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# *Grasp Your Field! First-Year Business Students' Engagement with the Study Environment and Their Own Academic Field*

Helena Kantanen, Leena Penttinen, Päivi Rosenius and Katri Ruth

## **Abstract**

This study focuses on first-year business students' transition into their study community and working life. It seeks to analyze and understand students' first-term experience by examining the self-determination theory and career orientation literature. The data consist of 84 reflective student papers written at the beginning and the end of the semester. Qualitative content analysis of the papers was conducted with ATLAS.ti. The results demonstrated the importance of a supportive study community for a successful transition and highlighted the need to strengthen first-year students' academic study skills. Older students and alumni's career experiences proved to be central in building a career orientation towards becoming a business professional. The study demonstrates the usefulness of self-determination theory in understanding students' first-year experience and the elements that significantly contribute to their engagement. Practically, it offers inspiration and tools for developing pedagogically motivated first-year studies.

## **Keywords:**

career orientation, engagement, first-year experience, self-determination theory

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## **1. Introduction**

As soon as a student receives the notification of acceptance from a university, he or she starts a transition towards integration into the academic community and working life orientation. The engagement developed during the first months of study is crucial to this process. Engagement can be defined as 'the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes' (Krause & Coates, 2008, p. 494), which highlights a student's own actions in the process of becoming a member of the new community. Annala et al. (2012) demonstrate the role of the academic community in engagement in terms of providing a supportive environment, which can underpin significant learning experiences through collaborative teaching and learning, as well as by giving academic challenges. Previous research has shown that introductory first-year experience (FYE) courses contribute to students' satisfaction and success in their studies (Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Tinto, 2000).

A successful transition period builds a positive self-image of the student as an academic learner, which, in turn, contributes to his or her long-term attachment to studies, integration, and engagement. The whole academic community is therefore encouraged to support the process of integration, which requires interactive participation and affects learning, motivation, persistence, graduation, and, above all, the process of becoming an academic professional (Lähteenoja, 2010). Positive interaction is needed with both peers and older students (peer mentors) and approachable faculty and staff (Krause & Coates, 2008; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Supportive interaction with teachers significantly enhances adjustment, as well as identity formation, in university transition (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006; Scanlon, Rowling & Weber, 2007).

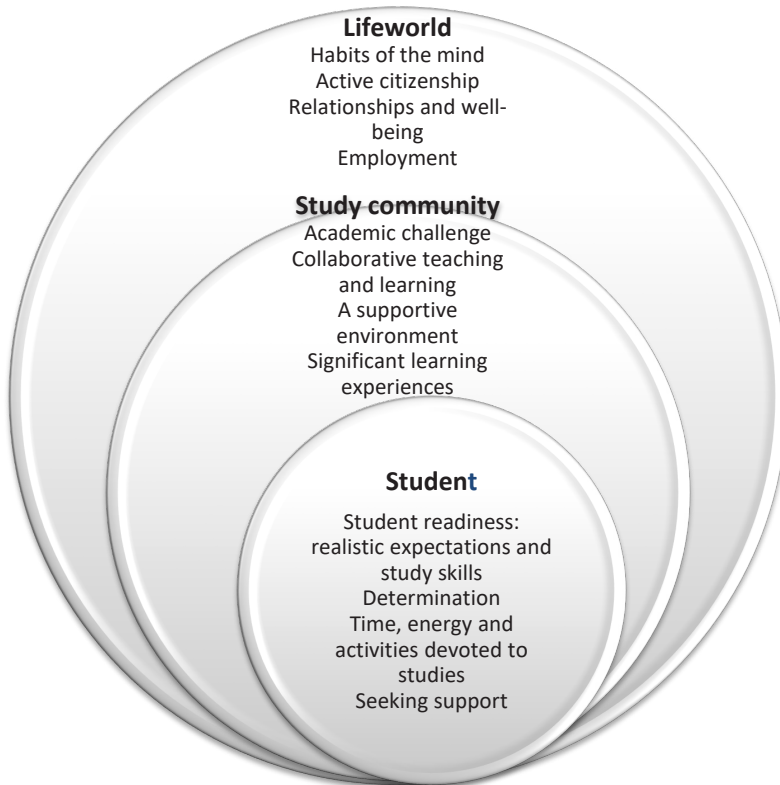
Because of the heterogeneous student body, a well-planned and supported transition period during the first weeks and months at university is needed. Many studies have illustrated the meaning of the quality of interaction between students and teachers in first-year engagement (Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Leese (2010) emphasizes that this also means improving the awareness of teaching staff about teaching and learning processes. Early interaction with academic staff leads to a more meaningful interaction with teachers later along the study path (Fuentes, Ruiz Alvarado, Berdan & DeAngelo, 2014).

The engagement model of Mäkinen and Annala (2011) (Figure 1) contextualizes the different aspects of the development of the first-year orientation approached in this study (see also Annala et al., 2012; Kipponen & Annala, 2016). The model examines engagement through three levels: individual level, community level, and lifeworld level. This framework for engagement is a useful tool to understand the connection of individual orientation and interaction with staff in pedagogical practices, as well as the meaning of the world outside the university and future prospects as combined factors of engagement in FYE. In the first zone of the engagement model, students' individual orientation to their studies plays an important role in the way they participate in educationally purposeful activities. This orientation is about students' readiness for academic studies and activities in seeking support. It is also about individual determination, which highlights students' own target orientation and active engagement.

