

**PERCEPTIONS OF CLASSROOM CLIMATE, PEER-
RELATIONSHIPS AND SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG
BEGINNER STUDENTS OF ITALIAN AT UNIVERSITY**

Antonella Beconi

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
The University of Sydney

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Program scholarship

*This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work.
This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.*

*I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all
the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.*

Antonella Beconi

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the perceptions of students enrolled in a beginners' course of Italian at the University of Sydney, focusing on three core aspects of their learning experience: Classroom Climate (CC), Peer-Relationships (PR), and Sense of Belonging to the University context (SBU). The research spans two years and is framed by the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. It employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of student experiences.

The study addresses two main research questions. Research Question 1 explores how students perceived CC, PR, and SBU before and after the transition to emergency remote teaching in Semester 1, 2020. The findings indicate that while students initially held positive perceptions of CC, the sudden shift to online learning posed significant challenges in fostering PR and maintaining a strong SBU. The supportive environment within the Italian classroom reported a substantial decline in their sense of belonging to the broader university community.

Research Question 2 examines students' perceptions at the beginning and at the end of Semester 1, 2021, as they navigated the return to a more normal academic environment which also saw the introduction of three different learning modalities, that is, face-to-face, HyFlex, and online. The study finds that CC remained consistently positive, including across all modalities, with HyFlex students expressing particular satisfaction due to the flexibility and adaptability of this format. However, challenges in PR persisted, with face-to-face students experiencing stronger peer interactions compared to their online peers. The SBU remained the most problematic aspect, with students across all modalities reporting a continued sense of disconnection from the broader university environment.

This study makes several contributions to the literature on second language learning. Firstly, it emphasizes the critical role of the classroom environment in shaping positive

educational experiences, particularly in a second language learning context. Secondly, it highlights the importance of peer-relationships in creating a supportive learning atmosphere, while also underscoring the difficulties students face in extending these relationships beyond the classroom, especially in online settings. Thirdly, it demonstrates the necessity for universities to offer flexible learning options that balance academic needs with opportunities for social integration, particularly in times of crisis. Fourthly, it highlights the need for universities to put in place appropriate measures that can foster students' engagement with the broader learning community on campus.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Premises of the study

This thesis investigates students' perceptions regarding three aspects of their experiences during their first year of learning Italian at an Australian metropolitan university: classroom climate, which encompasses the collective feelings about the teaching and learning context (Arnold et al., 2013, pp. 29-45)¹; peer-relationships, which refer to the interactions among students and with their teachers and their broader Sense of Belonging to the University context, which relates to the feeling of being part of a community. The study examines these perceptions at four key moments: at the start and end of the first semester in 2020, that is, before and after the pandemic-induced shift to mandatory online learning; and during the first semester of 2021, when students had the option of fully online, fully in-person, or hybrid (HyFlex²) learning modes. The analysis is based on both quantitative and qualitative data collected at these times (see Chapters 4 and 5).

This research builds on my decades-long passion for and expertise in language education and stems from my involvement in the "Flourishing in L2" project, launched by Strambi, Luzeckyj and Rubino in 2016. This initiative aimed to integrate Positive Psychology (henceforth PP)³ into language teaching to foster student relationships, social connections, and ultimately wellbeing. Norrish (2015, p. 100) emphasizes the social nature of the human mind, highlighting the importance of these connections, particularly for first-year students who often experience stress, pressure, and isolation (Headspace, 2016). Developing social bonds

¹When referring to whole books or book chapters I added the page numbers to improve readability for the reader and make it easier for them to locate the corresponding references.

² The term 'HyFlex' refers to a hybrid modality that allows students to choose to participate in the mode that works best for them over the course and from session to session. I use the term HyFlex following the indications of the educational innovation of the teaching@sydney of the University of Sydney. <https://educational-innovation.sydney.edu.au/teaching@sydney/tag/hyflex/>

³ PP is "the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions (Gable & Haidt 2005 p.103).

(Thomas, 2012) and a sense of belonging (Studiosity, 2018) is crucial for optimizing their educational experience.

When I began this research in 2019, my goal was to investigate how a communicative language approach could improve students' perceptions of peer-relationships and classroom atmosphere, potentially also enhancing their sense of belonging within the university. My initial research focus was on the social aspects of collaborative learning and whether incorporating specific communicative language materials could positively impact the students' educational experience (see Appendix 5). The approach was inspired by concepts from the “Flourishing in L2” project, guided by principles of PP, flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 2011; Lushyn et al., 2021;), positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2004; M. E. P. Seligman, 2011; Gregersen, MacIntyre, & Meza, 2016;), as well as theories related to Affective Filters (Krashen, 1981, 1985), and dynamic group work (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). These fields provided a foundation for my methodological approach (see Ch. 2).

The COVID-19 outbreak in mid-March 2020 significantly impacted the course of this research. The abrupt shift to ‘emergency remote teaching’, as called by Hodges et al., (2020), presented an unprecedented challenge for both educators and students. In response to this dramatic change, and in consultation with my supervisor, we decided to continue the study within the new online context, adjusting our approach while maintaining alignment with PP principles.

Extending data collection into 2021 provided an opportunity to broaden the research. With the introduction of various learning modalities (online, in-person, and HyFlex) in the first semester of 2021, the research expanded to explore how these different modes influenced students' perceptions of CC, PR, and SBU. This shift formed the basis of my second research aim: distinguishing the effects of online learning when it was an unforeseen necessity versus

a chosen mode. The study also began to focus on the pros and cons of online versus in-person learning, with particular attention to how the pandemic and its lockdowns affected students' social capital.⁴

To systematically address the research aims, I developed two primary research questions, each with three sub-questions, as presented below. These questions were organized chronologically to align with the data collection timeline, focusing on students' perceptions of Classroom Climate (CC), Peer-relationships (PR), and Sense of Belonging to the University context (SBU) based on survey responses and interview insights.

RQ1: What are the students' perceptions of CC, PR and SBU in Semester 1, 2020?

- Subquestion 1: What are these perceptions before the introduction of the emergency remote teaching?
- Subquestion 2: What are these perceptions following the emergency remote teaching?
- Subquestion 3: What changes emerge from students' perceptions at the beginning and end of Semester 1, 2020?

RQ2: What are the students' post-pandemic perceptions of CC, PR and SBU in Semester 1, 2021?

- Subquestion 1: What are these perceptions at the beginning of Semester 1, 2021?
- Subquestion 2: What are these perceptions at the end of Semester 1, 2021?
- Subquestion 3: What changes emerge from students' perceptions at the beginning and end of Semester 1, 2021?

The first question will be answered by examining the data from Survey 1, conducted in 2020 prior to the mandatory lockdown and switch of modality to online learning, and that of Survey

⁴ Social capital refers to the networks of relationships among people in a society and the benefits that arise from these connections.

2, conducted at the end of this semester after the students had been locked down for several weeks.

The second question will be answered by examining the data of the two surveys conducted at the beginning and end of the 2021 semester when students had the opportunity to choose their preferred learning modality. These students were afforded the comfort of being able to freely choose the most efficacious modality for their needs. I hoped that the additional data provided by the extension of the study would provide insights into a voluntary as opposed to mandatory implementation of a specific pedagogical modality.

1.2 Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data. Data were collected through self-administered online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with students and teachers. The surveys measured participants' agreement with standardized statements regarding CC, PR, and SBU, alongside sociodemographic information. The post-semester interviews⁵ provided deeper insights into students' attitudes and experiences.

1.3 Significance of the study

This research contributes to the understanding of classroom dynamics in second language learning contexts, particularly in the face of unprecedented challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. By exploring the interplay between CC, PR and SBU, this study offers insights into students' perceptions together with the influence of different teaching modalities (in-person, online, and HyFlex). It further explores the effects of forced versus chosen online learning

⁵ Students could only be interviewed after the publication of the final results.

environments, shedding light on the broader implications of these shifts for educational practices.

One of the key contributions of this research lies in its exploration of the role that some PP principles can play in fostering a supportive and effective learning environment, both in traditional classroom settings and remote learning contexts. The study highlights how the integration of some PP principles can enhance students' educational experiences, even under the challenging conditions of a pandemic-induced shift to online learning. The feedback from student interviews conducted in 2020 and 2021 underscores this, revealing that despite the difficulties of transitioning to online teaching, many students reported a positive educational experience.

The study examines the multi-faceted experiences of university students in Australia, digging into sociodemographic factors such as age, year of enrolment, working commitments and social support networks. It offers insights into the challenges different cohorts face in experiencing a positive learning environment, highlighting overlooked aspects related to students' sense of belonging, and its impact on their flourishing and wellbeing⁶.

The study's timeliness is particularly noteworthy. By addressing the impact of the pandemic and the associated shift to mandatory online learning on SLA, the study captures a unique moment in educational history. The data collected at four critical points during this period provide a comprehensive picture of how online education has influenced students' positive emotions and the importance of fostering positive relationships for achieving satisfaction and effective learning outcomes in this modality.

⁶ This communicative approach, inspired by PP, is monitored through five items in Survey 2 but it is not further analyzed.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is organized into six chapters. Following the introduction, Chapter 2 provides a literature review that informs the study's design, focusing on research in Positive Psychology, emotions, affective filters, and Dynamic Group Theory as they relate to second language acquisition (SLA). Chapter 3 details the methodology and theoretical framework, including the research context, participants, data collection instruments, and ethical considerations. Chapters 4 and 5 present the analysis, addressing the two primary research questions with data collected in 2020 and 2021, respectively. Chapter 6 summarizes the main findings, discusses the extent to which the research aims were met, and offers recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The first section of this chapter (2.2) examines the social aspects of language acquisition, including collaborative learning, peer-relationships, and the teacher's role in facilitating these dynamics.

Section 2.3 focuses on the impact of emotions on second language learning. It gives particular attention to how these emotions may relate to, or be affected by, the development of relationships in the classroom. This section also turns to the psychological aspects, delving into the field of Positive Psychology (PP) and its influence on language learning.

Section 2.4 investigates the concept of sense of belonging among university students, analyzing how physical space and various sociodemographic factors contribute to this crucial aspect of the student experience.

The final section (2.5) of this chapter addresses the timely issue of online learning and emergency remote teaching. It discusses the challenges faced by both students and educators, the essential skills required for effective remote instruction, and the potential advantages of these modalities in uncertain times.

2.2 Social aspects of second language learning

2.2.1 Collaborative learning and group dynamics

Collaborative learning is a pedagogical approach that actively engages students in the learning process through meaningful interactions and communicative acts (Gokhale, 1995; Murphey et al., 2012). This method leverages group dynamics to improve knowledge sharing, critical

thinking, openness to diversity, retention rates, and interpersonal and employability skills, as emphasized by Weeks and Keep⁷ in their article on educational innovation.

Furthermore, Mercer et al. (2012, p. 4) stress the importance of evaluating the entire teaching-learning process and classroom context, to fully understand how classes function, a view also supported by Gabryś-Barker (2016, pp. 155-174). This holistic view is essential for grasping the dynamics and outcomes of collaborative settings.

Collaborative learning, also referred to as cooperation, is especially conducive to learning, particularly in L2 language classrooms, as discussed below. The spectrum of cooperation—ranging from positive to neutral to negative—is closely linked with individual personality traits, significantly affecting the overall learning environment. Positive cooperation, characterized by open, social, and organized traits, has been shown to enhance academic performance and create a supportive learning atmosphere, as noted by Dörnyei⁸ (1997, pp. 482 -491). The advantages of fostering regular cooperative learning experiences include increasing cooperative behaviors, reducing aggression intended to cause harm, enhancing prosocial behaviors, reducing individualistic tendencies, and boosting student engagement, all of which contribute positively to the educational process (Ambrose et al., 2010).

Conversely, neutral cooperation involves minimal participation, meeting only the basic task requirements, whereas negative cooperation, often arising from conflicts or unclear goals, can lead to reduced learning efficiency and a disruptive classroom environment.

The significance of group dynamics in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has been widely assessed through theoretical and empirical studies, with significant contributions from scholars such as Clément et al. (1994), Dörnyei (2003, 2007a; 2014), and Hadfield

⁷ <https://educational-innovation.sydney.edu.au/teaching@sydney/encouraging-collaborative-learning/>.

⁸ <https://teaching.cornell.edu/teaching-resources/active-collaborative-learning/collaborative-learning>

(1992).Dörnyei and Murphey (2003, pp. 12-13), describe "group dynamics" as the patterns of interactions within a group and their impact on the collective learning experience. Such dynamics are pivotal for facilitating L2 acquisition and are influenced by factors such as classroom cohesion and environmental perceptions, as demonstrated by Murphey (1998) through the role of peer role models.

Dörnyei argues that group dynamics are a significant resource for improving L2 usage through peer interactions and comparisons, exploring the nuances of group work and motivation in cooperative language learning situations (Dörnyei, 1997, 2007a; Dörnyei & Murphey,2001;2003;). L2 learners working in groups tend to cooperate rather than compete, leading to higher L2 achievement.

As mentioned, group dynamics can transform neutral or negative attitudes towards the learning context or target language, enhancing students' motivation and positively influencing the Classroom Climate. Long's (1985) research article on group work dynamics and second language acquisition, reveals that collaborative learning environments lead to more frequent student-to-student corrections and increased interaction among students in small groups, compared to traditional teacher-led settings. Thus, understanding group dynamics is crucial for creating an inclusive and effective learning environment. Effective management of group interactions, as explored by Shaw et al. (1981, pp. 125-133), can lead to substantial benefits in achieving educational and organizational objectives, emphasizing the need for active communication, listening, and conflict resolution strategies.

Overall, these studies highlight the relevance of group dynamics in language education, emphasizing its positive impact on the stimulation of L2 learning and motivation. Dörnyei's theory links group dynamics with collaborative learning, aimed at promoting social connections and positive classroom atmosphere to enhance learning. His further research with Malderez (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997) found that small group interactions within classes boost

student motivation, improve safety, and enhance peer-relationships. These smaller settings offer more chances for students to practice the language through discussions and collaborative tasks. Dörnyei also provides practical and theoretical guidelines to improve cooperation in L2 classrooms, details of which will be discussed below (see 2.3).

2.2.2 Peer relationships and classroom climate

Drawing on definitions from Positive Psychology (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Peterson, 2006), good peer-relationships can be conceptualized as positive and plentiful exchanges characterized by mutual understanding among students (Seligman et al., 2009; Chu et al., 2010; ,)⁹. As discussed above, collaboration and group activities, integral to fostering these relationships, contribute to creating a sense of community within the classroom and facilitating language learning (Clément et al., 1994; Dörnyei, 2007a).

Positive peer-relationships are widely linked to student satisfaction and positive perceptions of the learning context, both the classroom and the broader university environment (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Stott & Fielding, 2014; Maunder, 2018;). For instance, in their quantitative study, Frisby & Martin employed Dwyer's Connected Classroom Climate Inventory (CCCI) (2004) to measure classroom connectedness, willingness to cooperate, and feelings of inclusion. Their findings indicated that enhanced connectedness improved student participation and learning outcomes. This tool is similarly used in the current study to evaluate these same dimensions. The study found that stronger classroom connectedness and rapport between instructors and students significantly improve student engagement and educational outcomes. Maunder's study (2018) of 135 English undergraduates of Social Science identified attachment to university peers as a crucial predictor of university adjustment, highlighting the vital role of social relationships in institutional belonging.

⁹ <https://inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/supporting-positive-peer-relationships/>

Secure attachments, built on positive attitudes, mutual similarity, and reciprocity, foster good relationships (Diener & Seligman, 2002, p. 83). Nonetheless, friendship, considered a fundamental human need, requires time and effort to develop, as indicated by research (Dunbar, 2018, p. 32). Supporting this, Hall's (2018, p. 1292) analysis of data from about 300 first-year students in the U.S. revealed that forming friendships typically requires 120-160 hours of interaction over three weeks. To further complicate the rise of a friendship is the need for similarity, which involves finding commonalities with others (Laursen, 2017, p. 282). For example, a study of Japanese students learning English (Murphey, 1998) underlined the motivational impact of culturally and age-similar peer role models on learning strategy choices and attitudes toward the learning environment (Murphey, 1998, pp. 201-205). Likewise, my research also examines students' perceptions of similarity in forming social connections and echoes these findings.

Within Positive Psychology (see section 2.2.3), there is a significant emphasis on the role of positive interpersonal relationships in enhancing student personal satisfaction and success (Diener & Seligman, 2002, p. 83; Warren & Donaldson, 2017). Numerous studies within the university setting have underscored the vital importance of social connections and a supportive learning environment in promoting student success and satisfaction (Dörnyei, 1997, pp. 490-491; Kemp & Grieve, 2014, pp. 8-9; Kimura, 2020, pp. 2-20). For example, when students establish strong connections with their peers or with their teacher, they are more likely to feel motivated to actively participate, engage and invest time and effort in the learning process, thus leading to their success (Gregersen, 2016, pp. 59-73). This study further investigates how perceptions of positive peer-relationships facilitate L2 learning, which is explored through one of the survey items.

Positive peer-relationships are also important to create an overall positive Classroom Climate. For example, as evidenced by a study conducted by MacIntyre et al. among 79 ninth

graders from a Canadian junior high school, building positive relationships both among peers and between students and teachers, contributes to a supportive L2 learning environment. This, in turn, enhances students' willingness to communicate, boosting their success (2001).

Beyond mere interactions among students in group activities, as discussed above, classroom dynamics for collaborative learning also involve building positive rapport among all participants in the classroom, including between students and teachers (Ambrose et al., 2010, pp. 156-186). These relationships significantly influence the overall classroom climate. Instructors also play a key role in fostering this positive climate and enhancing connectedness.

The interaction of such factors is confirmed in research on adolescents, which suggests that positive perceptions of the learning context are linked to relationships with peers and teachers (Chu et al., 2010). This is what emerges from their review of 246 studies on social support, where individuals believe help will be available when needed. The analysis found that social support both perceived and from teachers and the school correlates strongly with satisfaction and positive perceptions of the learning context. Thus, building relationships with peers creates a supportive learning environment where students may feel more comfortable to practice the language with classmates, reducing anxiety, and creating a space where mistakes are seen as part of the learning process. This was shown in Gabryś-Barker's study (2016, pp. 155-175) conducted among six female L2 students regarding the importance of a positive classroom climate. Her findings also point to the significant role of the teacher in establishing a conducive learning environment and suggest that the affective aspects, such as positive attitudes to learn and teach, are crucial. The study also underscores the importance of safety, support, and enjoyment within the classroom setting. Furthermore, a positive learning environment created through good relationships can contribute to a long-term commitment to language learning. This is evident in the study conducted by D'Orazzi and Hajek (2021) where

students who experienced an enjoyable and supportive classroom atmosphere based on positive peer-relationships were more likely to continue their language studies.

Group strategies, such as strategic seating arrangements, can effectively dismantle initial barriers to create a connected and welcoming Classroom Climate (Murphy & Valdez, 2005). Additionally, while not directly linked to L2 settings, a comprehensive U.S. study by Pettigrew & Tropp (2008) highlights the significant impact of positive relationships on classroom and group dynamics. This review involving over a quarter of a million participants across 38 nations, demonstrated how intergroup contact can decrease prejudice. The findings underscored the role of affective factors over cognitive factors in fostering positive relationships and overcoming collaboration barriers such as reducing anxiety and shyness, often experienced by students in new and unfamiliar classrooms, and increasing empathy.

Overall, studies have brought to the fore the importance of building positive peer-relationships in the classroom, including through collaborative learning, as a way to create a supportive learning environment and a “safe space” which would ultimately encourage learners to use their second language more freely. Hence, my study also delves into the role of peer-relationships in the second language classroom.

2.2.3 The role of the teacher

The important role of the teacher in establishing a positive, collaborative and inclusive classroom has been brought to the fore in several studies. Frisby & Martin (2010) found that the teacher’s rapport with students was the most critical factor in building an overall positive classroom environment, influencing student participation, affective learning, and cognitive learning among the 233 Communication students at a Mid-Atlantic university under study, even more than student-to-student rapport. In addition, Arnold et al. (2013, pp. 29-45), referencing Stevick, suggested that teachers should create an environment conducive to personal growth and development, rather than focusing solely on knowledge transfer.

In collaborative learning, the teacher actively participates in classroom activities alongside students, with the significance of building rapport highlighted by scholars who emphasize that a teacher's actions like positive attitude, and promotion of positive emotions, help to create a favorable Classroom Climate, boosting student motivation and learning enjoyment. That the teacher's specific behavior is crucial for success is also demonstrated in Webb and Barrett's (2014) U.S. study involving 230 undergraduate students, which highlighted, for example, attentive behavior, such as addressing students by name and involving all students (p. 19). Additionally, students expressed a desire for individual consideration and respect. According to Webb & Barrett (2014, pp. 22-23), teachers can enhance rapport and create a positive learning environment through attentiveness, courtesy, and personal connections with students, leading to positive learning outcomes. On the other hand, a lack of positive rapport-building mostly arises when the teacher shows disinterest towards the student or the teaching context (Webb & Barrett, 2014, pp. 22-23). Indeed, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) illustrated the substantial influence that classroom activities, teachers, and peers have on students' enjoyment levels, particularly through emotional engagement, highlighting the pivotal role of teachers in fostering this experience. Moreover, the classroom size can impact students' participation, group activities and the effectiveness of the teacher's instructional delivery. A U.S. study suggests that smaller classroom environments can lead to higher student engagement (Duraismy & al., 2019). This may be due to teachers' increased capacity to tailor their teaching methods in smaller classes, integrating more learner-centered and task-based strategies, as observed in another U.S. study (Wright et al., 2019).

As discussed above, collaborative learning generally contributes to creating a positive learning environment. In such a context, the teacher plays a pivotal role in fostering positive group dynamics that contribute to students feeling socially connected, safe, and cooperative, as found by (Gabrys-Barker, 2016). Her findings highlight that by fostering positive emotions,

teachers contribute to a more effective and supportive learning environment. Specifically, she suggests that a positive psychological environment in the classroom can promote not only language success but also the wellbeing and personal growth of both learners and teachers. For Sulis and Philp (2021, p. 102), ideal conditions for a successful learning environment include teachers offering appropriately tailored support, presenting interesting tasks that demand active and collaborative participation, and fostering positive relationships with both teachers and peers. This is what emerges from their study conducted among first year French beginner and advanced learners (pp. 107-110). As will be shown, such findings are confirmed also by my study, in that the tutor plays a crucial role in the establishment of a positive, judgmental-free and friendly learning environment.

2.3 The impact of emotions

Emotions play a significant role in the L2 classroom showcasing both positive and negative effects, as evidenced by studies linking emotions and motivation (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012, p. 113). Dewaele's (2010) multilingual study among 1746 foreign language learners from around the world and a subsequent quantitative study by Dewaele and Macintyre (2014) underscore the pivotal role of emotions, particularly enjoyment, interest, pride, and satisfaction, in driving L2 learning. Dewaele (2010) conducted a two-year online study, through a three-part survey. The first part included 13 personal questions covering aspects like age, gender, and dominant language(s). The second part featured 13 Likert-type questions concerning the choice of language for expressing emotions with different interlocutors. The third section presented nine open-ended personal questions exploring respondents' emotions. The results revealed the centrality of emotions in L2 learning. According to Dewaele (2010, p. 8), they form the foundation of any learning process, making them crucial for SLA. Similarly, in Dewaele's research context, emotions permeate language learning and interpersonal relationships, and impact on communication. Emotions in the learning environment can manifest as both positive

and negative, each influencing students' engagement and learning outcomes in distinct ways (Krashen, 1981). My thesis aligns with the evolving landscape of emotion-focused research in second language acquisition, acknowledging the significance of emotions in social interactions and relationships.

While the focus in my study is on the individual learner and how their emotions affect their ability to participate, perform, and learn, it must be noted that emotions can be deeply affected by the classroom climate and peer-relationships. Dörnyei (2019, pp. 22-26) incorporates the concept of "student engagement" from educational psychology into the L2 learning context. Emotions, both positive and negative, are central to Dörnyei's framework and they are shown to significantly impact student engagement by affecting their motivation and interaction with the learning process (pp. 24-25). This in turn influences the overall effectiveness of the L2 learning experience. Dörnyei emphasizes that this experience encompasses the learner's perceived quality of their engagement with various aspects of the language learning process, including factors such as the learning environment, the teacher, the classmates, the materials and the tasks. He argues that understanding the factors contributing to the L2 learning experience allows educators to create more motivating and effective learning environments (p. 27).

The section below will focus on negative emotions as inhibitors to second language learning.

2.3.1 Emotions as inhibitors to second language learning

In research on SLA highlighting the role of emotions, Krashen's Affective Filter theory has made a notable and pioneeristic contribution (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014, p. 159). Krashen's research, spanning from 1981 to 1985, emphasized the profound impact of emotional states on L2 learning, highlighting the negative impact of emotions like fear and anxiety (Krashen, 1985, p. 3). Subsequent studies, such as Henter (2014), have further emphasized this point adding

that both anxiety and attitude towards L2, as the main affective factors, play a role in shaping the second language acquisition (SLA) learning experience. Henter uses the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) and an English language test to measure the interplay between affective factors and language proficiency among 92 first-year Psychology and Educational Sciences students. She found that motivation and language anxiety are strongly correlated with performance in English, supporting the notion that emotions can also hinder language learning.

It has been shown that Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) emerges when students are required to perform in a language in which they are not fully proficient, with speaking and listening often triggering higher levels of anxiety (MacIntyre, 1995, p. 96). In fact, a number of studies have pointed to *anxiety* or ‘debilitating’ anxiety (Horwitz, 2010, p. 154) as a major emotion experienced by language learners, due to the copious performative elements involved in the foreign language classroom (Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz, 2001;).

In reviewing past studies regarding affect in language learning and how language anxiety develops and increases in the language classroom, Oxford (1999, pp. 58-68) demonstrated that language anxiety develops within the language classroom through personal channels, such as perceived threats to self-esteem (e.g. feeling inadequate, fear of making errors) and procedural channels, such as classroom competitiveness. Hence, these aspects were also explored in my research through both quantitative and qualitative data.

In a comprehensive review of empirical research spanning the 70s and 80s, MacIntyre (1995, p. 96) confirmed that students experiencing anxiety exhibited slower learning rates when compared to their more relaxed counterparts (1999, p. 38). However, Gardner and MacIntyre (1989) distinguish *debilitating* anxiety from *facilitating* anxiety, with the latter positively influencing performance and language learning outcomes (MacIntyre, 1999). In fact, research has shown that both forms of anxiety play integral roles in ensuring overall success in

SLA (Brown, 2000, p. 148). Thus, while some anxiety can be beneficial, excessive anxiety is detrimental. As explained, anxiety around learning a new language, such as taking risks and making mistakes, can be debilitating to the student's success unless group activities or other forms of collaboration can be used to build positive student-teacher relationships and create a safe space for them to thrive.

Overall, research suggests that a balanced level of anxiety can enhance critical processes of attention, positively impacting learning in the L2 classroom (Long, 2014, p. 13).

2.3.2 The influence of Positive Psychology

Since the late 1990s, attempts to mitigate the effects of negative emotions in SLA have been spearheaded by proponents of Positive Psychology (PP) (See Section 1.1). It can be better defined as the scientific study of the conditions that promote 'flourishing', which in turn, can be described as the optimal functioning of people, environments, and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 103). In PP, researchers explore various facets of positive emotions, including their significance and the utilization of positive events as predictors of happiness (Seligman, 2011, pp. 26-29) .

PP within the classroom setting holds particular relevance for my study, which focuses on exploring influential factors critical to students' satisfaction both in the classroom and within the university context. This entails a detailed examination of the significance of students' (positive) emotions, as integral components.

Fredrickson's seminal works (1998, 2001; 2004) propose that emotions, evolutionarily designed for survival, profoundly influence our focus and reactions. Positive emotions, according to Fredrickson, not only broaden cognition but also enhance behavior, making them crucial factors in resilience, survivability, and learning. The Broaden-and-Build model (2004)

she introduced elucidates how positive emotions expand an individual's thought-action repertoire, fostering creative ways of thinking and acting.

Csikszentmihalyi was crucial in developing the flow theory, with flow as the optimal experience. Flow occurs when an individual is deeply engaged in an activity, becoming so absorbed in the task that they lose track of time and experience enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). In his research, Csikszentmihalyi also emphasized the importance of one's immediate social network as a key provider of positive emotions and a vital support for managing stress. He posited that by engaging in activities one enjoys, people could experience this flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, p. 6). As a result, PP has been applied in the classroom by leveraging positive interactions and constructive responses. Social interactions within the classroom have been considered instrumental in generating positive emotions, contributing to individual and collective emotional self-esteem, and the strengthening of relationships (Gable & Reis, 2010, pp. 195-257).

More specifically, PP has been applied in language education, for example in Australia through the above mentioned Flourishing in a Second Language (FL2) project (see Ch. 1) (Rubino et al., 2017) which utilizes Seligman's PERMA+ model¹⁰ to explore positive emotions and diverse pedagogical interventions. Other studies such as (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014; Gregersen, MacIntyre, & Mercer, 2016; Strambi et al., 2017) have shown that integrating PP activities into language education positively impacts student comfort, peer-relationships, and academic achievement, supporting the broader movement of Positive Education (PE) in promoting flourishing and resilience among students. All these studies consistently demonstrate the positive impact of integrating PP interventions into language courses,

¹⁰ Seligman proposes a total of five aspects of comfort, each one present in each of the three happy lives, and each helping achieve individual flourishing: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment, hence acronym, PERMA. The PERMA model was later be expanded to PERMA+, with the plus sign indicating factors such as sleep, nutrition and sufficient physical activity as further components of wellbeing.

reinforcing the potential benefits for student wellbeing, motivation, and overall academic success within the framework of Positive Education (PE).

Specifically, Strambi, Luzeckyj and Rubino (2017) assess the impact of implementing PP pedagogical interventions in first-year university Italian language courses. The study, conducted in two Australian universities, integrates language learning activities based upon PP principles into the course curricula to sustain students' motivation and enhance their psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing while learning an L2. The activities received positive feedback in self-reported online surveys, indicating improved wellbeing and long-term motivation among students.

Gregersen, MacIntyre, and Meza (2016) also explored the effectiveness of PP interventions in L2 learning, drawing on quantitative and narrative data. Utilizing Seligman's PERMA+ model, they link humor, laughter, physical activity, pets, music, gratitude, and altruism to improved positive emotions and coping capabilities in language students. The study, conducted in US with six university students of English over 12 weeks, suggests that qualities like altruism and activities like interaction with pets directly enhance respectively feelings of belonging and emotional wellbeing, contributing to a more positive peer-relationships.

The impact of wellbeing is also demonstrated by King and Datu (2017). Their study investigates the influence of classmates' wellbeing on an individual student's wellbeing. Two studies were conducted among Filipino secondary school students. In Study 1, involving 788 students. Study 2 included 404 students. Results from both studies converge, indicating that an individual's wellbeing is influenced, in part, by the wellbeing of their classmates.

In conclusion, the integration of PP in SLA emphasizes the importance of students' emotional and psychological wellbeing in educational settings, particularly to and highlight foster a positive classroom climate, with enhanced peer-relationships, and improved students'

sense of belonging. In fact, promoting positive emotions and supportive learning environments can significantly benefit language learners' emotional, social, and academic development.

2.4 Sense of belonging as a university student

A sense of belonging to university can be defined as a sense of attachment that students hold emotionally to their studies and the university community as a whole, promoting wellbeing, retention, and academic achievement (Ahn & Davis, 2023, p. 622). It has similarly been defined as feeling accepted, valued, and included in university life, with a focus on support for personal autonomy (Thomas, 2012, p. 6), as stated by Thomas (p. 8), it is achieved, through supportive peer-relations and meaningful interaction between university staff and students. When students feel connected and included, they are more likely to engage with their academic journey, form lasting bonds within the community, and ultimately persist in their educational pursuits. Since a strong sense of belonging among students is integral to fostering retention rates and has long been considered an important component within students' satisfaction, my research considers this factor.

Indeed, research has consistently highlighted the critical influence of social interactions (Strayhorn, 2012, pp. 158-162), peer support (Dornyei, 2019), and a sense of belonging on student retention (Maunder, 2018) and overall wellbeing in higher education (Murphy & Valdez, 2005). A sense of belonging within the classroom is formed through social interaction with peers and teachers, engagement with the course material, and physical presence (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020, pp. 9-11; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020, p. 384). These findings are supported by an Australian study examining the impact of social capital (see Ch.1) on broader university life satisfaction (Bye et al., 2019), demonstrating the integral role that social capital plays in enhancing student wellbeing and satisfaction with university life. The research focused on circa 3,000 first-year students in a mandatory university course at the

University of Sunshine Coast. This research highlighted the importance of bridging social capital and peer support in predicting satisfaction with the university context (p. 908).

In addition, as demonstrated by the previously mentioned study by D'Orazzi & Hajek (2021), the role of relatives and friends in supporting students' studies and retention is particularly crucial for L2 learners (p. 464). Supporting this, Baumeister and Levy (1995) underscored the idea that fulfilling a sense of belonging within the university context relies on peer-relationships. Their study of 637 first-year students at the University of the Sunshine Coast suggested that social networks and community bonds are fundamental to fulfilling students' social needs and enhancing their university life. Similarly, Easterbrook and Vignoles (2013, p. 460) found that intragroup similarity and the quality of interpersonal relationships significantly influence students' feelings of belonging. Their longitudinal study at the University of Sussex, involving 113 participants, highlights how these dynamics impact academic engagement and retention. Further emphasizing the importance of peer connections in influencing students' perception of belonging to the university context, academic engagement, and, consequently, retention, Picton et al. (2017, pp. 7-9) conducted a longitudinal qualitative study at the same university, revealing through weekly interviews with 19 students that friendships play a critical role in enriching the university experience for first-year students.

In alignment with these insights, a series of research projects by a British charity, as part of a program on undergraduate student retention and educational success in the UK, confirmed the crucial role of inter-peer-relationships in fostering a sense of belonging and reducing dropout rates (Thomas, 2012, pp. 6-9)¹¹. The study demonstrated that students with strong social ties in the academic community were less likely to leave their studies. This finding

¹¹ The "What Works? Student Retention & Success" programme was initiated and funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). This initiative was designed to support the higher education sector in improving student retention and success, particularly focusing on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The programme involved collaborations through seven distinct projects across 22 higher education institutions from 2008 to 2011.

is consistent with similar research in Australia, where attrition and retention challenges in language and culture programs were linked to the strength of social connections within educational settings (Weuffen et al., 2021) Martín et al. (2016, pp. 134-138) also emphasized that friendships and peer support in language learning significantly encourage continuation. Zepke (2008), in his review article about student engagement within higher education and its crucial role in promoting retention and success (as cited in Crosling et al., 2008, pp. 73-75), further underscores the importance of positive classroom environments and effective group dynamics in fostering student engagement and retention. His comprehensive review, including the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and similar projects in Australia, the UK, and New Zealand, confirms that a nurturing educational context, built through strong peer interactions, is crucial for enhancing student retention and success. Zepke's finding is particularly true in the case in terms of first-year students. A recent quantitative British study (Ahn & Davis, 2023, pp. 1-6) conducted at Bangor University and involving 380 participants across 16 academic departments explored the relationship between students' sense of belonging, their socioeconomic status, and retention rates. The study found a significant link between a sense of belonging and the likelihood of retention, emphasizing the critical role of integrating students into the university community. Moreover, both academic and social engagement were identified as crucial factors influencing these outcomes, suggesting that universities should cultivate supportive environments to boost both aspects and enhance student retention and success.

On the other hand, research shows that students frequently feel a stronger sense of belonging within their classrooms than in the broader university environment, which significantly impacts their academic engagement and retention. Freeman (2007) in particular noted in his quantitative study conducted at a southeastern public university in the U.S. among 238 first-year students, that students consistently reported a higher sense of belonging within

their classrooms as compared to the broader university environment (p. 216). Similarly, Nelson and DeBacker (2008), in their quantitative study conducted among 253 above-average high school students in the midsouth of the US, observed that positive social relationships significantly boost class connectedness and academic competence. A study conducted within regional Australia (Kahu et al., 2017), at the University of the Sunshine Coast, also highlights the importance of both long-standing personal interests and interests sparked by specific classroom situations in maintaining student engagement, underscoring the tendency of students to gravitate towards peers with similar academic interests (2017, p. 58). Focusing on 19 first-year students across different disciplines, the researchers started with initial interviews and followed up with weekly 15-minute check-ins throughout the semester. D’Orazzi and Hajek (2021, p. 453) by examining the psychological and cognitive aspects that contribute to a strong sense of class belonging found that emotional ties to the language and its cultural facets, along with a supportive classroom environment, further strengthen these bonds. Moreover, as the semester progresses, the importance of the classroom grows, solidifying students' initial interest and fostering a deeper connection to their peers and the subject matter (D'Orazzi & Hajek, p. 460; Kahu et al., p. 60). My study supports all these findings, indicating that students feel more connected and supported in their immediate classroom environment compared with the broader university context. One reason for this greater impact by the classroom as opposed to the broader university context is time constraints that can diminish opportunities for socializing outside of the classroom. This was explained by Richardson et al. (2019, p. 27), who made a tally of the number of hours available to an Australian university student for socializing. They concluded that after considering activities such as their university schedule, travelling, chores in the home, self-care, or sleeping, a typical student had just one and a half hours left in the day for socializing. Thus, leveraging the classroom as an arena for

socialization, rather than doing the work of seeking out like-minded people on campus, is an understandable compromise.

Similarly, a U.S. study involving over 1,500 students at 11 colleges, found that students priorities personal growth, self-acceptance, and a desire to contribute positively to their fields and the broader campus community (Colby et al., 2022, p. 205). To achieve these goals, almost all the students reported engaging deeply in both academic and extracurricular activities, which they believed were crucial for achieving personal growth and self-acceptance. By engaging in extracurricular activities students have opportunities for personal growth, learning new skills, and better self-understanding, which are central to their sense of self-actualization. By providing supportive environments that facilitated these engagements, colleges helped students find meaningful ways to connect their personal aspirations with community-oriented goals.

In Australia, universities consistently grapple with the challenges of attrition and retention. Acknowledging these issues, the University of Adelaide (Levy, 2024) recently unveiled a comprehensive three-year plan that acknowledges "student engagement and a Sense of Belonging to the University context community" as pivotal factors for fostering positive retention and successful outcomes (p. 5). Researchers have also suggested that this strategy can be enhanced through the actions of the supervising teacher. In an 18-month study conducted at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, researchers compared sociodemographic data before and after a tutor-focused intervention (Keating et al., 2020). The study's findings indicated that tutors played a critical role in fostering a sense of belonging to the classroom among students, particularly when the instructional units involve numerous group activities (pp. 46-53) and over time they manage to foster a sense of belonging to the university.

In conclusion, three significant factors emerged in cultivating a sense of belonging to the university. Firstly, it is easier for university students to develop a sense of belonging towards their specific class rather than to the broader university context. Secondly, such a sense of

belonging has progressively decreased in Australian universities, primarily due in the main to time constraints. Thirdly, peer-relationships are a key component in sustaining a profound sense of belonging to the classroom. This emphasizes the importance of fostering collaborative and supportive connections among students as a first step to enhancing their university experience.

2.4.1 Sense of belonging and physical space

Studies have highlighted the importance of the university's physical environment, such as access to the campus, in establishing a sense of belonging. A study by Strayhorn (2012) conducted in the U.S. before the pandemic, found that many students stated that their attachment to the institution grew through participation in campus-related activities (Strayhorn, 2012, pp. 140-156). Similarly, a recent study conducted in the U.K. (Winstone et al., 2022) showed that in the universities an important component of developing a student identity is extracurricular participation, which also contributes to a greater sense of belonging and wellbeing. Moreover, a Romanian study conducted during and after the Covid-19 pandemic (Gherheș et al., 2021, pp. 12-15) found that students' desire to be on campus was of the utmost significance. The researchers surmised that the simple fact of being on campus made for a positive educational tertiary experience.

The campus provides a common ground for students who would otherwise not have the opportunity to connect (Walker et al., 2020, p. 12). Walker et al., (2020, p. 14; 34) note that the campus environment provides the right atmosphere for learning: for example, seeing other students working in the library can give a sense of motivation and help maintain focus. This notion of the campus providing a meeting place and fostering connections among students was confirmed in the work of Felten and Lambert (2020, pp. 62-64), after interviewing students and teachers at 29 higher education institutions around the U.S.

Conversely, Snow and Scherman (2021) reported that college and university students, in the U.S. and New Zealand respectively, who were unable to access their campus struggled to perceive themselves as part of a larger community, which hindered their development of a positive sense of identity and belonging. Just as Felten and Lambert (2020), Snow and Scherman advocated for a campus culture that fostered a sense of community, allowing students to feel part of a larger whole and encouraging the development and pursuit of shared ideals.

As will be shown, my study aligns with the findings presented in the mentioned studies regarding the pivotal role of the interconnected dynamics between physical spaces, peer-relationships, and a sense of belonging.

2.4.2 Sense of belonging: the impact of sociodemographic variables

This section delves into the varying needs of university students in establishing a Sense of Belonging within the university context. It explores relevant research on sociodemographic categories, specifically age, year of enrolment, working status and social network, providing an initial examination of their implications for this study. These categories along with others, will be further explored in terms of this study's data collection process (see Ch. 3).

2.4.2.1 Age

Research, as in a study conducted by the University of Plymouth in the UK (Hoskins et al., 1997), has shown that older university students, categorized as aged 21 to 25 and mature (+25), generally exhibit greater confidence and achieve better academic results compared to their younger peers (under 21). Specifically, mature students gained better degrees on average than younger students. This performance disparity is attributed to older students' more effective study approaches, higher motivation levels, and the application of life experiences and prior

knowledge in their education. Shanahan also demonstrated through face-to-face interviews, diary, survey and group discussions of eight mature students that their extensive life experiences provide them with enhanced knowledge and skills (Shanahan, 2000, p. 159).

However, the integration of older students into university life presents unique challenges. Ahn & Davis (2023) highlighted how age, alongside factors such as social class and ethnicity, can significantly impact students' sense of belonging and retention, particularly when older students feel alienated among younger peers or juggle external responsibilities like family or work (pp. 145-147).

Further illustrating these challenges, an Australian study of 815 young and mature students at university (Leder & Forgasz, 2004) noted that mature-aged students commonly struggle with balancing family, work, health, and adapting to new technologies. Similarly, Pearce's study (2017, p. 71), based at a Russell Group university in England noted similar issues and found that structured interactions, such as group projects, between younger and older students can help mitigate these challenges by breaking down misconceptions and reducing feelings of isolation among mature-aged learners (pp. 69-71).

2.4.2.2 Year of enrolment

Research highlights the critical role of sense of belonging to university and social integration in students' transition and retention across different stages of their university journey. Regarding first-year students, numerous studies suggest that peer-support programs and academic skills workshops are effective in enhancing their experience and improving retention (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001, pp. 192-197). Peer support has been shown to significantly aid first-year students in adjusting to university life, providing academic assistance, motivation, and reassurance through shared challenges. This support helps students forge a strong tertiary identity, as demonstrated in a UK qualitative study involving 27 first-year students (Cameron

& Rideout, 2022, pp. 677-678). For example, Swenson et al. (2008) found that while initial social capital from high school relationships is beneficial, the creation of new university friendships plays a more significant role as the semester progresses, particularly in adjusting to college life. Additionally, engaging in extracurricular activities and increasing interactions with tutors are also effective strategies in enhancing first-year students' sense of belonging to university (Kane et al., 2014, pp. 199-200). Moreover, in a study conducted at the University of Sydney among 111 first-year students on the transition from high school to university language learning, Stott and Fielding (2014) discovered that many students found the transition smoother than anticipated, contrary to some prior literature. Elements that aided successful transition included supportive peer-relationships, positive classroom climate, and good student-teacher rapport. These findings were later supported by another Australian study of 3,000 first-year students. Bye et al (2019, pp. 909-910) found that teachers could foster students' social capital, thereby enhancing their overall university experience.

Recent research has increasingly turned its attention to second-year students (Y2). Schaller (2010, pp. 16-23) and subsequent studies by Wang & Phillips (2013, pp. 543-545) in the US affirm that sustained social support is crucial for navigating the second year. The second year is a critical period for students, as the excitement and novelty of the first year are finished, and students are now faced with the more demanding years of their chosen course. Therefore, social connections and a sense of belonging can support for success and retention among second-year students.

In the case of third-year students (Y3), social connectedness remains a significant factor for retention and satisfaction, although these students are frequently more interested in building social capital focused on professional networking (Allen et al., 2008, p. 660). Yet, in a longitudinal study (2003-2005) of 6,872 students of 23 US universities, Allen et al. observed

that while these students often focus on building professional networks, their social connectedness still significantly impacted retention and satisfaction.

Maunder's quantitative study (2018) involving 135 UK undergraduates across all years indicates that strong peer-relationships enhance university adjustment and attachment, irrespective of the year of study. Findings reveal that strong attachment to peers correlates with higher levels of university adjustment and attachment to the institution. Conversely, difficulties in peer-relationships are associated with lower peer attachment and university adjustment. This uniformity suggests that the challenges and benefits of social integration persist throughout university life, underscoring the importance of fostering a supportive community to enhance student retention and success.

In conclusion, the literature shows that there is a discernible difference between the social needs in terms of a sense of belonging to university amongst students from different years of enrolment. Y1 students, who have just started university, may feel more disconnected and find it more challenging to establish meaningful connections and a concomitant sense of belonging. Similarly, for Y2 students, in the middle of their degree, social support remains essential, helping students deal with the increased academic demands, they might start to form more stable social networks. However, they often face the pressure of solidifying their academic and career trajectories, which can impact their sense of belonging if not adequately supported. In contrast, Y3 students, approaching the completion of their degrees, likely possess less interest in forming new relationships, preferring to prioritize academic and career-related goals emphasizing the importance of professional networking alongside academic and social connectedness for retention and satisfaction.

2.4.2.3 Working status

According to Elling & Elling (2000, p. 454), there has been a sustained interest in examining the influence of employment outside the university on the academic performance and satisfaction of university students. In general, scholars have found that working while studying can be detrimental to students' perceptions of classroom climate, peer-relationships and sense of belonging towards the university context. However, the findings regarding the impact of employment on students can be somehow discordant.

In a study comparing 110 American college students in the southwest US, Mounsey et al. (2013) discovered that those engaged in part-time work reported higher levels of anxiety and depression, and their academic outcomes were generally poorer. This was particularly evident as the number of work hours increased (pp. 386-387). This was confirmed by Perna and Odle in Washington (2020), who argued that part-time working students often experience reduced satisfaction and performance, struggling with campus connection and increased dropout rates. This situation was acknowledged by Lee (2017), from the University of Windsor, who after conducting a quantitative research among 41 Canadian part-time students proposed that enhancing working students' sense of belonging and social support (pp. 13-14), could improve retention.

Contrasting findings emerge from Darolia's study (2014) at the University of Missouri, indicating that full-time working students face academic challenges, whereas part-time employment does not notably affect student outcomes (pp. 47-48). This observation to an extent aligns with Lang's analysis (2012), from the Australian National Survey of Student Engagement, which showed no significant academic differences between working and non-working students among 794 surveyed. However, the study acknowledged a decline in campus social engagement linked to increased working commitments, impacting students' sense of belonging (p. 253). Supporting these findings, Polidano and Zakirova (2011) conducted a

national study for the Federal Department of Education in the US on the completion rates of vocational education and training students compared to higher education students, all aged 25. The study found that full-time students working up to eight hours a week had completion rates similar to those who did not work at all. However, those working more than eight hours weekly were less likely to complete their programs. Furthermore, part-time students who were employed full-time were approximately 12 percentage points less likely to complete their studies compared to those working fewer than 32 hours per week (pp. 11-14).

Recently, in Australia, especially post-Covid we witnessed an increase in working hours for students. Norton (2022) documents that after an initial drop in student employment rates during the lockdowns of April and May 2020, these rates bounced back to their 2019 levels by August 2020. The subsequent year saw student employment rates in NSW, Victoria, and the ACT not only recover but exceed 2019 levels by 10 percentage points or more, despite ongoing lockdowns (pp. 9-10). Further illustrating this trend, a 2023 Studiosity's study (2023), which surveyed 1,100 university students, revealed that 86% had engaged in paid work in 2022, an increase from 78% in 2021. Furthermore, in early 2022, more than half of the students reported working 20 hours or more per week, suggesting an increase in employment intensity among students (pp. 4-13). The increase in student employment could be a direct result of increased student fees according to the Australian Bureau of Statistic (2022, May).

2.4.2.4 Social network

University friends familiar with the institution can offer guidance and support, aiding students in understanding expectations and feeling at ease in their studies, and this is affirmed by numerous international studies. The research study conducted by Swenson et al., (2008) in the northeastern United States involved surveying 271 first-year college students on the impact of social capital on adaptation to college life. Their findings indicated that while high-school

friends provided initial support in alleviating feelings of isolation during the early weeks, forming new friendships within the college environment had a more significant impact on the students' overall adaptation as the semester progressed. Additionally, friendships formed with other students were found to help reduce anxiety and cultivate positive learning behaviors, as evidenced in a study at the University of Southern California, USA (Picton et al., 2017). Swenson, Nordstrom and Hiester (2008) added that friendships on campus not only help to establish confidence but can further a sense of belonging. This finding is reinforced by Keating, Rixon and Perenyi (2020, pp. 52-53), in their longitudinal study among Australian students, who found that those lacking time for friends felt the least comfortable and included. The researchers recommended regular team-sharing activities to foster a sense of belonging in the classroom, emphasizing the positive influence of tutors. The importance of social networks on campus is also highlighted in an Australian study with approximately 3,000 first-year students (Bye et al., 2019) which shows a positive impact on wellbeing and university-life satisfaction. In addition, social networks within universities have been found to serve as catalysts for both motivation (D'Orazzi & Hajek, 2021) and overall student retention, as shown in an Australian study of language attrition and retention (Martín et al., 2016). It is important to note that while social connections on campus contribute positively to the maintenance of a positive experience in class, the survey's results suggest that connections outside of the university, for example at work, may also assist with this.

