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Understanding the Academic and Social Integration Process of Students Entering Higher Education: Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Sara De Bruyn *,† **and Nina Van Eekert** †

Department of Sociology, University of Antwerp, 2000 Antwerpen, Belgium
* Correspondence: sara.debruyn@uantwerpen.be
† These authors contributed equally to this work.

Abstract: Background: The COVID-19 pandemic caused disruptions in numerous fields, including higher education. *New* students have been identified as a vulnerable sub-population experiencing stress and mental health problems due to the pandemic. Little research, however, explores *how* and *why* they are particularly vulnerable. We aimed to answer (1) how new students experienced their academic and social integration process during the pandemic and (2) how these changing conditions might affect their mental well-being. Methods: The researchers performed five focus group discussions with 23 new students (i.e., first-year students, international students, and students from a bridging program) from several faculties. Focus groups were coded and analyzed by two researchers. An abductive analytical perspective was used, building on the integration and emerging adulthood literature. Results: Three main processes were identified: (1) academic and social integration, formerly intertwined, have become two separate goals; (2) integration increasingly became the students' responsibility; and (3) COVID-19 measures and emerging adulthood expectations clashed: increasing social connection, exploration, and carefree living were replaced by, respectively, social isolation, lingering monotony, and increasing worries. Conclusion: COVID-19 measures presented students with a dichotomy in which they were pushed faster into adulthood by taking up increasing responsibilities and at the same time remained socially stuck in adolescence by not living up to emerging adulthood expectations.

Keywords: students; integration process; well-being; COVID-19; qualitative research

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1. Introduction

1.1. New Students as a Vulnerable Sub-Population: Insights from the Integration and Emerging Adulthood Literature

Higher education (HE) students in general have been identified as a vulnerable population for developing stress and mental health problems (Auerbach et al. 2016; Sharp and Theiler 2018). More specifically, especially the *transition* to HE is recognized as being challenging for new students, as they face changes both on an academic and a social level (Conley et al. 2020; Sharp and Theiler 2018; Tholen et al. 2022). Academically, these students have to adapt to a new learning environment and the academic demands of college (Willems et al. 2021). Socially, they gradually become more independent from parents, detach from former social roles, and develop new social networks (Preetz et al. 2021; Wilcox et al. 2005). As a result, new students might be especially vulnerable to mental health problems (Wyatt et al. 2017). Successful integration into both spheres has been related to important student outcomes, such as increasing student well-being and academic success, while struggling to integrate might lead to isolation or student attrition (Bronkema and Bowman 2019; Buote et al. 2007; Tinto 1975; van der Zanden et al. 2018).

Besides the academic and social integration challenges of new students, the transition to university also initiates an important developmental life stage for many students.

Defined as 'emerging adulthood' (EA), Arnett (2000) describes the age range of 18–29 as 'the most volitional years of life', characterized by 5 main criteria: exploring identity, entertaining possibilities, living with instability, engaging in self-focus, and feeling in-between (Arnett 2015; Arnett et al. 2014). EA is generally considered to be the life stage of possibilities in which individuals hold greater autonomy. However, at the same time, it is also a time of worry about the future (Germani et al. 2020). Although the concept of EA has received much attention and popularity within academic circles, it has also received a fair amount of criticism. For example, the 'free choice' assumptions of the EA theory have been questioned, considering the structural, social, and economic obstacles many young adults face (Côté 2014; Germani et al. 2020; Schwartz 2016).

1.2. New Students and the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the past few years, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the conditions in which university students live and study. Worldwide, measures have been taken in order to limit the transmission of the virus, and this includes HE. On an academic level, many classes that normally took place on campus were transformed into online classes, internships were (partially) cancelled, and exam and evaluation forms may have been changed. In addition, on a social level, social distancing measures impacted interpersonal relationships between students, leading to lower levels of social interaction and higher levels of loneliness (Son et al. 2020). The social integration process was challenged, as most social student activities were cancelled, and many students continued/moved back to living in their parental homes instead of on campus (Fry et al. 2020).

