"There's no place like campus": Students' need for social connectedness in a post-pandemic learning environment

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationships between students' psychosocial needs and their preferences for online vs. offline learning in a post-pandemic environment. A mixed-methods study was conducted at a higher education institution in Norway with 240 Bachelor students. Students in a post-covid learning environment value pedagogical forms of student-centered learning, through exploration and group reflection work. Second, students report a preference for limited amounts of online learning. Third, students express a significant need for social support, in the form of non-digital interaction with peers and teachers, and campus-based activities. Finally,

while students prefer receiving feedback from peers in physical form, they are also positive toward receiving feedback in a digital form.

These findings indicate that higher education institutions should carefully evaluate the amount of digital teaching offered to students, as such choices influence how and to what degree students are able to socially interact with peers and teachers, and their sense of belonging. More research is needed to understand the challenges associated with psychosocial health and well-being among students, and how this relates to online/offline forms of learning.

Keywords: Student performance, Student Wellbeing, Social support, Digital learning, Post-pandemic

Introduction

After three years of pandemic restrictions and online learning in Norway, students and teachers have gained competence in using digital tools within higher education. Although online/offline hybrid learning solutions have been on the agenda in higher education since the early 2000s, the lockdown brought with it changes in online competencies and work habits, which have become part of everyday life. However, important gaps of knowledge remain unexplored, as research has only begun to unveil the impact of COVID lockdown restrictions on students' education and psychosocial well-being. Whereas some studies have addressed issues such as a lack of social study environments and Zoom fatigue during the pandemic (e.g., Doolan et al., 2021; Solberg et al., 2021; Vee et al., 2022), questions remain with regards to students' welfare and the role of digital tools in a post-pandemic learning environment.

In the autumn of 2022, all corona-related restrictions were lifted in Norway. Physical classes restarted, and the students were back on campus. At the time, concern for students were expressed by influential voices in Norwegian public debate.[1] The concern was primarily for students in their first year (who entered higher education straight out of high school) with no prior experience of sitting written exams. In this climate of unease and worry, we sent out a survey to students to investigate their beliefs in their own abilities to succeed in their studies. We were especially curious to see how the first-year students responded. Though this was our starting point, the qualitative, open-ended responses we collected from students made it clear to us they had other things on their mind apart from worrying about exams. For example, the students expressed the importance of a supportive social environment, the need to belong, and concerns about their own mental health. These answers pointed us in the direction of another current and highly debated topic in Norway, namely the high prevalence of mental health problems reported in national student surveys (e.g., Sivertsen & Johansen, 2022). The most recent national student survey indicates that one out of three students qualify as having a mental illness, most frequently anxiety and/or depression (Solberg & Johansen, 2023). The answers we received were unforeseen and could not be fully explained by Albert Bandura's model of self-efficacy, which was the starting point for our survey. It thus followed that we needed to apply an explorative, Grounded Theory approach to further understand the subjective experiences expressed by our student sample, the outcomes of which are presented in this paper.

A large body of research has found associations between self-efficacy and student learning outcomes in higher education (Bartimote-Aufflick et al., 2015). However, the association between self-efficacy, stress, and mental health has been less studied (Robotham, 2008). A related, yet distinct, concept to self-efficacy is Axel Honneth's "self-esteem (1996). This concept has become a focal point to the study of learning behavior (Morrison & Thomas, 1975), academic aspirations (Zuckerman, 1980), and academic performance (Román et al., 2008). Generally, studies suggest that high levels of self-esteem foster higher academic achievement and is a stronger predicator of academic achievement than self-efficacy (Asakereh & Yousofi, 2018). However, studies linking self-esteem and psychosocial wellbeing to online versus offline learning in a post-pandemic student environment is lacking.

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[1] https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/wOwKAL/de-gikk-nesten-hele-videregaaende-i-unntakstilstand-naa-inntar-de-universitetene; https://khrono.no/hostens-forstearsstudenter-trenger-saerskilte-tiltak/676116

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In this paper, we explore the relationships between students' expressed needs for supportive relationships and social environments and their preferences for online vs. campus-based learning. "Online learning" is understood as digital real-time learning in the form of lectures, teacher-facilitated group work, and group/individual supervisions. "Hybrid learning solutions" is understood as a combination of online learning and physically present, campus-based learning. This paper aims to contribute to the discussion on such hybrid learning solutions from the perspective of a "pedagogy of recognition" (Honneth, 1996; Bainbridge, 2015). To do so, we explore the following:

What are the relationships between students' psychosocial needs and their preferences for online vs. offline learning in a post-pandemic environment?

