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The student experience in higher education reshaped by the pandemic: The autoethnographic perspective of a business school staff member

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Abstract

Covid-19 has impacted the lives of millions of students who experienced various well-being-related difficulties due to the lack of social relations. Contrary to what most studies suggest, it is challenging to delineate particular categories of students significantly affected by the pandemic. Therefore, this research relied on autoethnography as a method to study students' lived experiences through the author's subjective lens. It considers developing a digital and inclusive student experience to overcome the lack of social relations and provide a fair opportunity for the students to find their path in life during and after the pandemic. The findings show that we need to consider the student experience as a holistic experience, including the academic, professional, social and extracurricular experiences. Moreover, the individuals live it differently depending on their traits. The research confirms that the lack of social relations profoundly affects their well-being. It suggests developing a social constructivist approach and notably authentic learning activities, linking the academic, professional and extracurricular experiences to support students in engaging with their peers online, adapting their behaviour to a new environment and developing new, meaningful perspectives beyond the meritocratic notion of "success" in higher education.

1. Personal story

I have been working as a digital transformation director for a leading French business school specialising in technology-enhanced learning and apprenticeship of which the motto is “the new paths to success”, and I cannot help but wonder how both our current staff and students understand this expression.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic occurred in March 2020, I did not reflect on what the students’ paths to success could be anymore. The school has been closed, yet we maintained all courses online and the apprenticeship track. I must admit: I only thought of the pandemic as an opportunity to show how our strategic focus on technology-enhanced learning could make the institution stand out in these turbulent times and how it could support a larger crowd of diverse students to access quality education. Since the campus closure, the directors, including myself, only interacted with a few students through webconferences. Although they did not explicitly express concerns about their well-being, some staff stated that students lacked motivation and did not successfully engage with various projects and extracurricular activities during the pandemic.

Meanwhile, my wife and I said something that may seem shocking to most people: “2020’s been one of the best years in our life!”. From my perspective, working from home and spending my entire time with her felt like a luxury I was not ready to give up. However, on 1 February 2021, a year after the pandemic started, I encountered a transformative moment in my life. I returned to work after months of absence and finally met a few students in person. I did not realise how the lack of social experience impacted some of them, quite negatively in some cases, which called me to question my role as a director. Indeed, the student experience cannot be merely reduced to academic programmes and work experience. Interactions among students are vital to their well-being and development, especially undergraduates that are just discovering adulthood. How can I claim to provide an inclusive education while some students are left aside? Where are their paths to success?

Although there does not seem to be a simple solution to drastically improve their life in the current context, my study aims in the long run at creating a more inclusive student experience. I have a sense of urgency that drives me to think about how an institution could better support and care for all students overcoming their personal difficulties during the pandemic and beyond.

To make sense of the student experience from their perspective as well as from my own, I wrote an autoethnography. This methodological approach is centred on the self and shows “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live and the meaning of their struggles” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p111). Before diving into the interviews with the students to analyse these struggles, in the literature review, I investigated the negative impact of covid-19 on the students’ well-being and their experience as well as the opportunity for the students to grow as authentic beings able to adapt to such new environment.

This context led me to study the following research question:

- How can an institution provide a more inclusive experience to students by maintaining social interactions and improving their well-being during and after the pandemic?

The previous question was guided by the following two sub-questions:

1. What lessons can I draw from talking and interacting with students about the negative impact of Covid-19 on their student experience and their positive attitude to cope with it?
2. As the digital transformation director of a business school, how can I help students by enhancing their experience through online interactions during and after the pandemic?

2. Literature review

Research about Covid-19’s impact on students primarily focuses on negative psychological consequences. At the same time, few articles conceptualise the pandemic as an opportunity to self-reflect on the situation and adapt oneself to establish a new meaning and purpose in life. Accordingly, the following review features these two opposite views and delves into two concepts exploring how patterns of behaviour influence well-being.

Well-being can be defined as a sense of satisfaction and happiness, a healthy mindset conveying its perspective of an authentic, future, accomplished self (Sherman, 2021). Cooper (2016) defines it as fair, equitable consideration of all people contributing to their capacity and growth in synergy with others without disadvantaging their peers. Therefore, the students’ well-being is intrinsically linked to the student experience, which may refer to their social, professional or

academic experience in the literature (Costambeys-Kempczynski, 2015), whereas most articles referring to Covid-19 limits its impact to the academic dimension (Laslo-Roth et al., 2020; Petillion & McNeil, 2020; Veletsianos, 2020; Westbrook et al., 2021).

2.1 The essential components of psychological well-being and student experience

Two essential concepts stress different factors that play a role in both student experience and well-being. The first concept from Wilson et al. (2020) interprets the student experience during Covid-19 through four themes or patterns of behaviour: accountability, awareness, socialising and environment. The second concept from Ryff (1989) advances six prerequisites for psychological well-being: autonomy, self-acceptance, positive relation with others, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth. From these two concepts and the literature, I have refined broader personality traits and characteristics that seem to play a significant role in the students' well-being.

