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# University Students' Approaches to Making the Most of Their Study Time

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores university students' approaches to and positions with regard to making the most of their study time. The article discusses how various normative societal expectations around students' use and management of time feature in their talk about how they organise their everyday lives. The research is based on thematic interviews ( $n = 28$ ) that focused in detail on students' day-to-day activities that were generated with students from two sets of generalist study fields in three regional Finnish universities. The results of a discursive analysis of students' positionings reveal three discursive positions that represent of a variety in students' approaches to make sense of the temporal organisation of their everyday lives as students. The identified discursive positions draw on broader societal discourses and ideals about fast completion of studies, significance of academic immersion in becoming an expert, and optimising one's time use to enhance employability.

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## Introduction

Discourses on student study times have been enduring themes in higher education (HE) research, practice, and policy around the globe. Approaches inclined to students' learning processes focus merely on students' perceptions of time in the study context (e.g., Case & Gunstone, 2003), or on concerns about prolongation of the studies (e.g., Wild & Heuling, 2020). In turn, many HE policy driven perspectives on study times have currently drawn upon the notion of "graduate employability", especially in Nordic countries, where the studies are fully funded by the state (Nielsen & Sarauw, 2017; Sarauw & Madsen, 2020). This tends to encourage governments to expect HE institutions to deliver value-for-money, and to set certain employment indicators and indicators related to the study time (Ulriksen & Nejrup, 2021). Therefore, as Brooks (2021) states, the understanding of students within education policy differs across countries. For instance, while Sabri (2010) and Brooks (2021) argue that UK policy tends to converge with the Anglo-American model by understanding students as consumers, Nielsen and Sarauw (2017) state that Danish students are pushed to adopt such an anticipatory study orientation and paying their attention "towards processes of piecing together and forecasting a particular future in the labour market" (p. 156).

This study focuses on Finnish university education at a point of time where discussion around study time has intensified. In recent years, in the same way as in Denmark (see Ulriksen & Nejrup,

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2021), ever more forceful limits to study time and incentives for graduation have been introduced by the state: for instance, in 2014, a state compensation for 40 percent of study loans was introduced for those who complete their master's degree in target time (Kela, 2021).

As noted earlier, another current emphasis in the Finnish HE policy concerns graduate employability. Recently, a new criterion for state funding focusing on the “quality of employment” was introduced, and is effective from 2021, through which HE institutions are incentivised to produce “employable” graduates (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019). The criterion focuses on monitoring how well graduates' degrees produced in different institutions match their positions in the labour market. In contrast to many other countries, like the UK, discourses around employability have only relatively recently adopted a central position in the Finnish HE (Siivonen, 2017). These discourses have, however, arguably become quickly influential also in terms of informing students' experiences (Komulainen et al., 2020; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016). Students are increasingly faced with intensifying and often conflicting expectations concerning what to do with their study time and how to organise their everyday lives: namely, how to graduate quickly while acquiring a broad set of competences to survive in the labour market (Nielsen & Sarauw, 2017).

This study focuses on how different and often conflicting emphases regarding the use of study time in the current HE policy translate into expectations that students face in their everyday lives. We draw on theoretical and empirical discussions on time and temporalities in HE that approach study time as an experiential and discursive category negotiated by students in their everyday lives (e.g., Bennett & Burke, 2018). Drawing on interviews with 28 university students from two different sets of study fields in three regional Finnish universities, our analysis explores different kinds of discursive positions that are available for student to draw on as they talk about and describe their approaches to “making the most of their study time”.

## Study Time and Temporality in HE Research

Concerns about study time in HE policy, including discussions related to prolongation of studies, study progress, retention, and dropout, have spurred a broad research literature to address these problems (e.g., Douglas et al., 2016; Porath & Rosenblum, 2019; Wild & Heuling, 2020). In Finland, in comparison to other European countries, dropout rates have not been as big a concern as long study times, slow study progress, disengagement from studies and various time management problems (e.g., Kivinen & Nurmi, 2014; Mäkinen et al., 2004; Merenluoto & Lindberg, 2012).

Our research adopts an approach to temporality in university studies that is not focused on addressing a variety of factors influencing students' time use and seeking to identify “at-risk” students (e.g., Korhonen & Rautopuro, 2019), but instead addresses time and temporality as such as categories of interest and as social and cultural phenomena. Alongside discussions on the temporalities of academic work (e.g., Gibbs et al., 2014; Vostal, 2015; Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003), research has recently emerged focusing on temporalities in student life (Bennett & Burke, 2018; Bunn et al., 2019; Liao et al., 2013; Mäkinen et al., 2018; Nielsen & Sarauw, 2017). These studies on HE students' experiences and notions of temporality are often informed by a critical approach that addresses new kinds of temporal structures that emerge in the context of neoliberal policy emphases on enhancing the work life relevance of HE and employability of graduates.