First, we explore relational perspectives to education and outline a theoretical framework for a "pedagogy of recognition" in a post-pandemic learning environment. Next, we present the methods applied in our survey and to this exploratory study. Thirdly, the quantitative and qualitative results of our survey are presented, followed by a discussion of these results in light of Axel Honneth's spheres of recognition and hybrid online vs. offline learning in higher education. Finally, we suggest implications for future choices we make in our role as educators when considering online/offline hybrid solutions.

Theoretical Approach: Self-esteem and a Pedagogy of Recognition

Albert Bandura: An Individual-Focused Perspective on Student Life

Our original study was hypothesis-driven, based on Bandura's (1977) theoretical framework of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy (i.e., belief in one's own abilities) is known to have a positive effect on academic performance (Bartimote-Aufflick et al., 2015; Ayllón et al., 2019). Bandura theorized four main sources to self-efficacy: (1) previous experience with the same or similar task; (2) praise from a person highly qualified in the field of the task; (3) comparison to peers; and (4) the state of physical and mental health. Although it can be argued that Sources 2 and 3 have relational aspects, Bandura's theoretical model is not centered around relational and communal qualities. Rather, one could argue that in Bandura's model the individual is presented as a receptacle who is receiving feedback (Source 2), or as someone observing and comparing oneself to others from a distance (Source 3). While Bandura's model can be said to indirectly include aspects of social relations, as mental states (Source 4) are highly affected by our relationships and sense of belonging, this is not made explicit nor given center stage as a decisive dimension in Bandura's theoretical framework of self-efficacy. Therefore, when analyzing the results of our student sample and their expressed needs for social relationships and a supportive environment, we found that an alternative theoretical model was needed to understand the data.

Approaches to Education

We find a similar perception of the student as a receptacle in the traditional approach to education. Traditionally, education has been understood as transmission of knowledge from a teacher to a student with the appropriate method for learning being attending lectures. This educational practice within higher education is anchored in philosophical and religious traditions which predate literacy (Bartlett & Burton, 2007). Here, knowledge is understood as a measurable entity separate from the individual, and where individuals are separate from each other.

Alternative approaches to education are those of the German "bildung" (Westbury et al., 2000), the humanistic (Rogers, 1969), and the social pedagogy (Schugurensky & Silver, 2013) traditions. These are built on the humanities. Here, the student is seen as someone undergoing a personal and holistic development ("bildung") in the encounter with the world and the unknown. This process of maturing cannot be understood as separate from the student's social environment, as it is in the relational quality itself that education takes place. In other words, it is in the space between two persons or in the web of relations making up a social environment that new development unfolds. The role of a teacher is then not merely to transmit knowledge, but to facilitate learning by creating a social, motivational, and supportive environment around the student. Within this environment, meaningful relationships take form and learning takes place through exploration and reflection within these relational dyads and supportive environments. Student-centered learning and group reflection work are examples of methods applied in higher education that are based on these traditions.

Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy and its Contribution to the Field of Education

A more recent contribution to the field of education is Axel Honneth's social philosophy. According to Honneth (1996), "recognition" is a basic human need that can only take place in a relation – in the encounter between one individual and another. Within the field of education, this is known as "the pedagogy of recognition". For Honneth, there are three ways in which an individual can experience recognition that are applicable to learning in a higher educational context. The first source to recognition is through the love students receive from parents, in intimate relationships, and through close friendships with peers. The second source to recognition is through being recognized as a rights-bearing citizen with individual as well as group-based rights. In Norway, students have the right to a psychosocial supportive learning environment, and institutions of higher education have a duty to provide them with an environment that ensures them health, safety, and welfare[2]. The third source to recognition is through belonging to a social environment where students feel appreciated for their unique contribution and feel solidarity as well as share common goals and interests with others in their group. According to Honneth, this is the web of relations from which an individual experiences "self-worth", also referred to as "self-esteem", as they receive recognition from the group for their capabilities and positive qualities. With his theoretical framework, Honneth laid the foundation for a "pedagogy of recognition", as also these dimensions of student life are included in the choices we make as educators (Nixon et al., 1997; Walker, 2002). From our qualitative data, it is our view that the students' needs for meaningful relationships, supportive social environments, and a sense of belonging are better understood through Honneth's concept of "self-esteem" rather than Bandura's "self-efficacy".