These changing social and academic conditions during the pandemic might particularly affect *new* students. These include first-year students but also students in a bridging program who transfer from one study field to another, as well as international students, who start studying at a new institution in a new country. Most universities usually organize social activities such as orientation weeks or welcome days to help new students get settled into university life and meet fellow students. These activities, however, were either cancelled or transformed into an online environment, denying face-to-face contact (Resch et al. 2022). Nonetheless, these first experiences at a new HE institution are vital, as students' experiences within their first year at university will likely impact their integration process in subsequent years (Fergy et al. 2011; Swail 2004).

Several studies have shown that students' pre-pandemic vulnerability to stress and mental health difficulties continued during the pandemic (Daly et al. 2020; Hekmat et al. 2021; Preetz et al. 2021). Farris et al. (2021) differentiate between primary COVID-19-related stressors (i.e., stressors related to the virus itself) and secondary stressors (i.e., stressors related to virus control measures). These secondary stressors in particular have been related more strongly to poorer mental health (Van de Velde et al. 2021b). These include, among other things, social isolation and loneliness, difficulties adjusting to online learning, and financial stressors (Farris et al. 2021; Son et al. 2020; Van de Velde et al. 2021b). Moreover, research has shown that first-year students were more affected by the pandemic, as they experienced higher rates of depressive symptoms than other groups of students (Van de Velde et al. 2021b).

Despite increasing research on students' stressors during COVID-19, these stressors are rarely discussed in detail, specifically with respect to how and why they cluster within certain subgroups of students, i.e., new students, and how they clash with specific needs in this life stage. The current exploratory study aims to fill this gap and answer the following two research questions. (1) How did students entering HE during the COVID-19 pandemic experience their academic and social integration process? (2) How did these changing academic and social conditions affect students' mental well-being? In addressing these questions, we apply the lens of academic and social integration literature as well as emerging adulthood theory. The knowledge from this study could help to (1) mitigate the long-term consequences of the pandemic (measures) for this vulnerable student group and

(2) provide insights into the academic and social conditions necessary for new HE students in general.

2. Methodology

2.1. Sampling Strategy and Participants

The current research is part of a larger research project aiming to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' well-being. The larger research project consists of a quantitative part (i.e., the International Student Well-Being Study (ISWS) (Van de Velde et al. 2021a)) and a qualitative part, consisting of focus group discussions with potentially vulnerable subgroups of students in terms of mental well-being.

Based on an extensive literature search, the results of the Belgian sample of the ISWS, as well as preparatory FGDs with the university's student-centered staff (Van Eekert and Van Looy 2021), several potentially vulnerable student populations were identified: (1) first-year students, (2) international students, (3) students in a bridging program, (4) students with a migration background, (5) students with a vulnerable socio-economic status, and (6) students with a learning disability. The current study focuses on *new* students entering higher education during the pandemic, including first-year students, international students and students in a bridging program. A key factor was that these groups all entered a new university/faculty during the pandemic and thus needed to adapt to a new environment, both socially and academically.

Using purposive sampling we specifically targeted these first-year students, international students, and students in a bridging program to participate as respondents in our research. Respondents were recruited through e-mail and the university's intranet and were rewarded with a gift voucher of EUR 10. In total, 5 focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized with these subgroups, more specifically, one with exclusively first-year students, one with exclusively students in a bridging program, one with exclusively international students, and two including both first-year students and students in a bridging program.

In total, 23 students from several faculties participated in the FGDs. All students were studying at a Belgian university located in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (Flanders). The sample included 17 female and 6 male students, 14 first-year students, 2 international students, and 7 students in a bridging program. The majority of the students' (n: 19) ages ranged from 18 to 23 years, with 4 outliers, respectively, aged 30, 31, 32, and 42 years old. Participants' names were pseudonymized prior to data analyses. The research project obtained ethical clearance from the university's Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities (reference number: SHW_21_19).

