

Chapter #9

NAVIGATING CONTRADICTING EXPECTATIONS:

Study demands and resources in European games, animation and VFX education

Silke Hassreiter, A. Treshi-Marie Perera, Tuki Clavero, Lindsey Bouwels, & Mata Haggis-Burridge

The Academy for Games and Media, Breda University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

The games, animation, and visual effects (VFX) creative industries are characterised by high-pressure team projects and oversaturated job markets, leading to contradictory demands for students to become both humble team players and highly competitive self-promoters. Using qualitative semi-structured interviews and focus groups, this study examined the study demands and resources experienced by 50 participants across 12 European countries: educators (n = 28), students (n = 14), and recent graduates (n = 8). Drawing on Study Demands-Resources (SD-R) theory, which emphasises the importance of educational institutions balancing study demands and resources to support student well-being, this study demonstrates how curriculum reforms, faculty guidance, and peer networks (factors that should function as study resources) can instead transform into demands for students in these specific contexts. The findings also reveal adaptive strategies students developed in response to these conditions. This study extends SD-R theory by demonstrating conditions under which traditional resource-demand relationships operate differently than established patterns, contributing to theoretical understanding of student well-being in creative industries in higher education.

Keywords: games, animation and VFX industry, student well-being, study demands, study demands-resource theory, educational stress.

1. INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions increasingly recognise their responsibility to assess drivers of student burnout and engagement, and to initiate interventions at both individual and program levels (Bannigan et al., 2025). This requires coordinated institutional efforts: student counsellors need tools to identify early warning signs and intervene before students reach crisis points; lecturers need guidance for designing courses that balance learning objectives with sustainable workloads; and administrators need frameworks for evaluating which institutional structures support versus undermine student well-being. Effective, context-appropriate interventions depend on deep understanding of how demands and resources function within specific educational settings. Bakker and Mostert (2024) emphasise that rigorous sector-specific qualitative research is essential to explore how students perceive study demands and resources in relation to the systems around them, including the modulating influence of educators and the overall institutional climate.

The Study Demands-Resources (SD-R) framework (Bakker & Mostert, 2024) provides a systematic approach for this exploration by categorising study characteristics into demands and resources. In this framework, demands include study facets that impact physical, emotional, and mental well-being, such as high workloads (Travis et al., 2020), time

constraints (Lesener et al., 2019, 2020), and conflicting deadlines (Martin et al., 2021). In contrast, resources include factors such as lecturer and peer support (Cilliers et al., 2018) and developmental opportunities (Bakker et al., 2014), which can buffer the effects of study demands and contribute to student well-being (Bakker & Mostert, 2024). This study examines how sector-specific conditions shape study demands and resource dynamics within European games, animation, and visual effects (VFX) educational contexts.

The video games, animation, and visual effects (VFX) sectors are rapidly expanding industries characterised by high-pressure work environments demanding high-quality outputs under tight deadlines (Bourscheid et al., 2025; Horo et al., 2025; Wilkes et al., 2020) and oversaturated job markets with limited positions attracting large numbers of graduate applicants (Carey et al., 2024; GDC, 2025). These conditions make individual portfolio excellence the primary hiring criterion, not because studios undervalue collaboration but because market conditions make portfolio quality the most practical screening mechanism when hundreds of applicants compete for limited positions. Simultaneously, there is increased recognition of the importance of soft skills within the labour market (Poláková et al., 2023) and more specifically within the creative industries (Dooley et al., 2024; Munro, 2017). Educational institutions are increasingly responding to such industry needs by reforming curricula, shifting from modular learning emphasising individual technical skills toward collaborative, project-based and problem-based learning emphasising process over product (Hassreiter et al., 2024). Consequently, students in these programs face conflicting demands: becoming a competitive self-promoter while also becoming a humble team player (Hassreiter et al., 2024). Navigating these conflicting demands compounds the usual demands of higher education, including lectures, group projects, and assignments, placing students in these sectors under considerable strain.

