, significant, and mattered to the process of the workshops. The way the workshops were facilitated led to these feelings. This feeling of mattering to the process increased the participant's feelings of security and ability to express themselves freely and honestly in the workshops. The participant's ability to express themselves freely and honestly increased the quality of the workshop process. Examples of this are illustrated in the subthemes.

The subthemes that emerged through the data that led to the mattering to the process theme were the participants' importance, workshop rituals and activities, participant selection, experience, and engagement, decisions made by the facilitators, encouragement to expression, and sharing.

#### **The participants' importance**

The student's voice was an essential subtheme as many of the workshop participants were students, and the students' participation was fundamental in the IME process, which was mentioned many times by the facilitators. This contributed to the student participants feeling that they were important and a sense of belonging to the workshop process. The feeling of being important to the workshop process seemed to impact how the student participants acted and expressed themselves in the workshops. Facilitating the workshops to enable all the participants to fully participate, feel comfortable, and state their voices increased the quality of the process and outcomes. This comfort, expression, honesty, security, and feeling of belonging came a lot from how the workshop rituals and activities

happened. All the participants were reminded of their importance; this seemed to influence their sense of mattering to the process. When participants felt like they were important to the facilitators they also felt that they belonged more to the workshops and process.

### **Workshop rituals and activities**

The facilitation that took place came in the form of workshop rituals and activities. There was check-in at the start of each workshop where everyone introduced themselves and was able to express how they felt that day. Examples of the check-ins, workshop activities, and rituals are elaborated above in the "description of workshops and meetings" section. There were also many group tasks, discussions, and discussions with the whole workshop group with a low threshold for expression, honesty, and sharing. Workshop participants sat in a circle of chairs during the more extensive discussions. This circle can be interpreted as a symbol of equal value between the participants and influenced the participants feeling of mattering to the process.

The workshop participants also performed the ritual dissent exercise, which encouraged participants to give and take more honest and constructive feedback from each other. This honest feedback is easier given when the person getting the feedback has their back turned. The ritual dissent is explained in the "description of meetings and workshops" section. Ideas that were good but did not fit into current themes in the workshops were placed on a whiteboard. This whiteboard ensured that no one's ideas were left out. As mentioned above, this whiteboard was used for things related to personas and ideas for students' quality of life.

### **Participant selection, previous experience, and engagement**

Many of the participants had been in the IME project before; this, as well as being motivated to participate, led to a sense of mattering to the process. The participants were experts in different fields, such as student counselling, student psychologists, lecturers, and students. All of them were also engaged and motivated to be part of the workshops. This expertise and engagement influenced the whole atmosphere and other participants to be more engaged and participating. As described in the above section there was a diverse mix of participants.

### **Decisions made by the facilitators**

There were also moments where the participants mattering to the process might have suffered a little. The workshop facilitators made some significant decisions just between them at one point. As described above, one of those decisions was cutting 61 potential interventions down to ten to be presented in the third workshop. This might have negatively affected participants feeling of mattering to the process as the participants were not part of this decision. This decision from the facilitators was made due to time constraints.

### **Encouragement to express and sharing**

The welcoming of honest opinions created a culture of disruption, risk-taking, and a feeling of psychological safety. The disruption means the participants' willingness to disagree with facilitators and other participants and disrupt where the discussion and process are going. The disruption was a factor in increasing the workshop's quality and process leading up to results. If all the participants agreed on everything, it could have led to an unhealthy group mentality and consensus, leaving out essential and contrasting views on various issues. The participant's ability to challenge, be honest and disrupt came from a sense that they

were safe regarding consequences related to taking risks. The ability to disrupt and challenge the process and other members, as well as the feeling of mattering to the process, being respected, and feeling important, all influenced each other. Everyone was given equal chances to speak and state their opinions frequently and people's opinions were always considered, welcomed, or challenged.

### **Depth and learning**

The theme of depth and learning goes under the main theme of process.

Depth and learning are about how deep the process in the workshop went and what was learned from the process. Going deep into the process was essential to understand the different aspects, and complexity, and peeling back the layers of students' quality of life. The subthemes related to this main theme were time constraints, learning and creating knowledge from the process, and participant and facilitator constraints.

### **Time constraints**

It is elaborated above how central the time aspect was in the meetings and workshops. As there was limited time to complete the workshops, there were questions on how long to spend on each part, and how quickly to move through the process. To enable a deep process, it was essential to take the time and allow participants to uncover knowledge within themselves, from others, and from the workshop to build on the knowledge and go deeper. It was observed in the workshops that taking the time to get deeply into different aspects of the process and students' quality of life helped participants and facilitators to uncover more knowledge and learn more about the concepts. Taking the time enabled more and longer discussions, more reflection and questioning, and more knowledge sharing between participants and facilitators. This depth depended on if the stages of the workshops were rushed or took the necessary time to complete. There were concerns from the facilitators in the meetings if certain aspects of the workshops or results suffered in quality due to limited time to complete the workshops.

The two facilitators also made major decisions due to lack of time, like cutting 61 potential interventions down to ten. The cutting from 61 to ten interventions is something itself that could have been a long process including the participant's opinions, had there been time for it. But there was also an upside to this decision by the facilitators. First, it saved a lot of time from the workshops. Second, it made the workshop process easier for the participants in terms of not having to spend a lot of energy and time narrowing down to the most important interventions. For the participants, processing ten interventions was easier than processing 61 interventions. And these 61 potential interventions were something that had emerged from earlier Workshops and insights into the IME process, which some of the participants in the current workshops had also participated in.

### **Learning and creating knowledge from the process**

As described above, Ime had notetakers in place to document and learn from the whole process. The facilitators and participants talked a lot about the whole project of IME going beyond just the workshops. Here they talked about the contribution of knowledge and mentioned that IME was much more about the whole process through the years including data gathering, workshops, seminars, and more, and not just about the interventions that came from the workshops. Another object of IME was to share knowledge in academic and institutional circles so that more people could learn about students' quality of life and how to implement interventions. IME wanted to be central in the research circles regarding students' quality of life.

### **Participant and facilitator constraints**

The selection of participants might also have contributed to constraints regarding the workshop process. The participants were around 12-16 people for the workshops, handpicked by the facilitators. The facilitators choosing such a limited number of specific participants for the workshops affected the process and results. The facilitators themselves chose participants they felt were suited for the task at hand in the workshops. In the workshops, there was a small number of people making decisions for interventions to be made based on data from the experience of quality of life for over 600 students. The participant selection is also explained above. The selection of participants could have been a strength as well as a weakness in terms of creating quality processes in the workshops. The emphasis on the diversity of participants was mentioned in the workshop meetings as a good thing.

### **Persona's**

This theme is about the effect of implementing personas in the workshop. The personas were implemented in the workshop to allow the participants to become more emotionally connected to the different aspects of students' quality of life. The planning and exact implementation of personas is described above. The subthemes belonging to this theme were the discussions about personas relevance and the personas effect.

### **Discussions about personas' relevance**

The participants had a few discussions about how believable and relevant the personas addressed students' quality of life. In response to this, the facilitators changed some personas better to fit the discussions and opinions of the participants. The changed personas were then presented in the third workshop. There was frequent discussion about some personas not representing real student problems related to the quality of life. The facilitators would answer this by saying that it is not the personas that are the focus but the problems and life situations of the personas that were the important thing. This resistance from some of the participants about the personas not being accurate enough created discussions that led to deeper insight and understanding of students' quality of life. It also helped improve the personas for the third workshop, to reflect a summary of students' quality of life more accurately.