In this context, Clegg (2010) has argued that the category of “future” is becoming a dominant discursive category in HE featuring in concerns about future employability of students that inform both HE policy and practice, and students' own approaches to their use of time (also Bunn et al., 2019). Sharma (2014, p. 18) depicts this kind of an anticipatory orientation to future as temporal recalibration where “individuals and groups synchronize their body clocks, their senses of the future or the present, to an exterior relation”.

In addition to emphases that highlight a shift in the notions of temporality, research has documented multiple simultaneous discourses that represent different historical and cultural layers pertaining to different contexts in HE. Influentially, Ylijoki and Mäntylä (2003) have described

different kinds of orientations to time among academics with “scheduled time” referring to working according to externally imposed and controlled timetables and contrasted to “timeless time” which is not subjected to any kinds of external pressures and demands. Instead, it refers to “internally motivated use of time in which clock time loses its significance” (p. 62). Academic community has traditionally encouraged and valued timeless time, featuring a deep interest in encounters with knowledge. During the last decades, scheduled time and “time of systems” (Nowotny, 1996) have entered the academic world, both faculty and students, requiring a change of focus from the deep immersion with the object of activity towards visible outcomes within certain scheduled time frames. Consequently, also students today describe time as a resource that can be spent, owned, budgeted, used, wasted, invested and sacrificed (Liao et al., 2013; Mäkinen et al., 2018).

Students’ approach to their study time is connected to the life transitions from the former educational experience at school towards more autonomous adulthood with freedom and responsibilities (Hussey & Smith, 2010). Bunn et al. (2019) argue that flexible learning environments, like 24/7 student hubs, online courses and recorded lectures, work to responsabilise students for their own time management. They found that some students have internalised and are, more than others, ready to align with the new flexible structures, pointing to the importance of recognising “temporal inequity”. According to their argument, structures of temporality are entwined with social differences and inequalities, like class, ethnicity and gender, in ways that result in disadvantaged categories of students to blame themselves for their failure to manage their time use (see also Bennett & Burke, 2018). Changing temporal structures may thus work to create new kinds of social divisions between those with sufficient resources to respond to expectations related to being able to make sound temporal investments and those without such resources. Similarly, Sharma (2013) emphasises that time is relational and uneven; how sense of being short on time and the ideal to be free and have time, rests on a particular relationship to class and power.

## Methodology

This study utilises a discursive approach to studying what kinds of discursive positions are available for university students to make sense of and legitimate their use of study time. Our approach draws on the traditions of socio-psychological discursive and narrative research, and on the notions of discursive positions and positioning in particular (Bamberg, 1997; Davies & Harré, 1990). We understand discursive positions as context-dependent categories, or situational identities that are available for speakers to adopt as they describe their activities, ideas and values in the interview context (Nikander, 2012). Discursive positions on their part draw upon and are linked to broader discursive resources available in the culture.

From this perspective, our specified research questions are: (1) What kinds of discursive positions are available for university students from different fields to make sense of their approaches to utilising study time in the context of their everyday student lives? (2) What kinds of notions of temporality inform and are drawn upon in discourses and discursive positions related to study time?

## Interview Data

The empirical study draws on thematic interviews with university students ( $n = 28$ ; 15 women, 13 men) at the final phase of their undergraduate studies (the 3rd year of studies in most cases) representing two sets of “generalist” (non-professional) study fields: (1) humanities and human sciences (including cultural studies, languages, art history, literature, and also social and educational sciences) and (2) technological sciences (predominantly computer and information systems sciences, and one biotechnology student). The study phase (third year) and the study field were criteria for purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002, p. 243). Third-year students were chosen as a target group because they had experience of studies but were not looking for entering working life yet. Two sets of fields were investigated to capture diversity in academic student life regarding different

kinds of academic cultures and “tribes” (e.g., Becher & Trowler, 2001; Ulriksen, 2009). While our analysis focuses on discursive positions that are relevant across disciplines, accounting for emphases stemming from different academic cultures plays a significant role. Two sets of study fields can be described along the dimensions of soft to hard and pure to applied, with the first set representing mainly “soft” and “pure” disciplines with a “traditional” academic orientation and the second “hard” and “applied” disciplines with a professional orientation and a stronger labour market linkage (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Expectedly, the first set consists predominantly of female interviewees (12 out of 13) and the second of male interviewees (12 out of 15) in our data. However, this study did not adopt an explicit approach to gender, nor did gender emerge as a constitutive category with regard to discursive positions identified in the analysis. All the participants were white Finnish citizens.