2.1.1 A sense of agency and self-determination

"Autonomy" is a synonym of freedom of choice (Ryff, 1989) and works in pair with "accountability", defined as how we feel responsible for our actions (Wilson et al., 2020). In sociology, "agency" includes both notions and can be interpreted as how we act, make decisions and account for our actions. The students' agency contributes to their emotional engagement, self-awareness, motivation and their resilience towards adversity as a group (Wilson et al., 2020).

Indeed, the self-determination theory illustrates how people's psychological needs influence their extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to grow. It also corroborates how the student's psychological needs, such as autonomy and the will to socialise and be compassionate (called "relatedness"), lead to intrinsic motivation when fulfilled and contribute to their well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Motivation can arise from academic interactions and informal interactions between peers or peers and educators. Thus, it is not solely related to the individual but can also be fostered through group interactions when students challenge each other, work toward a common goal (Wolfe et al., 2018) or simply enjoy the activity in itself (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The lack of motivation resulting from a lack of social relations is considered one of the most critical difficulties the students have faced during the pandemic (Magson et al., 2021).

2.1.2 Self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-actualisation

Accordingly, students who have a sense of agency and are engaged display self-awareness (Wilson et al., 2020). Self-awareness illustrates the students' ability to self-reflect (Wilson et al., 2020) and is acknowledged as a critical factor to grow (Merryman W. et al., 2015), while self-acceptance relates to their ability to maintain a positive mindset toward themselves (Ryff, 1989). Self-awareness and self-acceptance combined with creativity help design responses to adapt to our current situation (Greening, 1992). Creative people can find a new purpose and grow toward self-actualisation, fulfilling their full potential (Larcus et al., 2016; Maslow, 1943). Pervin and Rubin (1967) contended that students achieve satisfaction when their perceived self-awareness converges toward self-actualisation.

Nevertheless, experience has proven that self-awareness alone might not be sufficient, and students may lack the will to act towards their well-being or do not feel entitled to act (Bolumole, 2020; Lynch et al., 2020). Although the literature describes self-awareness as an intrapersonal process, social distancing has prevented students from developing social relations and self-awareness in various online environments, according to Merryman W. et al. (2015). Thus, self-awareness would not only be intrapersonal but potentially related to sensemaking: a social process, an attempt to collectively rationalise our subjective thoughts and perspectives by interpreting symbols and cues from the environment (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick et al., 2005).

2.1.3 Social relations

Subsequently, social relations are considered crucial to each individual's development (Berger et al., 2020), notably for first-year students transitioning from high school and undergraduates in general (Elmer et al., 2020; Meuwese et al., 2017). Interactions enable students to apprehend social norms and develop a shared culture (Wilson et al., 2020). They enable academically marginalised students to succeed (Browning et al., 2021). Peer-group associations appeared to be the most critical interactions to create engagement and improve resilience (Tinto, 1975; Wilson et al., 2020). Similarly, educators' formal and informal interactions with the students are of utmost importance to foster self-determination (Hartnett, 2012).

Ryff (1989) characterises them as "warm" relationships. Warmth is an element associated with "growth" and a characteristic of self-actualisers who develop deep, caring relationships with others. Hence, students find meaning in

these interactions and might discover their wants, purpose and increase their well-being (Knowles et al., 2005; Larcus et al., 2016; Wang & Delaquil, 2020). However, due to Covid-19, when students moved from physical to online interactions, they seemed to have lost bearings, their sense of accountability, engagement, and sense of belonging (Wilson et al., 2020).

2.1.4 Environment

Consequently, I questioned how such an unexpected event and change in the environment might have impacted students. Wilson et al. (2020) defined the environment as external factors that impact the academic, professional and extracurricular experience. According to these authors, any change in the environment influences the student well-being, self-awareness, self-determination and self-actualisation. It is aligned with person-environment theories advance that the environment shapes the society's behaviour without considering the individuals' characteristics and behaviour.

Conversely, Holland's theory considers how individuals react to environmental pressures based on their personality (Walsh, 1973). However, the six personality types he defined seem to disregard the complexity of one's personality.

Finally, Ryff (1989, p. 1071) construed "environment mastery" as one's ability to "choose or create environments suitable to its psychic conditions". Thus, the individual is in control and not subdued to the environment. However, he did not conduct extensive research on the nature of change in the environment, the individual or learning.

Hence, all of these studies may contradict one another; however, they all establish a link between environment and people. I find it worth investigating how a change in a particular environment, such as social distancing which constrained students to study online and limited social interactions, impacted the student experience.

