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Promoting student engagement: insights from Iceland, Lithuania, and Norway

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Introduction: The complex phenomenon of engagement in the research draws upon the sociocultural theories and emphasizes the three interrelated dimensions: behavioral, emotional/affective, and cognitive. Student engagement in academic life is a key factor for student wellbeing, making it essential to address the issues related to student engagement to be able to foster overall academic success. The research has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the academic environment including students' performance and their social and private lives.

Methodology: In order to help young people prepare to become students, an analysis of student needs and experiences was carried out at three universities: the University of Stavanger (Norway), Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania), and the University of Iceland (Iceland). Focus group discussions were used to collect data about the students' experience entering university and what challenges first-year students faced before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 17 first-year (6 males and 11 females) who started their studies during COVID-19 lockdown and 16 second-year students (9 males and 7 females) who started their studies before COVID-19 participated in the focus group discussions. The collected data consists of students' responses during the focus group discussions. The qualitative thematic content analysis was used to identify emergent themes and categories.

Results: The results of the research indicate that students face several challenges when entering university: adapting to the academic environment and the student role, information overload, social relationships, communication, and self-esteem issues. Students who started their studies during the pandemic indicated different experiences and challenges in adapting to university life.

Discussion: This research faced several constraints, including the limited sample size, the focus on only three universities in Northern Europe, and the reliance on self-reported data from the focus group interviews, which may not fully capture the diversity of student experiences. Despite these limitations, the research provides valuable insights into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student engagement and the unique challenges faced by new students during this period. The results of this research confirm the findings of previous research claiming that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic vary depending on the environment. Students need a variety of targeted and /or intensive support services to address their increased social, emotional, and academic needs.

KEYWORDS

student engagement, university newcomers, academic environment, higher education, students wellbeing, study adaptation

1 Introduction

When starting their studies at university, students must quickly adapt to stricter time management, higher academic standards, and to organizing social and academic activities themselves. Their success is linked to their engagement, which can be identified as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks et al., 2016), in the processes related to the new academic and social environments. Research on higher education development and student engagement in recent years shows that many 1st-year students are not ready for their university studies and there are factors which impact their level of engagement and consequently their satisfaction and success (Hennessy and Murphy, 2023). The inability to cope with the challenges of combining student life and academic activities, study satisfaction, and social integration (Behr et al., 2020) often leads to difficulties in getting involved in university studies, causes unnecessary stress, and often results in the student neglecting and abandoning their studies at the university. Discontinuation of studies has both personal and social consequences for the economy and psychological wellbeing. Student involvement in university studies is influenced by institutional and personal factors including a wider socio-cultural context. As the research shows, the students neither receive the necessary help with academic standards and writing traditions (Jonsmoen and Greek, 2012; Tønnesson, 2012) nor are they provided with information on how to cope with changes in their personal life and social environment (Kahu, 2013). The need for greater support for the development of non-academic skills, on the one hand, and the complaints that the typical welcome week can be overwhelming, on the other, has led to the search for options to help students engage with the academic environment of universities (Davison et al., 2022). Also, the research overview on the dropout of students often focuses on the factors which are not influenced by institutions of higher education. Therefore, research on the factors which can be influenced by an institution i.e., motivation, satisfaction, and integration is required (Behr et al., 2020). This paper presents research on (a) the challenges students face when starting their university studies, (b) the support they need to integrate into academic life better, and (c) the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their engagement and successful integration. The research employed qualitative content analysis of focus group interviews as a tool for mapping out student engagement, allowing for an in-depth understanding of students' experiences and challenges. These methods can be further utilized in future studies to develop tailored interventions and support strategies, ensuring they are responsive to the evolving needs of students within varying academic environments.

