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Where is My Community? First-Year Experience of Business Students during the Pandemic

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Abstract

Early engagement with the academic community significantly impacts both educational and career trajectories. This study investigates relatedness, self-efficacy, autonomy, and career orientation within the first year of the 2020 student cohort, whose primary semester was conducted predominantly online due to COVID-19 restrictions. The analysis is based on 120 reflective papers written by first-semester students. These papers underwent qualitative content analysis using ATLAS.ti. Contrasting these findings with a 2018 cohort study uncovers the pivotal role of a supportive academic community and alumni interactions in motivation and engagement – elements notably lacking in 2020. Despite this absence, students' motivation remained unaffected, emphasizing the significance of belongingness. Both cohorts encountered academic study skill challenges. Therefore, targeted emphasis on academic skills for first-year students and fostering relatedness among the 'COVID cohort' are crucial.

Keywords:

first-year experience, pandemic, self-determination theory

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1. Introduction

Engagement developed during the first months of study is crucial for integration into the academic community and the orientation towards the future profession (Krause & Coates, 2008). 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). The whole academic community contributes to the engagement process by providing supportive interaction with teachers and staff, significant learning experiences and academic challenges (Annala et al., 2012). A successful first-year experience (FYE) contributes to students’ satisfaction and academic success (Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Tinto, 2000). Moreover, successful integration into the university community and with peers forms a good foundation for students’ professional identity and career prospects (Mäkinen, 2012; Shin & Lee, 2017).

Normally, FYE includes an intensive presence on campus but during the autumn of 2020, students started their studies almost entirely online because of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. During the autumn of 2020, the pandemic situation had already stabilized a little, and *emergency remote teaching* was no longer required (Hodges et al., 2020) as it was during the spring term of 2020. Distance education could be considered as an option, not as an obligation (Bozkurt et al., 2020). However, many Finnish higher education institutions chose to offer a major part of their teaching remotely because the pandemic situation varied, and universities wanted to avoid unnecessary hopping between onsite and online modes.

According to de Klerk et al. (2021), studies on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education have focused mainly on the institutions and faculty but little on students and their learning. However, it has been noted that students have faced several digital problems, and their self-efficacy has been challenged because of the urgent need to be able to regulate their own learning (Hodges et al., 2020). This study expands on our previous research on students’ FYE and career orientation by examining these phenomena during the exceptional circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Kantanen et al., 2020). Research has indicated that the pandemic time involved several sources of stress for students related to isolation and fear of contagion (Zurlo et al., 2020), food insecurity, financial hardships, lack of social connectedness and a sense of belonging, and uncertainty about the future (Lederer et al., 2021; Quijada, 2021). Therefore, it is important to know whether the circumstances affected students’ engagement with the study environment and their own academic field. Moreover, we wanted to know whether the FYE of the ‘COVID cohort’ was different from the FYE in normal circumstances. For the comparison, the dataset collected in 2018 was used.

The FYE is studied through the dimensions of self-determination theory (SDT), encompassing relatedness, self-efficacy/competence, and autonomy (Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moreover, we examined how students’ career orientation developed during the first months of business studies. The aim of the study was to understand what kinds of impacts the COVID-19 pandemic had on the FYE of business students and offer practical recommendations for those who plan and instruct first-year studies. Based on this, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How did the pandemic affect the needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy of first-year business students?
2. How did the pandemic affect the career orientation of first-year business students?

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The following two sections review the literature on the pandemic and HEIs and explain the use of self-determination theory (SDT) and career orientation in this study. Section 4 then offers the research context and methodology. Section 5 presents key findings, while sections 6, 7, and 8 cover discussion, conclusions, pedagogical implications, and suggestions for future research.

2. The pandemic and higher education institutions

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged societies, institutions and individuals to an extent not seen since World War II. Some authors have even labelled the pandemic as ‘one of the most significant collective traumas of the 21st century’, as it was sudden and rapid; radical, deep, and holistic; imposed from outside on the victims; and unexpected, unpredicted, and shocking (Town et al., 2020, p. 254). All educational institutions were forced to adopt the distance mode in March 2020, and the restrictions continued over the next two years in different forms. Research studies published to date within organizational research emphasize the need for emotional support, empathy, and both vertical and horizontal informal communication to reduce uncertainty during a major health emergency (e.g., Qin & Men, 2023; Rowe & Alexander, 2020). Moreover, research demonstrates the importance of good and trusting relationships as a prerequisite for coping with uncertainty (e.g., Reynolds & Quinn, 2008).

