

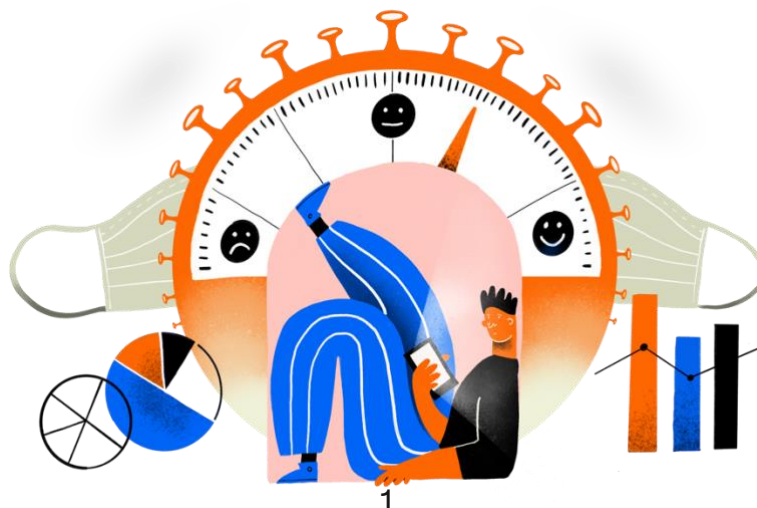
REPORT 8

Student life is the time of your life! Even during corona?

The Motivation Barometer

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Reference: Motivation Barometer (May 14, 2020). Student life is the time of your life! Even during corona? Ghent, Belgium.



Over the past few days, a lot of messages from concerned students about the well-being of their fellow students arose. This corona crisis weighs heavily and, as exams approach, agitation and panic prevail. Based on the ongoing Motivation Barometer study, researchers at Ghent University argue that these anecdotal messages are not unexpectedly. The results show that students in higher education are vulnerable to reduced well-being. Consequently, they are encouraging teachers to provide a needs-based learning environment, which fosters student well-being and study motivation.

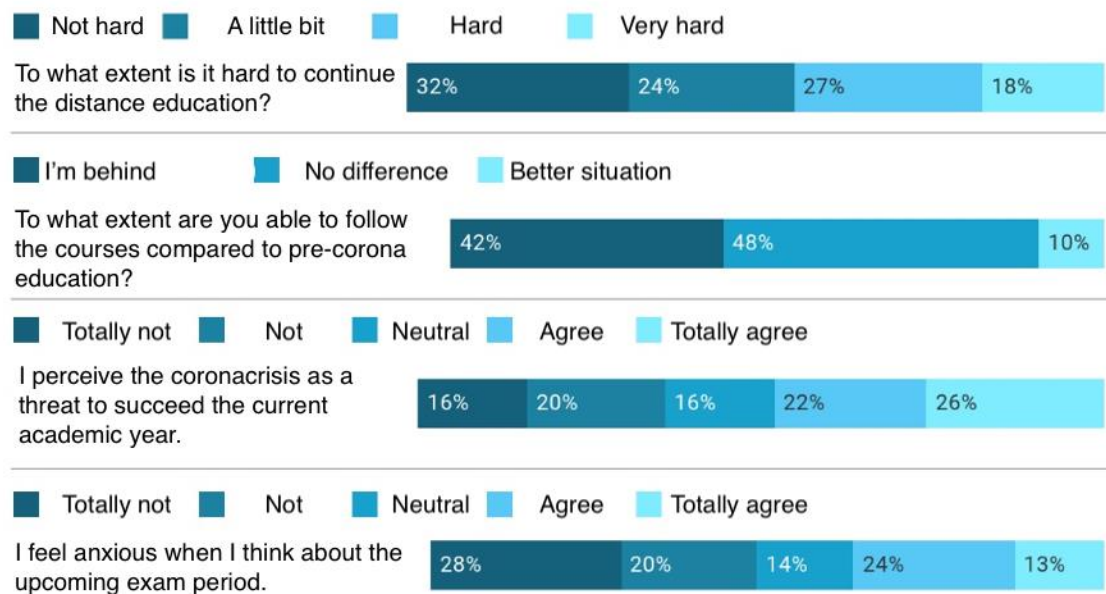
Between April 24 and May 6, as part of the Motivation Barometer, a survey was conducted among seniors, parents, teleworkers and students. 211 higher education students (83% female) of different educational institutions, study programs and provinces, were asked about their well-being and their experience of studying during the COVID-19 crisis. Although the size of this group is limited, the results help to put media coverage on the fate of students into a scientific perspective.

Students rightly raised the alarm

The data from this study show that higher education teachers and students are right to be concerned about the well-being of their peers. Although there are large differences in the resilience of higher education students, on average, students experienced more anxious and depressive symptoms than telecommuters, seniors, and parents in our study. Moreover, 1 in 5 students said they experienced depressive feelings for more than half of the week while 1 in 2 students felt anxious for more than half of the week.