### **Persona's effect**

In the meetings and workshops, there was much focus on the planning and intention of implementing personas. The personas were slightly introduced in the first workshop, took up most of the time in the second workshop, and took up some time in the third workshop.

It can seem that the involvement of the personas served as a distraction to what was truly important in terms of quality of life instead of acting as something that contributed positively to understanding the quality of life for students. Despite this, the personas also got the participants involved in discussions and reflections about students' quality of life. The personas also contributed to the participants becoming more emotionally invested, as some of the participants expressed emotionally loaded comments when talking about the stories of the personas. Implementing the personas could have confused the participants and taken their focus away from understanding and finding solutions to students' quality of life, but it might also have inspired better and more critical discussions.

## 4.2.2 Outcomes

This main theme is about outcomes related to improving students' quality of life that came through the workshops. In the workshops, the participants and facilitators analysed data on students' quality of life and developed interventions for improving it. This main theme sums up essential factors that influence students' quality of life, and interventions for improving students' quality of life. The themes belonging to this main theme are Being part of something bigger, and belonging in general and academically, considerations related to representation, expectations, challenges and growth, and interventions.

### **Being part of something bigger, and belonging in general and academically**

Through the workshop process and previously existing data (Coward, 2021; InMyExperience, 2022) students' need to belong emerged as a central factor influencing their quality of life. The subthemes related to this theme were, the double sidedness of belonging, home, and learning environment.

#### **Double sidedness of belonging**

The need to belong was strongly linked to rejection and exclusion and belonging seemed to be a double-edged sword. The arenas where students felt inclusion and belonging were for other students' arenas of pain, rejection, exclusion, and not belonging. This was especially evident in the data showing how many students had been rejected by various student organizations in Trondheim. Not belonging led to feelings of loneliness and other side effects like not being satisfied with one's study program, and not being able to perform academically.

#### **Home**

Feeling at home in the city and feeling that one is part of something bigger than oneself like a group, club or study contributed to a feeling of belonging. Belonging was about belonging socially, academically, and feeling at home in their living space, at the university, and amongst friends. This was evident in the sensemaker data that was discussed in the workshops. It also appeared through discussions and insights from the participants who had experienced this as something that was important to students' quality of life.

#### **Learning environment**

The need to belong academically was also quite evident; students report the desire to feel part of the study program, get to know fellow students in class, communicate, and feel like they belong in lectures. Communication between lecturers and students seemed to be an essential factor in increasing belongingness to the study program and university. The university plays a central role in belonging, which is also related to study satisfaction. Many students felt unsure of the study program they were partaking; this could sometimes be solved by feeling a sense of mattering to the study program.

### **Considerations related to Representation**

This theme is about what kind of students are represented when understanding and improving students' quality of life, and how they are represented and understood. The subthemes related to the bigger theme of representation are students' representation, vulnerable students, and threshold.



**Student representation**

IME had, from the start, emphasized the importance of student representation throughout the whole IME project. These implied students gathering data, giving data, participating in arranging workshops, and other things related to the IME project. As the IME project is about improving students' quality of life, students' role in the process has always been essential.

In the workshops, participants raised concerns about the data, not mentioning various subgroups of students such as international students, students with children, physical and mental illnesses, and gay students. The reply to these concerns was that these things were not often mentioned in the data sensemaker stories.

**Vulnerable students and the threshold**

Another emerging subtheme was the most vulnerable students—the students who had problems getting over the threshold to go out and seek belonging. In the workshops, it emerged that many students could go under this category of being vulnerable in the way that they struggle to get out of the house and approach various groups, arenas, and other people.

**Expectations, challenges, and growth**

Students seem to have expectations that do not always reflect reality; they face challenges that give them opportunities to grow. The subthemes related to this bigger theme were expectations vs. reality, pressure, and mastery.

**Expectations vs reality**

Students often set high expectations for themselves and their lives, especially in academic and social contexts. They expect to do well, perform, and be satisfied academically, socially, and in other parts of their lives. The students suffer when their expectations and aspirations are not met; either they cannot live up to them, or the context they are engaging in is not delivering what they expected. Suffering is expressed in the forms of dissatisfaction with current ongoings and mounting pressure on the self to live up to standards they, the university, friends, parents, or society has put on them. When the students desire something other than what they are currently doing and experiencing, there is a dissonance between reality and expectations.

**Pressure**

Students experience a lot of pressure related to many aspects of life but especially academically and socially. This was evident in the data from sensemaker and discussions in the workshop. The persona Kathrine was struggling with finishing her master's degree due to the fear of failing and pressure related to finishing. Peter was struggling with social pressure always feeling he had to say yes to everything and help everyone even though he was struggling to deal with his own emotions. Astrid was struggling with academic pressure and felt devastated when she got a grade she was not satisfied with.

**Mastery**

Students experience challenges related to social life, academic performance, and life. The data showed that challenges could also be sources of growth and mastery for students if the students can overcome them. If the students are not able to overcome and handle the challenges it can instead lead to stress, pressure, and dissatisfaction. Setting high aspirations can be a source of motivation and growth for students.

## **Interventions**

The aim of the workshops was to come up with interventions that would improve students' quality of life. The whole process led up to the conclusion of a few potential interventions to implement in Trondheim. The subthemes related to the theme of interventions are information vs intervention, crash course for lecturers in the learning environment, mentor arrangement, and social curator.

### **Information vs intervention**

It was discussed in the workshop if there were enough interventions in Trondheim already to improve students' quality of life and belonging. And if the question was more about becoming better at promoting and informing about the existing interventions. Would the answer be to come up with more arenas and interventions to promote students' quality of life or improve and better take advantage of what already exists? This could be reflected in creating an intervention as the social curator explained in detail below.

### **Crash course in the learning environment.**

Suggested interventions for study satisfaction and belonging were lecturers promoting a social learning environment, promoting belonging to the university, and student mentors helping younger students. The suggested intervention of lecturers being better trained at creating a better learning environment was aimed at helping students feel more belonging when at lectures. This could be done by lecturers helping students get to know other students in lectures, and by promoting more group work. This could further contribute to belonging to the study program and study satisfaction amongst the students.

### **Mentor Arrangement**

The mentor arrangement would have experienced students mentor and help younger new students become accommodated with life as a university student. This could help younger students feel more belonging when coming to a new city and study program. It could also help young students become satisfied with their study program quicker as the mentor would help them become familiarized with the ins and outs of being a student. A problem with the mentor arrangement was getting enough students to fill a huge number of roles, motivations for becoming a mentor, the question of paying mentors, and the general resources that would go into the arrangement. The challenge with training lecturers in creating a better learning environment is being able to convince lecturers to say yes to this.

### **Social Curator**

A suggested intervention for the students that were vulnerable and struggled to come over the threshold of going out to seek belonging was social curator. The social curator would help students find belonging in the already existing activities and student groups in Trondheim. To make information about offers and opportunities for students more accessible and help the vulnerable students find belonging seemed essential. To use the social curator, one could either go online on a webpage that would match one's interests and needs with different groups, sports, and activities in Trondheim. One could also go to a personal social curator which would help the students find these opportunities to become part of something bigger. The social curator would help students to find the groups and activities in Trondheim that match their interests. A challenge of this intervention was stigmatization for being someone who needs extra help to find belonging.