Overall, the studies presented above provide valuable insights into how different sociodemographic cohorts intersect with university life. Furthermore, they offer relevant findings for comparison with my own data that also consider age, year of enrolment, working status and social life of my participants.

2.5 Being a student in uncertain times: online learning and emergency remote teaching

Studies focusing on online learning have distinguished between *emergency remote teaching*, as used in the case of this study in 2020, and *online learning*, as practised outside of an emergency environment, as was used during the 2021 teaching semester (Hodges et al., 2020). Emergency remote teaching (ERT) is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. The different terminology lies in the nature of implementation: ERT is a sudden adaptation to unforeseen events, utilizing digital tools with minimal preparation. In contrast, online learning is a planned educational approach designed for delivery via digital platforms, historically known as 'distance education' prior to the internet's widespread adoption (Hodges et al., 2020).

Both paradigms utilize digital tools, but their aims differ. Online learning seeks to provide a comprehensive educational experience, as discussed in Compton's paper review (2009). On the other hand, ERT focuses on maintaining educational continuity during crises, as seen during Covid-19.

This section explores some relevant literature around the impact of the emergency lockdown and shift to online teaching on university students, particularly regarding classroom climate, peer-relationships, and sense of belonging. It also examines the literature regarding the effect of emergency remote teaching. The abrupt and unprecedented lockdown, which initiated an enforced shift to online learning and hybrid learning models, posed unique challenges to students' socialization, and integration in the university context. At the same time, it drew attention to some previously unutilized opportunities that will continue to have important ramifications for SLA pedagogy.

2.5.1 Challenges of online learning and emergency remote teaching

Numerous surveys or studies conducted by universities and institutions (QILT, 2020; SES, 2022; Walker et al., 2020) have highlighted some of the challenges involved in online learning, particularly during ERT periods induced by the pandemic. These challenges are well recognized by students, as demonstrated in a qualitative study at the University of Wyoming (Tan et al., 2010, pp. 12-13). This study examined the experiences of seven non-native English-speaking graduate students in online learning environments. The findings revealed that despite an awareness of the challenges, students experienced significant discomfort with the technological aspects of online learning and felt that the platforms did not adequately cater to their learning styles. Additionally, these challenges extended to logistical issues and social aspects, particularly feelings of isolation and a reduced sense of belonging within the university community.

As shown by this study, difficulties concerning the logistics of remote learning significantly alter the student experience. Effective online learning requires appropriate hardware, software, internet connectivity, and a conducive learning environment. Consequently, when the necessary conditions are not met, many students may experience suboptimal learning outcomes, potentially exacerbating issues of equity and inclusion (Smith & Ayers, 2006, pp. 413-414). Additionally, as detailed in the study by Smith and Ayers of the University of North Carolina, the complexities of implementing culturally responsive pedagogy online become more apparent, revealing significant inequalities in environments serving diverse student populations. This issue was underscored in a US study regarding ERT by Gillis and Krull (2020), who noted significant challenges faced by marginalized students, including inadequate access to necessary technology and economic barriers hindering the procurement of suitable devices. These systemic inequalities primarily affected non-white, female, and first-generation college students (pp. 283-296). Additionally, the sudden shift to

remote teaching brought various distractions ranging from changes in living conditions to family obligations and health concerns (p. 286), leading to decreased motivation, as students struggled with the lack of in-person interaction, fewer chances for asking questions, and reduced peer discussion opportunities (p. 293), all contributing to increased stress and anxiety.

Gillis and Krull (2020), similarly to my approach, during ERT conducted two surveys at the beginning and end of the semester across two introductory courses at different U.S. universities, involving 69 students. Their findings emphasized the importance of the implementation of instructional techniques over the techniques themselves. In other words, the effectiveness of teaching methods depends more on how they are put into practice (e.g., how well they are adapted to the context, how consistently they are used, how engaged the teacher is) rather than on the particular methods or strategies chosen.

Social anxiety in online environment was frequent in Australia during ERT, as reported by an online cross-sectional survey conducted with 787 university students enrolled in an Australian university (Dodd et al., 2021). The results in this study revealed that a significant majority (86.8%) of the participants felt their studies were significantly impacted by COVID-19, with factors such as gender, social status, and negative learning experiences correlating with decreased wellbeing.

Another challenge of ERT is that it frequently leads to distractions from technical glitches, microphone issues, and overall inefficiency, as detailed in MacIntyre et al.'s research (2020), who studied the emotional responses of 634 language teachers worldwide. The study also found that ERT provoked stress and loneliness among teachers, who were compelled to quickly adapt their courses for online teaching. This approach often resulted in suboptimal educational outcomes and increased stress for educators, contributing to phenomena like Zoom fatigue and disengagement (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Bailenson, 2021; Cheung, 2023;).

Interpersonal factors under emergency conditions were particularly detrimental to educational and developmental outcomes, contributing to social isolation and reduced student motivation and focus (Gherheş et al., 2021, pp. 3-12). Several scholars have noted that the solitary nature of ERT, coupled with a lack of peer-relationships and in-class interactions, can lead to social isolation (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020, pp. 3-4; Appleby et al., 2022, p. 11;), and the absence of face-to-face communication between students and teachers can pose challenges to student motivation and focus (Stark, 2019, p. 240).

The diminished interaction and increased isolation associated with ERT have impacted students' sense of belonging within the university context. This was highlighted by the "2022 Student Experience Survey National Report" (SES, 2022) conducted as part of the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) program and funded by the Australian Government Department of Education. Analyzing responses from 233,916 students, the report noted improvements in the overall quality of educational experiences from 2021 to 2022. However, it also pointed out persistent challenges in areas such as student engagement and support. Indeed, a study by Fabriz et al. (2021, p. 19) at a large German university involving 3,056 students and 396 teachers highlighted that students have a better perception of belonging in synchronous versus asynchronous online teaching modes. Results indicated that synchronous settings were associated with higher levels of student and teacher satisfaction, greater student engagement, and more effectively met psychological needs.

Other challenges of ERT specifically involve peer-relationships. Learning to interact and forming meaningful relationships are crucial aspects of education that were severely disrupted during ERT. Indeed, a 2020 survey (Walker et al.) at the University of Sydney revealed that over 94.92% of students found aspects of this mode of instruction unsatisfactory, particularly the reduced opportunities for social interaction. Furthermore, Cahuas et al. (2023) assessed that perceived social support played a critical role in alleviating the pandemic's

challenges, demonstrating a strong correlation between social support and enhanced quality of life among 1,296 university students in the Midwest of the US during the first semester of 2020. First-year students were particularly affected by the shift to remote learning, experiencing increased disconnection and anxiety, as highlighted in studies by Appleby et al (2022, p. 164) involving over 3,352 students across Queen's University in Canada and the University of Oxford in the UK. The need to create online social opportunities during the lockdown was particularly significant for the new students who did not have much time to get to know their classmates in person, as described in a British article on online social networking opportunities (O'Dea, 2021, pp. 1-4).

During the lockdown, a notable decline in student motivation was observed, largely due to decreased interaction with peers. This led to increased procrastination, as detailed in a German study involving 3,056 undergraduates (Fabriz & Stehle, 2021, p. 9). Concurrently, a survey of 787 Australian university students highlighted anxiety as a prevalent issue (Dodd et al., 2021, p. 7). These challenges, compounded by the extensive use of social media, online gaming, and video/streaming services, adversely affected academic performance, as noted by Fraser et al. (2022). Their longitudinal study of 74 college first-year students revealed that increased consumption of TV and video games during the pandemic was linked to heightened societal concerns. The data suggest that various media served as coping mechanisms, significantly impacting students' concern for themselves and others, thereby influencing their academic outcomes. While the active use of social media for social interactions has been found to positively affect wellbeing, the increased tendency to connect virtually during the pandemic had the negative outcome of reducing social networks to small, homogeneous groups.

With regard to the sense of belonging, as mentioned above and as Tice et al. (2021, pp. 6-9) suggest, physical presence on campus, including participation in social events and extracurricular activities, significantly fosters a sense of belonging within the university

context. During the pandemic, disruptions to this presence often lead to feelings of disconnection from the community and diminished academic engagement. Dingle et al. (2022) observed this phenomenon over three years (2019, 2020, 2021), noting that first-year students at an Australian university experienced heightened loneliness and reduced feelings of belonging during the pandemic. Surprisingly, they reported greater loneliness than their international counterparts, with loneliness associated with increased stressors and belonging linked to positive mental health outcomes. Arkorful and Abaidoo (2015, pp. 35-36), in their literature review examining the benefits and challenges of e-learning in higher education contexts, observed that the absence of face-to-face interactions during remote learning contributed to a sense of isolation and disengagement, ultimately affecting the formation of a sense of community.

My study aligns with the research presented here in that it also shows the negative impact of reduced social interactions on students' sense of belonging within the broader institutional context.

2.5.2 Emergency remote teaching: teachers' essential skills and strategies

ERT poses distinct challenges for educators, particularly due to the rapid transition required from traditional classroom settings to online formats (MacIntyre et al., 2020). This abrupt change has induced significant stress among teachers as adapting a course for online delivery typically requires specific skills and training that many may not possess (Davis & Rose, 2007, p. 7). Firstly, online language teaching demands a high degree of creativity from educators. This creativity is not only essential in the effective use of media and materials but also in building rapport with students. Hampel and Stickler (2005, pp. 319-320) note that the lack of physical presence in virtual classrooms impedes the natural development of interpersonal connections, as already discussed above. Educators are therefore tasked with creatively

utilizing digital tools to simulate classroom interactions and personalize the learning experience. Such efforts are crucial in language education, which relies heavily on interactive and communicative practices that are challenging to replicate online.

Secondly, the shift to online platforms necessitates a reassessment of instructional methods (Easton, 2003, p. 102). Teachers must adapt their teaching strategies to manage the complexities and potential fatigue associated with prolonged digital engagement (Bailenson, 2021). This adaptation often involves implementing detailed questioning and regular follow-ups to ensure comprehension and engagement (Compton, 2009, p. 8).

Lastly, online teachers play a crucial role in reducing students' loneliness by establishing strong, supportive relationships and fostering a welcoming online community (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020). Utilizing tools like breakout rooms and chat functions can greatly enhance interaction and help build a sense of community among students (Hehir et al., 2021, p. 14).

In conclusion, online educators – and even more so educators in ERT – must effectively facilitate communicative competence and promote social cohesion. They need to learn how to enhance peer-relationships and foster trust, in order to significantly improve students' overall educational experience.

2.5.3 General advantages of online learning and emergency remote teaching

Online learning has also been seen to have benefits, including for second language learning, encompassing logistical, pedagogical, and psychological aspects. These benefits have been highlighted by some studies, emphasizing the multifaceted advantages that technology-enhanced learning environments offer.

While logistical benefits primarily advantage institutions, they can also impact the student experience. Scholars have discussed the cost benefits for institutions (Stevens et al., 2021, p. 279), such as the ability to eliminate the need for physical lecture halls and the potential

to teach larger student bodies with fewer instructors (Moore & Kearsley, 2011, p. 16). Additionally, online learning can significantly enhance accessibility for students who are geographically isolated, as noted by Paechter and Maier (2010, p. 296). This mode of learning removes the need for commuting, saving time and potentially reducing environmental impacts such as CO₂ emissions and resource consumption, as explored in a UK study comparing traditional and online learning systems (Roy et al., 2004, pp. 3-5). Furthermore, a recent study on HyFlex classrooms highlights how this approach can enhance student satisfaction and learning flexibility, as students value the convenience, choice, and time savings, despite some challenges related to peer connection and technology management (Athens, 2023, pp. 1765-1783).

In the context of second language learning, online platforms offer pedagogical opportunities. Meskill and Anthony (2015, pp. 18-19) observed that online environments allow for the careful construction and enhancement of instructional conversations. The flexibility of accessing materials from anywhere enables learners to integrate language learning more seamlessly into their lives. Additionally, the use of multimedia tools in online settings can provide diverse language exposure and tailored learning experiences, which may not be feasible in traditional classrooms. For instance, Tudini (2010, p. 11) in her analysis of 133 learners and 584 native speakers of Italian, highlighted the potential for language development provided by computer-mediated communication, such as text interactions with native speakers, enhancing the traditional learning experience.

The psychological benefits of online learning are subtler yet significant. Arkorful and Abaidoo (2015, p. 34) in their literature review on the role of e-learning in higher education noted that online learning environments cater well to self-paced learning styles, which can be more comfortable for many students. This flexibility also extends educational opportunities to

those who might be unable to attend traditional classes due to geographic, financial, or time constraints.

In summary, the integration of online learning within educational frameworks – even in a situation of ERT – can offer a spectrum of advantages including educational, social, and environmental benefits. This comprehensive approach can accommodate the learning experience.

2.6 Conclusion

This literature review has explored a range of studies that are concerned with the dynamics that contribute to classroom climate, peer-relationships, and students' sense of belonging to the university, particularly within the context of second language acquisition (SLA). Firstly, the studies emphasize the positive influence of collaborative learning on academic outcomes, student motivation, and the classroom environment, as well as underscoring the significance of peer-relationships in fostering a supportive learning atmosphere.

Secondly, acknowledging the complexity of SLA and its social, emotional, and psychological dimensions, the studies reviewed here emphasize the centrality of emotions in second language learning processes. They demonstrate how anxiety can hinder learning rates and the positive impact of emotions such as confidence, enthusiasm, and curiosity on student wellbeing, motivation, and academic success.

Thirdly, studies demonstrate that a strong Sense of Belonging to the University context is essential for fostering retention rates and that a range of factors, primarily peer-relationships, plays a pivotal role in fostering it.

Lastly, the studies distinguish between emergency remote teaching and planned online learning, highlighting challenges such as social isolation and reduced sense of belonging particularly in the former. A range of studies delve into how the three factors explored in this

study, namely, Classroom Climate, Peer-relationships and Sense of Belonging to the University context were influenced by the abrupt shift to emergency remote teaching prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Overall, the studies emphasize the importance of creating social opportunities, fostering a sense of community, and equipping educators with essential skills for navigating the complexities of teaching in diverse learning environments. This literature review will serve as a foundational resource for understanding Italian students' perceptions before and after the Covid-19 pandemic regarding classroom climate, peer-relationships and sense of belonging to the university, which are the focus of this study.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology adopted here for studying university students' perceptions of classroom climate, peer-relationships, and their sense of belonging. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative semi-structured interviews. The theoretical framework is based on social-psychological aspects of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), emphasizing collaborative learning and the impact of emotions on the learning environment. As mentioned, (see Ch. 1) the research focuses on three main variables: Classroom Climate, Peer-relationships, and Sense of Belonging within the university context. The study also examines the influence of sociodemographic factors and the effects of the pandemic on online teaching and the three teaching methodologies offered post-pandemic by the university: Face-to-Face, HyFlex and Online.

3.2 Theoretical framework

As discussed in Chapter 1, my study draws inspiration from the Flourishing in a Second Language project and is anchored in the social-psychological aspects of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). I provide below some key-concepts at the basis of my study, some of which have been more extensively explored in the literature review (Chapter 2).

3.2.1 Collaborative learning

The first key-concept of my research, collaborative learning, is based on the social aspects of SLA as it occurs in the L2 classroom. Collaborative learning among classmates fosters an environment conducive to effective learning and is thus a crucial element of a positive classroom climate, a major variable in my study. Various factors play a role in creating a

collaborative learning environment, and amongst them of particular importance are positive social interactions among peers and tutors.

As advocated by Dörnyei (1997, 2001; 2003; 2007a;) in his work on group dynamics (see 2.2.1), collaborative learning environments are important for students' increased productivity, intrinsic motivation, and positive perceptions of the learning context. Collaborative learning is facilitated through task-based group work, as suggested by MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012, pp. 221-232), which enhances positive social interactions among peers.

In the process of collaborative learning, peer-relationships are a crucial element affecting student satisfaction and perceptions (see 2.2.1 and 2.2.2). As positive interpersonal connections are considered fundamental for students' learning process, attitudes, and personal satisfaction, the impact of these relationships on second language learning is taken as a major variable in this study, drawing on works by Arnold (2011), Clément et al. (1994, pp. 423-425) and Warren and Donaldson (2017). In considering the overall learning environment, my study also takes into account teachers for their pivotal role in establishing an inclusive and collaborative classroom (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Arnold et al., 2013, pp. 29-45;) (see also section 2.2.3).

3.2.2 Emotions

The second key concept considered in my study is emotion, for the impact that it can have in the second language (L2) classroom (see section 2.3). As both positive and negative emotions in the L2 classroom are recognized as multifaceted and interconnected factors across various elements of the learning environment, I examine them in relation to all three main variables under investigation, namely, Classroom Climate, Peer-relationships and Sense of Belonging to the University context (see section 3.3.1), and through a range of survey items (see section 3.4.1).

Amongst the negative emotions, I focus on debilitating anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986), for its influence on students' attitudes to the overall classroom climate and as a specific impediment to learning, for example through perceptions of a competitive classroom or strained relationships (MacIntyre, 1995). This, in turn, can diminish students' inclination to communicate in the target language (Gardner et al., 1992; 2001; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1995).

Amongst the positive emotions (see section 2.3), I focus on aspects of cooperation, supportive behavior, willingness to communicate, connectedness, acceptance, optimism about life, cordiality and closeness. These aspects play crucial roles in fostering strong interpersonal relationships, building a positive classroom climate and a sense of belonging.

3.3. Approach

This section articulates the specific approach that I employed in this study to examine Italian students' perceptions regarding three principal variables under study, that are illustrated below.

3.3.1 The three variables

Building on what was presented in Chapter 1, in this section, I further clarify the three major variables explored.

1. Classroom Climate (CC): As defined in section 1.1 describes the collective feelings about the teaching and learning context. A constructive CC is characterized by a sense of safety, respect, and value among students, who feel at ease to engage, err, and learn. Such an environment can greatly enhance emotional responses to the teaching and learning contexts, as detailed in section 2.2.2.
2. Peer-relationships (PR): PR encompasses the quality of interactions between students and between students and teachers. As shown in section 2.2.2, effective PR is crucial

for social cohesion and is associated with heightened student engagement and support (Frisby & Martin, 2010). Moreover, PR has been shown to positively influence student productivity, a finding supported by research in the fields of Second Language Acquisition and Positive Psychology (see section 2.3).

3. Sense of Belonging to the University context (SBU): SBU relates to students' feeling of being part of a community. A strong sense of belonging can boost motivation and participation, which, in turn, enhances student satisfaction and reduces the risk of academic abandonment (see section 2.4).

3.3.2 Sociodemographic factors

My study explicitly accounts for the impact of sociodemographic elements such as gender, age, enrolment year, employment commitments, and social networks on CC, PR, and SBU, as these factors are pivotal in shaping students' academic comfort, motivation, and endurance (see section 2.4.2). For example, the tendency of students to form relationships based on perceived similarities (Tomás-Miquel & Capó-Vicedo, 2022), suggests that a variable like a social network can significantly modulate the university experience (see section 2.4.2).

3.3.3 The impact of the pandemic and emergency remote teaching

As discussed in Chapter 1, my research was unexpectedly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the third week of my fieldwork in 2020, the NSW government declared a statewide emergency lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Consequently, the university's campus closed, and all teaching abruptly moved online¹². The sudden transition to emergency remote teaching necessitated by the NSW government's emergency lockdown presented unique challenges to my classroom-based study. Following my

¹² The proprietary video telephony software program known as "Zoom" was used by the University of Sydney to conduct classes during the pandemic.

supervisor's advice, I proceeded with the fieldwork online and scheduled a repeat of the study for the first semester of 2021 to provide comparative insights (see section 1.1). The subsequent semester the emergency lockdown was no longer in place, and students were allowed to choose their learning modality: Online, Face-to-Face, or HyFlex. Consequently, an additional element was incorporated into my study, allowing for an analysis of the lockdown's effects and the efficacy of the various instructional modalities. Therefore, my research also investigates how the different teaching methods affect CC, PR and SUB. This involves examining factors such as their impact on student relationships and sense of belonging, synchronous versus asynchronous online L2 learning and the impact of well-planned online learning versus the emergency transition prompted by COVID-19 (see section 2.5).

3.3.4 The research questions

Building upon the approach outlined above, as I already presented in Chapter 1, two research questions were formulated to explore students' perceptions of CC, PR, and SBU before and after the implementation of emergency remote teaching in 2020 and upon their return to campus in 2021. Additionally, the study aimed to investigate whether these perceptions were influenced by the diverse teaching methods offered by the university, encompassing online, in-person, and hybrid approaches. Each research question is further supported by three sub-questions.

RQ 1: What are the students' perceptions of CC, PR and SBU in Semester 1, 2020?

- Subquestion 1: What are these perceptions before the introduction of the emergency remote teaching?
- Subquestion 2: What are these perceptions following the emergency remote teaching?
- Subquestion 3: What changes emerge from students' perceptions at the beginning and end of Semester 1, 2020?

RQ2: What are the students' post-pandemic perceptions of CC, PR and SBU in Semester 1, 2021?

- Subquestion 1: What are these perceptions at the beginning of Semester 1, 2021?
- Subquestion 2: What are these perceptions at the end of Semester 1, 2021?
- Subquestion 3: What changes emerge from students' perceptions at the beginning and end of Semester 1, 2021?

These questions are explored through surveys administered both at the beginning (RQs 1.1 and 2.1) and at the end (RQs 1.2 and 2.2) of the 2020/2021 semesters and through post-semester interviews, providing insights into the dynamic interplay between student relationships and the teaching environment.

The analysis also considers the impact of participants' sociodemographic characteristics, utilizing REDCap¹³ to filter survey responses (see Appendix 1.1). Post-semester interviews with students and tutors provide additional qualitative evidence and background information, respectively.

The responses to the two surveys are then compared (RQs 1.3 and 2.3) to evaluate the changes in perceptions following the completion of the unit.

3.4 Method

Research into the influence of Positive Psychology and affective factors on learning enhancement has predominantly employed quantitative methods (see section 2.3.2). However, a mixed-methods approach, which integrates both quantitative and qualitative techniques, has gained traction in second language acquisition research (Elliot et al., 2016), especially in

¹³ REDCap is a secure web platform for building and managing online databases and surveys. Retrieved from the home page of <https://redcap.sydney.edu.au/>

studies involving a limited number of participants (Deifell & Shimanskaya, 2013; Gregersen, MacIntyre, & Meza, 2016).

In line with this trend, I adopted a mixed-methods approach to leverage the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms. This approach endorsed for its comprehensive analysis capabilities (Creswell, 2019), allows for the triangulation of the data, thereby enhancing the accuracy of the findings (Dörnyei, 2007b).

For quantitative data collection, I employed a survey. despite its potential reductionism, which may obscure the nuanced meanings of participants' experiences and circumstances (Dörnyei, 2007b, p. 35), the survey method is appreciated for its systematic approach and the generation of precise, reliable, and replicable data (Dörnyei, 2007b, pp. 32-34).

To complement this, qualitative methods were employed to capture detailed insights into participants' feelings, emotions and behaviors, thus allowing for a nuanced interpretation of quantitative data (Dörnyei, 2007b, p. 47). Although more time-intensive and subject to subjectivity and researcher bias (Dörnyei, 2007b, p. 42), qualitative methods, particularly semi-structured interviews as used here, offer flexibility in probing deeper into emerging themes (Dörnyei, 2007b). This format not only facilitates additional questioning but also fosters a conversational environment conducive to in-depth exploration of participant responses (Adams , 2015).

Quantitative data were collected via two surveys administered four times over a two-year period. Qualitative data were obtained through two sets of post-semester recorded semi-structured interviews with students and tutors, providing a deeper understanding of their perceptions of CC, P R, and SBU.

3.4.1 Survey design

For this study, two surveys were developed: Survey 1, administered at the start of the semester, and Survey 2, conducted at its conclusion. These surveys were designed to be succinct to attract a wider participant base and mitigate attrition rates (Galesic & Bosnjak, 2009).

Survey 1 consisted of two parts. The first part aimed to gauge students' perceptions in relation to the three variables, Classroom Climate (CC), Peer-relationships (PR), and Sense of Belonging to the University context (SBU). Drawing on previously validated surveys (see Appendix 2) it comprised statements related to social interactions and overall wellbeing, as further specified below. Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 5.00 (strongly agree) to 1.00 (strongly disagree), with 3.00 denoting neutrality and the 4.00 point as minimal level of agreement considered in the analysis. (Goodman et al., 2018). The subsequent part collected sociodemographic information, crucial for examining internal factors influencing responses and assessing the impact of different learning modalities on different students' cohorts. It specifically asked for participants' gender, age, university enrolment year, employment status, social networks, and tutorial group, providing essential context for analyzing survey data.

Survey 2 was the same as Survey 1 except for additional six statements, five of which probed the perceived effectiveness of the communicative approach that was adopted in the L2 teaching, to foster interpersonal connections among students. These five items are not analyzed and therefore are not presented in the analyses of the two Survey 2s (see sections 4.3 and 5.3). A sixth statement, "I have made friends in this class," aimed to explore a positive outcome associated with the PR variable, under the category 'Development of Friendship' (DOF) aimed at gauging friendship development within the classroom.

The distribution of statements concerning the three variables was as follows:

- Classroom Climate: 5 statements

- Peer-relationships: 10 statements
- Sense of Belonging to the University context: 5 statements
- Perceived value of the communicative approach: 5 statements
- Development of Friendships: 1 statement

Both surveys are provided in Appendix 1 for further reference.

Recognizing the limitations of self-reported data (Podsakoff & Lee, 2003, pp. 881-883; Chan, 2009, pp. 330-331;), measures were implemented to mitigate these challenges. Firstly, the statements were presented in a mix of positive and negative forms.¹⁴ Secondly, their sequence was randomized using Google Forms¹⁵ automatic shuffling system to reduce human subjectivity and alleviate the fatigue effect, where participants may attend more closely to the initial survey items than the latter ones (Carlsson et al., 2012, p. 20).

For ease of analysis, each survey statement was coded numerically, with the prefixes CC, PR and SBU indicating the respective variables. In Survey 2, an additional statement was prefixed (DOF) to evaluate the development of friendships, assessing whether students had made friends in the class during the semester.

3.4.1.1 Classroom Climate

To investigate students' perceptions of the general Italian Classroom Climate (CC), five specific statements were selected concerning factors that are critical in enhancing participation, fostering a sense of belonging, and supporting overall student wellbeing, as discussed in Chapter 2. To counter acquiescence bias, statements were balanced between positive (CC1, CC3, CC5) and negative (CC2, CC4) framings (refer to Appendix 2.1 for details).

¹⁴ For example, I included the statement “I think the language activities are useful to help me know the other students in the class”, which is framed positively, as well as the statement “I find these activities too “touchy-feely” for me”, which is framed negatively.

¹⁵ Google Forms is a web-based, survey administration software program.

- *CC1 I feel included in the Italian class* and *CC4 I'm afraid that somebody in the Italian class will laugh at me when I speak Italian*: assess students' feelings of inclusion, safety, and acceptance. These elements are pivotal for creating a positive classroom atmosphere, fostering friendship development, and encouraging active participation.
- *CC2 I don't feel comfortable in the Italian class* and *CC3 There is a good atmosphere in the Italian class* addresses students' comfort and the overall classroom environment.
- *CC5 The Italian class made me feel more comfortable at the university* explores the broader impact of the classroom on students' comfort and wellbeing within the university.

3.4.1.2 Peer-relationships

The investigation into students' perceptions of Peer-relationships (PR) within the Italian class, focused on aspects of cooperation, supportive behavior, willingness to communicate, connectedness, acceptance, cordiality, and closeness. To mitigate acquiescence bias, five statements are framed positively (PR1, PR2, PR5, PR6, PR7), and three negatively (PR3, PR4, PR8). The PR categories of the ten statements, detailed in Appendix 2.2, include:

- Classroom Dynamics for effective learning (CD) as discussed in the literature review section 2.2.1, *PR1 -The students in the Italian class are willing to cooperate with one another*: Assesses cooperation, highlighting its impact on the students' learning process.
- Socialization in the Italian Classroom (SC) explores willingness to communicate and support and how it affects learning and relationships through three different perspectives:
 - (i) perceptions of the classmates "they": *PR 3 - Students in the Italian class are very interested in getting to know their classmates*
 - (ii) perceptions of self "I" a) to other subjects: *PR2 - I feel friendlier with students of the Italian class than with students of other classes*, b) to the Italian classroom: *PR 6 – I get along with my Italian classmates*

(iii) perception of collective “we” *PR 7 – In the Italian class we chat before lessons start or during the break*

- Socialization at the University (SU): Measures the desire and actual commitment to socialize beyond the classroom, providing insights into broader social experiences. It measures:

(i) the desire for socialization: *PR 4 -Spending time with my university classmates is important to me; PR 5 - It is important to me to make friends at university*

(ii) the genuine commitment for socialization: *PR 10 - I spend time with my university classmates outside the classroom.*

- **Perception of the self (PS)** – measuring personal optimism (*PR 9 - I often notice good things happening to me*) and perceived similarity with peers (*PR 8 - I think that I’m similar to other university students*), which are important to develop confidence, resilience and better relationships.

3.4.1.3 Sense of Belonging to the University context

The Sense of Belonging to the University context (SBU) was examined through a combination of positively (SBU1, SBU2, SBU4) and negatively (SBU3, SBU5) framed statements. These statements, detailed in Appendix 2.3, assess external relationships and feelings of belonging.

- *SBU1 I am satisfied with my experiences at Uni* and *SBU2 There is someone on campus who helps me feel comfortable socially* assessing student satisfaction and social support availability, crucial elements for fostering a sense of belonging.
- *SBU3 It is difficult for me to meet other university students with whom I can relate* serves as a control statement to counterbalance positive impressions and mitigate bias.
- *SBU4 I take part in extra-curricular activities with other university students* gauges involvement in extracurricular activities, which contributes to a sense of belonging.

- *SBU5 I don't feel easy to establish relationships at university* explores the challenges of forming new relationships, providing insights into the social dynamics on campus.

3.4.2 The interviews

Semi-structured interviews (SSIs) with students and tutors were conducted at the end of the first two semesters. These interviews incorporated open-ended questions to probe students' perceptions of peer-relationships, classroom climate, overall wellbeing in the Italian class, and their Sense of Belonging to the University context, including their explanations and concrete examples. These data therefore enriched the self-reported survey data, providing a more nuanced understanding of the quantitative findings (Cohen et al., 2002, p. 349).

3.5 Ethical approval

Prior to commencement, the study received ethical approval from The University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee, ensuring adherence to ethical standards including participant anonymity, no recruitment coercion, and no participation rewards. Adjustments made in response to COVID-19, and subsequent lockdowns were also ethically reviewed and approved.

Following the guidelines, Beginner Italian course students were invited to participate, with surveys hosted on REDCap ensuring privacy. Informed consent was required for survey participation and interview recordings, with consent forms managed by the Chair of Italian Studies (March 2020) and the Unit of Study Coordinator (March 2021). The invitation included a project summary, the Participant Information Statement, and the Participant Consent Form for the recorded interviews. Interviews were scheduled only after the final semester results were published. This unfortunately affected participant recall of the class activities as emerged during the interviews.

Throughout the thesis, in line with guidelines, confidentiality has been maintained using pseudonyms for all participants.

3.6 Fieldwork

The participant pool for this study was drawn from students enrolled in the beginner Unit of Study of Italian (Italian 1), taught by Italian Studies at the University of Sydney. Italian 1 caters to absolute beginners and adopts a communicative approach. Classes are held twice per week in two-hour sessions for a total of four hours per week. The curriculum focuses on equipping students with fundamental communication skills for everyday scenarios, utilizing *New Italian Espresso 1* (Bultrini & Graziani, 2014) as the course textbook.

Following ethical approval in February 2020, a briefing session was organized with the unit's tutors to discuss the study's objectives and distribute kits to facilitate the inclusion in the program of some language group activities designed as part of this study.

In Semester 1, 2020, fieldwork included data gathered by Survey 1 at the beginning and Survey 2 at the end of the Semester (Table 1). Additionally, comprehensive notetaking was conducted by me and other tutors, documenting observations and reflections on the teaching process, particularly concerning adaptations to online instruction. These notes served as valuable references for analyzing the educational intervention and planning future fieldwork phases.

Table 1: Timeline of data collection.

Date Range	Participant groups	Type of data collected
Second week of March 2020	Students of Italian 1	Survey 1
Third week of May 2020	Students of Italian 1	Survey 2
July 2020	Students of Italian 1	Interviews
January 2021	Tutors of Italian 1 2020	Interviews
Second week of March 2021	Students of Italian 1	Survey 1
Third week of May 2021	Students of Italian 1	Survey 2
July 2021	Students of Italian 1	Interviews

In the second week of teaching, that is, in the second week of March 2020, the first survey was made accessible through a link posted on the Unit's online homepage by the Chair of Italian Studies. The survey remained open for completion until the conclusion of the third week attracting participation from 43 out of 101 enrolled students (42.57%). The second survey, in the semester's final weeks (between the third week of May and the first week of June 2020), saw a significant drop in participation, with only 6 students (11.53%) responding.

In 2021, the recruitment process followed a similar approach, with the Unit coordinator overseeing the administering of the survey. In March 2021 the participation rates improved: 33 out of 61 students (54.10%) completed the first survey and 23 (38.30%) completed the second. This demonstrated a notable increase in Survey 2 participation compared to the previous year. It is plausible that in 2020, students experienced survey fatigue, potentially exacerbated by the university's concerns for student wellbeing due to COVID, which led to an extensive survey load (see 4.3.1). Additionally, the online teaching modality in 2020 may have contributed to students feeling less connected to the university community (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020; Appleby et al., 2022, p. 11;). Notably, in the first semester of 2021, the response rate to the second survey from students in online classes was markedly low, with only one respondent compared with nine online for the first survey.

Over these two years, three different teaching modalities were employed for Italian 1. In 2020, students attended classes in person at the beginning of the semester and online since Week three. In 2021, they could opt for different learning modalities, namely, face-to-face, HyFlex and online, with tutorial Group 1 being offered as face-to-face, tutorial Group 2 in HyFlex mode and tutorial Group 3 completely online. These modalities and their associated conditions are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Teaching/learning modalities, their associated conditions, and utilization period.

Modality	Group	Expectation	Enforcement	Time Period
Face-to-face (F2F)	All	Expected	Mandatory	Beginning of 1 st semester 2020
Online	All	Unexpected	Mandatory	From 3rd week of 1 st semester 2020
Face-to-face (F2F)	G1	Expected	Voluntary	Throughout 1 st semester 2021
HyFlex (HF)	G2	Expected	Voluntary	Throughout 1 st semester 2021
Online	G3	Expected	Voluntary	Throughout 1 st semester 2021

Figure 1 presents the number of students participating in the first and second surveys according to modality. All 43 students who responded to Survey 1 in 2020 participated in F2F while six students responded to Survey 2 in 2020 under the emergency remote teaching modality.

Figure 1: Survey 2020 respondents.

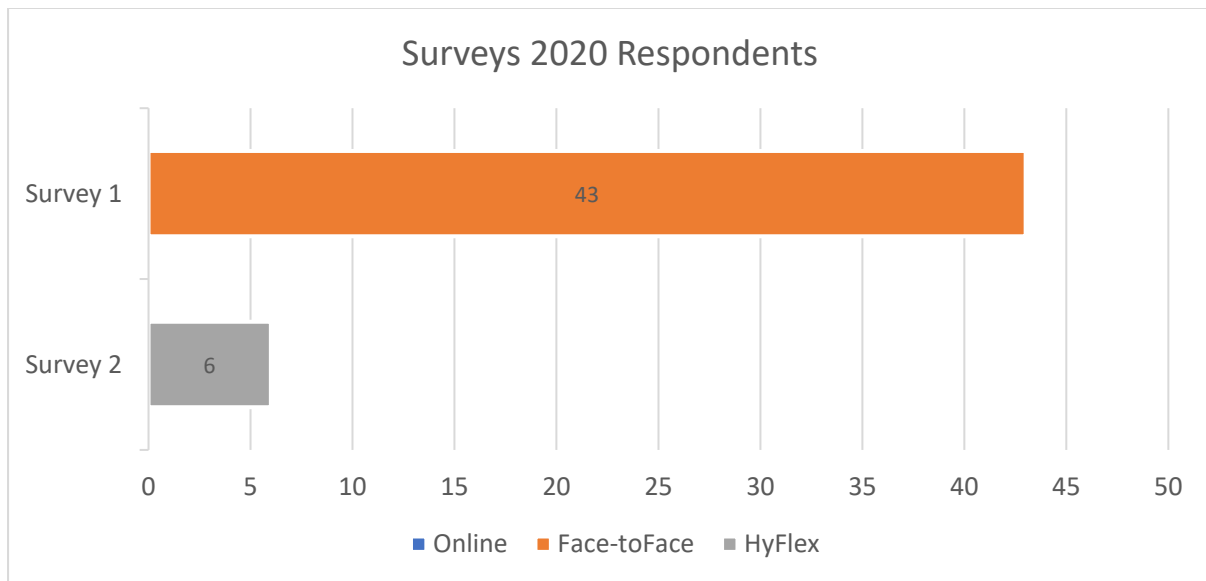
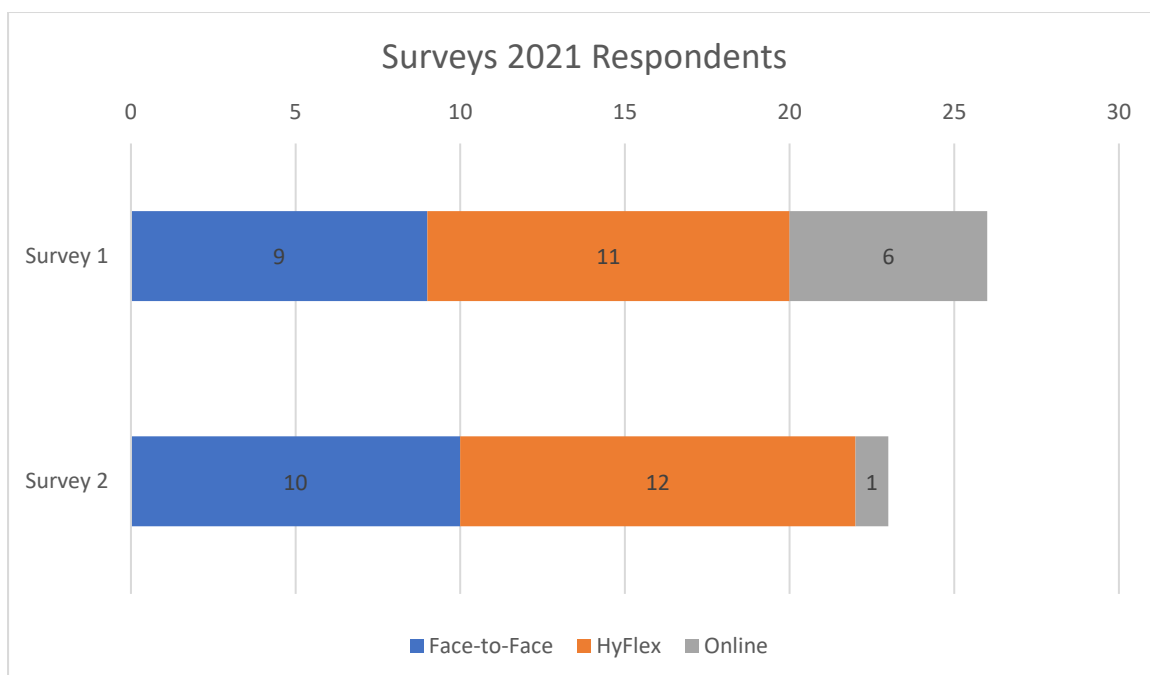


Figure 2 presents the number of students participating in the first and second surveys by modality for 2021. Of the 26 respondents to Survey 1, 11 students (42.3%) belonged to Group 1 (F2F), six (23.1%) to Group 2 (HF) and nine to Group 3 (Online). A total of 23 students completed Survey 2, with 10 students (43.50%) in Group 1, (F2F), 12 students (52.17%) in Group 2 (HF) and only one student (4.30%) in Group 3 (Online).

Figure 2: Survey 2021 respondents divided by their choice of study modality.



Interviews were conducted via Zoom by a doctoral student from Italian Studies, who was not previously known to the participants, thus ensuring an unbiased interaction. In 2020, two students declared their willingness to participate. The questions for the students were broadly based on the survey statements, exploring students' experiences in the classroom, and their perceptions of classroom atmosphere and relationships amongst peers. The interviews in 2020 occurred during the initial lockdown, capturing the immediate effects of the transition to remote learning.

In 2021, willingness to participate increased, with five students coming forward. This set of interviews aimed to understand the impact of the chosen learning modality and whether it facilitated relationship-building with classmates or meeting other students on campus. The interviews were conducted during the second lockdown, which occurred after the end of the teaching semester. Students were identified based on their tutorial group, ensuring diverse representation of the different learning modalities. Among the five interviewees, two attended the online classes, two the HyFlex and one the in-person course.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. For guidance for the interview protocol, I referred to the practical insights from Skype-based¹⁶ interviews (King et al., 2018).

To gain insights into the tutors' perspectives, especially regarding the transition to emergency remote teaching, I conducted semi-structured interviews, some in person and others online, with three tutors participating (see Appendix 1.2.3). These discussions explored the classroom climate, the impact of online teaching on CC, PR, and SBU, as well as the challenges encountered in adapting course delivery to an online format.

This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the educational dynamics during a period of significant transition.

¹⁶ Skype is a proprietary telecommunications application.

3.7 Analysis

For the analysis, quantitative data from survey responses were subjected to statistical analysis to discern trends and patterns. Concurrently, thematic analysis was applied to interview transcripts, aiming to uncover significant themes pertinent to Classroom Climate (CC), Peer-relationships (PR), and students' Sense of Belonging to the University context (SBU).

3.7.1 Quantitative data

The initial phase of survey analysis entailed the exclusion of incomplete responses, followed by a detailed examination of participants' agreement with statements addressing the three key variables (CC, PR, and SBU) to gain an overall perspective on their perception. The data were then exported from REDCap in raw and labelled formats to Microsoft Excel using CSV (Comma-Separated Values) files. Subsequently, I used the statistical software STATA¹⁷ for detailed statistical evaluation. Results were considered in conjunction with sociodemographic data, aiming to identify potential influencing factors. For the second survey, additional depth was provided by triangulating the quantitative data with insights from student and teacher interviews (see Ch. 4 and 5).

The analysis of students' responses first identifies some general trends, then explores the impact of the students' sociodemographic characteristics as well as of the diverse learning modalities selected by the students in 2021. The comparative analysis of responses from two distinct surveys facilitated an evaluation of perceptions' shifts following the completion of the Unit of Study.

To enhance the readability of the analysis, the agreement order for eight negatively framed statements was reversed (see Appendix A). This adjustment meant transforming strong

¹⁷ Stata is a statistical software for data science. <https://www.stata.com/>

disagreement (originally scored as 1) to strong agreement (now effectively scored as 5), and vice versa, with neutrality (scored as 3) remaining unchanged¹⁸.

3.7.2 Qualitative data

The interviews which were conducted via the Zoom online platform were audio-recorded. The transcribing of these interviews was facilitated by the use of NVivo, a qualitative analysis software, which also served as the primary tool for the data analysis phase. This software's capabilities allowed for a meticulous examination of the transcripts, enabling the identification and extraction of nuanced insights that complemented the quantitative data. Selected excerpts from these interviews were incorporated into the analysis, providing rich, qualitative depth to the study's findings.

3.8 Concluding remarks

This chapter has detailed the theoretical and methodological foundations of the study, which explores university students' perceptions of classroom climate, peer-relationships, and their sense of belonging. Employing a mixed-methods approach, it combines quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to provide a rich analysis and address the research questions. The theoretical framework draws on the social-psychological aspects of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), focusing on the importance of collaborative learning and the impact of emotions on students' learning environments. These elements were examined through the lens of various sociodemographic factors, the unprecedented shift to online teaching due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent online, Hyflex, face-to-face teaching dynamics.

¹⁸ To achieve this, response values were replaced using the transformation formula $(r - 6) * -1$ on Stata where r represents the original response value. For instance, a response initially scored as 5 (strongly agree) for a negatively framed statement would be recalculated as 1 (strongly disagree) through the transformation $5 - 6 = -1$.

The next chapter will investigate Research Question 1, assessing the students' perceptions of Classroom Climate, Peer-relationships, and Sense of Belonging in 2020, before and after the introduction of emergency remote teaching.

Chapter 4 – Addressing Research Question 1

4.1 Introduction to Research Question 1: Students' perceptions in 2020

This chapter focuses on Research Question 1, which examines the perceptions of the students of Italian 1 at the University of Sydney, regarding Classroom Climate (CC), Relationships (PR), and Sense of Belonging to the University context (SBU) over the course of the first semester 2020. Specifically, Research Question 1 has been formulated as follows (see section 1.1)

RQ1: What are the students' perceptions of CC, PR and SBU in Semester 1, 2020?

- Subquestion 1: What are these perceptions before the introduction of the emergency remote teaching?
- Subquestion 2: What are these perceptions following the emergency remote teaching?
- Subquestion 3: What changes emerge from students' perceptions at the beginning and end of Semester 1, 2020?

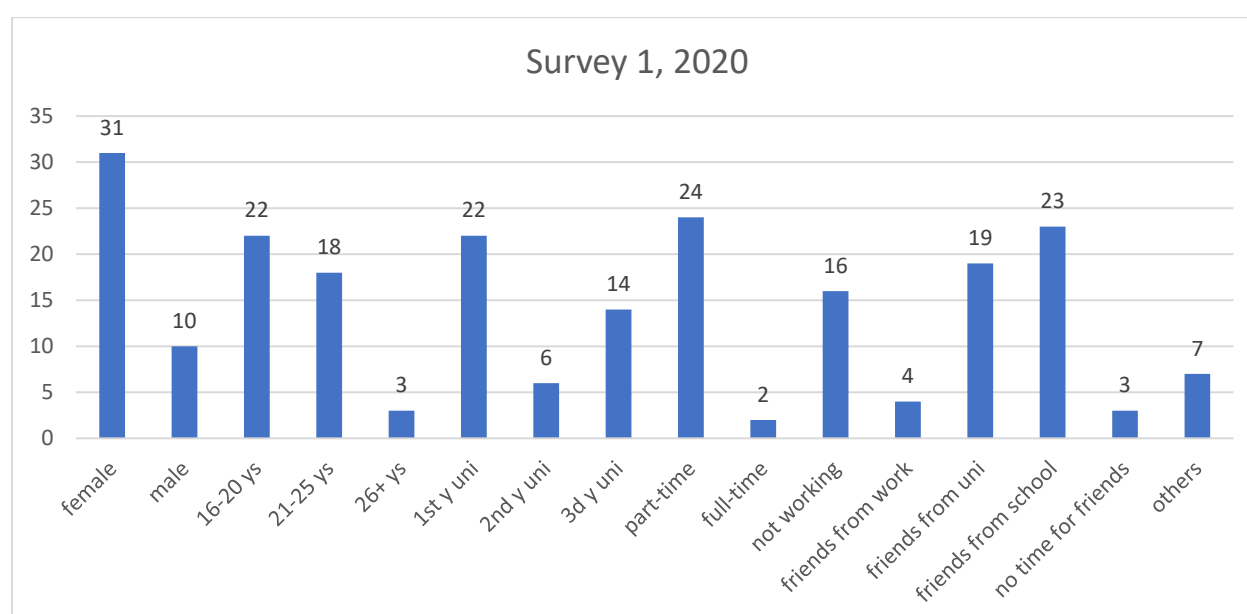
As outlined in the Methodology chapter (refer to Section 3.7), my analysis employs a blend of quantitative and qualitative data to elicit information regarding these perceptions. I begin by addressing the first subquestion and discussing the students' perceptions as revealed in the first survey (S1/2020), conducted at the beginning of the semester, followed by the second subquestion that relates to the second survey (S2/2020), conducted at the end of the semester. I then address the third subquestion by comparing the results to uncover and examine any changes and ultimately derive conclusions regarding these changes.

4.2 Survey 1, 2020: What are these perceptions before the introduction of the emergency remote teaching?

4.2.1 Sociodemographic characteristics of participants¹⁹

Out of 101 enrolled students, 43 students participated in the survey, achieving a 42.57% response rate (Section 3.5.1). Figure 3 shows the responses to the sociodemographic section of the survey regarding gender, age, year of enrolment, occupation, and social network of the participants. The tallies atop each column indicate the number of respondents in each category.

Figure 3: Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants in Survey 1.



In terms of gender, most respondents were female (n=31, 72%), which aligns with the enrolment figures for Italian 1, where females comprised 71.4% post-Census Day,²⁰ This gender imbalance has been widely acknowledged as characteristic of tertiary language courses (Carr & Frankcom, 1997; Scott Patrick & Spencer, 2013; Wightman, 2020, pp. 11-13), and is often attributed to the stereotypical association of language studies with feminine traits (Sunderland, 2000, p. 216).

¹⁹ For a comprehensive table of the demographic-data see Appendix 4.1.3.4

²⁰ The census date is the last date for withdrawing from a unit of study without penalties.

Age distribution showed that over 50% (n=22) of respondents were in the youngest bracket (16-20 years of age), 36% (n=14) in the middle bracket (21-25 years of age), leaving a minority of 7% (n=3) in the oldest bracket (over 26 years of age), indicating a predominantly young cohort.

Enrolment year data revealed that just over half of the respondents were in their first university year (Y1) (n=22, 51.2%), a third in their third year (Y3) (n=14, 32.6%), and the remainder were enrolled in their second year of study (Y2) (n=7, 16.2%). These percentages mirror those of language students throughout the university, with the university's annual report for 2019 (Sydney, 2020) indicating that 38% of language students were enrolled in their first year, 26% in the second, and 36% were enrolled in their third year of study.²¹

With regards to occupation, most students had jobs while they were studying. Specifically, 24 (55.81%) reported having a part-time job, 2 (4.65%) had a full-time job, while 16 students (38.1%) were not employed. Since the full-time working cohort consisted of only two people, I do not include their results in the analysis. This breakdown differs from national 2022²² ABS statistics, which stated that of the 2.1 million Australian people studying for a certificate, diploma, or degree, 40% worked part-time, 37% worked full-time, and 23% were not working. This discrepancy may be due to the year of publication (no equivalent data were released for 2020), or to the fact that it incorporates data from all forms of higher education, not just at the university level.