2.2. Data Collection and Analyses

The FGDs were organized in April 2021, during the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, outside gatherings were restricted to a maximum of 4 people (10 people at the end of April), indoor gatherings were restricted to one additional person besides household members, and students were only allowed to go to campus for a maximum of one day/week while wearing face masks and following social distancing measures. During March and April, there was also a curfew introduced from 12 p.m. to 5 a.m. (Federal Public Health Services 2021).

FGDs were organized online and were recorded. All students gave their informed consent before the start of the FGDs. All FGDs were moderated by two interviewers, i.e., one main moderator who led all the focus groups and one observer supporting the moderator. Four major themes were covered: (1) the impact of COVID-19 and its related measures on the academic context; (2) its impact on the social context; (3) how these evolutions impacted students' well-being; and (4) the public image of students and how they felt supported by their university. Next, all FGDs were transcribed verbatim, coded, and analyzed using Nvivo 12. Data coding and analyses were performed in two rounds by two researchers, augmenting intercoder reliability. Firstly, one of the authors thematically coded and analyzed all FGDs. After the first round of coding/analyses, we also did member

checking in which we provided the opportunity to the respondents to give feedback on the written report as well as on the presentation of the results on a study day. Secondly, the other author additionally coded and analyzed the FGDs using an abductive analytical perspective (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). This perspective uses similar coding steps as in grounded theory (i.e., open, axial, and selective coding) and similarly analyzes data with an open mind without a pre-identified coding structure. In addition, coding occurs against the background of relevant (sociological) theories. The aim of the abductive perspective is not to verify or disprove particular theories, but rather to build on them as sensitizing notions when analyzing empirical data (Blumer 1954). In line with the methodological prescription of abductive analysis, theoretical memos were created throughout the research process, and codes were constantly compared with the initial data (Charmaz 2012).

3. Results

3.1. Gap between Academic and Social Integration

The literature on the students' integration process often differentiates between academic integration on the one hand and social integration on the other. Tinto's (1975) integration theory, for example, explains how students need to integrate into the academic (e.g., intellectual development) as well as the social system (e.g., peer group interactions) of college in order to maximize college success and avoid dropout. Interestingly, before COVID-19, these two forms of integration were often intertwined, as certain activities can simultaneously foster both academic and social integration (Museus 2014). Students in our research, however, noted that COVID-19 measures caused a separation in this normally intertwining character of their integration process. Due to social distancing measures, when people switched to online learning, social aspects of the HE experience largely diminished, and classes became primarily academically focused. Although drastic changes were made on an academic level, i.e., the switch to (mainly) online education, it was the social changes that students found especially challenging. This gap between academic and social integration has been reported on several levels: within student-to-student connections, within student-to-professor connections, as well as within the broader university environment.

3.1.1. Integration Gap within Student-to-Student Connections

Students report how social distancing measures limit a connection with fellow students beyond the academic aspect. Students describe a gap between the formal/academic aspects and the informal/social aspects of student life.

> "My social life before COVID and now is completely different. It's a completely different way of connecting with people and I really miss that. Also, for example, those group works remain very formal. Normally you get a coffee after a group work. Or if the weather is good, you go to a café together. And then you also have that informal aspect. And now it is just talking about what you have to do and you end the conversation". (Niki, student from a bridging program, female, 21 years old)

Moreover, social integration goes beyond the *verbal* aspect. Connecting with other students also occurs *non-verbally*. For example, students report a form of social control in which other students make you 'have' to pay attention when you are in class.