Faculty contacts and student union social media sites were utilised in the recruitment process to deliver an invitation to third-year students. In addition, snowball sampling was used by asking voluntary interviewees if they know any fellow students who would be interested in participating. The aim of the interviews was to capture the everyday experience of student life. The interview schedule was organized around themes and included supporting questions to help probing a particular theme, but the focus was on encouraging open narrative accounts. In the beginning of the interviews, students were, by utilising a week calendar sheet, invited to talk in detail about the activities they engaged in during their previous week in study, work and leisure contexts. After this, we probed particular themes of use of time, planning their activities, and engaging in social activities and encounters during the previous week and within a longer time frame, as well as their ideas about their future and future careers, and how their considerations about the future are present and inform their day-to-day activities. Thus, the data gives insight into students’ approaches to making sense of their everyday activities and organising their studies as well as locating and assigning meaning to studies in the context of their on-going lives as a whole. The data consists of 30 h 55 min of interview material that were transcribed verbatim. The interview excerpts were translated from Finnish to English by the first author.

### **Data Analysis**

In this study, the interview is seen as an interactive site for performative construction of meaning and discursive positions that provides a window into on-going legitimation work students are engaged with in various contexts in academia (Nikander, 2012). Different modes and definitions of temporality informed the analysis and provided a frame for interpretations (Bunn et al., 2019; Liao et al., 2013; Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003).

The first reading of the data was data-driven and sought to identify sections in which students talked about how they manage their studies and their everyday lives and where they describe their relationship to academic studies in a more general sense. The second phase of the analysis focused on selected sections from the perspective of discursive legitimation work: that is, how different approaches of studying and managing one’s time were described and argued for in students’ talk. The discursive reading focused on the ways of positioning oneself in relation to studies and on placing academic studies in the flow of one’s everyday student life.

Finally, three discursive positions were identified that inform and organise students’ accounts across disciplines under scrutiny. They were named (1) *the practical-instrumental position*, (2) *the academic expertise building position*, and (3) *the competence and career building position*. The identified categories represent a set of discursive positions that are available for students to adopt, in part depending on the context, for instance the topic of discussion or a setting evoked in the interview, and several positions can feature in the same interview. An important feature of the positions under scrutiny is how they are defined in relation to each other. Adopting one position often entails taking distance from other culturally recognisable and available positions, and from the types of students or student identities associated with them.

## Findings

The next data-driven sections present the three discursive positions identified in the analysis, which will be followed by a discussion on how these positions are related to broader societal discourses around students' time use and how positions feature as relational categories and vary with regard to different academic cultures represented in our data.

### *The Practical-instrumental Position*

The first position identified in the analysis, *the practical-instrumental position*, is characterised by a notion of university studies as a distinct life stage and sphere of life. The position reflects an idea of a normative life course progressing from education and professional preparation to working life. In students' accounts across disciplinary contexts, studies are emphatically defined in practical and instrumental terms, simply in terms of needing to be completed in order to transition to working life and find good employment. From this position, academic studies are often referred to as "going to school" in a specific sense (cf. Siivonen & Filander, 2020). References to university as "school" can be found across data, but here it has a specific emphasis according to our interpretation. "School" is described as clearly distinct from other domains of life, like leisure, paid and voluntary work. From this position, extracurricular activities, like being involved in student associations, are often defined as non-study related social activities, or sometimes in terms of acquiring generic work experience. All in all, "going to school" is given clear temporal limits within students' everyday life from this position.

The orientation adopted from this position could be described as "completionist" in a sense that "going to school" is usually described in terms of going to the university just to complete courses, modules and eventually a degree. The position is characterised by the interviewees placing relatively little emphasis on the actual academic contents of the studies in their accounts. This involves motifs of defining oneself as not being "academically" or "theoretically" oriented, and emphasises rather on a more practical approach to studies that guarantees graduating swiftly, in good time. Taking distance from "being academic" can be seen as one of the defining features of the practical-instrumental position.