In the second zone of the engagement model, the initiatives of the community play an important role in how pedagogical practices and supportive activities foster students' belongingness to the study community. The interaction between staff and students forms the basis of students' participation and membership in the new cultural environment of academic studies. The last zone refers to the wider issues in students' lifeworlds. The overall economic and employment situation of students can play a significant role in their engagement in their studies.

In this zone, future career prospects at the beginning of one’s studies serve as determinants of successful engagement. However, the most important zone is the first one; students’ own activities and their motivation are the determinants of a successful study path, which we approach with self-determination theory (SDT). In this regard, the focus of the current empirical study was on students’ perceptions of their own actions and feelings towards participating in first-semester orientation and teaching activities.

**Figure 1.** Framework for enhancing engagement in one’s studies (Annala et al., 2012, p. 79; Mäkinen & Annala, 2011, p. 62).



Previous research has called for the development of different kinds of interventions for the early phase of studies to support successful transition and integration (e.g. Brinkworth et al., 2009; Gale & Parker, 2014; Greene, 2011). Therefore, the Business School decided to develop a new orientation programme for the new students of 2018 in order to integrate them efficiently into business studies and the academic study community. Willcoxson et al. (2011) suggest that first-year students must be provided with a clear idea of their career options in order to support their engagement, so career prospects were considered in the planning of the orientation programme. At the same time, in 2018, the entire university renewed the orientation period of first-year students, providing them with, for example, an open-access website with pre-orientation materials, including the key information necessary for a smooth start to their university studies.

The orientation programme for business students started on the newcomers' first day, September 3rd, and continued until December 3rd. The first week followed the schedule given by the university, but from the second week on the group of 42 first-year students then met every Monday for a mandatory two-hour class. The planning team for the introductory course, consisting of a study psychologist, a professor, two senior lecturers, an amanuensis, and a board member from the student association, incorporated themes such as academic learning skills, time management, presentation and group-work skills, language studies and overseas exchange options into the course syllabus. The majors offered at the bachelor level also had two class meetings each to present their offerings through their faculty and alumni. The programme contained certain informal elements. For example, it began with a treasure hunt activity and ended with a Christmas party that included mulled wine, snacks, and carol-singing.

This study provides new knowledge about the role of the FYE in business students' motivation, in their engagement with the academic community, and their career orientation. Pedagogically, the study offers new insights for teachers and administrators in charge of planning and implementing first-year students' orientation programmes. In the following, we outline the theoretical background of the study and then explain the methodology, process of analysis, and results.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Self-determination theory (SDT)

As a student's own activities play a key role in his or her successful engagement, we used SDT as a theoretical framework to explore the student experience of the new orientation. SDT is a widely used macro-theory of human motivation and explains extrinsic and intrinsic motivation through three universal psychological needs: relatedness, competence, and autonomy (e.g. Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory states that these needs must be met in order for people to function and grow optimally, so the social environment needs to nurture these needs. Relatedness encompasses the basic needs of security, connectedness, and caring; competence comprises people's need to control their performance, cope with challenges, and experience mastery; and autonomy means the need to work towards inner coherence and integration and to act on the basis of one's intrinsic motivation, not on the basis of external pressures.

*Relatedness*, or social integration, refers to students' connectedness to their academic environment, peers, and the faculty (Brooman & Darwent, 2014). During the early stages of socialization in the study community, students have a strong need to belong to the community and to negotiate their own identities as university students. Jamelske (2009) and Tinto (2000) maintain that four institutional prerequisites enable students' integration into the academic community: information and counseling, support, participation, and learning. First-year students must be provided with clear and logical structures and sufficient support. Moreover, the academic community must be seen as a human community in which relationships form central objects, goals, and structures of pedagogical efforts. According to research, meeting with the staff and faculty within the first weeks and months of study is considered very meaningful for first-year students (e.g. Krause & Coates, 2008). Continuous interaction with both peers and the faculty is needed for students' integration, engagement and persistence (Lay-Hwa Bowden, 2013; Leese, 2010).

As mentioned above, learning is one of the prerequisites for integration (Jamelske, 2009; Tinto, 2000). Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune (2008, p. 568) state that 'significant

learning is what changes our ability to engage in practice and to understand why we do it. Such learning is not just the acquisition of memories, habits, and skills, but also the formation of an identity'. Research shows that a positive identity formation process for a student at an early stage of his or her studies predicts academic attachment, participation, and engagement. First-year students will have already adopted different learning skills and strategies during their earlier studies and through their working life experiences, but they may still need new tools for their university studies (Christie et al., 2008). They must therefore be provided with these tools, so they can feel competent and strengthen their *self-efficacy*.