In terms of social networks, students could select multiple options (section 3.3.1). 23 (53.5%) respondents stated that their social life consisted of friends from school (F3), 19 (44.2%) had new university friends with whom they spent time (F2), 4 (9.3%) had most of their friends from work (F1), 3 (7%) had no time to go out with friends (F4), and the remaining 7

²¹ The remaining 10% of language students were enrolled in their fourth year or above Sydney, U. o. (2020). *The University of Sydney Annual Report 2019*. The University of Sydney.

²²<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/education-and-work-australia/latest-release#current-and-recent-study>

(16.3%) responses were for “Other.” The most common description for this last option was that they had friends from other universities which they had previously attended, or from cultural or sporting clubs outside of the university.

In summary, the respondent profile was predominantly female, aged 16-25, newly arrived at university, engaged in part-time employment or not working, with social lives centered around school and university friends.

4.2.2 Snapshot of the overall responses

The table below presents the responses to S1/2020 regarding the three variables, CC, PR and SBU, ranked from the highest to the lowest levels of mean agreement.

Table 3: Overall responses for Survey 1, 2020

S1 = 43	Mean	SD
CC2 – I feel comfortable in the Italian class.	4.53	0.55
PR1 – The students in the Italian class are willing to cooperate with one another.	4.35	0.48
CC3 – There is a good atmosphere in the Italian class.	4.33	0.71
PR5- It is important to me to make friends at university.	4.26	0.93
PR6 – I get along with my Italian classmates.	4.16	0.61
CC1 – I feel included in the Italian class.	4.16	0.57
SBU1 – I am satisfied with my experiences at the university.	4.05	0.72
PR7 – In the Italian class we chat before lessons start or during the break.	4.00	0.69
CC4 – I’m not afraid that somebody in the Italian class will laugh at me when I speak Italian.	4.00	0.93
CC 5 – The Italian class makes me feel more comfortable at the University.	3.88	0.67
PR9 – I often notice good things happening to me.	3.79	0.71
PR4 – Spending time with my university classmates is important to me.	3.74	0.93
PR2 – I feel friendlier with students of the Italian class than with students of other classes.	3.74	1.00
SBU2 – There is someone on campus who helps me feel comfortable socially.	3.65	0.95
SBU4 – I take part in extra-curricular activities with other university students.	3.60	0.95
PR3 – Students in the Italian class are very interested in getting to know their classmates.	3.58	0.76
SBU3 – It is easy for me to meet other University students with whom I can relate.	3.37	0.98
PR10 – I spend time with my university classmates outside the classroom.	3.21	0.99
SBU5 – I feel easy to establish relationships at university.	3.19	1.01
PR8 – I think that I’m similar to other University students.	3.14	1.06

Out of the 20 statements, nine reached agreement levels. Overall, there was a positive feeling towards the Italian class and classmates, as seen in the scores of 4.00 and above for the first nine statements. Four of these statements relate directly to CC including: the classroom atmosphere (CC3) and how included (CC1), comfortable (CC2), and safe (CC4) the students felt within it. Another four relate to PR and include: the students' impressions of their classmates (PR1, PR6), their social interactions before class (PR7), and their desire to make new friends at university (PR5). The last statement relates to SBU, and the satisfaction felt towards university (SBU1). The standard deviations (sd.) for these nine statements are all below 1.00, indicating a relatively high level of homogeneity in the responses.

The agreement for these nine statements indicates that even within the short space of two weeks, the students had a generally positive perception of the atmosphere in the Italian classroom and to a lesser extent, of the relationships they were building both in this class, and at the university in general. The students clearly valued the supportive environment within the Italian classroom more than they did the university context in general. This is a positive result, given that according to (D'Orazzi & Hajek, 2021, pp. 457-458) the learning environment can have a big influence on students' motivation to continue learning the language.

4.2.3 Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate

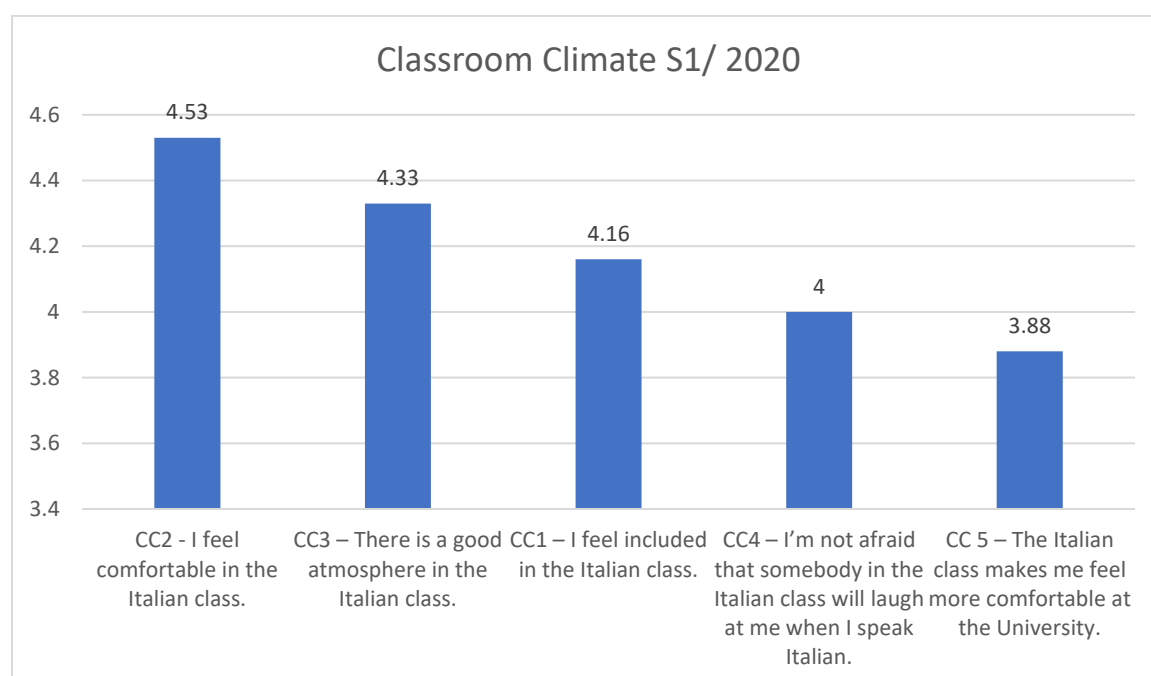
This section examines the overall responses to CC, followed by an analysis according to the sociodemographic profiles. As outlined in the methodology chapter (Section 3.3.1), the five statements about the classroom environment include important concepts known to influence CC and encourage participation while supporting students' wellbeing, such as inclusion (CC1), general comfort (CC2), positivity (CC3), security (CC4), and integration (CC5). While these statements primarily concern student interactions, it is recognized that instructors also play a

vital role in cultivating a positive CC, as highlighted by Frisby and Martin (2010, p. 148). My analysis, however, emphasizes student interactions within this dynamic.

4.2.3.1 Overview of results

The results, displayed below (Figure 4), ranked from highest to lowest levels of agreement, show a predominantly positive perception of CC. This is particularly true in terms of comfort (CC2 = 4.53), suggesting that from the beginning of the semester students felt welcomed in the classroom.

Figure 4: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate in Survey 1, 2020.



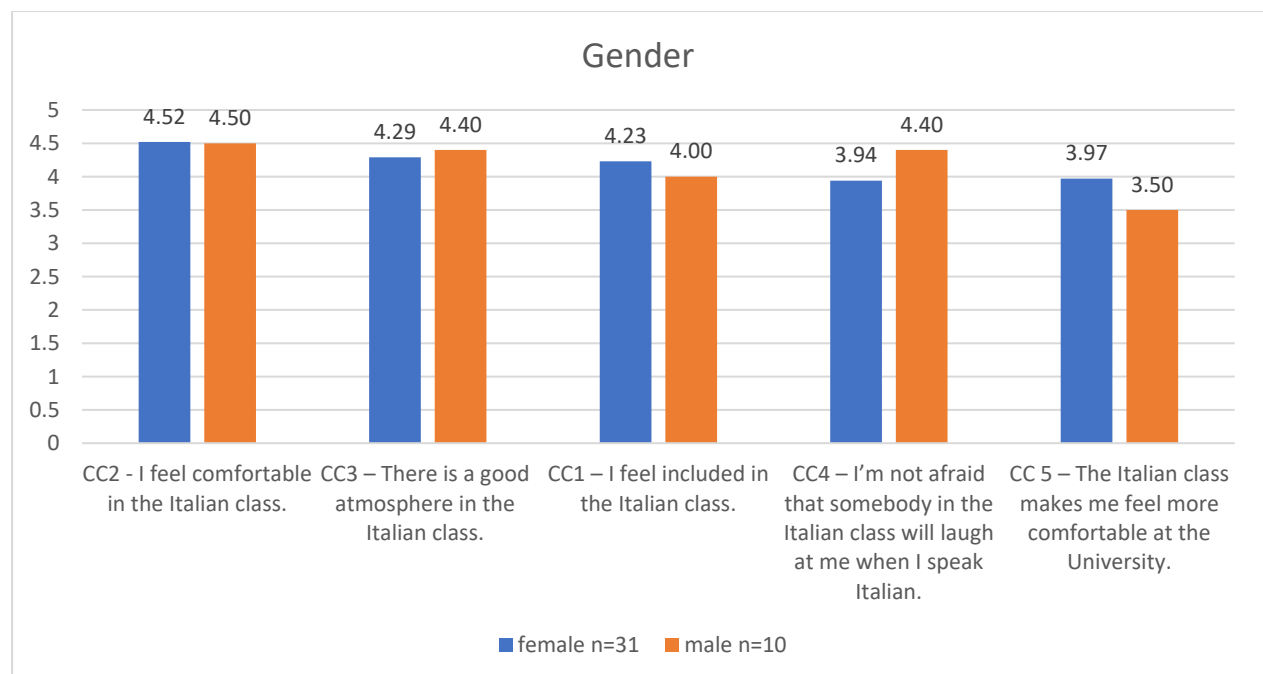
The next highest means were for the statements regarding overall class atmosphere (CC3 = 4.33) and feelings of inclusion (CC1 = 4.16). These findings underscore the classroom's role in reducing negative emotions such as anxiety, a known barrier to second language acquisition (Krashen, 1981) (see sections 2.3), and the importance of an approach that emphasizes communicative activities is crucial in developing language skills without fear of ridicule, as discussed by Dörnyei and colleagues in their studies regarding groups dynamics in the language classroom (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997, p. 77; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). The lowest score

was for feeling more comfortable at the university due to the Italian class (CC5 = 3.88), indicating room for improvement in integrating classroom experiences with the broader university life.

4.2.3.2 Results according to participants' sociodemographic characteristics

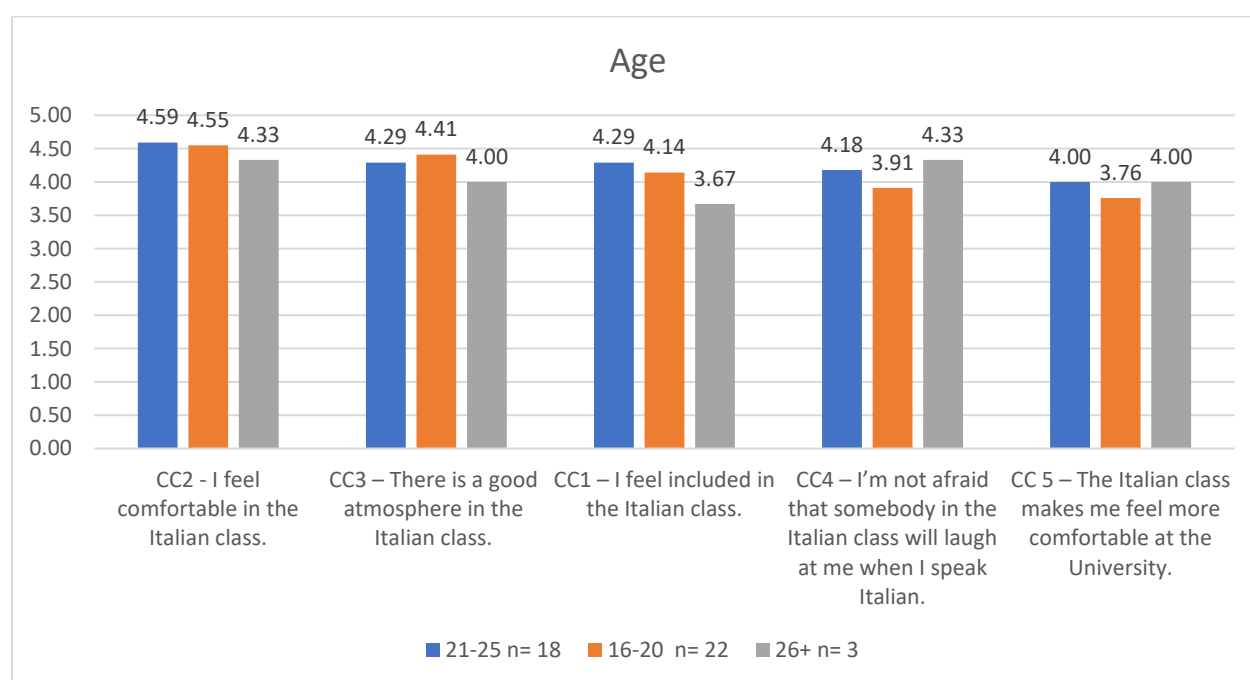
In this section, I present the results of CC from S1/2020 according to the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

Figure 5: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate by gender.



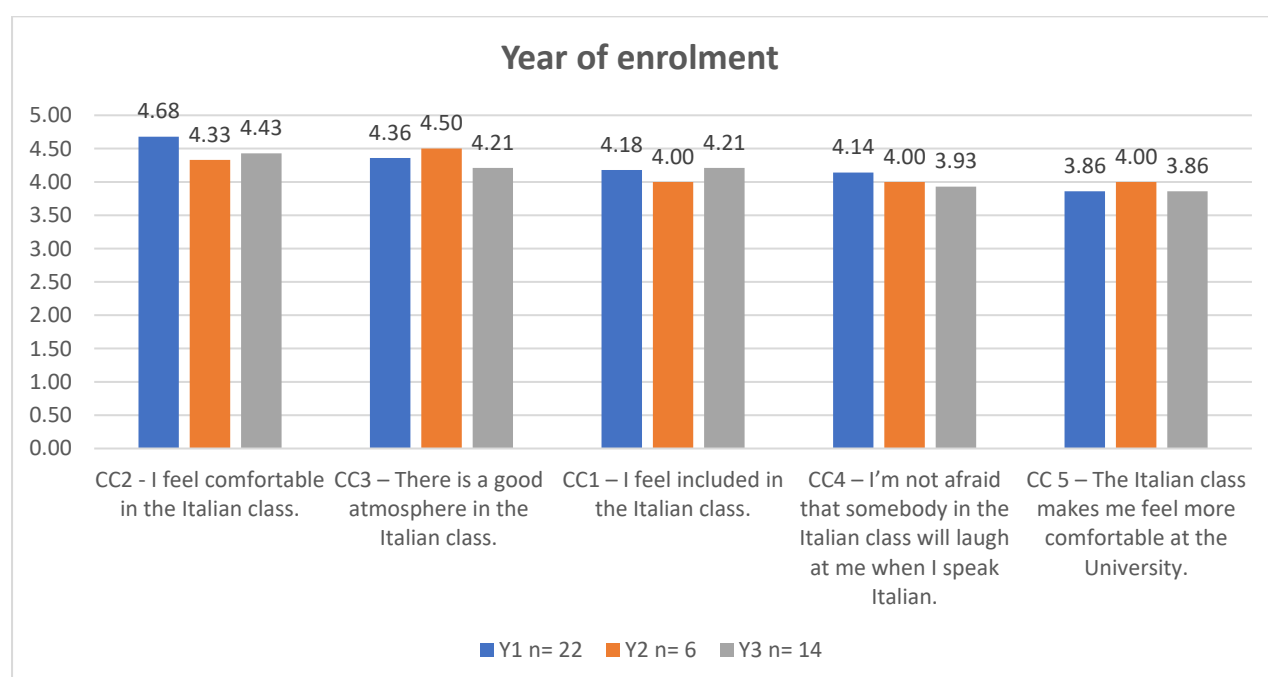
All students, regardless of gender (31 females, overall mean = 4.19 and 10 males, overall mean = 4.16), agreed that the Italian classroom was comfortable (CC2), had a good atmosphere (CC3), and was inclusive (CC1). Gender differences emerged with females feeling less secure speaking Italian (CC4 = 3.94 vs. 4.40), but more comfortable in the university setting (CC5 = 3.97 vs. 3.50).

Figure 6: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate by age.



The results indicated a slight correlation between age and CC. The middle cohort (21-25 years, $n = 18$) were the most satisfied, rating all statements above 4.00, with an overall mean of 4.23. The youngest cohort (16-20 years, $n = 22$), with an overall mean of 4.15, had slightly lower comfort levels, and greater fear of speaking Italian (CC4 = 3.91). The oldest group (26+; $n = 3$), with an overall mean of 4.06, while not feeling totally included (CC1 = 3.67) reported relatively high comfort and confidence, possibly due to greater life experience and more focused motivation, aligning with previous research on mature students' success factors (Pearce, 2017)(see 2.4.2.1).

Figure 7: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate by university year.



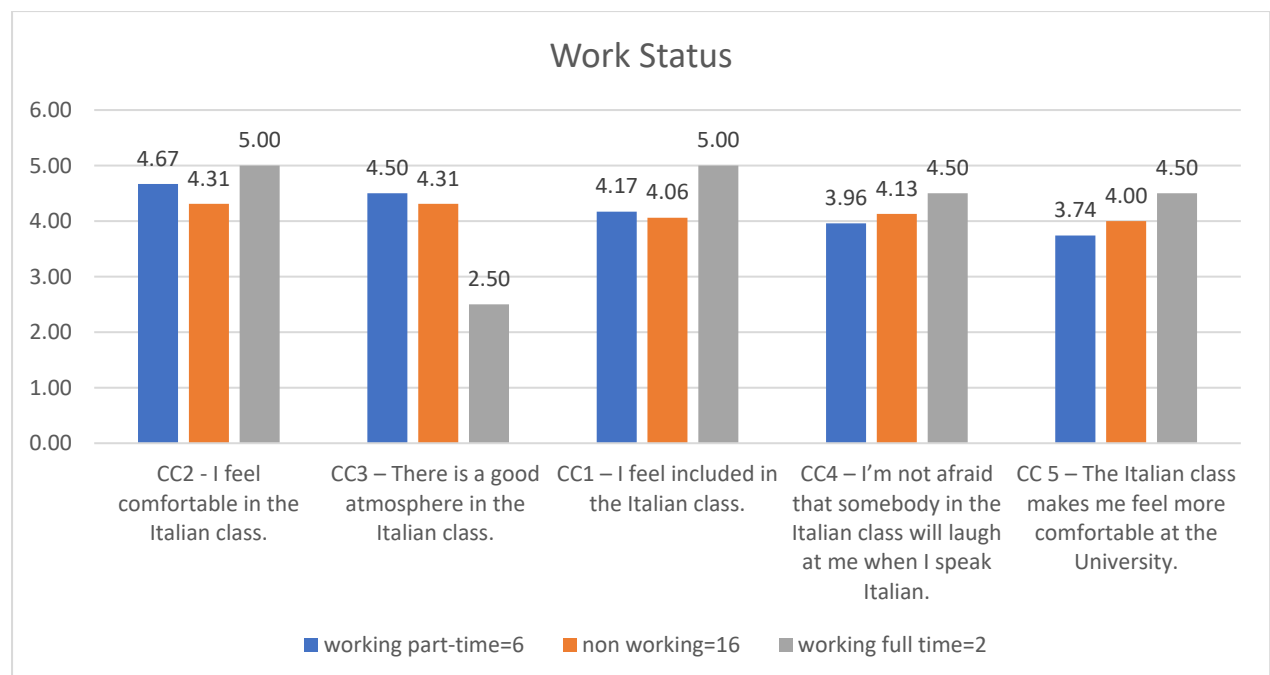
There was not a significant difference among the various enrollment year cohorts in terms of their general agreement on the comfort and inclusivity of the Italian classroom (see Figure 7).

However, some differences do emerge. First-year students (Y1, $n = 22$) fully agreed with four out of five CC statements, with an overall mean of 4.24. However, the statement regarding the Italian class making them feel more comfortable at university (CC5) garnered a slightly lower mean of 3.86, suggesting a greater focus on classroom experiences than broader university life, a trend supported by literature (D'Orazzi & Hajek, 2021, pp. 451-454). Alternatively, the lower score may stem from the timing of the survey, reflecting first-year students' uncertainty and unfamiliarity with the university environment, which aligns with findings from a recent Canadian study on the challenges faced by first-year students (R. B. Cameron & C. A. Rideout, 2022, pp. 671-679).

Second-year respondents (Y2, $n = 6$) fully agreed with all five CC statements with an overall mean of 4.18. Familiarity with the university's teaching/learning context may have contributed to this positivity, as noted in a study on second-year students in the United States (Graunke & Woosley, 2005) (see also section 2.4.2.2).

Third-year respondents (Y3, n = 14) reported slightly lower agreement levels with some CC statements, reaching an overall mean of 4.14, possibly being less interested in engaging with a new subject in their final year of their university life. They achieved the same result as the first-year students for the statement regarding the Italian class helping them to feel comfortable at university (CC5 = 3.86), potentially because, being familiar with the university context and having built friendships, the class's benefits were less impactful (see also 2.3.3.2).

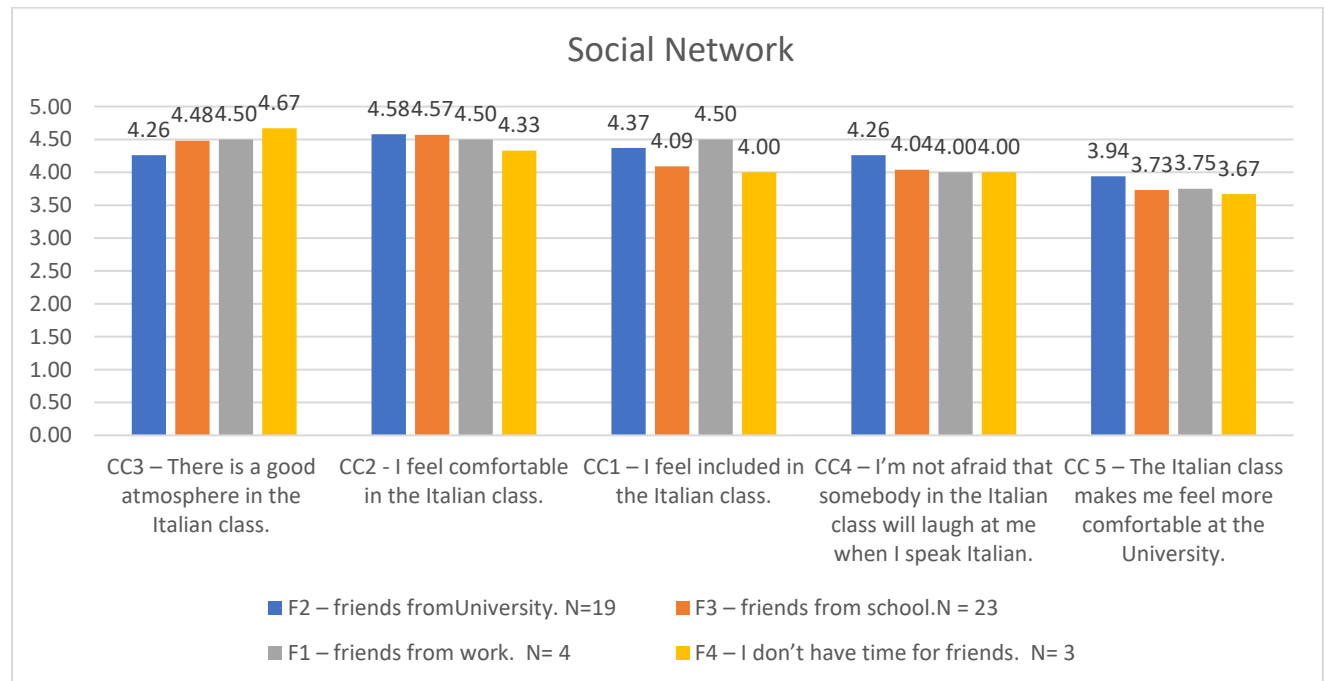
Figure 8: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate by work status.



Employment status substantially influenced CC perceptions, with part-time working students (n = 24, general mean: 4.20) and non-working students (n = 16, general mean: 4.16) having vastly different perceptions of the Italian class. Part-time working students perceived the class as more comfortable (CC2 = 4.67), with a better atmosphere (CC3 = 4.50), and a greater sense of inclusion (CC1 = 4.17). On the other hand, non-working students exhibited more confidence when speaking Italian (CC4 = 4.13), and felt the class contributed more to their comfort at university (CC5 = 4.00). These differences may arise from non-working students having more time for university, potentially experiencing less stress from having to balance work and study.

Indeed, research suggests that working students are more likely to suffer from anxiety (Mounsey & Diekhoff, 2013) (see also section 2.4.2.3).

Figure 9: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate by social network.



Social network analysis revealed that students with university friends felt more included and comfortable, underscoring the significance of social connections in academic settings. (see also section 2.4.2.4). These students (F2, n=19) reported the highest overall mean (4.28), indicating higher levels of inclusion (CC1), comfort (CC2), and a reduced fear of speaking Italian (CC4). Those with friends from work (F1, n=4) also expressed a positive experience, with an overall mean of 4.25. Students with friends from school (F3, n=23) had a slightly lower overall mean of 4.18, and those with no time for friends (F4, n=3) scored slightly lower levels again, albeit still maintaining a positive perception of the class (overall mean = 4.13).

4.2.3.3 Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the data indicate that in Survey 1, students generally perceived the classroom climate as positive, comfortable, and inclusive. This is important, as positive emotions are strong motivators within the classroom (MacIntyre et al., 2009, p. 47). In addition, classroom cohesion has been found to stimulate peer-to-peer exchange (Clément et al., 1994, pp. 423-425; Dörnyei, 2003, pp. 12-15; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003) (see section 2.2), and encourages student retention in higher education (Crosling et al., 2008, pp. 3-4; Martín et al., 2016; D'Orazzi & Hajek, 2021;).

The data regarding the respondents' socio-demographics revealed the following trends. The most positive agreements were found amongst female students, those between the ages of 21 and 25, and those in their second year at university. The last two cohorts no doubt have the advantage of being better adjusted to the university environment. In addition, non-working students displayed slightly higher levels of agreement with the CC statements, suggesting that the absence of work commitments may result in a more positive classroom experience, as did students with university friends, confirming the power of a supportive social network in increasing comfort in the learning process.

4.2.4 Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships

This section analyses the respondents' perceptions of PR. As discussed in the methodology chapter (see section 3.3.2.1), the survey included ten statements to gauge students' views on peer dynamics within the Italian classroom, each important for supporting students' motivation and wellbeing. To attain a more detailed view of perception, these statements can be further categorized into four key areas (refer to Appendix 2.2 for details) (see also section 3.4.1.2):

Classroom dynamics for effective learning (CD) –encapsulated by PR1, which examines the cooperative willingness among students as conducive to effective learning: *The students in the Italian class are willing to cooperate with one another*

Socialization within the classroom (SC) – from three perspectives:

- a) Students' perceptions of others towards socialization (PR3), as expressed by *PR 3 - Students in the Italian class are very interested in getting to know their classmates*
- b) Students' own perceptions towards socialization: (i) in relation to the Italian classroom: *PR 6 – I get along with my Italian classmates*) and (ii) In relation to other subjects: *PR2 - I feel friendlier with students of the Italian class than with students of other classes*
- c) Students' collective perception of the Italian classroom socialization: *PR 7 – In the Italian class we chat before lessons start or during the break*

Socialization at the university (SU) - reflecting the desire for social connections (*PR 4 - Spending time with my university classmates is important to me, PR 5 - It is important to me to make friends at university*) and actual social interactions (*PR 10 - I spend time with my university classmates outside the classroom*).

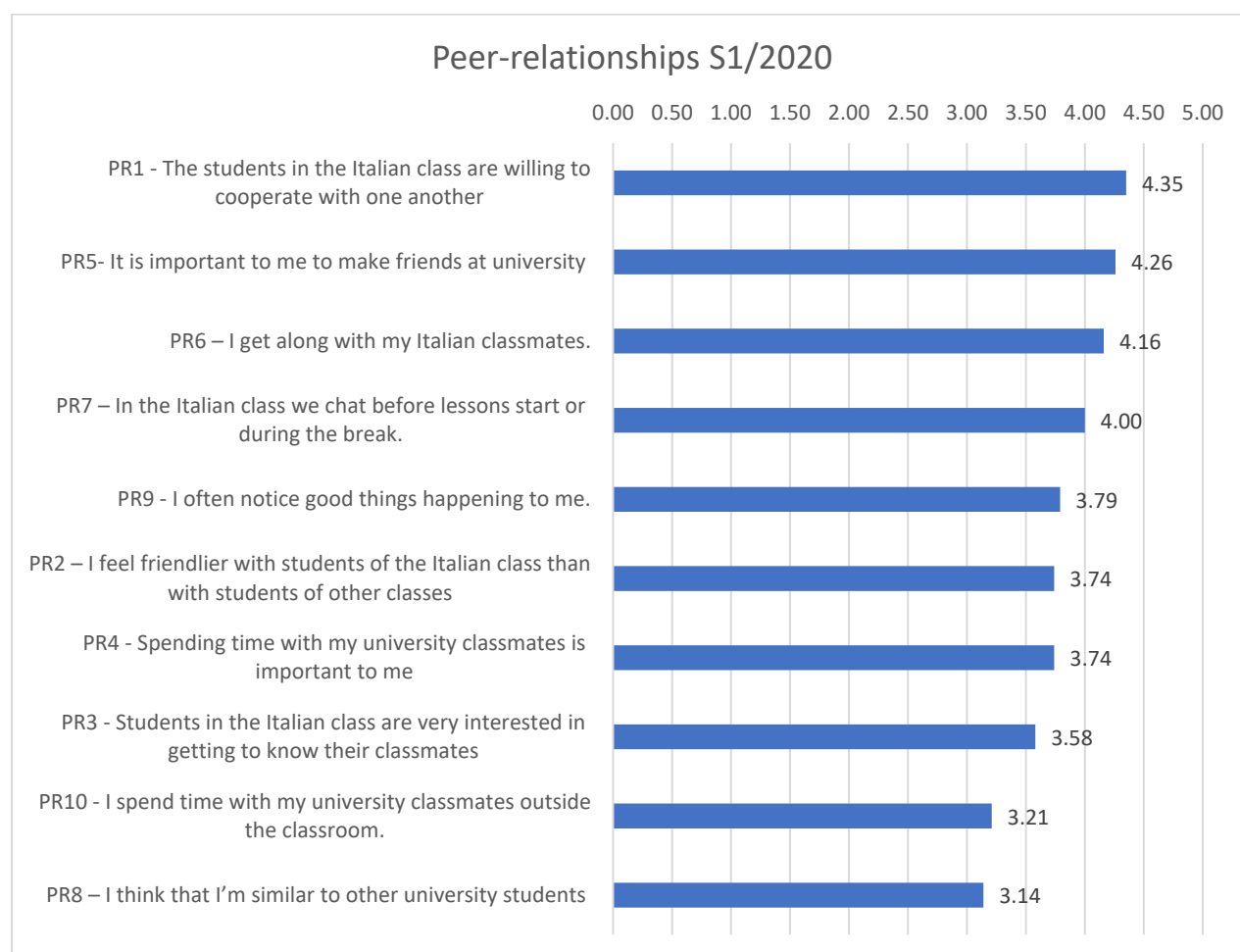
Perception of the self (PS) – measuring personal optimism (*PR 9 - I often notice good things happening to me*) and perceived similarity with peers (*PR 8 - I think that I'm similar to other university students*), which are important to develop confidence, resilience and better relationships.

4.2.4.1 Overview of results

The survey revealed agreement with four out of ten PR statements. The highest levels of agreement were for perceptions of classroom dynamics for effective learning (PR1 = 4.35), one Socialization at the university statement (PR5 = 4.26), and two Socialization within the

classroom statements (PR6 = 4.16 and PR7 = 4.00). The lowest scores were for one Perception of the self (PR8 = 3.14) and one Socialization at the university statement (PR10 = 3.21).

Figure 10: Students' perceptions of Peer-relationships in Survey 1,2020.



The high CD score (PR1 = 4.35) indicates a positive perception of the Italian students' willingness to cooperate. This is in line with the principles of cooperative learning, which emphasize students working together collaboratively to achieve common goals rather than competing (Dörnyei, 1994, pp. 423-425).

The positive results for PR 5 (SU) and PR6 (SC) are encouraging as they align with the literature regarding the ability for positive social connections to bolster resilience and motivation, contributing to decreased anxiety (Fredrickson, 2004, p. 1375; MacIntyre & Vincze, 2017, p. 77), encouraging student retention, and enhancing learning (Allen et al., 2008, pp. 660-662; Picton et al., 2017, pp. 7-9; D'Orazzi & Hajek, 2021, p. 464;). Peer support and

a robust social network are essential for adjustment to university life, as Cameron & Rideout describe in their Canadian study about perceptions of first-year students regarding adjusting to university life (2022, pp. 677-680). Furthermore, the literature underscores the importance of these concepts particularly in language learning (Martín et al., 2016, pp. 135-137; D'Orazzi & Hajek, 2021, p. 465;).

The positive result for the P7 (SC) is also important, given that developing enduring social connections is of great benefit, as confirmed through an Australian survey (Tice et al., 2021). The study underscores the value of casual interactions, like chatting before class, for forging lasting social bonds—a practice that is vital for university belongingness (Tice et al., 2021, p. 8) (see Ch. 2).

Less positive results were achieved for the two SC statements dealing with how the respondents perceived their peers felt about socialization. The statement regarding how students feel towards the Italian classmates' friendliness (PR2) garnered a mean of 3.74, and how much students felt their peers were interested in getting to know each other (PR3) managed just 3.58. These results indicate that students perceived their classmates as somewhat less friendly, and less enthusiastic about making new acquaintances. While these are perceptions of how others felt, and maybe erroneously held, they would still impact on the respondents' sense of socialization and wellbeing.

Of the remaining four statements, two belonged to the SU, socialization at university, category (PR =3.74, PR10=3.21) and could reflect early semester caution in forming new friendships. While students strongly desire to form friendships at the university (PR5=4.26), they were not willing to spend their time for this purpose (PR4=3.74), and their actual commitment to this was even lower (PR10=3.21).

The final two statements belong to the PS, perception of the self, category. The low score for perceptions of life optimism (PR9=3.79) is unfortunate since recognizing positive

events can foster resilience and overall satisfaction. Sharing positive experiences strengthens bonds, trust, and positivity (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003, pp.245-249; Gable et al., 2006, p. 916;), and increases confidence and wellbeing (Gable & Reis, 2010, p. 241). Likewise, the sense of similarity with peers also scored poorly (PR8 = 3.14), which is concerning, as perceived likeness is a foundational element for building connections and belonging (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013, p. 460; Laursen, 2017, p. 282)

Overall, while the current data indicate positive peer-relationships within the Italian classroom, the challenge of balancing commitments and social engagement is evident. The students felt that communally, there was a high level of cooperation (PR1), amiability (PR6), and a wish to socialize in the class (PR7). However, while they felt it was important to make friends on campus (PR5), they spent limited time doing so (PR10). This is disappointing, given that spending time with others is crucial for relationship development, a finding highlighted in Hall's study among first-year students (Hall, 2018). Insufficient social interaction may lead to a sense of detachment from the university (Section 2.3) and, in the absence of contextualized social support, may result in a sense of isolation, as demonstrated by Maunder in a study of Social Science students in the United Kingdom (2018, pp. 5-6).

The table below shows a summary of PR statements with their corresponding mean.

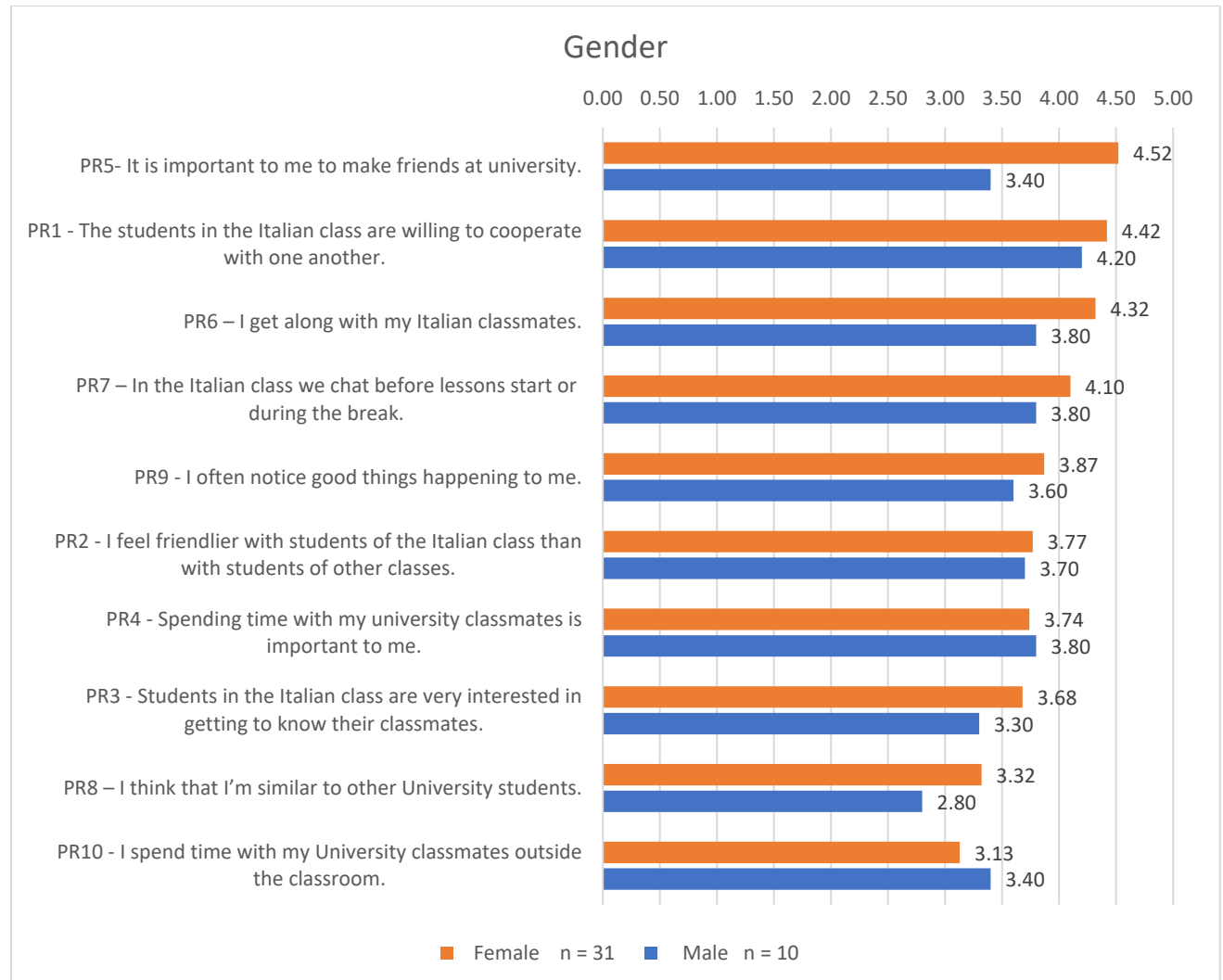
Table 4: Summary of the groupings and their mean

Group	Overarching attribute	Statements	Corresponding means	Overall mean
Group 1	Classroom dynamic for effective learning	PR1;	4.35,	4.35
Group 2	Socialisation in the class	PR2; PR3; PR6; PR7	3.74; 3.58; 4.16; 4.00	3.87
Group 4	Perception of the self	PR8; PR9	3.14; 3.79	3.46
Group 3	Socialisation at the university	PR4; PR5; PR10	3.74; 4.26; 3.21	3.37

4.2.4.2 Results according to participants' sociodemographic characteristics

In this section, I present the results of PR from S1/2020 according to the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

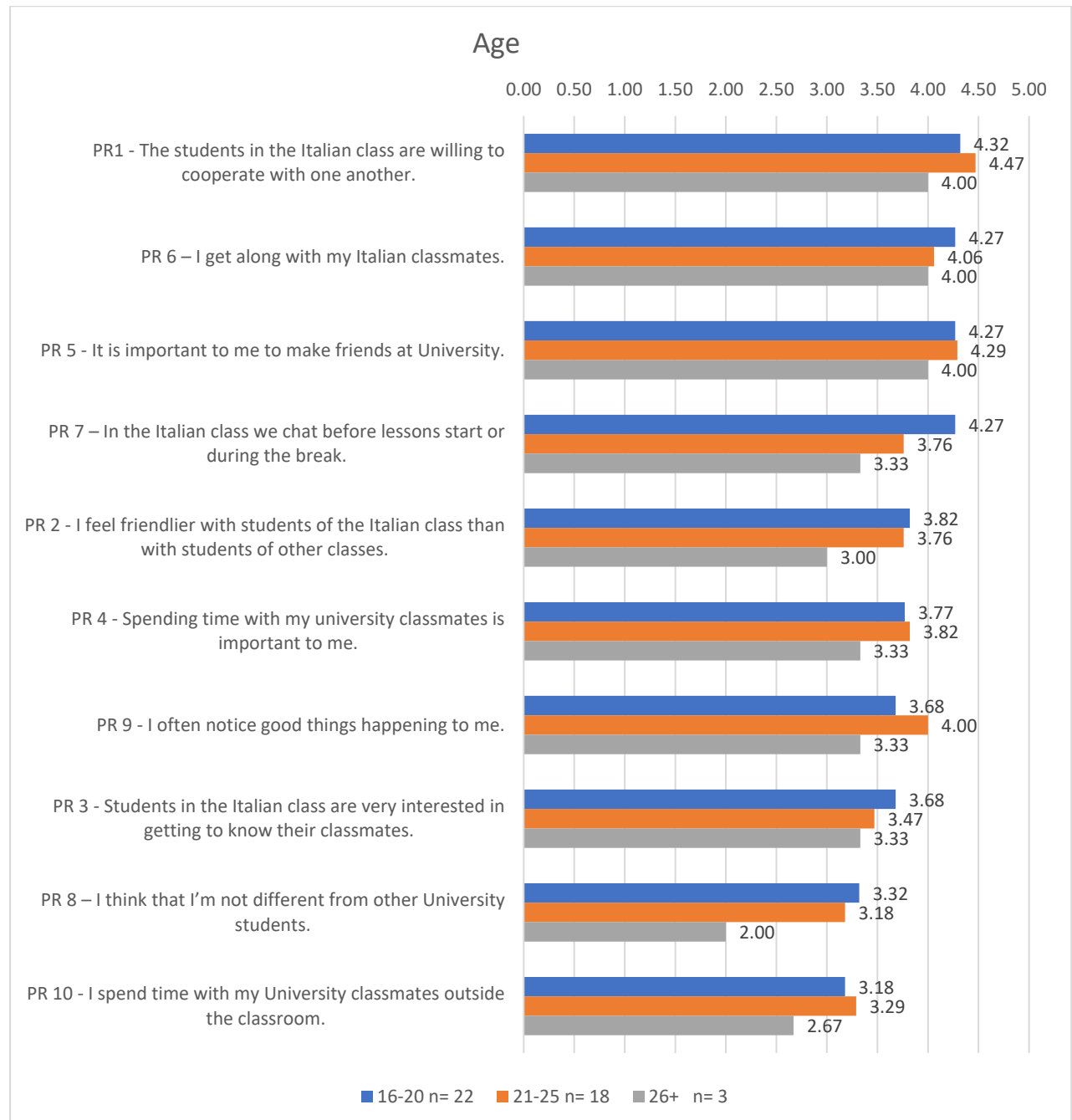
Figure 11: Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships by gender.



In terms of gender, a notable disparity appeared in areas of university socialization, where females (n=31) valued making university friends (PR5=4.52) significantly more than males (PR5=3.40). Interestingly, both genders reported a reluctance to invest time in getting to know peers (Female PR10=3.13, Male PR10=3.40), with the lesser engagement by females. Potentially due to time allocated for self-care and chores, as reflected in trends identified in an Australian study on first-year students' time management (Richardson et al., 2019, p. 24). Both

cohorts unanimously agreed on the positive dynamics within the classroom (PR1) and the female students in particular, noticed a strong sense of camaraderie (PR6=4.32) and sociability (PR7=4.10) in the Italian class.

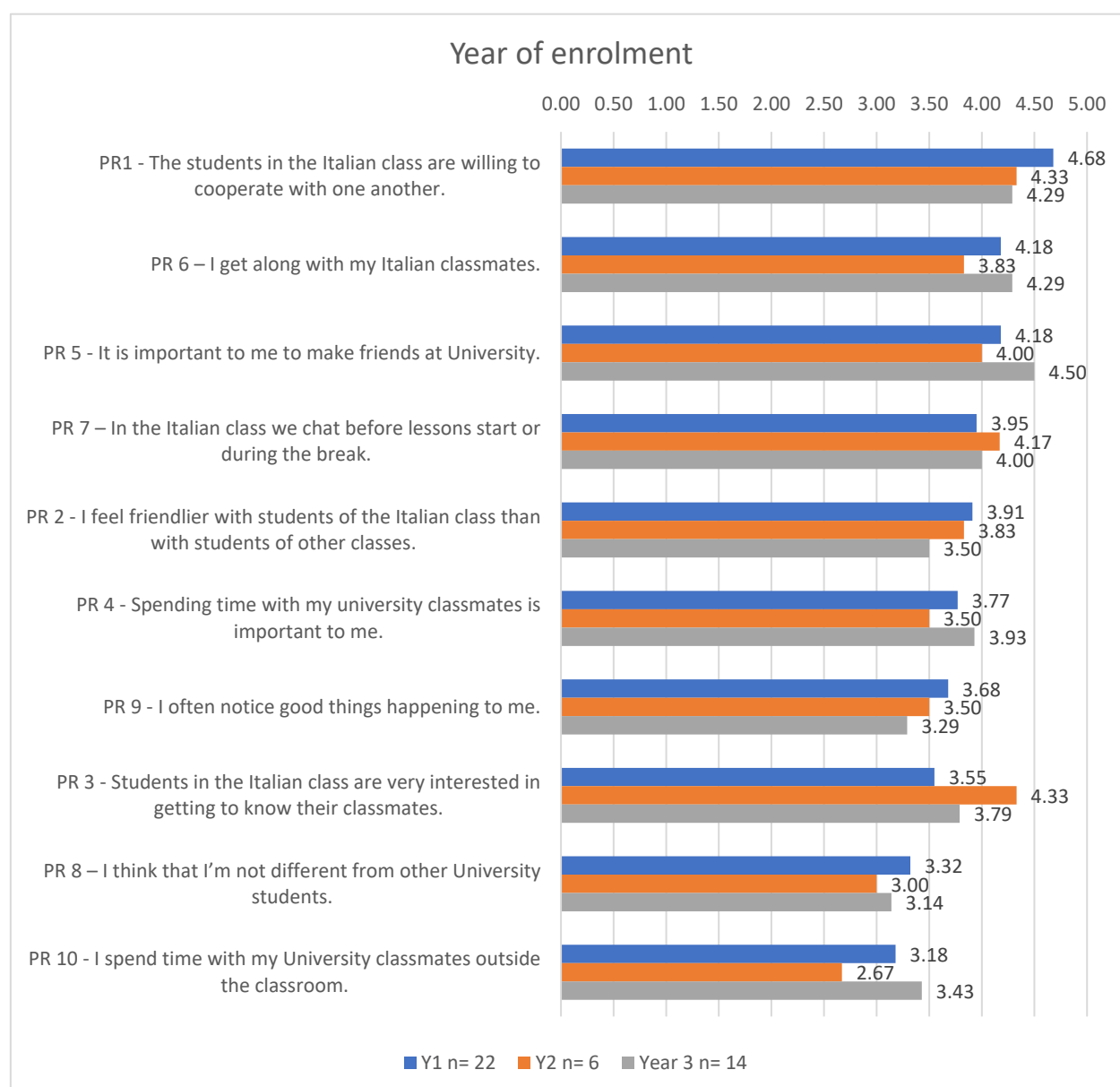
Figure 12: Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships by age.



The youngest group (16-20 years, n = 22) displayed the most favorable responses (overall mean of 3.90), particularly in terms of class socialization. This could possibly be due to their transition from high school, connecting with people in their immediate environment being

important to allow them to feel more comfortable, which aligns with a 2017 Australian study about first-year students (Kahu et al., pp. 58-60). The middle group (21-25 years, n= 8) showed similar levels of agreement (overall mean of 3.81) emphasizing a strong desire for friendship (PR5; PR4; PR10), potentially driven by career-oriented networking, as suggested by Australian studies on the significance of university social networks (Bridgstock et al., 2019). Conversely, the oldest age group (26+ years of age, n = 3), despite being a small sample size, showed the lowest agreement levels (mean=3.61) (see also 2.4.2.1), reflecting unique social dynamics and potential challenges as mature-age students in a predominantly younger university environment, similar to findings from a 2004 Australian university study (Leder & Forgasz).

Figure 13: Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships by university year.