### **4.2.3 Meta meanings of content**

The third main theme is called meta meanings and is about the meta meanings of the content and process that happened in the workshop. These meta meanings are things that were not directly about the process or content of the workshops. The meta meanings are more indirectly linked to the process and content. This means that complexity and interrelation is a theme that touches on both process of workshops as well as the contents of the workshop, and interventions related to students' quality of life. The themes connected to this main theme are complexity and interrelation, implicit meanings, and interrelated themes, stories, and interventions.

#### **Complexity and interrelation**

This theme is about the complexity of students' quality of life. It is also about the interrelation between factors on students' quality of life. To understand factors and interventions regarding students' quality of life, it is essential to see the complexity of factors and interventions and not just see it as a simple problem with a simple solution.

An example of this complexity is in the workshops, there was much emphasis on not just treating symptoms and individual problems when it came to students' quality of life but getting to the root of the problem and improving quality of life on a systematic level. An example of this can be improving things systematically for students in their environment instead of hiring more psychologists to help struggling students.

There were also discussions about whether more interventions such as meeting places would be the correct approach to improve quality of life. If not, how would the challenge of quality of life be addressed and approached instead?

#### **Implicit meanings**

Through discussions and the process in the workshop, the participants uncovered implicit meanings in data about students' quality of life; these implicit meanings were essential to understanding the complexity of students' quality of life. An example of implicit meanings were themes that were uncovered through discussions and analyzing data that did not appear directly through the data. For example, some students are not able to get out of their house and seek social arenas even though there are many opportunities for them to do so and they want to do so. This sort of knowledge did not appear directly in the sensemaker data about students' quality of life but was something that the participants uncovered by reflecting on the experience, seeing patterns, and discussing these things.

#### **Interrelated themes, stories, and interventions**

Through the workshop process, it was discovered by facilitators and participants that many themes, factors, and interventions for students' quality of life are interrelated. This means that concepts such as academic dissatisfaction and belonging can influence each other in positive and negative ways. Implementing an intervention to improve students' belonging can also positively influence their sense of academic satisfaction. And lonely students might not be able to focus and perform academically.

## 5 Discussion

This chapter will discuss the themes in the findings chapter with relevant theory and previous research. The main themes of the findings are process, outcomes, and meta meanings of content.

### 5.1 Process

In the results of the study, it is apparent that the process of the workshops is important to understand. The learning from the workshop process and the IME process, in general, give guidance on how to come up with interventions to improve students' quality of life. The findings also show what's important in such processes to reach the desired outcome and have influence over how the content of outcomes and interventions eventually end up.

#### 5.1.1 Matter to the process

In the workshop, one of the evident themes was that the participants feel that they matter to the IME process in general. This was reflected in the way they expressed themselves, and their engagement. It was facilitated by the way the workshop was designed and the activities, facilitators, plan, and completion of the workshops. But it could also have been that the participants were just generally engaged, confident individuals used to engaging in workshop scenarios.

In the workshop, the participants were frequently reminded of their importance and significance in terms of being valued members of the IME process. This could have affected the participants feeling of mattering to IME and the project. When one feels as if one matters one feels that one has meaningful connections with the people in the context and that one is an important member to the other people in the context (Flett, 2018, p.32). The theoretical concept of mattering seemed to be a good explanation for many of the findings in terms of how people feel that they matter to each other, the context and processes that surround them, as well as that they can also contribute to these people, contexts, and processes around them (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021, p.4). Mattering also seemed to be a broader theoretical concept covering more aspects than for example a theoretical concept such as the feeling of belonging. Many of the participants and facilitators knew each other and stated that they all appreciated each other. This feeling of mattering to the process again led to the participants feeling a degree of psychological safety in the workshops. The feeling of psychological safety made the participants express themselves more honestly, and take more risks, where they dared to disrupt the process and disagree with each other and the facilitators (Edmondson, 1999, p.350-375).

There was clear evidence that the way the workshop rituals and activities were designed contributed to the participants feeling mattering and psychological safety to express themselves. The activities were inclusive and made all the participants speak and discuss. There was also the ritual dissent, explained in the previous chapter, which opened the participants to honest expression and becoming closer as a group. The participants were also frequently encouraged by facilitators to discuss, give honest feedback, and state opinions. This feeling of mattering to the process and psychological safety contributed to the higher quality of the workshop process and outcomes. Because many of the participants had already known each other before in the IME process, this familiarity contributed to a feeling of mattering and psychological safety.

It could also be argued that the people seeking out those sorts of workshops, and who were chosen to participate by IME, were above average engaged in students' quality of life. This engagement can lead people already having strong opinions to express in the workshops, and their free expression could also be unrelated to a feeling of mattering to the process. The participants were chosen by the facilitators due to their relevance to the workshops, many of them had previous experience with similar processes and IME. When one already knows the people in the context and is already engaged in the theme and the process it can be easier to be comfortable and express oneself in such situations.

Factors that also could have explained the perception of mattering and psychological safety are social desirability bias, false consensus, and groupthink. Social desirability bias appears when participants act and answer in ways they think are more socially desirable and acceptable than what is their honest opinion (Chung & Monroe, 2003, p.292). False consensus is when people see their own behavior and judgments as of the right way (Jones & Roelofsma, 2000, p.1134). The participants all had different backgrounds which made them interpret the sensemaker data and quality of life differently. When members of a group share common knowledge, they might be vulnerable to groupthink (Jones & Roelofsma, 2000, p.1142). Groupthink happens when the need to be part of the group and group pressure overrides reasonable decision-making (Jones & Roelofsma, 2000, p.1141). All these biases affect decision-making (Jones & Roelofsma, 2000, p.1148). This could have been the case for some of the participants, due to most of them enjoyed being part of the group. The bias and groupthink could also have appeared because of the participants needed to fit into the workshop group. Social desirability bias, false consensus, and groupthink can have negative effects on the process and results.

The decision made by facilitators to cut 61 interventions down to ten described in the findings chapter could have influenced the participants feeling of mattering to the process. Ultimately the participants were the ones coming up with interventions for improving students' quality of life through these workshops. But the facilitators had to make harsh decisions due to time constraints, which they were transparent about. Mattering is about feeling that someone depends and relies on us (Flett, 2018, p.32; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981 as cited in Flett 2019, p.670). When the facilitators made a major decision like this, they showed that they didn't rely and depend on the participants to make this decision. Although not expressed, this could have been subconsciously felt by some of the participants, especially if they disagreed with some of the chosen interventions. But again, the participants might not have been bothered about this, it could have helped them and made the workshop process more efficient. And the 61 interventions that were cut down had already been developed by some of the participants in previous IME workshops.

To sum up this section the participants felt a sense of mattering and psychological safety in relation to the workshops. This was due to the culture and the way the workshops were designed, the participants' familiarity with IME and each other, and the participants' engagement in students' quality of life from before. Groupthink, social desirability, and false consensus could also have played a role in how the participants acted in the workshops.

### **5.1.2 Depth and learning**

In the workshop process, there was a fine line between moving quickly to reach the deadline and taking the time to learn from the process and create quality results.