A study of the impact of the pandemic in higher education in 31 countries (Bozkurt et al., 2020) revealed several issues of concern during the pandemic, namely trauma, psychological pressures, and anxiety (see also Morales-Rodríguez, 2021). It emphasized a *pedagogy of care*, which involves listening to students and open dialogue. In practice, this care could involve flexibility in terms of course requirements, clear communication, multiple contact points, personal connections, counselling services, and teaching practices that enhance a climate of care, such as collaborative learning spaces for students to establish peer contacts and gain peer support (Bozkurt et al., 2020). New solutions for the overwhelmingly stressful situation could be offered, such as alternative assessment methods.

Holzer et al. (2021) studied university students’ psychological well-being in Austria and Finland during the pandemic using the SDT framework. They maintain that the lack of physical presence, informal discourse, and spontaneous interaction contributed to the risk of transactional distance, which could create negative emotions, gaps in understanding, and misconceptions (p. 2). They stated that numerous studies have proved that *social relatedness* and academic success are connected and that relatedness contributes to psychological well-being. On the other hand, *social isolation* caused by the pandemic can predict anxiety, stress, and depression (e.g., Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010; Juntunen et al., 2022).

Aaltonen (2022) examined the FYE within the framework of the sociology of loss. The context of her study is the same as the one of this study. She maintains that even students who do not have earlier experience of university studies have many expectations of their new academic life. In this setting, losses mean lost opportunities from the point of view of experiences and relationships related to the start of university studies. She concludes that the university established several efforts for student well-being (e.g., new study counselling psychologists, well-being coordinators, and student-to-student contacts) but the major deficit was the *loss of informal encounters* outside the official curriculum work (Aaltonen, 2022).

In their study within a large Finnish university, Penttinen and Miettinen (2022) found that the majority of new students, particularly younger students, felt they suffered from the

pandemic situation. Social factors seem to be critical at the beginning of first-year university students' studies. Belonging to peer student groups and social support from fellow students were important factors during the exceptional situation of starting university studies during the pandemic. The lack of social relationships within the university community might have consequences for the dynamics of smaller-group engagement and a *sense of belonging* to the university. The study also confirmed the important role of teachers and staff in early engagement. Because of the pandemic situation and online interaction, it was impossible to create normal relationships with teachers. Therefore, this was not the most appropriate starting time for the identity negotiation processes that are particularly important for new students.

Previous studies have demonstrated that first-year students often have challenges with academic study skills (e.g., Kantanen et al., 2020). In 2020, students had to adopt new ways of academic learning, but also the principles of distance learning. Farid (2014) outlined e-learning readiness on the basis of a literature review and concluded that 'e-learning readiness is a multidimensional construct that refers generally to computer Internet self-efficacy, self-direction, motivation, interaction, and attitude' (p. 380). In summary, authors seem to relate e-learning readiness to technical readiness and self-directed and self-regulated learning competencies (e.g., Holzer et al., 2021). Studies on *digital competence* have, for their part, outlined that digital competence consists of technical skills, cognitive skills, and ethical knowledge (e.g., Heidari et al., 2021). The European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators (Redecker & Punie, 2017) maintains that learners' digital competence includes information and media literacy, digital communication and collaboration, digital content creation, responsible use, and digital problem-solving.

Bozkurt et al. (2020) discussed the topic of the *digital divide* or *digital gap*, which has gained a great deal of attention over the past decade (e.g., Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013), and particularly during the pandemic. Broadly, digital inclusiveness refers to inclusion in a society undergoing a digitalization process. In Northern Europe, we usually have internet access but there are inequalities in terms of bandwidth distribution, data price, and internet speed. Moreover, digital skills may vary, and usually, those who already have good skills to function in the digital society benefit most from different digital services, including education (Kuusisto et al., 2022). Moreover, digital devices, digital literacy, and digital skills are not enough, as *self-directed learning skills* are also needed to benefit from online education (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

To conclude, studies about the learning challenges during the pandemic emphasize challenges related to 1) self-directedness, 2) social relatedness, 3) uncertainty and anxiety, and 4) digital competence.