This study applies the Study Demands-Resource (SD-R) theory to examine the specific demands and resources experienced by students in the high-pressure games, animation, and VFX industries, along with their coping strategies. It offers in-depth and nuanced insights into the dynamic interplay between demands and resources, providing valuable guidance for educational institutions aiming to enhance student well-being, support faculty, and promote sustainable preparation for highly competitive creative industries. Additionally, this research advances SD-R literature by extending its application in high-pressure educational environments beyond medical education (National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine, 2019; Scheepers et al., 2024) to the creative media sector, addressing the tension between educational emphases on collaboration (which align with industry ideals) and hiring practices that prioritise individual portfolios (reflecting market realities). It also contributes to the growing body of work on media professionals' mental health and working conditions (Bourscheid et al., 2025; Bourscheid & Steil, 2024; Cote & Harris, 2021; Deuze, 2025) by shifting attention to students preparing to enter these fields, uniquely examining how contradictions between industry-valued principles and actual hiring practices manifest during educational experiences through an SD-R lens.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Sample Characteristics and Data-Collection Procedure

This study is part of a larger project (PANEURAMA: <https://www.paneurama.eu/>). The findings reported here comprise semi-structured interviews conducted with 50 participants (n = 50): educators (n = 28), students (n = 14), and recent graduates (n = 8) in the European games, animation, and VFX industries (see Figure 1). Educators comprised full-time and part-time lecturers (also working in the industry), and project supervisors. All

students were in their final-year, which allowed them to reflect effectively on their educational structures. Recent graduates were junior professionals (< 2 years post-graduation), able to reflect on both educational structures, application and early career experiences within their sector.

Interviews focused on understanding how students experienced industry demands and job market pressures, and how their universities' educational offerings responded to these demands and pressures. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted online between January and September 2024. Participants represented 12 European countries (see Figure 2) and recruitment followed purposive and snowball sampling methods. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. While gender-related demographic information was collected, such an analysis falls beyond this study's scope. However, the authors recognise that examining gender dynamics, particularly regarding how contradictory demands may differentially impact students of different genders, warrants future research.

Figure 1.
Distribution of participants by role across industry sectors.

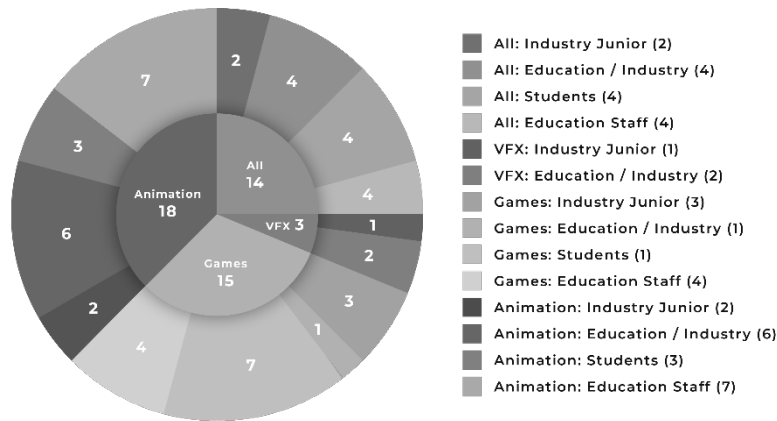
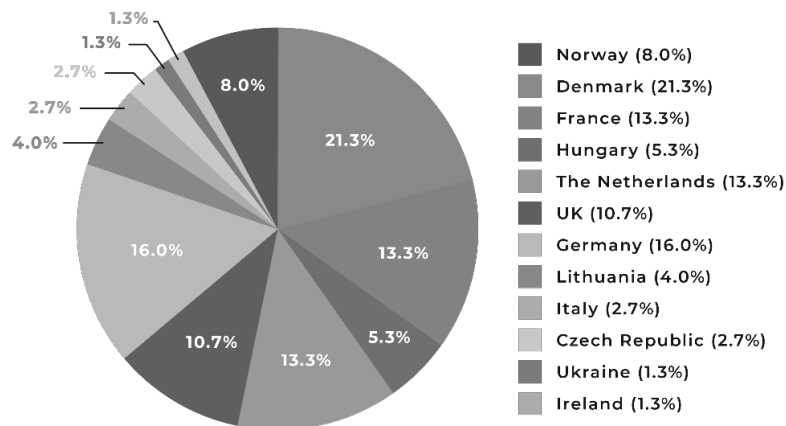


Figure 2.
Distribution of participants by country.



