Institute for Futures Studies

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Becoming a business student: Negotiating identity and social contacts during the first three months of an elite business education[1]

We know that informal networks explain differences in career success. Historical differences in business careers of men and women have frequently been explained with differences in informal networks. We also know that corporations tend to recruit future leaders and professionals from highly ranked business schools, and that important social networks form among the students there. However, it is not fully known how these networks form initially, and how they develop over time. In this first report from an ongoing longitudinal study of networking among students of four business schools in Sweden and Finland, we explore networking and socializing during the first term of education. The data that is reported here were collected in 2019, i.e. before the COVID-19 pandemic. We find that the first few weeks of education are crucial for networking: they present an "open window" for making new friends. This process is aided by structured efforts by the schools and the student unions which facilitate networking. We also find that expectations of networking can be felt as stressful by some students, as well as there being strong tendencies of homophily regarding gender and ethnicity among students. From the students' point of view, however, the friends they make

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seem to be the result of random encounters. Being socialized into becoming a business student also means relating to and often challenging a perceived stereotype of the (male) business student. The report ends with pointing toward the need for establishing an intersectional and longitudinal approach to the study of networking.

Introduction

What is it like to start at a prestige business school? How would you feel on the first day you walk in through those big, imposing doors, representing an institution that is known for how difficult it is to get accepted to it and how excruciatingly heavy the workload is? When you know all the stereotypes about posh students who might or might not take you in? And when you are constantly told that not only do you have to study hard to succeed, but also that the network you gain at the school is the most valuable part of your education, so you really need to keep your networking game up? Does it then make a difference whether you come from a family of entrepreneurs and business leaders where you are the third generation to attend this school and know all about the experience from the start, or whether you are a kid from a vulnerable area with refugee parents and a good head and a strong work ethic as your only assets? Does it make a difference whether you are a woman or a man? Does it make a difference whether you are a natural socializer or a shy wallflower? Yes, of course. But how?

This is a report from an ongoing study about business students, how they network with each other, and how that network helps them in their professional careers. The study follows three cohorts of business students from four highly ranked business schools in Finland and Sweden, starting in 2019, and applies a mixed-methods strategy, including social network analysis and in-depth interviews, to gauge networking behaviours and socialization processes that we believe are important to explain differences in career outcomes. The corporate sector recruits a lot of people who end up in managing positions from these schools. We are especially interested in the differences in networks and networking behaviour between men and women. There are however several other characteristics that can help explain different network outcomes, such as socio–economic background, ethnicity, and personality, and we take this into account in an attempt at approaching an intersectional (i.e. the *intersection* or interconnected nature of different social categories) analysis of friendship formation and networking behaviour.

In this particular report, we focus on the initial formation of networks. With other words: how people become friends and why. We are also interested in how students with different backgrounds adapt to or resist perceived norms for how students should behave or what they should look like in an elite business education setting. Indeed: how you become a business student. There is a general lack of studies focusing on the "birth" of social networks, which is why we devote this text to that crucial phase.

The data used in this report come *exclusively from data collected in 2019*. The reason for this is that we wanted to study how networking and socialization functioned during "normal circumstances", i.e. before the COVID-19 pandemic which started in 2020 and

severely affected students' networks and behaviours. In future reports, we will compare and contrast the findings in this report with the external shock to the system caused by the pandemic.

Earlier research indicates that career differences between men and women in business elites depend on differences in informal social networks. Women's weaker networks, along with the persistence of all-male networks, are generally considered major reasons behind women's relatively low acceptance into business elites (Woehler et al, 2021; Fang et al, 2021; Mishra et al, 2020; cf. Brands et al, 2022). Men are commonly considered to accumulate more useful connections than women; connections which over time evolve into instrumentally more valuable networks. Elite research also supports this notion, suggesting that important decisions are made outside formal meetings, and that traditional male social spaces such as golf clubs, dining rooms, and hunting parties act as arenas for entertaining "old boys' networks" (cf. Farr, 1988). At the same time, recent studies have produced results that are at odds with these findings, indicating that differences in networking and networks between men and women are very small or non-existent (Mengel, 2020).

The reason we are interested in higher education institutions is that these are the most prominent arenas for elite reproduction in contemporary societies (Bourdieu, 1998). Not only do students obtain necessary official credentials for their future careers, but they also accumulate individual level social capital, i.e. instrumentally useful social connections while doing so (ibid.). Secondly, this function of higher education as an arena of elite formation may be especially pronounced at high-ranking business schools. Business education typically involves a heavier emphasis on the social aspects of education than other elite educations (Stuber, 2009), and access to networks is often marketed as a main reason for applying to business schools in the first place. A diploma from a prestigious business school may also have long-lasting effects upon business graduates' careers.

Studying business school students allows us to study the evolution of their relevant social networks during a highly formative period of their careers, as such networks have been shown to form early on (Yang et al., 2019; Selfhout et al, 2010). In fact, especially friendships formed during the first term of university education have found to be remarkably stable (Buote et al, 2007). Furthermore, social networks formed at university are strong indicators for academic success (Buote et al, 2007; Demir & Orthel, 2011).

How do people make friends? Homophily and personality

Human beings tend to make friends, but who ends up as friends does not seem to be completely random. An ancient saying states that "birds of a feather flock together"[2]. Homophily is "the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people" (McPherson et al, 2001). There seems to be a strong homophilic component in the formation of acquaintances where individuals tend to cluster with people sharing one or several of a number of characteristics: gender,

[2] In Swedish, we find sayings such as "lika barn leka bäst" (similar children play best).

ethnicity/race, age, socioeconomic background, education, performance, etc. A tendency towards a social division of girls and boys is observed from early on in child care and school settings (ibid), whereas other forms of homophily are highly dependent on context and tend to become more pronounced over the life course.