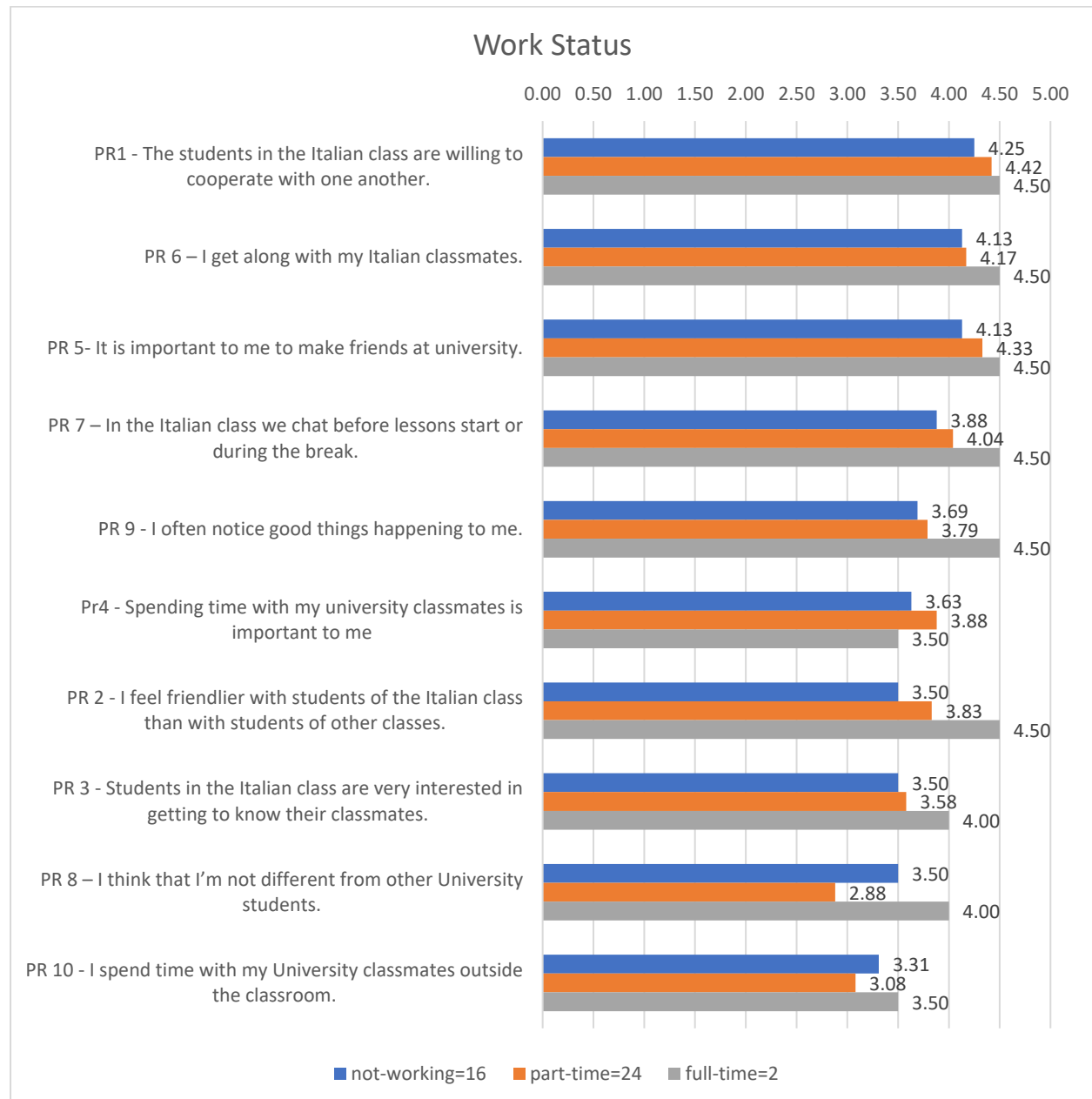


All respondents, no matter which year they were enrolled in, ranked positively the classroom dynamic (PR1), and the desire of making new friends at university (PR5).

First-year students (n=22, overall mean of 4.02) exhibited robust classroom dynamic (PR1=4.68) and classroom friendliness (PR6=4.18), positioning them as the most cooperative and content group. Third-year students (n=14, overall mean of 4.01) connected most with the university students outside of the classroom, highlighting a strong desire for university friendships (PR5 =4.50) other than with their classmates (PR6= 4.29). Second-year students (n

= 6, overall mean of 3.71) displayed a solid social engagement (PR7=4.17), and sociable atmosphere (PR3=4.33).

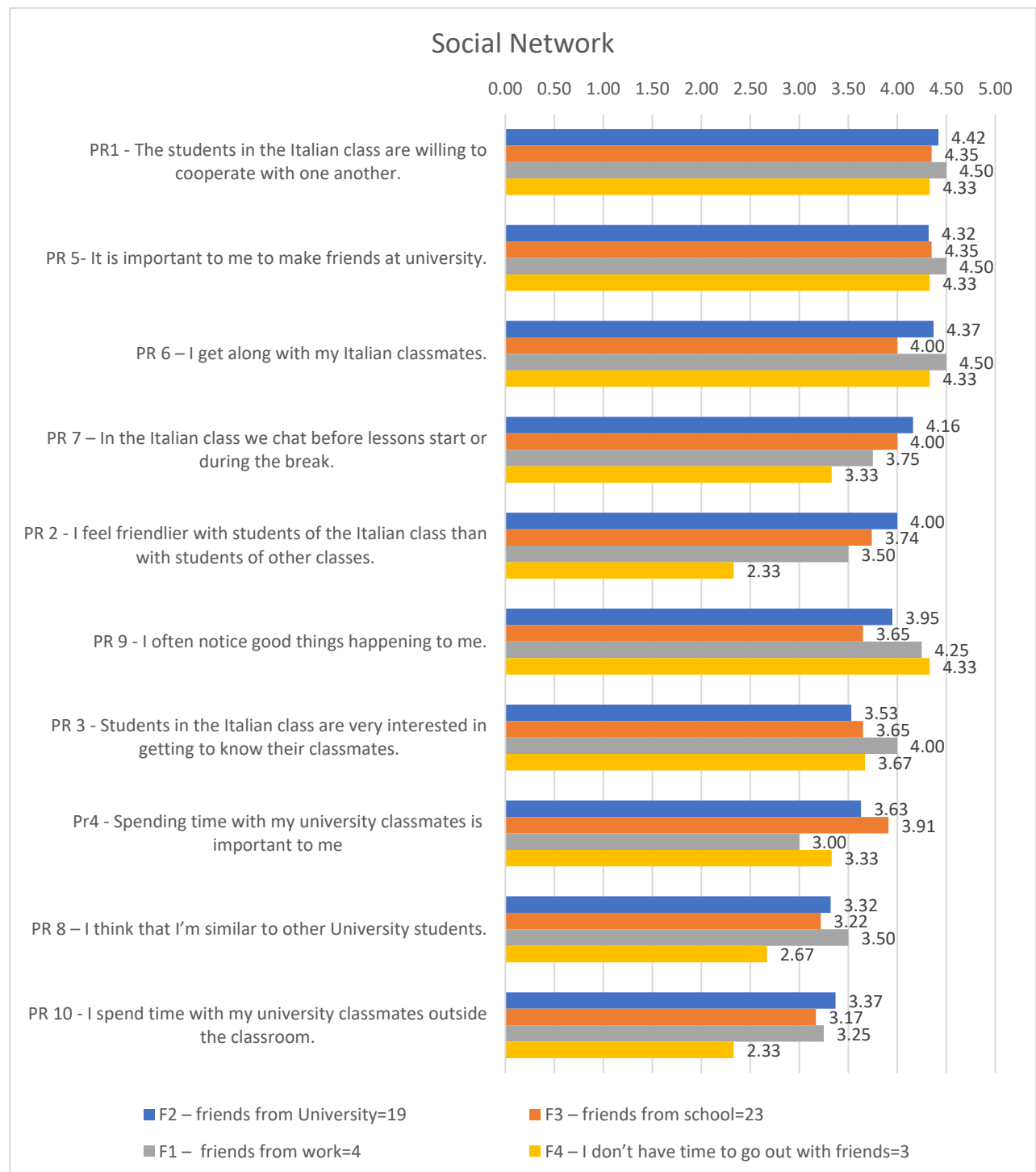
Figure 14: Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships by work status.



Regarding work status, the analysis primarily focuses on part-time working students (n= 24, mean=3.80) and non-working students (n=16, mean=3.83), as the full-time working group was too small for representative analysis. Both these groups shared similar views on classroom dynamics (PR1 = 4.35 and 4.52 respectively), socialization within the Italian class (PR6 = 4.13 and 4.17 respectively) and a desire to make university friends (PR5 = 4.13 and 4.33

respectively). However, they disagreed on the actual time spent with peers (PR10 = 3.08 for part-time workers and 3.31 for non-workers). Conversely, part-time workers prioritized in-class peer-relationships more (PR7 = 4.04 and 3.88 for non-workers), perhaps due to their work commitments and the consequent lack of time for socializing outside class.

Figure 15: Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships by social network.



There was not a great deal of disparity between the four cohorts for social network, although students with friends from university (F2, n=19, mean = 4.00) generally had the most positive responses, closely followed by those with friends from work (F1, n=4, mean = 3.92), and friends from school (F3, n=23, mean = 3.89), leaving those with no time for friends (F4, n=3, mean = 3.54), predictably in last place.

All groups consistently valued classroom cooperation (PR1), perceived a connection with their peers (PR6) and expressed a desire to make university friends (PR5), yet none effectively engaged in outside-class socialization (PR10).

4.2.4.3 Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the data show that at the beginning of the 2020 semester, students had an overall positive perception of peer-relationships, particularly those within the Italian classroom: they were likely and willing to make friends and to feel integrated into the Italian class. In addition, varying perception of the self suggest some cohorts maintained a positive outlook on life but may have perceived themselves differently from other university students due to cultural, family, academic, or individual factors. The demographic variations did not significantly impact the consensus on positive classroom dynamics and in-class socialization. However, female, 21-25 years-old, third-year students and students with friends from university displayed a higher engagement with socialization at university.

The following key trends emerged: a unanimous affirmation of cooperative behavior (PR1), in-class camaraderie (PR6), and pre-lesson social interactions (PR7). However, a persistent discrepancy was noted in the commitment to university socialization outside the classroom (PR10), potentially due to the various demands on students' time such as work. The study by Richardson et al. (2019) demonstrated that, excluding travel, sleep, self-care, and chores, to Australian students remain circa four hours for studying and one and a half hours for socializing. This is backed up by Kane, Chalcraft, and Volpe (2014, p. 199) who concluded that

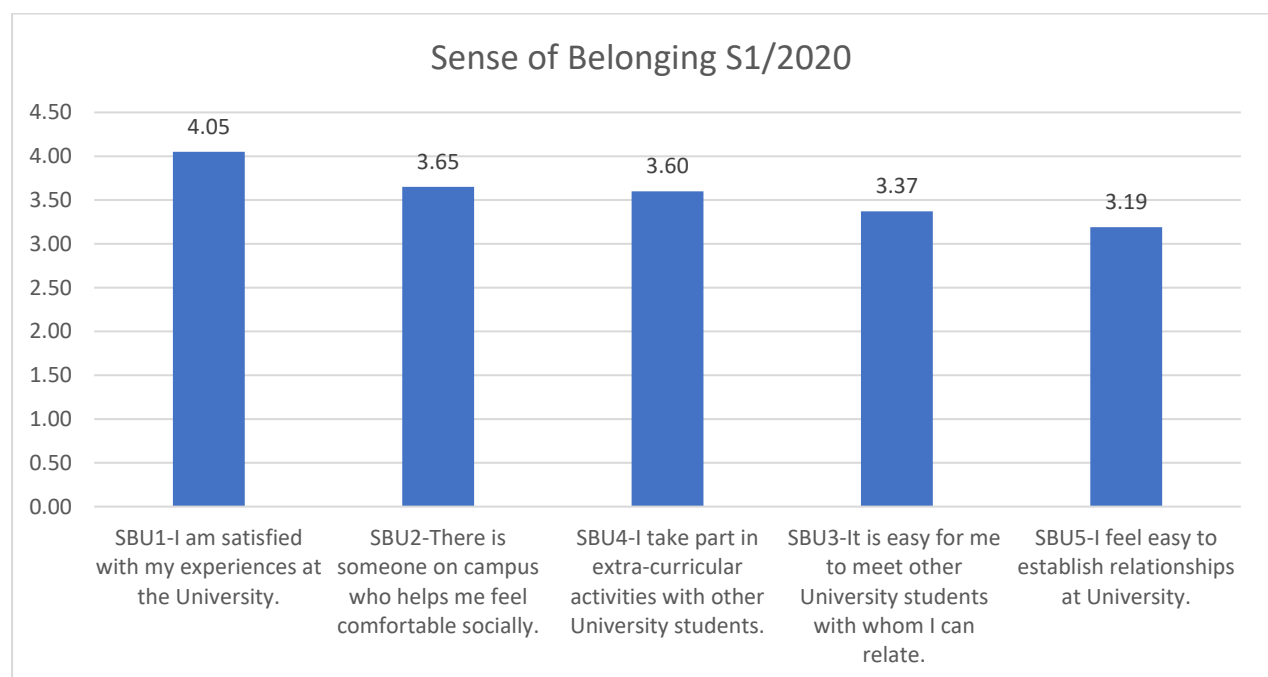
students, overwhelmed with coursework, internships, part-time jobs, and commuting demands, may have limited time for social interactions.

4.2.5 Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging

As discussed previously (section 3.4.1), the survey contained five statements that focused on feelings of satisfaction (SBU1), acceptance and support (SBU2), and the propensity to seek and develop social networks (SBU3; SBU4; SBU5). These are all factors that can enhance motivation and student retention through feeling a part of the university community, as evidenced by a study on language and culture students' attrition and retention at Australian universities (Martín et al., 2016, pp. 134-138) (See also 2.4 and 3.4.1 for further context).

4.2.5.1 Overview of results

Figure 16: Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging to the University context in Survey 1,2020.

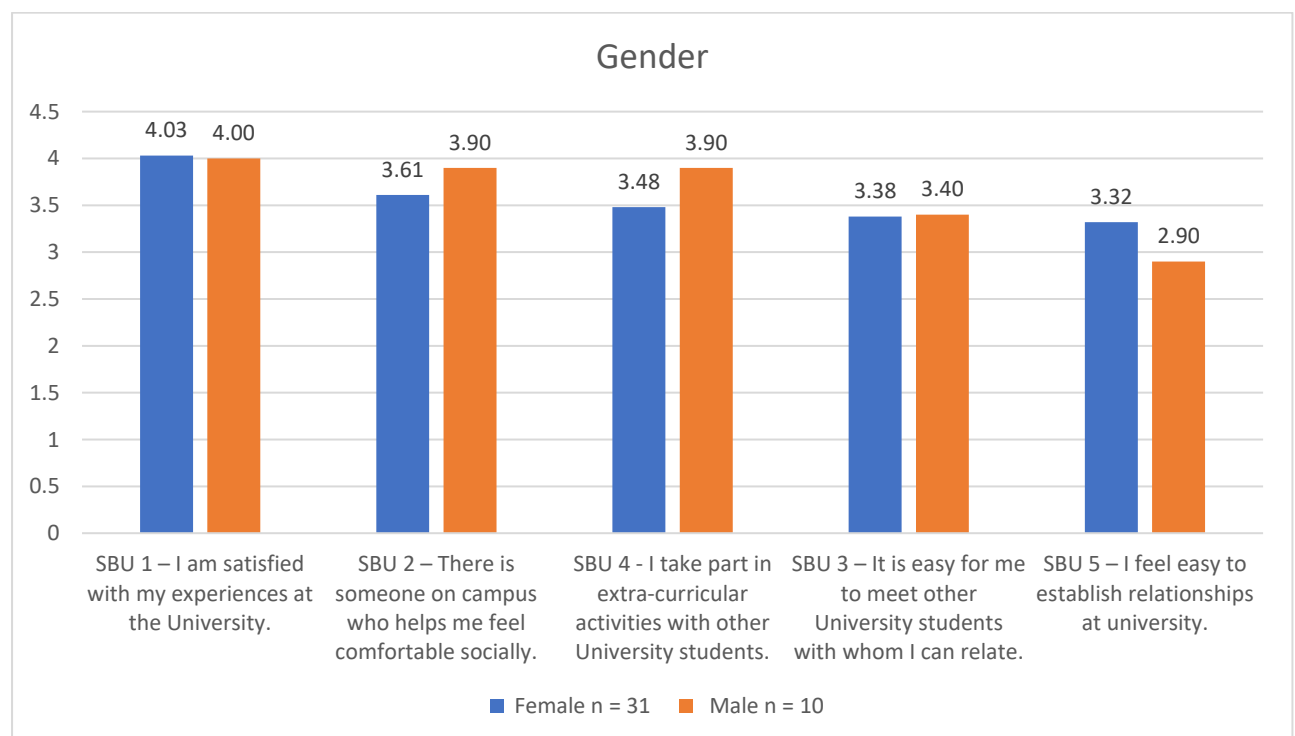


Among the five statements, only the one pertaining to a general sense of satisfaction with the university experience (SBU1) achieved unanimous agreement. This may be attributed to university initiatives, particularly during the pre-semester orientation week. Lower degrees of

agreement with the other items suggest challenges in socializing and establishing meaningful personal connections on campus, indicating a somewhat unsatisfactory SBU. A study across three London universities found that most first-year students develop a sense of belonging by the seventh week of the first semester (Kane et al., 2014, p. 193). Therefore, it is likely that the responses to my survey were symptomatic of the timing of the survey, with insufficient time having elapsed for feelings of connection to develop.

4.2.5.2 Results according to participants' sociodemographic characteristics

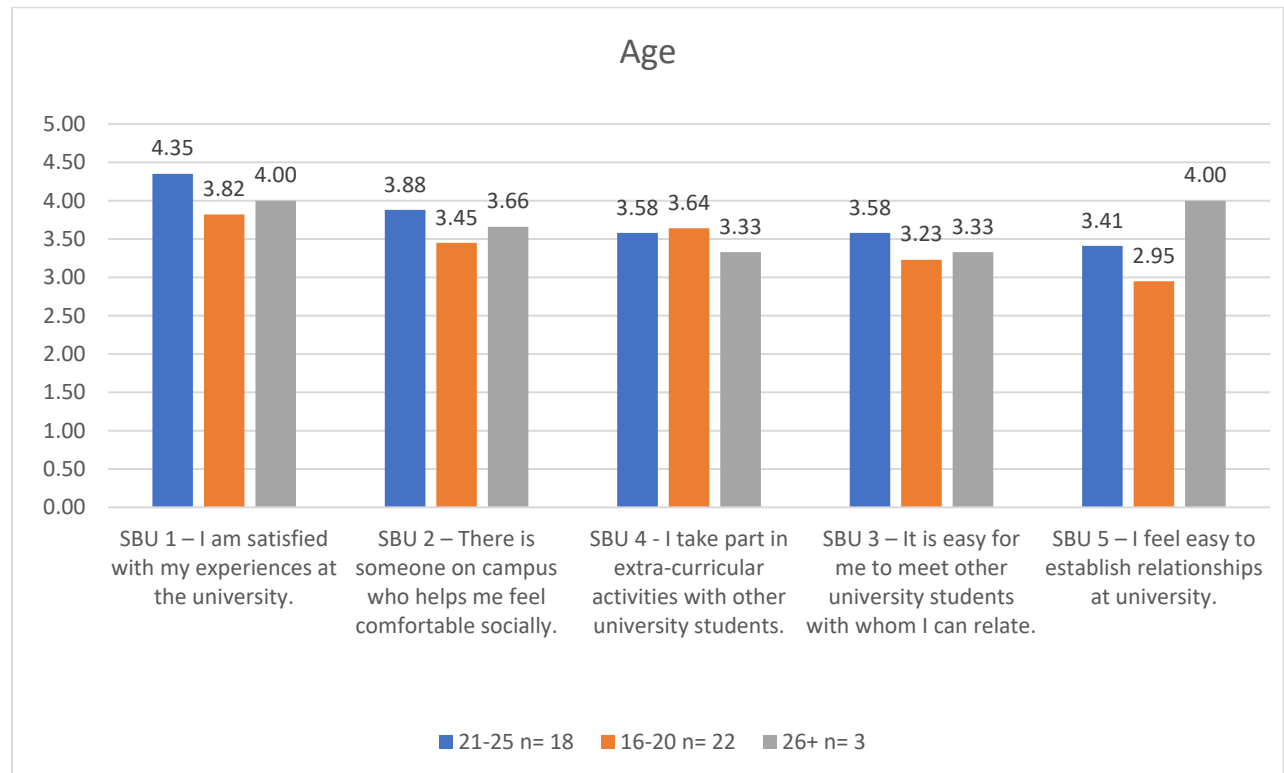
Figure 17: Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging by gender.



Both female (n=31, mean: 3.56) and male students (n=10, mean: 3.62) expressed contentment with their overall university experience (SBU1). Female students reported slightly higher feelings of isolation (SB2), aligning with a broad study showing higher loneliness among US female college students (NCHA, 2022, p. 12). In addition, both genders reported perceptions of lack of support (SBU5) and difficulty finding relatable peers (SBU3), potentially stemming from factors like age and interests (see 4.2.3.2). On the other hand, males were more proactive

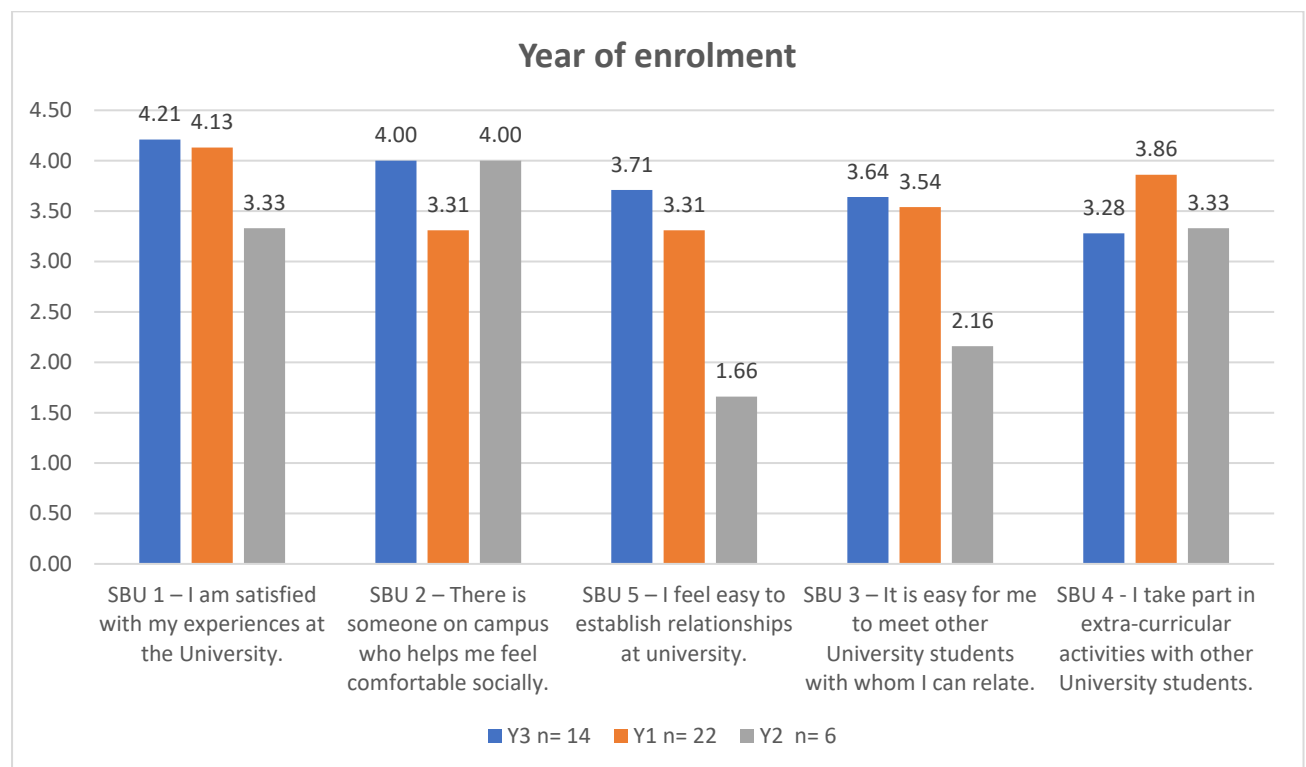
in establishing social networks, contributing to their greater perception of social support. This mirrors national trends of higher male involvement in extracurricular activities (ABS, 2020, pp. 1-39).

Figure 18: Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging by age



Differences in age significantly influenced perceptions, with the 21-25 age group (n=18, mean: 3.76) reporting the highest satisfaction levels (SBU1), likely due to previous university experiences and established social networks. Conversely, the youngest cohort (16-20; n=22, mean: 3.41) faced more significant challenges in social engagement, reflecting broader challenges encountered by first-year students (Cameron & Rideout, 2022). The oldest cohort (26+; n=3, mean: 3.66) while satisfied with their experience (SBU1) and social interactions (SBU5), showed the least participation in extracurricular activities, likely due to different life circumstances (SBU4).

Figure 19: Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging by university year.



There were more significant differences in terms of year of enrolment, with Y3 students (n=14) having the highest overall mean (3.96), followed by Y1 (n=22; overall mean = 3.83), and then Y2 students (n=6, overall mean = 2.90). Y3 students reported the highest satisfaction (SBU1 = 4.21), with good on-campus support (SBU2 = 4.00), indicating an accumulated sense of belonging and support. Y1 students showed the highest level of participation in extracurricular activities (SBU4 = 3.86), potentially aiding in building social support. As demonstrated in a recent Canadian study on first-year students transition to university (Cameron & Rideout, 2022, p. 678), engaging in extracurricular activities is a valuable strategy for building peers' connections and navigating the transition successfully. While Y2 students did have friends on campus (SBU2 = 4.00), they struggled with forming new relationships (SBU5 = 1.66 and SBU3 = 2.16) and avoided extra activities (SBU4 = 3.33), indicating potential adjustment challenges and an overall sense of disconnection (SBU1 = 3.33). As demonstrated in the previously cited study by Maunder (2018, p. 764) students who reported strong bonds with their peers also demonstrated higher levels of attachment to the university.

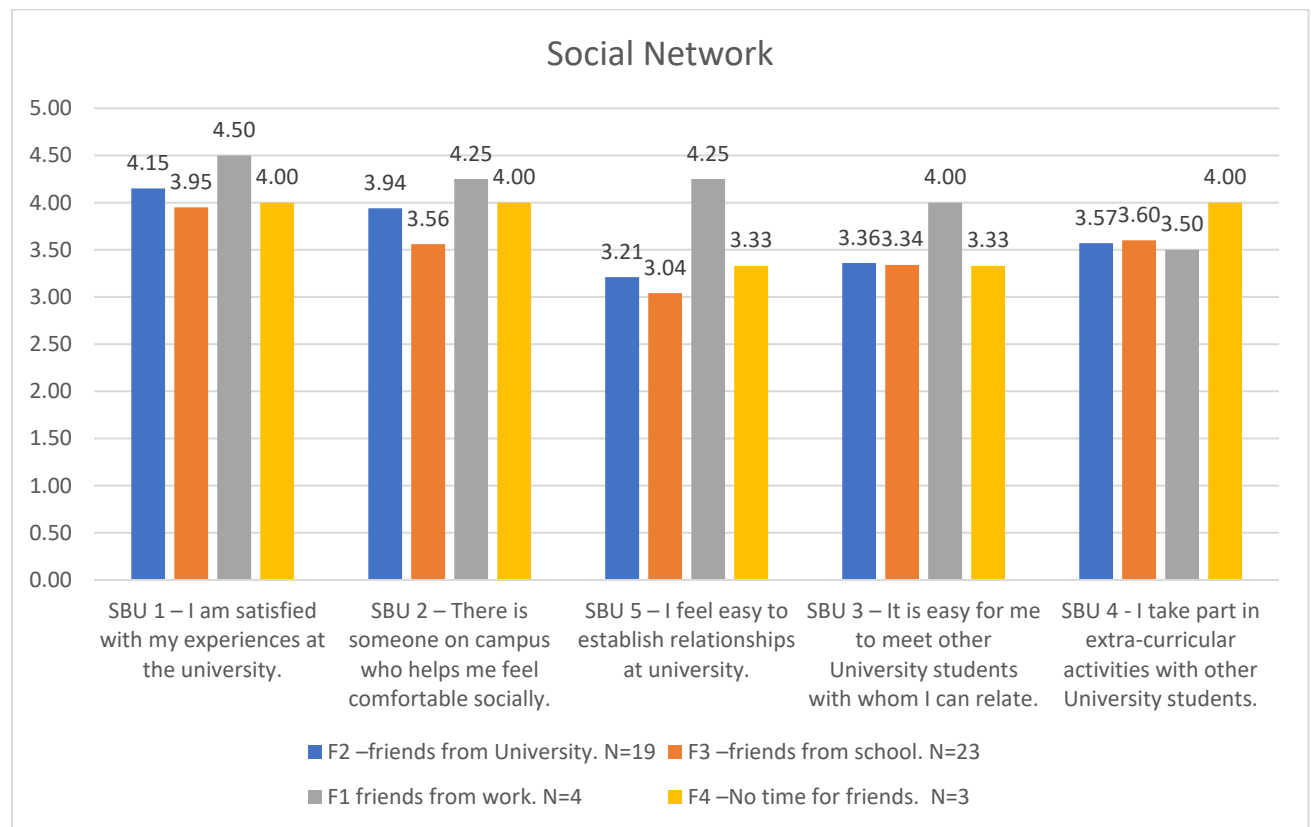
As discussed in 2.4.2, the second year is often a period of adjustment, where initial enthusiasm wanes, but confidence and familiarity have not fully developed.

Figure 20: Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging by work status.



Work status did not appear to overly affect SBU, except in the case of full-time working students ($n=2$), whose limited number preclude their inclusion in this analysis. The part-time working ($n=4$; mean: 3.53) and the non-working students ($n=16$; mean: 3.79) faced similar challenges in social interactions (SBU2; SBU3), though part-time students expressed higher satisfaction (SBU1: part-timer 4.08 vs. non-working 3.88), and non-working students engaged more in extracurricular activities (SBU4: non-working 3.75 vs. part-timer 3.46), likely due to time availability.

Figure 21: Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging by social network.



Social networks played an important part in SBU, with students with friends from work (F1, n=4) reporting the highest overall mean (4.10), followed by those with university friends (F2, n=19, overall mean=3.64), and those with friends from school (F3, n=23, overall mean = 3.49). Students with friends from work reported the highest satisfaction (SBU1 = 4.50), the greatest chance of having support on campus (SBU2=4.25), the greatest ease of establishing relationships on campus (SBU5=4.25) and the greatest capacity to meet relatable students on campus (SBU3= 4.00). The lowest scores were given by those with no time for friends (F4, n=3, overall mean = 3.73). They struggled the most in finding relatable peers (SBU3=3.33), despite participating in extracurricular activities (SBU4=4.00). Laursen (2017) suggests that involvement in university clubs or activities aligned with personal interests offers an effective strategy for friendship formation, saving time by connecting individuals with shared interests.

The results affirm the positive impact of social networks on belonging and motivation. Having social support, especially friends studying the same subjects, fosters collaboration,

understanding, and enhances motivation and retention (Martín et al., 2016, pp. 134-138). However, the results suggest that workplace relationships can also enhance university experiences. Ultimately, peer support positively influences language learning outcomes a finding echoed by D'Orazzi and Hajek (2021, p. 464) who highlight the pivotal role of social networks, including family and friends, in motivating Italian language learners at Australian universities.

4.2.5.3 Concluding remarks

In summary, student sentiments on belonging regarding the university context at the semester's outset are mixed. Despite overall satisfaction with university life, challenges in forming meaningful relationships are apparent, particularly in connecting with peers and in establishing close relationships. Female students reported feeling slightly more isolated despite higher satisfaction levels, whereas male students' participation in extracurricular activities appeared to foster a stronger sense of social support. The 21-25 age group and third-year students exhibited the most positive responses, indicating a solid foundation of familiarity and support. Working status shows limited influence, while friendships within the university significantly boosted feelings of belonging. Research underscores the critical role of social networks in enhancing student wellbeing and satisfaction. Thus, a supportive university environment is essential for fostering a sense of belonging among students.

4.2.6 Concluding Remarks on Survey 1

In conclusion, from the analysis of S1/2020 for perceptions of Classroom Climate, Peer Relationship and Sense of Belonging, after three weeks of attending Italian 1, the following overall trends emerge:

The CC showed the highest levels of positive feedback, indicating students felt comfortable and included in the Italian class. This positive perception likely stems from the welcoming atmosphere created by the teacher and the engaging nature of language learning activities.

PR was also generally positive rated, highlighting the significance of forming new connections within the classroom, although students struggled to extend these relationships beyond the classroom for a range of factors.

SBU had the lowest agreement levels, suggesting challenges in forming connections and a sense of belonging to the broader context early in the semester. The better outcomes for CC and PR compared to SBU can be attributed, amongst other factors, to the small size of the Italian class, which can encourage closer relationships between students and facilitate group activities. Another factor can be the nature of the language course as a common interest to be enjoyed and shared, promoting social bonding, possibly more than as a career-focused unit of study that forces competitiveness between students (See student's interview 4.3.3.2). Furthermore, university students, especially in their early weeks, tend to focus on their immediate academic environment over broader university life. This concentration on course-specific experiences may explain the stronger sense of connection within the Italian class compared to the wider university community.

Sociodemographically, the cohorts all reported feeling included and comfortable in the Italian class. The atmosphere was perceived as positive, with classmates seen as cooperative and approachable, facilitating comfort in speaking publicly. Interestingly, all groups, with the notable exception of male students, underscored the value of forming university friendships. The consensus highlighted the importance of peer interaction, despite actual socialization outside class being rare. Satisfaction with university life was broadly expressed, barring second-year students. Mature-age students, second-year students, and those constrained by time reported the lowest satisfaction in peer-relationships and sense of belonging.

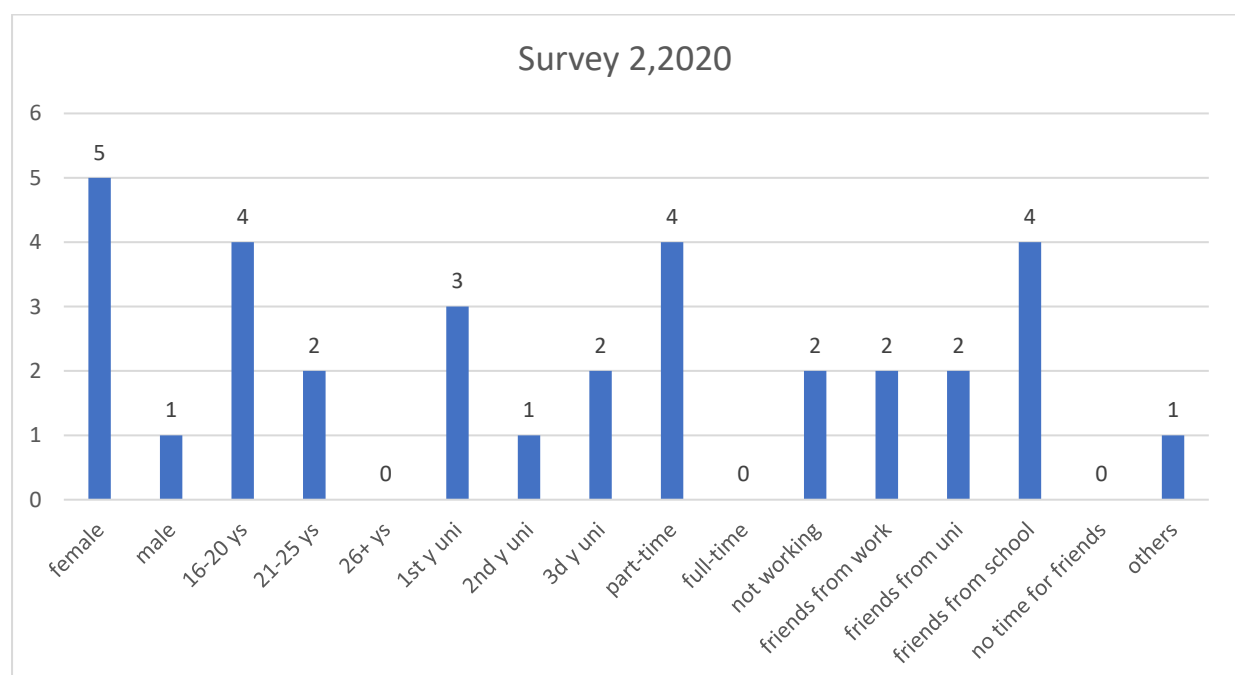
In all, my analysis of this first survey underscores the importance of the immediate social environment in students' perceptions, particularly at the beginning of semester, and the complexities of building relationships within the university context, aligning with previous studies. The upcoming section will delve into data from S2/2020, conducted after eight weeks of lockdown and the introduction of mandatory remote learning.

4.3 Survey 2: What are these perceptions following the emergency remote teaching?

4.3.1 Sociodemographic characteristics of participants, Survey 2, Semester 1

Out of the 52 students who completed the unit of study, only six (11.53%) responded to this survey. A potential reason for this decline in participation could be survey fatigue, which may also have impacted the nature of the responses collected (Possamai et al., 2022), as explained in 3.6 It might also be attributed to student disengagement, a phenomenon highlighted in international research comparing differences in student motivation in online as opposed to traditional face-to-face courses (Keis et al., 2017, p. 6; Stark, 2019, p. 240).

Figure 22: Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants in Survey 2



Despite the limited sample size, the sociodemographic trends emerging in this survey closely mirror those of the earlier survey. Most respondents were female (n=5, 83.3%), predominantly in their first (n=3, 30%) or third (n=2, 20%) year of university, and most had friendships extending from their school days (n=4, 66.7%). In addition, a significant portion (n=4, 66.7%) reported being employed part-time, while only two students (33.3%) indicated they were not working.

Some new trends emerged; specifically, all respondents were under 26 years of age, and there was a noted decrease in the number of students working full-time, ostensibly due to the lockdown, but potentially also due to heightened academic pressures towards the semester's end, as demonstrated by Darolia's (2014) exploration of the adverse effects of work commitments on academic performance (see also 2.4.2). A pronounced divergence was observed in social networking habits, with none of the respondents reporting having time for social outings. However, this shift was likely due not to a lack of time, but lack of opportunity, as elucidated by one student's comment in the survey: "Due to the Coronavirus, most of my interactions are through social media. I haven't met/gone out with friends in a while" (Survey2/2020).

It should be noted that due to the low number of respondents, some cohorts will not be included in the analysis. Gender will be ignored, (as there was only one male respondent), as will be the data from the second year of enrolment Y2 students (Y2, n = 1). Additionally, there were no participants in the oldest range (26+ years of age), from students working full-time, or with no time for friends. These data will be available in Appendix 4.1.2 for reference.

4.3.2 Snapshot of the overall responses

The table below summarizes the responses to the second survey (S2/2020), including the mean and standard deviations (sd.) for each statement, ordered from the highest to the lowest levels of agreement (see 3.4.1).

Table 5: Overall responses for Survey 2 in the first semester of 2020.

S2, N= 6	Mean	Sd
CC3 – There is a good atmosphere in the Italian class.	4.83	0.41
PR1 – The students in the Italian class are willing to cooperate with one another.	4.67	0.52
CC4 – I'm not afraid that somebody in the Italian class will laugh at me when I speak Italian.	4.67	0.52
Llas2 – I enjoyed doing the language learning activities.	4.67	0.52
Llas3 – The activities are not too "touchy-feely" for me.	4.67	0.52
Llas5 – On the whole, I found the activities useful.	4.50	0.55
PR6 – I get along with my Italian classmates.	4.33	0.52
CC1 – I feel included in the Italian class.	4.33	0.52
PR5 – It is important to me to make friends at university.	4.17	0.41
CC2 – I feel comfortable in the Italian class.	4.17	0.41
Llas1 – The activities were useful to make me know other students in the class.	4.17	0.41
PR4 – Spending time with my university classmates is important to me.	4.00	0.00
PR9 – I often notice good things happening to me.	4.00	0.63
CC5 – The Italian class makes me feel more comfortable at the University.	4.00	0.00
PR2 – I feel friendlier with students of the Italian class than with students of other classes.	3.83	1.17
SBU1 – I am satisfied with my experiences at the university.	3.83	0.41
PR3 – Students in the Italian class are very interested in getting to know their classmates.	3.67	0.82
SBU3 – It is easy for me to meet other University students with whom I can relate.	3.67	1.03
DOF – I have made friends in this class.	3.67	1.03
Llas4 – The activities made me feel connected to other students in the class.	3.67	0.52
PR7 – In the Italian class we chat before lessons start or during the break.	3.33	1.03
SBU2 – There is someone on campus who helps me feel comfortable socially.	3.33	1.21
SBU5 – I feel easy to establish relationships at university.	3.17	0.98
PR8 – I think that I'm similar to other University students.	3.00	1.10
PR10 – I spend time with my University classmates outside the classroom.	2.83	0.98
SBU4 – I take part in extra-curricular activities with other university students.	2.83	0.98

The survey responses indicated strong agreement with statements related to a positive Italian classroom environment. Strong agreements were given for a positive atmosphere (CC3=4.83), inclusion (CC1=4.33), comfort (CC2=4.17), and confidence (CC4=4.67) in the Italian class, no doubt helping respondents to feel comfortable at university (CC5=4.00). In addition, peer-relationships were generally perceived well, particularly in terms of cooperation (PR1=4.67), amiability (PR6=4.33), the importance of spending time with classmates (PR4=4.00), and noticing good things happening (PR9=4.00).

Lower agreements were achieved in terms of the remaining PR and all the SBU statements. Students noted restricted social interaction opportunities in the Italian class (PR7=3.33), along with scarce interactions with university peers (PR10=2.83), and a lack of feeling like their peers (PR8=3.00)²³. Students highlighted challenges in forming connections (SBU2=3.33), limited in-person interactions (SBU5=3.17), and minimal involvement in extracurricular activities (SBU4=2.83).

Besides the 20 standard survey questions, a question on the development of friendship (DOF) within their classes during the semester was included (see section 3.4.1). This item is not analyzed; it serves as a comparison with the DOF result from 2021.

In summary, the survey results paint a picture of a supportive and inclusive Italian classroom environment, serving as a vital community network, that fostered resilience even amid the emergency lockdown. While the pandemic's impact was evident outside the classroom, with students reporting difficulties in establishing connections and engaging in in-person interactions, friendships were developed within the Italian 1 classroom. As will be shown, these were facilitated by tutor support and class-based communicative activities, highlighting the importance of creating positive learning environments that extend beyond academic learning into areas of social and emotional support.

The following sections will examine the students' responses to each of the three variables (CC, PR and SBU), providing a more detailed exploration of the dynamics at play.

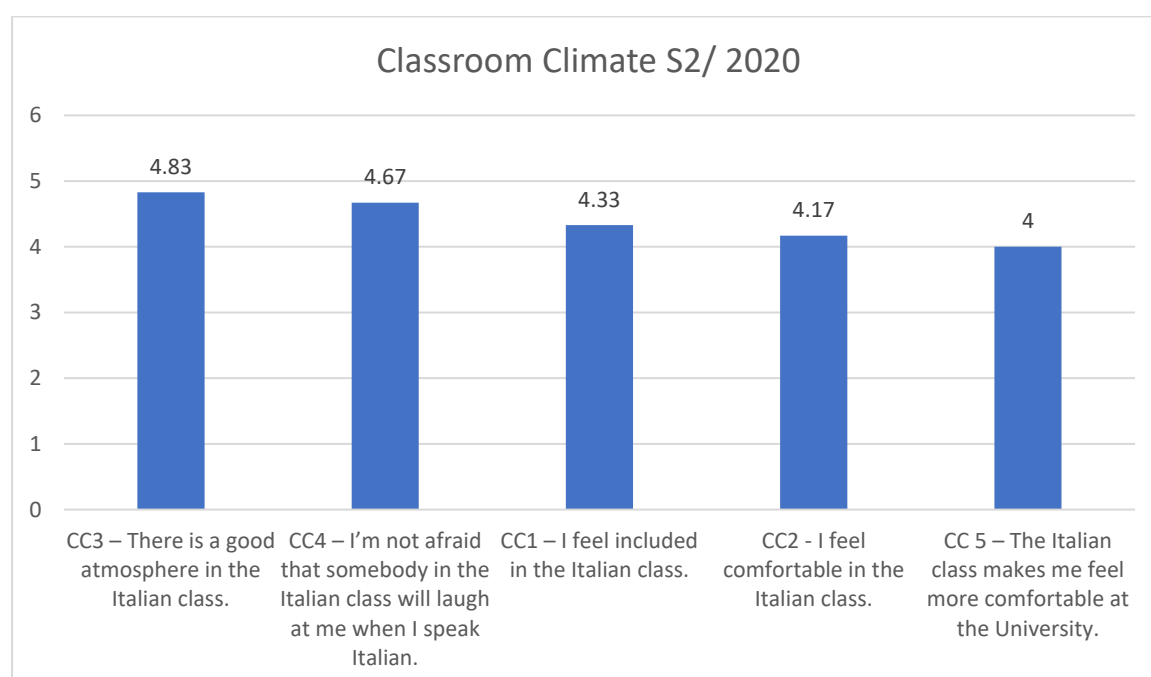
²³ Individuals tend to form positive attitudes towards those they perceive as similar to themselves as an US study on how contact can reduce intergroup prejudice demonstrated (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

4.3.3 Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate

4.3.3.1 Overview of results

The survey results unequivocally demonstrate a strong agreement with the CC statements, despite the course being conducted in a virtual setting. Perceptions concerning the class atmosphere (CC3), inclusiveness (CC1), comfort (CC2), and social dynamics (CC4) were uniformly positive, each receiving a score of 4.00 or above.

Figure 23: Students' perceptions of Classroom Climate in Survey 2/2020.



Qualitative insights from interviews with two students at the semester's end further corroborate the quantitative findings. Student 2 referenced the positive classroom climate, noting the ease of communication and the approachability of peers. In addition, this student felt comfortable asking questions, a sentiment that reflects a supportive and cooperative classroom environment:

They [the other students in the Italian class] were just really friendly, comfortable and relaxed with the other students. [...] Yeah, I thought everyone was like, super nice [...] if I had any questions, they're really easy to talk to and ask questions.

Moreover, Student 1 remarked on the non-competitive nature of the class, which fostered a safe space for speaking in Italian without fear of judgment.:

Everyone was like, super nice. Everyone is kind of in the same boat helping each other kind of thing. I never felt that if I said something people would like, laugh at me what an idiot kind of thing...And I felt that I was not afraid to ask a question like previous years. [...] You found a really comfortable and relaxed (atmosphere) with the other students [...]

This unified environment underscores a collective ethos of learning and growth.

The analysis below will delve into these findings about sociodemographic variables, offering a deeper understanding of how these factors may influence students' perceptions of the CC.

4.3.3.2 Results according to the cohorts' sociodemographic characteristics

Figure 24: Students' perceptions of Classroom Climate by age.

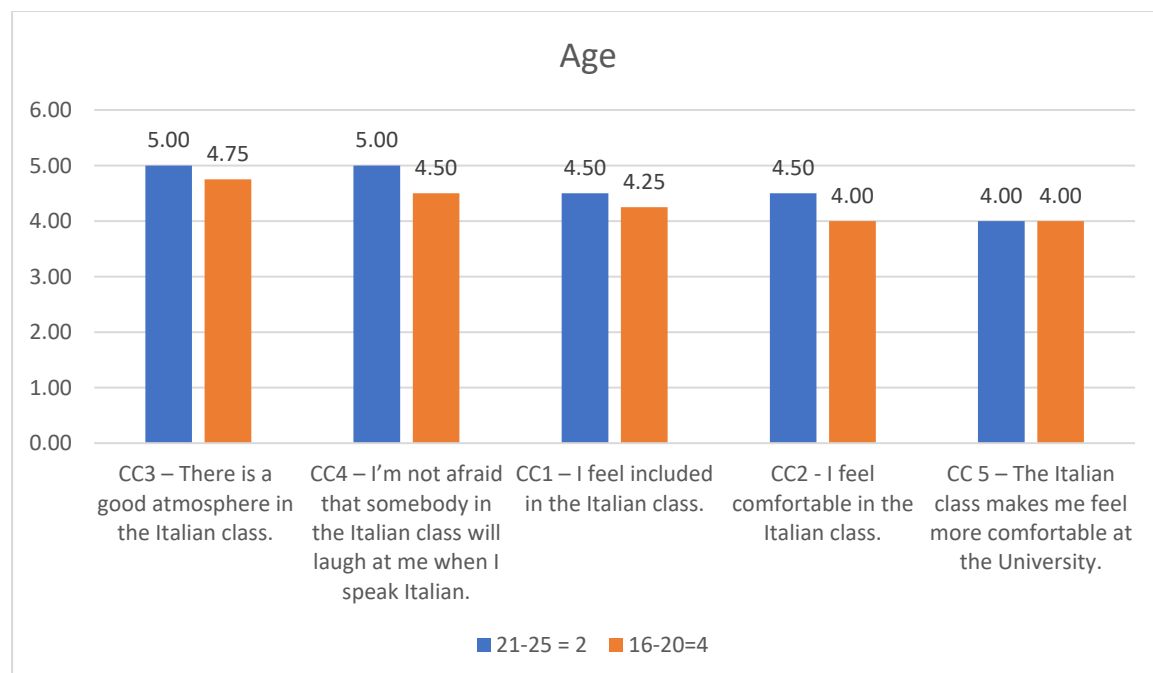
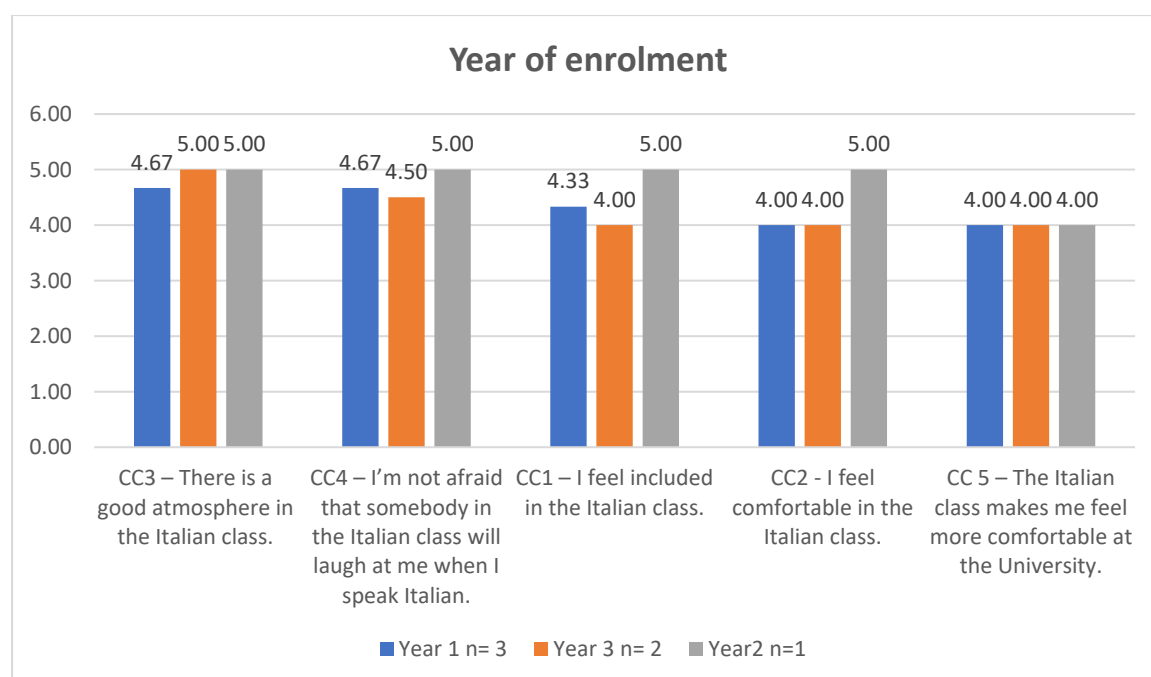


Figure 24 reveals that older students (21 - 25²⁴, n=2, mean=4.60) rated the CC statements more positively than their younger counterparts (16-20 years of age, n=4, mean=4.30). This variation may be attributed to their emotional maturity, or to their appreciation for the flexibility that remote learning offered. Additionally, younger students might have found remote learning less fulfilling, potentially due to having fewer life responsibilities or to increased anxiety, as suggested by relevant studies (Appleby et al., 2022, p. 164).