2.2. Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim using Notta.ai and uploaded to ATLAS.ti for analysis. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis and informed by the Study Demands-Resource (SD-R) theoretical framework (Bakker & Mostert, 2024). While the SD-R theory provided a sensitising lens for understanding the relationship between study-demands and resources in educational contexts, the analysis remained inductive (Atkinson & Delamont, 2010), allowing key patterns and themes to emerge from participant narratives rather than imposing predetermined categories. Data were open coded by the first author, which involved allocating a short phrase to data segments which addressed the study objectives. Subsequently, the first and second authors met to discuss the codes and inform the development of preliminary themes by grouping codes with similar meanings addressing the research objective. These findings were finally discussed with the research team, incorporating their expert insights relating to both the industry landscape and educational practices in the games, animation, and VFX sectors.

Preliminary findings of the project were also presented at three industry conferences: FMX (Film & Media Exchange Conference) 2024 in Stuttgart, Germany; the International Animation Film Festival in Annecy, France; and the Viborg Animation Festival in Denmark. Through engaging in panel discussions and informal conversations with educators, students, junior and senior professionals, these conferences further reinforced the findings of this study concerning the demands experienced by students navigating these industries and their coping strategies. This checking process supports both the validity of our findings and their significance for educational practice, while also providing additional contextual depth to our understanding of these paradoxical dynamics.

3. FINDINGS

Our thematic analysis revealed five themes outlined below. These themes emerged as interconnected and compounding factors, creating a chain of escalating circumstances that demonstrated how well-intentioned educational resources such as curricula updates aligning with industry demands, well-meant advice intended at improving employability and student well-being, and peer relationships may transform into demands for students within games, animation, and VFX.

3.1. Curriculum Reforms: Discipline-Specific Resource-To-Demand Transformations

Bakker and Mostert (2024) noted that studying is a social activity where collaboration provides opportunities for enjoyable and fulfilling experiences through peer learning and shared work, but may also involve interpersonal conflicts, for example, because of unequal contributions to groupwork. Our findings confirm these dynamics: students reported having to engage in group projects requiring extensive coordination, generating conflicts over quality expectations, working styles, and uneven contributions across members. Crucially, however, our data identified asymmetries across these resource-demand dynamics within disciplines. Among art and animation students, group work was experienced as the primary time demand competing with portfolio work. Conversely, game design, directing, and programming students experienced groupwork primarily as a means of coordination that led to emotional demands when teammates' disengagement undermined their ability to demonstrate collaborative skills.

Among the art and animation students, group projects presented a complex challenge. Students in our study recognised collaborative learning as essential preparation for industry work, articulating that working together in educational settings was necessary to learn how to function in collaborative production teams later. However, they simultaneously acknowledged fundamental challenges: first, securing employment requires an exceptional individual portfolio. As one student explained the tension:

I think they [the university] put a lot of emphasis on learning how to work together and in a team, but it's a bit difficult portfolio wise and applying for studios because there is nothing I can show really to prove my soft skills on my portfolio, right? OK, they will see a group project and if the art is aligned, they will probably see: OK, multiple artists worked on this, they are able to work together and create something cohesive.

Secondly, using the same group projects in individual portfolios creates problems because portfolios from one university would look too similar, risking student potential to stand out with differentiated work. This represents a compounding stressor encountered by these students where collaborative skills matter for professional success once employed, yet remain largely invisible during hiring. Moreover, even attempting to demonstrate collaboration through shared projects in portfolios risks appearing generic rather than exceptional. As a result, students invest substantial educational time developing competencies they valued and recognised as important, which provide limited tangible career advantage at the critical juncture of securing initial employment.

[Group work] is cool, but it felt sometimes like a waste of time. [...] I was all the time working. I made my portfolio after school hours. The first entire half year of year three I just spent animating all the time. Making sure that I create a portfolio according to skills that companies want to see more. Catching up with the skills I lack. School work I rarely use in my portfolio. I think maybe one or two pieces out of the six, so it's mainly self-study work that I put in.