> "When I look at a screen, even though I try really hard, sometimes my mind does wander. And when you're sitting there [on campus], there is more social pressure to be fully present. So, I do have the impression that I participate much more actively than at home". (Jorik, first-year student, male, age unknown)

3.1.2. Integration Gap within Student-to-Professor Connections

Social integration is not only about connecting with fellow students, but also about contact with the educational institution/professors/staff. In this respect, students report a disconnection between the academic and social integration fuelled by little interaction with

their professors. This limited interaction is bidirectional. Firstly, from student to professor: online education or a face mask in real-life education often form a barrier preventing students from connecting with the professor, for example, in asking questions or actively participating. It creates a distance from the professor.

> "I think I learn the most from someone telling me something and then taking it in, in physical proximity. And then possibly get into a discussion about it. In lecture theatres for first year courses that is sometimes difficult, because you sit there with a lot of people. But I do think that, this mix of online and offline in a way somewhat limits the motivation. The contact with the professor, to be able to ask questions, via chat is so impersonal. And in real life now it's with face masks, that's not very inviting either. But I do miss that. I think it does affect the results a little bit". (Walter, first-year student, male, age unknown)

Secondly, the interaction is also limited from professor to student: some students notice a big difference in interaction style between professors.

> "Sometimes you get lost in lectures and the professor just keep talking, talking. And after about 45 minutes: "any questions?" Then by the time it's like counting five seconds "no, no, no okay, I continue to the next slide". They're waiting for you not to ask a question. They don't even give you the room to talk or anything. That was quite difficult also". (Martha, international student, female, 31 years old)

3.1.3. Integration Gap within the Broader University Environment/Student Life

Students were not, or only to a limited extent, allowed to come to campus, and if they did go to campus, it was only allowed for academic purposes, as students could not continue social contact outside of class. During the pandemic, students indicated that the university only acted as an academic setting and not as a social setting.

> "After the exams there were often a few of us standing around talking to four people or so, which was actually allowed, but then it was immediately like, "You have to go home". I can understand that they want to be very careful and follow the rules, especially because for the rest they put so much effort into trying to do it all so well. But it is a little bit weird to have to leave immediately and not be allowed to talk". (Jorik, first year student, male, age unknown)

Moreover, this integration gap did not only appear within the physical setting of the university, but also with respect to the extent to which students perceive themselves as being students. Although some students indicated that the act of studying and attending classes is sufficient to feel like a student, plenty of students state that the feeling of being a student transcends the academic part of college life. They lack the social connections vital to their college experience, and it was especially the loss of this social connectedness that was challenging for most students. One student indicated that he only realized after the exams that he was not alone in the class.

> "The exams were organized live and it is one of the first moments where you see wow there are so many of us. And you do feel somewhat united. I liked that, that it wasn't held online. It gave me a lot of courage in a way". (Walter, first-year student, male, age unknown)

3.2. Integration as an Increasing Individual Responsibility

Compared to adolescence, the life phase of EA is characterized by increasing autonomy, in which young adults have a high degree of responsibility to decide on aspects of studies, work, living arrangements, relationships, etc. (Arnett 2015). This increasing agency generally goes hand in hand with decreasing institutional and family support (Wood et al. 2018). While the transition to HE always requires a (higher) degree of individual autonomy, it appears to have increased during COVID-19. Both academic and social integration have, to a large extent, become the individual responsibility of the student.

3.2.1. Academic Integration as an Individual Responsibility

Academically, several new students felt they were on their own in taking their first steps within the university context. Students reported less instrumental support (e.g., with respect to online registration) as well as being more on their own for several academic processes (e.g., independently processing study material, self-organization and planning, and pushing themselves to work for school).

> "I found it very difficult, for example, to go and look for the material myself everywhere. The professors put everything on the university's online platform and they expect you to find it all and to know when to process it. But if you've never had that class before, you don't know that at all". (Niki, student in bridging program, female, 21 years old)

Moreover, this academic integration process was even more difficult, as COVID-19 had caused some students to study less or not have final exams in their last year of secondary school, making the first exam period at university extra challenging.

