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Title: Students' Experiences About Entering Higher Education During Pandemic

Year: 2022

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Penttinen, L., & Miettinen, R. (2022). Students' Experiences About Entering Higher Education During Pandemic. In H. Burgsteiner, & G. Krammer (Eds.), Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic's Distance Learning on Students and Teachers in Schools and in Higher Education : International Perspectives (pp. 79-99). Leykam Buchverlag. https://doi.org/10.56560/isbn.978-3-7011-0496-3_5

Students' Experiences About Entering Higher Education During Pandemic

Leena Penttinen[1] & Riitta Miettinen[2]

Abstract

Autumn 2020 was an unexpected situation for many new university students in Finland as they suffered lack of orientation activities as well as both formal and informal learning experiences on campus. Instead of social events, peer group mentoring and study guidance, they entered university online.

Theoretical background. The conceptual framework of the study consists of the engagement and belongingness during studies. In addition, the first-year experience as footing for the academic educational path creates the framework of the empirical study.

Method. The study features a student survey carried out in the autumn of 2020 at a mid-sized university in Finland. A total of 803 first-year students (35% response rate) answered questions about their experience of the first months at the university, the online learning experience of the first courses and the support for learning, and they shared their feelings about belonging to the university and groups as well as concerning loneliness at the beginning of the studies.

Results. The main results show that there were contradictory experiences among the students during the pandemic. 30% said that the COVID-19 pandemic did not hamper the beginning of their studies but 60% suffered from the pandemic's circumstances. There were no differences between faculties or disciplines. Some of the students responded that the distance learning went smoothly for them. In contrast, some students felt it was disappointing. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the beginning of their studies was hampered for several reasons. The critical issues of starting university studies online without campus experience and the consequences for the development of a supporting transition are discussed.

Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic, first-year experience, engagement, transition, higher education

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Burgsteiner, Krammer (Eds.) (2022). Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic's Distance Learning, S. 79–99
https://doi.org/10.56560/isbn.978-3-7011-0496-3_5

1 Introduction

This study reports students' first-year experience (FYE) of higher education in Finland, starting a new educational path during the COVID-19 pandemic at a Finnish mid-sized university. The autumn of 2020 was an unexpected situation for many new university students in Finland as they suffered lack of orientation activities as well as both formal and informal learning experiences on campus. Instead of in-person study guidance, social events and peer group mentoring, they entered university online.

At the end of January 2020, Finland confirmed its first case of the contagious coronavirus disease (COVID-19). In March, all schools, including higher education, switched to distance education. As a result, the new academic year 2020–2021 began with distance learning in the autumn. All over the world, the pandemic affected the practices of teaching and learning. Most classroom teaching was replaced by distance teaching and learning (Marinoni et al., 2020). The UNESCO report (2020) highlights the consequences of the worldwide restrictions to young people's lives as increased pressure, stress and anxiety are underlined when routines are disrupted and social interaction decreased in addition to the lack of traditional learning methods.

The switch to distance teaching and learning has intensified the discussion about pandemic inferences and implications for higher education pedagogy as well as students' abilities to cope with the new situation. Some findings show that at the beginning of pandemic, many students enjoyed the new way of online education and that only a small minority had trouble (Karalis & Raikou, 2020). At the same time, distance learning at home required greater self-discipline and motivation to follow through with online lessons (Aristovnik et al., 2020).

Research has looked at the readiness for the situation of both individual students and the institutions. Oliveira and colleagues (2018) note that not all students are prepared to study online and enter a distance learning course, although principally the flexibility is the main advantage for students. In addition, the comparison of Austrian and Finnish higher education students during the pandemic has shown that individual competence as well as self-regulated learning are crucial factors to predict outcomes like motivation and emotions in education (Holzer et al., 2021). Institutionally, there have been discussions about universities' preparedness for new online teaching environments. Kamarianos and colleagues (2020) point out that the existing well developed and maintained digital technology could support the successful transfer to online teaching and administration.

As the pandemic situation has been challenging for both staff and students, we asked what kinds of experiences the newcomers had in the transition to higher education during the pandemic. In this study, our focus is on first-year students and their experience of starting a new study programme at a time when the pandemic forced the closure of the campus.