Several participants described experiencing a “double workload”. Here, learning time was spent on collaborative assignments to meet institutional deadlines that yield minimal portfolio utility. Consequently, additional hours (outside of a typical working day) are spent on developing individual pieces that would differentiate their portfolios from peers.

Students in game design, directing, and programming programmes within our sample reported different challenges within the same structures. Their work gained meaning through integration with others' contributions, making collaborative projects essential for demonstrating competencies. However, these participants encountered significant difficulties when teammates faced the double workload and portfolio differentiation pressures described above. As one game design student explained:

An example that really, really frustrates me, but I totally understand, is that many of the art students did not give a shit about group projects because they didn't need to. Their individual art pieces were actually more valuable for building a successful portfolio... The designer is heavily reliant on being able to work in a group context and produce work that is reflective of their design skill because a lot of design is foundational. So if there's nobody to build on top of your work like a programmer or an artist, then it doesn't exist. It doesn't come to life.

This participant's acknowledgment, “I totally understand,” reveals an awareness that their teammates' behaviour reflected a rational career strategy given portfolio requirements and differentiation needs. Yet, this understanding did not alleviate the demand. Instead, these

students reported investing substantially more time in coordination compared to collaborative and discipline specific skill development, thus compensating for limited engagement by their peers. They either take on additional work themselves, or accept lower quality group outputs which for them and unlike their teammates, served as primary demonstrations of their capabilities

3.2. Faculty Guidance: Resource-to-Demand Transformation Through Contradictory Messages

According to SD-R theory, faculty support and guidance represent key study resources that buffer demands and promote engagement (Bakker et al., 2015, as cited in Bakker & Mostert, 2024). However, students in our study reported experiencing faculty guidance as a source of stress and confusion when teachers provided conflicting messages about what to prioritise. While individual teachers were valued as mentors, students described the faculty as a whole creating additional demands through divergent expectations, they felt compelled to meet simultaneously. Educators confirmed this lack of pedagogical consensus, and validated students' experiences of contradictory guidance.

The differing educator-guidance experienced by students included, some educators emphasising collaborative work, group projects, and soft skills as being essential for evolving workplace cultures, and others prioritising the development of technical excellence and portfolio development for securing future employment. This conflicting educator advice within programmes was confirmed by an educator who explained:

The tricky thing is that even within our degree programs, we don't have consensus on this [teaching approach], because there are still industry veterans that say no, this is how the industry works [they need individual excellence]. [...] More people are talking about healthy, sane working practices. But that's not a universal message yet, and I don't think we can get away with a universal message yet.

Students are consequently left to reconcile these conflicting messages, as they may need to satisfy both sets of expectations to pass courses, and maintain relationships with all faculty. Crucially, this pedagogical divergence is not hidden or subtle, as another participant noted:

We have a hierarchy problem. Most teachers that come from the industry and teach are seniors, but they rather talk about past experiences in the industry and perpetuate. The ones that talk new practices are the ones that are juniors. That makes it difficult to change overall approaches in Universities due to hierarchy issues.

Educators further described the contextual factors creating these divergent approaches. As one explained, they cannot emphasise only collaboration because industry partners would criticise graduates for lacking technical skills. Yet focusing only on technical excellence perpetuates unsustainable practices. One educator explicitly articulated the conflict students must navigate:

That leaves us as an education in an incredibly tricky situation. Do we teach right now for the skills they need to get a job today, or do we teach what the industry should be according to a little more liberal interpretation of what a healthy workforce is? And there is a direct conflict with that.

As such, the contradictory educator guidance, represent systemic tensions rather than simple miscommunication from educators.

3.3. Wellness Initiatives as Performative Demand: When Balance Becomes Unachievable

Our study revealed a phenomenon not yet examined in SD-R research - institutional wellness messaging and faculty emphasis on work-life balance. Though well-intentioned and often expressed out of genuine concern for students, such messages can paradoxically transform into additional demands for students within the context of their heavy workloads, portfolio pressures and contradictory messages from educators. Amid such demands, a work-life balance is practically unachievable, causing such messaging to be perceived as a source of stress, compounding demands experienced by students. Specifically, while student participants in this study appreciated these messages and supported the principle of work-life balance, they noted feeling pressured to visibly demonstrate positive well-being and work-life balance, transforming wellness messages into a performative practice, and an additional task rather than serving as supportive resources.