3.2.2. Social Integration as an Individual Responsibility

Although social integration is a source of stress for some students in general, as students can find it difficult to make new friends and can experience loneliness (Buote et al. 2007), COVID-19 has possibly increased this distress. Social integration before COVID-19 was a shared responsibility between the university, student organizations, the students themselves, etc., as students met peers during academic activities, introduction days, parties, and in class. During COVID-19, however, the individual's own responsibility to build a social network increased. Students indicated that they now needed to actively start talking to someone, which was not always considered easy during COVID-19. Several barriers hindered students from actively building a social network at university, including the lack of onsite classes, physical distancing measures (face mask and 1.5-meter distance rule), studying in a large faculty with a lot of students, doubting other students' reactions, having the perception that others are already part of a group, and also the fact that some students focused more on conserving older friendships instead of exploring new ones at university. Although the university or student organizations still organized (online) social activities, students often indicate not attending online gatherings, mainly due to the perception that other people already know each other, that it is less personal, communication is more difficult, that it is too forced, or that they were simply tired of online meetings. Even if they managed to meet someone, they indicated it was more difficult to maintain these beginning friendships in online times.

> "I had a very active social life, but now I hardly see anyone anymore. So, I'm really falling into a dark space, so to speak. I really only know one fellow student. In the beginning I knew more, but because you see each other so little, those contacts diminish, you can't maintain that. So yes, really a pity". (Signe, first-year student, female, 19 years old)

Moreover, governmental measures to limit COVID-19 transmission heavily impacted their social integration process, and students often felt forgotten in their unique position as students. 'I think we are the most social generation', one student said. Nonetheless, they were treated similarly to adults, although they compare themselves more to young people with respect to following measures.

> "We are clearly not a priority I suppose. Most of the time it has been code red [i.e., closure of campus and courses are online], but that is so contradictory to what you do in high/middle school or elementary school. There they can eat all together in the refectory, that is only now being discussed, but apparently that has been happening for a year. But we are not allowed to sit with, let's say, thirty people in a large auditorium with a rotation system. I sometimes find that a bit contradictory". (Charlotte, student in bridging program, female, 21 years old)

3.3. Clash between COVID-19 Measures and Emerging Adulthood Expectations/Needs

New students often have certain expectations with regard to university and the new life phase they are about to enter. However, COVID-19 measures hindered these expectations and are even often perceived as being in striking contrast with the values and needs of this EA life phase. As explained by Frost and LeBlanc (2014, p. 2), non-events, i.e., "anticipated events or experiences that do not come to pass, can become chronic stressors that potentially have deleterious effects on mental health." This concept of non-events is particularly interesting in understanding stressors among students during the pandemic, as students in our research highlight anticipating aspects of student life that did not occur in real life, causing them stress. To be specific, students reported three clashes between COVID-19 measures and their EA expectations and needs: (1) anticipation of increasing social connection versus social isolation/stability, (2) the need for exploration versus lingering monotony, and (3) disrupted freedom/fear balance.

3.3.1. Anticipation of Increasing Social Connection versus Social Isolation/Stability

Before entering university, students had often formed an idea of what 'being a student' entails. This often included social expectations, such as getting to know a lot of new people. However, student life during COVID-19 was reduced to the academic aspect, and the social aspect diminished drastically. Although there was a wide variety of responses with respect to the level of social connections they made during university, students mainly reported limited social interactions as having a big, if not the biggest, impact on their transition to university, both with respect to quantity (i.e., less social interaction) as well as quality (i.e., less profound, meaningful interactions).

> "I had hoped, if it wasn't for corona, that I would, for example, often with many people or with some, cook together or go out to dinner or go on picnics. With us at the student housing you have to be very safe. There are also 105 students or so, so you don't just get to know someone else right away and that's actually also with those rules of . . . [. . .]. But I would have liked to meet with more people, invited more people also at student housing". (Anne, first-year student, female, age unknown)

It is important to note that, for this group of students, it is not only about less interaction in general, but especially about the non-realized anticipation of *increasing* social interaction. This means that not only a decrease in social contact, but also a *stability* in social contact was sometimes experienced as stressful. It is precisely because they are embarking on this EA life phase, characterized by exploration, change, and instability, that *not* meeting new people and *not* experiencing student life in all its facets can cause stress among some students as it does not meet their expectations.