There are important differences between homophily in different categories. For instance, ethnic homophily is usually affected by a majority-minority relationship (where one ethnic group is usually in a majority) and that ethnicity often is coupled with other categories, such as socioeconomic background. In contrast, there is roughly the same number of men as women, and men and women are linked together by households and family relations. But also behavioural patterns, attitudes and values have homophilic effects (cf. Hwang et al, 2004). For this reason, it is important to view homophily from an intersectional perspective: several aspects are relevant to acknowledge simultaneously when discussing homophilic tendencies in networking and networks.

The setting of a business school is heterogeneous in some ways and homogeneous in others. As stated previously, there are nowadays about the same number of men as of women students (a couple of decades ago, men tended to be in the clear majority). Regarding other characteristics, Nordic business students have more high-educated parents, parents with higher income, and are to a higher extent native born than the general population of the same age (Bryntesson & Börjesson, 2021). For obvious reasons, the opportunities for tendencies towards homophily in various respects are shaped by the composition of the student body.

In a number of studies of friendship formation in college education, it has consistently been found that tendencies towards homophily are strong, especially regarding gender and ethnicity/race (Mayer & Puller, 2008; Smith et al, 2014). However, physical proximity (for instance concerning student housing or being in the same class) can facilitate interracial/ cross-ethnic friendships (Marmaros & Sacerdote, 2006; Stearns et al, 2009). Another aspect of homophily is academic performance: there is a strong tendency for students to make friends who have the same level of perceived ambition and/or based on how good they are at studying: according to some studies, students tend to change friends rather than their academic performance in order to fit in (Smirnov & Turner, 2020).

Finally, personality traits can both predict networking behaviour as well as be an aspect of homophily in social networks, as individuals high on extraversion (i.e. energetic and sociable) tend to form more friendships and thus end up in larger networks, which also tend to have a high number of extrovert people in them (Selfhout et al, 2010). However, extroversion is not the only personality trait that is associated with homophilic tendencies in networks, as individuals high on agreeableness (i.e. warm and friendly) tend to be selected more as friends and thus also having a higher likelyhood of ending up in social networks (ibid).

Identity and adjustment: becoming a student

The first term at a university presents a life-changing experience for many people (Buote et al, 2009; Chemers et al, 2001; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). It represents for many a move from more regulated environments (living with your parents, long regulated school days) to less regulated environments (living alone or with peers, less regulated

"school days" and more personal responsibility) (ibid). Having friends seems to be an important factor in adjusting to academic life (ibid; Demir & Orhel, 2011), as well as self-efficacy and optimism (Chemers et al, 2001), and a "realistic" view on university life (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994).

Studies have shown that the socioeconomic background of students is a predictor for sense of belonging in higher education, meaning that it is easier to "fit in" if you come from an academic home (Ostrove, 2002), or if you belong to the ethnic majority group (Mendoza-Denton et al, 2002). Feelings of not belonging can be even stronger in elite schools, as "the schools themselves serve as cultural markers for belongingness" (Ostrove, 2002: 366): having studied at an elite school basically tells other alumni that you are of the same sort. These factors do not only make prospective students self-select into schools where they feel that they will fit in (or whether to go to university at all), but can also have effects on non-conforming students' retention levels (ibid). In other words, the extent to which you embrace your identity as a business student can be an important factor for predicting whether you also graduate from the business school.

Apart from adjusting to a new life setting, higher education also has a socializing function (in addition to other societal institutions, such as family, primary school, etc), where professional values and attitudes are conveyed (Haski-Leventhal et al 2020; Lämsä et al, 2008). Van Maanen & Schein (1979) lists six socialization tactics, among which we find – apart from formal training provided through education – the stepwise progression, and the fixed timetable of the BA or MA programme, "a collective process of grouping newcomers and putting them through common experiences", "a serial process where newcomers are socialized by experienced others", and "an investiture process that uses feedback to affirm the identity of newcomers" (Haski-Leventhal et al 2020), which in our case includes informal encounters but to a high degree is a very structured process run by the school and especially the student union during the introduction of new students into the student body and the school through social and school activities in smaller groups randomly composed of fellow students and under the auspices of assigned student mentors.

Business studies programs are especially interesting when it comes to adjusting and socializing, because there has been a longstanding debate on whether business schools convey "wrong" values and identities to students (a disconnect between ethics and professional behaviour), as well as how students can be made to adopt better values (better ethics) (Haski-Leventhal et al, 2020; Lämsä et al, 2008), although the values of business students could also depend on self-selection processes (Arieli et al, 2016). What norms and values are communicated in the school might have effects on students' adjustment to them. Indeed, most of the business schools in our study have very ambitious intra- or extracurricular programmes designed to make students embrace values as gender equality and diversity, as well as concepts such as sustainability and corporate social responsibility.

Thus, enrolling in an elite school education and the various effects on identity and retention can be said to have complex intersectional aspects, where class background, ethnicity, gender, and personal traits, as well as the cultural values conveyed by the schools, all seem to play important roles in the socialization process and friendship formation.

In the following section, we briefly discuss the design of the study. A full description of the design and methods is available from the authors.

Design

We study business programs at four top-ranked schools in Sweden and Finland: Stockholm School of Economics (SSE); School of Business, Economics and Law at Gothenburg University (GU); the MSc in Industrial Management and Engineering at the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH), and the Hanken School of Economics (Hanken). The schools are either independent business schools or well-defined units within larger schools (universities) and cater to the same segment of the business labour market.