3. Self-determination theory and career orientation

Self-determination theory is a psychological framework for understanding human motivation and personality development (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Self-determination theory was considered appropriate for the study of FYE because a student's own activities play a key role in his or her successful engagement. Moreover, the theory helps us to understand students' personal growth and development, which is an essential aspect of academic studies.

Self-determination theory states that motivation can be explained by the psychological needs of relatedness, self-efficacy/competence, and autonomy and that these needs must be met for people to function and grow optimally (Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). 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. If these three needs are not met, individuals may experience a lack of motivation and decreased well-being. (Ryan & Deci, 2000.)

Relatedness refers to students' social integration and connectedness to their peers and the faculty (Brooman & Darwent, 2014); the need for belongingness is very strong at the early stage of studies. Researchers have identified different prerequisites for the development of successful integration, such as information and counselling, sufficient support, participation, positive learning experiences, clear and logical study structures, and continuous interaction with peers, staff, and faculty (e.g., Jamelske, 2009; Krause & Coates, 2008; Lay-Hwa Bowden, 2013; Leese, 2010; Tinto, 2000).

During the first months of studies, students negotiate their own identities as university students. A positive identity formation process predicts academic attachment, participation, and engagement. This process requires adopting and mastering learning and time management skills and the new tools needed for academic studies, so that students can feel competent, and their *self-efficacy* is strengthened. A confident student works harder, accomplishes more, and perseveres in the face of challenges (Brooman & Darwent, 2014).

The third element of SDT, *autonomy*, refers to an individual's capability and willingness to behave in line with his or her own interests and make his or her own choices on the basis of intrinsic motivation (Jungert, Van den Broeck, Schreurs & Osterman, 2018). In the ideal case, intrinsic motivation makes an individual energetic and enables high-level self-regulation, while extrinsic motivation is driven by external rewards (Shin & Lee, 2017).

In the FYE, the overall economic and employment situation can play a significant role in the engagement process as a wider issue of career prospects in the life-world of students (see Annala et al., 2012; Mäkinen & Annala, 2011). Successful integration into the university community and with peers forms a good basis for students' professional identity and career prospects (Mäkinen, 2012; Shin & Lee, 2017). At the beginning of studies, the encounters with working life can foster the development of a personally meaningful learning process, which Jackson (2016) calls the development of a pre-professional identity.

The essential part of becoming a professional in the field is a process of differentiation from those outside one's own profession, in addition to identifying oneself as a member of the community (Trede, Macklin & Bridges, 2012). In their study of Finnish university students, Lairio and Penttinen (2006) observed that concerns about future career prospects are already prevalent during the early stages of their academic journey. The nascent career orientation during these formative years is predicated upon inquiries of a distinct nature, encompassing considerations of skills, knowledge acquisition, and personal values entwined with career prospects and the employability potential that education can provide (Penttinen, Skaniakos, & Lairio, 2013). Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) posit that the social context plays a pivotal role in shaping career choices. In this study, we integrate Hodkinson and Sparkes's socio-cultural theory with the individual aspects of the first-year experience as the initial step towards career orientation.

While traditional career theories have historically emphasized individual aspects such as the alignment between personality and work environments (Holland, 1959; Järnlström, 2002) or the maturation of career decision-making (Super, 1990), Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) underscore the significance of social and cultural factors in career decision-making. They introduce the concept of "horizons of action" to elucidate the socio-cultural experiences that influence

individuals' perceptions of potential career trajectories.