Figure 25: Students' perceptions of Classroom Climate by university year.



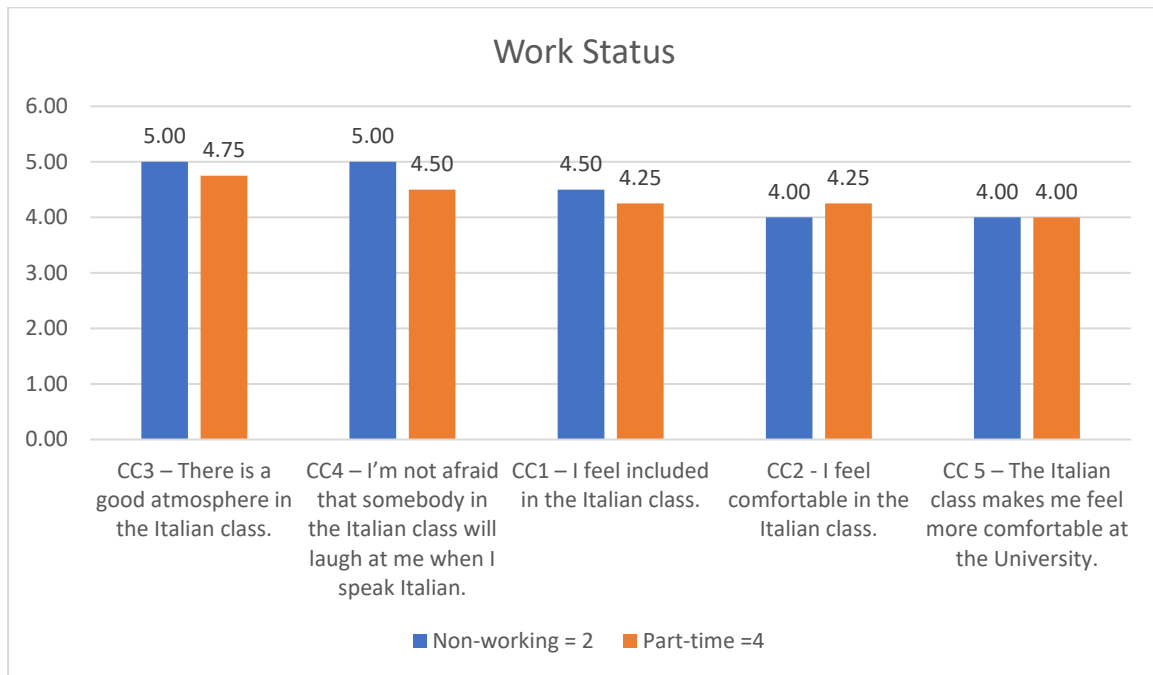
The analysis by university year showed consistent high agreement levels across all cohorts, with Y1 students (n=3, mean=4.33) appearing slightly more positive than their Y3 peers (n=2, mean=4.30).²⁵ This finding underscores the role of a positive learning environment in encouraging students to continue their studies, as illustrated by Student 2 decision to pursue Italian in the subsequent semester over other subjects:

No. I was gonna (sic) pick up a science subject in designing [...] So I was like just do Italian because, like, I want to do it and it's like safe.

²⁴ No responses were received from the oldest cohort.

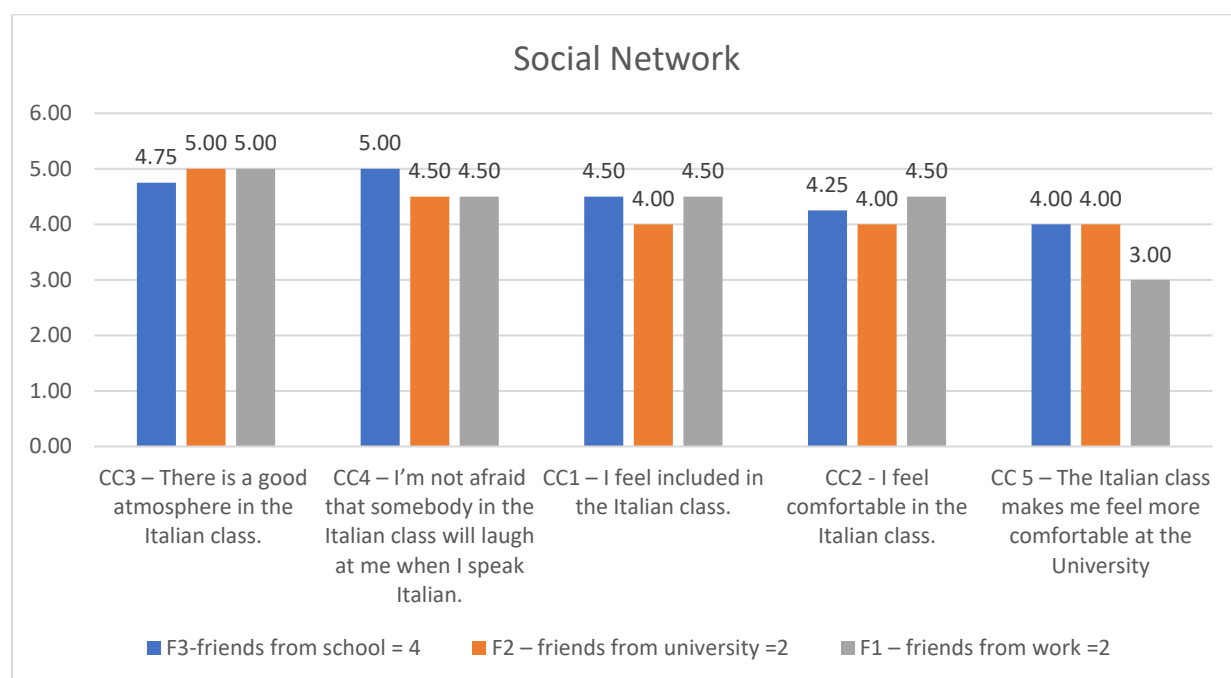
²⁵ The Y2 cohort had just one respondent, and as a result was not considered in this analysis.

Figure 26: Students' perceptions of Classroom Climate by work status.



Work status had minimal impact on perceptions of CC, with both part-time working (n=4, mean= 4.35) and non-working students (n=2, mean=4.50) showing strong agreement levels. Non-working students reported slightly better results for the class atmosphere (CC3), and feelings of security (CC4) and inclusion (CC1), as they probably faced fewer stressors than their employed peers. Interestingly, part-time working students felt slightly more at ease (CC2), possibly due to a boost in confidence from the social interactions their jobs provided during the pandemic. Indeed, in addressing the question if they were involved in any social activity during the online period, Student 1 answered: *No [...] you also pick up more shifts at work.*

Figure 27: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate by social network.



Social networks did influence perceptions of CC, with students with friends from school (F3, $n=4$, overall mean=4.50) reporting the most positive responses, particularly for confidence (CC4) and inclusion (CC1). This confirms previous findings that having pre-existing social connections, whether from school or university, contributes to feeling more comfortable in the classroom environment. Lower outcomes were seen from respondents with friends from work (F1, $n=2$, overall mean=4.30) and those with friends from university (F2, $n=2$, overall mean=4.30).

However, those with friends from work also appreciated the class's positive atmosphere. These findings align with Elling et al.'s (2000) study on employed American students, which emphasized how the role of pre-existing social connections and diverse social circles can help to shape students' experiences.

In summary, the analysis across sociodemographic lines at the end of the 2020 semester revealed that older, non-working students, and those with friends from school, adjusted more positively to the virtual classroom environment, compared to their younger, employed peers,

or those with friends from university or work. These findings underscore the nuanced ways in which factors such as age, employment status, and social networks, can influence students' perceptions of the learning environment, particularly in the context of emergency remote teaching.

4.3.3.3 The role of tutors

It is important to identify here an additional factor affecting students' perceptions - that of the role of tutors. Despite encountering numerous challenges in the online environment, the tutors endeavored to cultivate a positive CC that was conducive to learning. Achieving this goal necessitated the adoption of various strategies, including the provision of clear instructions and the utilization of interactive tools and activities, as noted by tutor Milena:

The situation forced us to modify the teaching approach by taking hi-tech teaching as the main approach in class.

The strategic use of breakout rooms emerged as a crucial tactic for allowing tutors to support social interaction. Their use is supported by a British study (Gallard et al., 2021), which referred to the provision of "we-moments," which allowed for informal conversations, fostering interactions with a wider variety of classmates, to enhance interaction development. They were particularly appreciated by students. For example, Student 2, appreciating the opportunity they provided for engaging with a diverse range of peers, noted:

Zoom forces you to talk with everyone. In face-to-face that doesn't happen [...] only 2 by 2 and usually with the one sitting close to you.

It is possible that the positive dispositions of the tutors and students, fostered by the teamwork established by the tutors, may have influenced the students' perceptions of CC.

4.3.3.4 Concluding remarks on Classroom Climate

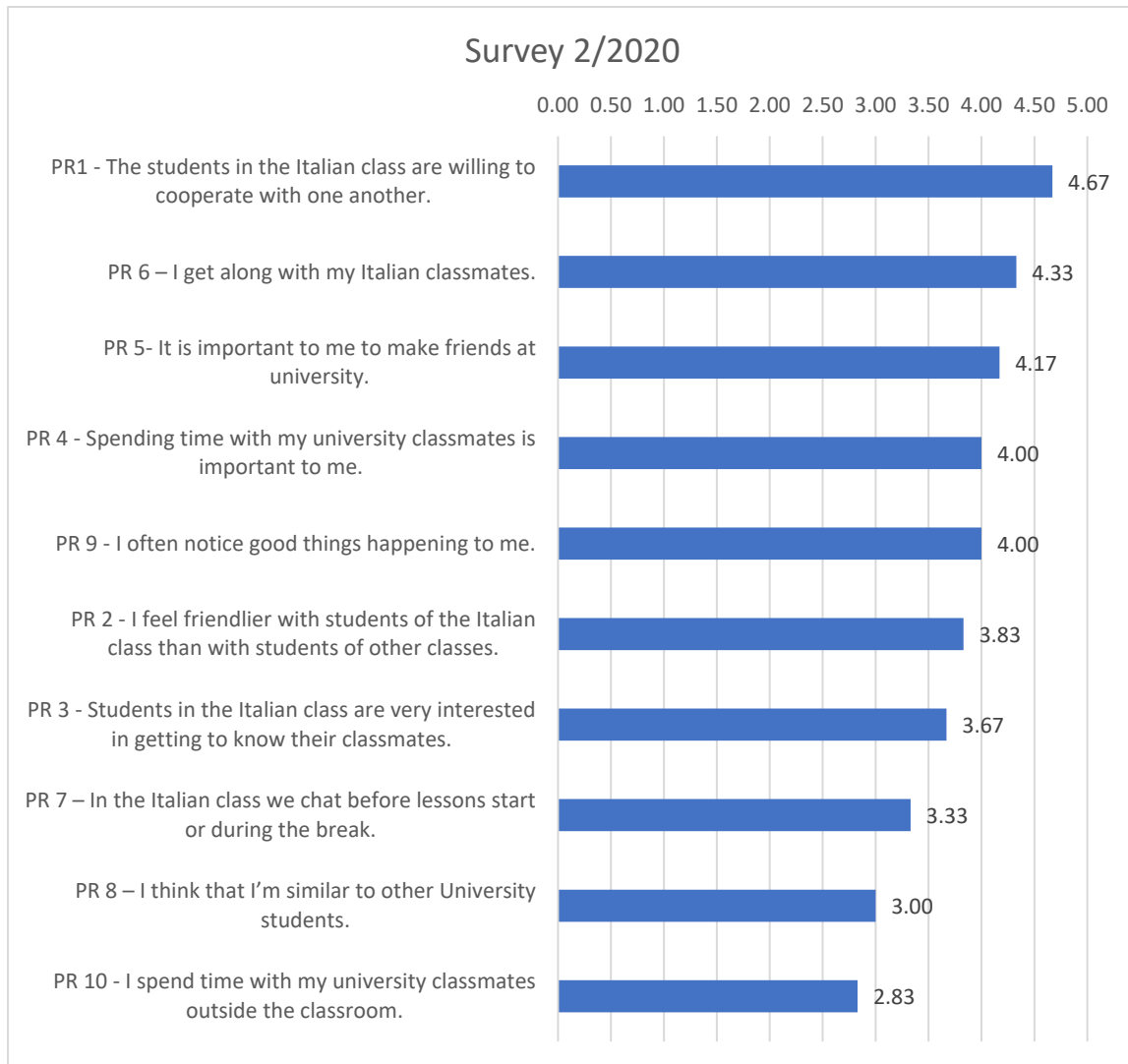
To conclude, the data, corroborated by interviews with students and tutors, reveal a consistently positive consensus regarding CC, even amidst the transition to remote learning. The feedback highlights students' appreciation for the tutors' dedicated efforts to cultivate a welcoming and inclusive online learning atmosphere. The demographic data clearly show unanimous positive feedback across all surveyed items from all student cohorts.

4.3.4 Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships

In this section, I analyze the respondents' perceptions of PR according to the results of Survey 2 and the interviews with both students and their tutors. are listed in Figure 28, in order from highest to lowest levels of agreement, along with their mean results. The analysis makes use of the four categories presented in 3.4.1.2 with a summary table of the findings included at the end of this section.

4.3.4.1 Overall Results in Peer-relationships

Figure 28: Students' perceptions of Peer-relationships in Survey 2/2020.



As with the previous survey, there was a strong agreement with the Classroom Dynamics (CD) statement related to cooperation (PR1=4.67), illustrating a robust sense of productive learning within the class. This observation was validated by a student's interview, in which Student 2 referenced the varying Italian proficiency levels, allowing for mutual teaching and learning opportunities:

I really liked that...there are different levels of Italian. So that was good because it's like, oh, I may be like a bit more competent than she is. So, I can teach her, but this guy could teach me.

This result was possible thanks to the synchronous form of learning that facilitates peer-interactions, as discussed in a German study on the impact of synchronous versus asynchronous online teaching (Fabriz & Stehle, 2021, p. 7).

Within the Socialization in the Classroom (SC) group, there was a mixed level of agreement. Only the statement regarding getting along with their classmates (PR6, mean = 4.33) achieved positive agreement. The higher score for this statement may have been due to the perception of the self inherent in it. The perception of greater friendliness with these classmates compared to other university peers (PR2) scored a mean of only 3.83, and the belief in their Italian 1 peers' interest in developing friendships (PR3) scored an even lower mean of 3.67. However, when interviewed, Student 2 commented: *I thought everyone was like, super nice.*

Likewise, Student 1 remarked: *Compared to other subjects, Italian students were making more of an effort to meet new people and seemed friendlier.*

Student 1 also observed that: *...this attitude might have been a result of the extensive group work in class*, while Student 2 attributed it to a *...less competitive environment* in the Italian 1 classroom.

Given the online environment, it is understandable that students disagreed with the statement related to chatting before and during the class (PR7, mean=3.33)

The two Socialization at University (SU) statements regarding the value of university friendships (PR5, mean =4.17), and the desire for social interaction (PR4, mean=4.00) received positive responses, perhaps amplified by the lockdown's social constraints. Understandably, the statement pertaining to the opportunities to spend time with university classmates received a low score (PR10, mean=2.83).

Of the Perception of the Self (PS) group of statements, PR9 gained a level of agreement (mean=4.00), highlighting participants' optimistic perspective. This is important, as acknowledging beneficial events plays a crucial role in nurturing a positive mindset, thereby

boosting personal wellbeing and resilience, as shown in studies like the one by Gable and Reis (2010) in the US. The connection between peer-relationships and a positive life outlook was further examined in research conducted during the pandemic by Lushyn, Sukhenko, and Davydova (2021). They found that students exhibited growth in personal areas when supported by robust social networks, a clear sense of purpose, or engagement in meaningful activities. This concept is especially pertinent in second language learning, where emotional engagement is significantly impactful, as discussed by Macintyre, Gregersen, and Mercer (2019, pp. 266-267) and D'Orazzi and Hajek (2021). However, students disagreed with the statement regarding feeling a sense of similarity with their peers (PR8, mean = 3.00). This finding is important as it highlights a potential barrier to engagement, which could negatively affect satisfaction with the university experience and potentially lead to disengagement from academic studies, as noted in literature focusing on Australian educational settings²⁶.

Table 6: PR groupings with overarching attributes and mean

Group	Overarching attribute	Statements	Corresponding means	Overall mean
Group 1	Classroom dynamics for effective learning	PR1;	4.66	4.66
Group 2	Socialisation within the classroom	PR2; PR3; PR6; PR7	3.83; 3.66; 4.33; 3.33	3.78
Group 3	Socialisation at the university	PR4; PR5; PR10	4.00; 4.17; 2.83	3.66
Group 4	Personal Development	PR8; PR9	3.00; 4.00	3.50

In conclusion, the findings from the end of the 2020 semester reveal that, despite the challenges posed by the emergency lockdown and the shift to remote teaching, students maintained an overall positive perception of their peer-relationships. Given the restrictions to traditional socializing practices and the students' clear longing for social interaction, the findings

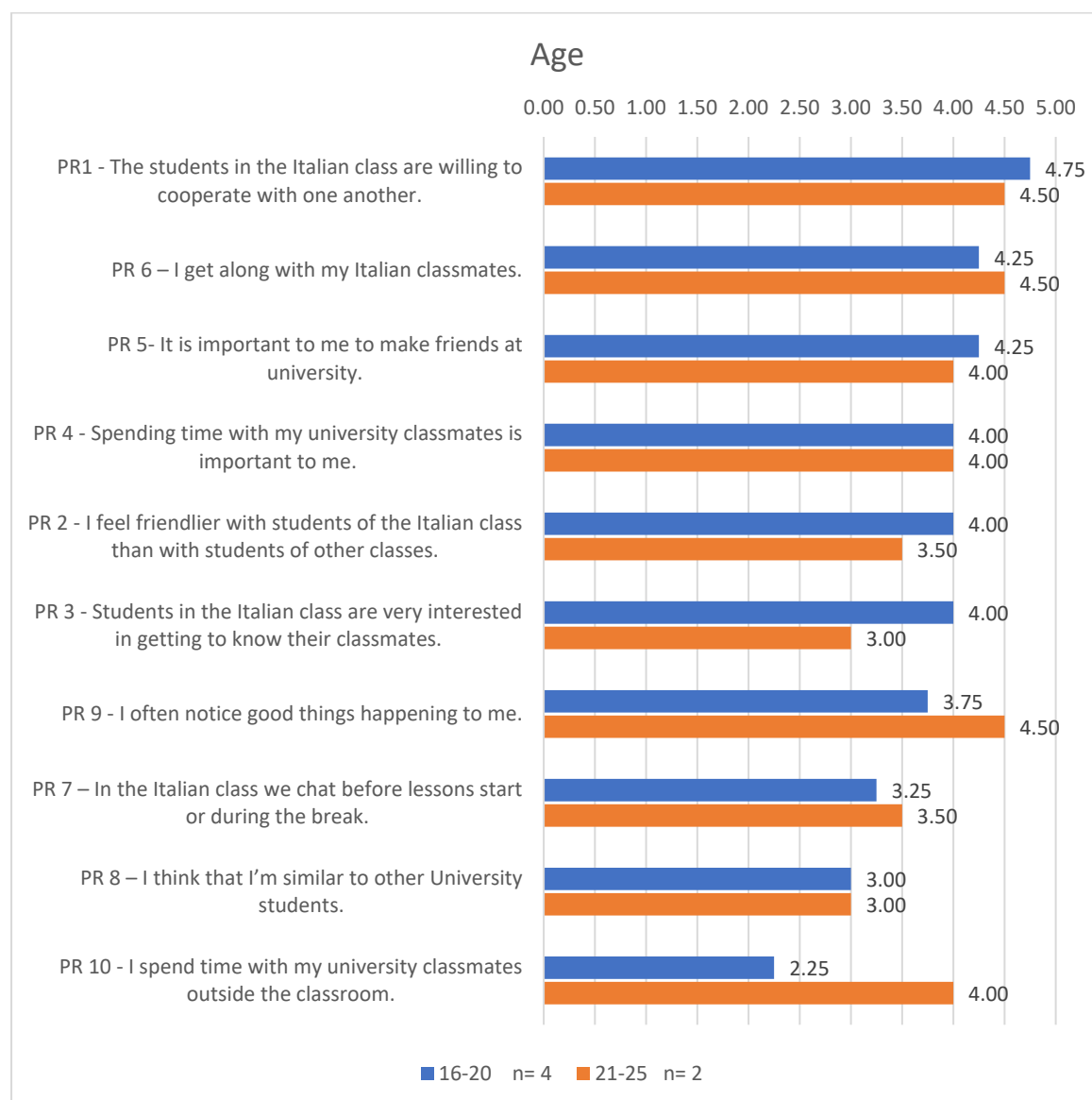
²⁶ <https://educational-innovation.sydney.edu.au/teaching@sydney/assessment-in-first-year-what-the-evidence-tells-us/>
by Ruth Weeks and Adam Bridgeman, 2021

emphasize the significance of collaboration and friendly interactions within the online classroom environment.

The analysis below will delve into these findings in relation to sociodemographic variables, offering a deeper understanding of how these factors may influence students' perceptions of Peer-Relationships.

4.3.4.2 Results according to the cohorts' sociodemographic characteristics

Figure 29: Students' perceptions of Peer-relationships by age.



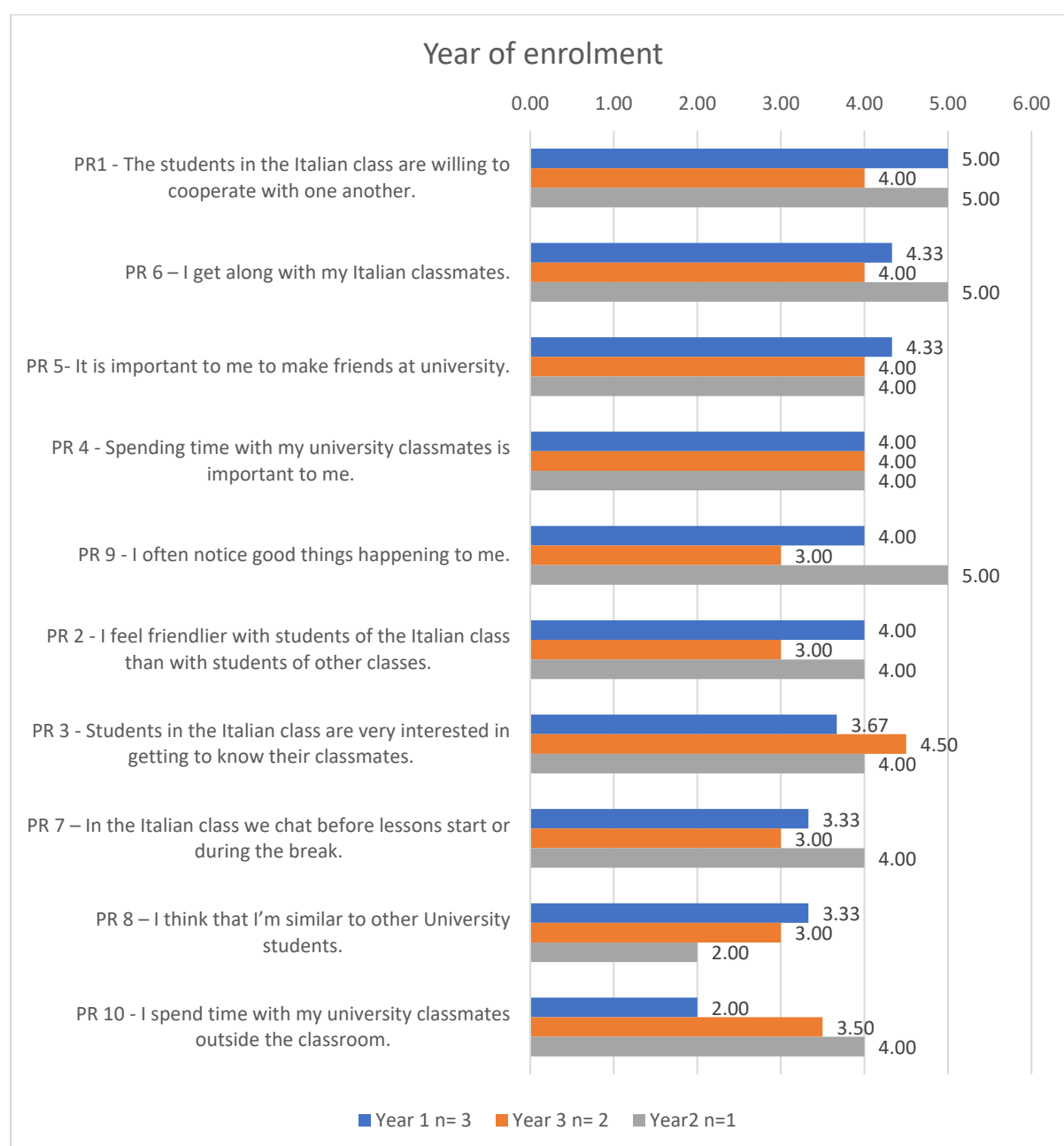
Some differences are noticeable when looking at the sociodemographic of age. The youngest group (16-20 years of age, n=4) expressed a stronger agreement than their older peers (21-25 years of age, n=2), with the statement concerning effective learning (PR1, mean=4.75 vs. 4.50) indicating a pronounced appreciation for collaborative learning. This trend extends to SC statements, with younger students feeling more connected to their Italian 1 classmates (PR2, mean=4.00 vs. 3.50; PR3, mean=4.00 vs. 3.50), although reporting a slightly less positive relationship overall (PR6, mean=4.25 vs. 4.50).

Regarding SU statements, the importance of making friends at university was rated higher by the youngest group (PR5=4.25 vs. 4.00), underlining a vital need for social connections during mandatory remote learning. This is supported by an US study on online connections which notes online learners often feel lonelier than their in-person counterparts (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020). Despite a shared desire to meet their peers (PR4, mean=4.00), younger students experienced fewer real-world interactions (PR10, mean=2.25 vs. 4.00), possibly due to limited pre-pandemic university engagements.

These results are reflected in the PS results, where the oldest participants, however, were more likely to notice positive events in their lives (PR9=4.50 vs. 3.75), despite both cohorts expressing similar perceptions of dissimilarity with peers (PR8=3.00). It is possible that established friendships prior to the pandemic may have influenced their more positive outlook.

In conclusion, younger students exhibited a strong inclination towards social interactions and forming new friendships, likely as a response to the isolating effects of online education. The older cohort's pre-existing social networks seemed to buffer them against these challenges, fostering a more positive perception of their university experience and peer interactions.

Figure 30: Students' perceptions of Peer-relationships by year of enrolment.



Year of enrolment seemed to have some impact on PR. First-year students (Y1, n= 3) achieved an overall mean of 3.90, and third-year students (Y3, n=2), an overall mean 3.60. In terms of CD, Y1 students displayed a more optimistic outlook, and a higher recognition of teamwork effectiveness compared to Y3 students (PR1, mean = 5.00 vs. 4.00). Regarding SC, Y1 students reported better camaraderie (PR6, mean = 4.33 vs. 4.00), greater friendliness in class (PR2, mean = 4.00 vs. 3.00), and more interaction outside class (PR7 = 3.33 vs. 3.00). In contrast, Y3

students perceived a stronger willingness amongst their peers for in-class socialization (PR3, mean = 4.50 vs. 3.67). Regarding SU, Y1 students indicated a stronger desire for making friends (PR5 = 4.33 vs. 4.00) and appeared to spend more time with them (PR10 = 3.50 vs. 2.00). In terms of PS, Y1 students exhibited more optimism (PR9, mean = 4.00 vs. 3.00), and felt more similar to peers, (PR8, mean = 3.33 vs. 3.00).

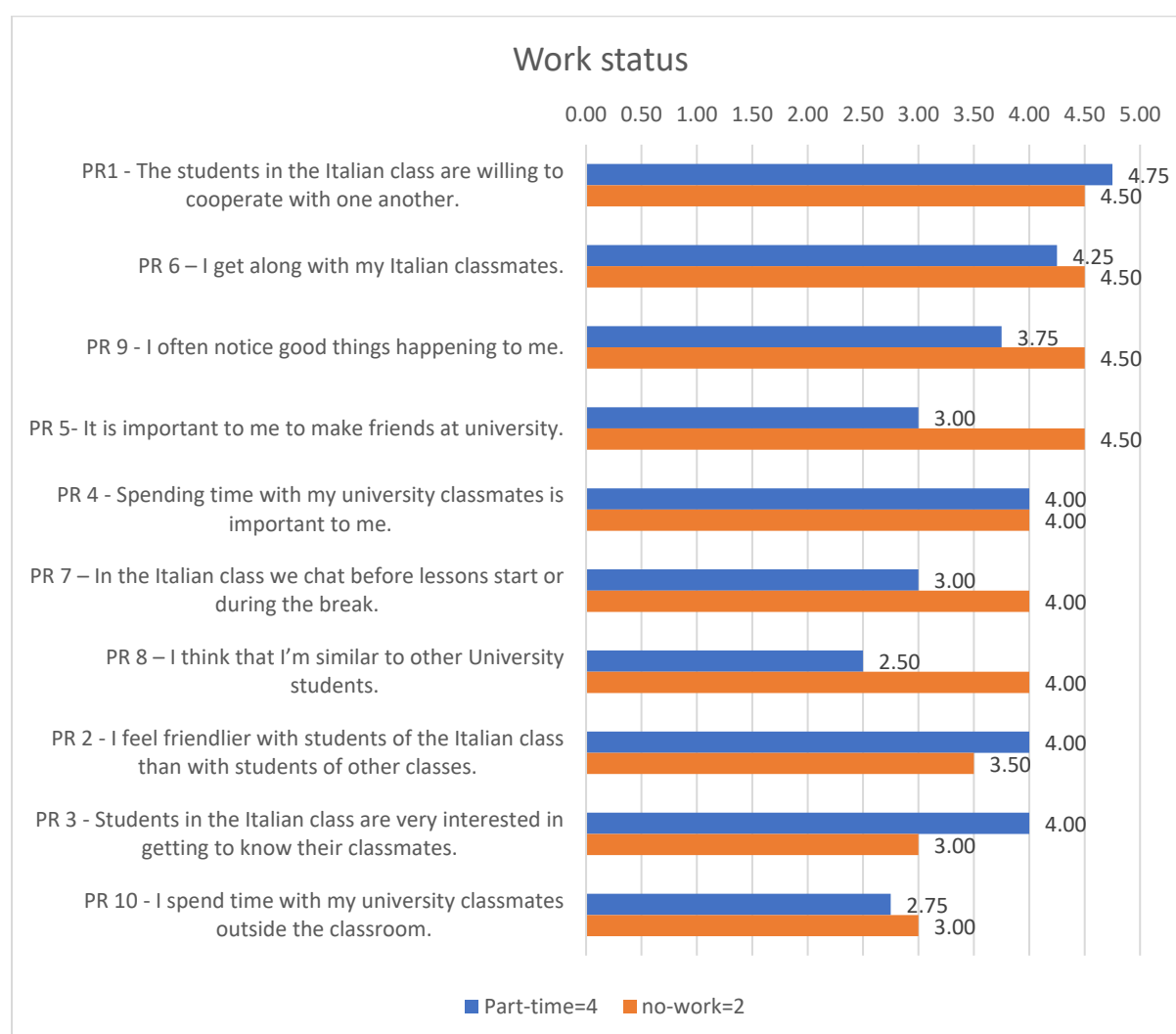
These response patterns indicate that Y1 students, embarking on their university journey, might have struggled more to establish meaningful connections - a theme echoed in the literature (Appleby et al. 2022, p. 11). Y3 students may have already established meaningful connections at university, and thus had less interest in forming new ones, as discussed by Allen et al.(2008, p. 662) and Sharma (2012, pp. 35-36). Interviews confirmed these findings, with Student 1, who was in her fourth year of study, stating that:

[...] people mak[e]ng more of an effort to meet new people, which I think is very first-year mentality, whereas fourth year and third-year people have already established different groups like that,

Similarly, Student 2, who was in her first year of study, stated that:

A lot of them also come from, like, second or third year, so they've already got, like, established, like, friendships and everything.

Figure 31: Students' perceptions of Peer-relationships by work status.



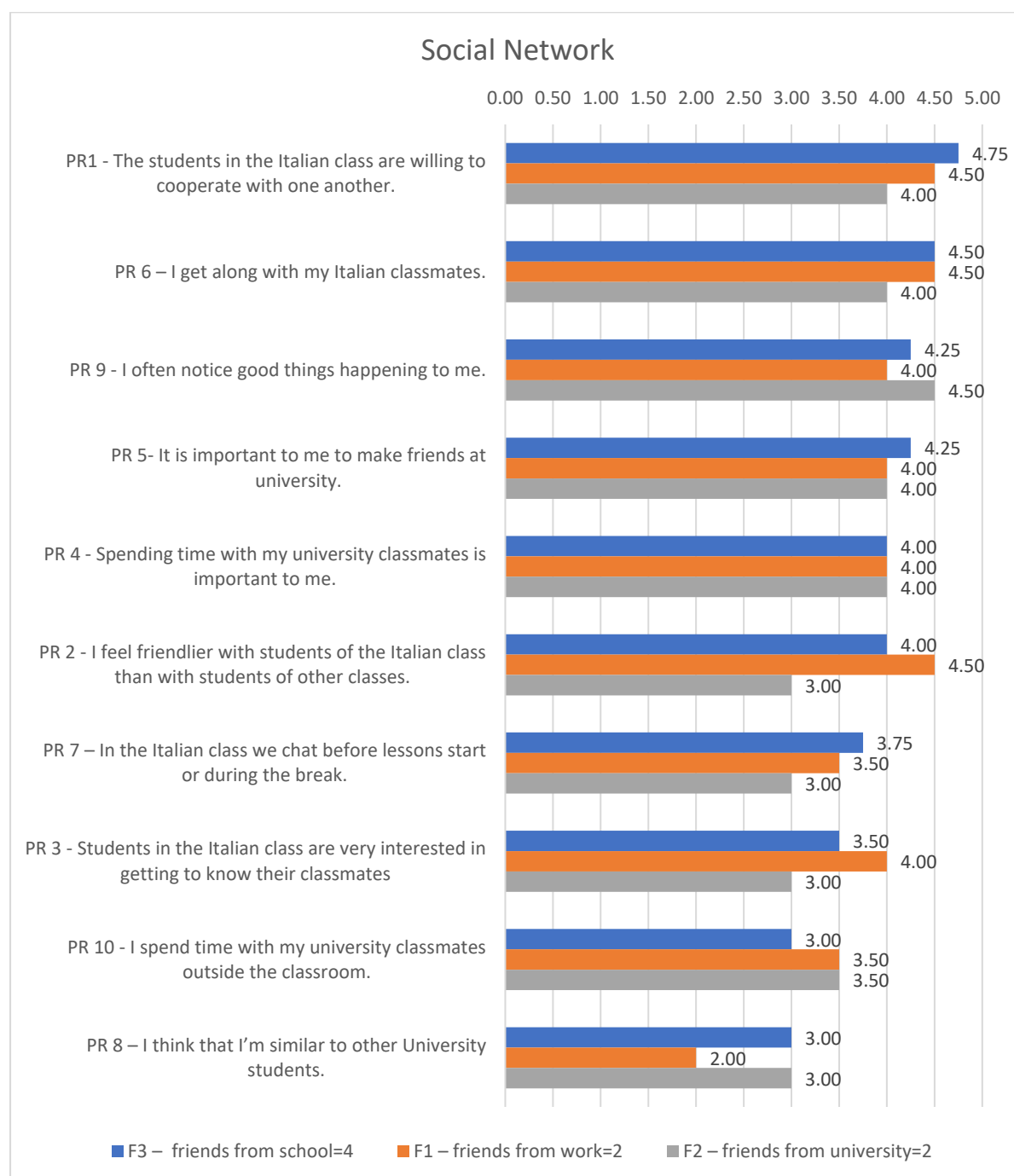
Work status had some impact on PR. Notably, non-working students (n=2) showed higher levels of agreement with most of the statements, with an average score of 4.05, in contrast to their part-time working counterparts (n=4), with an average of 3.70.

In terms of SC, non-working students found it easier to connect with classmates (PR6=4.50 vs. 4.25) and chatted more (PR7=4.00 vs. 3.00). They also showed more agreement with the PS statements, exhibiting greater optimism (PR 9=4.50 vs. 3.75), and a sense of similarity to other students (PR8=4.00 vs 2.50). In terms of the SU statements, they placed a greater significance on the importance of forging friendships at the university (PR5=4.50 vs 3.75) and spent more time with them (PR10=3.00 vs. 2.75).

Conversely, part-time working students scored the CD and SC statements of collaboration (PR1=4.75 vs. 4.50), and social interactions (PR2=4.00 vs. 3.50, PR3=4.00 vs. 3.00) higher than their non-working peers. This inclination may stem from their necessity to efficiently manage their time, forcing them to prioritize structured academic engagements (see 2.4.2 and 4.1.3.2).

These findings suggest that non-working students placed a higher emphasis on Peer-Relationships within the university setting, while their working colleagues looked more to the Italian 1 classroom. This is possibly due to those without jobs having more available time to dedicate to building these connections, while those with less time were further induced by the lockdown restrictions to economize on their efforts to establish connections.

Figure 32: Students' perceptions of Peer-relationships by social network.



Social networks had some impact on PR in this survey.²⁷ Participants with friends from school (F3, n=4) achieved the highest overall mean (3.90), those with friends from work (F1, n=2),

²⁷ As there were no respondents for “F4 – I don’t have time to go out with friends” at the end of the semester, an analysis of this group was not undertaken.

following with an overall mean of 3.85, and those with friends at university (F2, n=2), coming last with an overall mean of 3.60.

The F3 students displayed the highest satisfaction and engagement in the Italian classroom, emphasizing collaboration (PR1=4.75) and socialization (PR6 =4.50), affirming that school friendships positively impact academic and social engagement. F1 students highlighted the friendliness of the classmates (PR2=4.50; PR3=4.00) but felt less similar to peers (PR8=2.00), suggesting that work friendships can enhance classroom friendliness without necessarily fostering a sense of peer similarity. F2 students demonstrated significant personal optimism (PR9= 4.50), but disagreed, at just 3.00, with three SC statements (PR2, PR3, PR7), affirming the previous conclusion that existing university friendships decrease the need for additional social support from classmates, a finding supported by CC analysis (Section 4.2.3.2).

4.3.4.3 Tutors' and students' perceptions of building relationships

During the emergency lockdown, the transition to online learning significantly hindered the ability to forge meaningful connections within educational settings. Tutor Emily highlighted the loss of spontaneous peer interactions: *There was no space for them [the students] to spontaneously connect with their peers.* This shift was evident in the decreased engagement with informal chatting (See Figure 30, PR7=3.33) as noted by tutor Ester:

Students' only chances to interact with each other were in the breakout rooms, which were designed for the completion of activities, so the incidental chatter and bonding which would ordinarily happen in between the activities was absent.

She attributed this to the absence of the physical classroom environment: ... *the most effective space, the most rewarding environment...* - traditionally a catalyst for forming groups, engaging in casual conversations, and building friendships that enrich the learning experience (Clément et al., 1994, pp. 423-425).

Students also acknowledged the difficulty of developing friendships online, with Student 1 stating that:

With one girl in my class, I think if we had been in class, we probably would have become friends because, at the beginning of the semester, we liked to hang out after class a bit. I think had we've been face to face we probably would have become friends, but it's kind of awkward when you have only spoken to someone in person like six times and then you start messaging them online.

Student 2 added:

I feel because you only had three weeks of friendship, so not really that meaningful at this point because it's just you didn't spend time before you shift it online

These sentiments echo a study in Canada, which identified key elements missing from remote learning, including community, motivation, routine, and the campus experience, leading to lower motivation and higher distractions (Ong, 2020). As discussed (see section 2.4.1), the physical environment provides opportunities for greater social connection and a sense of belonging that can enhance the learning experience, as explained by Snow and Scherman (2021).

Despite the challenges posed by the online learning environment, the tutors worked diligently to maintain positive peer-relationships and facilitate meaningful interactions among students. However, when interviewed they spoke of the difficulty of establishing fruitful interactions in class. One such difficulty was that of interpreting body language online, as highlighted (Paradisi et al., 2021, p. 2). The loss of these communicative cues made monitoring and facilitating group activities more difficult. Tutor Ester explained that:

It was no longer possible to walk the room as the students conducted group activities. Therefore, we were no longer able to simultaneously control all groups (i.e.: via gaze or vocal instructions) and ensure they were all engaging with the activities.

In addition, she stated that she was hampered by:

...not being able to correct individual iterations while walking, thus being able to have a clear understanding of which students were struggling with the activity and thus needed more targeted help.

In summary, while online education offers convenience, it lacks the spontaneous, enriching social interactions that physical classrooms facilitate (see section 2.5). This fact can impact students' experience in many ways and requires more effort on the part of students and tutors alike to augment this social aspect of the learning experience.

4.3.4.4 Concluding Remarks

The findings discussed in this section highlight that the transition to online learning during the 2020 semester did not significantly diminish the positive peer-relationships among students in the Italian class. Despite the challenges, students reported a strong sense of unity, as evidenced by their agreement with the statements regarding collaboration (PR1) and camaraderie (PR6). The pandemic, while imposing physical separation, seemed to amplify students' appreciation for positive interactions, indicating that adversity may have heightened their sense of community.

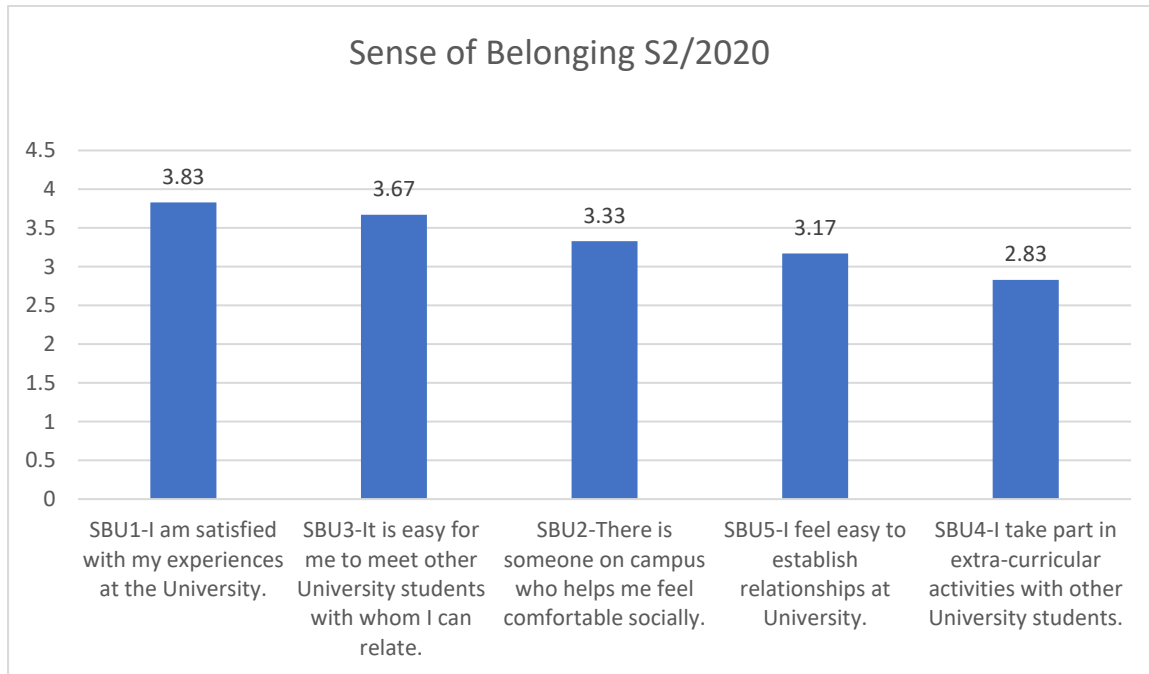
Several trends emerged in the examination of the sociodemographic data. First-year students, non-working students, and those with friends from school generally expressed more positive sentiments than their counterparts. Additionally, younger students exhibited a greater emphasis on and prioritization of social connections

In conclusion, while physical classroom dynamics are preferable, a sense of community and connection can still flourish in the context of online learning.

4.3.5 Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging

4.3.5.1 Overview of results

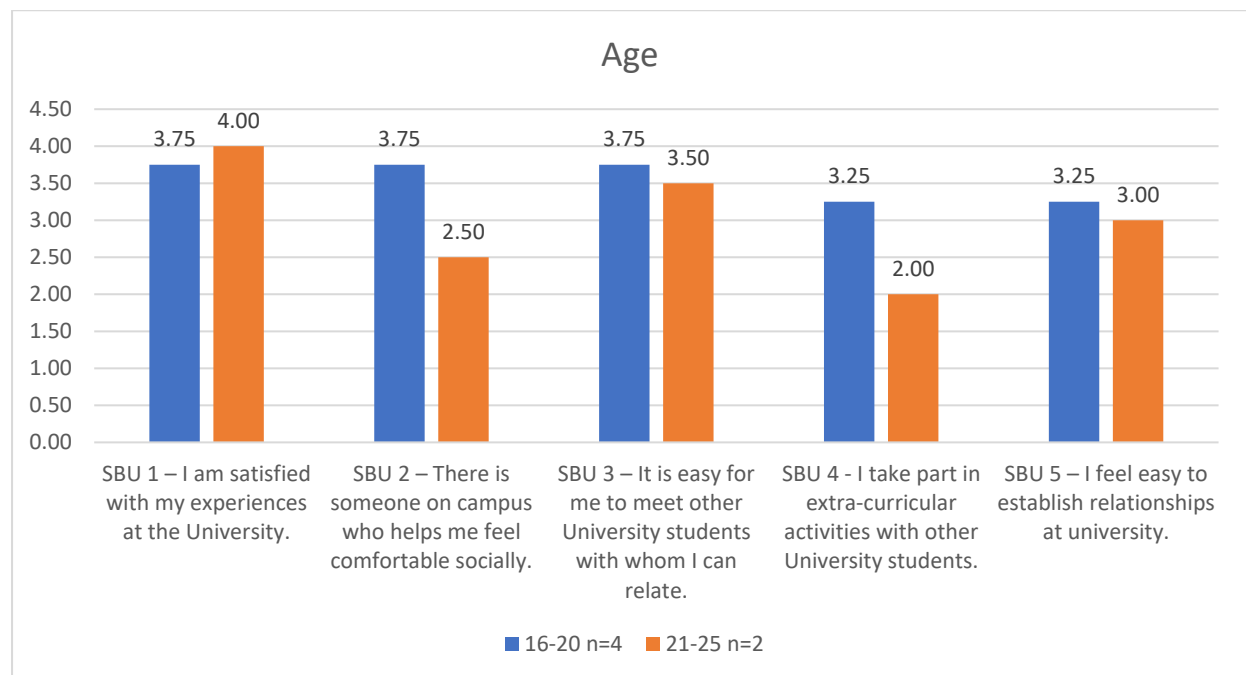
Figure 33: Students' perceptions of Sense of belonging Survey 2/2020.



Unlike CC and PR, at the semester's end, students' SBU declined notably, with no statement reaching the agreement level of 4.00. The highest mean recorded was for statement SBU1 at 3.83, suggesting students were ambivalent about their university experience. Specifically, SBU2 and SBU5, regarding friendships on campus, scored 3.33 and 3.17 respectively, indicating a level of disagreement.