According to the American Psychological Association ([www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)), self-efficacy, a concept introduced by Bandura in 1977, 'refers to an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments. Self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior, and social environment'. If a student has confidence in himself or herself, he or she may accomplish more, work harder, persevere with difficult tasks and try to master whatever task is at hand (Brooman & Darwent, 2014). Self-efficacy and competence also require basic learning skills, including study habits, such as time management and the ability to meet deadlines, and an understanding of how one can best approach his or her learning (Brooman & Darwent, 2014).

The third element of SDT, in addition to relatedness and competence/self-efficacy, is *autonomy*. 'According to SDT, being autonomous refers to acting with a sense of volition and the experience of willingness' (Deci & Ryan, 2012, p. 1). An autonomous individual behaves in line with his or her own interests, makes his or her own choices, and expresses his or her feelings freely (Jungert, Van den Broeck, Schreurs & Osterman, 2018). Intrinsic motivation is formed from an individual's own interest or enjoyment, whereas extrinsic motivation is related to external rewards (Shin & Lee, 2017). Intrinsic motivation 'makes individuals energetic and enables them to take actions with high-level self-regulated strategies voluntarily' (Shin & Lee, 2017, p. 314).

All three dimensions of SDT are closely connected. For example, a sense of secure relatedness seems to contribute to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The emphasis on intrinsic motivation and autonomous learning is also related to the challenges of working life nowadays. For example, Jungert et al. (2018) show that colleagues are increasingly important in stimulating the motivation of teams and employees; therefore, employees could be trained to support one another's needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Mylrea et al. (2017) suggest that providing support for students in these three areas of SDT may increase their motivation levels and sense of professional identity. Therefore, we maintain that the SDT theory offers a fruitful theoretical framework for the examination of business students' FYE. In addition, we approach the development of professional identity with questions about career orientation at the beginning of the studies. The link between SDT and career orientation is derived from Deci and Ryan's (2000, p. 263) description: 'social contexts [that are] supportive of the needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness . . . promote or strengthen aspirations or life goals that ongoingly provide the satisfaction of the basic needs'.

## 2.2. Career orientation in academic studies

Research has shown that participation in first-year introductory courses leads to higher satisfaction with studies and better academic achievement (Jamelske, 2009; Tinto, 2000). Moreover, successful integration into the university community and peer attachment is not just good for new students' mental well-being but also form a secure base for their professional

identity and career prospects (Mäkinen, 2012; Shin & Lee, 2017). From the point of view of working life skills, so-called 21st-century skills have been frequently discussed in recent years. These include collaboration, communication, use of information and communication technologies, social and cultural competencies, creative and critical thinking, and problem-solving (Kantanen, Koponen, Sointu & Valtonen, 2019; Mäkinen & Annala, 2011; Voogt & Roblin, 2012). As a result of a rapidly changing labor market and the development of related skills, many students lack clear ideas about their future careers. In addition, career concerns about future employment are already present at an early stage of their studies (Lairio & Penttinen, 2006).

Jackson (2016) discusses the importance of developing a pre-professional identity, which students start to develop at the beginning of their studies. Trede, Macklin and Bridges (2012) argue that becoming a professional starts by developing the necessary knowledge, skills, and values and a sense of being identical to that of the members of the profession. It is also a process of differentiation from those outside the profession and, finally, of identifying yourself as a member of that profession. Thus, paying attention to career orientation at the beginning of one's studies is important. Penttinen, Skaniakos and Lairio (2013) use the concept of working life orientation, which includes not only skills and knowledge but also personal values in relation to career prospects and employability. They highlight the need to support this kind of career orientation at the beginning of one's studies through various kinds of activities in teaching, guidance, and counseling. Structured group guidance, in which career concerns are shared and discussed with peers, can be a fruitful space for developing one's career orientation (Penttinen & Vesisenaho, 2013). Academic expertise is built through creative and constructive dialogues in which all participants can feel involved and can reflect upon and apply new collective knowledge. Physical premises that can enable this kind of fruitful academic interaction are therefore also needed, but even more important than dialogic premises are the attitudes of faculty and staff towards the new student. He or she is not inept and incapable but rather a valuable young member of the academic community who has entered the process of professional development as a responsible owner of his or her learning process (Krause & Coates, 2008).

### 2.3. Studies of the first-year experience in the business school context

Several studies have focused on the specific challenges in academic studies and the FYE of business school students. For example, Brown, Rich and Holtham (2014) examine student engagement and learning during a new management practice and skills study module at Cass Business School. They find only limited evidence of a connection between student engagement and student performance, but they also realize that creating a credible measure for student engagement is difficult. They call for more research on the connection between the theories of student engagement, learning, and appropriate teaching methods. De Maio and Desierto (2016) explore how embedding sessions and support workshops contributed to students' final results on a first-year course. Their findings indicated that the workshops were beneficial and that they improved the students' academic literacy skills, but no improvement in their final marks for the course unit was shown. Fleming and Stanway (2014) evaluate how a collaborative approach between teachers and administrators for a core business unit contributed to building an active learning environment. They find that some students benefitted from a collaborative learning model that encouraged them, for example, to actively engage in their learning and to self-reflect. The authors also establish that the success of this model required strong relationships between academic and professional staff. Nelson and Johnson (2011) study two individual characteristics: perceptions of social support (emotional, instrumental, informa-

tional, and appraisal) and attachment style in management education. Surprisingly, they find that social support was not related to academic performance.