2.1.5 Growth mindset: Meaning to life and purpose

Last but not least, Ryff (1989) defined personal growth and purpose in life as two essential prerequisites for psychological well-being. The author associated "meaning to life" with "purpose in life". He correlated them with the definition of self-actualisation, where one finds what is meaningful and fulfils its highest need for personal growth (Maslow, 1943). Meaning-making is a core concept that goes beyond the definition of sensemaking, where students make sense of their current self, envision and aspire to their

future self through their experiences and apprehend their existential purpose. Ryff (1989) added that a positive person who has a purpose and is self-directed finds meaning to life and refers to it as maturity, the cognitive and emotional growth. Although not defined by Wilson et al. (2020) as one of the critical conditions of well-being, the authors highlight the relationship between self-determination and growth and how each student's level of motivation can positively or negatively impact its growth, its engagement with the class and its resilience. In the two following paragraphs, I looked at how Covid-19 negatively impacted students and, conversely, how it can be seen as an opportunity to reflect on taken-for-granted assumptions about the student experience and reconnect with the world.

2.2 The negative impact of Covid-19

The literature investigated how some phenomena relate to a "nonconstructive, emotional experience" that negatively affects the students' academic life (Sherman, 2021, p59). The consequences on the students appeared to be a lack of engagement with the social, extracurricular life and an outburst of negative feelings (stress, depression, anxiety) leading to mental health issues as well as alcohol, drug and violence (Sherman, 2021). These problems affected students as well as their parents, who might have experienced similar issues, job loss, and financial pressure (Brooks et al., 2020);

Social distancing was also a factor resulting from the Covid-19 context that aggravated the situation. On the one hand, the students often had to give up their independence and return to live with their parents, which negatively impacted their self-perception (Gaviria, 2021). On the other hand, those living independently have not been able to maintain a relationship with their friends and show symptoms of depression. (Gaviria, 2021). Mental health issues seemed to be related, in essence, to their isolation and the lack of social interactions (Elmer et al., 2020). In 2021, little is known yet about the long-term consequences that Covid-19 could have. However, such mental illnesses could have detrimental effects over the lifetime of these young students (Magson et al., 2021).

Moreover, some studies suggested that the lack of social interactions triggered considerable distress among young people compared to the fear of being infected (Magson et al., 2021). The literature stressed that the difficulty to access technology caused a lack of authentic online interactions. Some technology-enhanced learning researchers argued that online interactions did not help to maintain engagement, motivation and even worsened the students' isolation and capacity to learn when they were the only

alternative to face-to-face interactions (Hill K., 2020; Kahu et al., 2020). Conversely, others, including Westbrook et al. (2021), described webconferencing as “therapeutic forms of student-lecturer collaboration [...] for enhancing well-being” as the nearest lifelike interactions that we can experience online.

Finally, the literature substantiated the belief that some populations were more impacted by the pandemic than others. The undergraduates seemed to have been severely hit by social distancing and school closures (Karasmanaki & Tsantopoulos, 2021). Data evidenced Covid-19’s impact on “marginalised students” with disabilities or coming from minorities (Song et al., 2020). Quantitative research also highlighted that female students have been more affected than male students (Karasmanaki & Tsantopoulos, 2021).

2.3 Covid as an opportunity for change?

Contrary to the research about Covid-19’s negative impacts, the literature about existential-humanistic psychology helped me make sense of the current situation and find meaning. Any difficulty in life can be seen as a challenge that disrupts what we take for granted.

Greening (1992) stressed that we should accept an environment that cannot be controlled, live fully, remain open, self-aware, and adapt to find new meaning and purpose, contributing to our personal growth. Ryff (1989) also corroborated that self-actualisation contributes to the students’ growth and is characterised by openness to experience and perpetual change. Finally, Bland (2020) added that we should embrace “positive freedom” (Bland, 2020, p715): seizing opportunities while being aware of our limits regarding others and the context; we should engage authentically with others despite the hurdles while showing empathy and altruism to support those who need it the most. Thus, the literature unveiled two different views of the pandemic as a calamity and an opportunity.

2.4 The gap in the literature

To sum up, most of the literature about student experience during the pandemic focused on the academic experience and related how well-being could not be sustained in online environments.

Moreover, it emphasised Covid-19’s negative impact on students. However, it seems hazardous to delineate distinct types of students with specific needs solely based on quantitative data. For example, Karasmanaki and Tsantopoulos (2021) only conducted surveys with closed-ended questions

to gather socio-demographic data. Some authors, such as Song et al. (2020), did not explain the rationale behind these categories. Although scholars might have done so with good intentions to provide customised support to clear-cut categories of students, it may lead to the exclusion of others who do not fit into these. I contend that we should strive for an inclusive education considering each individual’s needs and potential within our society.

While Covid-19’s aftermath prevails in the literature and cannot be underrated, I intend to debunk the common discourse acknowledging the pandemic as a fatality. Through qualitative research, I will attempt to conceptualise an ontological approach to advance it as an opportunity to improve the student experience in the long term, considering how social interactions and well-being can be leveraged by distance.