The project follows two cohorts of students from these four Bachelor programs[3]: the cohort starting in September 2019 and finishing in June 2022, the cohort starting September 2020 and finishing in June 2023. Additionally, we follow the Master program at one of the schools. Each cohort is included in the study in its entirety. In this report, only cohort 1 and wave 1 is included, consisting of 1005 individuals. Including the second cohort, the total number will be ca 2 400 individuals.

This report is based on the first wave of data collection in 2019, as described below.

Table 1. The population (cohort 1, 2019). Survey response rates and interviews

2019	**No. of students**	**Response rate (survey)**	**No. of interviews**	
			Men	Women
SSE (first year)	352	35%	3	3
GU (first year)	270	59%	3	3
KTH (first year)	170	53%	3	3
Hanken (first year)	213	26%	3	3
Total	1005	43%	12	12

Data were collected through 1) an online survey, and 2) through in-depth interviews. All students in the cohorts were included as respondents for the online survey, whereas a smaller number (six per cohort) were included in the interviews.

Online survey

The survey's main focus was directed towards the respondent's relevant social networks, but also contained a variety of questions on background factors. In this particular questionnaire, social network data was collected with the aid of two separate modules of items: one designed to capture students within-school social contacts among their peers ('School networks'), and one devised to solicit information about their support networks of significant others outside of school ('Support networks'). Here we will report some descriptive statistics from the first wave, which was collected in September and October of 2019 (about 1 month into the first semester).

[3] The MSc in Industrial Ecnomics at KTH has a 3+2 structure, with a 2-year Master following a 3-year Bachelor.

Interviews

To discern students' reasoning about their social life at the school, and how they experience starting higher studies, we conducted interviews at each school. The respondents were randomly selected by a research assistant from total lists of students provided by the respective schools.

True to the abductive nature of the project our coding was done in several steps, following the principles of thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2011). In this report, we will focus on two themes, namely the point of getting to know someone and how to become a business student, i.e. socialization, using data from interviews obtained during wave 1, collected in October and November of 2019 (about 2 months into the first semester).

The composition of the student body

Table 2 shows the composition of the individuals contributing to the survey by school and gender. As is visible, men are in the majority in all schools, which also roughly corresponds to the make-up of the entire cohorts. Regarding the skewed gender composition at KTH, the business programme in question is located at a technical institute with even higher proportions of men in other programmes. The students are fairly young with some exceptions. Usually, these business programmes are attended by students fresh out of high school or after a sabbatical year, although instances of older students are not extremely rare. Respondents' age varies between 18 and 35, with a mean age of 20.92 (SD 2.59). As we see in the table, the mean age for women and men, respectively, is roughly the same. The students are to a very high degree native-born, which is in line with expectations. They also come from academic homes, indeed to the extent that quite many of them have at least one parent who has attended a postgraduate/doctoral programme.

In the next section, we provide some descriptive results from the survey module of the study, which we follow up by reporting initial findings from the interviews regarding two themes: the "open window" phase of social networking at school, and the question of socialization into the business school student identity. In the latter section we also provide information about values and personality from the survey. We end with a brief discussion of the results and prospects for future research.

Table 2. Background (survey response)

		School									
		SSE		GU		KTH		Hanken			
		Absolute numbers	%	Absolute numbers	%	Absolute numbers	%	Absolute numbers	%		
Gender distribution among respondents[4]	Men	61	54%	82	52%	65	73%	27	49%		
	Women	46	41%	73	46%	15	17%	23	42%		
	No response	6	5%	4	3%	7	10%	5	9%		
	Total	113		159		88		55			
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	All men	All women
	Average age (years)	20	21	22	21	20	20	22	21	21	20,75
Birth place (%, zeros omitted)	Nordics	83%	74%	96%	91%	93%	86%	100%	100%	93%	88%
	Elsewhere Europe	9%	18%	1%	4%	2%				3%	6%
	Africa	2%			3%					1%	1%
	Asia	6%	3%	3%	1%	5%	14%			4%	5%
	North America		5%							0%	1%
Educational level of parent with the highest educational level	Elementary school			4%	10%	3%		7%	14%	4%	6%
	High school	22%	21%	31%	37%	14%	25%	7%		19%	21%
	University or higher education studies	67%	63%	62%	49%	74%	75%	80%	71%	71%	65%
	Third-cycle studies	11%	17%	4%	5%	9%		7%	14%	8%	9%

[4] The question included the option “other”, but only one respondent chose this option.

Table 3. Average number of reported school contacts[5]

	Male	Female
SSE	8,2	7,6
GU	6,9	5,5
KTH	6,4	5,1
Hanken	7,6	6,5
Total	7,2	6,2

Table 4. Average number of external contacts/support network [6]

	Male	Female
SSE	3,6	3,7
GU	3,7	3,4
KTH	3,9	3,5
Hanken	3,3	3,5
Total	3,7	3,5

Respondents were asked to report which students in their own cohorts (classes) they had spent time with during the past semester or the past 6 months. This is an important indicator of which are the student's most important contacts in the school, in this case during the first semester of the education. The average number of reported school contacts of men and women in the different schools is shown in table 3. The median number of alters (in this case an alter is a friend or a social contact) reported by all respondents is 6.0. The mean is slightly higher at 6.5, and male respondents report on average 7.2 contacts – a somewhat higher number of social contacts than female respondents, who report 6.2 social contacts on average. The observed mean difference is, however, statistically insignificant. 50 students reported the maximum number of 15 in-school contacts.