2 First-year Experience as Footing for the Academic Study Path

The first few weeks at the university campus are crucial for the whole study path as such. Biggs and colleagues (2012) describe the transition as a complex process involving students' previous knowledge and expectations, before coming to the campus, as well as the first campus experience and the supportive practices organised by the university. Our study utilises the conceptual framework of the studies of engagement and belongingness during higher education. The engagement developed during the first months is crucial for the later study path. Krause and Coates (2008, p. 494) define it as: 'the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes and their definition highlights the student's own activity in the process of becoming a member of the new community'. In their model, Annala and colleagues (2012) emphasise the way a student's own activity interacts with an academic community that is seen as a supportive environment for significant learning experiences by collaborative teaching and learning. Some studies have also paid attention, not only to the amount of time, but also to the quality of time spent on diverse kinds of activities. Fosnacht, McGormick and Lerma (2018) found that students often spend their free time relaxing and socialising as well as volunteering.

Trautwein and Bosse (2017) found four dimensions of critical requirements to be considered as crucial for early engagement. Difficulties with these requirements can harm a successful transition to university. First, they summarised a dimension of personal requirements as potential difficulties in terms of the students' self-management and their personal adjustment to university, for example, involving a wide variety of challenges in general study skills and the ability to schedule learning activities. This can also include a new life situation and balancing studying with other areas of life. Secondly, the organisational dimension refers to the more social issues in a new environment. These can be difficulties with coping with the university system, its rules and regulations or other institutional conditions. A new student might not gain an overall orientation within the university system or the ways in which learning and teaching are organised. Students might struggle with their exam schedule or lack of supervision. Thirdly, the content-related dimension concerns challenges regarding the content of students' study programme and the complexity of the subject matter of the courses. These challenges might be related to the choice between the actual study programme and their interest or expectations regarding the study content. The last category is the social dimension. The social dimension is about building up peer relations as well as integrating and getting involved in social groups on the campus.

The interaction with staff and peers plays a significant role in the integration and engagement process. The interaction between students and teachers influences the quality of the first-year engagement (Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Teachers' support enhances adjustment also as regards identity for-

mation in the transition phase and early experiences on campus (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006; Scanlon, Rowling & Weber, 2007). Teachers play a key role in aiding students' identity formation, and it is important that students have experiences of teachers being accessible since many studies report students' feelings of anonymity as problematic (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005).

For first-year students, it is important that they receive support during their early experiences in a new community. Teaching staff play a vital role in that. Leese (2010) points out that new students look for an opportunity to speak with teaching staff as well as for the ability to talk to personal tutors. The possibility to speak with teachers outside the classroom can foster academic achievements and study paths in the long term (Schudde, 2019). Fuentes, Alvarado, Brendan, and De Angelo (2014) suggest that the early interaction with academic staff leads to a more meaningful interaction with teachers also later on along the study path. Supportive teachers can improve integration and engagement as well as support identity formation at the beginning of studies (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006; Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). In addition to the quality of the teacher–student relationship, the interaction with peers and older students is important in the transition to the new study community (Krause & Coates, 2008; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005).

3 Supporting the Transition to University

The early weeks on campus are crucial for building up social relationships (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Previous research has called for developing various kinds of interventions and particular introductory courses for the early phase of studies to support successful transitioning and integration (Brinkworth et al., 2009; Brooman & Darwent, 2013; Gale & Parker, 2014; Greene, 2011; Kantanen et al., 2020; Tinto, 2000; Willcoxson, Cotter & Joy, 2011). There is the need for a well-planned and supported transition period during the first weeks and months at university. Leese (2010) noticed that students were prepared for the increased workload, higher expectations, and emphasis on independent learning, but, at the same time, some students were surprised about these. This might also be related to a lack of cultural capital in the heterogeneous student population. Leese (2010) emphasises that this also has to do with the growing awareness of teaching staff about teaching and learning processes.

University student services aim to support new students during their transition as well as their long-term engagement in studies. In Finland, the transition to university is supported by several kinds of practices regarding guidance and counselling. Lairio and Penttinen (2006) present the holistic student-centred model of guidance applied at many Finnish universities. Peer tutoring plays a vital role in the socialisation and integration of new students in the study community (Skaniakos, Penttinen & Lairio, 2014). In addition, the role of academic staff is recognised on the horizon of pedagogical practices, and teachers'

role is seen as important in the development of academic identity and future prospects during studies (Penttinen, Skaniakos & Lairio, 2013). Thus, most Finnish universities have a long tradition of developing practices to support new students' transition to academic studies.