The time constraint influenced the workshop process in both negative and positive ways. Due to the shortage of time to complete the workshops, some processes had to be rushed more than what was ideal. There was also an incentive to learn from the process and create knowledge about students' quality of life, how to improve it, and how to reach such interventions through a workshop process. Also, there were constraints related to participants and facilitators.

When there is not enough time in a project it gets harder for people to learn from the process and evaluate their own experiences. Time pressure is one of the main barriers to project-based learning (Keegan & Turner, 2001, p.1). IME was really interested in learning from the process and spreading the knowledge to other scientific circles so that similar projects could be repeated in other contexts. But due to their tight deadline, it was challenging to be process and outcome-oriented at the same time in the workshops. IME had notetakers in place including me to document and learn from the process as it was happening. But knowledge about projects can often be forgotten when taken up again after the project is done, it's always better to reflect on learning while it is fresh in the memory. There were also frequent reflection rounds amongst participants and facilitators about where they were in the current process and what they had learned. But there were no meta briefings of the process of the workshops during the workshops. Momentary discussion and learning about the process didn't appear in the workshops (Keegan & Turner, 2001, p.23). This is something that could have prohibited learning from the process of the workshops, due to important lessons from the workshops being more difficult to remember once the workshops are done. It could have confused the participants if they were to focus on the process of the workshops as well as focusing on finding interventions for improving students' quality of life.

There was a focus on learning after the workshops were finished. It must be mentioned that looking at what was learnt from the workshop processes, happened in the meetings between and after the workshops. Here the facilitators, consultants and I discussed what was good about the workshops, what was learned, and what could be done better in the next one. But again, the deadline for the workshops was so tight that there was not a lot of time during workshops to discuss and learn from the process (Fuller et al., 2010, p.120; Keegan & Turner, 2001, p.1-17). Reflecting and learning about the process after the workshops were helpful, although it's easy to miss valuable lessons by doing it this way.

Learning about the process of projects is essential to delivering quality products in the long term (Keegan & Turner, 2001, p.26). This idea was relevant for IME as they wanted to spread the knowledge of their project on improving students' quality of life to other institutions in Norway. Learning about the process during the process is ideal, but there are also lessons to be learned by having debriefs in between and after the workshops, although not ideal.

### **5.1.3 Personas**

The Personas were used in the workshops to connect participants' emotions to students' quality of life.

The personas represented the average student and mirrored different aspects of a students' quality of life. The purpose of personas is for product designers to visualize their

target group, and the needs of the target group, make better product decisions, and increase engagement and empathy from product designers toward the needs of the users (Cooper, 1999; Pruitt & Adlin, 2010, p.155-643). The implementation of the personas seemed to engage the participants quite a lot and had some of the participants showing verbal and non-verbal emotions directed towards the personas. The participants did show strong emotions while discussing personas and this was interpreted as a sign of higher engagement and empathy towards students' quality of life than otherwise in the workshop.

The personas sparked a lot of discussion in the workshops due to some perceived inaccuracy in representing students' quality of life. These discussions arguably lead to a better change and more reflections amongst the participants about what really matters when it comes to improving students' quality of life. Some of the participants were dissatisfied with how one of the Personas didn't represent a student struggling with "real issues" related to the quality of life. This persona represented someone who was dissatisfied academically but had a good support network and was despite the dissatisfaction, academically successful. The participants' concerns about the relevance of this Personas were answered by facilitators and other participants saying that academic dissatisfaction was something many students in Trondheim struggled with and that the focus shouldn't be on the actual persona but on how to improve the factors related to the persona's quality of life. The disadvantage of personas is that the details of personas can distract product designers from what's important about the product (Pruitt & Adlin, 2010, p.505). In this case, the complex stories of the personas seemed to distract some of the participants to focus on how accurate the persona was instead of interventions to improve students' quality of life. The participants' reactions and long discussions about the personas relevance in the workshops are evidence of the possible distraction that personas can bring to a project.

Ultimately the personas engaged participants' feelings in the process. It created good discussions that led to new reflections and a deeper understanding of students' quality of life. But it also dominated the second workshop and distracted some participants from the aim of the workshop. One can imagine how the workshop would have ended up had the personas been left out. The workshops could have been more efficient and there could have been more time for other activities had the personas been left out. But that could have made the participants less engaged and empathic towards students' quality of life.

Another, simpler alternative to personas could have been a person-based approach. Which involves designers of interventions to imagine how users will respond to an intervention, what the users' needs are, how to make an intervention feasible, and how to implement it (Yardley et al., 2015, p.6-7). This could have been a milder version of the Personas without the extra distraction but also possibly without the empathy, emotional investment, and engagement from the participants about students' quality of life.

The personas contributed to bringing the participants' engagement into the project and empathy towards students' quality of life. The personas also contributed to deeper reflections about what's truly important regarding students' quality of life. But the personas also served as a distraction, engaging the participants in long discussions about the persona's accuracy in reflecting students' quality of life. This energy and engagement could have distracted the participants from the object of the workshops. A simpler alternative to the personas could have been the person-based approach.

## 5.2 Outcomes

One of the significant emerging themes was outcomes. Outcomes are about the content that emerged from the workshops, important to improving students' quality of life.

### 5.2.1 Being part of something bigger and mattering in general and academically

Students experience a sense of belonging, mattering, and feeling at home both socially and academically as very important for their quality of life.

Students also have a need to feel at home in their studies, where they live, and in the city, they live in. They have a need to feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves. The learning environment is essential for students feeling of belonging and mattering. Getting to know classmates, and lecturers, and feeling welcomed and part of the study program is important. Flett et al., (2019, p.668) found a positive correlation between mattering and academic success. University and the learning environment can promote mattering. Promoting a mattering centered school engaging students to contribute but also helping them feel as if they matter to the university, lecturers, and each other can have positive effects on wellbeing, motivation, involvement, and academic performance, and can increase the quality of the study program (Flett et al., 2019; Dixon & Tucker, 2008, p.123-125; Pilivan and Siegl, 2007 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.676; Schlossberg, 1989 as cited in Tovar et al., 2009, p.174). When students are welcomed into the university and a new city it can contribute to a sense of mattering, which can have a cascading positive effect on other areas of their life.

When students feel they matter it is about more than just having friends and family. It's also about a sense of feeling at home in the different arenas such as university and leisure arenas that students engage in from day-to-day activities. Also feeling valued in an arena as mentioned earlier can promote more honesty and expression which means that students can more easily add value to these arenas. Adding value and feeling valued are both essential in mattering (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021, p.4). Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, (2021) mentions that changing the mindset and structure of things from a "me culture" to a "we culture" can have positive effects on mattering and wellbeing. If students focus more on being part of something bigger contributing and engaging, they might feel more mattering, at home, and engaged. But it can be difficult for students to become part of these arenas and engaged if they are not encouraged into it or are already part of it, they already have a fear of seeking belonging and rejection. This was seen in the data about students that had been rejected by such arenas had a fear of being rejected again, as behaviour can often be driven by the fear of shame, rejection and feeling devalued (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021, p.14). This can serve for an explanation of the vulnerable students described in the findings chapter.

When arenas for belonging and mattering are created it is a double-sided sword. Having arenas where students can matter also creates an exclusive arena for students who can't participate in these sorts of activities and arenas. Many students from the findings report the pain of being excluded from sports clubs, volunteering clubs, and so on, which are essentially arenas that create a lot of inclusion and matter for students. But unfortunately, these arenas don't have room for everyone. Students report having been rejected many times by different volunteering clubs. This can affect their social and general self-esteem



and sense of mattering which can further negatively affect their chances of pursuing and successfully participating in a mattering context (Flett, 2018, p.52-71).