> "That social life between my fellow students was actually completely lacking for me, it wasn't there. You see people talking to each other and groups of two or three and then I thought, wow, I don't have this, this really sucks. And then I thought, I have to do something, I'm going to approach some people. It was I think about five people and it didn't work for all five of them. You do send something, but then you get nothing back. You keep trying and eventually, it's just dead, it doesn't work. And then I actually just kind of gave up on that. So now it's really just exactly the same as before college. And I don't see that changing". (John, first-year student, male, 19 years old)

3.3.2. Need for Exploration versus Lingering Monotony

EA is a phase of self-exploration in which young people develop their identity through social interaction and how other people respond to the roles they take on (Arnett 2000, 2015). However, during the pandemic, students reported an enormous monotony in taking on different roles, a monotony in social contacts, and a monotony in their studies, as everything was online.

> "Sometimes it's really just too confronting how similar the days are. Whereas, in high school, I was a student council member on the core team, I was president, vice president of the last 100 days, I was on the school council. All days were different, until corona and now it's just constantly the same and you just don't feel like you're alive". (Naomi, first-year student, female, 18 years old)

One student also indicated the importance of meeting in large groups. Especially when students get to know new people, those large groups become necessary.

> "Everything becomes a bit monotonous and after a while you don't feel like doing it any more. If something changes like you can meet again with ten people and you can go with a bigger group, that's when things start to happen again. We're all going to go away or we're going to visit some museum or doesn't matter what. Then there is just a bit more of a desire to do all that again. Whereas if it's such a long time that you can only meet up with very few people, then after a while it sort of fades out". (Jorik, first-year student, male, age unknown)

Importantly, not only the lack of exploration itself, but especially the lack of perspective about when this monotony will end is stressful for students. This lingering monotony, with a disproportionate balance between a higher academic focus and little social contact, as well as the ongoing pandemic, make students feel like they cannot take a (mental) break.

> "I really did have a hard time. Especially after the exams in January, because you're all the time rushing to those exams and studying and there was nothing to break that up. There was nothing, not a moment of yes, we survived. [...] the break between studying and working hard, that's just gone. I do go and meet up with my friends outside, take a walk, I go running, but that's not the same as spending an evening chatting in a bar with your friends, not having to think about anything. For me personally, there is no break in my head". (Niki, student in bridging program, female student, 21 years old)

Moreover, this lingering aspect of the pandemic makes social contact more difficult. Students report a paradox in which they really want social contact, but at the same time they sometimes settle into this monotony, as it takes energy to meet people given the circumstances at that time (e.g., only able to meet online). Given the immense urge to explore, this prolonged monotony weighs heavily on students in the midst of their identity development, which might explain the violations of COVID-19 measures that were regularly reported in the media.

> "Especially the lack of perspective. Because I myself have been alone at home for a year and I also miss my friends a lot. And I never get to meet up with them either. So I get that people stop following the rules when you never know when you're able to meet your friends again. But I also understand that there are rules and I also follow them one hundred percent. But I get that people don't want to follow them anymore". (Ella, first-year student, female, 18 years old)

3.3.3. Disrupted Freedom/Worry Balance

EA is often seen as the life stage of possibilities, in which young adults have the freedom to discover who they are and what they want (Arnett 2015). Emerging adults often have more autonomy than adolescents and fewer responsibilities than adults. At the same time, Germani et al. (2020) indicate that emerging adults also frequently worry about the future. Students note that this double-faceted nature of the EA life stage has shifted due to COVID-19; freedom has decreased and worry has increased.

With respect to the increasing worry, this was related to the virus itself, as some students report fear of infection or infecting family.