However, in the exceptional situation of the pandemic, the support during the transition lacked social events and face-to-face peer mentoring. In addition, the introductory courses were carried out online without the students experiencing learning in lecture halls where feelings can be shared with other new students in one's field. At many universities, there were some small group events for new students, like at this university. In addition, teaching was implemented mostly as distance learning online, but although intensified study guidance and counselling were offered partly on the campus, many students lacked the motivation to come to an empty campus.

4 Research Question

The aim of our research was to understand the effects of the pandemic on the process of transition to university. Based on previous research on first-year students' experiences, our research questions were designed to identify the effects of the pandemic on first-year students during this unique period. The aim was to gain an understanding of the variations among the student experiences. Our research questions were the following:

1. Did first-year students have trouble starting their studies during the pandemic situation?
2. How was the experience of the pandemic connected to social aspects of the students' early engagement, that is, to their:
    a. sense of belonging to the groups at the university,
    b. feeling of loneliness at the beginning of the studies,
    c. experience of student–staff engagement,
    d. experience of support from staff, peer students, the student union as well as friends and family?
3. How did students themselves describe the effects of the pandemic on the early phase of their studies?

The first two questions were quantitative and aimed to describe the aspects of the situation in general. The last research question focused more on the aim to give space to the

voice of the students themselves in order to capture their own interpretation of their first-year experience during such an exceptional situation.

5 Methodology

5.1 Data Collection

Data were gathered with a survey of first-year students of a medium-sized university in Finland. The questionnaire consisted of structured questions about background information (age, gender, previous experience of university studies, the degree programme, and faculty). Students' own evaluations of COVID-19 effects were also asked about with a structured question, "Has the pandemic situation made it difficult to start your studies?", with options "Yes", "No", and "Cannot say". After answering the multiple-choice question they could describe their experience of the situation further in their own words.

Because of COVID-19 pandemic effects, there were questions about belonging to the university and groups as well as aspects of loneliness at the beginning of their studies in line with questions used in the Finnish Students Health and Well-Being Survey (KOTT, 2021, see also Kunttu, Pesonen & Saari, 2016). Students' sense of belonging to a group was asked about with a multi-selectable multiple choice question, "In which groups do you feel that you belong?", with choices "University", "Field of study", "Academic year class", "Student union", "Peer student group", and "Peer group outside university". Social support at the beginning of the studies was measured with a multiple-choice question, "How much support and help have you received from peer students / peer mentors / teachers / personal study tutor / friends outside the university / family?", with a Likert-type scale of answers from 1 ("Not at all") to 4 ("A lot").

The questionnaire also included questions about the first courses and interaction with staff. The scale for measuring these factors was modified from the Student–Staff Engagement scale for first-year students developed by Krause and Coates (2008). The scale highlights the important role of staff in higher education students' first-year experience. Some items were added to deal with online teaching. The respondents were asked to evaluate statements (e. g., "The first courses were interesting", "The quality of online teaching has been good", "Teaching methods have supported my learning", "I have received support for learning online", "Teachers have been easy to contact online or on campus", "Most of the staff have been easy to approach", "I know who to ask for help if needed", and "Study guidance is readily available") with a Likert-type scale from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree").

A total number of 803 first-year students (response rate 35%) answered the questionnaire at the end of the autumn 2020 semester. At completion, the data consisted of 798 respondents, after we deducted five respondents from the distance affiliation of the uni-

versity. Most of the respondents had started a Bachelor's degree (80.6%). Although fewer respondents started a Master's degree (19.4%), more than half of the respondents (51.3%) reported having previous experience of university studies in Finland; it is quite common for students to have studied at open university before applying for a degree. Thus, the data consist of a heterogeneous student body of Finnish university students starting a new study programme. The first-year students in Finland tend to be older compared to those in most other OECD countries (OECD, 2021). The youngest respondents were 18 years of age and the eldest was 70 years old. The average age was 24.8 years (SD 7.61). The national average age of entrance in higher education in Finland was 22.8 years in 2020 (Karhunen et al., 2021). The respondents were categorised into three groups according to age. The *youngest group* (21 years or younger) of respondents represented those who had only one or two gap years before university. The *young adult group* (22 to 29 years) was based on an age category used in Finnish youth policy. Finally, the others were classed as the *older group* (30 years and older).

All of the questions in the questionnaire were optional to answer. Because there were no compulsory questions, we were satisfied with the manner of how respondents had filled in the questionnaire. Only some answers were missing throughout the data. Gender distribution was 74.6% *female*, 22,0 % *male* and 0.5% *other*, while 2.9% selected *I do not want to state my gender*. These numbers characterise the average student population in Finland, where most students at the research universities without technical or medical education are female. The respondents represented the average distribution of students across different faculties: 27.4% humanities and social sciences, 15.2% information technology, 24.4% education and psychology, 10.7% business and economics, 11.9% sports and health sciences, and 10.4% mathematics and science.