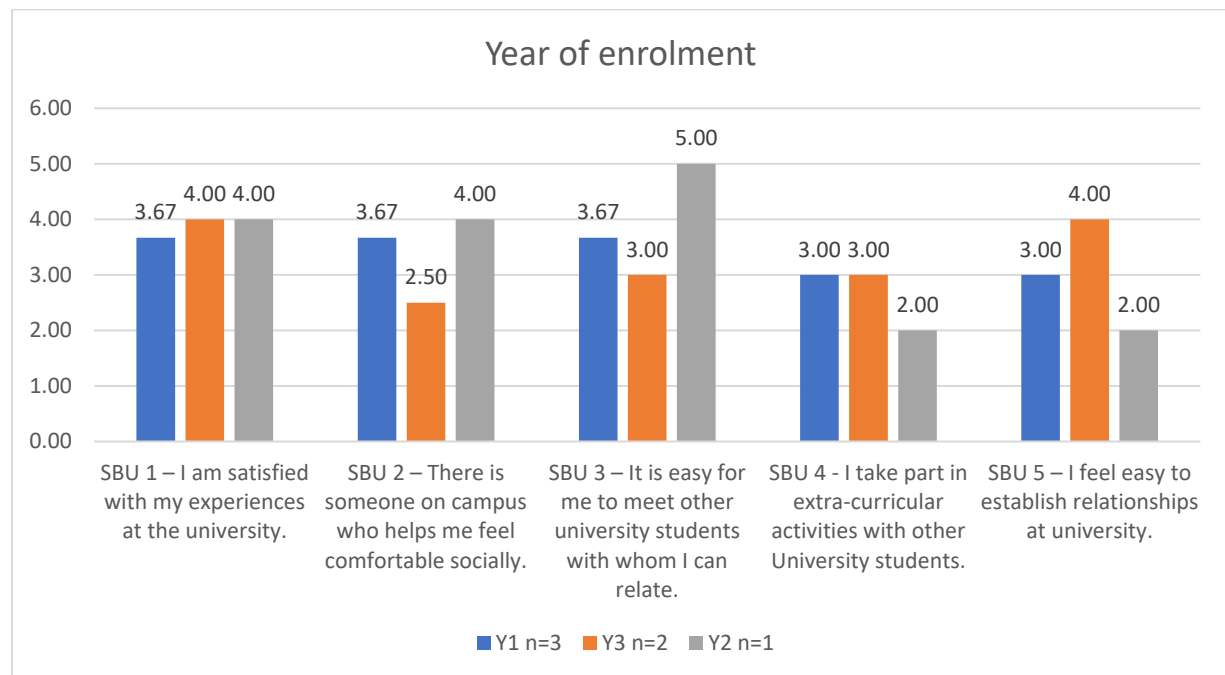
4.3.5.2 Results according to the cohorts' sociodemographic characteristics

Figure 34: Students' perceptions of Sense of Belonging by age.



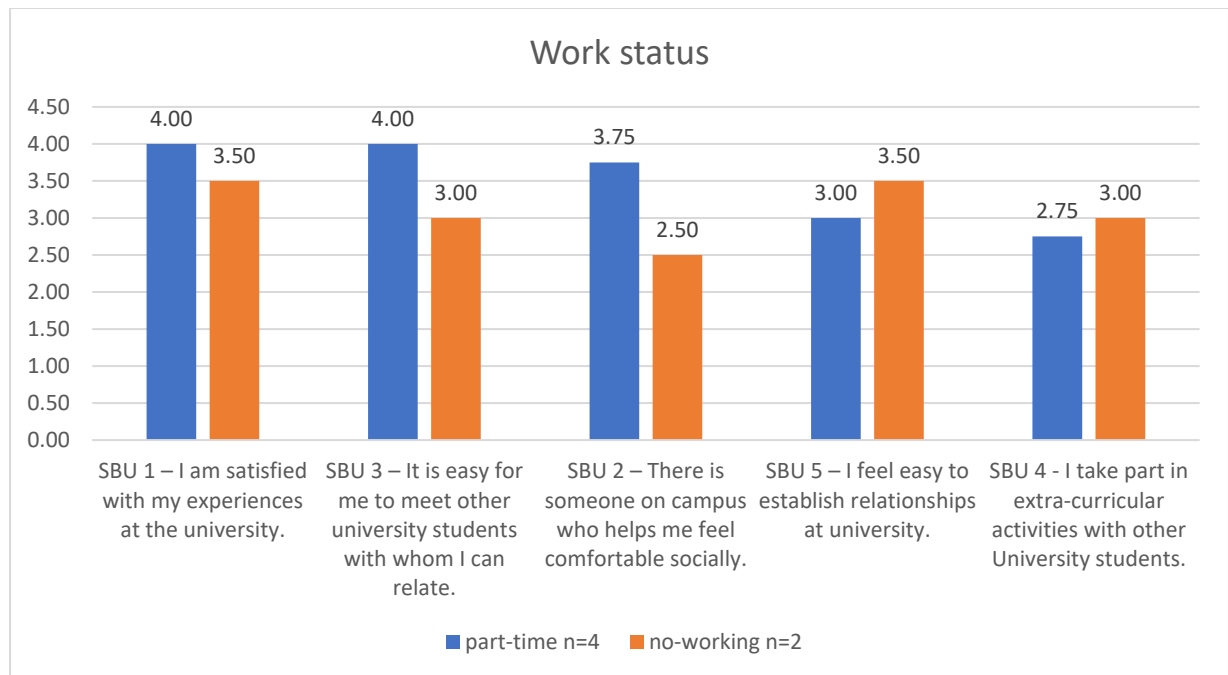
Age impacted the results for SBU, with younger students (16-20 years of age, n=4) showing more favorable responses (overall mean=3.55), compared to their older counterparts (21-25 years of age, n=2, overall mean=3.00). The younger cohort felt more socially supported (SBU2, mean=3.75 vs 2.50), and reported greater ease in establishing peer connections (SBU3, mean=3.75 vs 3.50), despite slightly lower overall university satisfaction (SBU1, mean=3.75 vs 4.00). They also had slightly better responses, albeit still at the level of disagreement, for forming relationships (SBU5, mean=3.25 vs. 3.00), and in participating in extracurricular activities (SBU4, mean=3.25 vs. 2.00), these poor responses are likely due to prolonged social distancing.

Figure 35: Students' perceptions of Sense of Belonging by year of enrolment.



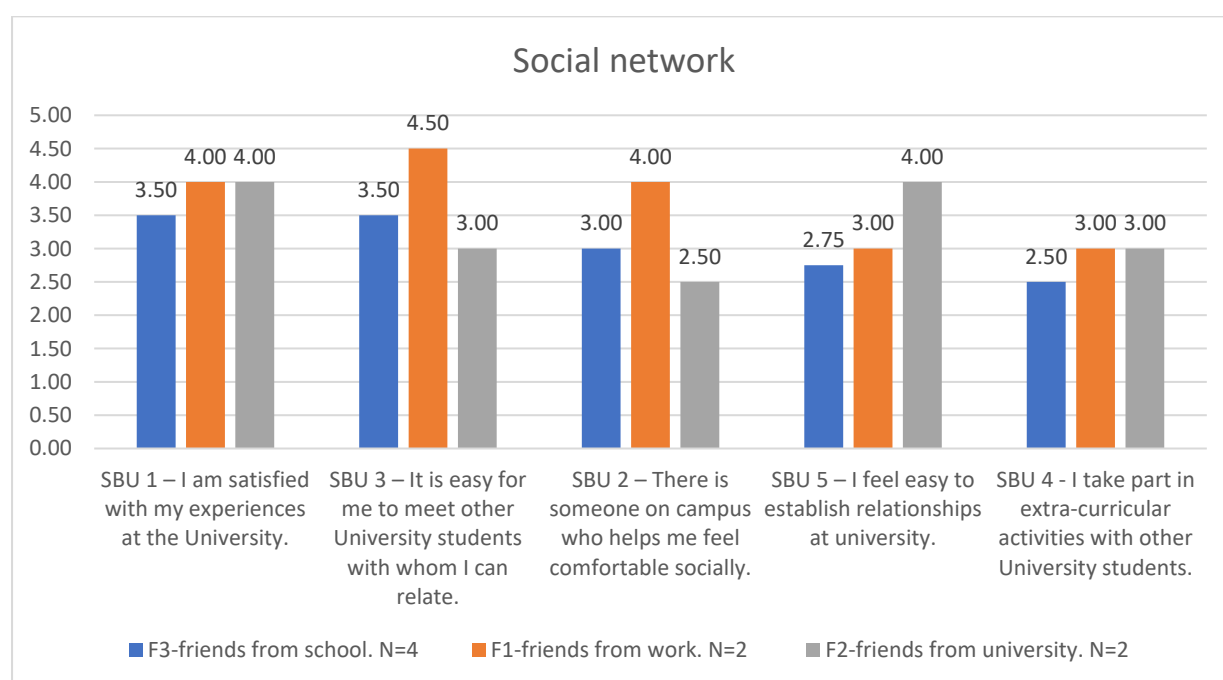
Comparing the two cohorts for year of enrolment by their overall means shows that first-year students (Y1, n=3, mean= 3.40) showed more positive responses than their third-year peers (Y3, n=2, mean=3.30). However, this distinction dissipates when we look at each statement in turn. While Y1 students appeared more likely to have a friend on campus (SBU2=3.67 vs. 2.50) and found it easier to meet people on campus (SBU3=3.67 vs. 3.00), Y3 students showed greater satisfaction with their university experiences (SBU1=4.00 vs. 3.67), and greater ease of establishing relationships at university (SBU5=4.00 vs. 3.00). The findings suggest increased satisfaction as students progress, with first-year students, navigating uncertainties, exhibiting the lowest satisfaction and greatest difficulties forming connections, while third-year students, more accustomed to university life, reporting higher satisfaction and fewer relationship-building challenges.

Figure 36: Students' perceptions of Sense of Belonging by work status.



The analysis by work status uncovers pronounced distinctions between part-time working students (n=4, mean=3.50) and those who were not working (n=2, mean=3.10). Working students felt less isolated (SBU2=3.70 vs. 2.50), and more connected at university (SBU3=4.00 vs. 3.00), despite participating less in extracurricular activities (SBU4=2.75 vs 3.00). Their employment may have offered additional social interactions (refer to sections 4.2.3.2 and 4.2.4.2), leading to higher university satisfaction (SBU1=4.00 vs. 3.50). This outcome lines up with other results regarding the students who work part-time in terms of peer-relationships (4.2.3.2).

Figure 37: Students' perceptions of Sense of Belonging by social network.



The three student cohorts considered in terms of their social networks demonstrated varying levels of agreement with the statements. Students with friends from work (F1, n=2), reported the highest scores (mean=3.70), those with university friends (F2, n=2) following with an overall mean of 3.30, leaving those with friends from school (F3, n=4) with the lowest overall mean of 3.05.

Specifically, F1 students reported the highest satisfaction (SBU1=4.00), greater ease in relating to others (SBU3=4.50) and were more likely to have a support network on campus (SBU2=4.00), underscoring the value of external social connections. F2 students, likely having formed their on-campus bonds before the lockdown, found it easier to establish relationships at university (SBU5=4.00), and expressed high satisfaction (SBU1=4.00). This indicates the positive impact of intra-university friendships on students' experiences, even in difficult circumstances. Conversely, F3 students experienced indecision about their university experience (SBU1=3.50) and challenges in forming new university relationships (SBU5=2.75). This may be attributed to a former reliance on their school friends, and an insufficient amount

of time for building new connections at university, resonating with Maunder's findings on belonging (Maunder, 2018, pp. 4-7).

In summary, during the lockdown, students' social networks significantly affected participants' university experiences. Workplace friendships enhanced satisfaction, university-based friendships facilitated relationship building, and school-based friendships presented adaptation challenges.

4.3.5.3 Tutors' and students' perceptions of Sense of Belonging during lockdown

It is clear that the closure of campus significantly impacted students' SBU. Tutors echoed this sentiment, highlighting the physical presence on campus as integral to students' identity and connection to the university. As the tutor Emily remarked:

To be online has also had an impact on students' sense of belonging, just the simple fact of walking or commuting to campus, the idea of place is very connected to that of identity. So, to be able to conduct studies within the campus itself and the classrooms, that in itself is helping the student connect with the university at large.

For many students, the lockdown period saw a suspension of social life. Some students used the time to increase their study or working hours, where they were able to develop relationships. In describing their extracurricular engagement with the university context (SBU4), Student 2 stated that she spent more time studying:

During the online period? No, not at all. Just because, you know, when you're online, you're like 'Oh, well, now I have more time to do my studying, '.

4.3.5.4 Concluding remarks

In summary, this survey's findings underscore the profound impact of social connections and access to a physical campus on students' SBU on cultivating students' feelings of belonging and overall satisfaction with their university experience. The campus closures prompted by the

COVID-19 pandemic, and the associated shift to online learning led to feelings of disconnection from the university community for many students.

The sociodemographic data reveal that certain groups - older students, those in their third year of study, students working part-time, and individuals with established social networks from work or university reported more positive university experiences and a stronger SBU. Specifically, part-time working students experienced less isolation, and those with work-based or university-based friendships found it easier to maintain or form new connections, despite the challenges posed by remote learning.

4.3.6 Concluding remarks on Survey 2

The results of the survey were quite revealing. There was a significant agreement with statements related to CC and PR, indicating a sense of inclusion and cooperative learning within the virtual classroom environment. Across the board, students expressed satisfaction with their Italian class, showing agreement with all five CC items. Furthermore, there was unanimous agreement across cohorts regarding the positive classroom dynamics for learning (PR1) and the friendliness (PR6) observed among students. The importance of friendship (PR5) and spending time with peers (PR4) was also a common thread.

This positivity is likely a result of the resilience displayed by students during these challenging times, along with the dedicated efforts of tutors. The tutors' adoption of a teaching approach that enhances interaction and student engagement had a beneficial impact on group dynamics, nurturing connections among students and providing a sense of comfort, security, and unity.

This positivity is not echoed in terms of the students' sense of connection to the university. Most participants reported dissatisfaction with their overall university experience, a sentiment clearly exacerbated by the campus closure.

Sociodemographic data analysis revealed several trends at the end of this online semester. Firstly, older, non-working students with friends from school reported the most positive CC. Secondly, younger, non-working students with friends from school reported the most positive PR. Finally, older, working students with friends from work or university reported the most positive SBU.

In summary, this analysis sheds light on the multifaceted factors influencing student experiences during the shift to remote learning caused by the pandemic. While there were obstacles, particularly in forming social bonds on campus, the resilience of students and the adaptability of the tutors to preserve a positive classroom and maintain supportive peer relations, are remarkable.

4.4 What changes emerge from students' perceptions at the beginning and end of Semester 1, 2020?

4.4.1 Comparing the results of the two surveys

This section presents a comparative analysis of data gathered during Survey 1 with that of Survey 2, intending to identify shifts in students' perceptions of CC, PR and SBU throughout 2020. The comparison is hindered by the low response rate of the second survey, and the same sociodemographic exclusions (gender, Y2 students, oldest (25+ years of age) students, those working full-time, and those with no time for friends) will necessarily apply here. Despite these challenges, some consistent trends can be identified.

Table 7 presents the mean results for each of the survey statements, as well as their tabulated differences. The analysis centers on mean variations greater than ± 0.10 , as anything smaller is normally considered negligible (Cohen, 1988, pp. 25-26). The first numeric column lists the S1/2020 results, the third column the S2/2020 outcomes, and the fifth column shows

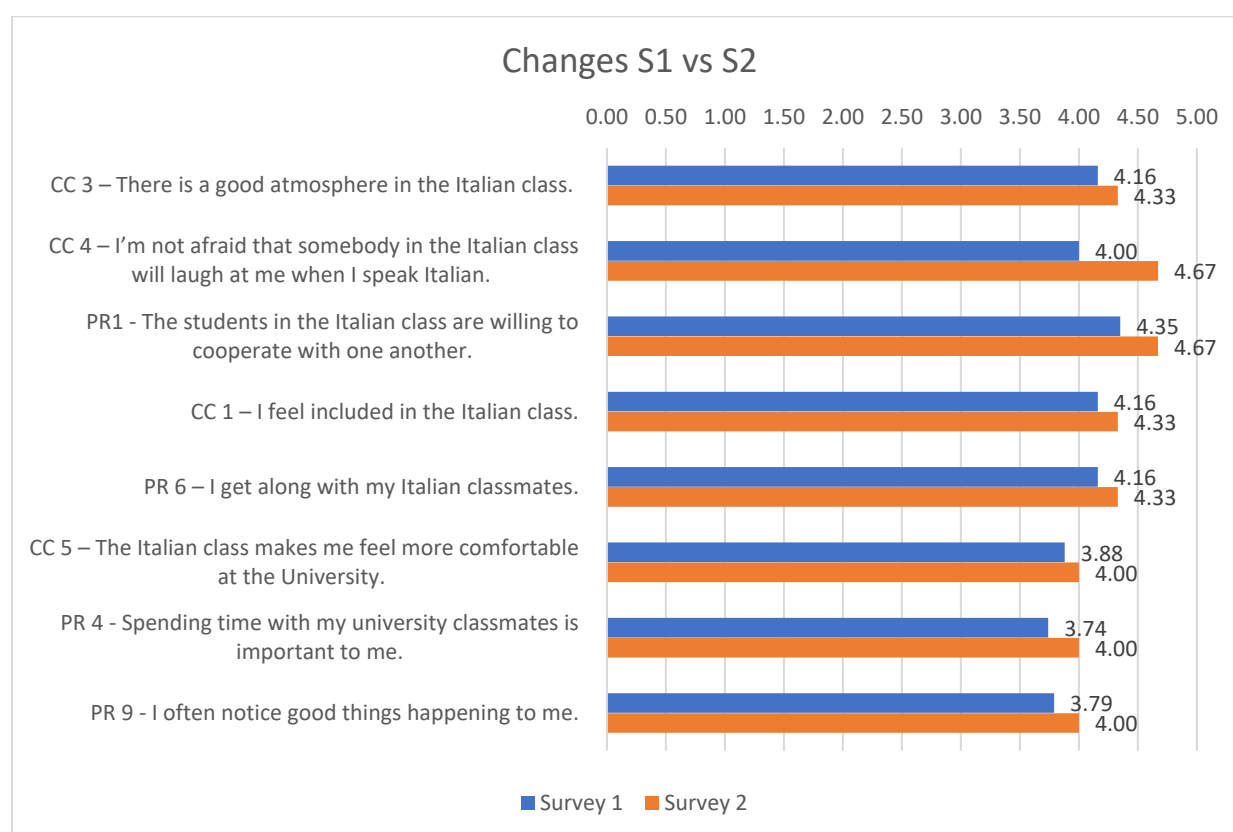
the changes between the surveys. Consistency in agreement is identified by remaining colorless, while increases are denoted in green, and decreases in red.

Table 7: Differences between S1/2020 and S2/2020.

Surveys 2020	S1=43		S2 = 6		S1 vs S2	
	mean	sd	mean	sd	differences	sd
Classroom Climate						
CC 1 – I feel included in the Italian class.	4.16	0.57	4.33	0.52	+0.17	0.25
CC 2 - I feel comfortable in the Italian class.	4.53	0.55	4.17	0.41	-0.37	0.23
CC 3 – There is a good atmosphere in the Italian class.	4.33	0.71	4.83	0.41	+0.51	0.03
CC 4 – I’m not afraid that somebody in the Italian class will laugh at me when I speak Italian.	4.00	0.93	4.67	0.52	+0.67	0.39
CC 5 – The Italian class makes me feel more comfortable at the University.	3.88	0.67	4.00	0.00	+0.12	0.28
Peer-relationships						
PR1 - The students in the Italian class are willing to cooperate with one another.	4.35	0.48	4.67	0.52	+0.32	0.21
PR 2 - I feel friendlier with students of the Italian class than with students of other classes.	3.74	1.00	3.83	1.17	+0.09	0.46
PR 3 - Students in the Italian class are very interested in getting to know their classmates.	3.58	0.76	3.67	0.82	+0.09	0.34
PR 4 - Spending time with my university classmates is important to me.	3.74	0.93	4.00	0.00	+0.26	0.38
PR 5- It is important to me to make friends at university.	4.26	0.93	4.17	0.41	-0.09	0.39
PR 6 – I get along with my Italian classmates.	4.16	0.61	4.33	0.52	+0.17	0.26
PR 7 – In the Italian class we chat before lessons start or during the break.	4.00	0.69	3.33	1.03	-0.67	0.32
PR 8 – I think that I’m similar to other University students.	3.14	1.06	3.00	1.10	-0.14	0.46
PR 9 - I often notice good things happening to me.	3.79	0.71	4.00	0.63	+0.21	0.30
PR 10 - I spend time with my university classmates outside the classroom.	3.21	0.99	2.83	0.98	-0.38	0.43
Sense of Belonging						
SBU 1 – I am satisfied with my experiences at the University.	4.05	0.72	3.83	0.41	-0.21	0.30
SBU 2 – There is someone on campus who helps me feel comfortable socially.	3.65	0.95	3.33	1.21	-0.32	0.43
SBU 3 – It is easy for me to meet other University students with whom I can relate.	3.37	0.98	3.67	1.03	+0.30	0.43
SBU 4 - I take part in extra-curricular activities with other University students.	3.60	0.95	2.83	0.98	-0.80	0.42
SBU 5 – I feel easy to establish relationships at university.	3.19	1.01	3.17	0.98	-0.02	0.44

Figure 38 arranges the statements that underwent the most significant changes by CC, PR, and SBU, ranked from the most to the least change, focusing on those that reached 4.00.

Figure 38: Items with the largest increase in agreement between Surveys 1 and 2, Semester 1, 2020.



The data underscore a rise in students' sense of unity in the classroom, a consistency in social relations in the classroom and on-campus, and a decrease in feeling a part of university community. Notable was the improvement in perceptions of the classroom atmosphere (CC3, +0.51) and inclusion (CC1, +0.17), likely influenced by the collective experience of overcoming the challenges posed by the pandemic, which may have strengthened the sense of community. Supporting evidence from a U.S. study (Cahuas et al., 2023) on the pandemic's effect on student quality of life underscores the importance of perceived social support during times of uncertainty.

Additionally, students acknowledged the Italian class's beneficial role in decreasing their fear of judgment within the class (CC4, +0.67) and more broadly in enhancing their comfort at the university (CC5, +0.12). Despite the obstacles presented by the lockdown, there

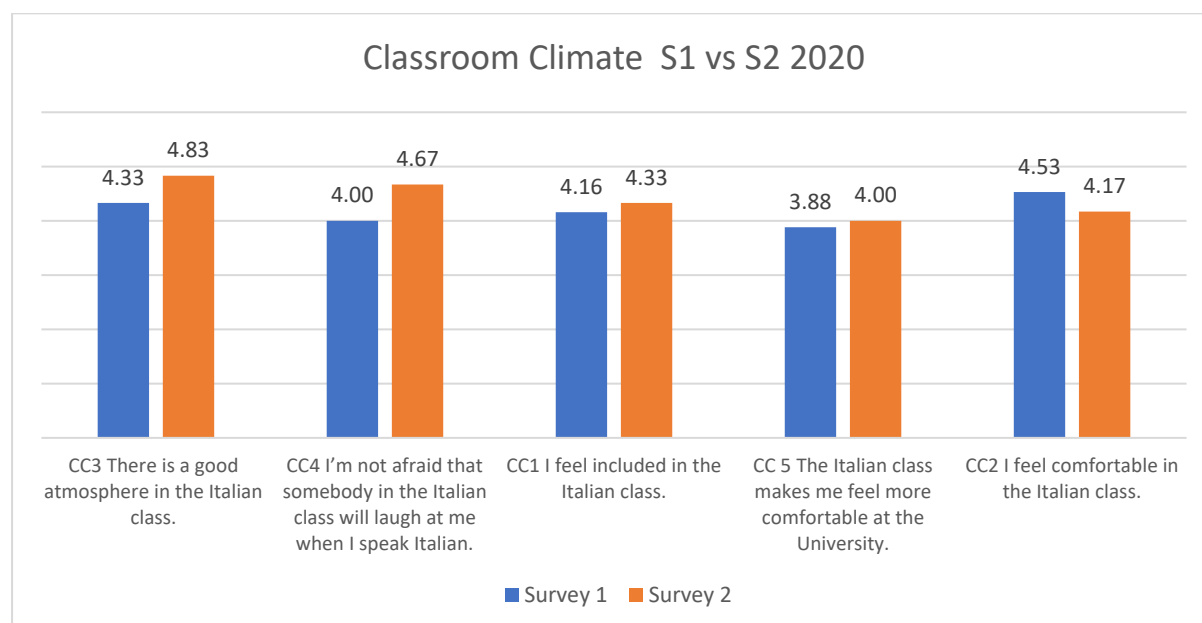
was a marked increase in cooperation (PR1, +0.32), and in rapport with Italian peers (PR6, +0.17).

The lockdown period also seemed to increase students' willingness to engage with peers (PR4, +0.26), likely as a response to the reduced avenues for social interaction. Moreover, students reported a greater appreciation for positive experiences (PR9, +0.21), reflecting a resilience that echoes the concepts of Positive Psychology (see section 2.3.2) such as enhanced wellbeing and coping mechanisms during stressful events.

It is critical to highlight that interviews with students suggested the significant role played by tutors in fostering these improved perceptions.

4.4.1.1 Changes in the students' perceptions of Classroom Climate

Figure 39: Changes in the students' perceptions of Classroom Climate, between Survey 1 and Survey 2 in the first semester of 2020.



Overall, there was a notable increase in agreement with most CC statements. Students reported a substantial boost in confidence when speaking Italian (CC4, +0.67), and in the overall atmosphere of the classroom (CC3, +0.51). Smaller increases were in their sense of inclusion (CC1, +0.17), and in their ease within the university setting (CC5, +0.12). Despite a slight

decline in the comfort felt in the Italian class (CC2, -0.37), the mean score remained in the agreement range with a mean of 4.17.

As already mentioned, the successful transition to online learning, despite its inherent challenges, can be attributed to the tutor's ability to foster a welcoming and supportive virtual classroom, as can be evinced by the words of these interviewed tutors: *If the teacher manages to make the students feel welcomed and supported, positive energy follows.* [Milena] and *Online teaching is a challenge but there is space to still deliver high-quality content and high-quality engagement.* [Ester].

Looking at the results for CC in terms of sociodemographic, we can identify four cohorts that saw the greatest positive improvements in CC. These are: older students (overall change = +1.66), Y3 students (overall change = +0.87), non-working students (overall change = +1.70), and those with more friends from school (overall change = +1.60).

Table 8: Changes for CC, S1 vs. S2 according to participants' sociodemographic data.

S1 vs S2 2020						
Changes in the students' perceptions of Classroom Climate, between Survey 1 and Survey 2 in the first semester 2020, according to participants' socio-demographic data		CC1 – I feel included in the Italian class.	CC2 - I feel comfortable in the Italian class.	CC3 – There is a good atmosphere in the Italian class.	CC4 – I'm not afraid that somebody in the Italian class will laugh at me when I speak Italian.	CC 5 – The Italian class makes me feel more comfortable at the university.
Age	Age 16-20	+0.11	-0.54	+0.34	+0.59	+0.24
	Age 21-25	+0.21	-0.08	+0.71	+0.82	0.00
Current university year	Uni Year 1	+0.15	-0.68	+0.30	+0.53	+0.14
	Uni Year 3	-0.21	-0.42	+0.79	+0.57	+0.14
Work status						
	Part-time	+0.08	-0.41	+0.25	+0.54	+0.26
	Not working	+0.44	-0.31	+0.69	+0.88	0.00
Current social life	Friends from work	0.00	0.00	+0.50	+0.50	+0.25
	Friends from Uni	-0.36	-0.57	+0.74	+0.24	+0.06
	Friends from school	+0.41	-0.31	+0.27	+0.96	+0.27

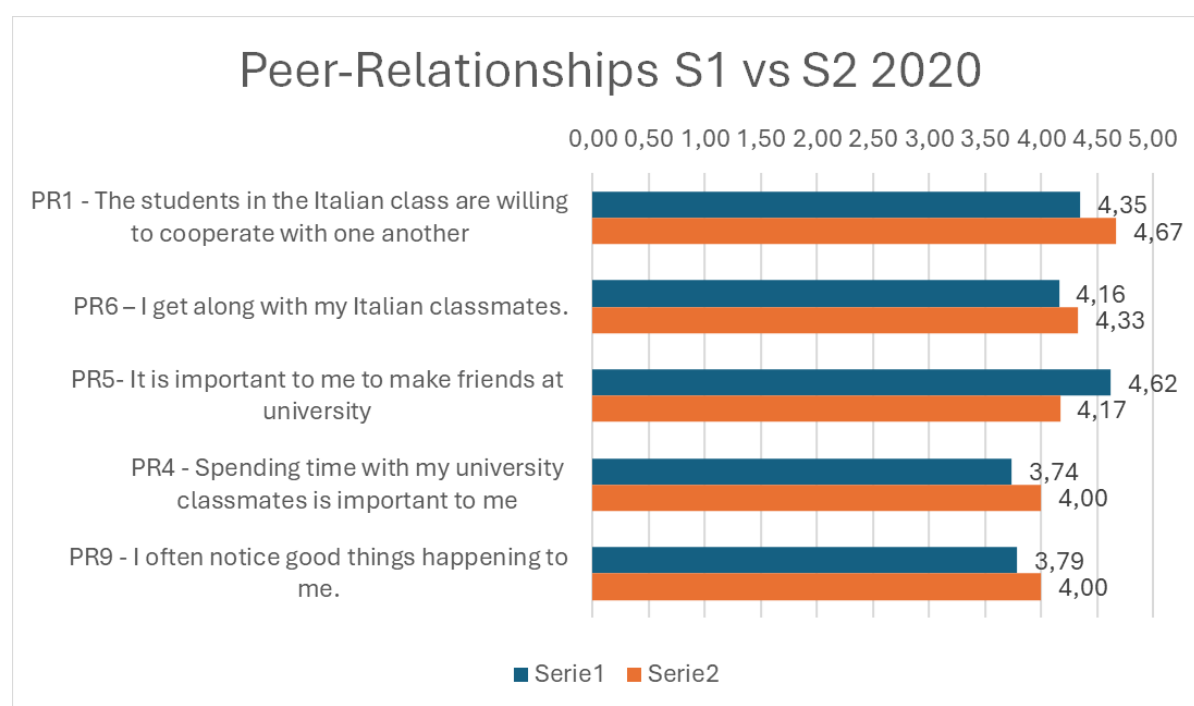
Compared with their younger colleagues, older students (21-25 years of age) reported improved perceptions in S2/2020, particularly in terms of feelings of inclusion (CC1 +0.21 vs. +0.11), confidence (CC4, +0.82 vs. +0.59), and comfort (CC2, -0.08 vs. -0.54), as well as noticing an improved classroom atmosphere (CC3, + 0.71 vs. +0.34). The younger students reported an improvement in the Italian class making them feel more comfortable at university (CC5, +0.24 vs. 0.00). It is possible that older students found the online experience less divisive, while the younger students struggled more online.

Similar results were found in terms of year of enrolment, with Y3 students reporting more positive shifts in perception than Y1 students. They noticed a better atmosphere in the

classroom (CC3, +0.79 vs. +0.30), were more confident (CC4, +0.57 vs. +0.53), and experienced a lesser decrease in feelings of comfort in the classroom, (CC2 -0.42 vs. -0.68). Y1 students experienced greater feelings of inclusion (CC1, +0.15 vs. -0.21). Non-working students reported more positive shifts in perception than their working colleagues. This was particularly notable in their appreciation of the atmosphere of the Italian class (CC3, +0.69 vs. +0.25), feelings of inclusion (CC1, +0.44 vs. +0.08), and confidence (CC4, +0.88 vs. +0.54)

4.4.1.2 Changes in the students' perceptions of Peer-Relationships

Figure 40: Changes in the students' perceptions of Peer-Relationships, between Survey 1 and Survey 2 in the first semester 2020S1 vs. S2 2020 Peer-Relationshipship.



Despite the obstacles presented by the lockdown, the data highlight growth in some items related to PR during the 2020 semester, albeit this growth was less pronounced than was found with CC. There was a marked increase in cooperative learning (PR1, +0.32), and socialization within the Italian class (PR6, +0.17). The lockdown period also seemed to increase students' willingness to engage with their classmates (PR4, +0.26), likely as a response to the reduced avenues for social interaction. Moreover, students reported a greater appreciation for positive experiences (PR9, +0.21), reflecting a resilience that once again echoes the concepts of

Positive Psychology. As repeatedly mentioned, an important factor in fostering these improved perceptions is, as highlighted in the interviews with students, the significant role played by tutors and the unit coordinator.

In terms of the sociodemographic data, the trends observed were similar to those seen in the CC analysis, albeit the improvements were noticeably less marked. The cohorts with the most significant changes for PR were non-working students (overall change = +2.20), students with friends from school (overall change = +1.32), Y1 students (overall change = +0.86), and older students (overall change = +0.86).

Table 9: Changes for PR, S1 vs. S2 according to participants' sociodemographic data.

S1 vs S2 2020	PR1 - The students in the Italian class are willing to cooperate with one another.	PR4 - Spending time with my university classmates is important to me.	PR5- It is important to me to make friends at university.	PR6 – I get along with my Italian classmates.	PR9 - I often notice good things happening to me.
Male	-0.20	+0.20	+0.60	+0.20	+0.40
Female	+0.38	+0.26	-0.31	+0.08	+0.13
Age 16-20	+0.43	+0.23	-0.02	-0.02	+0.07
Age 21-25	+0.03	+0.18	-0.29	+0.44	+0.50
Uni Year 1	+0.59	+0.09	+0.15	+0.15	-0.10
Uni Year 2	+0.67	+0.17	0.00	+1.17	+0.50
Uni Year 3	-0.28	+0.50	-0.50	-0.28	+0.57
Part-time	+0.33	+0.13	-0.33	+0.08	-0.04
Not working	+0.25	+0.38	+0.38	+0.38	+0.81
Friends from work	0.00	+1.00	-0.50	0.00	-0.25
Friends from Uni	-0.42	+0.37	-0.31	-0.36	+0.55
Friends from school	+0.40	+0.09	-0.09	+0.50	+0.60

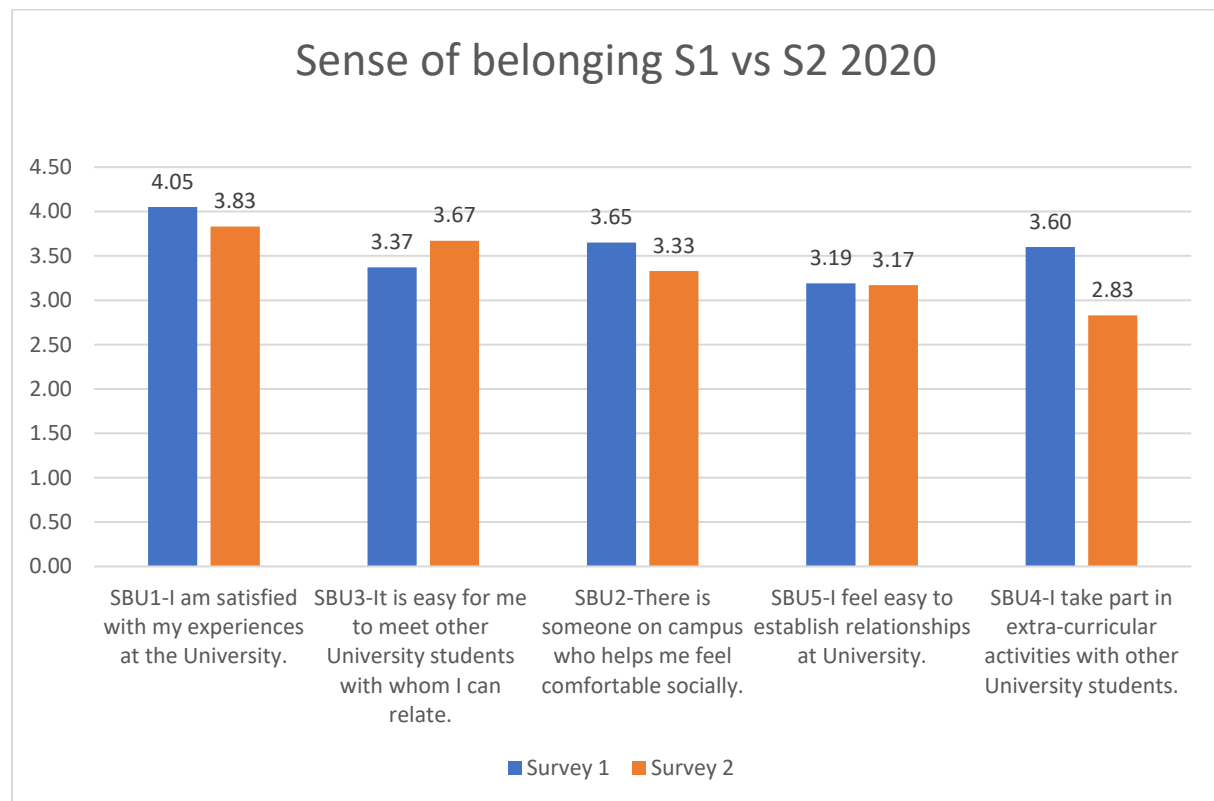
The results in terms of age were mixed, although when tallied up the older students showed a greater overall positive shift in PR. This was most marked in their perception of getting along with their Italian 1 colleagues (PR6, +0.44 vs. -0.02), and in their noticing of good things happening to them (PR9, +0.50 vs. +0.07). However, the younger students showed greater improvement in perceptions of conducive learning (PR1, +0.43 vs. +0.03) and in their increased interest in interacting with peers (PR4, +0.23 vs. +0.18; PR5, -0.02 vs. -0.29). This

was potentially due to their greater need for peer connections during remote learning, as supported by recent studies and student interviews (O'Dea, 2021; see sections 4.2.3.2 and 4.2.4.2).

Non-working students showed greater positive changes, in comparison with their working colleagues, possibly due to their having more time for peer interactions. This positive shift was particularly apparent in the importance they placed on making friends at university (PR4, +0.38, vs. +0.13; PR5, +0.38 vs. -0.33). The dramatic difference in their positive shift in terms of noticing good things happening to them (PR9, +0.81 vs. -0.04) is interesting and is possibly due an increased focus on their studies in general, and on the Italian class in particular.

4.4.1.3 Changes in students' perceptions of Sense of Belonging

Figure 41: Changes in the students' perceptions of Sense of Belonging between Survey 1 and Survey 2 in the first semester of 2020.



While CC and PR experienced some positive developments during the 2020 semester, SBU saw a noticeable decline in agreement levels for most items, each dropping below a 4.00 threshold, as illustrated in Figure 41.

Clearly, the lockdown laws limited extracurricular activities, leading to increased feelings of loneliness among university students, and incurring an overriding loss of SBU. Students who already had established friendships before the lockdown found it easier to maintain these social connections during this time. However, the majority of students struggled to form new friendships and relationships due to the constraints of remote learning, as documented in the already mentioned survey conducted by the University of Sydney (Walker et al., 2020, p. 11). As shown in that survey, the extended lockdown negatively impacted

engagement, and sense of belonging to the university, leading to decreased satisfaction, lower retention rates, and overall, less positive university experiences, as discussed in section 2.5²⁸.

4.5 Concluding remarks regarding Research Question 1

The analysis of the two surveys conducted in 2020 has explored students' perceptions regarding CC, PR and SBU during a time of pedagogical transition. It shows students and tutors both adapted to this transition and highlights the challenges of building important social relationships in an online learning environment.

The findings from Survey 1/2020, conducted after three weeks of face-to-face teaching, revealed interesting insights into students' experiences in the Italian class. CC statements received the highest positive feedback, indicating that students felt comfortable and included in the Italian class. The smaller class size and the nature of a language course as a shared interest are thought to have contributed positively to this outcome.

While PR statements were generally rated positively, highlighting the importance of establishing new relationships at university, it is worth noting that many participants found it challenging to extend these relationships beyond the classroom setting. Interestingly, SBU statements had the lowest agreement levels, suggesting difficulties in forming connections and a sense of belonging early in the semester.

From a sociodemographic perspective, most cohorts reported feeling included and comfortable in the Italian class, with the atmosphere perceived as positive, and classmates seen as cooperative and approachable. All groups highlighted the value of forming friendships at university, and satisfaction with university life was relatively high, except in the case of second-year students, mature-age students, second-year students, and those constrained by time.

²⁸ For further information regarding changes in students' perceptions of Sense of Belonging based on participants' socio-demographic characteristics, please refer to Appendix A1.3.3.

Moving on to Survey 2, conducted at the end of the semester after the transition to online learning, we see some shifts in student experiences. CC statements again showed the most positive results. Students felt a sense of comfort, confidence and inclusion, and benefited from the cooperative learning facilitated by the tutors' dedicated efforts to enhance interaction and engagement while teaching online. PR statements also showed positive results, with the students valuing the positive peer-relationships as significant to their learning experience. However, when it came to students' sense of connection to the university as a whole, the results were less encouraging. Many participants reported dissatisfaction with their overall university experience, a sentiment that was clearly exacerbated by the campus closure and the resulting physical disconnection from the institution.

Interestingly, satisfaction with the classroom climate remained high across all demographic groups. The value placed on friendships and peer interactions was a common thread throughout the responses, highlighting the crucial role of social connections in the university experience.

Regarding the changes observed between the two surveys, several key points emerged. There was a notable improvement in the positive feedback on CC, emphasizing the resilience displayed by students and the critical role of tutors in maintaining a positive atmosphere and a supportive and inclusive learning environment in the Italian class. There were some, albeit lesser improvements in PR, with it being clear that students faced increased obstacles in extending peer-relationships beyond the classroom setting. The limitations imposed by the pandemic on extracurricular activities and physical interactions hindered students' ability to form and maintain broader social connections, in turn leading to a decline in SBU.

Sociodemographic analysis revealed that most cohorts reported feeling included and comfortable in the Italian class. Older students, and those in their second and third year generally reported more positive changes, suggesting the importance of familiarity with the

learning environment and the university particularly during difficult times. First-year students displayed an increase in positive perceptions of PR, particularly in conducive learning, and in-class interactions, driven by their optimism and need for peer connections during this time. Non-working students and students with pre-existing friendships, either from school or from previous university years, experienced higher increases in perceptions of CC and PR, suggesting that available free time and the nature of existing social networks influenced the quality of these relationships. The decline in perceptions of SBU was consistent across all cohorts, underscoring the widespread impact of the pandemic on students' university experience.

In conclusion, the analysis for Research Question 1 has shed light on the dynamic factors influencing students' experiences in the Italian 1 language course, and at the university, at an important moment in time. The findings emphasize the importance, particularly in challenging times, of fostering supportive classroom environments that facilitate peer-relationships, and how this can also be achieved online.

The next chapter will explore students' perceptions of CC, PR and SBU during the 2021 semester, examining also the effects of the choice of different teaching modalities offered by the university.

Chapter 5 – Addressing Research Question 2

5.1 Introduction

Research Question 2 examines the perceptions of the students of Italian 1 at the University of Sydney, regarding Classroom Climate (CC), Peer-relationships (PR), and Sense of Belonging to the University context (SBU) over the course of the first semester 2021.

RQ2: What are the students' post-pandemic perceptions of CC, PR and SBU in Semester 1, 2021?

- Subquestion 1: What are these perceptions at the beginning of Semester 1, 2021?
- Subquestion 2: What are these perceptions at the end of Semester 1, 2021?
- Subquestion 3: What changes emerge from students' perceptions at the beginning and end of Semester 1, 2021?

My model of analysis will follow what I have done in Chapter 4, examining the quantitative data gathered through two surveys as well as the impact of sociodemographic characteristics of the participants. The data will be enhanced through findings from end-of-semester interviews.

This semester was characterized by the easing of the emergency lockdown and the gradual reopening of the campus. As previously mentioned (Section 3.3.1), a major difference in this semester was that students had the opportunity to choose their learning modality, according to the tutorial group that best suit them. Group 1 (G1, n=11) comprised students who chose to study Italian exclusively face-to-face. Group 2 (G2, n=6) consisted of those who chose the Hyflex (HF) option, in which students could chose daily whether to attend online or face-to-face. Group 3 (G3, n=9) consisted of students who chose the exclusively online option.

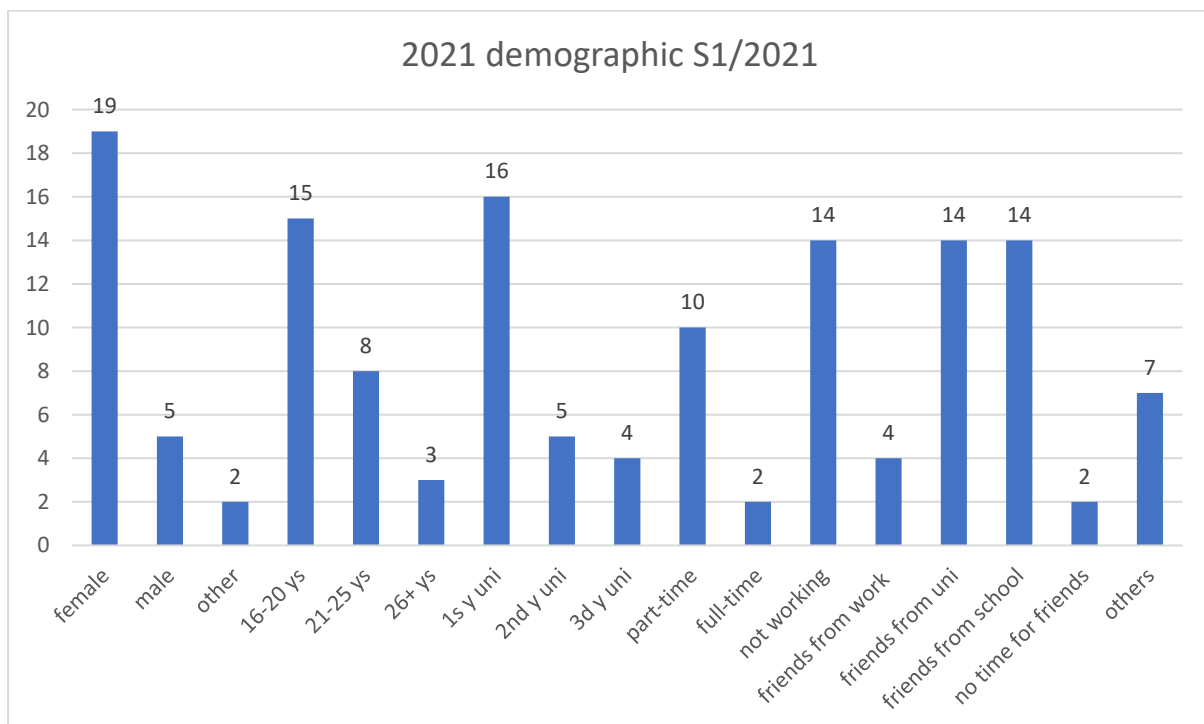
The analysis that follows will also examine the impact of the three learning modalities at the beginning of the semester and at its end, and ultimately compare these results, to explore changes in students' perceptions of CC, PR and SBU throughout the semester.

5.2 What are these perceptions at the beginning of Semester 1, 2021?

5.2.1 Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

This section introduces the sociodemographic profiles of respondents to the survey conducted at the beginning of Semester 1, 2021 (S1/2021). Of all the students enrolled in Italian 1, 33 (54.1%) took part in the first survey, but only 26²⁹ completed all its parts. Their sociodemographic characteristics are presented in Figure 1. Tallies atop each column indicate the number of respondents in each category. Throughout the analysis there will be some exclusions in the reporting of the sociodemographic data, due to low numbers in some of the cohorts. These data can be found in Appendix 4.2.3.4 for reference.

Figure 42: Demographic Results of Surveys 1 and 2, Semester 1, 2021.



The gender distribution was predominantly female³⁰ (females: n=19, 73.1% vs. males: n=5, 19.2%), and most were below 26 years of age, (16-20 years of age: n=15, 57.7% vs. 21-25

²⁹ 28 students answered the Survey's questions, and 2 did not complete the demographic and the group questions. Therefore, the total number of respondents for the Survey's items is 28 but the total number of respondents of the three groups is 26. I am also using 28 as a number. For example, in the first table that I present the total is 28, not 26.

³⁰ Out of the 26 gender respondents two answered with 'Others' (7.7%).

years of age: n=8, 30.8%, and 26+ years of age: n=3, 11.5%. Most were in their first year at university (Y1: n=16, 61.5% vs. Y2: n=5, 19.2%, and Y3: n=4, 15.4%). Just over half of the respondents were not working (non-working: n=10, 38.5% vs. part-time: n=14, 53.8%). Social networks were diverse, with 53.8% (n=14) having friends from work, 53.8% (n=14) friends from university, 53.8% (n=14) friends from school, and 26.9% (n=7), indicating they had no time for friends.

The age distribution and social life patterns show a similar trend to the previous surveys, with most respondents in the younger age brackets and a significant portion of social networks stemming from school and university.

5.2.2 Snapshot of overall responses

Table 10 presents the mean and standard deviations in response to all the survey statements, ranked from the highest to the lowest levels of agreement.

Table 10: General snapshot of Participants' responses in Survey 1/2021.