Digital Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic

As we connect the act of teaching to that of students' need for recognition, we need to consider whether online (as opposed to offline) learning can provide students with these needs. Although the recorded increase in mental health problems among students during the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be solely explained by a lack of on-campus learning, this period nevertheless provides us with a unique opportunity to explore how students experience a situation where online learning is

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[2] Act relating to universities and university colleges, §§ 4-3 Learning environment:

https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2005-04-01-15

the only option. Studies conducted with students at Norwegian universities in the spring and autumn of 2020 (during lockdown) indicate that students experienced the biggest challenges to be from a lack of social study environments, a lack of contact and feedback from fellow students and lecturers, and difficulties in structuring their everyday life (Egelandsdal & Hansen, 2021; Jelsness-Jørgensen, 2020; Solberg et al., 2021). Moreover, many students who started higher education in the autumn of 2020 experienced difficulties with establishing social relationships with fellow students, as they had few physical meeting places (Egelandsdal & Hansen, 2021; Solberg et al., 2021). Taken together, the closure of physical campuses and transition to digital learning seem to have contributed to psychosocial stress (Solberg et al., 2021) as well as lower wellbeing, particularly among students without a supportive social network (Doolan et al., 2021). Many students also experienced that their academic performance deteriorated during this period, due to a lack of quiet study environments, good internet connection, social networks, and psychological well-being (Doolan et al., 2021).

In addition to the psychosocial challenges linked to isolation and a lack of physical meeting places, studies suggest that students experience burnout and exhaustion from digital learning, so-called "Zoom fatigue" (Bailenson, 2021; Massner, 2021; Vee et al., 2022). Importantly, however, Bern et al. (2021) show that online learning in real time contributes to both opportunities and limitations for the establishment and development of learning, and that students may experience this differently. The obstacles lie in not wanting to be visible, not seeing fellow students and thus losing track of the communication, as well as not being visible to the lecturer. The possibilities are that real-time online learning can be similar to on-campus learning and thus feel natural for some students. Students may also perceive online communication to protect them against other people's reactions and enable more direct communication with their teacher (Bern et al., 2021). Nevertheless, a literature review of research conducted during the COVID-pandemic suggests that the majority of students experienced Zoom fatigue during online learning, and that this was mainly due to technological challenges, cognitive overload, and lack of social interactions (Vee et al., 2022). Shorter teaching sessions, frequent breaks, and student-active forms of teaching appear to provide relief from Zoom fatigue (Vee et al., 2022).

Mixed Methods and a Grounded Theory Approach Study Design

The results of this paper are based on a survey sent out to students in higher education in the fall of 2022, when campus-based learning was fully resumed. Although the original aim of the survey was to test Albert Bandura's self-efficacy model, the results discussed in this paper are qualitative statements which fell outside of our chosen theoretical framework. We have therefore adapted an explorative, Grounded Theory methodological approach to this qualitative dataset (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Our original aim was to investigate levels of self-efficacy among students who had entered higher education straight out of high school (i.e., a group with no experience of sitting written exams). We applied a cross-sectional survey design and recruited participants during the first post-pandemic semester with physical on-campus teaching. While the first-year students were our main group of interest, we also included students from the second and third year to act as comparison groups. Since all the students in our sample have been affected by the pandemic (in

some way or another), they can be used to explore this paper's research question: What are the relationships between students' psychosocial needs and their preferences for online vs. offline learning in a post-pandemic environment?

This study employs mixed methods (i.e., both quantitative and qualitative approaches) to better grasp the phenomenon in question. The quantitative questions had standardized answer options, whereas the qualitative questions were meant to provide in-depth and supplementary insights to the quantitative data. The design has limitations regarding causality, as the relationships between phenomena studied in this paper are understood as interconnected, but not as one isolated factor affecting another. Another limitation is that the response rate to the survey was 19%, which limits the generalizability of the findings.

Participants

The sample comprised 247 students (18-52 years; Mage = 23.5; n = 196 identified as female, n = 52 identified as male) and included first-, second- and third-year Bachelor students at [BLINDED] majoring in Economics & Administration, Organization & Management, Psychology, Tourism, and Social Work (see Table 1). Gathering data from a variety of study programs as well as from first-, second- and third-year students may increase the generalizability of the findings from the study sample to the larger student population.