Before observing the workshops, I had already studied the concept of mattering quite a bit. I knew that it could be a central theme to shed some light on students' quality of life. This was a form of confirmation bias and could limit the quality of my study. To counter this I had the mindset that I wanted to get surprised by the themes that came up during the observations.

Mattering for students and feeling part of something bigger than themselves is important for students. Many arenas such as sports clubs, universities, and leisure clubs can help students feel mattering. But the arenas that create a sense of mattering can also unintentionally exclude students that can't be part of it. This can affect students' sense of mattering in a negative way, pushing them further away from seeking arenas that can help their sense of mattering. Many students are in a vulnerable position where they are not able or too scared to go out and join arenas that can promote a sense of mattering.

### **5.2.2 Considerations related to Representation**

The students' involvement and representation during the process were essential for IME.

Nielsen (2013, p.1030) found that employees in a company where interventions are being implemented play a key role in the process of the intervention and in whether the intervention for improving wellbeing and health amongst the employees is successful. (Landsbergis & Vivona-Vaughan, 1995; Mikkelsen, 2005; Nielsen and Randall, 2012a as cited in Nielsen, 2013, p.1034). This raises questions about participation if 12-16 people were qualified to make decisions that could possibly affect the quality of life of some students in Trondheim. But again, the participants were chosen due to their expertise and experience in the field of quality of life and had different jobs where they were in unique positions to come close to and better understand students' quality of life. There were also a few students as participants in the IME workshops, which is arguably a good representation as the goal was to create interventions for students.

There were concerns raised about the data and focus of the workshops not considering various subgroups of students. The reply was that the subgroups didn't appear that often in the data. To achieve mattering on a larger scale it's also important to promote wellness and fairness in society and for everyone (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021). So, neglecting certain student groups from the data to improve students' quality of life could have adverse effects and create bigger divides between student groups and the student environment in Trondheim. It can create more of the double-sidedness of mattering where some students feel included, and others are excluded due to the nature of the interventions being created. As one of the examples from the workshop showed, if there are a lot of interventions for the general students who are interested in partying, other students that don't like to party can feel excluded from this and feel a lack of mattering. If the students that don't like to party mattered to the system, they would also be considered in the development of interventions targeted at students' quality of life. Following that argument developing interventions for students' quality of life and not considering the needs of subgroups of students such as for example international students is not a good strategy to raise the quality of life for students. Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky (2021, p.16) state that mattering is for everyone and so to promote it can mean to include everyone and all student subgroups

and create interventions that can connect with everyone, and not just the average student. Mattering can mean creating a culture and arenas for all different kinds of students to fit in which raises everyone's quality of life.

One subgroup that emerged in the data is the vulnerable students who struggle to get out and seek mattering and belonging. It can be hard for vulnerable students to take care of their own quality of life and go out and seek mattering, belonging connection, and friendship. A lack of mattering increases anxiety, depression, social phobia, loneliness, perfectionism, lowers self-esteem and increases self-criticism and stress (Dixon & Robinson Karpus, 2008; Flett et al., 2012; Joeng and Turner, 2015 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.673-674; Rosenberg & McCollough, 1981 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.674). For students, this can have a negative feedback loop as a lack of mattering reinforces the fear of going out and seeking social arenas (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021, p.14). These vulnerable students might be too depressed, have too much anxiety, and be too socially scared to join activities that could increase their mattering. That gives the question of how can we help these students? This was answered in the workshops with the social curator intervention which would help these students find arenas of mattering that matched them. the social curator would be an extra motivator and help these sorts of students to find arenas they could matter and belong to. Are the vulnerable students responsible for their own well-being or do we need to have better systems in place to help these students even more? How much can and should the systems do to help students promote their quality of life?

Having the target group represent the design team of an intervention is helpful to make more efficient interventions. Amongst the participants in the workshops, there were also some students creating interventions to promote students' quality of life, which helped the quality of the intervention. There were concerns if the sensemaker data didn't represent all subgroups of students such as for example students with international students or vulnerable students. Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky (2021) states that mattering is about fairness and is inclusive and for everyone. Being aware of student subgroups when designing interventions is helpful. But this was not focused on much in the workshops, due to subgroups not being explicitly mentioned in the sensemaker data according to the facilitators. The subgroup of vulnerable students was considered when designing the social curator intervention. The social curator helps students who struggle to find inclusive arenas, to find an inclusive arena that fits them well. When designing interventions to help students in Trondheim, it's important to consider all subgroups of students and not just design interventions for the average student. The goal should be mattering and quality of life for all students not just the average student.

### **5.2.3 Expectations, pressure, mastery, challenges, and growth**

Students experience frequent stress pressure and challenges related to academic life, social life, and life in general. Also, they have certain expectations of how the student life will turn out to be, which doesn't always match reality. This has a big impact on students' quality of life. But it also presents an opportunity to grow, master, and overcome challenges to increase the quality of life.

Huuse (2021, p.13) found that some students have high expectations to study life but are instead met with unexpected loneliness and challenges. They feel expectations from themselves, others, and society and feel ashamed, stigmatized, and lonely when they don't



live up to those expectations. This was also reflected in the findings of this thesis. Students that struggle to live up to expectations and aspirations they or society sets for them suffer. It increases the pressure and has a cascading effect on various areas of the student's life. When the students desire something they are not having or reaching it creates dissonance. This gap between expectations, ideals, and reality can cause depression, and anxiety and reduce a feeling of mattering amongst students (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021, p.258). In relation to expectations students also experience high levels of stress in their lives. The experienced stress consists of a stressor and the student's interpretation of the stressor (Ursin & Eriksen, 2004, p.567). Students can cope with stress by changing behavioral and cognitive efforts. Stress also represents opportunities for students to master and overcome, and the coping with stress can raise feelings of motivation and mastery (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p.131-634). Stressors cause stress, but interpretation and expectations of stressors can regulate this stress.

Colombo et al., (2020, p.1) found that having a positively biased view combined with an open and accepting attitude towards future events that can be both negative and positive increases resilience, handling of stress, wellbeing, and optimism. So, the student's biased view might influence how they handle social and academic stress, challenges, adversity, and stressors that come their way. The student's interpretation of the stressor and happening can also influence how they handle the stressor. They have the option to see it as a challenge that can lead to growth and better coping with stress. This sort of coping is important for students, just as it is important for students to face and overcome challenges to grow. Ryan & Deci (2000, p.58) mention that perceived competence is important for students to believe that they will master things. Perceived competence can come through overcoming challenges and dealing with stress. Hence it can create a positive feedback loop.

A way to decrease stress is by feeling a sense of meaning and belonging and being included in the university which can also increase resilience, optimism, and academic performance in students (Hausmann et al., 2017, p.805; Osterman, 2000, p.359; Glass, 2012, p.108; Pan, 2007, p.747; Krypel & King, 2010, p.421). It was also seen in the findings that the different areas of student's life influence each other. A sense of belonging and mattering socially and, in the university, can increase someone's academic satisfaction and decrease their stress. This supports the fact that mattering and belonging in university and socially should be prioritized to promote students' quality of life. These interrelations also affect each other negatively as it can be more difficult for someone who is stressed and pressured to feel mattering, be social and perform academically. Following this argument levels of stress can be influenced by many aspects of someone's lifestyle such as a sense of mattering, belonging to the university and social life, and is not predominantly influenced by the students' expectations to life and interpretation of the stressor.