As described above, the studies conducted in business school contexts produced contradictory results regarding the connections between relatedness/social support and performance. Moreover, these studies seemed to focus mainly on students' academic performance. They were also often quantitatively orientated, with psychometric validation and a statistical focus. Krause and Coats (2008) suggest that qualitative elements should be incorporated into the data collection. The present study fills the need for qualitatively orientated research of the FYE of business school students and offers a wider perspective on working life orientation.

#### 2.4. Research questions

The main goal of this study is to analyze and understand business students' first-term experience in terms of needs and engagement. This is approached through two research questions:

1. How did the needs of relatedness, self-efficacy/competence, and autonomy affect students' satisfaction in their first-year experience?
2. How did students' career orientation evolve during the first semester?

### 3. Data collection and analysis

The data consist of 84 reflective student papers written by 42 first-year business students at the beginning and the end of a new three-month-long introductory course. Altogether, the data comprise 106 pages of written text. The papers were mandatory course assignments, but they were not graded. Of the students, 43% were female and 57% were male. The average age of the students was 21 years old. Sixty-seven percent ( $n = 28$ ) had started studying business from the beginning in 2018, whereas 33% ( $n = 14$ ) had already completed several open university courses, studied in another university, or studied a totally different field. The students gave their consent to the use of their papers for the research. The first assignment was assisted by the following questions: 'How did you choose the field of business studies?', 'What kinds of themes do you think your studies will include?' and 'What kind of work would you like to do in the future?' The second assignment offered the following questions as prompts: 'How has your interest in business studies changed during the autumn?', 'Which subjects have been interesting and inspiring for you?', 'What has been hard or difficult?', 'Have you received enough help and counseling?' and 'What do you think of business studies, in general, and management and marketing studies and accounting and finance studies, in particular?'

Qualitative content analysis was performed on the data using ATLAS.ti software. The process included open coding, category creation, and abstraction (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). The first stage of the analysis was inductive and involved open coding. The first author analyzed the reflective papers to find key codes related to the experiences and challenges of the students during their first university semester. The second stage of the analysis was deductive and involved the classification of the codes into the categories derived from the literature, such as relatedness, self-efficacy/competence, autonomy, and career orientation. The whole team discussed the categorization and commented on the choices of sample quotations. The qualitative results were also quantified by calculating the code frequencies in the data. Table 1 illustrates the process of coding.



**Table 1.** Categorisation of first-semester experiences.

CATEGORIES	KEY CODES (ENABLERS AND CHALLENGES; NUMBERS IN THE DATA)	EXAMPLES OF QUOTATIONS
Relatedness (SDT): expressions of security, belonging, and caring	+ study buddies (18) + peer mentors and older students (6) + teachers (5) + students' association (4) *** - isolation (1) - competition (1)	<p><i>I've been truly inspired by the common sharing and supporting. I couldn't imagine that at the university level, students would help and support one another this much.</i> (study buddies) [informant 8]</p> <p><i>Our peer mentors have been there for us, too, motivating and helping us.</i> (peer mentors and older students) [informant 18]</p> <p><i>I'm glad that the professors are friendly and ready to help students whenever needed.</i> (teachers) [informant 1]</p>
Self-efficacy/competence (SDT): expressions of control of performance, coping with challenges and experiences of mastery within the field of business; basic skills to learn, including productive study habits	+ interesting courses (32) + strengths (15) + everything okay (9) + feeling of competence (7) + attitude change (6) + learning methods (4) *** - academic study skills (37) - time management (11) - frustration (8) - work-heavy courses (7) - early mornings (4) - workload (4) - everything is new (3) - lack of math skills (3)	<p><i>I have particularly enjoyed the studies of management and English.</i> (interesting courses) [informant 2]</p> <p><i>I find it a strength that I'm usually pretty good at constructing the bigger picture and remembering the essential points.</i> (strengths) [informant 5]</p> <p><i>I have enjoyed the feeling of success in math lectures and exercises.</i> (feeling of competence) [informant 22]</p> <p><i>I must admit that I was doubtful about the management course because I thought that you learn leadership by leading, but the introductory course changed my mind.</i> (attitude change) [informant 14]</p> <p><i>There has been a good variation in the working methods in different courses.</i> (learning methods) [informant 17]</p> <p>***</p> <p><i>I should improve my reading speed.</i> (academic study skills) [informant 25]</p> <p><i>There are many development needs, particularly starting to study early enough.</i> (time management) [informant 5]</p> <p><i>The most challenging and laborious courses so far have been the introductory courses on economics and accounting.</i> (work-heavy courses) [informant 13]</p>
Autonomy (SDT): expressions of inner coherence and integration, acting on the basis of intrinsic motivation	+ open university background (12) + motivation strengthened (11) + my field (8) + interesting courses to come (4)	<p><i>My interest in business studies has remained or even increased.</i> (motivation strengthened) [informant 10]</p> <p><i>I just love this field because you learn all the time and never become 'completely ready'.</i> (my field) [informant 26]</p>
Career orientation: expressions of academic competencies, future visions, and career prospects	+ auditing, banking, investments or finance (15) + variety of options (11) + working life orientation (10) + alumni and other business experts (9) + an appreciated degree and a secure future (4) *** - second choice (7) - no clear idea yet (6) - disappointment (1)	<p><i>Business studies have been a very positive experience. They give you competence in many different careers.</i> (variety of options) [informant 21]</p> <p><i>I have become more and more interested in marketing, and different future visions have started filling my mind.</i> (working life orientation) [informant 7]</p> <p><i>It has been inspiring to listen to the experiences and career paths of alumni.</i> (alumni and other business experts) [informant 10]</p> <p>***</p> <p><i>Business was my plan b ... it was also a bit related to my first choice, which was law.</i> (second choice) [informant 40]</p>