Students completed the survey digitally in the period 19.10.22 - 28.10.22 via Nettskjema[3]. Students could access the survey via the online learning platform Canvas, but were also informed about, and encouraged to participate in, the study during lectures. In some lectures, time was set aside for students to answer the survey.

Table 1: Number of students per Major

Major	n
Economics & Administration	5
Organization & Management	35
Psychology	121
Tourism	27
Social Work	58
Total	247

Measures

Quantitative Measures

Preference for a Physical vs. Digital Teaching and Learning Environment

Students were asked: "When you read and work with assignments, where do you prefer to be?" Students could choose between the following options: "at campus", "at home", and "other". Students were additionally asked: "Do you prefer to be physically or digitally present during lectures?" Students could choose between one of the two options.

Campus-Based vs. Digital Attendance

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[3] https://www.uio.no/english/services/it/adm-services/nettskjema/

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Students were asked to indicate their agreement with two statements assessing whether they were normally physically (as opposed to digitally) present for teaching and learning: "I am normally physically present on campus when there are lectures"; "I am normally physically present on campus when working on group assignments". Responses were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree).

Campus-Based vs. Digital outcomes

Students were asked to indicate their agreement with one statement assessing their perception of how physical (as opposed to digital) attendance affected their self-efficacy: "I notice that I gain more confidence in my abilities to succeed with my studies when I am physically (as opposed to digitally) present for lectures and group work". Students were then asked to indicate their agreement with two statements assessing how they perceived encouragement and support from their peers in a physical vs. digital setting: "I believe encouragement and support from my peers affect me positively when we work physically together"; "I believe encouragement and support from my peers affect me positively when we work digitally together". Responses were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree).

Qualitative Data and Analysis

Using open-ended responses, we asked the students to reflect upon the following: 1) "Does succeeding with your studies mean something else to you apart from achieving good grades, completing your studies, or learning something new?"; 2) "Are there other factors (not mentioned above)[4] that you think could enhance your confidence in succeeding with your studies?" We received 149 responses. The answers were a mix of several themes. Some were related to previous exam experiences, their views on how teachers must facilitate for exams, their work routines, and future job security and opportunities. These responses are not discussed in this paper. What is discussed are the responses where students expressed the following: a desire for self-development through their studies; a preference for student-centered and reflection-based learning; concerns about their mental health; their need for relationships; social support from peers and teachers; a sense of belonging; being part of a community; and online vs. offline learning preferences.

We analyzed the qualitative data following Giorgi's (2009) phenomenological method. This is done by identifying central themes and dimensions of the phenomenon using participants' own expressions as starting point. The analysis consists of four stages. First, the researcher acquires a general descriptive overview of the data. Second, similar experiences, interests, wishes, attitudes, and perspectives are grouped together based on participants' own expressions (thematic categories). Third, the researcher identifies meanings which are revealed through comparing the content within and across these categories. As the researcher applies more abstract descriptive terminology (etic categories), new meaning entities emerge. Lastly, from a wide theoretical landscape, the researcher selects the theoretical perspective that appears to be most relevant to further understand these meaning entities. This is the final step in Giorgi's analytical method and corresponds to Strauss & Corbin's (1996) Grounded Theory approach. Strauss and Corbin emphasized the importance of choosing theory at the end stage of analysis for inductive research designs, as opposed to deductive designs. In the Grounded Theory approach, theory is seen as a

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[4] The questions above which we referred to were based on Bandura's four sources to self-efficacy, which were the starting point of our survey.

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tool to further understand informants' descriptions of their experiences, rather than to test theory-driven hypotheses.