5.2 *Analysis*

Data were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively to aim at a descriptive outlook on the overall situation. For the quantitative analysis, the IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26) programme was utilised and consisted of descriptive statistics. The items of the Student–Staff Engagement scale were used to create a new sum variable of Student–Staff Engagement Group differences ($\alpha = 0.83$, $n = 8$) that were tested with the Chi-square test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) (Larson, 2008). The aim of the analysis was to get a descriptive picture of the general factors influencing students' first-year experience at the start of a new study programme from the perspective of an exceptional situation, the COVID-19 pandemic.

The qualitative content analysis featured open-ended questions about the students' own descriptions of the effects of the pandemic on the beginning of their studies. The data consisted of 604 unique answers from individual respondents. Quite brief answers were typically – one or two sentences about whether or not a respondent felt that the pandemic

had harmed the early phase of their recent studies. The qualitative data were divided into two main categories: 1) those descriptions that highlight the difficulties that the pandemic caused, and 2) those answers which included argumentation about the good qualities of how studying was handled during the pandemic. Two researchers checked the data and applied thematic categories that were compared and discussed. The content analysis utilised the original ideas of Patton (2002) and Bengtsson (2016). We treated the two categories as separate units of analysis representing the variance in students' opinions. The overall strategy was more like manifest analysis (see Bengtsson, 2016). All the thematic categories were organised according to the broader surface structure, and the aim was to complement the understanding of the descriptive results of the quantitative data analysis.

6 Results

6.1 The Influence of the Pandemic Experience

The effects of the pandemic were experienced in diverse ways among the student population. The main results show that there were contradictory experiences among the first-year higher education students during the pandemic. Two-thirds of respondents (59.9%) reported that the pandemic had hampered the beginning of their studies. However, almost one-third (30.4%) felt that the pandemic had not caused much trouble at the beginning of their studies. Less than ten percent (9.7%) of the respondents could not say whether or not the pandemic had any consequences for the early phase of their studies. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between pandemic situation and background information. When comparing respondents' pandemic experience according to their background information, only age made any difference with respect to the variety of experiences (Table 1). More than two-thirds of the youngest respondents (age 21 years or younger) reported difficulties with the pandemic. It was quite the opposite among the older student group (30 years or older), where only one-third reported that the pandemic had harmed the beginning of their studies. Gender and the field of study made no difference.

Table 1: The experience of the pandemic situation according to age

Has the pandemic made it difficult to start your studies?	Yes		No		Cannot say				
Age	f	%	f	%	f	%	X^2	p	df
21 years or younger	287	71.0	74	18.3	43	10.6	99.349	.000	4
22–29 years	132	56.9	75	32.3	25	10.8			
30 years or older	51	34.2	90	60.4	8	5.4			
Total	476	59.9	242	30.4	77	9.7			

6.2 The Social Aspects of Early Engagement and the Pandemic Situation

When exploring students' sense of belonging to groups, some differences were found. The majority of respondents (85.3%) reported feeling a sense of belonging to the university where they had been accepted to study. Likewise, 77.5% of all respondents felt they belong to the study field they had chosen. Only a small minority (8.2%) of respondents did not have feelings of belonging to any group at all.

The sense of belonging to the university and field of discipline can be interpreted as representing the overall belongingness to the academic study community as a shared experience without connection to the pandemic situation, and there were no significant differences between groups. However, there were significant differences in the feelings of belonging to smaller and more concrete social groups; these differences are reported in Figure 1. These respondents, who felt difficulties caused by the pandemic, also reported less belonging to their academic year class ($X^2 = 10.852$, $df = 2$, $p = .004$). In addition, they reported a lesser feeling of belonging to a smaller peer student group ($X^2 = 13.683$, $df = 2$, $p = .001$) and to the student union ($X^2 = 22.044$, $df = 2$, $p = .000$). However, when it comes to friends outside university, those who suffered from the pandemic reported belonging to this kind of peer group outside university in more cases than those whose studies had not been hampered ($X^2 = 26.623$, $df = 2$, $p = .000$).