The 1st year of university is a difficult period for students, as they must adapt to a new learning environment along with major changes in their personal lives. Students need a variety of support services to help them become involved in their university studies. Thus, student engagement has received much attention in recent decades (Fredricks et al., 2016; Kahu and Nelson, 2018; Krause and Coates, 2008; Kuh, 2003; Picton et al., 2018). Engagement is important because it is a key determinant of student achievement and academic success. Studies carried out in different countries have looked at engagement in different contexts, periods and levels of conceptualization. The research on engagement has grown out of

different theoretical traditions; motivational theories such as self-determination, self-regulation, flow, goal theory, and expectancy-value theories have been used to examine the links between contextual factors, patterns of engagement, adjustment, for school identification, school connectedness, and life course theories. These have all been used to explain the role of involvement in the process of school dropout and dropping out of the education system (Fredricks et al., 2016). So, there are difficulties in comparing research results (Christenson et al., 2012; Fredricks et al., 2016).

The most popular understanding is that engagement has three interrelated dimensions: behavioral, emotional/affective, and cognitive. Different authors define the dimensions of engagement in different ways, but this article uses the definitions suggested by Fredricks (2015). Behavioral engagement is defined as participation, effort, attention, persistence, positive behavior, and the absence of disruptive behavior. Emotional involvement focuses on positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, sciences or school, and a sense of belonging and identification with school or subject areas. Cognitive engagement is defined as self-regulated learning, the use of deep learning strategies, and the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas. Additionally, this study draws on Kahu and Nelson (2018) sociocultural theoretical model of student engagement, which illustrates a complex set of institutional and student variables that drive student engagement and are influenced by the broader sociocultural context. The educational context is conceptualized as “the psychosocial space in which individual students experience their learning.” In addition, the scholars propose four modes of engagement: self-efficacy, emotion, belonging, and wellbeing. Thus, this study combines the previous theoretical perspective (Christenson et al., 2012) with student experience data to better understand student engagement and wellbeing, along with the support they need during enrolment at university. The researchers (Kahu and Nelson, 2018, p. 64) also emphasize that individual student experiences vary depending on a variety of institutional and student factors and the broader social and cultural context (Picton et al., 2018). Students who have graduated from different upper secondary schools, as well as from different countries, may face different problems when entering university and have different levels of engagement.

While student engagement in academic life influenced student success before the COVID-19 pandemic (Picton et al., 2018), the academic environment has become even more important in the face of COVID-19. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, massive changes affected students and teachers as they had to adapt to a new reality (Cicha et al., 2021). The pandemic created an additional burden on students that affected not only their overall engagement in academic life but also their social and personal lives. Challenges related to COVID-19 in university studies require a greater flexibility of teachers and the need to provide more intensive social-emotional, behavioral, and academic support (Minkos and Gelbar, 2020). Therefore, student engagement during studies should be supported in various ways, including, for example, course programs that constructively combine student learning goals, engaging teaching methods, varied assignments, and diverse assessment methods that benefit student wellbeing and support their learning autonomy (Biggs and Tang, 2011). The start of academic life is a challenge for students, and emotional stress is one of the consequences. In addition, COVID-19 lockdowns moved

studies very quickly to online learning, which increased the stress level and additional challenges for university 1st-year students. Thus, students entering university must be supported to overcome difficulties and challenges.

The paper is organized as follows: Section I provides the introduction; Section II the methodology; Section III the results analysis; Section IV is discussion and conclusions; and Section V provides limitations and methodological reflections.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Research design