Table 2: Steps of Analysis Following Giorgi's Phenomenological Method

Informant quotes	Thematic categories	Meaning phenomena	Theoretical perspective
"Good friends and a social life that supports me." "To have more time for my closest relationships." "To have my parents believe in me."	Support from loved ones	Self-worth from relational dyads with close others	Honneth's first source of recognition: love from family and friendships
"To have more support from teachers. We are often just given assignments without any concrete explanations or help. I have experienced this as extremely exhausting, and it has had a negative effect upon my mental health." "To have more follow-up and encouragement from teachers and student program organizers."	Support from teachers	Self-worth from relational dyads with teachers	Part of Honneth's pedagogy of recognition: student-teacher relationships
"To have good cooperation between us students, especially during group work. Cheer each other on." "To have a good group where everyone does their part and help each other."	Support from peers	Self-worth from peer groups recognizing one's capabilities/positive qualities; web of relations	Honneth's concept of self-esteem through sense of belonging to a group
"A sense of belonging to the student environment is important. This becomes difficult if you are only operating in a	Support from the social environment	Self-worth from belonging to a community; web of relations	Honneth's concept of self-esteem from sense of belonging to a wider

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Informant quotes	Thematic categories	Meaning phenomena	Theoretical perspective
foreign social climate." "Easier to succeed when you have a good social environment around you."	surrounding the student		community
"To acquire personal experiences and develop as a person and fellow human being." "Where the teacher does not just repeat book content (most people should be able to read this themselves), but rather creates reflection and engagement around the syllabus."	Education through reflection; education as self-development	Self-worth from education as a process of maturing	Education as "bildung"; part of Honneth's pedagogy of recognition

Ethical Considerations

Three ethical principles were relevant to this study: 1) participants' right to self-determination and autonomy; 2) participants' right to a private life; and 3) participants' right to safety. First, to safeguard participants' right to self-determination and autonomy (1), students were informed that participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain anonymous and un-identifiable in the written report. Second, to respect participants' right to private life (2), students were only sent one reminder to fill in the survey. Finally, we discussed and made adjustments to the wording of certain items to avoid causing harm to the participants (3). Seeing as the study did not gather sensitive information, it was not subject to approval by an ethics committee or the national data protection agency (Norsk senter for forskningsdata). To take part in a lottery to win a gift certificate, students could provide their e-mail address at the end of the survey. These e-mail addresses were stored separately from, and could not be linked to, the data.

Results

Quantitative Results

Preference for a Physical vs. Digital Teaching and Learning Environment

A majority of students in our sample indicated a preference for working on campus (51.4%) over working from home (42.4%). An even larger proportion of students in our sample (76.2%) indicated a preference for physical (as opposed to digital) teaching.

Physical vs. Digital Attendance

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A majority of students in our sample indicated that they were normally physically (as opposed to digitally) present for lectures (77.4%) and group work (85%).

Physical vs. Digital Outcomes:

A majority of students in our sample (completely) agreed that being physically present for lectures and group work increased their confidence in their own abilities (68.1%), while a minority (16.9%) neither disagreed nor agreed. A similar proportion of students (completely) agreed that encouragement and support from their peers affected them positively when working digitally (76.2%) and physically (68.9%) together.

Qualitative Results

From our qualitative, free-association questions, we were left with an impression of students which we had not anticipated. When students were asked about what succeeding in their studies meant to them, many students brought up personal development:

- For me, being successful in my studies involves becoming a better person and learning moreabout myself.

- The grades are only a biproduct of the competence I gain from reflecting over the syllabus and lectures.

- […] teachers [should] not just repeat book content […] but rather create reflection and engagement around the syllabus and lectures. When I sit for the exam, I want to have acquired knowledge that is not memorized but put into context and understood – at a level where I am able to discuss.

These answers are in line with a humanistic view of education, in which an individual is seen to be on a personal journey toward maturity. We also saw this in the answers that included mentions of welfare:

-To be better equipped to meet life's challenges.

-A secure future.

-To get high marks and learn something new, while at the same time being content and having good mental health.

-A sense of achievement. / That I have done my best.

In addition, and again in line with a humanistic view, we see that students situate education within social relationships:

- To get to know new people.

- Cooperation.

- To get better at my job so I can help others.

When students were asked about what could help them succeed in higher education, the focus on the psychosocial aspects of their life became even more apparent. Students expressed a significant

need for social support and described three sources of social support. Most attention was given to the need for social support from peers, and the importance of belonging to a community:

-Pleasant gatherings with fellow students that increase a sense of community – e.g., being able to express what is difficult about the studies and feeling less alone about struggling with the syllabus.

- It is easier to succeed when you have a good environment surrounding you, something I have in my study program.

- Good friends and a good social life that supports me.

The second most stated source of social support referred to support from teachers:

- Personal feedback and guidance from teacher/mentor, not just groups.

- It is important to have pleasant and committed teachers. Many are good at this and encourage us students and respond in a pleasant way if we give input or come up with questions.