### *A Practical Orientation to Studies as a Distinct Life Stage*

The following excerpt by a female information systems student, describing her study objectives, highlights an emphasis on swift completion and transition to working life:

Well, I'd like to graduate relatively quickly, because I don't want to hang around here for too long. I'll be 24 [years old] now, so I don't want to hang around here until I'm 30, doing a master's degree.<sup>1</sup> I just want to graduate, find work and move on. (P24, female, IT)

In a similar fashion, the following excerpt by a male information systems student can be interpreted as a motif of positioning studies as a distinct life stage preceding employment and as detached, in a particular sense, from employment and career concerns:

I'm not thinking about it [the future employment] a lot in my everyday life. Because I just have ... I have shorter-term goals myself. [...] I have thought that it's useless to make any grand plans. I just want to complete my studies relatively honourably, and perhaps after the bachelor degree phase, I will think about it [the future employment] more closely. In my everyday life, I really don't think about employment. For me it's like, that of course I will be employed. My attitude is that, of course, I will find work, it won't be a problem. (P22, male, IT)

The quotes above include expressions of trust in finding employment after graduation and not seeing much value in worrying about it in advance. The study time as a life stage is located here before working life and detached from future employment concerns. These concerns are portrayed as

<sup>1</sup>In Finnish universities, most of the students are accepted to study both a bachelor's and a master's degree. An undergraduate degree is seen, in the study fields represented in our data, rather as a stage in the studies than to have value for employability.



becoming relevant only nearer to the transition from education to work. The orientation adopted here differs starkly from positions – that will be discussed later – where thinking about employment and managing one’s “employability” are given a central role throughout one’s studies. The reference in the second excerpt to “grand plans”, that some students may have, can be interpreted as hinting to an awareness of a “career-oriented” approach which is contrasted in the excerpt by an approach emphasising “shorter term” and by implication, perhaps more practical, realistic and down-to-earth goals.

### *Motifs of Taking Distance from Being “Academic”*

The next excerpts, from an interview of a female cultural studies student, feature an emphasis on how completed, well-chosen study modules and a completed degree in the end matter more for becoming employed than best grades and top academic performance on individual courses. The first excerpt includes – what could be interpreted as – a motif of distancing from academically oriented student types: “straight-A students”. In the second excerpt, these straight-A students’ orientation to studies and to the use of study time are portrayed, in a sense, quite impractical, compromising living and welfare for the sake of studying. Furthermore, the excerpt includes an emphasis on placing “school” in a limited role in one’s everyday life:

I don’t know if I understand [...] straight-A students as such, if one has to put such an effort into it [into studying, into getting the best grades]. Myself, I’m not a ‘super-learner’, so that it would be easy for me to get [the best grades]. And then, even if I want to be employed well, I still have this idea that these individual courses [...] do not have much significance, rather it’s the modules you’ve chosen, your major subject and your minors [that matter]. [... ...]

Even if education is important to me, I have never been a straight-A student, because I find that it’s almost useless. I rather live the kind of life I like and get worse grades [laughs]. So, this is the mindset through which I set my priorities [in relation to school things]. And then, for instance, I consciously avoid stress. (P01, female, humanities)

The next example from an interview with another female cultural studies student also illustrates dis-identifying with being an “academic” person. Here, coming from a non-academic social environment is connected to not having internalised the “university life”:

Maybe it’s some old habit or something, but I don’t feel that I’m as good and as smart as people at the university usually are. I have this feeling that I may not be as academic a person as others in that sense. Perhaps it’s due to the fact that most of my friends are ... Like, I am the only one who studies at the university, and when you spend time with people who don’t even study anymore, you probably don’t internalise that university life so well. (P03, female, humanities)

It is possible to suggest that the excerpt above draws on classed cultural discourses, like a (working-class) discourse concerning the division between theoretical and practical domains of knowledge and learning, with emphasis on and identification with the latter (Lehmann, 2009). Thus, the practical-instrumental position may be linked to social class in a sense that it affords itself especially for those who do not feel entirely “at home” in the “academic life” because of their social background, networks and cultural resources (Käyhkö, 2015; Reay et al., 2010). Overall, the practical-instrumental position is marked by discursive work around what it means to be “academic”. From this position, a “traditional” academic orientation – that includes deep immersion into the subject matter and striving for academic excellence – is portrayed as impractical or even elitist. Indeed, from a temporal perspective, it is portrayed as “wasting time” for useless activities (cf. Mäkinen et al., 2018), for activities that are not seen as necessarily contributing to getting employed.

As a response to the broader societal and cultural expectations concerning the “proper” use of study time and making the most of one’s studies, it is possible to interpret that the practical-instrumental position aligns with current higher education policy discourses that emphasise fast completion of studies and transition to working life. From this perspective, the interviews feature emphases on the virtue of keeping up with the schedules in completing courses and eventually



graduating. Emphasis is placed rather on meeting the set quantitative expectations within a given time frame than on investing time in building academic or professional disciplinary-specific expertise, or in improving networks and “employability” – which characterise positions discussed in the following sections.