We also surveyed the study experiences of higher education students (see Figure 1). During this corona crisis, 68% of students find it somewhat to very difficult to persevere in distance learning. 42% of the students indicate that they are less on track compared to before the corona crisis and almost half of the students (48%) consider the corona crisis as a threat to the successful completion of their academic year. Moreover, 37% of students report feeling restless or even panicky when thinking about the upcoming exam or study period. Next, the data shows that students who do not feel good about themselves put more pressure on themselves when studying, and risk becoming completely demotivated for their studies. They explicitly question why they should still be committed to their studies when they feel that they are wasting their time in their educational track.

Figure 1. Summary of results on study experiences.



Basic psychological needs as drivers of well-being and motivation

Several students reported in the media that they are overwhelmed by the many self-study tasks. They are constantly functioning in 'exam mode'. Due to the abundance of information, they risk losing the overview. At the same time, they have similar concerns like everyone else because of the corona measures. According to some students, the communication with their teacher is difficult and the expectations are often unclear. From a psychology perspective, we say that, under these circumstances, the basic psychological needs of these students are unsatisfied, or perhaps even roughly frustrated.

We distinguish three basic psychological needs that provide energy for our mental well-being and that give oxygen to our motivation. First, there is the need for autonomy. When this need is satisfied, students experience a certain freedom and choice. They can make their own decisions and stand firmly behind what they are doing at that time. Although distance learning seems to offer students the opportunity to be more independent in their teaching and study time, an overload of tasks and assignments just causes their autonomy to be frustrated. Especially with a lack of participation, students may feel like they have to rush from one mandatory chore to the next and may experience distance learning as extremely smothering. Second, there is the need for belongingness. When satisfied, students experience warm and supportive contact with others, both with their peers and with the instructors. When this need is frustrated, students feel alone and isolated. The isolation and lack of opportunities to physically get together with fellow students and instructors fosters such belongingness frustration. Finally, there is the need for

competence. When satisfied, students feel capable of meeting school challenges and feel competent to achieve their preconceived goals. In contrast, when this need is frustrated, students experience a sense of failure. The risk of competence frustration increases if it is unclear what study material is to be known, if students feel that the bar is set as high as it was in regular times, and when the volume of tasks and learning is overwhelming. You can easily remember these three needs by ABC, where the A stands for Autonomy, the B stands for Belongingness, and the C stands for Competence.

This ABC of the student is important because plenty of research has shown that students whose ABCs are satisfied, feel better about themselves and are more committed to their studies^{1,2,3}. The results of the current study also indicate that need satisfaction nurtures mental health and resilience in students. Students with low ABC levels report more depressive and anxious symptoms and experience this corona crisis as an obstacle to successfully complete the academic year. In addition, these students exhibit more fear of failure and procrastination and are less motivated to engage in their studies.

The ABC of students

But which of these three basic needs is currently, during the corona crisis, under the most pressure? Figure 2 provides an overview of the extent to which these three needs are either satisfied or frustrated for students in higher education. In the case of relatedness, both warm contact with peers and teachers was mapped. Three interesting observations stand out here.

Figure 2. The ABC of students.

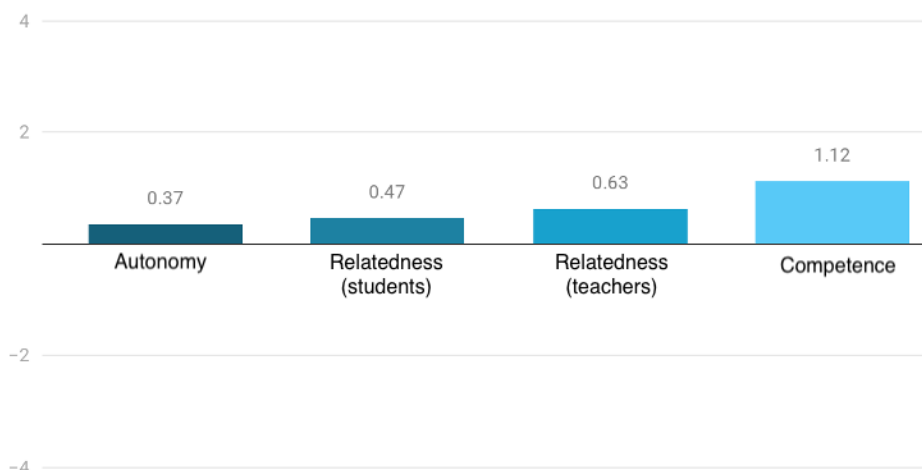
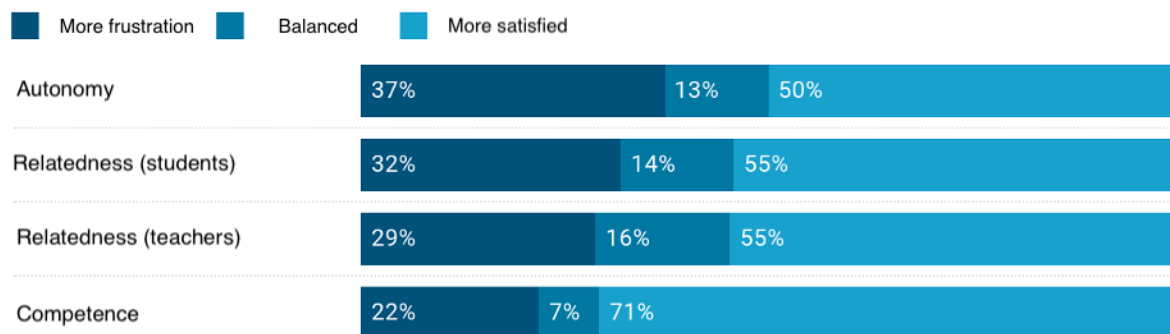


Figure 3. Need frustration among students.