## 4. Findings

In the following, the main findings are further discussed on the basis of the qualitative content analysis conducted. The main goal was to analyze and understand business students' first-term experience in terms of needs and engagement. This was approached through two research questions: 1. How did the needs of relatedness, self-efficacy/competence, and autonomy affect students' satisfaction in their first-year experience? 2. How did students' career orientation evolve during the first semester?

### 4.1. Relatedness enhanced by peer and staff support

In this study, the need for relatedness was examined through expressions of security, belonging, and caring. This dimension of SDT was clearly demonstrated in the data; a team spirit and helping and caring amongst study buddies, in particular, contributed to relatedness. The experience of informant 38 summarises this aptly: 'The first year has started really well with the help of new, nice study buddies and by motivating one another'. Peer mentors, older students, and the business students' association also played a central role in first-year students' security and belonging and, thus, in their engagement with the academic community. Moreover, in the data, teachers were seen as approachable and ready to help, which is always beneficial for learning.

It is worth noting that the feeling of relatedness also contributed to the students' experience of deciding whether business was their field, as informant 31 put it: 'In the beginning, I was probably a bit lost and wondered whether this was my field, but now, three months later, I've started feeling that this is the right choice because I've started making new friends and acquaintances'. This notion is in line with Deci and Ryan's (2000) idea that the dimensions of SDT are closely connected.

Basically, there were only two negative notions associated with relatedness—one student expressed feelings of isolation despite having new friends, and another slightly criticized the competitive spirit amongst students.

### 4.2. Deficits in academic study skills challenging self-efficacy

In this study, the need for self-efficacy referred to expressions of control over performance, coping with challenges, and experiences of mastery in relation to one's own academic field. It also included basic learning skills. There was a significant variation in individual experiences, which underlines the importance of self-efficacy in engagement.

A few respondents seemed to be doing fine without any specific challenges: 'nothing has been overwhelmingly difficult so far' [informant 30]. The courses that the students take at the beginning of their studies are central to providing them with experiences of mastery. There were numerous mentions of interesting courses in the data. These courses were interesting because of the students' long-term interest in the topics, because these were considered new and exciting, or because of the unique teaching methods used.

The data show that the combination of interesting courses and the variations in teaching and learning methods contributed to self-efficacy amongst the students and helped them identify and develop their own strengths. However, it is important to remember that sometimes, success in coping with challenges also strengthens the experience of self-efficacy: 'The toughest part of the studies was the struggle with the economics course because I couldn't care less, and the topics were mainly very difficult to understand. However, I'm now very pleased because I learned that my extensive reading has been rewarded, as I got a good grade after all' [informant 28].

The first-year students and their feelings of competence were also challenged in many ways. Everything was new, they had a difficult time understanding the structure of their degree programme and they faced some difficult courses and heavy workloads, as described by informant 38: 'A few weeks in mid-November were really tough because we had many exams and assignments to return within a couple of weeks'.

The data also showed that the first-year students had much to learn in their new phase of life. They reported many challenges in their new independent lives with regard to early morning starts and, in particular, academic study skills and time management.

The most difficult part has been learning how to learn. I didn't read much in high school ... A grade of 8 [scale 4–10] was satisfactory enough for me, and it could be achieved without even opening one's textbook. [informant 9]

Getting prepared for exams has been very challenging because it was difficult to find information on how and what one should study. [informant 28]

Time management has been the most difficult part ... In the future, I will divide my work evenly over the whole course to avoid the 'piling-up' of tasks at the end. [informant 29]

My challenge is concentration or the lack of it. I'm simply lazy. [informant 13]

The mentions of deficits in academic study skills were so frequent in the data that faculty need to ponder how these issues can be addressed, both during the first semester and throughout the students' study path. This is essential because significant problems with these skills may lead to frustration and disappointment and, in the worst case, suspension.