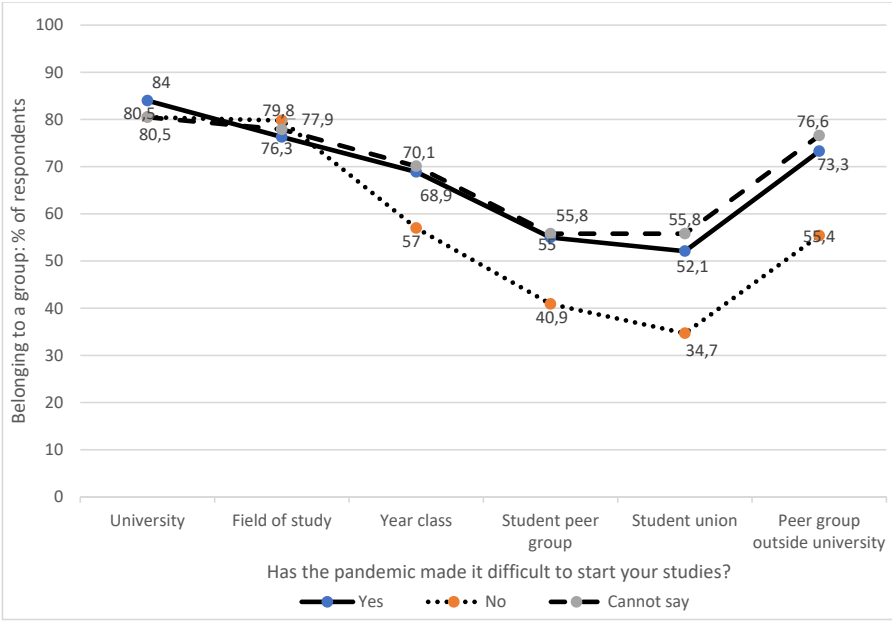

Figure 1: Significant differences between sense of belonging to a group and the pandemic experience

Table 2: The pandemic experience and the feelings of loneliness at the beginning of the studies

Has the pandemic made it difficult to start your studies?	Yes		No		Cannot say		Total				
	f	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	%	%	X^2	*df*	*p*
Do you feel lonely?											
No	148	31.1	147	60.7	36	46.8	331	41.6	60.441	4	.000
Yes, sometimes	265	55.7	80	33.1	36	46.8	381	47.9			
Yes, often	63	13.2	15	6.2	5	6.5	83	10.4			
Total	476	100	242	100	77	100	795	100			
Has starting to study increased your loneliness?											
Not decreased, nor increased	144	30.3	152	62.8	30	39.0	326	41.1	81.408	6	.000
Not able to say	32	6.7	15	6.2	6	7.8	53	6.7			
Increased loneliness	214	45.1	40	16.5	24	31.2	278	35.0			
Decreased loneliness	85	17.9	35	14.5	17	22.1	137	17.3			
Total	475	100	247	100	77	100	794	100			
What kinds of effects have loneliness had on your studies?											
Not negative or positive	184	39.3	150	63.6	36	47.4	370	47.4	65.174	6	.000
Not able to say	111	23.7	54	22.9	26	34.2	191	24.5			
Negative	164	35.0	24	10.2	12	15.8	200	25.6			
Positive	9	1.9	8	3.4	2	2.6	19	2.4			
Total	468	100	241	100	76	100	780	100			

In addition to belonging to groups, respondents were asked about feelings of loneliness. The experience of the pandemic and loneliness is compared in Table 2. Almost half of the respondents (47.9%) had felt loneliness at least sometimes during that period, while a minority (10.4%) had felt lonely often. Loneliness and the pandemic were related in a way: respondents who felt the pandemic harmed them in their first year of higher education also reported loneliness. These respondents reported increased feelings of loneliness at the beginning of their studies in more cases. In addition, overall, every fourth respondent felt that loneliness had had a negative effect on their studies. Those respondents who did not consider the pandemic to have caused them much trouble thought more often that starting their studies did not increase or decrease their loneliness. In addition, almost two-thirds of all students were quite neutral in regard to any effect of loneliness on their studies. Those respondents who suffered from the pandemic felt in more cases that loneliness had negative effects on their studies.