### ***The Academic Expertise Building Position***

*The academic expertise building position* shares, to an extent, the notion of university studies as a distinct and separate stage and domain of life with the previously discussed practical-instrumental position. However, the orientation to, and the understanding of the role, place and timing of studies in one’s everyday life and life course are quite different. Taking up the academic expertise building position is marked by placing emphasis on academic excellence, on meeting the academic learning goals and professional standards, and on meaningful engagement with the disciplinary contents. In fact, distance is sometimes explicitly taken from merely “completionist” or “instrumental” orientations to studies. Focus is placed on building a disciplinary and professional identity, becoming an expert and a member of a professional or scientific community.

Regarding the sets of disciplines under scrutiny, the academic expertise building position expectedly features more commonly in the accounts of humanities and human science students in our data. However, it is also present in a few of IT students’ accounts who adopt a “traditional” professional identity as experts.

### ***Emphases on Engaging with the Disciplinary Contents and Adopting an “Academic” Outlook***

The temporal positioning of studies in everyday student life differs in particular ways with regard to the discussed positions. While adopting the practical instrumental position is associated with giving a rather limited space for studies in one’s life, the academic expertise building position often features emphases on academic virtues of deep learning and immersion into the subject matter, as well as transcendence over set temporal limits for study time. These different notions of temporality resemble the notions of “scheduled time” and “timeless time” identified by Ylijoki and Mäntylä (2003) in their study of temporalities in academic work.

The following excerpt of a process of writing a bachelor thesis illustrates descriptions of learning as an “immersive” experience, where one can experience having hard time recalling details of one’s schedule. It needs to be noted though that writing a thesis is a particular kind of a learning activity where students are expected to go deep into the topic. However, here this process is emphatically described as an all-encompassing state of immersion, of being “outside time”, in a sense.

I really don’t remember anything. I have been lost in thought and written it. There hasn’t been anything else: the bachelor thesis has been constantly in my mind, even when I have not been doing it. The thought process has been going on. (P04, male, humanities)

The disciplinary contents of studies are given a central role from the academic expertise building position, which sets it apart from emphases that characterise the practical-instrumental position. The interviewees adopting this position emphasise their engagement with the subject matter and with the particular culture of their chosen discipline. The following excerpt, for instance, includes a description of how the interviewee has past her initial concerns about unclear and uncertain employment prospects in her field. There is a motif of adopting a disposition of being motivated by the substance of one’s discipline:

I have liked [this degree programme] a lot, even if it felt a little indefinite initially. Because it’s not clear with an Art Education major ... there is no specific profession to which you’ll graduate. But when I got past that thinking, it’s the subject matter [in itself] that has become the thing that motivates me. (P12, female, humanities)

Another example of growing into, becoming appreciative of, and taking pride in having adopted an “academic outlook” is found from a male information systems student’s account:

For me, university life has been the best time of my life. After a long journey, it feels good. When I was a kid, I swore I wouldn't go to university because I can't read. I've always said that I am not fit for reading books. Somehow that idea has crumbled into pieces. It has been fun to observe how your outlook can change. (P25, male, IT)

The excerpts here include a motif of taking distance from one's past self and positioning oneself as having grasped the academic ethos and having started to enjoy and be motivated by the academic way of life. As regards employment prospects, adopting the academic expertise building position means subscribing to an idea that becoming a full expert in one's discipline is a key to success in the labour market. The proper use of study time is thus defined, not only by being able to complete courses, but by achieving learning objectives that lead to expertise in the field.

### ***Taking Distance from Instrumentalism and "Completionism"***

In the following excerpt, distance is taken from a mere "completionist" orientation to studies that might compromise academic and professional standards and learning goals. The interviewee emphasises in a particular way academic integrity and work ethic, that is described as lacking from some individuals. The account is initiated by the interviewer enquiring how the interviewee thinks that her peers see her as a student:

They would probably say that she's conscientious, especially because I've done a lot especially during the first years. They would say that she has opinions on how to do things. For instance, if you do a translation, you have to do a lot yourself: you cannot use Google Translate and then work on that. I think that courses should not come as given, you should work for them. (P09, female, humanities)

The interviewee takes up a role, as it were, of a guardian of academic work ethics. As regards teachers' and staff's perception of her, she continues:

They would say that I'm quite conscientious – and I think that they can see it, that I've put a lot of effort into it. They have given quite good grades [...] so, that estimation shouldn't be too incorrect. (P09, female, humanities)

She later emphasises how she is willing to work *at the library night and day* to achieve her high academic standards within the set deadlines.