This study investigates what challenges students face when starting university and how the pandemic has affected these challenges. The specific research questions are as follows: (1) What challenges and difficulties do university students in the three countries face when starting their university studies? (2) What support do 1st-year students need to effectively start and continue their studies at university and become a successful part of the academic community? (3) What additional challenges did 1st-year students face during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The research design of this study is grounded in the work of the previously mentioned authors, particularly [Fredricks et al. \(2016\)](#), [Kahu and Nelson \(2018\)](#), and [Krause and Coates \(2008\)](#) who have extensively discussed student engagement and performance. Their sociocultural theories provided the foundational framework for analyzing how student performance is influenced by various factors within the academic environment, especially during the challenging circumstances brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study was conducted during the spring of 2021 at three European universities: The University of Stavanger (UiS, Norway), Kaunas University of Technology (KTU, Lithuania) and the University of Iceland (UI, Iceland). All three participated in this project related to the needs of 1st-year students in order to sustain their academic engagement. Although some actions, such as introductory weeks for the 1st-year students were organized in all three institutions to increase the level of student engagement, it was observed through dropout numbers that it was not sufficient enough. Therefore, to address the noted rate of drop-out, a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews was used. Focus group interviews were used to collect data about the students' experience entering university and what challenges 1st-year students faced before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. By using focus group interviews, it was possible to interact with the students and get a broad understanding of the topic in a relatively short period of time. The deductive approach was adopted and the theoretical framework was modified according to the specifics of the participant countries: each partner had a session to identify the specifics and relevant questions to each country and, hence, the university. The results of the sessions were again discussed in all three partner sessions and consequently, the questions for the interviews were developed. The structure allowed for discussion about a research topic that required collective views and the meanings behind those views, including experiences and beliefs.

The groups of students were assembled to discuss their complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes through a moderated interaction ([Nyumba et al., 2018](#)). A strategic sample of two main student groups is included in this study. Firstly, groups of 2nd-year students who started their studies in 2019 before the COVID-19 outbreak were invited to participate in the first round of interviews. Secondly, 1st-year students who started their studies in 2020 during the COVID lockdown were invited to participate in the second round of interviews. Focus group interviews with groups of 1st- and 2nd-year students were performed at each of the three universities. A call was announced with an invitation to participate in the research and the students who expressed interest were invited to the focus group interviews. In total, 17 1st-year (six males and 11 females) and 16 2nd-year students (nine males and seven females) participated in the six interviews. All the students were of a respective nationality, and the ages of the 1st and 2nd-year students had not been identified as the main focus was on the study year. Iceland: 1st year five students (two males, three females), 2nd year three male students; Lithuania: 1st year eight students (two males, six females), 2nd year eight students (four males, four females); Norway: 1st year four students (two males, two females); 2nd year five students (two males, three females). The participant data are identified by the following scheme: IS—Iceland, LT—Lithuania, NO—Norway, year of the student (1st or 2nd), number of the student (1, 2, 3, 4); also, the quotes are enumerated and cited in the text. The invited students represented different schools or faculties (Natural Sciences, Engineering, Informatics, Humanities, Education, Economics and Business, Social Sciences, and Health Sciences) ([Table 1](#)).

All participants gave written informed consent to participate in the study. All the data material was processed according to the research integrity procedures for maintaining information security, and all participants were given pseudonyms to protect anonymity. Each focus group interview was conducted by one moderator and one observer, who was taking notes on the interviewees' reactions and responses. A total of six focus group interviews were performed using a common interview guide, and due to the COVID-19 lockdown, all interviews were performed online in Teams or Zoom. Each interview lasted 60–90 min, and each focus group interview was conducted in the students' mother tongue (Icelandic, Lithuanian, or Norwegian), audio-recorded, and transcribed soon after the interview. Superfluous words such as “eh” and “um,” as well as repetitions that were not seen as reinforcements of ideas or arguments, but rather, occurred as a result of the oral situation, were omitted in the process to enhance the reading experience ([Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009](#)). The responses were translated into English by the interviewers. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions regarding students entering the university which were:

- What difficulties did you experience when you started your studies? (academic issues, study skills, youth culture, campus issues, interests, and digital skills).
- What would you have needed more information about as new students?
- (Writing, reading, responsibilities, study skills/study techniques, transport, campus, activities, surroundings, health

TABLE 1 Demographic profile of participants.

Country	Group	Gender	Departments
Iceland	First-year students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 males • 3 females 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Social Sciences • Health Sciences • Natural Sciences and Engineering
	Second-year students	3 males	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanities • Natural Sciences and Engineering
	Students of foreign origin	2 females	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanities • Natural Sciences and Engineering
Lithuania	First-year students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 males • 6 females 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chemical Technology • Civil Engineering and Architecture • Electrical and Electronics Engineering • Informatics • Mathematics and Natural Sciences • Mechanical Engineering and Design • Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities • School of Economics and Business
	Second-year students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 males • 4 females 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chemical Technology • Civil Engineering and Architecture • Electrical and Electronics Engineering • Informatics • Mathematics and Natural Sciences • Mechanical Engineering and Design • Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities • School of Economics and Business
Norway	First-year students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 males • 2 females 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different faculties
	Second-year students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 males • 3 females 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different faculties

care, psychological, and counseling) services, rights, exams, and dormitories/housing).