All students experience stress and expectations from themselves and the world around them. Interpretation and changing expectations to self can regulate how much stress they feel and how they cope with it. Coping can also come in the form of feeling a sense of belonging and mattering from different arenas such as friends and university. Stress also represents an opportunity to overcome, master and grow as a person. But that depends on how students interpret and cope with the stress, pressure, and expectations.

## 5.2.4 Interventions

The workshops resulted in ideas for interventions to improve students' quality of life.

The crash course in learning environment intervention was based on helping students feel mattering and belonging in their learning arenas. This would have lecturers create learning environments to promote the social aspects of learning. Dixon & Tucker (2008, p.123-125) believe mattering should have a central part in school settings. They suggest implementing the principles of mattering in classrooms, counselling, and involving the whole school, staff, stakeholders, students, and lecturers. Having everyone add value, contribute, engage in volunteering, treat each other as beings that matter, and allow everyone to use their strengths and have an impact on the happenings at the university. This can have many positive benefits for everyone involved. (Piliavin and Siegl, 2007 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.676; Schlossberg 1989 as cited in Tovar et al., 2009, p.174; Tinto 2017 as cited in Flett et al., 2019; Di Placito-De Rango, 2018 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.676).

The mentor arrangement which is explained in the findings chapter is also about creating a sense of mattering and belonging at university. Having older students help young new students to master the study life can help the younger students feel like they matter in the university context. Creating social arenas for students at universities, where students are heard and seen by each other and the lecturer, can promote a sense of mattering and quality of life. Having a mentor arrangement for new students can help them feel valued and important as individuals and help them settle more into their university and social life when they first move to a new city and begin studies. The mentor arrangement and improvement of the learning environment can work but will take a lot of resources to carry out from students, the university, and professors. It would also take that students show up at lectures and take use of the student mentors to benefit from these interventions. These sorts of arrangements can promote mattering and quality of life in students who are vulnerable like the first-year students (Schlossberg, 1989 as cited in Flett et al., 2019, p.669).

Does Trondheim need more interventions for students to improve their quality of life? Or does the city just have to inform and get more people to join their existing intervention? What does an effective, good intervention look like? The social curator intervention is an example of a different sort of intervention aimed at involving students in the already existing interventions such as sports teams, clubs, and volunteering. Arguably this can be a very efficient intervention, as there is a lot in Trondheim for students to do and participate in, but not all the alternatives are well informed. Many students also struggle to find out exactly what to do with all the existing offers. A social curator targets students' quality of life in an area that's more difficult to do something about. The intervention targets vulnerable students, uncertain students, and students that want but don't know how to join arenas. Arguably many students are in these categories and the social curator gives a helping hand to these students. Going back to that mattering is about everyone finding their place where they feel they fit in and Matter, the social curator does this. Instead of just creating an intervention like a festival where one hopes that all students will enjoy this sort of arrangement.

The university can play a central role in students' quality of life. Here promoting students' feelings of mattering will play a key role. There are many things such as student mentor and inclusive learning environment that the university can do to promote students' feelings

of mattering. Targeting the first-year students through the mentoring arrangement or the vulnerable students through the social curator role is essential to promote mattering and quality of life on a significant scale amongst students. Mattering is about everyone finding their place and having systems in place to help students find the arenas they fit into and promote inclusiveness in the already existing arenas to target the average students but also students in various vulnerable positions.

### **5.3 Meta meanings of content**

The meta meanings were shown in the findings in that not everything that happened in the workshops could be directly linked to content or process.

Promoting students' quality of life can be seen as a complex issue to solve and would involve the participants and facilitators being prepared to work in such a complex domain. I believe that the Cynefin framework can help to understand what sort of complex environment the participants, facilitators, and consultants were working in to handle the issue of students' quality of life. The Cynefin framework can help address complex challenges and give an understanding of the appropriate action for the complex issue someone is facing (Snowden & Boone, 2007, p.2; Van Beurden et al., 2011, p.73-81). The challenges related to students' quality of life weren't linear cause and effect and often had unpredictability, many right answers, uncertainty, and non-linear causal relationships related to it (Snowden & Boone, 2007; Van Beurden et al., 2011, p.74-76). It was important for the participants to investigate how things in relation to students' quality of life affected each other, what was under the surface, and how they could understand the issues more deeply. All the workshops had a lot of focus on learning and getting deeper into understanding the issue. Important in the complex domain is collaboration, exploring patterns and correlations, getting a good understanding of what's useful to do, and understanding how to approach the issue (Snowden & Booner, 2007; Van Beurden et al., 2011, p.76-81). The workshops were dominated by collaboration, looking at patterns and correlations to understand students' quality of life and how different aspects of it affected each other such as university and belonging. The way the workshops were constructed made it so that the participants and facilitators worked in such a way that was appropriate for such a complex issue.

Implicit meanings came in the form of discussions in the workshops, these discussions uncovered themes such as the vulnerable students that didn't explicitly appear in the sensemaker data. Through discussions, seeing patterns and reading between the lines the participants found many themes and implicit meanings related to students' quality of life. The participants also made connections in the workshops, seeing patterns and relationships that didn't appear explicitly in the sensemaker data. They were able to see how themes, stories, and interventions were interrelated and all influenced each other. Creating belonging for a student can also reduce their levels of stress and creating a better learning environment for someone can also increase their sense of mattering. Different aspects of students' quality of life influenced each other in both negative and positive ways.

There was an incentive not to treat symptoms but find the root of the problem in the workshop. There were also frequent discussions about what the root of the problem was and if creating more interventions such as meeting places for students was the correct approach. Alternatively, how could students' quality of life be approached instead?

The approach was then to create interventions and improve the quality of life for students by focusing on positive student experiences and systematically based interventions. For example, if a student felt a lack of mattering, the approach would be to improve something systematically, such as an inclusive learning environment to help the student feel more of a sense of mattering. If there are many already existing interventions that should promote students' quality of life why aren't students' quality of life high then, and why do we still find many vulnerable students that are not able to get out and seek arenas for quality of life?

When looking at the lack of quality of life, the root of the problem might be systematic. But it might also be reflected in deeper, cultural values, as systems are rooted in culture. So, the root of the problem might go deeper than just systematic changes. Some cultures are dominated by competition, performance, narcissism, production, and individualism. These cultures can also fall subject to promoting quality of life through an individualistic wellbeing strategy. Although pursuing individual quality of life is necessary, it's not sufficient. Whereas there's evidence that quality of life is often tied to a sense of Collectiveness, mattering, caring for the environment, togetherness, fairness, equality, community, and belonging (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021, p.252-266). This is arguably also what's missing in some cultures and can be an efficient way to promote quality of life on a broader level in society. How can people focus on collective values and a "we culture" if the world around them is mirroring individualistic values and a "me culture?" Certain individualistic values seem to stay in contrast with more collectively oriented values, and have a negative effect on wellbeing, prosocial behavior, and caring for the environment (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021; Kasser, 2011). This can mean that interventions to improve quality of life should target the core of the issue which might be cultural values.