In the following excerpt, a motif of taking distance from less study-oriented students is made very explicit with reference to two categories of students: to those who spend a lot of free time together engaging in student activities, and to those who focus on their studies. In the course of the interview, the interviewee seems to identify with "students who study":

Now, it's like that there are those who spend a lot of free time together. And then there are students who study. And these groups do not interact with each other a lot. And then there's also a little bit of mocking the other group. They don't talk much about it but in reality it goes on. From those who go to these social events, there's this talk that "well, she never participates in any of these [kinds of events]". Then those who focus on studies, there's the kind of talk that: "What's the point coming to the university, if you're not going to study." (P06, female, social sciences)

From the academic expertise building position, the proper use of study time is defined in terms of investing time in becoming an expert in one's chosen field or discipline. Sometimes aiming for high academic standards conflicts with the institutional time limits for studies (cf. Nielsen & Sarauw, 2017). In these cases, the interviewees adopting this position sometimes describe themselves as willing to put aside other priorities of life as they align with the "traditional" academic ethos of self-sacrifice in pursuit for knowledge.

### ***The Competence and Career Building Position***

*The competence and career building position* is related to a distinctly different notion of how studies are related to other domains of life and how they are temporally located. While the practical-instrumental and the academic expertise building positions define studies and study time as distinct from

other domains of life, from the competence and career building position different domains of life are not distinguished so clearly. The position is characterised by a strategic approach to both studies and to the other domains of life, like work and extracurricular social activities, from the perspective of building competences and skills as well as networks that can be utilised in finding employment and pursuing career goals.

### ***Emphasising a Strategic Orientation to Student Life***

The following excerpt by a female art history student illustrates a strategic orientation to both studies and social life. The meaning of studies is described here in terms of accumulating work-life relevant know-how and competences. The interviewee portrays herself as active in constantly developing herself and engaging in social activities in the academic and student community:

I study quite responsibly. I have got good grades and I am organized. For me studying and accumulating knowledge is a priority, so that I will have know-how. That will affect my employment prospects. I am constantly trying to develop myself. And then I have been involved in student association activities, and I have tried to activate myself. I think that also shows that you are trying to develop yourself. (P18, female, humanities)

In this excerpt, a noteworthy feature is the speaker's reflexivity on expectations related to being able to portray oneself as active and development oriented. Being involved in student association is defined in instrumental terms as a way to display one's active orientation to constant self-improvement. This kind of an instrumental definition of student sociality, on its part, sets the competence and career building position apart from the other identified positions. From this position, student sociality and social activities are defined as purposeful "networking". Furthermore, interviewees adopting this position talk about accumulating skills, know-how and professional competences. The Finnish term used in this context, "osaaminen", refers to readily applicable skills, competences and know-how that are relevant for the working life. This differs characteristically from disciplinary, academic definitions of knowledge and expertise as not straightforwardly applicable but having intrinsic value, associated with the previously discussed academic expertise building position.

The orientation to accumulating purposefully different kinds of resources is illustrated in the following accounts of a female cultural studies student. In the first excerpt, she describes herself as "exceptional" in a sense of being an extremely active student in various domains of student life. In addition to being able to do lots of credits, she talks a lot about being involved in and having important roles in the student community. In the second excerpt below, she links her activities to accumulating "all kinds of capital". She interestingly positions herself as different from people who are concerned with enjoyment in their lives and having a family and other "ordinary" things. She, on her part, describes how she worries that she "will be nothing" which she portrays as a reason for being constantly working on her "portfolio", as it were:

Perhaps, I'm exceptional in a sense that I'm quite a workaholic. I have lots going on all the time: what other people usually do, I'll double it, almost. Usually people study the basic 60 credits a year when they are aiming to graduate. I am doing 100 credits a year, or more. [... ...]

It's funny how usually people worry that their life won't be enjoyable or that they won't get a partner or kids. My biggest worry is that I will be nothing. That's why I am working on it all the time, accumulating all kinds of capital. (P02, female, humanities)

### ***Taking Distance from the "Ordinary" Student Types***

In the following excerpt, a male information systems student emphasises a strategic orientation to studies from the perspective of a "bigger whole" and building useful know-how:

[You] need to try to keep your focus on a bigger whole. Not just thinking that now I have to submit these assignments, rather thinking [that] now I need to get this know-how, I might need it in the future. (P11, male, IT)

In this description distance is explicitly taken from a “completionist” orientation to studies, from just “submitting assignments”. These kinds of motifs of taking distance from both “completionist” and also “academic” orientations to studies – and portraying oneself as different from “ordinary” students – can be interpreted as playing a central role in the construction of what we describe here as the competence and career building position. The following excerpt by another male information systems student gives another illustration of portraying oneself as distinct from the “ordinary” student types:

I’m not a kind of a person that goes to lectures and then goes home to do homework, or the type that does things when there’s time. I have noticed that more I do, more I get done. If there’s less things to do, then you won’t have energy to do even that. You get a lot of energy from doing [...]. Sometimes I’m terrified when I’m doing these 12-13-hour days for a week, two or three in a row. But then when you remember to take a day or two off, you’re full of energy again. (P28, male, IT)

### ***Portraying Oneself as an “Optimiser” of One’s Performance***

The following excerpts from an interview with another male information systems student further capture many of the emphases already discussed. With the previous excerpt, it also brings attention to a motif of “optimising” one’s use of time and personal resources in pursuing to become as “employable” as possible. Additionally, the interviewee portrays himself as an active “networker” which he sees as key to achieving his career goals:

My aim is that I want to learn as much as possible, without burning myself out. I want to absorb as much information as possible, and I want to be able to do it with my own hands, so that I will learn it even better. I’m not a very theoretical person, I’m more of a practical person. So, when I get to do things, I learn much better. [... ...]

Interviewer: What do you think [you can do to] achieve these goals of yours?

Of course, [by] studying and making progress. And then by networking. For me it’s like ... I like to expose myself to things, and be active, all the time in every little thing, show my face everywhere, and network actively. (P25, male, IT)

The interviewee positions himself as a person for whom being active and “exposing oneself to things” is a characteristic disposition. Another male information systems student takes a very similar stance:

[You can influence your future] by working. That’s important. And then by networking. I see that as key to finding employment and as regards one’s career. These networks that I have, I have tried to make them as extensive as possible. (P27, male, IT)

The competence and career building position includes seeking to portray oneself as strategic regarding one’s investments of time in studies and other activities, like networking. It includes emphases on taking a practical approach in evaluating the usefulness of different courses from one’s own perspective: some courses, in particular those seen as key to achieve work-life relevant competences, are portrayed as being worth investing more time than others. Furthermore, networking activities are a crucial part of the equation. Being strategic about one’s investments of time in various activities in pursuit of career advantages is a key characteristic of the competence and career building position. According to our interpretation, students’ discursive legitimisation work here revolves around portraying oneself as a flexible and strategic expert and a networker along the lines of current discourses that emphasise “entrepreneurial” qualities of an ideal employee (Komulainen et al., 2020) and becoming an “employable” graduate (Siivonen, 2017).

## **Discussion**

The study portrayed three discursive positions that are available for university students to make sense of their orientations to their studies and study time. The results also highlighted how studies

are located in a temporal and also spatial sense in students' accounts about their everyday lives. Students' responses show variation from portraying studies as a separated sphere of life with clear temporal limits to positioning studies as part of a broader ongoing and all-encompassing project of developing oneself and attempting to optimise one's employability.

Our analysis highlighted how different positions involve and draw upon different discourses of temporality in HE. First, there is a discourse emphasising fast completion of studies and smooth transitioning to working life. This discourse prioritises virtues of meeting the set target time for graduation over considerations on the quality of one's study experience. The second discourse draws upon "traditional" academic virtues of deep learning and immersion to studies and emphasises the quality of the academic learning experience and the process of becoming a member of a disciplinary community. The third discourse emphasises "study time as an investment" in improving one's "employability". These discourses provide legitimacy to each of the adopted positions and represent comprehensible stances for students to account for their approaches to *making the most of their study time*. The respective discourses and other key features related to each discursive position are summarised in [Table 1](#).

Our analysis highlights dynamics between different positions and how positions are established as *relational positions*. Taking up one position involves a need to take distance from and to dis-identify with other positions with their characteristic orientations to studies and managing one's study time. The results highlight the fact that there are tensions between different positions and stances that draw upon similarly conflicting discourses and different kinds of societal and cultural expectations faced by students in the context of current university education. Furthermore, it is possible to cautiously interpret that there are hierarchies between the identified positions. The positions may not be equally accessible for students from various social and economic backgrounds with differing sets of resources. In this sense, our findings contribute to the question of "temporal equity" discussed by Bunn et al. (2019) in their study about how new temporalities in HE produce new kinds of divisions and inequalities among different kinds of students. For instance, our data