The third most stated source of social support referred to support from family:

- Support from my parents, that they believe in me.

Another observation we made of the qualitative data was that some students brought up their mental health. Some described feeling excluded, in isolation, or in states of hopelessness:

-It doesn't feel like I have a choice. It is almost survival, avoiding hopelessness, sitting without doing anything every day. Then you choose to do something you don't feel you can master, with the small hope that it will later give [you] meaning and hope.

-The intimidation tactics that have been present a lot since the start of this semester as well as the noticeable stress do not give me a positive attitude to succeed. And the obvious "you have to find out everything yourself" doesn't make it easy.

Others wrote about mental health as something they pay close attention to:

-Keep up the motivation and remember to take breaks so that you don't get burnout.

-To be content outside of my studies also helps me get out of any negative thought patterns.

Finally, there were six qualitative answers from students who requested more online and hybrid learning solutions:

-IMPORTANT: To be able to choose yourself whether to participate physically or virtually on lectures. The COVID period showed that this works perfectly for many of us and makes everyday life EASIER, so that you have energy to focus on what is essential to succeed,

> *rather than transportation. Many more would (successfully) study fulltime this way! Still important with obligatory physical meetup for presentations, practical training, etc.*

> *-Digital teaching, which makes it's easier to combine work with studies. Possibly recording of lectures, which means that you can watch these later if lectures crash with work/other things.*

Discussion

Since the early 2000s, there has been a growing demand for higher education institutions to employ online or hybrid (online/offline) learning solutions. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the so-called "digital revolution" in higher education, as many lecturers had to quickly adapt to using digital tools. Considering the high prevalence of mental health problems reported in recent national student surveys (e.g., Solberg & Johansen, 2023), this paper explores the relationships between students' psychosocial needs and their preferences for online vs. offline learning.

A Preference for Limited Online Learning

In our qualitative data, six students raised the need for more online learning. One of these students linked this need to demands at work. Balancing work demands and studies is part of most students' lives in Norway today. However, our quantitative results showed that the vast majority of students in our sample preferred, and engaged better in, learning environments in which they and their teachers were physically present. Moreover, our qualitative data showed that students themselves viewed academic success to not only be based on grades, but also on their personal development, growth, and psychosocial wellbeing. In addition to this, the students in our sample expressed a wish for campus-based social relationships and supportive social environments. These findings point toward a humanistic perspective to education and are in line with Honneth's "pedagogy of recognition". Moreover, these findings show that, in our student sample, students who prefer online teaching are in a clear minority. Yet, it may very well be that the post-pandemic discourse on hybrid learning solutions is more influenced by students who shout the loudest about their preference for online learning (see the quote above with capital letters: "IMPORTANT...EASIER..."). In light of this, it may be important to reduce the amount of online learning in higher education (or at the very least not increase it).

Another important dimension to consider in the context of hybrid learning is "Zoom fatigue" (Bailenson, 2021; Massner, 2021; Vee et al., 2022), and how online learning adds to the time students already spend online as part of their everyday life. In Norway, over 52% of students report having a social media addiction (Sivertsen & Johansen, 2022). Related to this, studies have shown that internet addiction positively correlates with depression amongst students in higher education (Oliveira et al., 2022; Orsal et al., 2013). Yet some students seem to flourish in an online rather than in an offline learning context, as they feel more protected against other students' reactions and able to engage more directly with the teacher (Bern et al., 2021). It is important therefore that also these students are considered when planning future scenarios of hybrid learning environments. Moreover, although most students referred to digital student life as a major challenge during the pandemic (Egelandsdal & Hansen, 2021; Solberg et al., 2021), some

students in our sample reported that the lockdown had a positive effect on them by improving their work routines.

Loneliness vs. Physical Meetups - Potential Spinoff-Effects

One of our most notable findings is that many students in our sample expressed a need for social support, meaningful relationships, and a social learning environment to which they can belong. Related to this, in a recent Norwegian national student survey (Sivertsen & Johansen, 2022), 29% of students reported they "often/very often" miss someone to be with. Twenty percent report they "often/very often" feel excluded and "often/very often" feel isolated. During lockdown in 2021, an even larger proportion (41%) of students reported feeling lonely. Several studies have shown that, during the pandemic, students reported a lack of contact and feedback from co-students and lecturers (Egelandsdal & Hansen, 2021; Jelsness-Jørgensen, 2020). Although levels of loneliness have dropped since then, they are still high, and potentially on the rise (Sivertsen & Johansen, 2022). According to another recent national survey, there is a weak decline in student satisfaction with their social student environment from 2019 to 2022 (NOKUT, 2022). Thus, even though levels of social interactions were at their lowest during the COVID-19 lockdown, experiences of inclusion are not back to pre-pandemic scores (NOKUT, 2022).