Within the realm of higher education, the cultivation of career orientation is fostered through educational initiatives, individual courses, and everyday interactions with peers and faculty members, collectively contributing to the development of a pedagogical framework that shapes one's perspective on working life during their academic pursuits (Penttinen et al., 2013). This sociological perspective on career orientation highlights the intricate interplay between the broader landscape of employability and work-related opportunities, juxtaposed with the personally significant objectives that students hold for their educational journey. Career orientation can be linked to the SDT through supportive environments that answer to the psychological needs of an individual and thus strengthen individual life goals (see Deci & Ryan, 2000). By focusing on both sociocultural factors and individual aspects such as motivation, self-efficacy, and autonomy, this study yields pertinent insights for the advancement of pedagogy within the context of the FYE.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research context

The context of this study is a medium-sized Finnish university, specifically its Business School, which comprises 1600 students across two campuses. The University of Eastern Finland, like many Finnish universities, applies holistic, student-centred guidance (Lairio & Penttinen, 2006) during the introductory period, including peer tutoring and meetings with academic and support staff. In recent years, the introductory period has involved online pre-materials, an onsite week on campus, and a second part later in the autumn. The most important benefits of the week, from students' point of view, have been social interaction, information, a feeling of belongingness, and getting to know the campus. Each department or school also has its own introductory programme, such as the Business School that developed a term-long programme first implemented in 2018 (Kantanen et al., 2020).

As far as the pandemic is concerned, the university had applied different tools to enhance student well-being. It participated in a project funded by the Ministry of Education and called Bridges during 2021–2023, the aim of which was to strengthen the engagement and inclusion of students and prevent exclusion through peer-counselling activities and community support (<https://kamu.uef.fi/en/bridges-project-supports-students-wellbeing/>). For example, in February 2022, 15,000 text messages and emails were sent to students, asking how they were doing, and offering the possibility of talking with trained peer counsellors.

4.2. Data collection and analysis

The data consist of 120 reflective student papers written by 60 first-year business students of the University of Eastern Finland in Kuopio campus at the beginning and at the end of a three-month-long introductory course. The students were asked to write about their choice of study field and their expectations and experiences. The original number of informants was 68 but eight students did not give their consent for the research use of their writings. Altogether, the data comprise 151 pages of written text. The papers were mandatory course assignments, but they were not graded. Of the students, 37% were female and 63% were male. The average age of the students was 22 years old.

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 second stage was deductive and involved the classification of the codes into theory-driven categories. For example, all challenges mentioned in the texts were coded, and in the second round of coding, overlapping codes were merged, leading to the categorization of challenges into distinct groups, including those associated with the SDT elements of relatedness, self-efficacy, and autonomy, challenges pertaining to career orientation, and specific challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. For the trustworthiness of the analysis, the team discussed the categorization and quotations. Additionally, the researcher's influence was assessed. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) the researcher is a good instrument in qualitative research when she or he is familiar with the phenomenon, when she or he has strong conceptual interests, when a multi-disciplinary approach is used, and when the researcher has good investigative skills. The team that conducted this study fulfils all these requirements.

The main categories of the analysis, derived from the SDT, were the following:

- *Relatedness* (expressions of security, belonging, and caring);
- *Self-efficacy/competence* (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); and
- *Autonomy* (expressions of inner coherence and integration, acting on the basis of intrinsic motivation).

Moreover, the category of *career orientation* (expressions of academic competencies, future visions, and career prospects) was included. Both joys and challenges were included within each category, even though the emphasis was on the challenges met.

In the following, the findings are presented within the framework of the STD and career orientation.

Table 1. Categorisation of first-semester experiences.