3. Autoethnography

3.1 The story behind the methodology

Through an existential-phenomenological approach, I intended to understand retrospectively the subjective students’ experiences and the meaning I made of them (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Indeed, phenomenology studies behaviours through phenomena of experience. It attempts to comprehend the interviewee’s knowledge of a particular phenomenon by analysing its reasoning and the process that resulted in its knowledge and understanding of a situation. I looked at the pandemic from the students’ perspectives and brought an existential approach that focused on making sense of the students’ “lived experiences” through a reflexive process (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

To do so, I chose autoethnography as a methodology: it intricates autobiography, or “the craft of life writing” (Adams, 2021), with ethnography which studies cultural life and practices through artistic narratives (Adams et al., 2014). According to Adams, such a reflexive process on the self and a cultural phenomenon harmoniously combines an academic and scholarly tradition with storytelling.

Allow me to digress from the methodology to my own story and my institutional context to better explain the rationale behind the choice of an autoethnography: The business school has 60 years of existence and is one of the “Grandes Ecoles”, a category of selective, accredited institutions in France which are known for the quality of their education and, to my great disappointment, are often considered as elitist, recruiting only “the best” students and

requiring them to pay high tuition fees.

However, in comparison to other Grandes Ecoles and despite the lack of communication from the institution on the topic, this business school has always been inclusive and wears values such as “Openness, challenge and empathy”. Indeed, I cannot seem to remember any utterance from the management board to the staff or students explicitly explaining what we meant by “the new paths to success”. In the only written evidence of institutional discourse that I found, the words “path” and “success” were not clearly defined. Only a reference to “success” as “a state of mind rather than a social norm” supported by the claim that “success can emerge from failure” suggests that the institution possibly gives a rather existential meaning to the word, rather than the shared, accepted definition of success in our meritocratic higher education system that considers it as achieving good academic results.

Nonetheless, to me, the expression bears meaning: providing an inclusive education to students regardless of their background and skills, to help them access education and succeed in finding their path in life and career, achieving their personal goals. Indeed, the admission exam has never excluded students who did not score very high, provided that they showed motivation and a keen interest in the disciplines studied. The tuition fees range from 7,000€ to 10,000€ per year at the undergraduate level. Nevertheless, the institution was the second in France to develop apprenticeship, enabling students to finance their studies while gaining work experience. It is a reasonably small institution with over 500 students where the staff is proud to “empathise” with students from various backgrounds, providing them with personal support to find their path in life and overcome the challenges they will face.

An inclusive, online education is what attracted me to this business school when I heard of its project to bring education to Africa in partnership with UNESCO. I had a passion for studies and always wanted to be an educator. I worked for many years in business development in various industries before finding my way in higher education. Nonetheless, I worked in international student recruitment. To me, it was about providing an opportunity to these students to access a high quality education. However, to the university, it was just a mean to achieve revenue, and it did not resonate with me. When I finally discovered online education as a postgraduate student, it changed my perspective beyond what I imagined. I learned so much from both my peers and tutors and had more support online than in any course on campus.

I finally came across a French business school that

seemed to share the same ideals of online and open education that I had. Initially, I joined it as a business development and communication director. And eventually, the institution allowed me to find my path as a digital transformation director, managing the change from on-campus to online education and designing e-learning programmes for all students.

Nevertheless, I felt like something was missing to provide the online experience the students deserve and this became more apparent during the pandemic. I needed to know their experience to provide them with the support they needed. Although most autoethnographies rather lean on the author’s life story, in this research, I deliberately chose to include the students as “co-participants” (Chang, 2008, p65). I relied on my professional experience in technology-enhanced learning and management to discover myself as a complex, emotional being while exploring their personal experiences to better grasp this social phenomenon and strive for a better, inclusive education.

To put it simply, I conducted qualitative research in which I reflected on my own experience and emotions in relation to others (Chang, 2008). Indeed, every time I broached this topic, I could not help myself but quaver. I felt deeply emotional when thinking about what students were going through. Therefore, I aspired to produce research that embraced my own sensitivity to understand my emotions and how I could benevolently support the students to improve their lives (Ellis, 2016).

From my perspective, autoethnography was also a mean to communicate about these disregarded students’ lives to a broad audience and make institutions reflect upon this situation to make education more inclusive and provide equitable support to all students.

3.2 Method

On the one hand, I collected data using “friendship as a method” (Adams, 2015), approaching interviews as friendly relations and caring for the interviewees beyond the interview. This method fitted well with my personal convictions: it was not about extracting data from students but rather interacting with them to support the students with compassion and help them overcome their potential difficulties. Hence, it required me to prioritise the relationship by accommodating the students’ needs and considering any ethical issues. I adopted a flat relationship and casually conversed with them to make students more open and comfortable in discussing their personal issues without feeling oppressed. Such a method helped me understand them more authentically.

They were able to ask me questions or discuss topics I would not have brought up.