- Did you have an introductory course before you started university. If so, what were the most relevant issues or what were the most lacking issues.
- If you could have access to an introductory course before you started as a student, what issues do you think this course should have covered?
- What other skills could be included in the introductory course to help you develop your own?
- What do you think makes your studies successful?

The objectivity, reliability, and validity were assured by the process of the research: the researchers from all three universities conducted the analysis of the results separately and independently

from the findings of each of the other partner countries. The data was generalized and interpreted to ensure the representativeness and validity of it.

2.2 Data analysis

The study is exploratory and qualitative content analysis was used to identify emergent themes and categories in the transcribed texts from each country (Patton, 2002). The focus was on challenges and drivers, the transcribed texts were analyzed and read numerous times, and then, common topics, themes, categories and differences between the three countries were identified. Furthermore, differences between the two groups of students (pre-pandemic and during the pandemic period with imposed lockdowns) were analyzed. The analysis process consisted of the following steps. (1) Transcripts were read and re-read. (2) Thoughts and comments expressed during discussions were identified and grouped according to the themes and subthemes. The main points from each data set were classified and placed under the appropriate category heading. (3) Commonalities and repeated patterns were identified to generate emergent themes. The qualitative methods used to analyze the two data sets served to meet a central aim of the study: to investigate the challenges and drivers faced by 1st-year students and identify what support students need when entering the university. The statements and ideas expressed during focus group discussions were explored thematically according to each country.

3 Results

The research results are classified according to the research questions with identified challenges indicated by the respondents.

3.1 Reliance on informal support and information networks

The majority of Icelandic students who participated in the discussion felt that there was a lack of information or that they received the information from informal channels but not from the administration of the university or relevant departments (26).

Some of the answers reveal (27, 28) that students were not using counseling resources provided by their universities.

Norwegian students emphasized how the students' social networks are an important source of information. They rely on what other students and friends tell them (Table 2).

Even though some students admit that support is actually provided by the university through counseling, administration, and various departments, they claim that they were not aware of that when needed and, thus, sought peer advice and support instead. Therefore, it can be considered as an indication that students are aware of the importance of social and personal engagement through networks to achieve academic success.

TABLE 2 Informal information and social networking channels.

Category	Example
Lack of official information	(26) “A lot of stuff that the university has to offer <...> but maybe you don’t know so much about it” (IS, 1st year student 5).
Information provided on officials channel is not used	(27) “The only thing that I know of, even though I have not used it myself, is guidance and career counseling and the psychologists, but I haven’t used either of those services and this is all I know about” (IS, 1st year student 5).
Social networking with other students	(28) “Having tasks together with others, in the beginning, helps in a way to get to know each other and then [...] better known than when only sitting next to each other, then you get that, that other talk in addition, so you get to know each other” (NO, 2nd year student 4).

Furthermore, the insights gained from our study regarding the importance of providing more comprehensive information before and at the start of studies resonate with the recommendations by Krause and Coates (2008), who advocated for proactive institutional support to facilitate smoother transitions. This suggests that while these challenges are well-documented, the need for timely and targeted interventions remains critical.

3.2 Time planning and organizational skills: the ability to plan and distribute time, prioritize activities, and how to study at university

Some of the students had learned study techniques and time management in high school and took advantage of this, while others lacked this knowledge and had a hard time figuring out how to manage their time and workload (29).

Many respondents mentioned their lack of planning skills (30) and the necessity to have discussions on how to learn them (Table 3).

In their answers, students frequently admit that the obstacle to successful time management might be a lack of responsibility and self-discipline, whereas on the other hand, the answers also imply self-awareness and willingness to change.