| CATEGORIES | KEY CODES | EXAMPLES OF QUOTATIONS |
|---|---|--|
| <p>Relatedness: expressions of security, belonging, and caring</p> | <p>Challenges: lack of peer learning and class discussions, loneliness, uncertainty</p> <p>Joys: study buddies, learning circles, family and friends in town</p> | <p>Challenges: Familiarization with other students and teachers has remained very superficial. (informant 405) For me it is not a challenge to meet deadlines; it is a challenge to struggle alone in your own nook. (informant 387)</p> <p>Joys: A big thank you for getting us started goes to the tutors, who did a fantastic job despite the constraints. (informant 435) I've made a lot of new friends in my new city, which has made it easy to adapt. (informant 425)</p> |
| <p>Self-efficacy/competence: 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</p> | <p>Challenges: concentration, asking for help, heavy workload, time management</p> <p>Joys: theoretical approaches, exchange options</p> | <p>Challenges: It has been hard to study mathematics in a distant mode. I am poor at asking for help and without face-to-face contacts with teachers I have been left alone with my problems. (informant 394) Normally you would get help during classes but asking for help in mathematics by email just does not work. (informant 407) It is hard to stay motivated when you have so many stimuli around you. (informant 392) It was hard to stay awake during some of the lectures when you studied from your own couch. (informant 412)</p> <p>Joys: Theoretical studies suit me, and that's one of the reasons why I applied to university. (informant 322) In the autumn of my third year, I went on a student exchange to Switzerland. Studying there was similar to what I imagine university studies are like in Finland, and I didn't want to go back to the university of applied sciences. (informant 321)</p> |
| <p>Autonomy: expressions of inner coherence and integration, acting on the basis of intrinsic motivation</p> | <p>Challenges: motivation, study rhythm and routines, long lectures</p> <p>Joys: flexibility, better work/life balance, own field, motivation built in open university, answer to high ambitions</p> | <p>Challenges: The coronavirus has thrown a wrench into my study routine. I still don't quite feel like I'm attending a university because I do all my work from home, and it's challenging to stay focused. (informant 451)</p> <p>Joys: With distance learning, courses offer more flexibility. For example, lectures can be watched as recordings, and you don't have to rush from one on-campus lecture to another all the time. (informant 389) The quality of teaching has been very good, which, in itself, fosters enthusiasm and interest in future courses. (informant 427) I haven't minded distance learning at all because I've been working alongside my studies. (informant 402)</p> |
| <p>Career orientation: expressions of academic competencies, future visions, and career prospects</p> | <p>Challenges: second choice</p> <p>Joys: appreciated degree, good employment prospects, variety of employment options, long-term interests (e.g., investments, finance, marketing, fashion), possibility to enhance competence, secure income, own firm, international options</p> | <p>Challenges: I decided to apply for business studies as a second choice if I weren't accepted in medicine. (informant 309)</p> <p>Joys: Particularly, the fact that business studies offer excellent employment opportunities in various professions helped me make my choice. (informant 311) I expect the job to be challenging enough and to test my skills. (informant 333) I have worked in our family firm over the past six years. (informant 380) I didn't know what I'd like to be when I grow up, so I was fascinated by the versatility of business studies. (informant 317)</p> |

5. Findings

5.1. Relatedness and the pandemic

Loneliness and lack of belonging were significant problems for these students. They missed the opportunity to meet teachers and peers in classes and cafés, to get to know them, and to share problems and find solutions. It was a challenge to work in groups when not knowing one another.

We had some class sessions during the autumn, and I realized that it was a totally different feeling to work together on campus after classes. I felt that each time I got some extra boost for studies, and the assignments were completed in a much more efficient way than at home. (informant 408)

The students missed class discussions, which they felt would have been deeper and richer on-site than online, particularly during their Introduction to Management course.

I don't like online learning and hope we could return to contact teaching as soon as possible, COVID permitting. Interaction is so important and, unfortunately, you cannot make such contact with teachers and other students online as you would make onsite. (informant 418)

Actually, the first-term studies did not cause too much stress to the students and Teams and Zoom classes were basically fine – the problem was the monotonous life indoors, studying alone, and lack of collaborative learning. The first-year students missed the student life they had expected: going to classes and events with peers.

I have done pretty well despite the virus, but I think it is obvious that this situation is definitely not a good way to start university studies; a social animal becomes very lonely, all of a sudden. (informant 426)

One could think that previous open university studies would have prepared the students for independent planning and studying, but this was not always the case.

Even though I studied for years in the open university, where they expect total independence, I have been surprised to realize how alone I was left with my studies. (informant 430)

There were also some positive examples of solutions to the lack of relatedness. A few students mentioned that the university town was their hometown, so they already knew the city and had family and friends there. Some had spent most of their time in their hometown elsewhere in Finland. Some students had formed their own learning circles during the first weeks of study when they met on campus with their tutor group, and these circles had been an enormous support to them in their struggle with distance studies. They had both studied together and found common leisure-time activities.