“Every time a teacher enters the room, I feel like I have to strike a yoga pose.” This quote captures the performative aspect that well-being messaging takes, when students feel they must prove they are following institutional guidance about self-care while simultaneously managing the impossible workload created by competing demands. Within SD-R theory, this represents a particularly insidious form of demand escalation: the institutional resource intended to buffer stress, which instead becomes an additional performance expectation that students must manage alongside their already unsustainable workload.

Students find themselves caught between genuinely wanting to maintain healthy practices and feeling pressured to demonstrate their compliance with institutional wellness expectations. The transformation of well-being from a natural state into a performance requirement illustrates how even the most positive institutional intentions can become additional sources of stress when they exist alongside contradictory structural demands. Students cannot genuinely achieve work-life balance when structural conditions require them to invest full effort in both collaborative work and individual portfolios simultaneously. Yet they must perform balance for institutional audiences, adding the emotional labour of appearing well to the already excessive workload of their studies.

3.4. The ‘Newly Found Family’ that Becomes a Demanding Community

According to SD-R theory, peer support represents a crucial study resource that buffers demands, promotes engagement, and protects against burnout (Bakker et al., 2015 as cited in Bakker & Mostert, 2024). Social connections provide emotional support, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging that help students navigate academic challenges. Our data confirmed that peer networks function as major resources, yet also revealed how these same networks can transform into demanding communities that intensify pressure and create additional stressors.

Despite recognising that peers will be future sources of competition, students identified peers as their greatest resource during their studies. They valued peer networks for motivating each other as they complete educational tasks, sharing resources relating to the industry landscape, keeping each other updated on sought-after skills, and identifying potential employment opportunities. As one participant explained:

For sure, you kind of still want to be the best. But you also want your friends to succeed as well, right? So, we are really pushing each other. We motivate each other. I would not have managed to get where I am right now without my friends and that is really

important to me personally. They helped me continue. I helped them push. We all push each other and make sure that we did our best.

This mutual support and motivation exemplify how peer networks should function as study resources within SD-R theory, providing both emotional encouragement and practical assistance that buffer academic demands and promote sustained engagement.

However, while peers function as strong resources in academic and later work contexts, an overly deep sense of belonging can transform peer networks into stressors. Participants reported that students in these fields often experienced exclusion in previous educational settings for being different. When entering university, they frequently meet like-minded peers for the first time and experience deep friendship, which can lead students to push themselves to stay within their peer group and environment, even when they lack the skill level or mental and emotional capacity to remain in education and later in the industry sustainably. As one participant explained:

They [peers at educational institution] were my people and it was the first time I felt like I was part of a collective. I've never had that before. [...]. I think it's the people that were a bit ostracised by society because they are nerds, gamers. This even goes with the artists. They were probably doodling in their sketchbooks in high school, and then other people were like: 'Oh, look at that nerd just drawing'. Then you come all of a sudden to this place [university], where everyone has been ostracised at some point and you're like: 'Oh, we've all been going through the same for being different.'

An educator further explained this dynamic and its risks:

Often, these students have dealt with loneliness and exclusion, perhaps as loners in school. They weren't on the sports team, they weren't the centre of attention, they've been more in the background. Now, with this education, it is their chance to be seen, heard, and admired. And it's very dangerous [that they push themselves too hard].

This intense drive to prove themselves and belong can lead to unhealthy work-life balance, as the desire for validation from peers becomes a significant demand. Students may feel compelled to maintain their position within these high-performing communities, even when they lack the capacity to do so sustainably. In this way, the peer network that should buffer other demands instead amplifies them, students must not only meet institutional requirements but also maintain performance levels that preserve their valued social belonging.

3.5. When Multiple Demands Converge: Student Adaptive Responses

The contradictory demands from inside and outside the university create a confluence of stressors that fundamentally reshape the student experience. According to SD-R theory, when faced with high demands, individuals develop coping strategies that influence both well-being and performance outcomes (Bakker et al., 2015 as cited in Bakker & Mostert, 2024). Our data reveal diverse adaptive responses students develop to navigate the impossible workload created by structural contradictions. These adaptive strategies carry significant implications for both immediate well-being and long-term career sustainability.