3.3 More information and support

Some of the respondents’ answers regarding expected support and information were related to specific issues, such as orientation, printing, etc. Students felt the lack of information about the course on the introduction to the studies, and admitted that there was no awareness of student orientation activities, or information on where to look for some specific information, or information about the infrastructure (31–34).

Some of the students from each of the three countries also indicated that there was a need for basic information about everyday life, such as, where students eat, leisure activities, sports

TABLE 3 Time planning and organizational skills.

Category	Example
Time management skills	(29) “I did not have time planning skills, and I found myself in the situation when all the tasks were left for the last minute and for the same period of time and it was very stressful and even after the tasks were completed the stress for new tasks starts, it’s like a vicious circle” (LT, 2nd year student 6).
Planning skills	(30) “It would have been useful to have some meetings in small groups to discuss how to plan activities, how to study/learn at university we need to learn that” (LT, 1st year student 6).
Organizational skills	(31) “I realize that I struggle a lot with that, reading the course literature, because you have some texts that are, eh, interesting to read and that works fine, but then you sometimes have to read something you are not very interested in, and then I definitely realize that I am dropping out and [...] that is a bit stupid, because it is in a way the things you are less interested in that you most likely do not know, and therefore you should get it” (NO, 1st year student 7).

TABLE 4 Need for more information and support.

Category	Example
Lack information about orientation	(32) “I don’t really recall any orientation. I went to something, but I can’t remember” (IS, 2nd year student 2). (33) “When we get some information in the form of a newsletter, not all students read it, the information should be present in other forms” (LT, 1st year student 6).
Unclear means of disseminating information	(34) “When something happens, you do not have information, where to look for it” (LT, 1st year student 2).
Lack of financial management skills	(35) “When I started living independently, I felt such lack of knowledge in how to manage finances because it is important when you start living by yourself” (LT, 2nd year student 1).

activities, dormitories and the services in them, additional courses for 1st-year students, the ability to manage finances (35), and IT literacy (Table 4).

The answers indicate that students are aware of the importance of self-development and abilities to manage everyday life activities.

3.4 Missing friend or mentor: feeling lonely

The respondents’ answers reveal that successful studies rely not only on information and time management activities, but also on social aspects, communication and, at times, psychological or just the friendly support of someone to rely on personally. The excerpts from the Lithuanian and Norwegian students (36, 37) reveal the aspect of missing friends or mentors during the 1st day at the dormitory (Table 5).

Overall, these results indicate that regarding the specifics of the support students need to effectively start and proceed with their university studies and to become a successful part of the

TABLE 5 Feeling lonely.

Category	Example
Feeling lonely	(36) "I came with my group of friends who came along with me and traveled, and I was left alone when we got dormitory rooms. I had nobody to contact. I was all alone in the dormitory and my friends went to have some dinner or something, I do not know where they went, but I was left alone" (LT, 1st year student 3).
	(37) "It is hard, when the group consists of 200–300 people, to find someone you can work with, so [...] compared to high school when we [...] when I had a class there, the group was very small and it was easier to discuss and it was kind of a low bar regarding discussing with the teacher and stuff like that, so it makes you feel kind of [...] yeah, you become very small in those huge groups" (NO, 2nd year student).

academic community, they identified the expectations they had for more institutional support, emphasizing the importance of informal support thorough individual as well as social networks, which is key to emotional wellbeing. Moreover, time planning and organizational skills were identified as those which 1st-year students should work on in order to be able to integrate into the academic learning environment more effectively. Finally, mentoring support was identified as especially relevant and effective in students' successful engagement into academic life.

The findings of this study align with the challenges identified in previous research, such as those outlined by [Fredricks et al. \(2016\)](#), [Kahu and Nelson \(2018\)](#), and [Krause and Coates \(2008\)](#), which emphasize the multifaceted difficulties students face when transitioning to university life. These studies similarly noted issues related to adapting to academic demands, forming social connections, and managing personal wellbeing, all of which were echoed in our research.