With these scores of perceived loneliness and exclusion, it is important to consider that social encounters often have positive spinoff-effects. For example, showing up to class can lead to informal and unfacilitated "hangouts", such as sharing a meal together with other students. This has the potential to enhance self-esteem – Honneth's (1996) third sphere of recognition. In these informal contexts, students learn about each other's unique qualities and can develop a sense of identity as a group within a larger student community. This can in turn foster social solidarity and common goals. Moreover, being "silent together", for example when studying together in the library, can improve well-being (Fagerlid, 2016). Taken together, physical meetings in and outside of the classroom can lead to students experiencing a sense of belonging. Moreover, when students actively participate in a community, this may lead to close friendships. Such friendships can become part of a student's private social circle – Honneth's first form of recognition. In line with this, our qualitative data indicate that students express a clear need for friendships with fellow students, and a sense of belonging to a student community. In a discussion of online versus offline learning and perceived loneliness, the question remains: what social possibilities are we as lecturers taking away from students when we transfer certain campus-based lectures, group work and supervisions to online platforms?

Students' Mental Health, and Hybrid Forms of Social Connectedness

Social relationships are fundamental to students' sense of self-worth and mental health. National statistics show that psychological well-being amongst students in Norway is on a decline (Solberg & Johansen, 2023; Sivertsen & Johansen, 2022). Although the number of students reporting mental health problems was at a peak in 2021, the number has increased from every sixth student in 2010 to every third student in 2022 (Sivertsen & Johansen, 2022). Today, every fifth student reports having a psychological diagnosis, and a recent survey of student mental health suggests that every third student qualifies as having a mental illness (Solberg & Johansen, 2023). While offline learning may not necessarily be the only answer to mental health problems among students, studies have documented how the first-year students who started their studies during

lockdown in the autumn of 2020, struggled with the lack of a supportive social environment (Egelandsdal & Hansen, 2021; Solberg et al., 2021). These first-year students had not previously developed relationships to other students. Second- and third-year students, on the other hand, had already established social ties with one another, which then, at least to some degree, seem to have been transferred to different forms of online social connectedness during lockdown (Egelandsdal & Hansen, 2021; Solberg et al., 2021). It thus seems to be the case that while students may struggle initiating close relationships online, they are able to maintain such relationships online. In fact, most of us now engage in a hybrid form of connectedness in our closest relationships, with both digital and physical communication and meet-ups (Broch, 2022). That said, we know that some individuals find a sense of belonging to groups online, which is particularly notable within gaming communities (Prochnow et al., 2020). Research has shown that for groups with various types of social anxiety, it can be easier to socially connect with others online than offline. This is because digital connectedness affords people certain possibilities of control (Broch, 2022). Thus, for (some) socially anxious individuals, the pandemic may have been experienced as a relief, as they did not feel pressure to engage in social activities where they had to be physically present.

Since the lockdown in the autumn of 2020, Norwegian students have rated the degree to which they felt well integrated into a social student environment (NOKUT, 2022). The results clearly show that the number of students reporting feeling "well integrated" declines as the amount of online learning increases. For students who have had online learning almost exclusively, the proportion of students who "agree/completely agree" to feeling well integrated decreases to less than 40% (NOKUT, 2022). However, it is only when online learning exceeds 50% that the proportion of students who "agree/completely agree" to feeling well integrated decreases from 60% to 55%. Therefore, it is not the case that 100% campus-based learning would guarantee social inclusion. Interestingly, the results of our survey showed that 76.2% agreed that online feedback from their peers had a good effect on them. In fact, student approval rate was higher for digital than physical feedback (68.9%). This indicates that group reflection work may in fact be possible to achieve in some forms of online learning. It also suggests a development in students' experiences and competencies with using digital tools online, having dealt with online feedback since the lockdown in 2020. Such digital competencies are valuable for their future integration into society. Studies suggest that higher education institutions play an important role in improving digital literacy skills (Arslantas et al., 2023). Higher education institutions also play an important role in preparing students for adult working life through helping them develop both online and offline social skills and establish social conduct.