**Table 1.** A summary of the discursive positions.

Discursive positions	The practical-instrumental position	The academic expertise building position	The competence and career building position
How is the position taken up and legitimated?	Adopting <i>the practical – instrumental position</i> involves distancing from an "academic" orientation to studies which is portrayed as impractical and as "waste of time". It involves emphasising practical and down-to-earth approach to studies which is given a limited role in their everyday lives.	<i>The academic expertise building position</i> is constituted by taking distance from a merely "completionist" and instrumental orientation, and emphasis is placed on academic and professional integrity and standards that should not be compromised. In this context, an orientation towards building a disciplinary identity as experts is adopted in a chosen field which means prioritising studies in one's everyday life.	<i>The competence and career building position</i> involves distancing from "ordinary" students that lack a vision of a "bigger whole" and just go on doing studies. Emphasis is placed on portraying oneself as a strategic agent in relation to both studies and one's activities and social networks outside studies. From this position studies as well as other life activities and social relations are mobilised to making oneself "employable".
Discursive basis of the position	Draws upon and responds to current societal discourses emphasising fast completion of studies and transitioning to working life (with "faith" in the promise of education as a guarantee for employment)	Draws upon and responds to discourses emphasising "traditional" academic virtues of deep learning and immersion into the subject matter as well as academic and professional integrity	Draws upon and responds to discourses emphasising "entrepreneurial" qualities of an ideal employer and becoming "employable"
Definition of study time	Study time as limited and defined as a separated sphere of life, "scheduled time"	Study time as separate but limitless, "timeless time"	Study time as a strategic resource, "time as an investment"

suggests that the practical-instrumental position may be easier to adopt, than other positions, for those coming from non-academic backgrounds.

The academic expertise building position, on its part, may not be accessible to those without particular cultural resources and competence. It requires being able to portray oneself as an “academic” person which is not an accessible identity to everyone (e.g., Käyhkö, 2015). Furthermore, taking up the competence and career building position may require specific social competences since it requires responding to an “imperative” to network. Our data suggests that in particular the competence and career building position, which is aligned with current discourses emphasising employability, is increasingly taken up by students as a hegemonic ideal. An emerging emphasis on study time as a matter of personal investment is also found, for instance, in studies by Bunn et al. (2019) and Nielsen and Sarauw (2017). Responsibility for time management is increasingly an individual enterprise to temporally recalibrate study time towards an exterior relation i.e., securing employability (cf. Sharma, 2014). The competence and career building position illustrates a way in which students internalise sole responsibility for managing their own time and investing in studies in a “smart” way. Yet, some students are not able or willing to adopt this kind of an approach, but rather opt for different orientations to sensible use of time.

## Conclusion

This paper contributes to emerging research on time and temporalities in higher education (Bennett & Burke, 2018; Bunn et al., 2019; Case & Gunstone, 2003; Clegg & Bufton, 2008; Nielsen & Sarauw, 2017; Stevenson & Clegg, 2011) by focusing on discursive positions available for university students that emerge in relation to societal expectations regarding making the most of one’s study time. Our analysis brings forth different and often conflicting expectations that students need to negotiate in their everyday student lives. The positions captured in students’ accounts have also implications for how students orient to their studies, what study-related activities they see as worthwhile “investments”, and what kinds of temporal pressures they experience in their study paths. The findings of this paper are related to previous observations on the acceleration of temporal individualisation and fragmentation in higher education (Bunn et al., 2019). In particular, an increasing emphasis on time as an individual investment steers both students and higher education institutions towards optimising use of study time in order to make students employable with a consequence of devaluing traditional academic virtues of immersion into the subject matter and slow-paced growth into the membership of the academic or professional disciplinary community (Clegg & Bufton, 2008). As Clegg (2010) has argued, the category of future, and students’ future employability in particular, is increasingly adopting a dominant position in HE also in Finland and other Nordic contexts (Nielsen & Sarauw, 2017). While there are differences regarding which temporalities are valued and adopt a dominant position in each context, our findings suggest that the “time as investment for the future” emphasis is increasingly found across study fields in the Finnish academic HE.

With regard to HE policy, this study highlights the significance of taking into account the diversity of temporalities and notions of what making the most of one’s time as a student means in different contexts and for different kinds of students. Unidimensional and one-size-fits-all solutions in promoting completion of studies and student employability reflect poorly the diversity of different disciplinary contexts, their respective academic cultures and “implied” (ideal) students (Ulriksen, 2009). While identifying students who are in need of support as regards managing their time and progressing in their studies is important (Korhonen & Rautopuro, 2019), we would like to highlight the importance of critically addressing tendencies to individualise what may be structural in nature. Our findings illustrate how societal expectations related to studies are negotiated and aligned with other expectations in the context of students’ variable everyday lives.

The results of this study are limited to particular sets of academic disciplines in the Finnish university education, and further research is needed to investigate more broadly various kinds of



conflicting pressures and their implications for students and their welfare in the Nordic higher education contexts as well as globally.

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