> "There is also a risk within my family, so I don't want to be the one who brings the virus home, or who makes someone sick in my family [...]. But I feel now that it does start to weigh on me. Not so much the aspect of wanting to go out

> and go to bars, but just the aspect of if I want to meet up, I can meet up". (Sara, student in bridging program, female, 23 years old)

Moreover, students' worries not only increased concerning the virus, but also with respect to future social contact or work opportunities.

> "I always believed that networking is one of the most important tools we can use nowadays to do a lot of things. It was one of my motivations to study in Belgium to be able to network with people from diverse backgrounds. Because I believe that networking with people from diverse backgrounds is going to pave a way into my career that I'm looking for". (Dennis, international student, male, 30 years old)

Besides increasing worries, the carefreeness and freedom that are characteristic of this life stage have decreased. Spontaneous live social contacts were replaced by orchestrated social contacts with rules on the number of people and how to interact (i.e., online or live but while keeping distance).

> "The time of when you should be very carefree . . . That's not now. When I do meet up with someone, you're immediately concerned, is it actually allowed, or I have to be home by twelve o'clock. And it's much more like that than purely studying, which I do miss now". (Estrelle, first-year student, female, 19 years old)

As previously mentioned, students indicate wanting to meet new people, but at the same time they are often reluctant to go to new, organized events because it detracts from the organic aspect of meeting new people.

> "I do agree with going to a café after class or working in groups and then going to a coffee bar or something. You can certainly make friends there, but I think if the university says, for example, "okay, we'll organize a walk" or something, I think it's a bit forced in making friends. That would discourage me from participating". (Manon, student in bridging program, female, 23 years old)

4. Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major global, social, and economic impact, as well as a major impact on the field of higher education. By performing focus groups with 23 students entering HE, the current research aimed to understand (1) how these students experienced their academic and social integration process during the pandemic and (2) how these changing academic and social conditions might affect students' mental well-being. We made use of HE integration literature as well as EA theory.

The current research revealed three main processes. Firstly, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a disruption between the academic and social integration process of new students, a process which was formerly largely intertwined (Museus 2014). Students experienced a gap between academic and social integration with respect to one-on-one interactions with fellow students, with professors, and with the broader university environment/setting. Whereas previous research has highlighted the lack of social contact as an important stressor during the COVID-19 pandemic (Farris et al. 2021), the current study also shows the importance of an intangible social connectedness, i.e., the feeling of being part of a community. This feeling of connectedness has been found to be an important predictor of both academic performance and mental well-being (O'Keeffe 2013; OECD 2017). Secondly, integration within HE increasingly became the students' responsibility. Although increased responsibilities are inextricably linked with the transition to HE, students reported explicit challenges in taking up both academic and social responsibilities due to COVID-19 restrictions, as well as responsibilities in following governmental measures. Finally, students indicated how COVID-19 measures clashed with EA expectations/needs. EA needs, such as increasing social connection, exploration, and carefree living were (partly) replaced by social isolation and/or stability, lingering monotony, and increasing worries, respectively. As such, during the pandemic, demands on new students increased and social support decreased (drasti-

cally); both of these shifts have been related to mental health problems in previous research (Lesener et al. 2020; Wei et al. 2022).

Theoretically, our research shows a *dichotomy* in which, on the one hand, (young) students were pushed faster into adulthood by taking up increasing responsibilities, i.e., in terms of their academic and social integration process, as well as in compliance with COVID-19 measures, where they were treated similarly to adults; on the other hand, the students remain stuck in adolescence on a social level, as the EA needs for increasing social connection, exploration, and carefree living were not met. Although the EA life stage is characterized by increasing agency in general compared to adolescents, for example, by taking up more adult roles or engaging in more mature relationships (Wood et al. 2018), it is not yet about definitive responsibilities. Taking up responsibilities normally takes place within an explorative and dynamic framework, within which students can explore different social roles. Our study shows the crucial role of peers within these explorative steps to independence. Friendships seem to form a kind of safe haven within which emerging adults can discover themselves and develop. Taking up these increasing responsibilities during COVID-19 means this safe haven of peers becomes even more important. Moreover, positive relationships with peers have been found to attenuate the mental health impacts of stressful events (Kawachi and Berkman 2001). However, while the importance of peers grew during the COVID-19 pandemic, students were not able to build new social relationships at university, but instead had to rely more on their formal social network and especially their household members, as real-life meetings with peers were restricted. While this social network can provide support, it can also cause stress (Caputo 2020; Van de Velde et al. 2021b).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