### 4.3. Intrinsic motivation as a basis of learning

In this study, autonomy meant expressions of inner coherence and integration and the ability to act on the basis of intrinsic motivation. Those who entered business school with a considerable number of earlier study credits were naturally guided by their strong intrinsic motivation and did not need to ponder whether this was their field. However, from the point of view of those coming directly from high school, the situation was quite different, with the data indicating how the students' motivation was strengthened: 'My opinion of and interest in business studies have become deeper during the autumn. I'm more certain than before that this is the field I want to study' [informant 22]. Some students also recognized a turning point at which they became committed to the field of business studies and their motivation was strengthened: 'The class in which management studies was introduced was personally meaningful for me and was some sort of a turning point because then I felt that this was precisely what I wanted to study' [informant 28]. A systematic comparison of the two groups of students—those with earlier university studies and those without—and the differences between them are discussed in Chapter 4.5.

### 4.4. Alumni providing visions for career paths

In addition to the students' needs, examined through the three dimensions of SDT, we wanted to explore whether the new introductory programme contributed to the future orientation and career prospects of the first-year students. In general, major differences were found amongst

the students in terms of their future career prospects and the assurance they felt that they were in the right field of study. The data revealed that very few first-year students had any specific plans for the future; instead, they had chosen the field on the basis of the recommendations of their family or friends or because they wanted an appreciated degree, meaningful work, or secure employment options. Many of the students were also aware of the fact that a business degree offers a combination of professional knowledge and transformative skills, which can open very different doors for them in the future. This is why the employment options presented during the orientation programme through older students and visitors were extremely valuable, as informant 17 put it: ‘The visitors to the introductory course explained nicely the content of the studies ... and it’s also very important to receive information about different career options at an early stage of one’s studies’. The orientation course both extended the students’ ideas of the employment opportunities of business graduates and gave them role models and specific visions for the future. Encounters with alumni and working life professionals offered more diverse career perspectives to their academic studies. This is what Horn (2009) calls career-informed studying, which means that different career options are presented during one’s studies and provide future visions. At the end of the orientation semester, we concluded that alumni attendance provided first-year students with these visions and strengthened their motivation.

#### 4.5. Comparisons of the two student groups and two reflective papers

A systematic comparison of the students who had already completed a considerable amount of academic study versus those who had started business studies from the beginning in 2018 revealed that generally, there was only a slight variation in how these two groups expressed their self-determination or career orientation. However, a rough quantification (Table 2) of the different codes within these categories reveals some differences.

**Table 2.** Frequencies of quotations reflecting the main categories of the data in this study.

CODE CATEGORY	EARLIER STUDIES (33% OF THE STUDENTS, N = 14), NUMBER OF QUOTATIONS	NO EARLIER STUDIES (67% OF THE STUDENTS, N = 28), NUMBER OF QUOTATIONS	TOTAL
Relatedness	13 (37%)	22 (63 %)	35
* Challenges of relatedness	0 (0%)	2 (100%)	2
Self-efficacy	22 (24%)	69 (76%)	91
* Challenges of self-efficacy	32 (38%)	54 (62%)	86
Autonomy	23 (46%)	27 (54%)	50
* Challenges of autonomy	0	0	0
Career orientation	41 (37%)	70 (63%)	111
* Challenges of career orientation	2 (14%)	12 (86%)	14
<b>Total</b>	133 (34%)	256 (66%)	389

**Relatedness** and study buddies, in particular, were equally important for both the more mature students and those without earlier studies. This can be explained at least through the fact that open university studies are often undertaken alone, so joining a group of peers may be important for students.

Within the dimension of **self-efficacy**, interesting courses played a more important role for those coming directly from high school. On the other hand, those who had studied a considera-

ble number of business courses expressed frustration because they had already learned many interesting topics before. It is an interesting notion related to self-efficacy that both groups of students were well aware of their individual strengths. They were good at math, concentration, giving presentations, or organizing.

Academic study skills seemed to be a major issue in this study; surprisingly, the two student groups had no major differences because the number of challenges identified was equal to the proportion of each group in data. The explanation can be that more mature students have already identified their weak spots and challenges and can express them more specifically.

In terms of **autonomy**, the students with earlier university studies expressed greater autonomous orientation and stronger intrinsic motivation, which is expected. However, less-experienced students had strong motivators behind their career choices. It can be noted, though, that their interest in business studies was not necessarily intrinsic; it originated from examples available in the family or amongst other close relationships.

Different aspects of **career orientation** were equally important for both student groups, but those with less previous studies benefited more from the alumni visits and other career prospects introduced to them. Consequently, the more experienced students did not find any challenges related to their career orientation the way their younger peers did. It seems that the fields of auditing, banking, investments, and finance were the possible career paths for some students when they applied to business school, and this pre-professional identity (Jackson, 2016) was strengthened during the first semester. After the first semester, the students' interests were divided equally into management and marketing versus accounting and finance.

A longitudinal analysis of the reflective papers written at the beginning and the end of the first semester shows that the students have had certain ideas of their future careers at the beginning of their studies; for example, summer job experiences or family and friends had guided them towards business studies. Often, their expectations were at a general level; they wanted an appreciated degree that offers a wide variety of options and adequate challenges. What really challenged their career orientation was the fact that for some, business school was only the second option, and their first choice was medicine, psychology, or law. However, the first semester was rewarding enough because the students did not question their choice of business studies at the end of the semester.