The number does however not say a lot about these networks or how they function. In this section, we will only briefly visit the question of gender homophily. There is a clear indication of sex-based homophily: male respondents report 75.2% male alters, and female respondents report 66.9% female alters. The Phi-correlation between respondents' and alters sex is 0.41 (Sig. 0.000), indicating a strong association. This is in line with expectations: we know from practically all contexts that men and women

[5] Question: Which students in your cohort have you spent time with during the past semester/6 months? Respondents could name a maximum of 15 students.

[6] Question: With regard to relatives, friends and acquaintances who are not currently students at [name of school], who are the people whose help and support you have been able to count on in career-related respects during the past year? Respondent could name a maximum of 5 contacts.

typically have social networks that are characterized by disproportionate levels of same-sex contacts.

As for the volume of social contacts in students' support networks outside school (table 4), respondents reported on average 3,6 (SD 1.9) significant others whom they could rely on for support in career related matters. A full 47% of respondents who filled out this module reported the maximum possible 5 alters. Male respondents reporting an average of 3.7(SD 1.8) alters in their support networks, while female respondents reported an average of 3.5 (SD 1.8) alters.

In regard to the primary nature of those who populate respondents' support networks, we find that an overwhelming majority of them are categorized as 'Friends' (40.2%). 57.3% of respondents included at least one parent in their support network. We find a substantial association between respondents' sex and the primary nature of their reported alters (Phi 0.281, Chi^2 0.000). Female students are more likely to report parents, siblings, and partners than their male counterparts who, in turn, are more likely to report friends, co-workers, and acquaintances as members of their support networks. Female respondents' support networks are to a higher degree populated by close family, while male respondents' support networks contain a higher number of non-family contacts. 52% of support network alters reported by women are family/partners, compared to 43.9% of men's support network alters.

Since some students in the interviews report feelings of stress regarding their study situation and the demands of social networking, we here include descriptive results relating to this and also include results for trust levels among students. As is visible in table 5, women tend to report slightly higher stress levels and feelings of self-doubt than men. The association is statistically significant. The respondents do not on average have any large problems with social interaction at school and there are no major gender differences either though women tend to report slightly higher levels of difficulties in social interaction than men. Regarding the question of trust, men are generally slightly more trusting than women, but a very clear pattern is that respondents are considerably more trusting of people at their schools than of people in general.

In the following sections, we will try to get behind these numbers, starting with the question of initial friendship formation at school.

Table 5. Social life

	School									
	SSE		**GU**		**KTH**		**Hanken**		**All**	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Stress (1-5 where: 1 = To a very little extent, 5 = To a very great extent)										
To what extent do you perceive nerves or stress over grades among the students at your school?	3,2	3,5	2,8	3,3	2,8	3,4	3	3	3,0	3,3
To what extent do you yourself experience nerves or stress as part of your studies at your school?	3	3,5	2,9	3,6	3	3,4	3	2,9	3,0	3,4
Self-doubt (1-4, where: 1 = Never, 4 = Often)										
How often do you have doubts about your study skills?	2,6	3,2	2,6	3,4	2,4	3,1	2,3	2,8	2,5	3,1
To what extent have you experienced the following difficulties regarding social interaction among students at your school? (1-5, where: 1= low, 5 = high)										
Difficult to fit in with the student group	2	1,7	1,6	1,9	2,2	2,6	2,1	2,5	2,0	2,2
Difficult to make friends among my fellow students	1,9	1,7	1,7	1,8	2,1	2,1	2	2,2	1,9	2,0
Far too few organised social gatherings	1,9	1,5	1,7	1,8	1,6	1,3	2,2	1,7	1,9	1,6
I feel anonymous due to the size of the student group	2,1	1,9	2,6	3,1	2,5	3,1	2,2	2,9	2,4	2,8
I feel we have difficulties cooperating in group work	1,9	1,8	1,9	2,2	1,8	2,4	1,6	1,5	1,8	2,0
The high rate of studies is not conducive to social interaction	2,8	3	2,7	3,2	2,5	3,2	1,9	2,1	2,5	2,9
I feel that the requirements for participation in various social contexts as part of student life are too high	1,9	2,4	2,1	2,5	2,4	3,1	1,9	2,6	2,1	2,7
Trust (0-100, Where: 0 = low, 100 = high)										
To what extent people can be trusted in general?	56	63	52	54	57	50	72	64	57	58
To what extent people can people at your school be trusted?	69	75	64	65	63	54	78	74	67	68

The open window

As we stated above, going to university is a major event in most people's lives. Most students are young and at an age where personalities and identities are still forming. University education differs enormously from secondary education, with typically a higher workload and foremost more independence. Although some students still live with their parents, many if not most move to their first own home during this period, which entails a very tangible station in a process of becoming independent. It also means meeting a lot of new people. Some people stop seeing their old friends altogether, while others maintain a steady relationship, but for most, especially young students, going to university means forming new and often lifelong relationships, finding romantic partners and future colleagues. Previous research points to a period of increased openness to form social contacts during the first few weeks at university (Yang et al 2019), and that is evident in many of the interviews here. Inspired by the students in our interviews, we choose to call this period *the open window*. Studies of networking and networks have hitherto focused to a large extent on existing networks rather than focusing on the formation phase of networks and contacts. For this reason, we have this period as the focus of this report.