The results of this study identify three main processes: (1) academic and social integration, formerly intertwined, have become two separate goals; (2) integration increasingly became the students' responsibility; and (3) COVID-19 measures and emerging adulthood expectations clashed: increasing social connection, exploration, and carefree living were replaced by, respectively, social isolation, lingering monotony, and increasing worries. COVID-19 measures presented students with a dichotomy in which they were pushed faster into adulthood by taking up increasing responsibilities and at the same time remained socially stuck in adolescence by not living up to emerging adulthood expectations.

5.2. Strengths and Limitations

The strengths/contributions of the current study to the existing literature are the following. (1) We performed in-depth qualitative research to understand the vulnerabilities of new students entering HE during the pandemic. This qualitative research does not attempt to expose general truths, as the 'typical' student and his or her needs do not exist, but rather to explore how and why mental health problems are high within this vulnerable group. (2) We studied integration over a longer period. Students were interviewed in the spring of 2021, i.e., approximately seven months after the start of the academic year. By looking back over a longer period, we acknowledge the process-like character of integration (Wilcox et al. 2005; Willems et al. 2021). We thereby complement other studies, which examined stressors relatively early in the pandemic (Elmer et al. 2020; Farris et al. 2021; Hoyt et al. 2021). (3) We build on the literature of academic and social integration, as well as the EA literature, to understand the reasons behind the stress and mental health problems experienced.

Despite the strengths of this study, this research also has some limitations. Firstly, like all qualitative research, our results cannot be generalized to all Flemish students entering HE, as we were unable to include certain groups of students (e.g., students who already quit or never even started university) or over-represented other groups (e.g., students who experience a strong impact of COVID-19 on their well-being). Furthermore,

students from the social sciences are over-represented in our study. Secondly, this research focused on one particular vulnerable group, i.e., new students, but within this group, other vulnerable characteristics might also present. For example, previous research highlighted female students, students with a lower SES, with a migration background, and with a learning disability as vulnerable groups for experiencing stress and mental health problems during COVID-19 (Van de Velde et al. 2021b; Van Eekert and Van Looy 2021), These populations were not included in our sample of students. Follow-up research on the mental health of several vulnerable groups in the post-COVID-19 area will remain important, as we expect lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' mental health (Veldhuis et al. 2021).

5.3. Policy Implications and Recommendations

Practically, the results of the current study can play an important role in designing HE (mental health) policies in the post-pandemic era, most importantly with respect to limiting the dichotomy for new students. This means that these students should be guided in their academic uptake of responsibilities and at the same time should be given the freedom to integrate socially with the support of the university. It is important that students who have had a rough start during COVID-19 be explicitly acknowledged and offered alternatives in the upcoming year(s). There may be a need to catch up on their social integration process. Many students may therefore benefit from new welcome sessions/exploration days/introductory games to make up for the bumpy start. It is also important that online education be designed in a way that promotes social interaction between students, e.g., by actively asking questions, group work, class discussions (in small groups), etc. In addition, however, physical non-orchestrated social contact remains crucial. In times when blended education also offers a lot of advantages, it is important that the university continue to serve as a social space, and students must be motivated as much as possible to come to campus. After all, social integration mainly occurs in an unstructured, spontaneous way, and it is crucial for both the mental well-being and academic success of all students (Hartley 2010; Kessler et al. 1995).

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