Family and friends outside the university was the most often mentioned source of social support at the beginning of the studies (Table 3). Here, the neutral group of respondents "cannot say", who were not able to determine whether or not they had difficulties because of the pandemic, reported the highest amount of social support from both formal and informal sources. A post hoc Tukey's test showed that in the cases of different kind of peer support (peer students, peer mentors, and friends outside university) the "cannot say" group differed from the other groups significantly at $p < .05$. In the case of support received from teachers, based on Tukey's test the group "yes" differed from the other groups "cannot say" and "no" significantly at the $p < .05$. The group "yes" differed from the group "no" significantly at $p < .05$ in the case of support from personal study advisor. In addition, a post hoc Tuckey's test showed that the group "yes" differed from the group "cannot say" significantly at $p < .05$.

Table 3: The pandemic experience and support from staff, peer students, family, and friends

Has the pandemic made it difficult to start your studies?												
	Yes		No		Cannot say		All					
	Mean	SD	Mean		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	p	df1	df2
Peer students	3.16	.91	3.05	.92	3.47	.75	3.16	.90	5.752	.003	2	749
Peer mentor	2.88	.85	2.88	.90	3.23	.80	2.91	.87	5.297	.005	2	715
Teachers	2.57	.75	2.90	.83	2.91	.77	2.70	.79	15.087	.000	2	719
Personal study tutor	2.78	.89	3.15	.79	2.93	.96	2.90	.88	12.548	.000	2	677
Friends outside university	3.24	.81	3.09	.87	3.49	.61	3.22	.82	6.289	.002	2	688
Family	3.31	.83	3.41	.78	3.58	.74	3.36	.81	4.275	.014	2	752

Both the experience of the pandemic situation and the student–staff interaction according to the Student–Staff Engagement scale are presented in Table 4. Those students who did not think that the pandemic disrupted the beginning of their first year of university had higher scores on the Student–Staff Engagement scale than those who considered the pandemic situation as difficult for the start of their studies. A post hoc Tuckey's test showed that all the groups differed from each other significantly at $p < .05$.

Table 4: The pandemic experience and student–staff interaction

	Student–staff engagement					
Has the pandemic situation made it difficult to start your studies?						
	n	Mean	SD	F	df	p
Yes	466	3.46	.73	66.531	2	.000
No	249	4.09	.66			
Cannot say	77	3.87	.58			

6.3 Students' Own Descriptions of the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Early Phase of their Studies

6.3.1 The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Challenging Situation

Students' own descriptions about the pandemic situation contained both the things that made it difficult to start their university studies and the factors that related to the experience of the pandemic not having interfered with their studies. The challenges of the situation were categorised into three themes: 1) Challenges of lack of social life and friends; 2) Challenges of unbalanced workload of distance learning; and 3) Challenges of lack of academic study skills, self-directedness, and time management.

Challenges of lack of social life and friends highlighted the social aspects and typical student life missing in studying during the pandemic as indicated by these students:

> I have gotten to know one new person only. (Female, 28, Humanities and Social Sciences)
>
> It is quite tricky to make friends with anyone. (Female, 24, Humanities and Social Sciences)
>
> There is no grouping or familiarising at all. (Female, 24, Information Technology)
>
> Making new friends in a new town is incredibly challenging. (Male, 23, Information Technology)

Challenges of unbalanced workload of distance learning were also seen as problematic Lack of learning experience from contact teaching at the university and the strain of distance learning increased the workload:

> Distance studying requires more effort than traditional learning. (Female, 20, Information Technology)
>
> Continuous distance studying increases the workload. (Female, 20, Business and Economics)
>
> Courses blend together, online everything seems the same and mashed. (Female, 39, Education and Psychology)
>
> Distance lectures are harder to follow than lectures on campus. (Male, 21, Humanities and Social Sciences)

Online learning was reported as being quite a lonely experience and students also felt challenged to get support from teachers:

> Studying is watching old lecture videos alone at home. (Female, 19, Education and Psychology)
>
> Distance courses without live lectures are very oppressive to do alone. (Female, 36, Information Technology)
>
> On the internet, it is more troublesome to contact teachers and to get help. (Female, 32, Information Technology)

The third aspect of the negative experience of starting studies during the pandemic was the *Challenges of self-directedness, studying skills, and time management*. The pressure to manage things alone by themselves was described as demanding self-regulation and time management. This was a question of taking responsibility or generating motivation but also required the ability to focus more on the learning tasks:

> It is difficult to concentrate on distance teaching. (Female, 21, Humanities and Social Sciences)
>
> Difficulties of keeping up a regular study rhythm. (Female, 27, Humanities and Social Sciences)
>
> I must have had more independence and self-control. (Female, 19, Humanities and Social Sciences)
>
> *It is difficult to shape up and get motivated to study. (Male, 19, Business and Economics)*
>
> *I had the responsibility of progressing my studies completely by myself. (Female, 34, Humanities and Social Sciences*)