The students were interviewed during their first semester at university. We asked them who they spend time with among their fellow students, how they met, why they ended up being friends, and what they do when they hang out. Many of them specifically mention the introductory groups that they more or less randomly are put in by the student union as part of the introduction, and/or by the school, as part of their group tasks in class. Indeed, the schools and the student unions seem to spend a lot of energy in creating a welcoming environment which is conducive to icebreaking and getting students to know one another. Even before students start, they can get contacted by the school and/or the student union to start creating rapport and making new students feel welcomed. At some schools, a preparatory course in mathematics is offered which provides an additional opportunity for students to get to know each other. Just before the term starts, the student union initiation, a series of rites with long traditions that is common in Swedish and Finnish universities and usually with a background of hazing, starts. The initiation is voluntary and is organized by more senior students as a string of activities and games devised to introduce new students to each other, to school, and to student life. Typically, students are sorted into small groups under the mentorship of a senior student. Becoming a mentor is usually a competitive process which also can include a training programme for the mentor, for instance focusing on social inclusion and non-discrimination. It is very common that students' first friendships form here, friendships that also tend to be long-lasting. It also provides an opportunity to strike up acquaintances to senior students through the involvement of mentors.

In combination, the student union introductory groups and the school peer learning teams are the most important settings for friendship formation: an infrastructure for networking. Even the structures of social events seem to be tailored towards making friends: "it feels like they try to interrupt, or move things around, it's really something that has been on my mind during these dinners, that they are very cunningly devised give people something to talk about" (Sam)[7], i.e. students are supposed to strike up a

[7] All names are pseudonyms.

conversation with others at the table, but in order to avoid potential awkward silences from nervous newcomers, there are frequent interruptions of entertainment, speeches, etc. that provide an opportunity for ending a conversation that does not lead anywhere, as well as to provide fodder for new conversations after the interruption.

> Well, first it is the [student union] initiation, and then we had those [peer learning] teams. I didn't engage a lot in the initiation, I was only there for a short time. But you learned to know a couple of people. And then in the peer learning teams, I was in the same team as one of the guys from the initiation. And he had gotten to know some others and I got to know them. So that is the way. You get to know someone who knows someone else, and you group with more and more people. (Andreas)

> *Interviewer*: So you met them through the initiation groups and they already had a gang from the summer math? *Annika:* Exactly. But then I was going to an event that wasn't school related. And like one-on-one I asked, or I was saying goodbye to the girls, and [one of them] asked what I was doing later that evening, I think. And I said I was going to this event and asked if she would like to join me, just like that. She wanted to. […] After that we've had daily contact and spent a lot of time together at school. (*Annika*)

Students typically get to know friends' friends in a pattern well known in the literature, forming larger or smaller gangs of other students, often with a smaller number of closer confidants. These gangs tend to be made up of same-sex friendship relations, and sometimes other characteristics of sameness. Students generally do not spontaneously mention sameness in terms of gender, ethnicity etc. when describing why they ended up being friends with one particular student and not another one. Instead, social networking and making friends is described as the cause of random events. This juxtaposed experiences of randomness on one side and likeness on the other in friendship formations is striking. Students describing the moment they first meet someone who later becomes a friend talk of how they either meet someone in a smaller group and connect or they randomly sit down next to another student and connects – or not. First impressions play an important part. Connecting is basically a sense of immediately having a good first impression of another person: "She was a nice and cute girl! […] And she also has a boyfriend." (Sanna)

> Sometimes I think it's like this: the first impression you have of a person. The ones I had a good first impression of – I started hanging out with them early on. Then I became a closer friend to the other ones in that circle of friends. And so it's natural that you hang out, and come closer to those people, and others understand that you are more interested in other people. […] A lot of things when you think about it, goes back to the initiation time. (*Jonathan*)

It seems to be much easier clicking with people who share certain commonalities; this can be described in very general terms; the "same type of people", a "common sense of humour" (Laura), or people "sharing the same basic values" (Annika), or people having the same level of ambition. Gender is one of the most obvious commonalities, with a lot of students stating (when asked) that spending time with people of your own gender feels more easy and natural, even though several interviewees say that they think it is just the result of chance that they are in a group with ten people of the same gender.

The result is nevertheless that a lot of friendship circles tend to be made up of either men or women. When asked about *why* people feel comfortable with friends of their own gender, answers range from pure coincidence, to men and women having different interests (such as, stereotypically but explicitly mentioned in the interviews, sports for men and relationships for women), to the explicit mentioning of opposite gender relations being problematic due to the prospect of romantic or sexual relations: "it's more complicated to hang out across the gender borders if you are among heterosexuals, sort of" (Sam). A man and a woman describe it like this:

> Well, I guess you feel a little nervous. Someone has said that there is this statistic, that many marry their classmates. So I think that people feel a lot of stress related to performance on that front, too, in the group. (*Peter*)

> You don't want to tar everyone with the same brush, but you know like – you don't know their intentions. With gay guys, this sexual intention, you know, isn't there, so then it's easier to relax. (*Sofi*)

Of course, even if the tendency towards gender homophily in friendship circles is relatively strong, this does not mean that all friendship circles are like this. Among our interviewees, we find men who say that they are not comfortable with being in male groups, and women who prefer to spend time with men.

