University students' experiences of remote teaching and learning during the pandemic differ

17 November 2022

Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Concerns over university students' strain and well-being soared when the coronavirus pandemic moved lectures online and sent students home.

A new study among Finnish university students shows that the transition to remote teaching and learning was experienced in many ways. Strengthening students' motivation and especially their expectations, interest and personal importance, and reducing costs, can all play important roles in supporting students' coping mechanisms in exceptional times.

"It is also important to identify and take into account individual differences when planning future teaching and measures to support students," says Professor Markku Niemivirta of the University of Eastern Finland, summing up the findings.

This project focusing on student well-being and motivation during the pandemic was conducted within the Motivation, Learning and Well-being research collective led by Niemivirta.

Motivation matters

The transition to remote teaching and learning concerned all students, but not all had similar experiences. According to the researchers, motivation is one factor that explains the differences between students.

"We examined what kind of motivation profiles could be identified among university students 9–10 months after the transition to remote teaching and learning, and how students with different expectancy-cost-value profiles differed in terms of their experiences and well-being. We also examined how students' experiences of remote teaching and learning were associated with well-being, and whether these experiences were associated with factors of well-being similarly in different student groups," says Doctoral Researcher and first author Henriikka Juntunen.

Motivation was examined by looking at different emphases in students' expectancy-cost-value profiles. Based on the results, six different profiles were identified among Finnish university students: moderately motivated (25%), utility-oriented (22%), disengaged (16%), indifferent (15%), positively ambitious (13%) and struggling ambitious (9%) students.

Utility-oriented students emphasized external motivation, while disengaged and indifferent students seemed to struggle to find interest and meaning in their studies. Disengaged students in particular felt that their studies required effort and took time away from other important activities. Positively ambitious and struggling ambitious students expected to do well in their studies and considered them interesting and meaningful, but
these groups differed significantly in terms of the experienced costs of investing in their studies: despite positive expectations and values, struggling ambitious students felt that their studies took too much time and effort.

**Motivation contributes to experiences of remote teaching and learning, and well-being**

Experiences of remote teaching and learning were defined to include experiences of the transition to, and experienced strain of, remote teaching and learning, as well as experienced sense of alienation. Positively ambitious and moderately motivated students had the most positive attitude towards remote teaching and learning, while the most negative attitude was held by disengaged students.

"Utility-oriented and disengaged students experienced the highest levels, and positively ambitious students the lowest levels of strain. Sense of alienation and feeling like an outsider was most experienced by utility-oriented, disengaged and struggling ambitious students, and least by moderately motivated and positively ambitious students," Niemivirta says.

Well-being was examined from the perspectives of student motivation, mental exhaustion, and depressive symptoms.

"Positively ambitious and struggling ambitious students experienced the highest levels of motivation. Utility-oriented and disengaged students, on the other hand, experienced the highest levels of mental exhaustion. Disengaged students also reported most symptoms of depression," Niemivirta continues.

Evaluations of remote teaching and learning also predicted student well-being, and those associations remained similar regardless of motivation.

"A positive evaluation of the transition to remote teaching and learning was associated with engagement, experienced strain with mental exhaustion and, in particular, sense of alienation with depressive symptoms," Juntunen notes.

**Students' different experiences should be identified and taken into account**

The study shows that the consequences of the pandemic for teaching and learning were experienced differently by students depending on their general motivation and experienced strain.

"Internal motivation and a positive attitude towards change seemed to be act as a buffer against the strain caused by the exceptional situation. However, an emphasis on external motivation and experienced studies-related strain in particular were associated with considerably weaker coping. Especially sense of alienation was highlighted as a risk to well-being," Niemivirta says.

Students have experienced the consequences of the pandemic for their studies in different ways, and for some, the experience has been a very positive one.

"Still, the diverse associations of experienced strain and sense of alienation with lower well-being indicate that it is important to ensure that students don't feel left alone in these kinds of situations," Niemivirta points out.

The study is published in Educational Psychology. Although university students have returned to campus, the project will continue.

"At least this autumn still, we'll be collecting data on students' experiences to see what kind of a mark the pandemic has left," Niemivirta concludes.


Provided by University of Eastern Finland