Promoting students' quality of life is a complex issue, and it's important to understand the implicit meanings, interrelations, and the root of the problem to be able to promote it. Making systematic changes helps to improve students' quality of life but focusing on cultural values which can be reflected in individual values, behavior, and systems, is also important to truly understand it.

## 6 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to better understand how students in Trondheim experience quality of life and how IME created a process to improve the quality of life for students. In this chapter I will summarize my answers to the research question, "how do students in Trondheim experience quality of life, and how was the process of trying to understand the underlying issues and promote students' quality of life?" and discuss the limitations of this study.

In terms of the process, there is evidence that a sense of mattering and psychological safety amongst the participants leads to a quality process and results. The way the workshop was designed, familiarity between participants, and engagement in the general theme are things that lead to them feeling a sense of mattering and psychological safety. The potential dark side of this is social desirability bias, groupthink, and false consensus which can influence the workshop process in negative ways.

IME was interested in learning about the process and spreading this knowledge to other research circles. They decided to learn about the process in debrief meetings instead of having discussions and meta briefings during the process to learn about it. According to Keegan & Turner (2001, p.26) learning about the process as it is happening is the best way to do it.

The personas served a purpose in that they created discussions, deeper understanding, more engagement, and increased the participants' empathy in relation to students' quality of life. But they also served as a distraction for the participants focusing on the details of the personas and how accurate they were instead of focusing on ways to promote students' quality of life. A simpler alternative that might not have distracted the participants so much could have been the person-based approach (Yardley et al., 2015, p.6-7).

For students' quality of life, feeling a sense of mattering, and feeling a part of something bigger is essential. Arenas such as the university and leisure clubs can assist in promoting these feelings in students. But these also undesirably exclude students, not everyone fitting into the same arenas and activities that can promote mattering. When students get rejected and don't feel they matter, it can push them further away from these arenas and make them vulnerable to loneliness, exclusion, and a lack of belongingness. Therefore, representation of all students was important in the IME process and in creating interventions in general to promote students' quality of life. All subgroups of students such as international students and first-year students are important to consider when creating interventions, as all students need to represent when it comes to promoting quality of life. Not all students feel mattering and fit into interventions that promote the quality of life for the average student. To promote quality of life amongst students it's important to not neglect certain subgroups of students.

Stress, pressure, and high expectations from the self are normal among students, how they interpret stress and adjust their own expectations to themselves is essential to how they cope and their quality of life. Interpreting stress and expectations as something that serves them and motivates them to overcome challenges can give positive feelings of mastery and growth.

The university is central to promoting students' quality of life. Promoting a learning environment built on the principles of mattering, social learning, and inclusion can help students connect more with each other the lecturer and the study program. This can also affect other parts of their life positively, such as their stress levels. Mentor arrangements for first-year students can help the extra vulnerable students that are new to the city and program quickly find their way around and feel a sense of mattering, which then can increase their quality of life. The social curator can help and motivate the vulnerable students to find arenas where they fit in and can increase their sense of mattering and quality of life.

To promote students' quality of life, it's important to consider the interrelations between different aspects of students' quality of life and look at the complex patterns and implicit meanings that are not directly shown through surveys. Such as for example students that are too afraid to go out and find connections and arenas to participate in, and a sense of mattering can reduce academic stress in students. It's also worth considering if the perceived root of the problem really is the root of the problem or just a more advanced symptom. To promote students' quality of life there must be systematic changes as an individualized symptom approach is clearly not enough, but the root of the problem also stretches deeper into cultural values that Norwegian culture has been built on.

## **6.1 Limitations and implications for future research**

There were limitations and considerations related to this study. I was aware of my role as a researcher and a student. Quality of life is something I have always been interested in learning about. Also being a student and reflecting on my own quality of life influenced me to want to write about this subject. This was something I had to question myself during my research to make sure I was not too much influenced by the assumptions, feelings, and knowledge I already had about the subject.

Confirmation bias was a potential limitation of my study, due to my need to confirm what I already knew about the quality of life. To counter this I had a mindset in my research that I wanted to look for the unexpected and get surprised. The findings then decided what sort of theory I used in this thesis, so it was an inductive process.

Another potential limitation was the way the workshops were arranged. There were 12 to 16 participants discussing sensemaker data representing over 600 students in the workshops. It was clear that the way the participants interpreted the sensemaker data was influenced by the way they viewed the issue of quality of life. I observed the participants interpreting this sensemaker data. I was getting the data to understand how students in Trondheim experienced their quality of life through a third-hand source interpreting it. Therefore, I also focused on how the process of coming up with the interventions happened.

My lack of experience in observing and the difficulty of capturing everything I was observing was also a limitation. I was also a participant in the meetings of IME before and between workshops. This meant I got an insight into the planning of the workshops; I was also used as a consulting member which could have influenced the way the workshops turned out. I could also have influenced the way the participants of the workshops acted just based on my presence as an observer.

The findings of this thesis can inspire researchers interested in students' quality of life and quality of life in general. It can give researchers new insight into understanding and improving students' quality of life and how to create processes that can improve students' quality of life. This thesis can inspire action and implementation to improve instead of just gathering data about the subject. The process and content orientation in this thesis can show researchers that it's important to consider both process and content when improving students' quality of life. If there are going to be done future projects with similar designs as IME's workshop design, this thesis can then help to understand some of the important aspects to create a quality process. The workshop process also uncovered implicit truths about students' quality of life that would have been difficult to grasp by just looking at the sensemaker data. The documentation and awareness of these implicit truths in this study are valuable for future research to better understand students' quality of life.

## 6.2 Personal reflections

Doing this study has made me realize that students' quality of life is something that is not simple to promote. But I think it's a step in the right direction to look at how to promote it and create processes that do promote it. Personally, I believe that looking at collective strategies, such as promoting community, collectiveness, mattering, and belonging is something that can help immensely in promoting students' quality of life. Taking care of the self is also important but it seems to me that western culture is very good at promoting "self-care" and "self-improvement", so maybe there's something else missing in the quality of life of students. The different aspects of quality of life affect each other, so promoting for example mattering can have significant effects on stress and psychological and physical health. Taking responsibility for our own lives and not blaming all our problems on the system is important, but it's also important to create systems and cultures that work in favor of students' quality of life. There is a balance here. Many students are in vulnerable positions, where they're either too stressed with their studies to seek social arenas, or too scared to go out and do things that can promote their quality of life. The negative feelings that students experience can partly be due to the culture we live in, which is dominated by individualism and competition. These students are responsible for their own quality of life, but more can be done on a systematic and cultural level to give the most vulnerable students a little nudge in the right direction.

I think that we all on an individual and systematic level need to ask ourselves what we value and how this is affecting our quality of life. Now more than ever we need to question the values that have for so long helped societies to thrive. In such a fast-changing world where humans need to adapt to new challenges and new ways of living to cope with the demands of the modern world, we also need to adapt how we understand and approach our quality of life.

There is still much to learn about the interrelations between factors that influence quality of life. And there can be questions if it's even possible to raise the quality of life for the general student population, or if this will demand sacrifices in other forms. These things will be answered in time, but one thing is certain, improving our understanding of this phenomenon is without a doubt beneficial.



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## **8 Appendix**

### **8.1 NSD Information form**

The attached consent form beneath has the original research question and description of the project that I started out with in the beginning of the project. Since then, I changed the research question, aim and description of the project quite a bit to better fit the data that I observed and analysed. It is natural in such projects that the research question and aim of project can change along the way.

## Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet

### *Hva slags rolle spiller mattering for studenters opplevelse av livskvalitet i Trondheim*

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å undersøke Hva slags rolle mattering har for studenters livskvalitet i Trondheim. I dette skrevet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

#### **Formål**

Formålet med prosjektet er å undersøke hva slags rolle mattering som betyr «føle seg verdifull og tilføye verdi» spiller for studenters livskvalitet i Trondheim.

#### **Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?**

NTNU er ansvarlig for prosjektet.

#### **Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?**

Du får spørsmål om å delta fordi du som student som er med i In My Experience sin workshop er relevant for prosjektet mitt.

#### **Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?**

Hvis du velger å delta innebærer det at du lar deg selv observere mens du deltar på workshopen. Opplysningen som samles, vil bestå av notatskriving på hva som skjer og kommuniseres i workshopen. Alle opplysninger vil bli slettet når prosjektet er ferdig.

#### **Det er frivillig å delta**

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du har problemer med noe jeg har observert under workshopen så har du rett til å spørre meg som prosjektleder om å fjerne dette fra notatene mine.

#### **Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger**

Vi vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrevet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Jeg som ansvarlig students for prosjektet og veileder for prosjektet som er professor ved NTNU vil ha tilgang til opplysninger fra prosjektet.

Du som deltaker på prosjektet vil anonymiseres og ingen uvedkommende vil ha tilgang til personopplysninger om deg, som lagres på en navneliste adskilt fra øvrige data. Opplysninger vil bli lagret og kryptert på en minnepenn. I publikasjonen av Master prosjektet vil du ikke være gjenkjennbar.

#### **Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?**

Opplysningene anonymiseres når prosjektet avsluttes/oppgaven er godkjent, noe som etter planen er 1.juni 2022. Da vil all data fra prosjektet bli slettet utenom den ferdig stilte master oppgaven som vil publiseres på NTNU sine sider.

#### **Dine rettigheter**

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke personopplysninger som er registrert om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av opplysningene,
- å få rettet personopplysninger om deg,
- å få slettet personopplysninger om deg, og
- å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger.

#### **Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?**

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra NTNU har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

#### **Hvor kan jeg finne ut mer?**

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med Prosjektansvarlig; [redacted]

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til NSD sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med:

- NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS på epost ([personverntjenester@nsd.no](mailto:personverntjenester@nsd.no)) eller på telefon: 55 58 21 17.

Med vennlig hilsen

---

## **Samtykkeerklæring**

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet [*sett inn tittel*], og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

- å delta i observasjon

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet

---

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

## 8.2 Observation guide and example of analysis notes

### OBSERVASJONS GUIDE.

#### Tips:

- KODER for folkene.
- Hvordan opplever studenter i Trondheim livskvalitet, sett i lys av mattering begrepet.
- Sitt med en og en gruppe
- Sosial interaksjon!!
- Guida av problemstilling og teori, fleksibel til ny kunnskap, ikke for farget av teori.
- Ikke bekreft eller forkaste teori/hypotese, undersøk fenomen.
- Hva er viktigst å observere for å operasjonalisere problemstilling?
- supplementært med mini intervjuer.
- Beskriv uten å tilføye mening, nøyaktig, detaljer, i riktig rekkefølge.
- Relevant bakgrunns info.
- Dato, tid, sted, mitt navn, hvem til stede.
- Informert samtykke.
- Bruk nøytrale ord (unngår, hyggelig osv.)
- Ikke konkluder (utforskende).
- Snevre inn hva jeg vil observere, begrensn/streng data-hold deg te teori, dybde.
- Kommunikasjon og tiltak er viktigst.
- Interessert i hva de tenker, sier og handler.
- Min identitet, bakgrunn og bias.
- Koder for tema som forventes- sorter obs etter temaer
- Ikke skriv ordrett, men heller hva som skjer.
- Viktig å fylle på rett etter obs.

#### Hva skal jeg se etter:

- bakgrunn/mål:
- Hva gjøres/kommuniseres det om som er viktig.
- Hva resultat prøver de å oppnå.
- Uforutsette temaer:
- Hva slags beslutninger blir befattet.
- Egne betraktninger.

Bigger themes	Content of observation	codes
Sharing, social, expressive environment.	- participants sitting in right in the circle as usual.	Circle.
Disruption Representation of students	<p>Facilitator: parking spot= notes that don't fit the personas.</p> <p>Participant 1: Missing performance, students are measured academically, good, network etc. students with mental illnesses, depression, anxiety, <u>adhd</u>, self-medication, lots of party and sex, bad self-awareness, sits alone and plays videogames, feels unnormal, different than others, outside of society, smokes weed. Didn't have personas that have failed socially. The personas missed someone that has bigger psychological challenges. Many of them seemed quite successful socially and such, people that can't lean themselves on highly educated parents etc. No personas on an exchange student, international students, in the fear of just developing for Norwegian students in Norwegian cities. <u>NTNU</u> is going to grow a lot, and the international students will play central role. Also, non-ethnic people need to be represented, everyone that have a special role. Jonas might have been little missed in according to helping the people that need it the most.</p> <p>Participant 2: But Jonas represents academic dissatisfaction which is very central aspect.</p> <p>Participant 3: dissatisfaction over studies comes through the other personas. Students have before the pandemic not come to lectures, but once the pandemic <u>started</u> they became so keen on having physical lectures, pandemic influenced this.</p>	<p>Study Satisfaction</p> <p>Pandemic</p> <p>Student representation</p> <p>Discussion</p>



## 8.3 NSD confirmation

07.05.2022, 15:44

Meldeskjema for behandling av personopplysninger

# NSD NORSK SENTER FOR FORSKNINGSDATA

## Vurdering

**Referansenummer**

197743

**Prosjekttittel**

Hvordan opplever studenter i Trondheim livskvalitet, sett i lys av mattering begrepet.

**Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon**Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet / Fakultet for samfunns- og utdanningsvitenskap (SU) /  
Institutt for pedagogikk og livslang læring**Prosjektansvarlig (vitenskapelig ansatt/veileder eller stipendiat)****Type prosjekt**

Studentprosjekt, masterstudium

**Kontaktinformasjon, student****Prosjektperiode**

07.01.2022 - 01.06.2022

**Vurdering (1)****19.01.2022 - Vurdert**

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet med vedlegg den 19.01.2022. Behandlingen kan starte.

**TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET**

Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige kategorier av personopplysninger frem til 01.06.2022.

**LOVLIG GRUNNLAG**

Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake.

Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a.

**PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER**<https://meldeskjema.nsd.no/vurdering/6197c7ec-fc2e-4e27-846c-7edd73e8cd45>

1/2

07.05.2022, 15:44

Meldeskjema for behandling av personopplysninger

Personverntjenester vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen om:

- lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen
- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke behandles til nye, uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet
- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

#### DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), og dataportabilitet (art. 20).

Personverntjenester vurderer at informasjonen om behandlingen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

#### FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

Personverntjenester legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og/eller rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

#### MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER

Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til oss ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde: <https://www.nsd.no/personverntjenester/fylle-ut-meldeskjema-for-personopplysninger/melde-endringer-i-meldeskjema>

Du må vente på svar fra oss før endringen gjennomføres.

#### OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

Personverntjenester vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