## 5. Discussion

In this study, SDT helped us understand how students determine themselves in relation to a new environment, its communities, and its responsibilities. The concept of career orientation, for its part, positioned students on a continuum that starts from the notification of acceptance from the university. Career orientation was strengthened by inspiring courses and meetings with business professionals that offered first-year students different visions for the future.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

This study explored business students' first semester from the perspectives of self-determination (Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and career orientation (Jamelske, 2009; Mäkinen, 2012; Shin & Lee, 2017).

From the point of view of SDT, we can conclude that the theory offered a solid framework for the examination of business students' first semester. From our data, we can conclude that the students' needs of relatedness and autonomy were fulfilled, but their self-efficacy was challenged in many ways. These needs could not have been monitored without the intervention of

a three-month-long orientation course, which included reflective writing at the beginning and at the end of the semester.

From the point of view of **relatedness**, we conclude that first-year students formed a community characterized by belonging and caring. They achieved this through a new, longer orientation period; peer mentor groups; shared first-year courses, and approachable administrators and teachers. First-year business students' experience of accessible teachers as key actors who were interested in the newcomers in the community supported the findings about teachers' pedagogical role in previous research (Scanlon et al., 2007; Willcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). This supportive and participative study environment offered a secure base for their integration and the development of their professional identities (Jamelske, 2009; Tinto, 2000).

Christie et al. (2008) call for further investigation into how confidence and motivation contribute to learning identities. The study revealed that the combination of interesting courses and varied teaching and learning methods contributed to **self-efficacy/competence** and a positive learner identity formation process. Success in coping with challenging courses strengthened the feeling of competence. However, the first semester also offered several sources of concern for first-year students, such as uncertainty about the structure and requirements of university studies, laborious courses, and heavy workloads. These findings are in line with those of Leese (2010), who found that first-year students may be prepared for an increased workload, higher expectations, and the challenges of independent learning, but these new demands may also overwhelm them.

From the point of view of **autonomy** and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2012), the new orientation course proved extremely useful. It strengthened the students' motivation by providing information on their future studies and career prospects in auditing and finance and in management and marketing. Deci and Ryan (2000) see extrinsic and intrinsic motivation as a continuum, and it seems that for those who had chosen business school based on the examples of family or friends, an inspiring first semester changed their extrinsic motivation towards intrinsic motivation. This is the right direction from the point of view of learning.

In sum, it is an interesting result that from the point of view of SDT, only the self-efficacy/competence dimension proved problematic. The study community was characterized by belongingness and caring for one another, and there were also signs of the advancement of intrinsic motivation. Our results demonstrated the importance of pedagogical approaches and methodologies that address the students' different needs—those that strengthen their skills and self-efficacy in a way that also supports engagement and belonging. At the same time, the students are active participants in their study community and can determine their own goals.

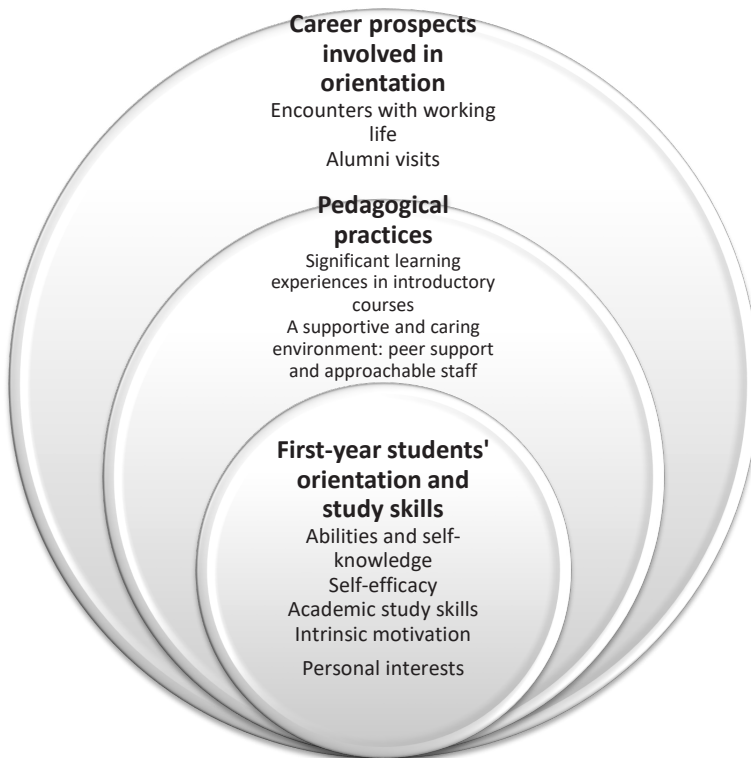
From the point of view of **future orientation** and working life prospects, the first semester extended the students' ideas of their employment opportunities and gave them role models and specific visions for the future through the experiences of Master's level students and alumni. They were offered a forum for constructive dialogue in which the students could envision their future and enter the process of professional development (Krause & Coates, 2008).