5.2. Self-efficacy/competence and the pandemic

The pandemic challenged students' self-efficacy in many ways. Several students reported that it was very difficult to ask for help during online classes. They missed both the teacher's and their peers' presence and help. This was particularly true during the Business Mathematics course, which the students considered demanding; students found that it was extremely difficult to ask for help online or by email. Moreover, the whole campus remained quite distant to the students; as one of them put it:

The threshold to visit the university or study counsellor has become high because these locations have not become a part of our everyday life. (informant 416)

Several students reported that they had visited the university premises only a few times during their first study semester. The students pondered their course choices for the second study year, and felt uncertainty and loneliness, did not understand the degree structure, and did not know whom to ask, when or how.

It is common that first-year students may experience several challenges with their academic study skills, and so it was with this group, too. It was hard to find a rhythm for life, develop schedules, and follow them. Distance studies at home challenged their acquisition of productive study habits. Several students mentioned that they had trouble concentrating because of the many stimuli at home, and because of the exhaustion caused by several long online lectures in a row. Some students also actively sought solutions to the remoteness of studying.

I have tried to find tools to concentrate on long online lectures and realized that good sleep, fresh air, sports, and varied and regular meals help with concentration. (informant 444)

5.3. Autonomy and the pandemic

Several students mentioned challenges in terms of their motivation. However, almost all reported that they were still very enthusiastic about business studies as such but the exceptional conditions and lack of onsite classes and student events had weakened their motivation. On the other hand, the study revealed the other side of distance learning: flexibility, easier time management, better work-life balance, more leisure time, and less traveling.

This arrangement has suited me very well. It was a soft start for university studies when you can study from your home coach. The first exam was not too exciting when I could do it at home, having breakfast at the same time in my night gown and wool socks. (informant 416)

... distance studies have fitted in well with my life situation. It has not been too painful to balance work, family, and floorball. This combination would have been much more challenging with 'normal' ways of studying. (informant 448)

5.4. Career orientation and the pandemic

The variety of different kinds of experiences of the first semester was not seen in the students' career orientation. In general, when choosing business studies, students appreciate the variety of options and careers this path can offer, an appreciated degree, and secure future employment.

I do not know yet what profession would interest me most, so I thought that at least business studies offers several options. This was the main reason why I applied. (informant 369)

I pondered some options, of which business studies turned out to be the most interesting. I thought it was a good option because I had heard that the degree opens diverse options to working life. The business degree is also appreciated and employment options are good. The variety of specialization alternatives sounded interesting. Several future opportunities will be open to you when you can work on so many different assignments. (informant 362)

For some, the way to Business School had been clear and predetermined, while others had first preferred another option (usually medicine or law), had tried other fields (such as engineering, pharmacy, or environmental science), or had tried business studies at the university of applied science level. For some, an orientation towards business studies had grown during their gap year or when working in the field of business. Quite a number of students had started business studies in the open university and gained a strong motivation there. Actually, in this cohort there was only one student who did not know why he was studying business and, even at the end of the first semester, still pondered whether he was in the right place.

Already at the beginning of the first semester, some students had clear visions of their future employment.

Employment in marketing or management in the field of fashion, video games or beauty business sounds interesting. (informant 328)

I wish my future job would be somehow connected to finance and financial organizations. (informant 345)

My dream is to have a job connected to sports. (informant 371)

Even more frequent were general mentions such as 'a position that I can be proud of' (informant 344), 'work that is in line with my values' (informant 348), and 'neat but challenging and rewarding office work' (informant 383).

An interesting feature in the data was the students' orientation towards entrepreneurship. They mentioned entrepreneurship as a serious career option. Twelve students talked about their entrepreneurial families and how they had followed their parents' work. Four students had already established their own businesses. They were also aware that entrepreneurship is not a popular career option for business students, as described by the following informant:

I learned that Finnish business school graduates are not eager to set up companies be-

cause of high risks. Then I decided that my goal is to start my own business and study management and marketing. (informant 379)

One of the students whose family runs a firm dreamt of an innovative career of his own to avoid the constant comparisons to his family members. (informant 347)

6. Discussion

In this study, the aim was to find out how the pandemic had affected first-year students’ needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Moreover, the study sought to determine whether the pandemic had affected the career orientation of these students. To explore the impact of the pandemic, we utilized our previous study about first-year business students’ needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy, as well as their career orientation (see Kantanen et al., 2020). Table 2 summarises the major differences and similarities between the 2018 and 2020 student cohorts.