> *Annika:* So I'm very comfortable in boy gangs. *Interviewer:* Because? *Annika:* It's simple. *Interviewer:* What's simple? *Annika:* Well, I…I feel that what they say is what they mean. *(Annika)*

Other points of sameness include ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and age. Business schools tend to be populated by young, middle- to upper-class urbanites of native ethnicity, and students who belong to the minority in any of these respects are forced to navigate those categories, which they do in different ways. Older students seem to cluster, while others state that they have less of an appetite for socializing, as well as less time, due to family obligations. Regarding ethnicity, both majority and minority students are aware of the business classes being predominantly Swedish or Finnish/ White, but this is not something that is brought up by everyone. There are also hints that ethnic minority students cluster. Samir lives in a suburb dominated by people who are first or second generation immigrants, and in Swedish, talking about "the suburb" (förorten) and the people living there often is a shorthand for describing a context dominated by ethnic minority groups with lower access to resources:

> All of us have come from some sort of suburb. I'm from [name of suburb], one is from [name of suburb], like this, we are from the suburbs, we have gathered in [name of educational programme], we have made it this far. So that's exactly why, where we come from, we have a certain sense of humour, we feel unity and we can relate to each other. […] That's why we go together so well. Yes, that's exactly why we, that's why it's going so great for us together. *(Samir)*

Socioeconomic status also seems to be a factor in students' minds, but not at all as strong as gender, or at least not as noticeable. When asked about stereotypes or specific clusters at school, a certain type of upper-class student is often mentioned, but most

students do not think that the stereotype exists, or at least is not dominant at school, and at any rate not a problem. There are some notable exceptions to this, with some students connecting their feelings of alienation at school with class:

> Because here it's like, well I don't know, but it's a lot of upper class people. Not that I have anything against that because I guess they worked hard, or someone worked hard somewhere, up towards money. But I don't know, they have such self-confidence, and I feel like sort of they are excessively nice, and it makes me suspicious." (*Carl*)

Carl feels it difficult to network and also feels a good deal of stress over not having networked enough. Considering the extreme focus on networking, he could be categorized as a "loner".

It is important to remember that all of these things have happened in the first two months of business school. Many students refer to an open window, a window of opportunity for socializing at a period when most if not all new students are especially perceptible to striking up new acquaintances (Buote et al 2007). This driving force is then further enhanced by what we referred to earlier as the infrastructure for networking. This, in combination with the explicit statement from the schools that networking is absolutely crucial to their future careers make some students use their natural abilities to network, and others to feel unsuccessful, while yet others say that they refrain from networking for networking's own sake.

> *Peter:* In the beginning […] everyone wants to make contact with as much people as possible. So when I say that I was working all the time I'm just saying that I kept open to it and also was looking for it myself. I tried to be very open in all manner of ways so it would be as easy as possible to get to know more people. *Interviewer:* How do you do that? Peter: How you behave when you are open? *Interviewer*: Yes. *Peter*: I don't know. Maybe you acknowledge where other people are at, what they want to talk about, who they are. How you can relate to them. You don't want to lock yourself into specific views. You talk about things in an exciting and charismatic way, hopefully. And then you just try to make sure that you at all instances and moments create added value to those involved. (Peter)

This last quote is representative for a specific type in the student body, one that we find in the survey data as well as in the interviews: the superconnector (Uzzi & Dunlap, 2005), a type of student that by their extensive networking behaviour functions as a bridge between different unconnected cliques or groups of students by filling the "structural holes" between them, and thus connecting them (Burt, 1998). Some of the students we talked to mentioned a high degree of strategic thinking when networking: one mentioned that he participated in the initiation in order to be able to "build alliances" and said that he had "20–30 people" that he knew among the other students in the class (Sam). Another (Peter) stated that he didn't "have a core gang" but that he was like a "guest" in several such gangs. A third (Per) mentioned having 50 friends in class, of which he considered about ten to be close. In the survey data we find them as the 50 individuals in the data of the first wave who use the maximum numbers of contacts (15) when describing their network at school.

From the other side, it is clear that they are observed early on by fellow students.

"There are always a couple in each class that walk around and talk to everyone and are really nice […] They ask a lot of questions, that's why they seem nice…it's a lot of "Hey, how are you doing"" (Daisy). It's "especially guys" who do this (Sanna), which is also evident from the survey data: indeed, two thirds of the superconnectors are men.

After some time, the open window closes. The superconnector Peter describes the situation succinctly.

> In the beginning I really felt like this "wow, you can sit anywhere, everyone is really very open". […] You're still welcome. Considering I'm usually late to class you can sit anywhere without it being weird. But you can still see that people have retracted into cliques, pretty openly. *(Peter)*

If superconnectors find the open window closing, it is even more clearly so for students who feel that they are less sociable: "The problem is that you weren't that active in the beginning and then you fall behind a little, so there's something of an obstacle there." (Alexander)

Most students seem to fall somewhere between the superconnectors and the loners, with a small number of confidants embedded in a group of up to 8-10 people with whom they regularly hang out. The loners differ to what extent they find it to be a problem that they do not have a large network of students around themselves. If being a socialite is not something that comes naturally to you, being in an environment that puts so much focus on the necessity of networking can feel stressful and disorienting.

> The most difficult thing with being in school? It's all the people and that you have such a superficial relationship to them all. So then knowing how to approach people and talk to them and who are you close to and who not, because you can have such different ideas about that. How close you are…how good friends you are, so that's sometimes difficult. *(Olivia)*

One student says that he has never so far recognized another student at class. "and then it feels silly to even talk to someone" (Marcus). But the social infrastructure that the school offers can also be an avenue for students who have had problems with social relationships in the past to create a more social environment. Even if they can feel a resistance towards socializing, a certain degree of it is necessary at school, and then you can "feel by the end of the day that you have been social" (Elsa).

During the open window, students go through a very intensive networking phase where friendships are struck up within the framework of the infrastructure for networking provided by the school. This process is experienced as random and to some extent is, since a lot of contacts are made in the smaller groups set up at the beginning of the first semester, but to a large degree these tend to be homophilious in one or several respects. Depending on personality, students feel more or less stress about the felt need for making new friends. The end result is one of smaller often homophilious cliques of students after the closing of the window, with lone wolves (our outcasts) at the edges, with the cliques seemingly held together by the superconnectors.