6.3.2 The Pandemic as Enabling Increased Flexibility

Despite the majority having difficulties during the exceptional situation, there were also students who thought that the pandemic had not caused any disruption to their early steps in the new degree programme. These experiences were characterised by the theme of increased flexibility. Flexibility included short stories about individual life situations, combining work, family life and studies, as well as overall notions about the fit of the online learning environment to one's own style of studying. Four categories of chances and benefits were identified: 1) Chance of the possibility to combine work, family and studies; 2) Chance for individual learning styles and habits; 3) Benefits of lack of personal need for social events and groups on campus; and 4) Benefits of satisfaction with teaching arrangements projected increased flexibility as a positive experience.

The advantages of *chances of combining work, family and studies* are presented in the following quotes:

> It is easier to combine work and studies. I have been grateful that teachers have lessons on Zoom, record lectures, and have made comprehensive content available at Moodle. (Female, 32, Business and Economics)

> I work full-time, so Corona [the COVID-19 pandemic] has improved my possibilities to study independently outside my work time. (Female, 27, Business and Economics)

> Distance learning makes it possible to combine work, family and studies. It is a modern way of studying. I hope hybrid studying is one way to learn in the future. (Female, 43, Business and Economics)

For many respondents, flexibility regarding time and place brought more freedom to make their studies as *a chance for individual learning styles and habits*. This flexibility supported their individual learning styles. This experience shared by students of different ages, as seen here:

> That you can study anywhere, for example, brings more freedom. (Female, 19, Business and Economics)

> It is easy to study alone; watching lectures at home is easy and convenient. (Female, 19, Mathematics and Science)

> Distance learning suits me better than contact teaching. (Male, 38, Information Technology)

> Contrarily, distance learning has made more efficient, more independent, and more flexible studies possible as I do not need to run around campus. (Male, 30, Humanities and Social Sciences)

> Distance learning has been an effective way to study for me. I can watch the videos in my own rhythm and it is possible to pause if I want to reflect on something or find out more information before continuing to watch the lecture. (Female, 30, Education and Psychology)

The students who felt they benefitted from the Pandemic situation also expressed that they did not feel bad about missing social events or student life on campus. They reported *the benefits of lack of personal need for social events and groups on campus*. They also felt that they had a sufficient social network around them:

> I see that I can study much more effectively as I can find my own rhythm for doing the distance studies and social events do not take away time from my studies. (Female, 26, Business and Economics)

> I do not feel a need for social events. For me, the most important thing is to learn new knowledge and to graduate into a new career. I am undertaking a Master's degree and am not participating freetime activities, so the Coronavirus [COVID-19 pandemic] has not really had an impact on me. (Female, 26, Humanities and Social Sciences)

> I have a good, supportive social network around me. (Female, 20, Education and Psychology)

These respondents were satisfied with the way the teaching was organised by the university. They also thought that the quality of teaching was good. These experiences were categorised as *the benefits of satisfaction with teaching arrangements projected increased flexibility as a positive experience*.

> Distance learning has been well arranged. (Male, 47, Business and Economics)

> Online lectures are excellent. (Male, age not stated, Mathematics and Science)

> Things are well organised online, and my own digital skills are sufficient. (Female, 33, Education and Psychology)

7 Discussion

The results show that, at the university examined here, the majority of new students felt they suffered from the pandemic situation. However, this is not the only truth about the first-year experience as there were also around one-third of the respondents who did not think that the pandemic had disrupted the beginning of their studies. Based on the statistics, these student groups differed from each other by age. Those who had trouble starting their studies were often younger students. The older group, students over 30 years of age, reported less negative effects having been experienced due to the pandemic. Hence, the critical issues of starting university studies online without campus experience seem to be related to the age and overall life situation of individual students. The variation can partly be explained and understood as a part of the overall student body's heterogeneity, but the differences should not be seen only as individual factors as there were also institutional and pedagogical issues. Next, these aspects are discussed further.

The quantitative results draw a picture of how the COVID-19 pandemic has been connected to the experience of social factors at the beginning of first-year university students'

studies. The results concerning feelings of belonging to groups are in line with previous literature emphasising the importance of students' interactions with school staff and peers (Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Our findings also indicate that belonging to peer student groups and social support from fellow students have been important factors during the exceptional situation of starting university studies during the pandemic. The reported experience of loneliness of many students intertwines with the lack of interaction and support with peer students, although there is no causal connection. It is also of interest that friends and family outside the university were the most common source of support reported. It appears that the pandemic situation has caused students to seek support even more than before from familiar sources. The lack of social relationships inside the university community might have had consequences for the dynamics of the smaller group engagement and feelings of belonging to the university.