I initially contacted all the students by e-mail, specified who I was, what was my research about, why I was writing it and how I was planning to conduct it. Eight students volunteered to take part in this research. I also proactively contacted two of the interviewees as I knew them personally. They had mentioned their difficulties prior to my research, which triggered my interest. In total, I selected five of them and chose diverse profiles (see Table 1 below). I focused on undergraduates who have been described as a particularly vulnerable population in the literature. I considered their gender, as research highlighted that women are more affected by the pandemic. However, I could only interview one female student I proactively contacted, as all other students who responded to my e-mails were male students. Therefore, I might not have substantial data regarding female students, as they did not express their interest further to my e-mail. I also considered the students' nationality, as international students far from their families might feel more isolated than local students. I selected students from the first year of the Bachelor to the last year of the Master's degree across various programmes. The aim was to analyse not only their maturity but the diversity of their experience, whether or not they had an academic experience on campus and a professional experience (by distance or on campus) before or during the pandemic. I also chose students who never had any experience in the institution I work for (two international students and a first-year student) to understand whether they had built a sense of belonging by distance without knowing any of their classmates. Therefore, I could analyse whether their characteristics aligned with the groups defined in the literature.

I conducted individual interviews through Microsoft Teams which lasted between thirty minutes and one and a half hour. We also exchanged messages through this app occasionally. However, these messages were not used in this paper. There were simply a mean to support the students with their current difficulties beyond the research. Indeed, friendship as a method did not limit the relationship to a planned interview. It allowed the students to discuss with me through their favourite mean (Microsoft Teams) after the interviews were completed as well.

I wrote down all the conversations from the interviews and conducted a horizontal analysis: I identified the qualitative data that aligned or differed from the themes and issues in the literature, cross-referenced the common themes in each dialogue and arranged them in the following sections, namely impact of Covid-19 and socialising, growth mindset, self-acceptance, self-awareness and self-actualisation. Highlighting the differences which make each story unique also enabled me to identify solutions to answer the research questions in the later discussion section.

On the other hand, I used a hybrid systematic self-observation to collect my thoughts when engaging with emotions related to my research (Chang, 2008). The hybrid model is based on a pre-structured chart in which I complement my emotions with a narrative to express my thoughts and specify the time of each event. I then wrote an evocative dialogue made of the students' dialogues interwoven with all these personal emotions and thoughts.

3.3 Ethical issues and limitations

Each student signed a consent form and volunteered for the interviews. I have used fake names in the autoethnography and did not provide any specific details about their life

Table 1. list of participants and their characteristics

Name	Programme	Experience in the institution before Covid-19	International student	Course delivery during Covid-19	Work experience
Emilie	Master 1 GE	Yes	No	by distance only	by distance only
John	Bachelor 3 IM	No	Yes	by distance only	No
Pat	Master 2 IB	No	Yes	on campus + e-learning	No
Nicolas	Bachelor 1 EBM	No	No	on campus + e-learning	No
Adrien	Master 2 GE	Yes	No	by distance only	Yes. Entrepreneur

and origin to protect their identity.

I intended to conduct the interviews face-to-face, but they had to occur via Microsoft Teams due to the ongoing school closure. It was not always possible to see the interviewees due to some access to technology and broadband quality issues. However, the students willingly shared their feelings about their experiences, and I could still apply “friendship as method”.

Finally, my research happened within a short timeframe. Thus, it will not be possible to compare the evolution of the students’ well-being over a long period.

4. Findings

This section introduces each interviewee’s unique experience as dialogues arranged by themes. The emotions I felt during my research are also outlined.

4.1 Student experience and socialising during Covid-19

I asked the students what “student experience” meant to them. Most of them did not know this term, but all mentioned every aspect of the experience: learning, working, socialising. Everything was linked.

“The student experience, to me, it’s the experience with others. When you’re a student, you discover social life, what’s closer to adult life. You have courses [...], the professional life. [...] I have to be an adult and be accountable for what I do”, said Emilie.

Socialising was the most emphasised aspect among all students.

Pat, an English-speaking international student from Africa who came to pursue a Master’s degree in my institution, said:

“It’s about meeting people, socialising with them, getting to know their way of socialising. We come from different backgrounds, countries. We come to share our ideas. There are students from China, France...but we’re not together, so it’s been difficult.”

I could feel Pat had many difficulties adapting, yet he kept a smile on his face during the entire conversation so far...

The pandemic’s impact varied from one student to another.

“How did you feel being isolated?” I asked Nicolas, a first-year Bachelor and local student who did not have many opportunities to experience life in a business school:

“Well, I wasn’t isolated. I lived with one of my colleagues. We still met with my friends and played football. I was never depressed or low in spirits”, he said with enthusiasm.

Conversely, Pat lived a very different experience:

“How was your experience [in the business school] so far?” I asked.

Pat scratched his head. The smile faded from his face.

“This Tuesday, I was at the hospital to see my doctor and explained to her that I’m feeling pretty depressed. In a sense, I don’t have anybody to talk to. So, it’s just me and my computer all day long [...]. It’s just been ME, ME and MYSELF...ALONE. I tried to connect [with my peers], I tried my best...”, Pat replied, desperate.