In the next section, we explore the socialization at the school.

Becoming a business student

The first few months at university creates an environment of insecurity where the student has to orient themself in a completely new situation. For some students, starting at university also means being in an environment that is socially and ethnically different from where you grew up or went to school. It is thus not surprising that many of the respondents express insecurities regarding their self-image, their relation to themselves as students, and their relation to other students, in particular concerning the pressure to make social contacts. In the interviews, one question relates to how one is supposed to be as a business student. Discussions regarding this issue includes descriptions of the ”stereotypical” business student and the explicit or implicit norms of how students should be, and how they are in reality.

Almost all interviewees can provide a very clear description of a stereotypical business student – especially a stereotypical *male* business student. One version might go something like this: a man who dresses in a suit, who is very interested in making money, perhaps specializing in finance and dabbling in day trading on the side, has a lot of acquaintances but fewer friends, looks upon other people as means rather than goals in themselves, and so on. This man comes from an affluent big city area, have gone to good high schools at home or abroad, and might have parents who themselves have graduated from the same school – maybe they even met there? The female stereotype – although most interviewees seem to struggle with coming up with one, perhaps indicating that the stereotypical business student still is seen as a man – can in the same vein be imagined as a young woman who is very smart and ambitious, who has always been a “good girl”, i.e. hard-working and studious at school, and who dresses very well. Interestingly, the female stereotype does not tend to include as many attributes that can be construed as negative, compared to the male stereotype. Even so, some students state that this stereotype does not exist in reality and that it is something that people from the outside project on students from the school, while others claim that the stereotype is very real but that they themselves do not belong to it. Some students are surprised that the actual student body does not conform to the stereotype. Maybe it is, one student ponders, because they are just not real business students yet.

> It feels like they are like most other people. But regarding the image if business students, I think at least a business shirt, preferably a jacket, like. But it’s also like if they’re too young still. They haven’t sort of become business students yet. So they look like regular people on the street. It’s a little, maybe not surprising, but I’d thought they would dress up more. (*Marcus*)

Then again, some students do seem to fit the stereotype, at least according to some. They “probably think they are better than the others” (Jonathan), they have “a grandiose self-image” (Marcus), they dress well, they have educated parents. Strikingly, these stereotypes seem to be associated with male students. So while students on the one hand usually have a clear image of how people outside the school view business students, they differ as to whether that stereotype is, if not true, then at least to what extent there are some people who fit the description.

The stereotypes are interesting because even if they do not necessarily represent what students actually believe the norm to be: it functions as a point of reference, especially since the students are aware of that the stereotypes are alive and well in the conscience

of people outside the business school, even among friends and sometimes family, many of them describing how they sometimes keep quiet about what school they are studying at since they do not want to get in any trouble, or being forced to defend their life choices, or be the butt of jokes.

There is also variation as to how interviewees describe social clustering in school – for some, it does not exist at all, while for others it is very tangible. And the interviewees talk about the extent to which they feel that they fit well into these norms and social clusters or not. For some students, this is also expressed in how they relate to the interview situation itself.

Business students have consistently been shown to value self-enhancement and power more than prosocial values, as "business entails the pursuit of power and prestige, ambition and success" (Arieli et al 2016: 495), aligning with an entrepreneurial spirit on a competitive market. There is a scholarly discussion concerning the extent to which the personality traits and social values of graduates from business schools depend on self-selection or socialization. Empirical findings tend to put more importance on self-selection than on socialization, i.e. students seek out business schools because they already share the basic values rather than the other way around (Arieli et al 2016; Litten et al 2018; Bardi et al 2014). For this reason, it is of interest to study not only how students personality traits and values vary over time, but also to study how students reason along lines of value and personality fit. Are there students who do not "fit" the norms, and how do they cope?

In table 6 we show the respondents' average scores for personality, using a version of the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (Erhart et al, 2009), which is based on the familiar Big 5 personality traits measurement. We also measure values, using the short Schwartz value survey (Lindeman et al, 2005). Respondents tend to score higher on extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness than neuroticism (mental instability) and openness. The only major difference between men and women is that women tend to score higher on the neuroticism scale. Women also tend to score slightly higher than men on the agreeableness scale. Considering values, there are very small differences between men and women. The values for which students give the highest scores are achievement, self-direction and benevolence. We are however less interested in the absolute levels of values and personality traits measurement and more so in change over time as well as any causal relationships between these and network composition, which fall outside of the purposes of this report.

A basic value that is very obviously promoted at the schools does perhaps not seem to belong to the competitive, power-seeking stereotype of the business student – the extreme focus on networking and creating a welcoming, nice environment at school. Some students state that they are surprised by this.

> People are very nice at [the business school], I don't know if that is because you want to get in contact to people quickly and so on, I don't know, but maybe it's more like, I guess it's something that I have noticed, that people are very open and nice and polite, so I guess I have a positive image of those who have gone to [the business school]. I guess I had, and it's a bit connected to the stereotype that people would have like sharp elbows and be very competitive but it's not like that at all." *(Alexander)*

Connecting back to our discussion above about superconnectors, "normal", and loners, many students describe themselves as either very social, or not so social, and the wider student body either as very extrovert or very introvert, which perhaps is a judgement in the eye of the beholder (i.e., many of the students describing themselves or the student body at large as introvert might not score very high on the introversion scale in a personality test). Many describe themselves as people who get things done, take the lead, or are good at studying, and also generally see that as good traits to seek out in friends. A major difference concerning sociality is that those who describe themselves as not so good at or interested in doing a lot of socializing feel that they have to explain themselves and often relate it to the perceived image of being a "good" student at the particular school (i.e. that they do not have time to network as much as they would like because they have to study hard and not attend social events), whereas the respondents who describe themselves as social does not offer any explanation for why this is the case. This could be indicative of a perceived norm of students at the schools under study to be especially socially active.