The first semester fulfilled its purpose and enabled the students to be active participants in their own transitions rather than merely recipients of the information. A longer transition period proved to be beneficial from the point of view of motivation as conceptualized through SDT (Brooman & Darwent, 2014). The study contributes to the student engagement literature by confirming the evidence offered by Fleming and Stanway (2014) that an engaging learning environment requires academic and professional partnerships and the integration of academic skills within the discipline in question.

### 5.2. Pedagogical implications

Brown, Rich and Holtham (2014) called for more research on the connection between theories of student engagement, learning, and appropriate teaching methods. The results of our study offer several pedagogical and practical implications. Based on our results, we modified the Annala et al.'s (2012) original student engagement model to present the three levels of engagement as the pedagogical outcomes of our study. Students' own abilities and self-knowledge, as well as their academic study skills and motivation, can be supported by pedagogical activities in a study community that offers significant learning experiences, collaboration, and peer and staff support. In addition, engagement is connected to future employment and career prospects, which are shown in the early phase of studies. Figure 2 contains a summary of the supportive orientation in terms of the key findings and pedagogical implications of our study. The need for self-efficacy/competence is a central element of the inner zone, the need for the relatedness of the second zone, and the need for autonomy of the third zone.

**Figure 2.** Key elements in developing a successful orientation programme (pedagogical modification from Mäkinen & Annala, 2011, p. 62; Annala et al., 2012, p. 79).



Another pedagogical implication is that the move toward comprehensive orientation over a longer period of time seems appropriate. Previously, the orientation period involved only two intensive weeks at the beginning of the academic year; now, the process starts with the distribution of online materials during the summer, and, in our case, it lasts through the autumn semester. Obviously, better integration of university-wide and department-specific orientation programmes is needed to take the holistic lifeworld of students into account and to serve them in the best possible way.

All efforts must be taken to maintain the excellent aspects of the orientation at the moment—the feeling of belongingness amongst first-year students and meetings with alumni and other business professionals as guides for students' future visions as business professionals. Moreover, the results have implications for curriculum planning. Introductory courses should be pedagogically well planned and implemented, and they should offer enough intellectual stimulation but not too heavy workloads in order to enhance and maintain first-year students' motivation. Avoiding the overlap of several course deadlines is also a curriculum planning issue. Likewise, those who have already taken a considerable number of business courses in an open university or elsewhere could be offered individual counseling and an accelerated programme to maintain their motivation and avoid frustration.

Such forums where teachers, administrators, and new students can discuss the time management and academic study skills required at university are needed (Brooman & Darwent, 2014). The data show that this area must be extended in the orientation period in the future because many deficits were reported. Attention must be given to these challenges to ensure that students can have confidence in themselves and thus accomplish more and persevere in the face of difficulties (Brooman & Darwent, 2014). Both more mature and younger students need to strengthen their academic study skills with the help of the faculty. This should include instructing them about different tools for time management, briefing them about studying for exams, and providing practical skills, such as note-taking techniques.

### 5.3. Limitations and future research

Unfortunately, we did not have comparable data from previous years to demonstrate the efficacy of the new semester-long orientation programme. However, the study provides highly valuable information for the faculty and administrators for the further development of the business students' FYE. During our study, we have become aware of the need to examine business students' orientation course within the larger FYE framework, and this could be the next step of our research. We intend to collect longitudinal data focusing on students' expectations and motivations at the beginning of their studies and the end of their bachelor's degree paths. Furthermore, whether the reported lack of academic study skills reflects upon the first-year students' academic performance would be worth exploring. Examining the kinds of pedagogical practices that are effective and that contribute to the motivation, engagement, and career orientation of new students, as well as what these practices mean from the point of view of teaching culture, would likewise be interesting.

## 6. Conclusions

The study demonstrates the usefulness of self-determination theory in understanding students' first-year experience and the elements that significantly contribute to their engagement. Practically, it offers inspiration and tools for developing pedagogically motivated first-year studies.

Preparing students for their future workplaces is difficult if their engagement with their ac-



ademic field remains weak and their orientation towards working life develops inadequately. This study proves that focusing on the transition period of first-year students during their very first semester in the academe is crucial. The results presented here report the initial learning experiences of students during a special phase of life. The orientation period offered a forum to monitor these experiences, so they can be addressed in curriculum planning in the future.

The three-month-long orientation period proved useful from several viewpoints. From the first viewpoint, the results demonstrate the importance of a supportive study community for a successful transition. This kind of community relieves fears related to a new environment and university studies, and it enables the development of self-efficacy: 'Even I can make it, and university studies do not ... require supernatural powers' [informant 6]. From the second viewpoint, the study highlights the need to strengthen the academic study skills of first-year students. The career experiences of older students and alumni also proved to be central in building a future orientation towards becoming a business professional. From the last viewpoint, discussions about students' and young employees' self-determination and mental well-being have been active in the Finnish mass and business media in 2019 (e.g. Hs.fi; Talouselama.fi; Yle.fi). We argue that successful first-semester engagement that fulfills students' psychological needs of relatedness, self-efficacy, and autonomy and that opens career prospects is beneficial in addressing these concerns.

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