The interaction with staff and the early experience of learning in the first courses had a clear connection to the pandemic situation. Our results confirm the important role of teachers and staff in early engagement, which has been highlighted in previous studies (e. g., Kantanen et al., 2020). It is evident that, for many new university students, the pandemic situation and the online interaction have not made it possible to create the usual relationships with teachers. Wilcox and colleagues (2005) have pointed the importance of being able to negotiate a new identity as a university student and the need to belong to a group for a successful study path. Our study shows that the pandemic situation has not been the most appropriate starting point for these kinds of processes that are particularly important for new students. Early interaction with staff is also significant because, according to Fuentes and colleagues (2014), it leads to a more meaningful interaction with teachers later along the study path. Thus, there is good reason to be worried about further waves of first-year students during the pandemic and their educational engagement.

Students' own descriptions about the challenges of starting their studies during the pandemic and simultaneously their personal responses expressing their satisfaction with the educational adjustments highlight the two-sided experience of the pandemic. Though our overall group of respondents had a heterogeneous background of previous studies, the online experience was contrasted to the traditional face-to-face teaching. Those who were suffering from the non-traditional online entrance to higher education were mostly young students aged 21 and younger. They can be seen as having been in a particularly sensitive phase along their educational path as many of them were entering university straight from upper secondary school. Previous research has paid a lot of attention to this particular age group and highlighted the need for these transitioning young adults' negotiation between their old and new identity as well as the importance of social support.

The experience of the youngest respondents shows that the specific requirements Trautwein and Bosse (2017) suggest for a successful transition are critical in the time of the

pandemic and online transitioning. This group lacked these requirements in many ways. They described challenges in personal requirements for study skills, time management and self-directiveness. These can be seen as critical issues in student's own activities in the engagement process (see Annala et al., 2012). In addition, the qualitative data show that organisational and social dimensions seem to be critical during the pandemic situation. The institutional conditions were different from the traditional teaching and more demanding for many respondents. Likewise, the social aspects of building up peer relations and integrating in groups were not as easy in the online learning experience.

The group with more positive feelings about the online study experience consisted mostly of older students. They might have a family and career and more life experience. Theoretically, we can assume that they have already gone through various kinds of negotiating processes regarding their identity and membership in diverse groups. However, they seemed to either feel like belonging to institutional or non-formal peer groups. Individual qualitative data portrayed a picture of adult learners with professional objectives for their studies. They might be the type of students with autonomy, competence and self-regulation described by Holzer and colleagues (2021). They might also have more capacity for flexibility and thus are able to gain more advantage in such a situation (see Oliveira et al., 2018).

Online university entrance seems to be challenging, particularly to young students who need a lot of social support and places to discuss the demands of academic studies, which Aristovnik and colleagues (2020) have also highlighted during the pandemic. There is also a need for support for academic study skills and time management, which was described in responses to specific open-ended questions. The online first-year experience raises the question of how to answer new students' heterogeneous needs for supportive practices at the very beginning of their studies, especially for the ones who are at university for the very first time. Previous studies have called for special programmes for newcomers to the academic study community (Brinkworth et al., 2009; Brooman & Darwent, 2013; Gale & Parker, 2014; Greene, 2011). The results of our study confirm the need for that. However, the early transition programmes should take into account the individual needs and the diversity of the student body.

The pandemic forced universities to roll out the extremely large-scale intervention of online teaching and learning. Oliveira and colleagues (2018) point out: "It is possible that the distance modality continues to grow steadily, but it still seems utopian to say that at some point in the history of education, face-to-face teaching will become obsolete and thus be totally replaced by EAD". In the case of first-year students in higher education, the pandemic has shown that there are still many lessons to be learned about developing practices for online transitioning. These lessons concern the importance of social relationships and community aspects as well as pedagogics.

We also acknowledge the limitations of our study. Not all (just under half) of the respondents were entirely new university students without any prior experience of university studies. However, they represent a proportion of the typical first-year student body in Finland, and the data represent the diversity of new students and their needs. It also highlights the importance of understanding the complexity of supporting individual students at the start of their higher education studies in appropriate and meaningful ways.

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