Table 2. Comparison of the results of the 2018 study with a regular first-year student cohort and the 2020 study with the pandemic cohort.

| ELEMENTS ENHANCING ENGAGEMENT IN STUDIES | RESULTS OF THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE IN 2018 | RESULTS OF THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE IN 2020 |
|--|--|--|
| Career prospects involved in introductory period: Working life encounters and alumni visits. | Central to strengthening motivation and visioning career prospects. | No working life encounters or alumni visits. |
| Pedagogical practices and learning experiences | Significant learning experiences in introductory courses. Supportive and caring environment: Peer support and approachable staff. | Lack of shared learning experiences and peer support in introductory courses; few self-made learning circles. Passive participation and interaction with teachers. Uncertainty about how and where to find help when needed. |
| Motivation and study skills | Challenges in terms of self-directedness, academic study skills, and time management. Intrinsic motivation. | Challenges in terms of self-directedness, academic study skills, and time management vs. increased individual flexibility. Good digital study skills. Entrepreneurial ambitions. Strong intrinsic motivation. |

Studying at home was often boring and lonely. The students reported disruptions that made concentration difficult but no technical challenges. For example, Kyne and Thompson (2020) found in their study that a poor internet connection and other technical problems made studying hard. Therefore, one could conclude that the concept of the digital divide was not an issue for this student cohort.

Our previous study (Kantanen et al., 2020), as well as other studies in the field, have emphasized the importance of a supportive study community for a successful student transition. Thus, meaningful relationships with peer students and staff are needed for a successful transition during a ‘complex new life chapter, where students are often leaving their established support networks (family, schools, social) and are suddenly presented with new intellectual, social, and personal challenges’ (Kyne & Thompson, 2020, p. 3382). The cohort of 2020 also missed the FYE

of their expectations, as one of our informants (424) put it: 'I have missed the normal first-year experience of business students as it has been described to me.' Aaltonen (2022) examined this phenomenon within the framework of the 'sociology of loss'. Fortunately, in 2020 the onsite introductory week could be held, and during that time some of the students managed to build their own small learning communities. The current study reveals the importance of these first weeks of study for the transition: significant relationships and study habits are formed, and students' understanding of the new academic environment increases. This time can be characterized as particularly vulnerable, but also as a window of opportunity (van Herpen et al., 2020).

Compared to the previous study, the pandemic challenged the transition in many ways. Alumni visits were not possible during the autumn of 2020, and the first-year students could not gain inspiration and motivation from their working life experiences. When it comes to learning experiences, for some the online introductory courses were just fine, while many felt that they would rather have studied onsite. The major challenge was the lack of relatedness: a lack of peer and staff support. This is a serious factor, because there is a connection between relatedness and academic success, and between relatedness and psychological well-being (Dutcher et al., 2022; Holzer et al., 2021). According to the literature, a pedagogy of care with informal encounters, listening, and dialogue would have helped students during the pandemic (Aaltonen, 2022; Bozkurt et al., 2020). Moreover, trusting relationships and sharing could have reduced their stress and anxiety. However, it seems that the first-year students of 2020 lacked the emotional and practical support of their academic community and, therefore, their engagement with their study environment may have remained superficial. Furthermore, they needed help with the development of their academic study skills, just like the cohort of 2018. In addition, quite advanced digital study skills were required of the cohort of 2020, but this was not a problem for these students.

An interesting finding is that, despite some challenges, young students' motivation to study business seemed to remain strong. The pandemic did not harm their motivation and orientation towards their future career. Recent research has shown that intrinsic motivation and a positive attitude towards change can buffer the burdening impacts of new situations (Juntunen et al., 2022). Without comparative data from any other study field, we cannot say whether the strong career orientation is connected to this specific study field. We can only note that first-year business students did not struggle with their career prospects although the pandemic caused other challenges for starting studies in an exceptional situation. Hence, the students have a strong foundation for the development of their professional identities, however, the absence of interaction and social support still poses a potential threat to this affirmative progression (see Jackson, 2016). Figure 1 contains a summary of the key findings.