When our discussion ended, I realised how life was difficult for some isolated students and how lucky I was to work from home with someone by my side. My wife looked at me and asked what had just happened. As soon as I started telling her Pat’s story, tears came to my eyes.

Adrien, a Master student and entrepreneur from the region, gave me a more nuanced view:

“It’s a paradox. There are students like me who are really fine. I can’t complain, but for some others, it sounds almost like a catastrophe. [...] I know it can be tough psychologically, and some may have after-effects. But being stuck for months and not being able to a nightclub is not such a big deal.”

Then, Adrien added:

“Nevertheless, what hurts me the most is that I can’t play my [favourite sport] at a regional level anymore. [...] I understand that we need to support each other and follow the rules, but I miss playing”.

John is an ERASMUS student doing his Bachelor's degree in France who inspired my research. I felt terrible when I saw him in February 2021: he seemed so happy, discovering the campus for the first time, but all I could think of was that he missed a chance to live a life in France, discover a new environment, socialise with friends, learn our language and culture. When I interviewed him, I asked John if he still made some friends despite the lockdown.

John added:

"It's hard to meet some people. Everything is closed. Since last year, you can't enjoy restaurants, bars, night-life, social life... so friends become even more valuable. I'm one of the few that don't live near the university's residence. [...] I need to socialise with people, to talk, have conversations."

After talking for one and a half hour, John asked me to stop the recording to tell his story. He did not mind me writing about it, but he was ashamed of being filmed. He wanted to tell me how social distancing was hard to live, and his only way to develop some relationship was to meet someone through Tinder, an online dating app. "90% of my friends in Brest did use such app" he added. It saddened me, yet I could see that the young generation did not stop living because of Covid. They relied on technology to build and maintain relationships.

Emilie was the most enthusiastic student I knew on campus. She came to this business school after being a victim of bullying in her previous institution. Remembering her past life, she said:

"That year, I didn't wanna study anymore. I worked to avoid going to class. I didn't even want to get up in the morning. I preferred going to the doctor instead."

"How's been your experience been so far at [this business school]?" I enquired.

She replied with her usual boundless enthusiasm:

"It changed everything! There's a good atmosphere in the class, although we don't really know each other well. People are caring. The support from Elsa (Student affairs officer) that I didn't have in my previous school, it's really what I like! This year, it's peculiar... I didn't meet with my cohort, and it's hard to develop relations with it. But there's really a lot of mutual support and benevolence. We have small cohorts; we work and live together.

Even if we didn't have a chance in life to grow, here [in this business school], we've been given this chance."

This last sentence about inclusion made me suddenly feel emotional. I almost burst into tears, but I contained myself, a lump in my throat.

Emily qualified her experience since social distancing:

"Nonetheless, to me, social distancing is terrible, frightening... My buddies who are introverts, they're happy" she commented. "But I NEED to meet people!" insisted Emily.

I realised how such social relations mattered and that despite all the efforts our institution (and probably most institutions) had made to maintain courses and apprenticeship, this was far from enough to support students.

4.2 A growth mindset towards the pandemic

Despite the lack of social events, I tried to understand how students interacted:

"Do you communicate with your entire class or a smaller group of friends?" I asked each student.

Emily, Nicolas and John all said that, during classes, the group works "forced" them to interact, and they benefitted from this engagement and the support from their peers and tutors.

John added:

"This would be nice if it could apply to our social experience too. We could imagine group activities, workouts, etc. by distance to create this engagement".

Nicolas replied enthusiastically:

"The entire class, it's a fantastic cohort, no one's left behind!" he said enthusiastically. "If you have a problem, you just ask, that's all! If you're late, you tell your friends to let the lecturer know, and you can be sure they'll do it."

I couldn't be happier hearing how they all got along together, had such a group cohesion and sense of agency. They sounded like close family members who were always there for each other. "No one's left behind!". These powerful words touched me and echoed in my mind, even long after

the interview. I hoped it was the same in every class, in every institution.

John put things into perspective:

“I’m pretty positive, I think my situation is not the best, but it’s cool.”

“You seem quite positive. How do you keep yourself motivated?” I asked.

“I can still make a lot of contacts. I don’t feel left out. I didn’t come here to stay sad...”

My question triggered some emotions in John, who could not contain himself. He took a break and came back a minute later saying:

“Being far from home makes you stronger. You can’t call your parents when something goes wrong. You become more independent.”

I could perceive how some students adapted to their environment, being autonomous and accountable.

Emilie added:

“We had group work, and we gathered in my home. It was just unbearable to work all day long without meeting anyone. We decided to eat next to each other, but we were accountable. If someone had any symptoms, we were all getting tested. We didn’t meet anyone else, just the four of us. It’s up to us to be careful outside.”

However, without any help, Pat, who did not have anyone to rely on, could not overcome his difficulties.

“Some of my classmates already have connections and a circle of friends here”, he deplored.