First, it appears that competence is the most fulfilled psychological need, followed by relatedness. Autonomy comes in last place. Second, it stands out that relatedness with instructors is higher than relatedness with fellow students. Third, it still appears that a significant proportion of students feel that their basic needs are being actively frustrated. Figure 3 shows that this is still somewhat subdued in the case of the need for competence, with 1 in 5 students (22%) feeling actively frustrated in this need. In terms of relatedness, nearly 1 in 3 students (32% and 29%) appear to feel frustrated in their relatedness to fellow students and teachers, respectively. Nearly 4 in 10 students (37%) indicate that their need for autonomy is more frustrated than satisfied.

We also see that students in higher education experience relatively little relatedness. There seems to be a particular lack of contact with fellow students, possibly because the physical contact with fellow students when spending time together in class was replaced by purely digital contact, a formula that seems to be suboptimal over time.

Create a needs-based learning environment

While the data show that students' ABCs can be improved, we also see large differences between students in their levels of need satisfaction and well-being. There are students who get through this period more resiliently, which indicates that students are by no means a homogeneous group. Still, overall, the data indicates that quite a few students are in a vulnerable position. Support of the ABC by teachers is therefore desirable to guide them through this period. In the table below we formulate some recommendations:

Autonomy

- Make room for dialogue with students and listen to their opinions or suggestions. Students who bring suggestions demonstrate a constructive commitment. By being open to and encouraging suggestions, you can more quickly develop solutions to problems that arise.
- Show recognition that it is a difficult time for students. Try to include their perspective when you are shaping lessons or assignments and show understanding when students express negativity or resistance.
- Try to respond to the world in which students currently find themselves. By linking the subject matter or competencies of the course to their interests, current events or the corona crisis that is present, you immediately demonstrate the added value of the course and the subject matter.
- Offer students the opportunity to submit tasks at a later date and provide multiple submission dates, for example. This flexible setup takes the workload down a bit and creates oxygen for students.

Relatedness

- Show commitment to students and try to be available. Quite a few students feel inhibited to contact you digitally. The lower the barriers, the easier it is for them to contact you when something is unclear. Therefore, make it clear to students when and in what way they can contact you in case of difficulties.
- Try to reduce the distance between you and your students. This can be done in various ways, for example by opening up an online forum in a course (for large groups of students) or by organizing video chat sessions with smaller groups of students. Also ask for their experiences and interests.
- Dare to be vulnerable. If you tell yourself that you sometimes have a hard time and how you deal with it, students can mirror this. If we show ourselves to be big and strong, then students feel that they should do the same.

Competency

- Be transparent about what you expect from students and communicate clearly and unambiguously. If certain things are not yet established, give students perspective and make it clear when you will communicate about them.
- Try to think about which learning goals or final competencies students must necessarily achieve and which are rather optional. Be transparent to students and share the results of this thinking exercise with them. In doing so, explain why you think it is important for them to master certain end competencies. In this way, the relevance of the learning material becomes immediately clear and students have a clear goal in mind.
- Especially during this period, provide plenty of sample exam questions or even sample exams. Students are asking for these more than ever, as it gives them guidance on the level and type of understanding required for a subject.
- Express confidence in students' abilities and convey the message that given the difficult circumstances, they can only do their best. A supportive message through the learning platform can increase courage for students.
- Students report that they are overwhelmed by the many self-study tasks and online learning paths. Not all students feel competent to complete these independently. Therefore, consider whether students need additional help and guidance and provide additional instructions if needed.

Teachers need students too

In making these recommendations, we would like to note two final things. Teachers also need the students. These are unprecedented circumstances for teachers as well and they, too, are sometimes at a loss as to how to most efficiently teach their material. In addition, the lack of physical meetings means they are less aware of what is going on. Clear feedback from the students, a proactive attitude and constructive negotiation, especially when it is supported by a larger group of students, is appreciated by most teachers. They can work with this to better respond to the needs of students.

For this coordination between teachers and students to work well, coordination at the level of departments and faculties proves very useful. By scheduling consultations at fixed times between student representatives, deans, education directors and ombudsmen, isolated problems (e.g., individual courses) and structural problems (e.g., ICT problems) can be identified and remedied. This creates a broader consultative climate in which students and teachers can meet each other. In contrast, media opinions that pit teachers and students against each other can be unnecessarily polarizing and counterproductive. Neither the teachers nor the students are homogeneous groups. What is certain is that in these times they need each other more than ever.

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