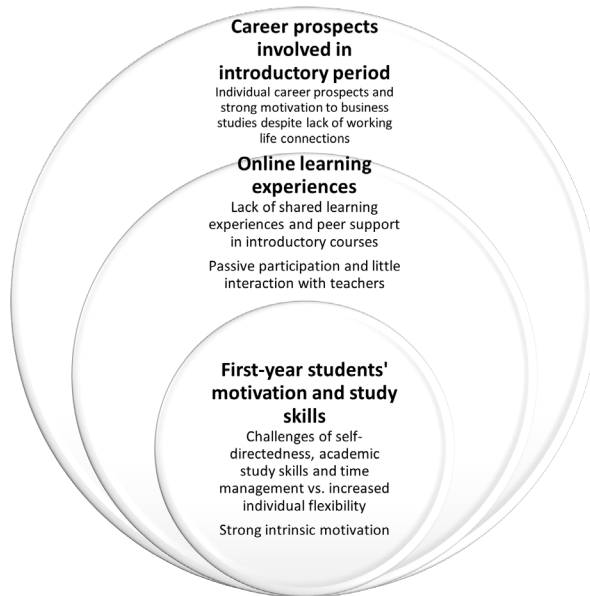


Figure 1. The pandemic situation as a challenge for a successful first-year experience (modified from Kantanen et al., 2020; Annala et al., 2012; Mäkinen & Annala, 2011).

7. Conclusion and pedagogical implications

The study proves the importance of relatedness for successful integration into the academic community and for the orientation towards one’s own academic field and future profession. Moreover, it demonstrates the different needs of students: for some, online studies offered more flexibility and better study-life balance, while others suffered from loneliness and the lack of collaborative learning.

Recent research on pandemic-time learning has emphasized the importance of motivation. Juntunen et al. (2022), for example, identified six expectancy-value-cost profiles in their study of 2,686 Finnish university students: moderately motivated, utility-oriented, disengaged, indifferent, positively ambitious, and struggling ambitious. They suggested that motivational mindsets may relieve the eventual negative outcomes of remote studying, and buffer against these. Therefore, and in line with the present study as well, more attention should be paid to students’ motivation and its maintenance.

The results of this study will be useful from the point of view of developing online and blended learning. They may also be helpful for those in charge of planning post-pandemic support programmes for those students who missed their important first academic year of collaborative learning. In practice, there is a need to pay attention to the development of first-year students’ career orientation with the help of older students, alumni, and other business professionals, and to the relatedness of the pandemic-time intakes of 2020 and 2021. Recent research has shown that feelings of belonging shape mental health among young adults (Dutcher et al., 2022). Therefore, we should give our ‘COVID cohorts’ trusting relationships with teachers and peers and a true sense of belonging. In summary, our recommendations for those who plan and instruct first-year courses include:

1. Foster a genuine sense of community and belonging among students. For instance, strengthen relationships between first-year students, peer tutors, teachers, and staff, all working toward the common goal of student well-being.
2. Cultivate trusting relationships with teachers and staff. Consider introducing first-year teachers and student advisers in face-to-face meetings early on and actively promote interaction.
3. Enhance students' self-directedness and academic study skills. Discuss these topics during the orientation period for first-year students and provide practical tools for time management and academic writing.
4. Provide flexible study options tailored to students' needs. Avoid mandating 100% attendance and offer online alternatives when learning objectives can be achieved through online means.
5. Harness students' advanced digital skills. Allow students to share their favorite scheduling apps or collaborative tools.

8. Limitations and future research directions

While we possess a comparable dataset from the pre-pandemic era, it is important to acknowledge that our data is confined to a specific academic discipline and a relatively small student cohort. Nevertheless, there is potential to conduct a more in-depth analysis of these student cohorts by tracking their career trajectories throughout their degree programs. This would involve examining the evolution of their motivation over the years, assessing the realization of their career aspirations, and evaluating their academic performance. Student well-being is intricately connected to pedagogical leadership and teacher well-being (e.g., Mäki et al., 2021), both of which are pertinent and current research areas. Additionally, teachers have been in need of information and support, encompassing the mental, pedagogical, and technical aspects. Skillfully led and participatory post-pandemic learning communities have the potential to not only support instructors but also foster student engagement within their academic environment and chosen fields of study.

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