Notable divergence from the literature is that while our students acknowledged the importance of these factors for their wellbeing, they did not always correlate them directly with academic success or express a strong demand for institutional support. This contrasts with the findings of [Korhonen et al. \(2019\)](#), who emphasized the importance of teacher-student collaboration in fostering student engagement. This suggests that there may be a gap between student perceptions and the actual benefits of institutional support, highlighting a potential area for further exploration.

3.5 The challenges students faced during the pandemic

The 1st- and 2nd-year student groups in all three countries were different in their attitudes to the academic environment, university and student life. The 1st-year students who started studies during the COVID-19 lockdown were more frustrated and criticized the university for lack of information, and the lecturers for only talking about their scientific work. They were also frustrated about the pandemic. Some of the common issues mentioned by the respondents (38) were the lack of information about the students who are in your group, in the same modules etc.

TABLE 6 Challenges related to COVID-19.

Category	Example
Information overload	(38) "I did not know who was in my group. maybe it's because of the distant learning" (LT, 1st year student 2). (39) "It was difficult to understand how AIS and Moodle work" (LT, 1st year student 8). (40) "I had many problems understanding AIS and Moodle" (LT, 1st year student 7).
	(41) "You get a lot of emails in the university, I think from all sorts of career and guidance counselors, and I just think it's horribly much, especially in COVID-19" (IS, 2nd year student 1). (42) "With online studying I feel like I interact more with the professors than my fellow students" (IS, 2nd year student 3). (43) "It used to be a lot of info. Yes. There was a lot when I started last year and yes, almost weekly I think, something was happening" (IS, 2nd year student 7).
Lack of socialization	(44) "I think it went well, but in addition, it could have gone so much better if it would not have been COVID-19 and we had to sit at home using Zoom and things like that, because (...) I lost a lot of motivation to do that. It often does not work in Zoom, and it is also difficult to follow, so you do not get what is being said and then you lose all motivation and then you end up not listening and then everything goes in and right out again, so you get very little" (NO, 1st year student 6). (45) "Since the start of the pandemic the real issue for me has been online lessons. The fact that it is very hard to follow up, because for me at least from my perspective it is complicated to follow up classes through a computer with web-camera and so on. It is hard from that perspective" (LT, 2nd year student 4).

and the online environment: incomplete information, differently presented learning material, and email (39, 40).

Negative features mentioned, specifically related to the pandemic were: the flood of emails at the beginning of the year (41, 42), information overflow (43), little to no awareness of student orientation activities, and no options for socializing after classes (44, 45) (Table 6).

Students also mentioned (45) issues like, reliance on informal support and information networks, increase in lack of motivation, individual study process, lack of academic engagement, and difficulties studying online. Research results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7 provides a summary of the key challenges and experiences reported by students when entering university. The information is organized by the main themes identified in the study. By tabulating these results, the table reports on how specific factors such as self-efficacy, social relationships, and institutional support play a role in student engagement.

The focus group interviews revealed both general and country-specific challenge areas in which 1st-year students need support for better integration into a new academic environment, better engagement, and better overall wellbeing. It can be concluded that the online academic environment was not easily accepted by the students and was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning in all three countries. It was complicated

TABLE 7 Challenges identified during the research.

Informal support and information networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lack of information (IS) • Rely on social networks (NO) • Peer advice and support (all)
Missing friend or mentor: feeling lonely	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missing friends or mentors during (LT, NO)
Time planning and organizational skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to plan and distribute time (LT) • Lack time and workload management skills (LT) • Planning skills (NO) • Study skills (LT, NO)
Information and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lack of introductory information (IS) • A need for different information dissemination channels (LT) • A lack information about everyday life (all)
The challenges during the pandemic study skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lack of information (LT) • Technological skills (LT) • Information overflow (IS) • A loss of motivation (NO) • A lack if academic engagement (LT)

and depersonalized because of the lack of in-person contact, the opportunities to socialize, and the ability to have strong social and personal networks.