The three primary adaptive responses we identified emerged inductively from student narratives about how they balanced competing demands. These were not predetermined constructs but patterns we identified through our analysis of how students described their study strategies and work ethics in response to contradictory institutional and industry pressures.

3.5.1. The Individual Excellence Approach

Some students prioritise standing out and dedicate significant time to mastering technical skills and building exceptional portfolios. This approach clashes with present curricula emphasising collaboration and creates tension between personal goals and the team-oriented structure of projects. As one student described the extreme workload this strategy requires:

In uni, I think my standard week was like 80 hours and then it would jump up to 110 at times. So eventually I also took a break for a year like between my 3rd and 4th year. [Then] I felt I lost time. I worked hard again and made up for putting a gap year in.

According to the participant, these students run the risk of overworking to create exceptional portfolios and gain visibility, fostering unsustainable work habits during university years. Despite their potential to gain a competitive edge in the job market through portfolio excellence, they might struggle with transitioning toward collaborative production teams when they secure employment in the industry.

3.5.2. The Self-Preservation Approach

Other students prioritise personal well-being while developing a solid foundation in both technical and soft skills. The curriculum's emphasis on group work aligns with their approach, allowing them to develop collaborative skills and share responsibilities in ways that support their balanced lifestyle. As one student explained:

If I think about it too much, then it gets stressful. Then I'm like, oh shit, maybe I also need to do that [work as hard as them], but I know for myself, I'm not even able to do that kind of stuff, like work so many afterhours and stuff. So for me, I'm kind of accepting it. Like we'll see where I land and I'm not trying to worry about other people.

Some students following this approach face difficulties securing employment despite having solid portfolios. As a result, they either consider working in other industries or adopt a competitive improvement approach (see below) during master's studies, using this time alongside full-time study to create stronger portfolios without creating gaps in their CVs. However, some teachers expressed concern about this trend, fearing this focus on work-life balance might lead students to self-limit and choose different career paths too early, potentially missing opportunities to reach their full potential.

3.5.3. The Competitive Improvement Approach

A third group focuses on individual excellence and creating exceptional portfolios alongside developing soft skills, actively engaging in peer networking and extracurricular activities for experience and insights, all while fulfilling educational tasks requiring participation in group work. This mindset attempts to meet all demands simultaneously. As one student described:

Game education is something that you have to sacrifice things for. It takes time, not just a regular nine to five. [...] You will do more outside of it because you will want to learn different things. You'll want to make a portfolio, so you gotta put in those hours. You gotta do your research for that in order to get to where you want to go. [...] Talk to those people, make connections right away. [...]. Be friendly, be flexible. [...]. You just need to work hard and be nice to get in.

As a result, these students often exceed 40-hour study weeks and sacrifice leisure time to meet their goals. Educational experts expressed concern about the potential negative impact of this approach on student well-being. One young professional who adopted this approach compared their study time to working in the highly demanding games, animation, and VFX industry: “Compared to the stress levels during my studies, a job in the industry feels like a walk in the park.”

When discussing these findings with teachers, the educators found it striking to gain such detailed insights into students’ perspectives and coping mechanisms, as they had not previously been aware of them to this extent. Recognising the potential impact on student well-being and learning outcomes, they indicated they would bring these findings to the wider faculty to discuss how teaching approaches and support structures might be adjusted in response.

4. CONCLUSION

This study points to a recurring pattern within the games, animation, and VFX programmes we examined: several well-intentioned educational resources can become experienced as demands when they are embedded in contradictory expectations. In our sample, curriculum elements designed to promote collaboration (Section 3.1), faculty support structures (Section 3.2), wellness initiatives (Section 3.3), and peer communities (Section 3.4) were often described by students as turning into demands. This shift occurred particularly when students felt they had to excel in both group projects and individual portfolios, navigate inconsistent or conflicting guidance from staff, “perform” wellness while facing high workloads, or maintain a sense of belonging within competitive peer groups.