As we have touched on above, this creates stress among some of those who feel that they are wasting their time at business school by not socializing enough. That students are especially reflective when it comes to their own experiences of being more or less social is not surprising as this theme is what the interview revolves around. Especially the ones who feel more introvert, or less apt at socializing tended to elaborate on this. Several students reflected upon whether they would "fit" the study or not, i.e. whether they would conform to the norm of the extrovert socialite business student. "I am going to mess up your study, I deviate a lot", one student noted (Carl).

When it comes to positioning themselves in relation to other students, it is obvious that there is a common type of student, one who is young, ethnically native and from a upper-class or upper-middle-class, academic family in an affluent big city neighborhood. The students who belong to this category generally do not categorize their fellow students along these lines. One student instead talks of ambitious and less ambitious students as a way to categorize people. Some talk about the way people dress (up), while others to the contrary find it interesting that the students do not dress up especially. The students who belong to an ethnic minority tend to point out the ethnic homogeneity of the student population (this is also noted by one majority student), and the students from smaller towns sometimes points out that the big city students tend to hang together. "The girls in hijab sit together", an ethnic minority student says (Sofi), and there are hints of ethnic clustering elsewhere in the interviews, as in the quote from Samir above.

Other perceived norms actualized by the interview situation include being young. As mentioned before, our pilot interviews included a rather homogeneous batch of young, socially active students who were all engaged in the student union. The random sampling strategy (i.e. rather than relying on snowballing or letting the student union or school recruit interviewees) resulted in a more diverse set of respondents. *Erica* started her interview by saying that she was not "like that…we'll see if you will have any use for me.", referring to the fact that she is older than most students.

Table 6. Personality and values

	School										
	SSE		GU		KTH		Hanken				
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	All men	All women	Average difference between men and women
Personality (0–100, 0 = low, 100 = high)											
Extraversion	60	67	61	63	59	50	62	65	60	63	-3
Agreeableness	67	75	64	75	66	66	68	75	66	74	-8
Conscientiousness	70	66	69	70	70	77	63	79	69	69	0
Neuroticism	35	45	34	49	35	48	32	48	34	48	-14
Openness	56	57	56	55	57	52	58	62	57	56	1
Values (1–5, 1 = Not important, 5= Very important											
Power	4,5	4,4	4,3	3,7	4,2	3,5	4,2	3,7	4,3	3,8	0,5
Achievement	5,4	5,2	5,1	5,2	5,2	5,3	5,0	5,0	5,2	5,2	0
Hedonism	4,4	5,0	4,4	4,7	4,5	4,8	4,2	4,3	4,4	4,8	-0,4
Stimulation	4,1	5,3	4,8	4,5	5,1	4,8	5,0	4,3	5,0	4,7	0,3
Self-direction	5,2	5,4	4,7	4,9	5,1	4,9	4,7	5,2	4,9	5,1	-0,2
Universalism	4,1	4,7	4,0	4,4	4,5	4,4	3,9	5,0	4,1	4,5	-0,4
Benevolence	4,8	5,3	4,8	5,2	5,2	4,8	4,6	5,4	4,9	5,2	-0,3
Tradition	3,7	3,7	3,5	3,9	3,5	3,5	4,1	3,8	3,6	3,8	0,2
Conformity	3,5	4,4	4,6	4,8	4,9	4,4	4,7	4,7	4,7	4,6	-0,1
Security	4,7	4,9	4,6	5,0	5,0	4,9	4,6	5,0	4,7	4,9	0,2

Becoming a friend of business students

When seen from the outside or from above, it can seem as if students at elite business schools are a homogeneous mass of people, perhaps conforming to one or more of the usual stereotypes of which the students themselves are so aware. Indeed, that is a commonly held view by prospective students themselves. But from the inside, and after starting your education, it is obvious that not only are most of the first-term students not yet quite business students – some of them will perhaps never become business students, at least not in that stereotypical shape. The stereotype is a strong ideal type for students to relate to – joke about, mark distance to, or even embrace. Although some students find some affinity to the stereotype, it is much more common to outright reject the stereotype or refer it to a small group of students, than to place oneself in that category. The stereotype is, as stereotypes go, mostly associated with negative aspects (feeling superior to others, having "sharp elbows"), while other aspects that could be seen as just as stereotypical (being extremely polite, outgoing and social) are not seen as belonging to the stereotype.

When trying to go deep into the situation of who ends up with whom in a business school, it is clear that there are tendencies towards homophily in terms of gender and social background as well as ethnicity, but students rarely talk about making friends through that lens. Instead, making friends is often talked about as the result of chance, and sharing common values is mentioned more often than sharing a common background. Most respondents report a joyful if stressful experience of entering business school, even if some feel that they are not making the most out of the opportunities of networking. There are clear expectations of students wanting to befriend each other, which is mirrored in an infrastructure for networking which includes small introductory groups where a small number of newcomers spend a lot of time together, and of numerous social activities organized by the school and the student union. What we describe in this report points to the possibility that many of the structural features of students' social networks are in fact decided already during the first few months at school.

In future publications from this project, we will study how networks develop and change over the years at the business school, and what effects the composition of networks formed at business school might have on future careers. We will also study the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' networking. An important question for the project will be whether different background factors, such as gender, family background, ethnicity, but also personality and ambitions, might have on network composition and development.

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