His class lacked the warm feeling of cohesion from Nicolas’ Bachelor class where everybody supported each other. I then wondered how I could create a consistent experience across all cohorts.

4.3 Self-acceptance, self-awareness and self-actualisation

Some students maintained a positive mindset despite the unusual environment in which they had to pursue their studies, without meeting their friends, far from campus:

“I was confined in my parents’ home. I’m lucky that I had a house, a garden. It must be tough to be stuck in an apartment. I have good relations with my sister and parents, even though we have a few scuffles, I feel like I’m really lucky”, said Adrian.

I also asked everyone how they maintain their motivation to study, work, socialise and simply live their life.

Adrien replied:

“It’s in my nature. I’m very optimistic and always see the bright side of things. Especially since I joined [this school], I’m very entrepreneurial. [...] I need to always have this sense of urgency and to challenge myself.”

Emily reacted:

“Ouch! It’s hard [to be motivated]! Often, I just fake it. I mean...it’s not easy, but it’s harder for others...”

She then talked me through her experience as a child traveling through many countries:

“...In Cambodia, I learned about the totalitarian and repressive Khmer Rouge regime. I was shattered. Yet, Cambodians look always happy although they went through hell.”

What Emily said then resonated with me:

“...So, I’m a social chameleon: I adapt myself so that I seem to be alright. I consider that it’s up to us to create happiness. If you consider you’re happy, you’ll be happy. If you smile at others, the others will smile back at you. Smiling is about survival. If you make others smile, you live happier. So, I smile all the time, even when I’m sad. If you suffer atrocities, you can bounce back!”

I could appreciate how Emily’s exposure to such international contexts and people really opened her mind.

I was also impressed that all students knew what they wanted to do in life. They discovered it through authentic learning activities where they explored real-world problems (Lee, 2018) or the few social events that were maintained.

Emilie said:

“I transpose what I do in my personal life to my professional life. By organising events, I gain skills in HR, leadership. I must motivate others.”

5. Discussion

This discussion section interprets the previous interviews and provides an answer to the research question: “What have I learned, from talking and interacting with students, about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their student experience, well-being and social interactions?” in the first part. In the following one, I suggest some future solutions based on the findings and the lessons I have drawn from them.

5.1 What the students taught me

Firstly, this research underlines that each student has their own characteristics and evolves differently based on their environment, as Ryff (1989) previously illustrated. Therefore, it is challenging to define particular groups of marginalised students. Institutions need to look closer at each individual and provide more inclusive solutions.

Some expressed a strong sense of belonging. However, it was not the case in every class. According to the interviewees and the literature, it seems to be correlated with the small class size (Walsh, 1973). However, this requires further studies to understand other potential underlying reasons.

Secondly, the interviews evidenced that the term “student experience” is not commonly used or understood in France, where extracurricular activities and social relations are referred to as “student life” and considered separately from learning and professional experience. However, they also suggest that student experience could not be restricted to extracurricular activities and should bind all three dimensions and the social interactions between them.

Nonetheless, the academic experience was the only experience that some students benefited from. Therefore, their engagement and well-being depended on the only interactions with the lecturers and their peers (Wilson et al., 2020).

Overall, I would define “student experience” as *the holistic, unique, lived experience of individual students, enabling them to grow together, make meaning of life, and attempt to fulfil their purpose through self-discovery, freedom of choice, and positive social interactions*. In other words, I would argue that student experience is an individual experience that cannot be fully lived without developing “a self and social awareness” (Lee, 2020, pp. 572-573).

Thirdly, both the literature and the interviews corroborate a relationship between the various personal characteristics contributing to their well-being and social experience. Indeed, students need to build a sense of agency to develop their motivation and confer their peers the same confidence and motivation to work together toward a common goal and overcome the difficulties together.

Self-acceptance and self-awareness also appear to be critical elements to maintain a positive attitude in all circumstances. During this challenging time, some students were able to accept the situation, focus on the positive aspects of their life and live authentically by finding creative ways to cope with the lockdown. In other words, they successfully adapted to their environment or shaped it to meet their needs. They reached a certain maturity through this event. However, not everyone could cope with such difficulties, especially isolated students who lost their motivation and felt unable to adapt and develop themselves.

Indeed, their adaptability was positively related to their social relations. The interviews confirmed they were essential aspects of the student experience and well-being. Nevertheless, every student adapted differently to the situation: students describing themselves as extrovert and social were the most affected by social distancing.

5.2 How meaningful interactions could lead to future solutions

In this section, firstly, I explain how my interactions with the students had meaning, no matter how small my contribution was. Secondly, as the digital transformation director of this business school, I provide some insight into how I could enhance their student experience overall through online interactions beyond the pandemic to encourage socialising.

The interactions I had with students not only had meaning to them but to me as well.

Similarly to Adrien, I also felt like my positive mindset enabled me to appreciate what I had, but one year of isolation made me more withdrawn. Through the few social interactions I had with the students, I unearthed the altruism I had buried in me for too long. Conducting this autoethnography during the pandemic convinced me that I had to develop a sustainable way to help students find their paths and succeed in their life. It felt like a new step in the evolution of my consciousness to become a better self.

