

Invitation

You are cordially invited to the public defence to obtain the academic degree of

DOCTOR OF BUSINESS ECONOMICS

by Lize Vanderstraeten

**Navigating change during the transition to higher education:
Evidence on student well-being and orientation initiatives in economics and business education**

Supervisors:

Prof. dr. Evelien Opdecam

Prof. dr. Patricia Everaert

Tuesday, 18 June 2024 at 17h00

in Vandenhove Paviljoen, Rozier 1, 9000 Ghent

Please confirm your attendance no later than 11 June by email to lize.vanderstraeten@ugent.be.

EXAMINATION BOARD

Prof. dr. Johan Christiaens
Chair, Ghent University

Prof. dr. Evelien Opdecam
Supervisor, Ghent University

Prof. dr. Patricia Everaert
Supervisor, Ghent University

Dr. Davy Vercruysse
Ghent University

Prof. dr. Wim Beyers
Ghent University

Prof. dr. Nadine Engels
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Prof. dr. Chi Baik
University of Melbourne

Dr. Nicola Beatson
University of Otago

Abstract

The transition to higher education presents substantial challenges for first-year students, requiring major adjustments and expectations. Understanding and supporting incoming first-year students early on is crucial, as their well-being is pivotal for their academic success. Well-being influences students' ability to cope with transitional challenges. Institutions must foster supportive environments to ensure successful transitions, thereby contributing to students' well-being and academic success. This dissertation addresses two research objectives: monitoring changes in first-year students' well-being and investigating how well-being relates to challenging circumstances (R01) and exploring and evaluating an orientation day as a targeted initiative to support students' well-being and transition to higher education (R02). Therefore, this dissertation adds value through its combination of its two research objectives: measuring the *as-is* of first-year student well-being through R01 and aiming to achieve an improved *to-be* through R02.

Study 1 (Chapter 2) addresses R01 by examining the effects of the challenging circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic on student well-being and transition. Next to well-being, this study measures students' academic confidence, feeling of informedness, and self-efficacy. Cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses are combined to compare a pre-covid student cohort and a covid-affected student cohort and examine the covid-affected student cohort over time. Cross-sectional analyses demonstrate no significant negative effects of COVID-19 at the start of the academic year, but a negative effect three weeks later. Furthermore, longitudinal analyses indicate significant changes in students' well-being and self-efficacy throughout their first year: significant declines during the first semester, followed by a slight recovery at the start of the second semester. *Study 2 (Chapter 3)* covers the first examination period as a challenging circumstance for first-year students to cope with, thereby contributing to R01. This study investigates how changes in well-being and self-efficacy relate to course performance in the first examination period. The bidirectional relationship between, on the one hand, well-being and self-efficacy and, on the other hand, course performance is examined. The findings indicate that well-being before the examination period affects students' course performance. Furthermore, better course performance leads to higher well-being and self-efficacy at the start of the next semester, as well as elevated well-being and self-efficacy in comparison with the previous semester. This study therefore adds to understanding how students' well-being relates to academic success and how well-being and self-efficacy coevolve with specific challenging events. Through R02, this dissertation explores and evaluates a targeted orientation day as a way of supporting students' well-being and transition. *Study 3 (Chapter 4)* is a qualitative case study, presenting a teaching case on a theory-informed, intentionally designed, empirically evaluated game-based orientation day. This study presents the design principles of the orientation day, founded in educational theory. Furthermore, qualitative survey data offer empirical insights into the feasibility and suitability of the orientation day. Thematic analysis scrutinises students' experiences with the orientation day and prominent strengths they identified, including social integration, active learning, and faculty-student connections. These results elucidate important aspects and potential benefits of highly interactive orientation days to support and enhance students' transition to higher education. *Study 4 (Chapter 5)* addresses R02 through an intervention study, quantitatively assessing the effectiveness of the aforementioned orientation day in comparison with a lecture-based orientation day that served as a control treatment. The effectiveness of the highly interactive game-based orientation day is measured in terms of students' well-being and feeling of informedness, at the orientation day and three weeks later. Cross-sectional results demonstrate that the game-based orientation day is more effective in supporting well-being than the lecture-based orientation day, and at least equally effective in informing students. The findings contribute to the idea that, even given current challenges in contemporary higher education, interactive and deliberately designed orientation days are necessary to foster students' well-being and transition.

This doctoral research, conducted at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of Ghent University (Belgium), explores the well-being of first-year students in an open-admission system. This system is characterised by substantial subsidisation, low barriers to entry, limited resources, high dropout rates, and large and diverse student populations. Many students struggle to adjust to the academic environment, leading to dropout. This is a costly problem for individual students, higher education institutions, the government, and society as a whole, taking into account the high level of subsidisation of higher education in Belgium. These issues are not unique to Belgium; similar challenges exist in Europe and globally, particularly in institutions adopting policies to widen participation. Synthesising insights gained from the empirical studies, this dissertation provides contributions to the academic discourse on first-year student transition and actionable recommendations for educators and policymakers. The implications encourage institutions to rethink how to support first-year students and their well-being. This dissertation seeks to initiate conversations and innovative ideas on how to support first-year students while they navigate change during their transition to higher education.

Curriculum vitae

Lize Vanderstraeten (°1997, Jette) holds the degrees of Master of Science in Business Economics (2018, Ghent University), Master of Science in Communication Science (2020, Ghent University) and Master of Science in Teaching in Economics (2020, Ghent University). She joined the Accounting Education Research Group (Department of Accounting, Corporate Finance and Taxation) at Ghent University in 2020 as a PhD student. Two studies of her dissertation are published. Chapter 2 (Study 1) was published in *Educational Psychology* (<https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2023.2223787>). Chapter 3 (Study 2) was published in *Accounting Education* (<https://doi.org/10.1080/09639284.2024.2354766>). Lize presented her research at several international conferences, including the Developments in Economics Education (DEE) conference (2020, Virtual), the International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation (ICERI) (2021, Virtual), the European Conference for Games Based Learning (ECGBL) (2022, Lisbon), the European Accounting Association (EAA) conference (Bergen, 2022), and the British Accounting & Finance Association SIG Accounting Education Conference (Durham, 2023; Leeds, 2024), where she received the Best Paper Award in 2023. Lize was a visiting researcher at the University of Melbourne for several months in 2023.