S1= 28	mean	sd
CC3 – There is a good atmosphere in the Italian class.	4.62	0.49
PR1 – The students in the Italian class are willing to cooperate with one another.	4.42	0.57
CC2 – I feel comfortable in the Italian class.	4.42	0.83
PR5 – It is important to me to make friends at university.	4.35	0.86
CC1 – I feel included in the Italian class.	4.17	0.72
PR6 – I get along with my Italian classmates.	4.14	0.70
PR4 – Spending time with my university classmates is important to me.	3.96	1.07
CC4 – I'm not afraid that somebody in the Italian class will laugh at me when I speak Italian.	3.92	1.11
CC 5 – The Italian class makes me feel more comfortable at the University.	3.89	0.62
PR9 – I often notice good things happening to me.	3.82	0.77
PR7 – In the Italian class we chat before lessons start or during the break.	3.78	0.91
PR2 – I feel friendlier with students of the Italian class than with students of other classes.	3.75	1.04
SBU1 – I am satisfied with my experiences at the university.	3.64	1.16
PR3 – Students in the Italian class are every interested in getting to know their classmates.	3.60	0.83
SBU4 – I take part in extra-curricular activities with other university students.	3.27	1.22
SBU3 – It is easy for me to meet other university students with whom I can relate.	3.25	1.26
PR8 – I think that I'm similar to other university students.	3.14	1.04
SBU2 – There is someone on campus who helps me feel comfortable socially.	3.14	1.14
PR10 – I spend time with my university classmates outside the classroom.	3.00	1.15
SBU5 – I feel easy to establish relationships at university.	2.96	1.23

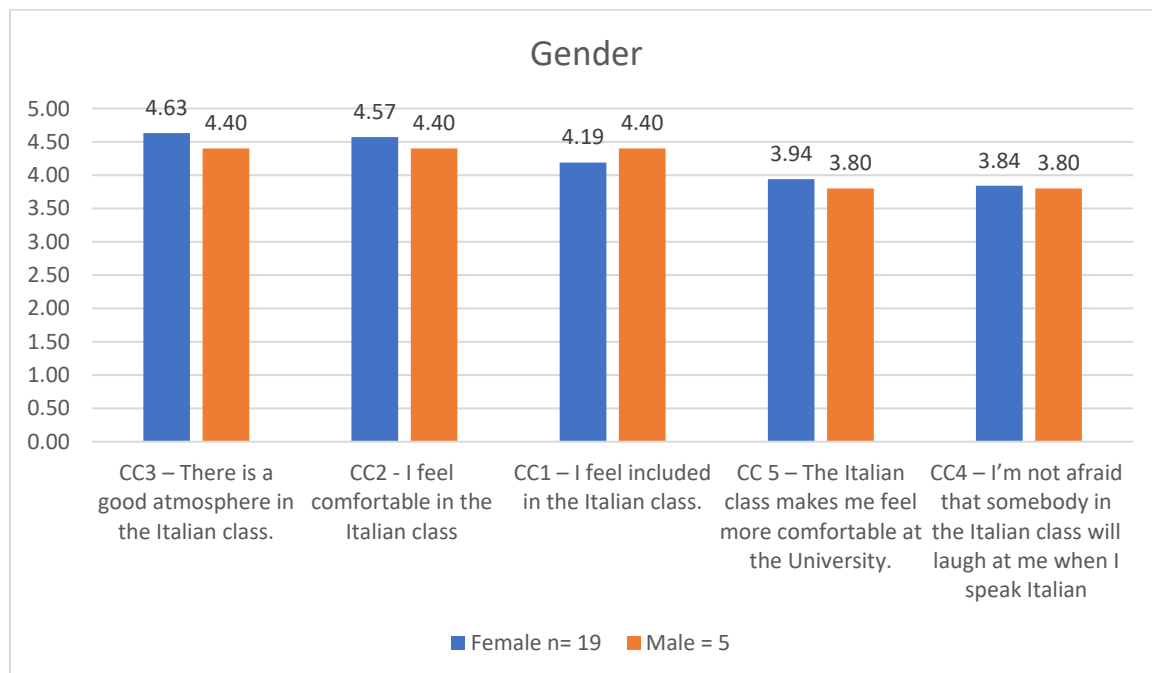
Positive feedback was given for six statements – three out of the five CC statements and three out of the ten PR statements. Agreement was achieved in terms of the Italian class's positive atmosphere (CC3 = 4.62), comfort level (CC2 = 4.42) and inclusivity (CC1 = 4.17), its collaborative environment (PR1 = 4.42), as well as the intrinsic efforts towards forming social bonds at university (PR5 = 4.35), and in getting along with their Italian classmates (PR6 = 4.14).

The remaining statements did not achieve agreement level. Despite some interest in forming deeper friendships (PR3 = 3.60), this goal remained largely unfulfilled (PR10 = 3.00). In addition, students did not feel similar to their peers (PR8 = 3.14), this potentially hindering efforts to connect with others (a topic explored in depth in section 4.2.3.2). All the SBU statements were rated low (3.64 and below).

5.2.3 Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate

5.2.3.1 Results according to participants' sociodemographic characteristics

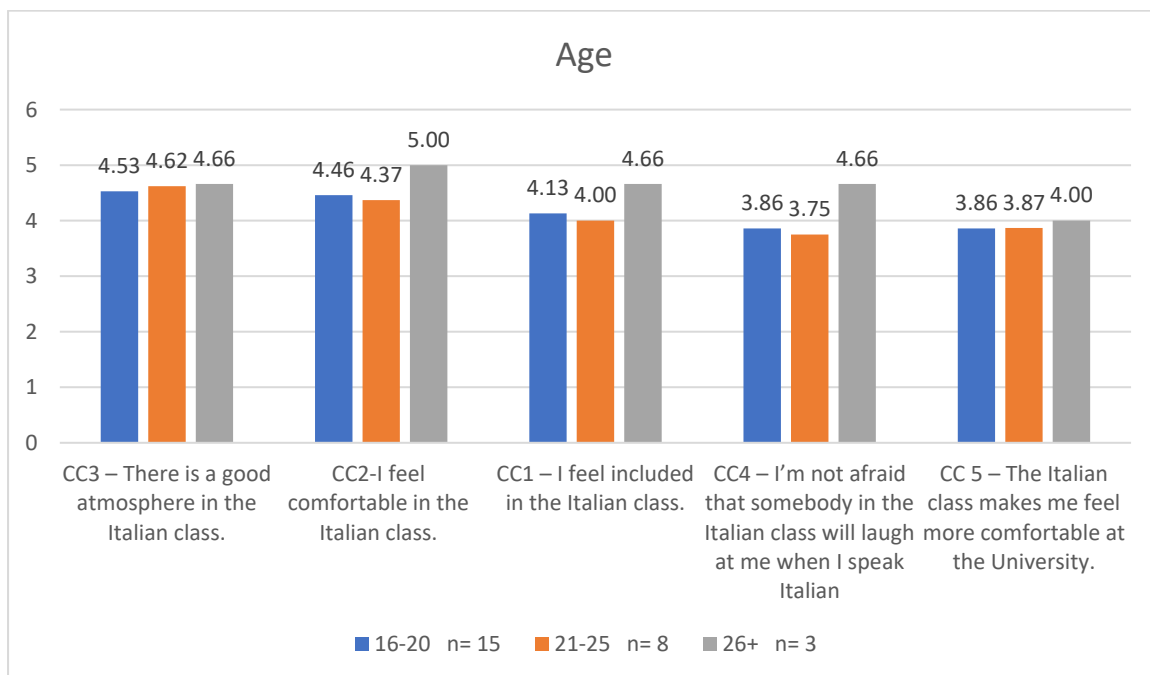
Figure 43: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate by gender.



Both male and female students reported similarly positive experiences in the Italian class, with close overall mean scores (females, n=19, overall mean: 4.23; males, n=5, overall mean: 4.16), indicating an atmosphere where students felt comfortable and included. Interestingly, while females generally rated most of the statements more favorably, males reported a higher sense of inclusion in the classroom (CC1, males: 4.40 vs. females: 4.19).

A notable area of concern for both genders was their comfort with speaking in front of the class (CC4, females: 3.84 and males: 3.80). This hesitation might be linked to the prolonged social distancing measures during the Covid-19 pandemic, exacerbating social anxiety. Supporting this observation, an Israeli study involving 99 undergraduates found that social distancing had a significant impact on social anxiety, fostering an avoidance of social situations (Arad et al., 2021).

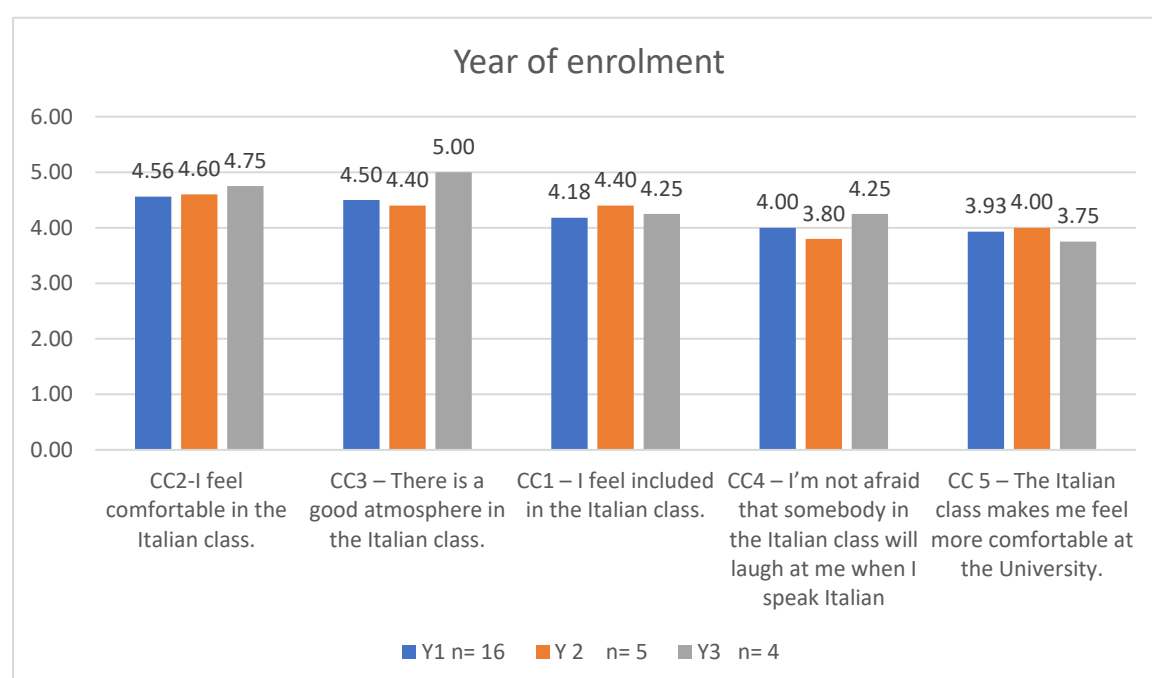
Figure 44: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate by age.



Analyzing the respondents' ages, the findings show distinct disparities. The oldest participants (over 26 years, n=3, overall mean: 4.79), reported the most positive outlook, with all assessments achieving scores above 4.00. Their confidence in speaking Italian in class was particularly high (CC4 = 4.66), likely reflecting the advantages of experience in mitigating peer

judgment concerns (Section 2.3.3.1). Despite the positive responses for comfort (CC2 = 4.46), class atmosphere (CC3 = 4.53), and inclusion (CC1 = 4.13), the youngest respondents (ages 16-20, n=15, overall mean: 4.16), reported a fear of ridicule when speaking Italian (CC4 = 3.86). Similarly, the middle cohort (ages 21-25, n=8, overall mean: 4.12) gave positive ratings for class atmosphere (CC3 = 4.62), comfort (CC2 = 4.37) and inclusion (CC1 = 4.00), but a low score for confidence in public speaking (CC4 = 3.75).

Figure 45: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate by university year³¹.

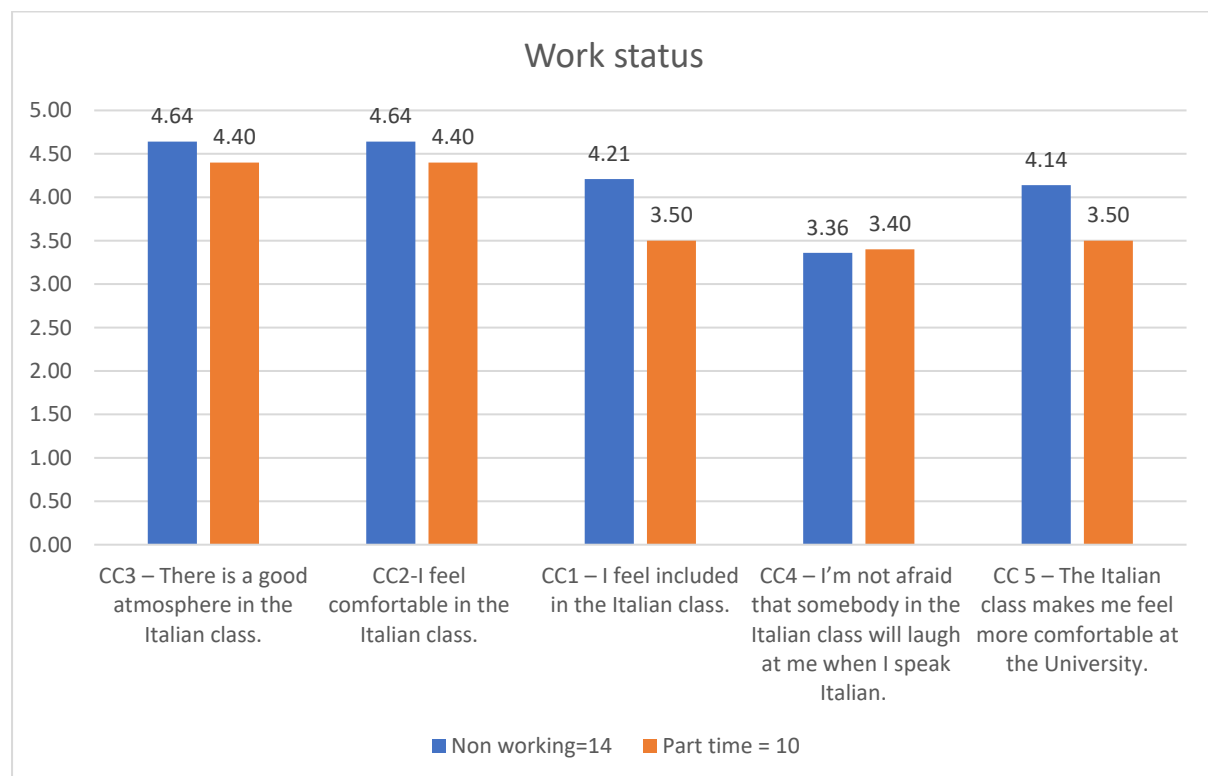


The results for year of enrolment were fairly equitable, each cohort reaching an overall mean of around 4.20. Third-year students (n=4) enjoyed the highest overall mean at 4.40. They reported feeling the most comfortable (CC2 = 4.75) and the most secure in speaking in front of peers (CC4 = 4.25), likely due to their longer university tenure and greater public speaking experience. Second-year students (n=5) followed with an overall mean of 4.24. They reported the highest level of agreement with the statement regarding feelings of inclusion (CC1 = 4.40) but expressed uncertainty about speaking in front of their peers (CC4 = 3.80). This aligns with

³¹ 25 respondents answered this question, one chooses not to answer.

the challenges often faced in the second year, marked by increased academic demands and personal growth (see also sections 2.4.2.2 and 4.2.3.2). First-year students (n=16) achieved a slightly lower overall mean at 4.23. They showed agreement with most CC statements, feeling comfortable (CC2 = 4.56) and perceiving a positive atmosphere (CC3 = 4.50), along with a sense of inclusion (CC1 = 4.18), and safety (CC4 = 4.00) in the Italian class.

Figure 46: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate by work status.

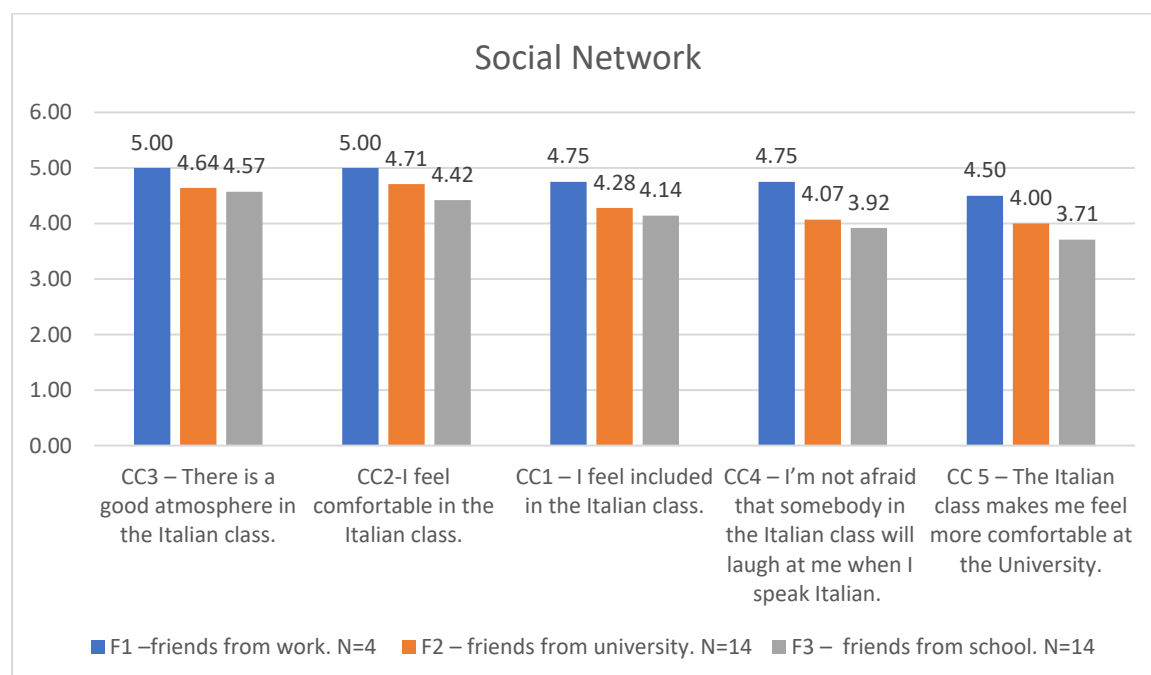


The results for work status were similar to those of 2020 (See 4.2.2), with the non-working students reporting the greatest levels of agreement with the CC statements³². The non-working students (n=14) achieved an overall mean of 4.39, as compared to those working part-time (n=10), with an overall mean of just 3.84. Both cohorts praised the good atmosphere (CC3: non-working = 4.64 vs. part-time = 4.40), the sense of comfort (CC2: non-working = 4.64 vs. part-time = 4.40), and inclusion (CC1: non-working = 4.21 vs. part-time = 3.50) in the Italian

³² Unfortunately, there is limited representation from the full-time workers (n=2, overall mean: 4.42), which hinders a comprehensive analysis of this cohort.

class. They also fully acknowledged the positive impact of the Italian class on their university sense of ease (CC5: non-working = 4.14 vs. part-time = 3.50). However, both cohorts expressed less confidence in speaking in front of peers (CC4: non-working students = 3.36 and part-time working students = 3.40). For further discussion about the influence and the reasons of work status on CC refer to sections: 2.4.2.3 and 4.2.3.2.

Figure 47: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate by social network.



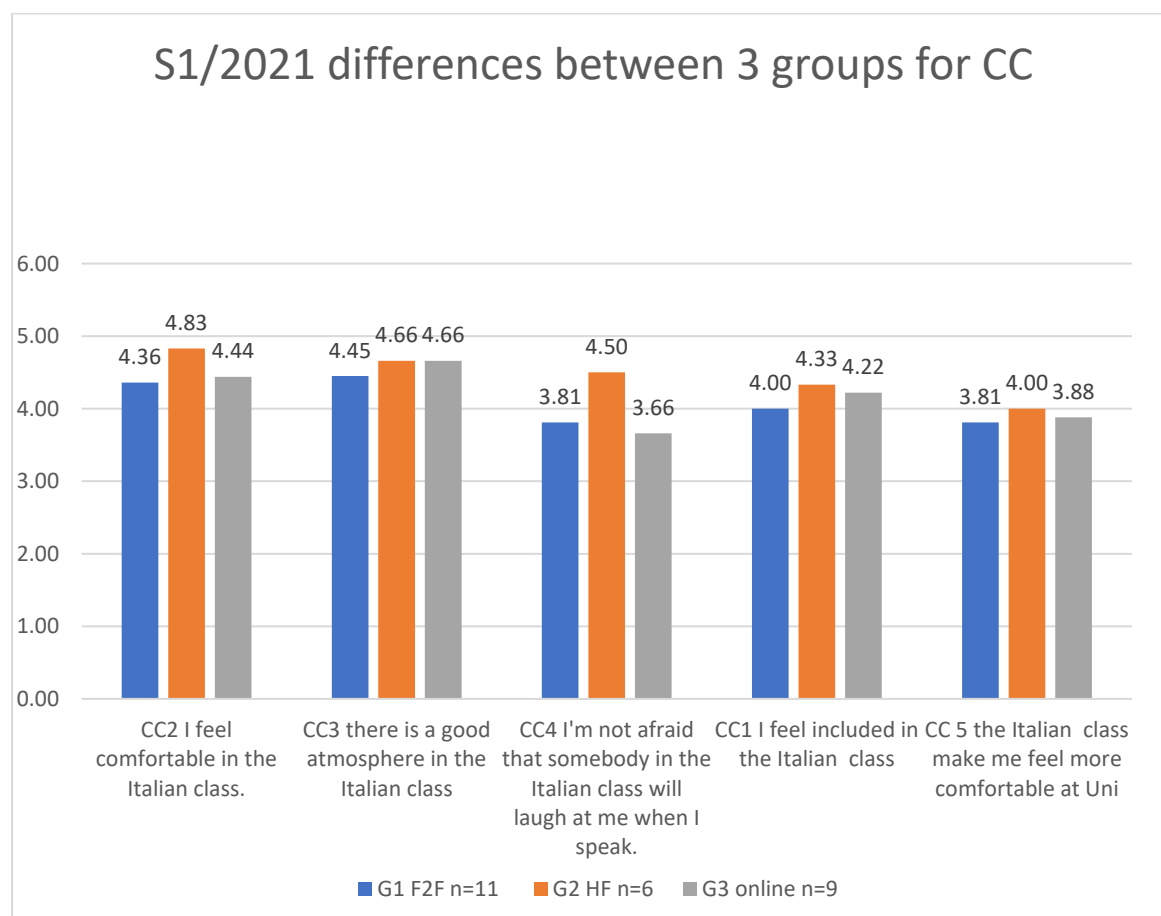
Some marked differences were seen in terms of social networks,³³ with students having friends from work (F1, n=4; overall mean: 4.80) reporting the highest levels of agreement for all the C statements, possibly due to external work experience and social support. Students with friends from university (F2, n=14) scored the next highest overall mean at 4.34. They felt comfortable in the Italian class (CC2 = 4.71), where they perceived a good atmosphere (CC3 = 4.64), felt included (CC1 = 4.28), and confident (CC4 = 4.07). Students with friends from school (F3, n=14) had the lowest overall mean at 4.15, achieving agreement levels only for there being a good atmosphere in the Italian class (CC3 = 4.57), where they felt comfortable

³³ Only two students who do not have time for friends answered the S1 (n=2, overall mean: 3.20)

(CC2 = 4.42), and included (CC1 = 4.14). These trends are consistent with the 2020 results (Section 4.2.3.2) and can be explained with the influence of work status as discussed in 2.4.2.3.

5.2.3.2 Results according to learning modality

Figure 48: S1/2021 with the three participants' learning modalities result for Classroom Climate.



Perceptions of CC seem to be more positive amongst the students in the tutorial group that adopted the HyFlex format (G2, n=6 students, overall mean = 4.46), possibly underscoring the value these students place on flexibility. This finding aligns with a study conducted in a United States university between 2020 and 2021, where due to the pandemic, students who had originally registered for face-to-face classes were given the flexibility to attend in multiple modes. The study found that 70% of participants preferred the HyFlex, rather than an online option, for its convenience and time-saving benefits (Athens, 2023).

The face-to-face group (G1, n=11, overall mean 4.36) strongly agreed that the atmosphere in the Italian classroom was positive (CC3 = 4.45), and that they felt comfortable (CC2 = 4.36), and included (CC1 = 4.00). Curiously, this group showed a higher level of fear in speaking in front of the class (CC4 = 3.81). This insecurity could be attributed to the extended periods away from physical classroom settings, causing students to become unaccustomed to the physical presence of peers, as discussed by Kindred and Bates (2023).

The online-only group (G3, n=9) had the lowest overall mean (4.17) for the CC statements. They reported the lowest score for confidence in speaking in front of the class (CC4 = 3.66), highlighting the impact of virtual platforms on students' fear of judgment. This is supported by literature, including Bailenson (2021) and Prentiss (2021) who emphasize the drawbacks of online learning environments on students' public speaking confidence and the challenges posed by the lack of nonverbal cues and increased self-monitoring in virtual settings (Ledford et al., 2023, p. 73). Despite this, they reported a high level of comfort in the Italian classroom (CC2 = 4.44), reflecting an overall positive reception of the virtual learning environment. This was possibly due to its convenience and the efforts by the tutors, as discussed in Section 2.4.

In conclusion, students in all three groups reported that they found the Italian classroom to be positive and comfortable, with a moderate positive impact on their overall comfort at university. The group that adopted the HyFlex format stood out for their higher satisfaction scores across all five statements.

5.2.3.3 Concluding remarks

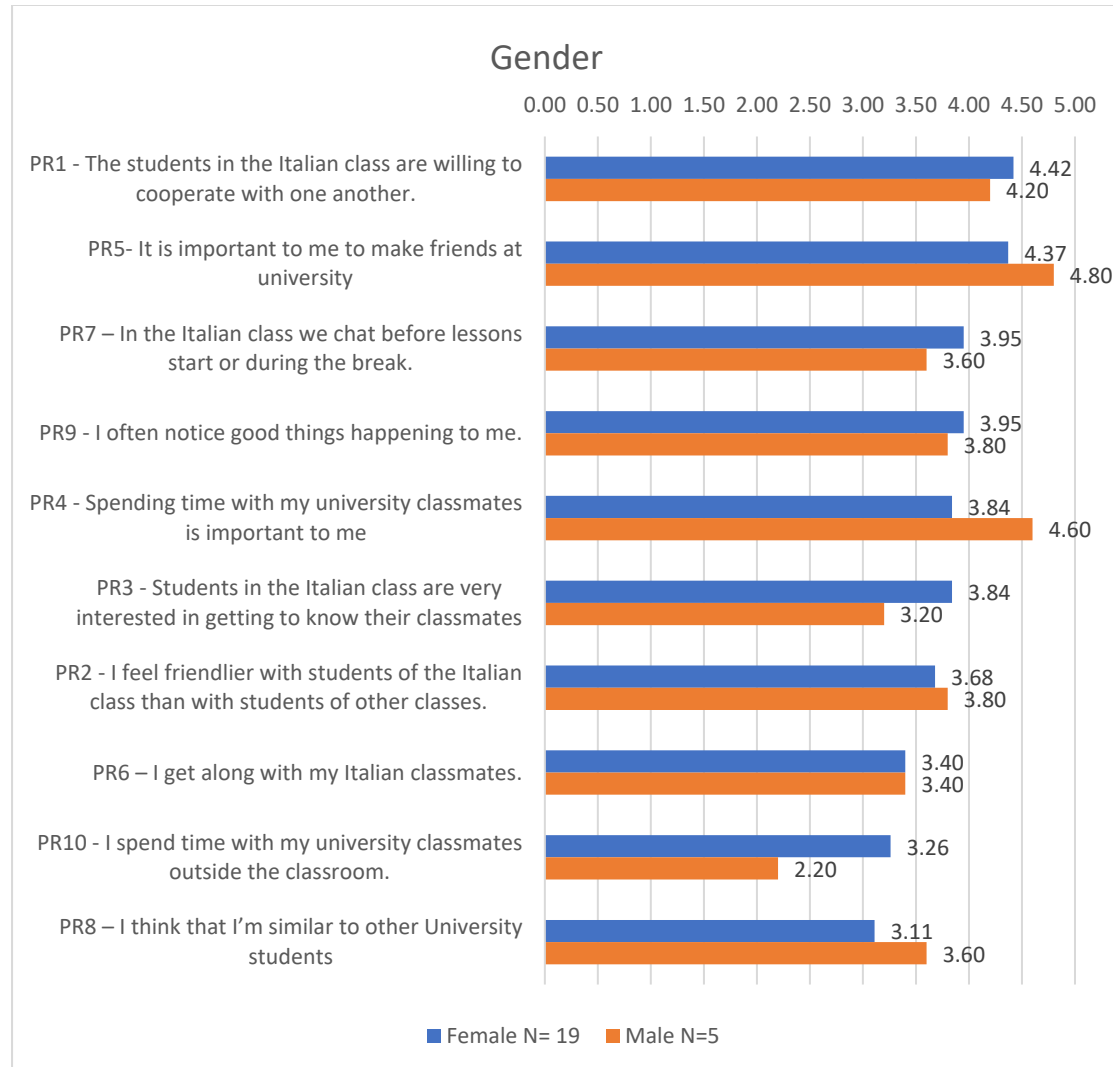
In analyzing students' perceptions of CC at the beginning of the 2021 semester, some sociodemographic trends were observed. Females found the Italian classroom to be more comfortable but less inclusive, indicating potential concerns with classroom dynamics. Age also influenced perceptions, with older students feeling more at ease and included, likely due to their greater life experiences. First-year students showed considerable enthusiasm for their classes, while second-year students were more self-conscious about speaking publicly. Non-working students had a more positive response than part-time working students, who no doubt faced additional commitments that impacted their engagement with university life. Finally, students with friends from work or university felt more comfortable and included in the class, highlighting the importance of social networks in shaping classroom experiences.

Regarding the three different learning modalities, respondents recognized the positive classroom climate, yet the HyFlex group showing the highest levels of agreement. This suggests that in the post-pandemic time, students appreciated the flexibility of HyFlex learning, which combines the benefits of in-person interaction with the convenience of online options, allowing them to choose daily the model that best suits their needs.

5.2.4 Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships

5.2.4.1 Results according to participants' sociodemographic characteristics

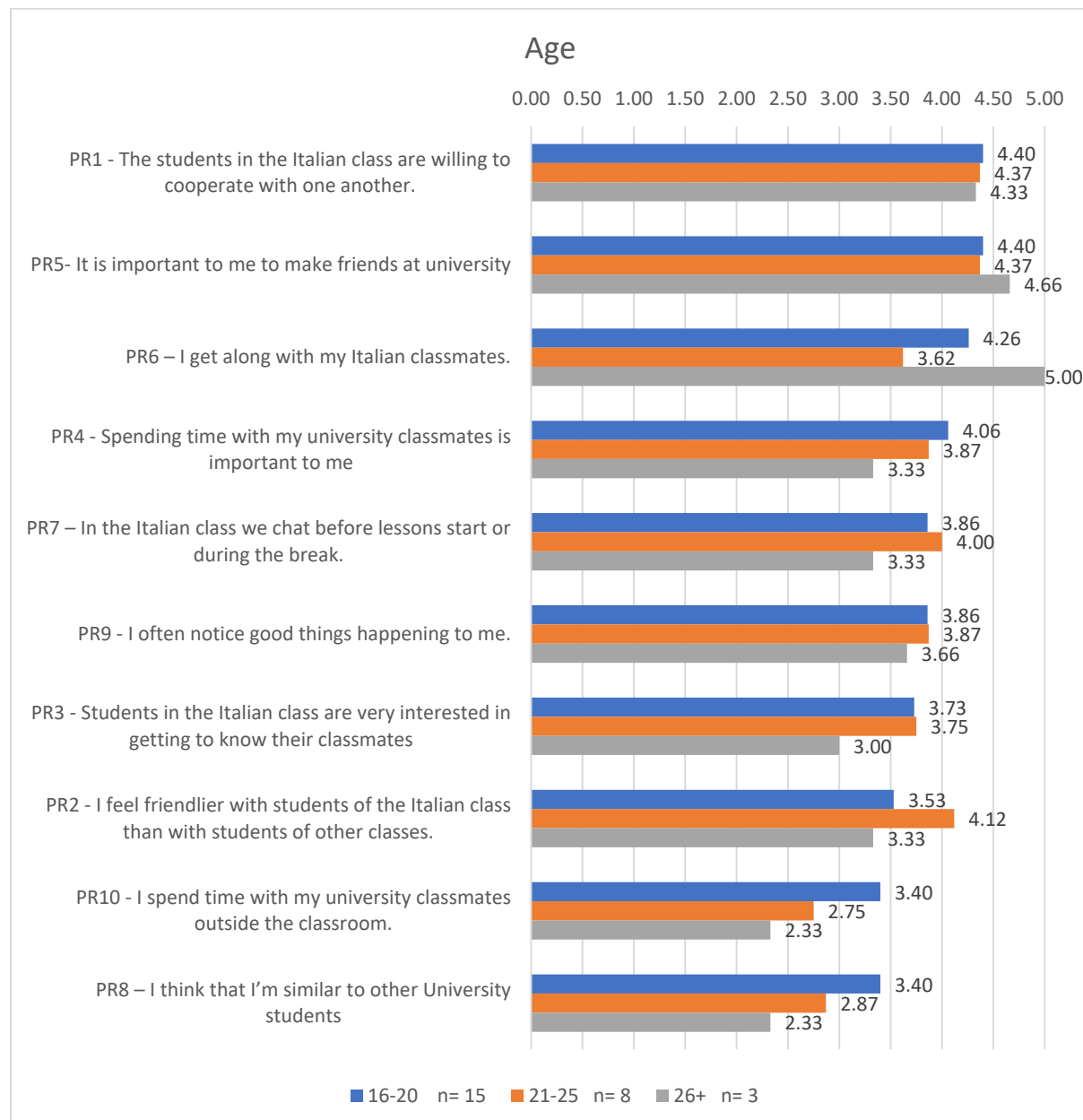
Figure 49: Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships by gender.



Gender appeared to have a limited influence on PR (male: $n=5$, overall mean: 3.96 vs. female: $n=19$, overall mean: 3.80). However, male students showed a preference for broader social interactions within the university, valuing the formation of friendships (PR5 = 4.80 vs. 4.37), and having a strong desire to spend time with classmates (PR4 = 4.60 vs. 3.84). Nonetheless, their actual participation in these activities was notably lower (PR10 = 2.20 vs. 3.26), indicating a gap between intention and engagement. In addition, female students were slightly more

involved in classroom dynamics (PR1 = 4.42 vs. 4.20), suggesting a stronger engagement with the immediate classroom environment.

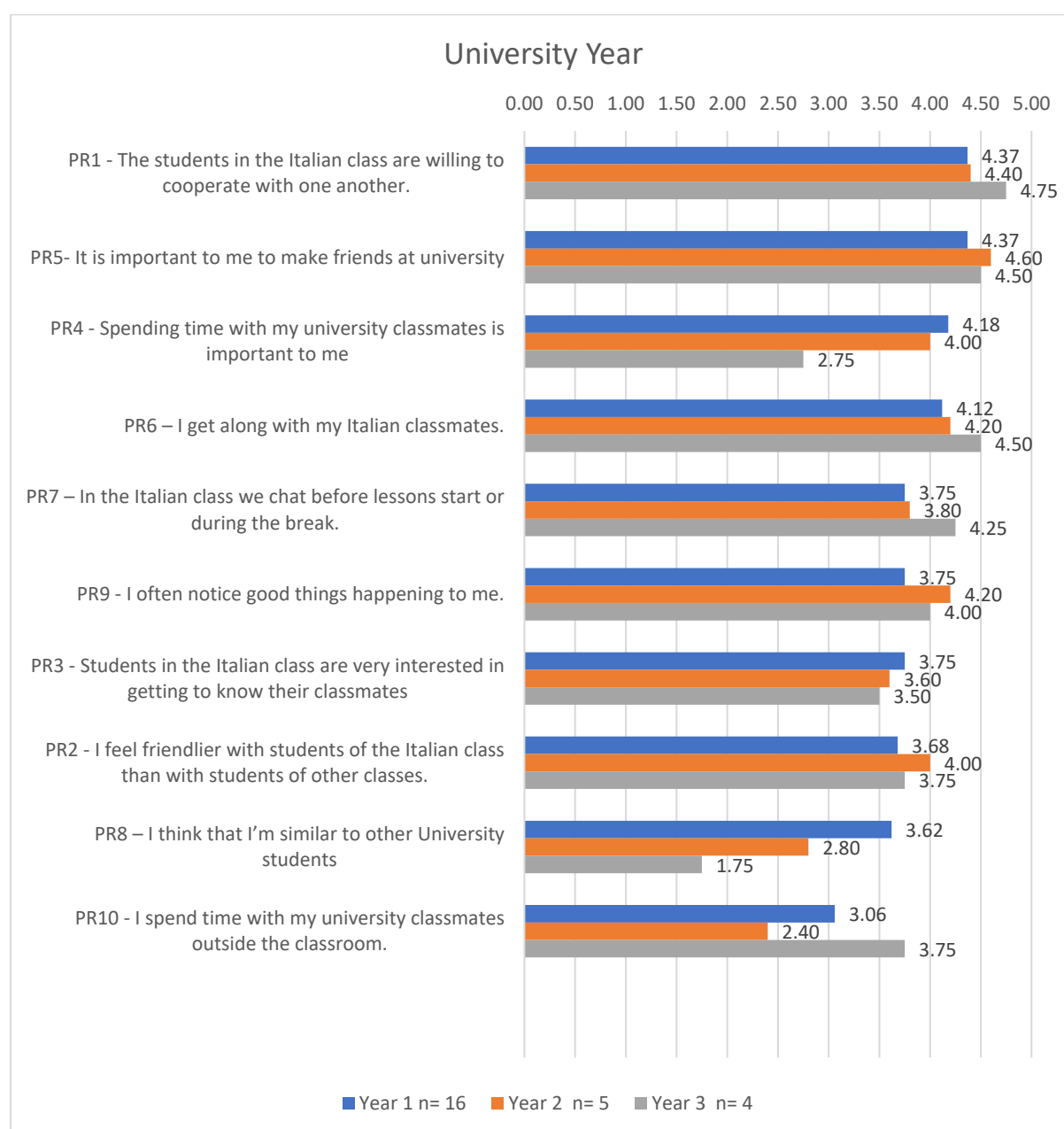
Figure 50: Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships by age.



In terms of age, the youngest cohort (16-20 years of age, n=15) consistently reported the most positive perceptions, with an overall mean of 3.89. The middle cohort (21-25 years of age, n=8) followed with a mean of 3.75, while the oldest students (+26 years of age, n=3) had the lowest mean of just 3.50. All three age cohorts highly rated the CD statement (PR1 = 4.40; 4.38; 4.33 respectively), suggesting a favorable classroom atmosphere that supported effective learning

in the Italian class. There was a unanimous strong desire for friendship across cohorts (PR5 = 4.40; 4.37; 4.66 respectively), yet a significant gap between this desire and actual social engagement (PR10 = 3.40; 2.75; 2.33 respectively). The middle cohort placed the most value on the friendliness of their Italian class peers, compared to other classmates (PR2 = 4.12) and showed the most engagement in outside-class chats (PR7 = 4.00). Meanwhile, the oldest cohort scored the highest in getting along with Italian classmates (PR6 = 5.00), suggesting satisfaction with class interactions, despite a lower interest in deepening these acquaintances (PR3 = 3.00).

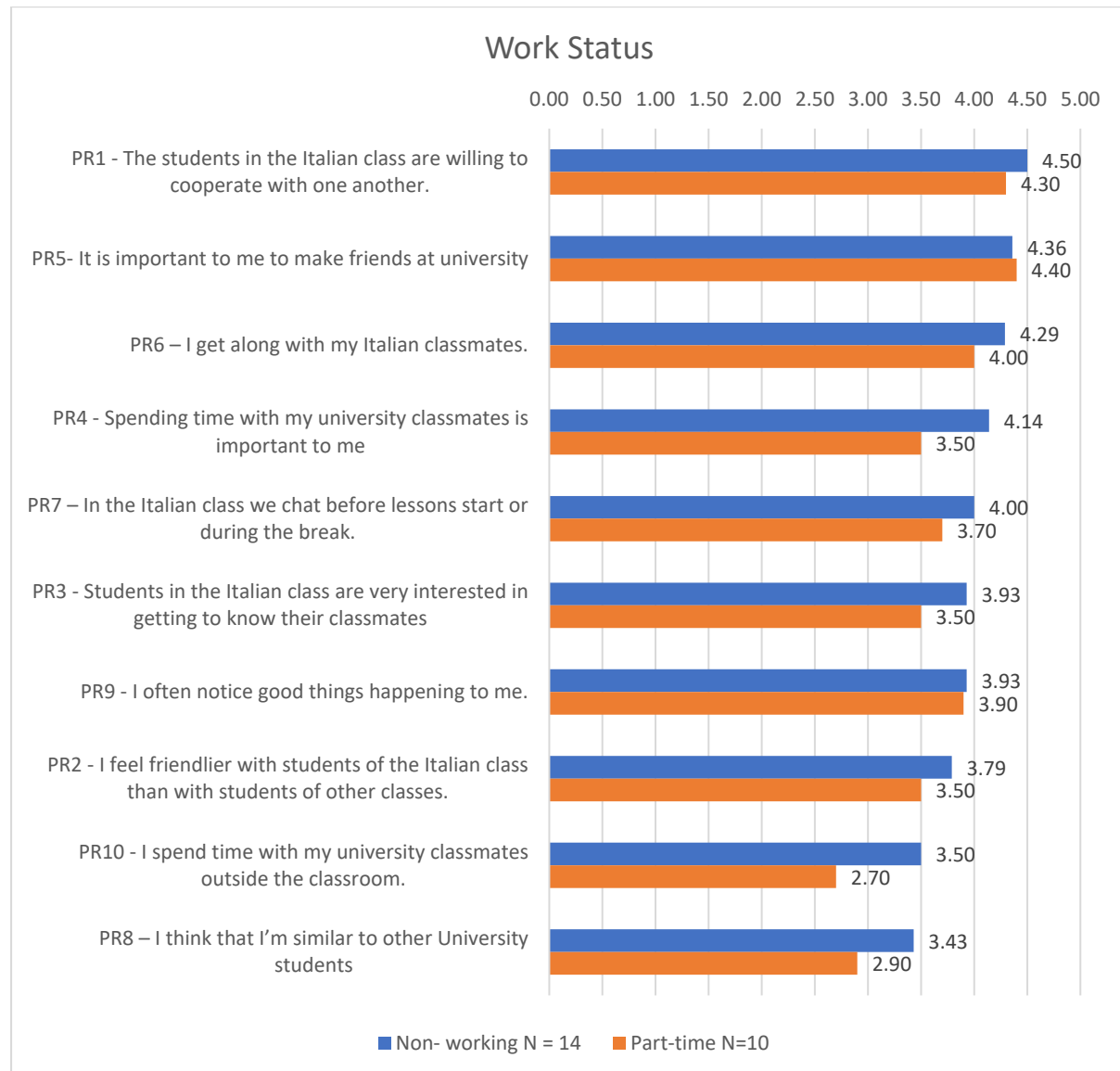
Figure 51: Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships by university year.



When examining the responses by year of enrolment, the second-year students (Y2, n=5) showed the highest overall mean at 3.94, followed by third-year students (Y3, n=4) at 3.87, and first-year students (Y1, n=16) with an overall mean of 3.83. They all agreed on the importance of collaboration (PR1 = 4.37 – 4.75), the desire for friendships (PR5 = 4.37 – 4.60), and peer engagement (PR6 = 4.12 – 4.50). Y2 students also enjoyed the company of their Italian classmates (PR2 = 4.00), while Y3 students were the most proactive in social interactions

outside class (PR7 = 4.25), likely benefiting from their extended time at the university. Meanwhile, Y1 students had the most positive outlook on friendship formation (PR4 = 4.18), perhaps due to their fresh perspective and commonalities with fellow newcomers.

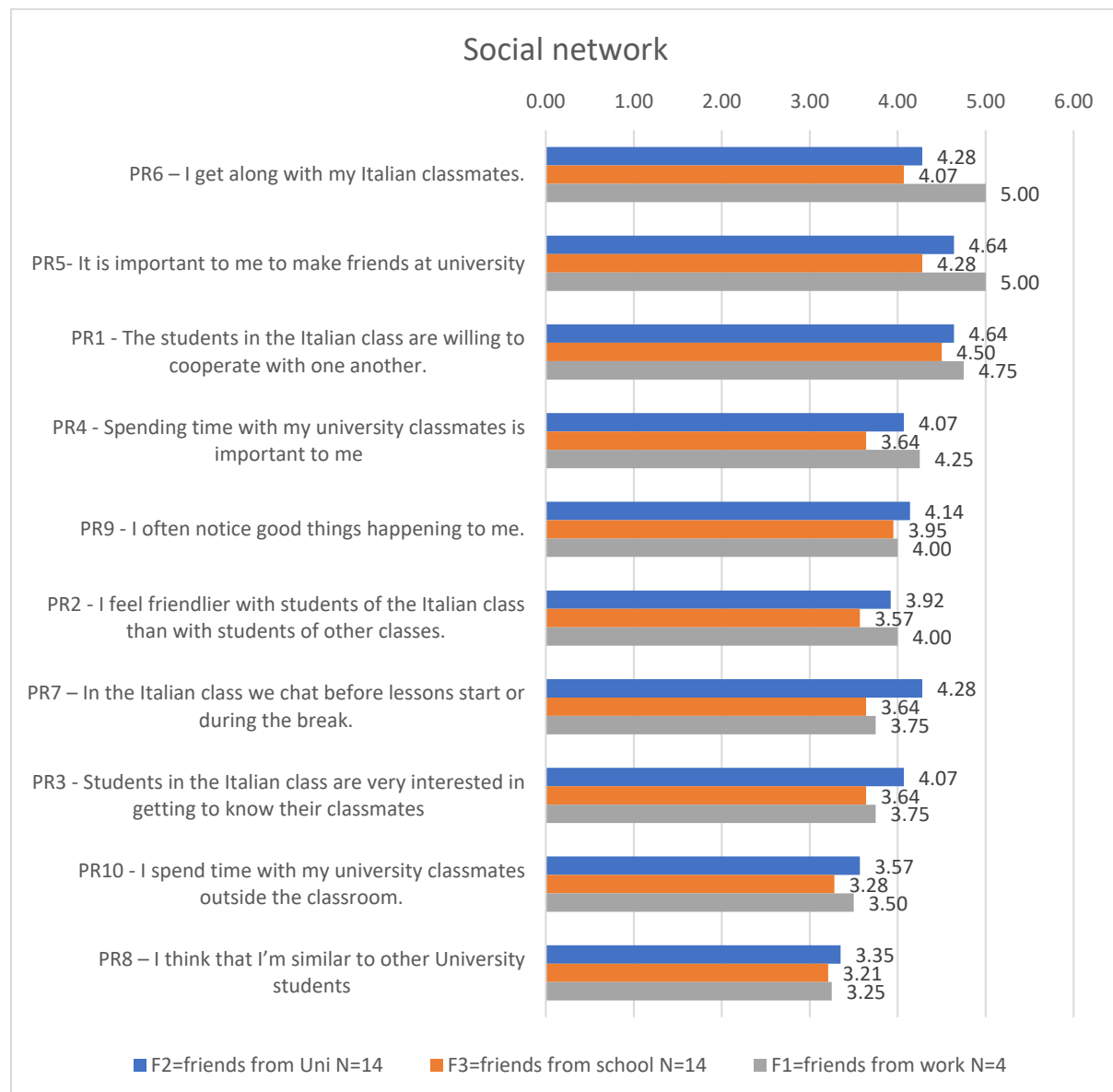
Figure 52: Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships by work status.



Students' working status significantly influenced their social connections at university and within the classroom, with non-working students (n=14, overall mean: 4.06) reporting more positive agreements than their part-time working colleagues (n=10, overall mean: 3.30). Non-working students demonstrated a higher readiness to interact with university peers (PR1 = 4.50 vs. 4.30) both during and outside class (PR7 = 4.00 vs. 3.70; PR4 = 4.14 vs. 3.50), also feeling

a stronger connection with their Italian class peers (PR6 = 4.29 vs. 4.00). This enhanced social engagement could be linked to their greater amount of free time, or to a feeling of closer affinity with their classmates. Notably, the impact of working status on students' social perceptions and activities in 2021 reflects similar trends observed the previous year.

Figure 53: Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships by social network.



Across all social network groups³⁴, students consistently valued the positive classroom dynamics (PR1 = 4.50 – 4.75) and friendliness among Italian classmates (PR6 = 4.07 – 5.00).

³⁴ Only two participants who do not have time for friends (mean: 3.20) answered the survey.