The physical barriers which were created during the pandemic made contact with teachers and peers inaccessible, and in-person studies impossible. This in turn made it more complicated to engage in the process of studies and academic life.

Challenges which could have been solved during in-person studies in pre-pandemic situations could not be so easily solved when studying online during the pandemic.

Consequently, the level of engagement of students who started their studies during the pandemic was challenged even more.

4 Discussion and conclusions

The findings indicated the range of challenges students face when starting university which are consistent with previous research (Fredricks et al., 2016; Kahu and Nelson, 2018; Krause and Coates, 2008). Moreover, the results of the research provided some new insights into the actions that higher education institutions could take to ensure a smoother and more successful transition to university life, such as providing more information before the studies start or during the beginning of the studies, which is in line with the findings of previous research (Krause and Coates, 2008). The results of this research as well as the results of research by Kahu and Nelson (2018) indicate that challenges may be due to reduced self-efficacy (Soria and Stubblefield, 2014), a lack of belonging, negative emotions, decreased wellbeing and increased stress. These challenges include practical issues, such as housing, socialization, and time management (Soria and Stubblefield, 2014). Kahu and Nelson (2018) and Picton and Kahu (2022) claim that student experience of the educational interface is influenced as much by the student as it is by the institution, and that student engagement is influenced by the interactions between student factors and institutional factors, as well as the close collaboration between teachers and students (Korhonen et al., 2019). While students recognize the relevance of these aspects to their overall wellbeing, they do not necessarily associate them directly with

academic success or express a need for support from the university. In terms of support, the importance of teachers' efforts to engage and motivate students, as well as presenting learning materials effectively, have been identified as important factors contributing to students' success. The results of this research are in line with the claims by Kahu and Nelson (2018), who indicate that the responsibility for student experience with the educational interface lies with multiple stakeholders. However, the student, as an active participant in their own learning, has a central role to play. Proper time management, including opportunities for social interactions and engagement with the university community, were considered important for student success. These findings correspond with the results of the research by Xerri et al. (2018). This research indicates that effective teacher-student relationships encouraging positive student-student relationships and communicating a clear sense of purpose to students, positively influence student engagement in academic activities, and reduce the feeling of alienation while creating the feelings of belonging (Korhonen et al., 2019). Effective communication, both in terms of accessing relevant information sources and utilizing different communication channels, was identified as a valuable skill for students. Students from different countries face different problems. In order to reduce their stress as well as the risk of dropping out of university, efforts should be made to support them and help them adapt in various areas related to their studies and social life. It is equally important to discover not only the most effective ways of engaging students in academic and social life but also the ways that encourage overcoming difficulties in their personal life.

The study also provides some insights into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on 1st-year students. The pandemic has created additional challenges that affect students' academic and social engagement, as well as their personal lives. Students who are navigating a transition to university life have been saddled with the additional burdens and disruptions caused by the pandemic, which further affect their integration and overall wellbeing. The results of this study contribute to a better understanding of the challenges university 1st-year students face and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their academic journeys. By recognizing these challenges and responding to student support needs, universities can create an environment that fosters student engagement, student wellbeing and overall student success. Moreover, the results of this research confirm the findings by Minkos and Gelbar (2020) that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic vary depending on the environment. Therefore, educators need to continue to demonstrate flexibility, adaptation, and dedication to their student wellbeing after universities reopened while also coping with their own personal stress issues. Therefore, it can be claimed that students need a variety of targeted and/or intensive support services to address their increased social, emotional, and academic needs.

5 Limitations and methodological reflections

While this study provides valuable insight into the challenges students face entering university and the impact of the pandemic on their experiences, more research is needed. During the focus group

discussions, students talked about practical issues concerning student life, such as housing, social life, how to find new friends, and how to find activities and organizations they can join. They connect this to how they manage their life, but they do not necessarily connect it to their success as students and what support they need from different stakeholders. Further research might include questions related to academic preparedness, institutional preparedness, and student preparedness.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human participants following the local legislation and institutional requirements. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

SP: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SJ: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. GT: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. EE: Conceptualization, Investigation,

Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RS: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RD: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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