“Friendship as method” enabled me to extend the relationship with some students beyond the interviews. I offered my help to John. Although he was not fluent in French, I could help him find an internship and finally experience life in France.

I helped Pat find a doctor and a university to pursue his studies in France later. He is probably not the only one suffering, and I feel the urge to improve everyone’s situation.

Finally, when I asked Adrien what the school could do to improve everyone’s situation, he said:

“The school may wanna try to communicate better, to go and meet students like you do today, to accompany them individually and engage the conversation”.

I realised how such simple conversations had meaning to them. I needed to develop a solution that could facilitate the social interactions between students and staff so that no one was left behind.

Students had difficulties articulating their own solutions, in particular, to replicate extracurricular activities online. Nonetheless, they provided me with insights that could be further studied in future research.

As a digital transformation director, these insights encourage me to think of using a social constructivist approach, notably through online discussions across all the institution’s departments and the students on the one hand. The newly implemented LMS, Canvas, could be used to create such an environment to support the students all along their student experience by making them active contributors on forums, Wikis and other types of online social interactions. As part of their extracurricular activities, I could also involve them in designing part of this student experience themselves to answer their own needs, help each other and ensure that all cohorts benefit from a consistent experience where “no one is left behind”. The intercultural aspect could be emphasised through the forum discussions so that students develop a global mind and openness.

My role implies supporting lecturers to become online tutors. However, my own experience supporting students during the pandemic urges me to think that all the institution’s staff could better support students online. I would need to consider involving all the administrative staff (Student affairs, Talent Centre-Student Life, Apprenticeship departments) and conduct further research to study how they could take on such roles to support students online across their professional and extracurricular experience.

On the other hand, the students’ insights also lead me to think of developing authentic learning activities in groups, including extracurricular activities, which trigger their motivation and help them connect their learning experience with their future self.

Authentic learning incorporates group work where students experience real-life situations across various disciplines and use their unique, personal skills to solve a complex problem while self-reflecting and making meaning of it to transform themselves (Herrington et al., 2010; Lee, 2020, p572-573). Such a learning approach enables students to become authentic beings, support each other to grow and find meaning in their endeavour together and make a difference in society (Kreber, 2013).

Yu and Bryant (2019) evidenced that the students’ routines in group work influence how they interact online through their academic experience and social experience. Therefore, the institution should consider designing additional authentic learning activities in the classroom, facilitating social interactions in informal settings and linking every activity to the overall student experience.

Nevertheless, there are four limitations to this digital student experience.

First, extracurricular activities contribute to the students’ growth, notably because they volunteer and choose to do the activities with whomever they want. Embedding them into the curriculum might have a counter-productive effect and increase the risk of negative social interactions such as conflicts or bullying (Berger et al., 2020).

Second, while a comprehensive digital student experience may help to facilitate communication with and between students, all interviewees valued having “real interactions” on campus. Consequently, online interactions should only enhance and not replace face-to-face activities beyond the pandemic.

Third, authentic learning activities may be challenging to implement and are time-consuming for the educators and staff who will interact with the students online.

Finally, developing a consistent experience across cohorts will be challenging in a bilingual environment with French and English-speaking students. While it is possible to design a course with an immersive reader in Canvas (translating a course page in one click), it is unlikely that students speaking different languages communicate on the same forums.

Therefore, a divide between English-speaking and Nicolas' French-speaking cohorts may subsist.

6. Conclusion

Karasmanaki and Tsantopoulos (2021) emphasised that "online learning became the new normal".

Covid-19 had such a significant impact that I took a stance, considering it as an opportunity to re-think how we learn, interact with one another and experience life inclusively.

The research has highlighted emerging issues related to the pandemic and made visible pre-existing issues that need to be addressed.

My interactions with the students highlighted how the lack of social relations threatened their well-being. I argue that a more inclusive student experience based on a social constructivist approach where both staff and students actively use online discussions could help improve the students' well-being and growth. This study also contends that authentic learning activities need to be further developed as part of the entire student experience to enable their self-actualisation. They need to closely mirror reality to give them a sense of purpose.

To conclude, further research needs to be carried out to identify how such an experience can be designed in practice. There is also a need to study how different types of activities influence individuals with different personality traits and skills and how each one results in well-being. Nonetheless, I would like all the staff in higher education to think of the role they can play to support the growth of our students across the entire spectrum of the student experience, from the student's registration to graduation and beyond. I would like the students to also think of the active role they can play in designing their own experience. We all have the duty to strive for making the student experience more personal and meaningful.

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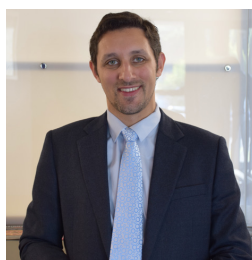
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