Our findings contribute to SD-R theory by showing how resource–demand conversions can arise from structural contradictions in addition to individual or interpersonal mechanisms. In the contexts we studied, tensions between programme design (informed by industry-articulated ideals such as collaboration) and actual hiring practices (influenced by competitive market realities) appeared to create conditions where intended resources could no longer operate as SD-R theory predicts. In other words, resources were not “failing” due to student dispositions but because contradictions built into the institutional environment amplified the processes through which resources became demands.

4.1. Study Limitations and Future Research

Participants in this study were predominantly based in Northern and Central Europe, with limited representation from Southern and Eastern European regions, despite recruitment efforts. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with important caveats concerning their generalisability across European educational systems with substantially different pedagogical structures, industry relationships, or labour market conditions. While our use of a snowball sampling method may have reinforced these effects, it provided access to participants with relevant experiences who could offer valuable insights.

This study captured participant experiences at a single point in time rather than tracking individual trajectories. Using longitudinal designs, future research could examine how students’ adaptive strategies evolve across their academic careers, and into early professional practice. Comparative studies across diverse geographic, cultural, and institutional contexts would also strengthen our understanding of how different educational models and industry relationships shape student experiences. Longitudinal, comparative, and mixed-methods research would help clarify which patterns are context-specific versus widespread, how adaptive strategies impact long-term well-being and career trajectories, and which

programmatic changes most effectively transform resources into genuine support rather than additional demands. Research should also consider gender differences, as Deuze (2025) notes persistent variations in experiences and outcomes across genders in media education and work, to ensure that interventions support all students equitably.

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AUTHORS' INFORMATION

Full name: Silke Hassreiter

Institutional affiliation: Breda University of Applied Science

Institutional address: Mgr. Hopmansstraat 2, Postbus 3917, 4800 DX Breda, The Netherlands

Contact information: hassreiter.S@buas.nl

Short biographical sketch: Silke Hassreiter is a researcher at the Academy for AI, Games & Media at Breda University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. Her current research interests include workplace ethnography and diversity in the animation, games, and VFX industries. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9700-3838>

Full name: A. Treshi-Marie Perera

Institutional affiliation: Breda University of Applied Science

Institutional address: Mgr. Hopmansstraat 2, Postbus 3917, 4800 DX Breda, The Netherlands

Contact information: perera.t@buas.nl

Short biographical sketch: A. Treshi-Marie Perera is a senior researcher at the Academy for AI, Games & Media, Breda University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands. Her current research focuses on the cultural relevance of video games. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3812-5023>

Full name: Tuki Clavero

Institutional affiliation: Breda University of Applied Science

Institutional address: Mgr. Hopmansstraat 2, Postbus 3917, 4800 DX Breda, The Netherlands

Contact information: clavero.t@buas.nl

Short biographical sketch: Tuki Clavero is a Research Coordinator at the Academy for AI, Games & Media at Breda University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. Tuki specialises in coordinating cross-disciplinary teams to explore the intersection of creative video games, AI-driven research processes, XR technologies, and human-computer interaction (HCI). <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0554-7980>

S. Hassreiter, A. T.-M. Perera, T. Clavero, L. Bouwels, & M. Haggis-Burridge

Full name: Lindsey Bouwels

Institutional affiliation: Breda University of Applied Science

Institutional address: Mgr. Hopmansstraat 2, Postbus 3917, 4800 DX Breda, The Netherlands

Contact information: bouwels.l@buas.nl

Short biographical sketch: Lindsey Bouwels is a researcher at the Academy for AI, Games & Media at Breda University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands. Her research interests lie in entertainment games, user experience, and video game accessibility. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8241-0470>

Full name: Mata Haggis-Burridge

Institutional affiliation: Breda University of Applied Science

Institutional address: Mgr. Hopmansstraat 2, Postbus 3917, 4800 DX Breda, The Netherlands

Contact information: haggis.m@buas.nl

Short biographical sketch: Mata Haggis-Burridge is a professor at Breda University of Applied Science, where they lead the research line in Creative and Entertainment Games. Their research spans video games' content, creation processes, and cultural context. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9619-5268>