Limitations and Future Directions

The statistics from NOKUT paint a picture of how various types of social connectedness, but also forms of loneliness and isolation, occurs online as well as offline. The extent to which online vs. offline encounters promote self-esteem and a sense of belonging need further exploration in a post-pandemic learning context, as many questions are left unanswered. Our own data is limited to Bachelor students expecting a fulltime student life. The results may therefore not be representative of the whole student population. Students who sign up for purely online courses will have other expectations. Furthermore, our qualitative dataset is limited. There is thus a need to follow up these data with in-depth interviews and longitudinal studies. Researchers may for example opt to follow various student groups over the course of their degree. Such study designs

may give valuable insights into how student relationships and communities form online and offline, and whether they last over time or are disrupted.

A pressing question is how to take better care of our most vulnerable student group. In Norway, every fifth student reports having a psychological diagnosis. Every fifth student reports having purposely inflicted pain on themselves, and 5% report having tried to take their own life (Sivertsen & Johansen, 2022). The body of students who are the most psychologically vulnerable is diverse, and we do not know enough about this body of students to say for certain who would benefit from online vs. offline learning, and in what form. Can research that was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic given us some valuable information in this regard? It seems that for the group of first-year students in 2020, the lack of physical meetup possibilities was a hindrance to establishing a social student environment which had the potential to be transferred online (Egelandsdal & Hansen, 2021; Solberg et al., 2021). This is an indication of the need to establish regular on-campus meetups for first-year students in a post-pandemic learning environment that increasingly employs digital learning. However, research over the COVID-pandemic has also shown that for certain students, online learning feels more controlled, and therefore socially safer (Bern et al., 2021). It may well be that for some of the most vulnerable students, online learning and online social platforms can be experienced as more socially inclusive than campus-based meetups.

Conclusion: Suggested Implications for Hybrid Online/Offline Learning

In this paper, we have explored students' self-reported preferences for online vs. offline learning, as well as their psychosocial needs for supportive relationships and social environments. Our study provides a starting point for discussion, as it represents a "snapshot in time" of students' lives, preferences and needs at a time when COVID-19 pandemic lockdown-measures had recently been lifted.

Our results indicated first and foremost that many students wanted student-centered forms of education that encourage reflection and a journey toward personal development and maturity. Second, many students reported a preference for campus-based learning, and to be physically present for lectures and group work. Third, many students wanted encouragement and support from teachers and fellow students, as well as to feel a sense of belonging to a student community. Finally, while many students valued campus-based feedback, many reported that they were also positive toward receiving feedback in a digital form.

The overall picture we are left with is a testimony of the complex present post-pandemic landscape, where both learning and social life dimensions are interlinked with online and offline social connectedness or lack thereof. Loneliness and psychosocial well-being are real and of increasing concern, which higher education institutions in Norway are legally obliged to address. However, it does not follow that a complete return to campus-based learning is the only solution to these challenges. When we look at students' overall satisfaction with their social environment, this only declines when online learning exceeds 50% of the total amount of education offered in their student program (NOKUT, 2022).

From the perspective of a "pedagogy of recognition", our role as educators cannot be reduced to the function of transmission of knowledge (from teacher to student). When we as lecturers make

choices concerning online-offline hybrid solutions for learning, we need to ask ourselves what the consequences of our choices will be for students' psychosocial needs and learning. Moreover, we ought to consider that when we plan lectures, group work and evaluation feedback online, we add to the total time spent online to a group in society which is already prone to internet addiction.

When lecturers opt for online rather than offline (campus-based) teaching formats, social encounters are transferred online. Whether lecturers can transfer their role as social facilitators from an offline to an online setting is not clear. If that is not possible, and online teaching is to continue, other social activities on campus need to be established to facilitate social encounters. It is important, however, to bear in mind that social connectedness may be easier online than offline for some students. Thus, institutions ought to also facilitate online meetups for students who function better in online than offline social settings. An important role of educators is to actively encourage experiences of self-worth and self-esteem among students through the building of meaningful relationships and communities. These are thus dimensions which higher education institutions must bring into decision-making processes when planning and budgeting for hybrid online/offline courses in a post-pandemic learning environment.

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