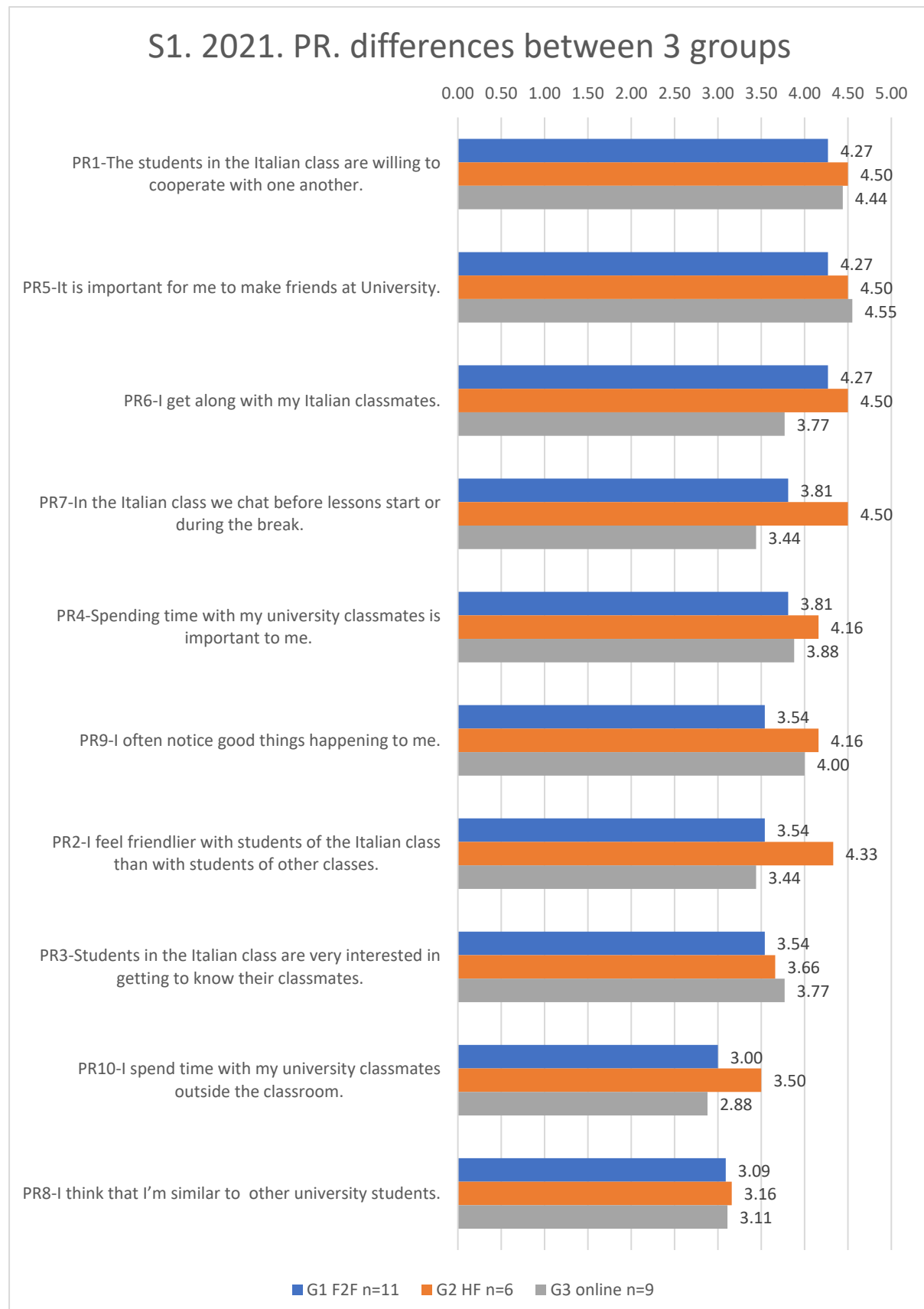
Their desire to make friends (PR5 = 4.28 – 5.00), highlighted the importance of a welcoming classroom environment regardless of students' existing social connections.

However, some differences emerged. Students with friends from university (F2: n=14) had the highest overall mean at 4.16. They demonstrated a significant preference for social interactions (PR7 = 4.28) and were more actively engaged in these interactions (PR3 = 4.07). Their positive outcomes might be attributed to their higher personal optimism (PR9 = 4.14), or to the support gained from university friendships, enhancing their confidence. Students with friends from work (F1, n=4) had the next highest overall mean at 4.12. They displayed strong enthusiasm for the university environment (PR4 = 4.25) and an exceptional eagerness to form new friendships (PR5 = 5.00). They also reported high levels of satisfaction (PR9 = 4.00) and felt friendlier with Italian classmates (PR2 = 4.00). This suggests that students with work-based friendships may be particularly motivated to expand their social networks within the university setting. Students with friends from school (F3, n=14) had the lowest overall mean at 3.72. This could indicate that having pre-existing school friendships do not represent a support system as strong as university friends.

These insights confirm the crucial role of social networks and friendships in enhancing students' university experience, as found in earlier surveys (see sections 4.2.4.2 and 4.3.4.2), impacting their social and academic engagement. This aligns with D'Orazzi and Hajek's (2021) findings on the influence of friendships on university students' lives, and reaffirms the patterns observed in the S1/2020 (see 4.2.4.2).

5.2.4.2 Results according to learning modality

Figure 54: Differences for PR comparing the three teaching modalities and S1/2020.



Students in the HyFlex group (G2, n=6) reported the highest overall mean at 4.00, followed by the online group (G3, n=9) at 3.82, while the face-to-face group (G1, n=11) had the lowest overall mean at just 3.81.

The HyFlex group gave positive perceptions for seven out of ten of the PR statements. They scored the CD statement highly, demonstrating strong social connections and collaboration (PR1 = 4.50). In terms of SC, they gave strong agreements for getting along with their classmates (PR6 = 4.50), engaging in pre-lesson chats (PR7 = 4.50), and for the perceived friendliness of their classmates (PR2 = 4.33). They also gave agreements for most of the SU statements, with a pronounced interest in forming friendships at university (PR5 = 4.50), and interacting with classmates (PR4 = 4.16), despite not actually achieving this (PR10 = 3.50). This group also displayed an optimistic perspective (PR9 = 4.16). These positive perceptions were confirmed in some interviews. For example, one student from this group, Teodoro, credited the role of group communicative activities in facilitating these connections, making social networking more natural and integrated.

So, I think if these exercises weren't in place, I think this social networking wouldn't really have been easily facilitated. I think it was much easier to do that with these exercises because it makes it more natural. You get used to interacting where not everyone is used to it.

On the other hand, the students in the face-to-face group showed strong agreement with only three of the ten PR statements. These focused on students' cooperation (PR1 = 4.27), university socialization (PR5 = 4.27), and feeling a deep connection with their peers (PR6 = 4.27). These agreements appeared to have been aided by the group class activities, and one student from this group, Leonora, remarked on the ease of establishing initial connections through collaborative tasks:

It was kind of like easier to make a first connection with people, if you'd need to talk to them about something [...] The tasks students had to solve together and the fact they were moved around for their completion facilitate the peer contact.

Similarly, the online group agreed with only three of the ten PR statements, highlighting the significance of student's cooperation (PR1= 4.44), interpersonal connections at the university (PR5 = 4.55), and optimism (PR9 = 4.00). Not surprisingly, this group also experienced some of the lowest levels of agreement with four of the PR statements - regarding informal conversation engagement (PR7 = 3.44), feelings of connection or support by classmates (PR6 = 3.77), perceptions of peer friendliness (PR2 = 3.44) and the lowest actual time spent with peers (PR10 = 2.88), pointing to the unique challenges of fostering connections in a fully online setting. In this regard, a student from this group, Katerina, observed that breakout rooms and specific assignments, like discussing favorite weekend activities, played a crucial role in developing closer connections among students, despite the virtual barriers: *you got to know people better or made better connections with people.* (See also 4.3.3).

In summary, the HyFlex group demonstrated the most robust social engagement, highlighted by active participation in informal conversations, high levels of cooperation, and a strong desire to build friendships, that was supported by positive perceptions of peer interaction and friendliness. The face-to-face group valued direct social interactions and connections with classmates, reflecting positively on their experiences, despite noting a lesser focus on developing deep friendships. Conversely, the online group faced challenges in fully realizing these connections, attributable to the constraints of the online learning format.

5.2.4.3 Concluding remarks

Regarding peer-relationships, sociodemographic characteristics played a significant role in shaping students' perceptions and experiences in this survey. Male students showed a preference for broader social interactions, and female students demonstrated stronger

engagement in classroom dynamics. Younger students generally reported more positive perceptions of PR, with all age cohorts valuing the classroom dynamics and desiring friendships, despite varying levels of actual engagement. Year of enrolment and working status also influenced social connections, with non-working students showing the most positive outlook on peer interactions. Students' existing social networks significantly influenced their PR, with those having university friends showing the most positive outcomes for social interactions and engagement.

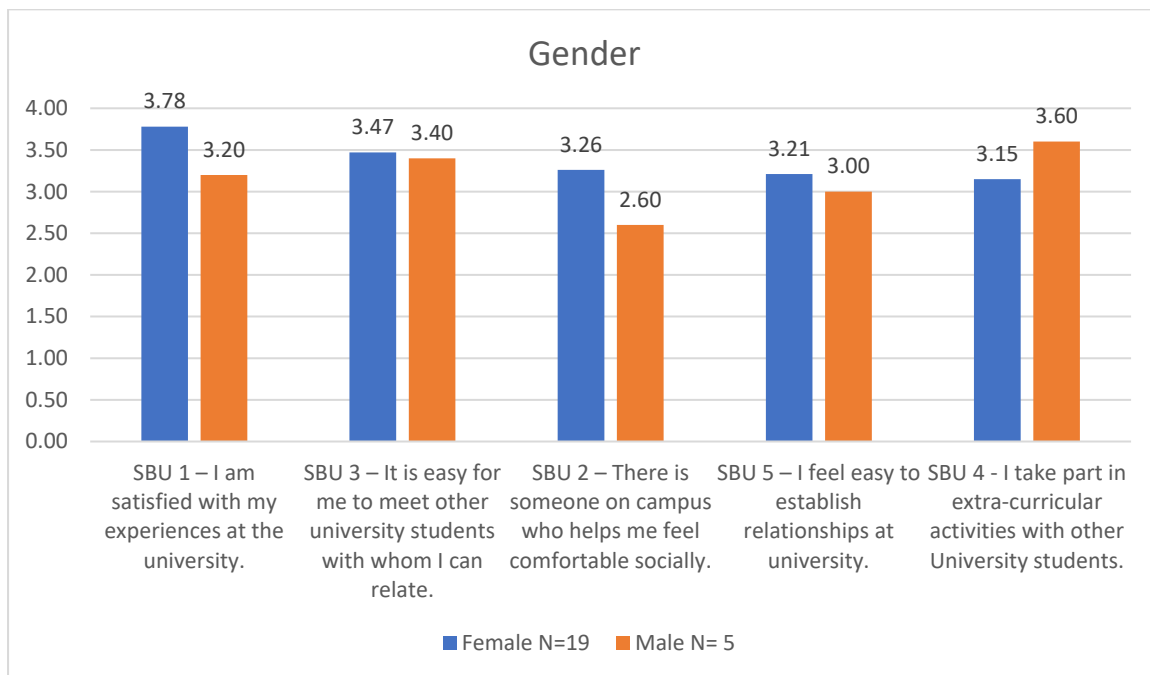
Examining the three learning modalities, the HyFlex group demonstrated the strongest social connections and collaboration. They showed particular interest in forming friendships, engaging in pre-lesson chats, and perceived a friendly atmosphere among their peers. The face-to-face group strongly agreed on the importance of cooperation, university socialization, and in feeling connected to their peers, largely facilitated by in-class activities and group work. The online group, while valuing cooperation and interpersonal connections, faced unique challenges in fostering deep connections, reporting lower levels of informal engagement and feelings of peer support.

5.2.5 Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging

5.2.5.1 Results according to participants' sociodemographic characteristics

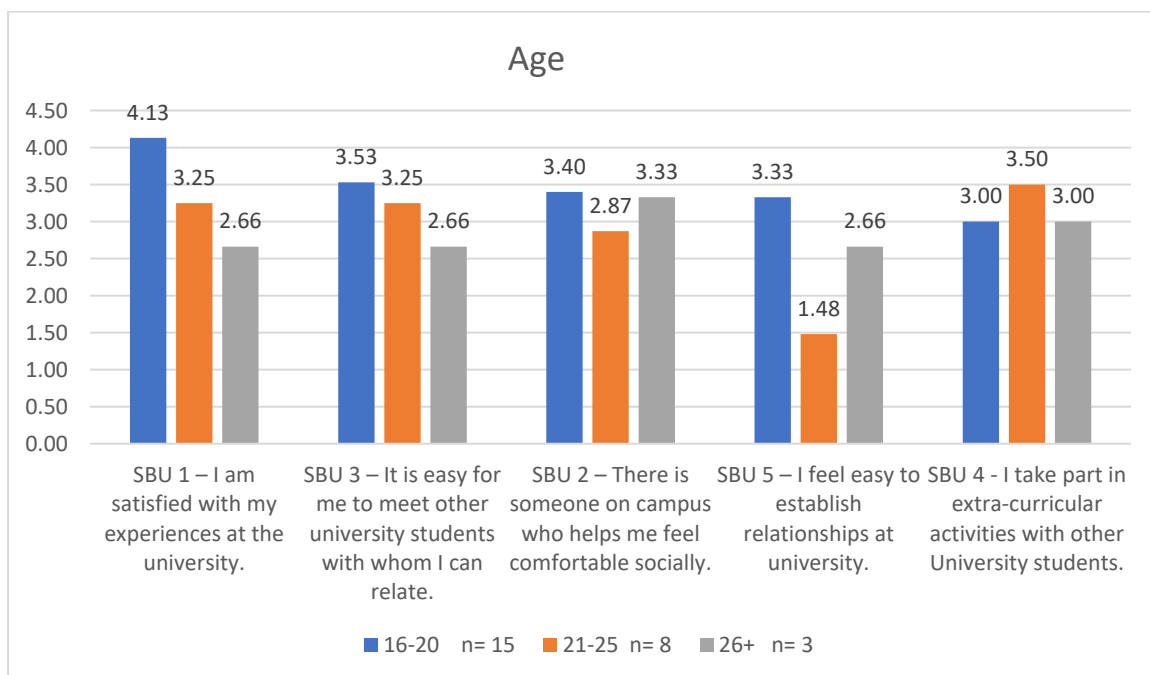
As shown in Table 1 above, there was an overall disagreement with the five statements related to SBU. As a result, the analysis in this section will be kept brief, while outlining some important trends.

Figure 55: Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging by gender.



Despite the overall lack of agreement, females (n=19, mean: 3.37) gave slightly less negative responses than males (n=10, mean: 3.16), except in terms of engagement with extracurricular activities (SBU4 = 3.15 for females vs. 3.60 for males).

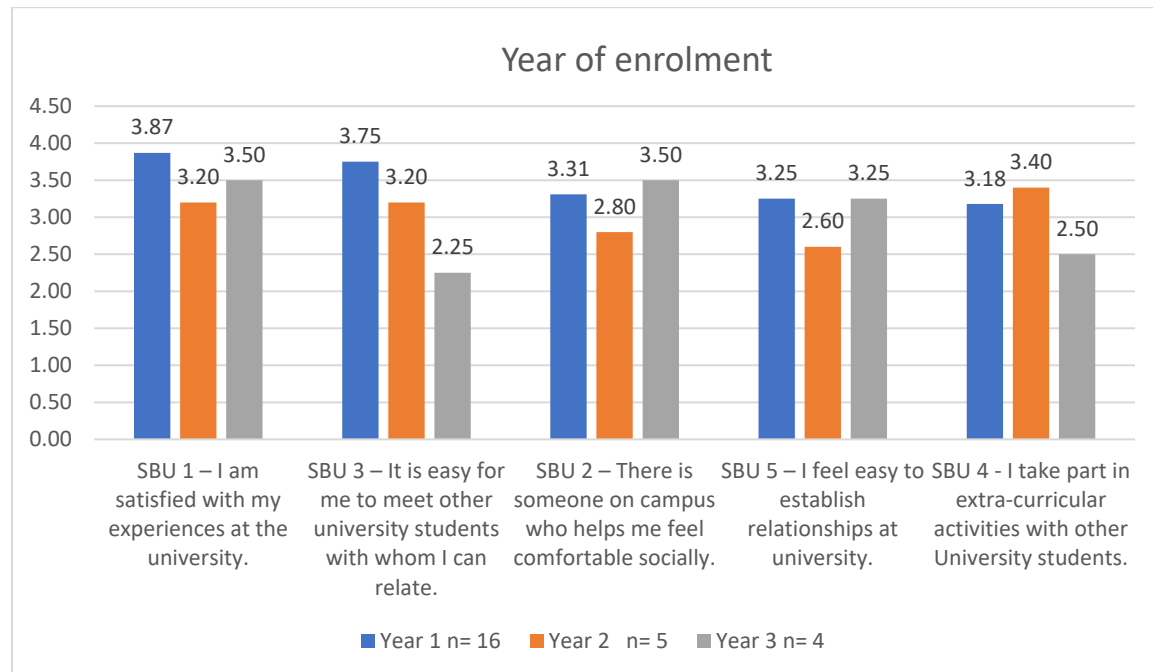
Figure 56: Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging by age.



Age appeared to have some impact on SBU, with the youngest cohort (16-20 years of age, n=15) showing the highest mean (3.47). They were one of the only cohorts to report an

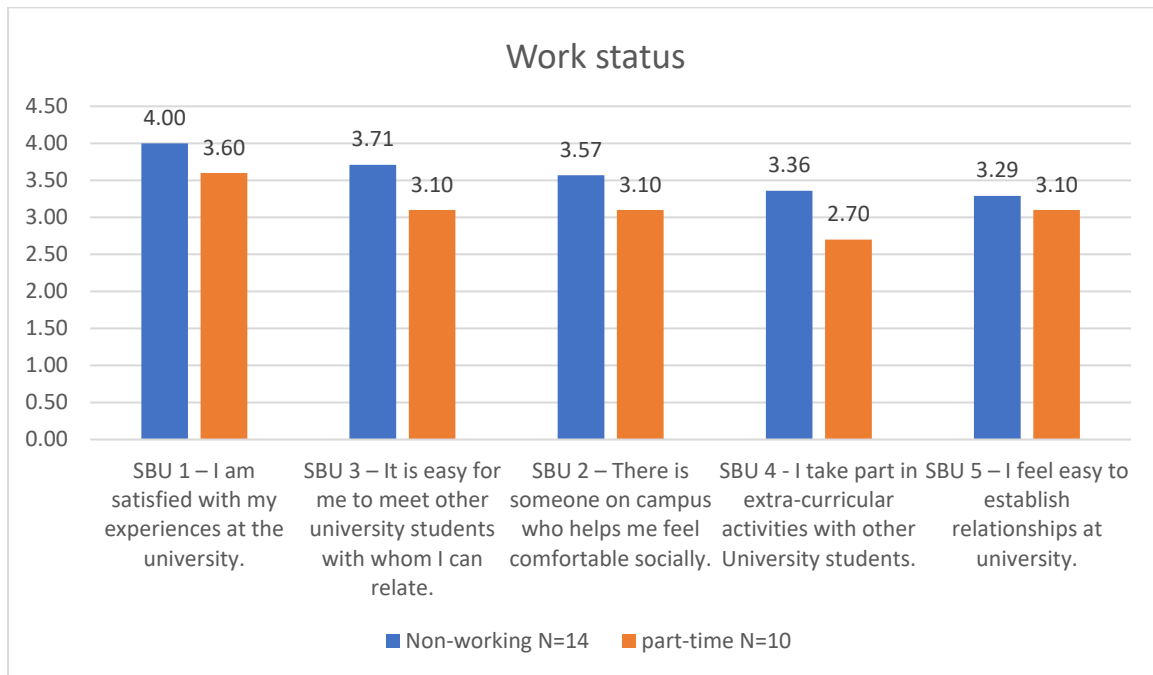
agreement with an SBU statement, reporting satisfaction with their university experiences (SBU1 = 4.13). The oldest cohort (26+ years of age, n=3) showed a poor response, with a mean of 2.86, while the middle cohort (21-25 years of age, n=8) reported the lowest mean at 2.67.

Figure 57: Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging by year of enrolment.



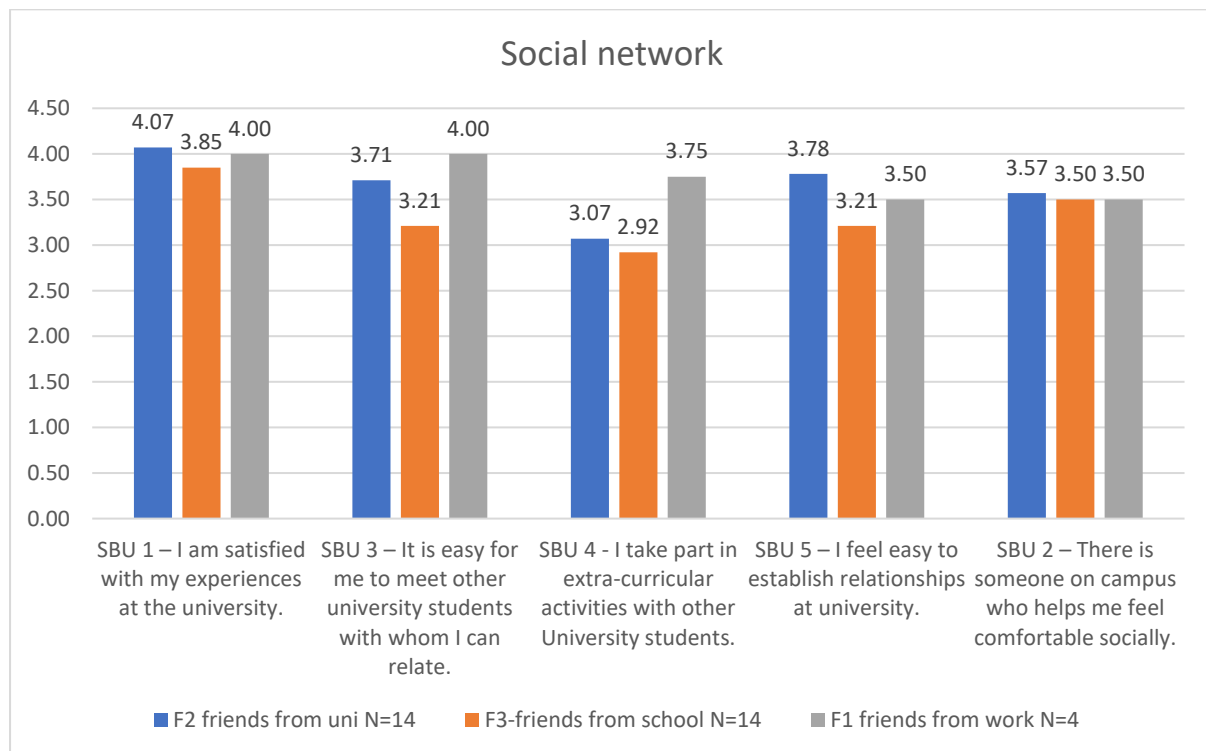
Year of enrolment also had an impact on SBU, with first-year students (Y1, n=16; mean: 3.67) appearing less negative, potentially due to the excitement of their new experiences. While second year (Y2, n=5) showed more negative responses (mean: 3.06), it was third-year students (Y3, n=4) who were the most negative (mean: 2.80). This may reflect a comparison that they made with earlier experiences at university, potentially conducted prior to the university lockdown.

Figure 58: Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging by work status.



Work status had a strong influence on SBU, with non-working students (n=14) garnering a higher mean (3.78) than their part-time working peers (n=10, mean: 3.12). These non-working students were one of the only cohorts to reach an agreement level for an SBU statement, reporting a score of 4.00 for satisfaction with their university experiences (SBU1 = 4.00).

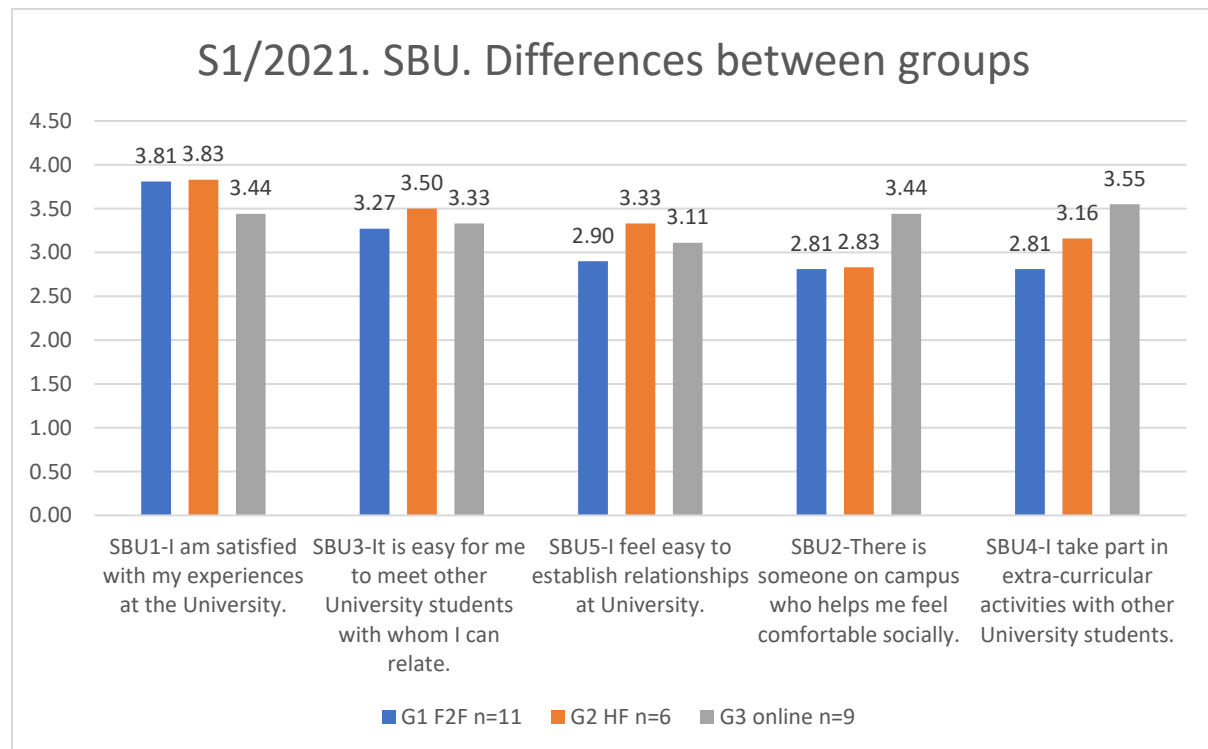
Figure 59: Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging by social network.



Students with university friends (F2, n=14, mean: 3.64) or with a strong support network at work (F1, n=4, mean: 3.75) reported higher satisfaction levels (SBU1 = F2:4.07; F1: 4.00). F1 found it relatively easy to connect with fellow students, suggesting that diverse social networks can positively impact students' sense of belonging and integration in the university environment.

5.2.5.2 Results according to learning modality

Figure 60: Sense of Belonging, comparison of the three teaching modalities.



Students across all three teaching modalities reported similarly poor levels of SBU, suggesting that physical presence on campus alone may not be sufficient to foster a strong SBU. Interestingly, the online group (G3, n=9) showed a slightly higher overall mean score at 3.37, possibly due to their higher participation to the extracurricular activities³⁵ (SBU4 = 3.55). The HyFlex group (G2, n=6) followed, with an overall mean of 3.33, while the lowest overall mean score, at 3.12, was achieved by the face-to-face group (G1, n=11).

Despite the campus being re-opened for access, the responses to the statement regarding taking part in extra-curricular activities still did not reach full agreement by any of the groups. Here there was an option for additional comments regarding joining student organizations. From these comments, it was clear that just over half (n=15, 57.7%) decided not to join, mainly due to time constraints, or to commuting or study commitments. Conversely, of the students

³⁵ Many online students were actually present on campus but decided to follow Italian only online as they reported during classes.

who joined an organization (n=11, 42.3%), motivations included to pursue personal interests, or to make new friends, illustrating the complex decision-making process behind student involvement in campus life, as discussed in the literature (Winstone et al., 2022) (see 2.3.2).

These poor SBU scores may reflect the lingering effects of recent lockdown measures and continued limited campus access. This aligns with prior research on the impact of digital and physical learning environments on student connections (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015, pp. 35-36; Snow & Scherman, 2021). However, other factors may have been at play, such as age, as in the case of one student from the online group who wrote as an additional comment that: *As a mature age student (31 years old) I am the minority in any classroom and so it can be difficult to connect with the much younger students.*

5.2.5.3 Concluding remarks

The participants in this survey were very reticent in their agreement with the SBU statements. However, the negative trends were similar to those seen in S1/2020, and the survey was conducted in the initial two weeks of the semester, with students still adjusting to their new environment after a long absence from the campus. This seems to point towards a consistent challenge in fostering a sense of community within the university setting at the beginning of a year.

Sociodemographic insights reveal that females, younger students, first-year students, non-working students and students with university friends, or with strong workplace support networks, displayed fewer negative perceptions of SBU. Furthermore, the analysis across different learning modalities shows uniformity in the lack of agreement with the surveyed statements

5.2.6 Concluding remarks on Survey 1

S1/2021 was conducted after the first two weeks of teaching, when some Covid restrictions were still in place, and access to some campus areas remained restricted. The analysis of its data reveals a significant contrast between students' perceptions of CC, PR and SBU, and these results can be partially attributable to this mutable environment.

The results point to a positive perception of CC across all learning modalities, with the HyFlex group showing the highest levels of agreement. This indicates that students in this post-pandemic period obviously respond well to the flexibility it offered them. Some differences were observed in terms of gender, with females finding the Italian classroom more comfortable, but less inclusive than males. Age also played a role, with older students feeling more at ease and included. First-year students showed considerable enthusiasm for their classes, while second-year students were more self-conscious about speaking publicly. Non-working students had more positive responses than their part-time working peers, and those with friends from work or university felt more comfortable and included in class, highlighting the importance of social networks for a positive CC.

Positive trends were also seen for about half of the PR statements, with students expressing an eagerness to form new friendships within the university context, particularly in the classroom, although they faced challenges in dedicating the time to build relationships outside the classroom. Again, it was the HyFlex group that consistently reported the most positive responses, underscoring the importance of flexible learning options that facilitate social interactions. The face-to-face group, while appreciating their classroom experiences, reported challenges in forming peer-relationships outside the classroom. Interestingly, the online group, despite having fewer in-person encounters, showed a preference for social interactions and reported some social support.

The findings for SBU indicate a more cautious and undecided response, as seen also in S1/2020, indicating a consistent challenge in fostering a sense of community early in the year. Sociodemographic insights reveal that females, younger students, first-year students, non-working students, and those with university friends or strong workplace support networks displayed fewer negative perceptions of SBU. The analysis across different learning modalities showed a uniformity in response. The persisting Covid restrictions and the slowness of the reopening of the campus, likely contributing to this disconnection.

5.3 What are these perceptions at the end of Semester 1, 2021?

5.3.1 Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

Regarding the second survey administered at the end of semester 2021, out of 31 responses only 23 were complete. In addition, there were only two male respondents, two from the 26+ years of age category, and just one full-time working student. As a result, in the sociodemographic analysis, gender will not be discussed, nor will the data for the older, full-time working students. In addition, as only one student from the online group responded to this survey³⁶, this group will not be considered in the analysis according to modality. The data for all these excluded elements can be found in Appendix 4.2 for reference.

5.3.2 Snapshot of overall responses

Table 11 offers an overview of the responses, listing the overall means for each statement, ordered by degree of agreement. Respondents agreed on ten items as in previous surveys, the consensus mainly pertained to their perceptions of CC and PR. However, a positive perception of the university context indicates an overall improvement from the start of semester.

Table 11: General snapshot of Participants' responses in Survey 2/2021.

³⁶ It is possible that the very low response reflects a sense of detachment from the students doing Italian completely online.

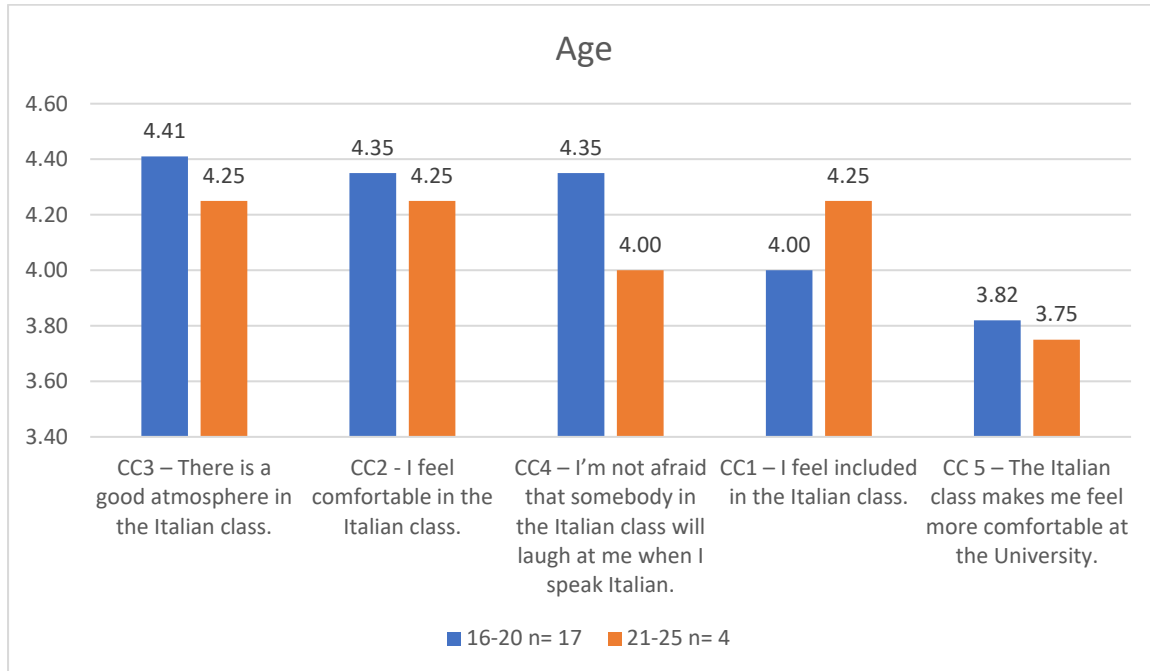
Count 23	mean	sd
PR6 – I get along with my Italian classmates.	4.39	0.58
CC3 – There is a good atmosphere in the Italian class.	4.39	0.58
CC2 – I feel comfortable in the Italian class.	4.39	0.89
PR7 – In the Italian class we chat before lessons start or during the break.	4.34	0.57
CC4 – I'm not afraid that somebody in the Italian class will laugh at me when I speak Italian	4.34	0.93
PR1 – The students in the Italian class are willing to cooperate with one another.	4.21	0.73
CC1 – I feel included in the Italian class.	4.08	0.59
PR5 – It is important to me to make friends at university.	4.04	0.92
SBU1 – I am satisfied with my experiences at the university.	4.00	0.67
CC5 – The Italian class makes me feel more comfortable at the university.	3.78	0.67
SBU2 – There is someone on campus who helps me feel comfortable socially.	3.78	1.04
PR2 – I feel friendlier with students of the Italian class than with students of other classes.	3.73	1.13
PR9 – I often notice good things happening to me.	3.69	0.76
PR4 – Spending time with my university classmates is important to me.	3.65	1.33
PR3 – Students in the Italian class are very interested in getting to know their classmates	3.60	0.94
SBU3 – It is easy for me to meet other University students with whom I can relate	3.47	1.08
PR8 – I think that I'm similar to other University students	3.39	0.72
PR10 – I spend time with my university classmates outside the classroom.	3.13	1.28
SBU5 – I feel easy to establish relationships at university.	3.04	1.22
SBU4 – I take part in extra-curricular activities with other University students.	2.73	1.13
DOF – I have made friends in this class.	4.04	0.70

In 2021, the DOF shows complete agreement, indicating that the majority of students have made friends in the Italian class (see section 4.3.2).

5.3.3 Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate

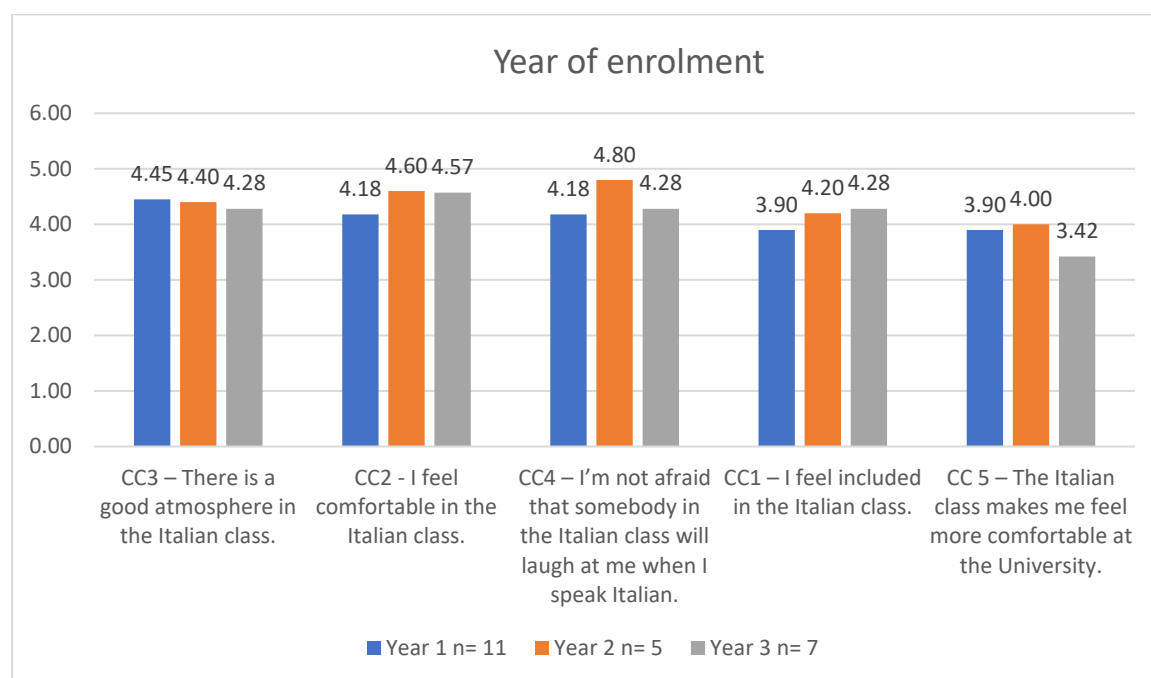
5.3.3.1 Results according to the participants' sociodemographic characteristics

Figure 61: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate by age.



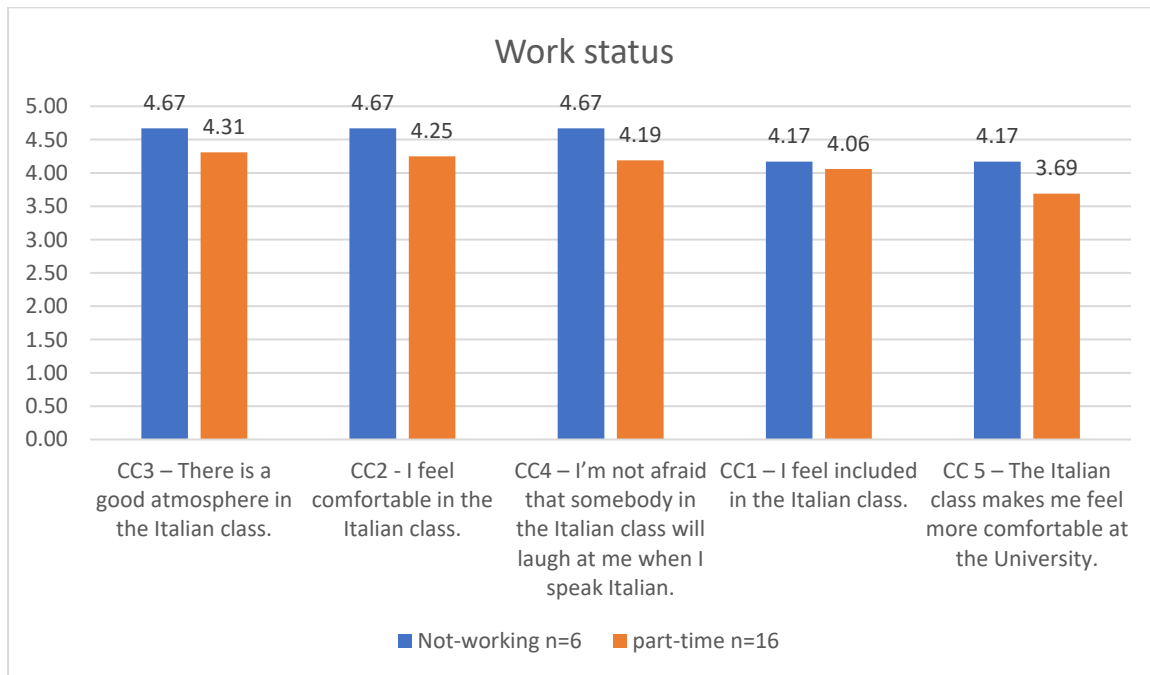
Both age cohorts reported positive perceptions across all statements, with four out of five achieving scores of 4.00 or above, reinforcing observations of a positive atmosphere, that was comfortable, inclusive, and inspired confidence. Comparing the two, the youngest cohort (16-20 years of age: n=17, mean = 4.18) showed higher levels of agreement than the middle cohort (21-25 years of age: n=4, mean = 4.10).

Figure 62: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate by year of enrolment.



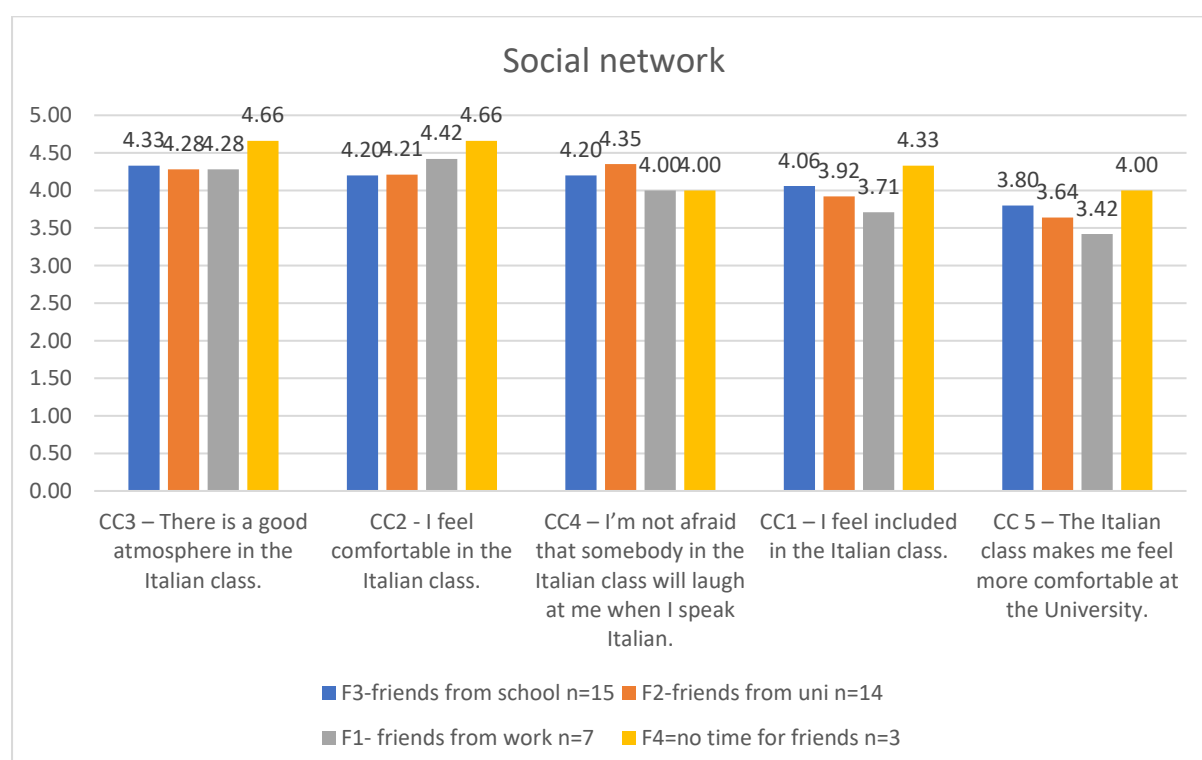
Y2 students (n=5; mean: 4.60) consistently displayed more positive perceptions in various aspects of classroom climate, particularly in feeling comfortable in the Italian class (CC2 = 4.60) and confidence in speaking (CC4 = 4.80). Y3 students (n=7; mean: 4.35) displayed a positive outlook, especially in feeling included (CC1 = 4.28), suggesting growing confidence with university progression. Y1 students (n=11; mean: 4.08), while also generally positive, perceived a particularly favorable classroom atmosphere (CC3 = 4.45). These findings, consistent across surveys, underscore Y2's appreciation for class activities, atmosphere, and peer-relationships in the Italian class.

Figure 63: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate by work status.



In the analysis of work status, it is evident that non-working students (n=6; mean: 4.47) outperformed their part-time working counterparts (n=16; mean: 4.10) across all five CC statements. They demonstrated consistently higher agreement, with ratings ranging from 4.17 for CC5 and CC1 to 4.67 for CC2, CC3, and CC4. While part-time working students also expressed positive perceptions of the classroom environment, their assessments were marginally lower, particularly regarding the Italian class's impact on overall university comfort (CC5 = 3.69). This comparison underscores the potential impact of work commitments on students' ability to fully engage and feel integrated within the classroom setting, as previously observed.

Figure 64: Participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate by social network.

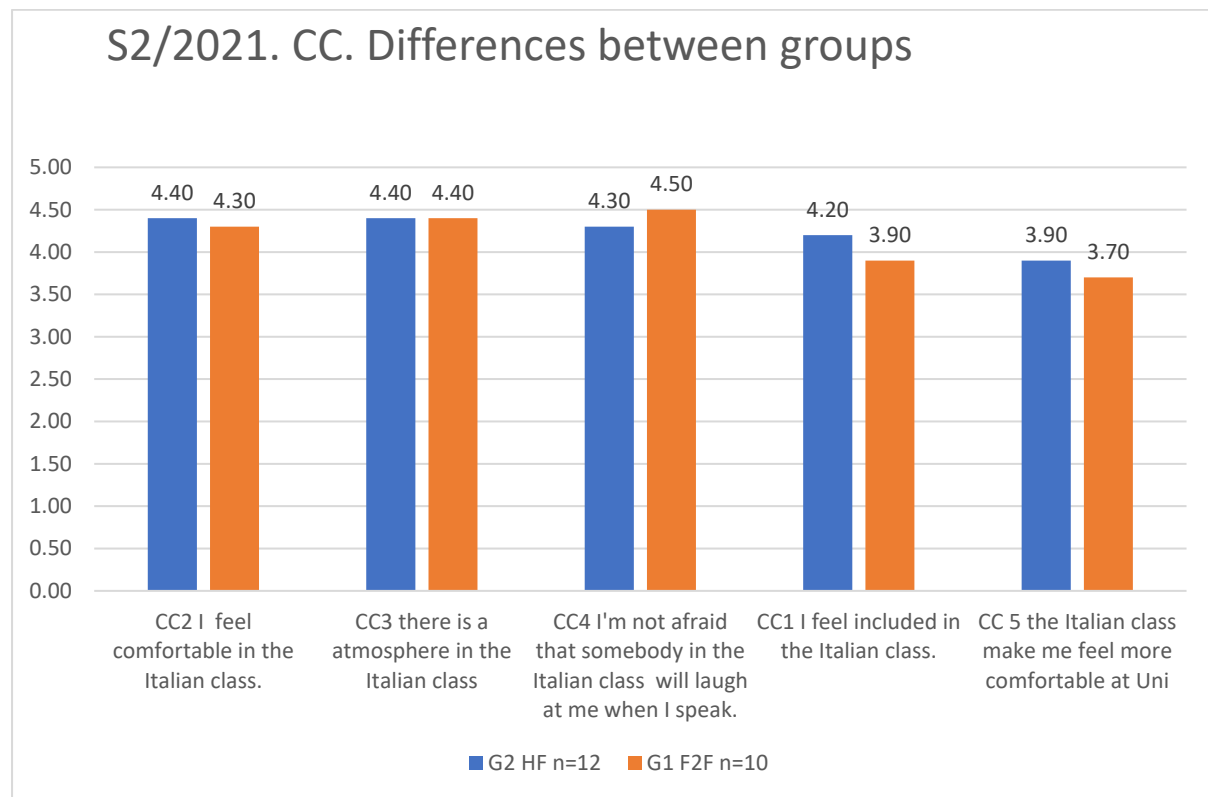


Regarding social networks, responses were generally positive across all cohorts. Students with limited time for socializing (F4, n=3) garnered the highest overall mean at 4.33, suggesting that the classroom may have acted as a substitute comfort zone for them. This group is followed by those with friends from school (F3, n=15; mean=4.25), those with university friends (F2, n=14; mean: 4.08), and lastly those with friends from the workplace (F1, n=7; mean=3.97).

The two largest groups, F3 and F2, generally showed agreement with the CC items, reflecting a positive experience in the Italian classroom environment (CC5, F3=3.80; F2=3.64). However, for these groups, the Italian class does not seem to play a significant role in their broader university experience, having already social experiences elsewhere.

5.3.3.2 Results according to learning modality

Figure 65: S2/2021 with two participants' learning modalities results.



The survey results provide insightful similarities and distinctions between the HyFlex group (G2, n=12, mean: 4.24) and the face-to-face group (G1, n=10, mean: 4.16). As only one student from the online group responded to this survey the group is not considered in this analysis.

Both groups demonstrated a high level of comfort in the Italian class environment (CC2: G2 = 4.40 and G1 = 4.30), with G1 showing a particularly strong agreement regarding confidence (CC4 = 4.50). This suggests that the physical presence and interactive nature of face-to-face learning may have enhanced students' confidence in verbal participation. Additionally, both groups equally valued the classroom atmosphere (CC3 = 4.40), indicating engaging teaching methods were used across modalities. Interestingly, HyFlex students reported marginally higher comfort in the Italian class overall (CC2 = 4.40 vs. 4.30). Despite these differences, both groups appreciated the engaging and supportive teaching methods that

created a friendly and non-competitive learning environment. Interviews further corroborated these findings, with students highlighting the benefits of interactive activities: “...*we had like lots of activities with like partnered up and sometimes, we got moved around* (Leonore G1), and personal interactions in the classroom: “...*that's what I personally like a lot about [...] roleplay with a classmate or to create a scenario or dialogue. [...] that was my highlight with Italian.* (Teodoro G2)

The HyFlex students, however, reported challenges in online engagement, echoing difficulties in participating in discussions and interpreting nonverbal cues, which underscored a preference for in-person classes for better peer interaction. As one student from the HyFlex group says: *I definitely prefer being in class.* (Margherita G2)

These insights align with previous findings on the benefits of face-to-face and HyFlex modalities, as detailed in section 5.3.1, and reflect previously observed broader trends, underscoring the consistent positive impact of active and inclusive classroom strategies on student engagement and social connection.

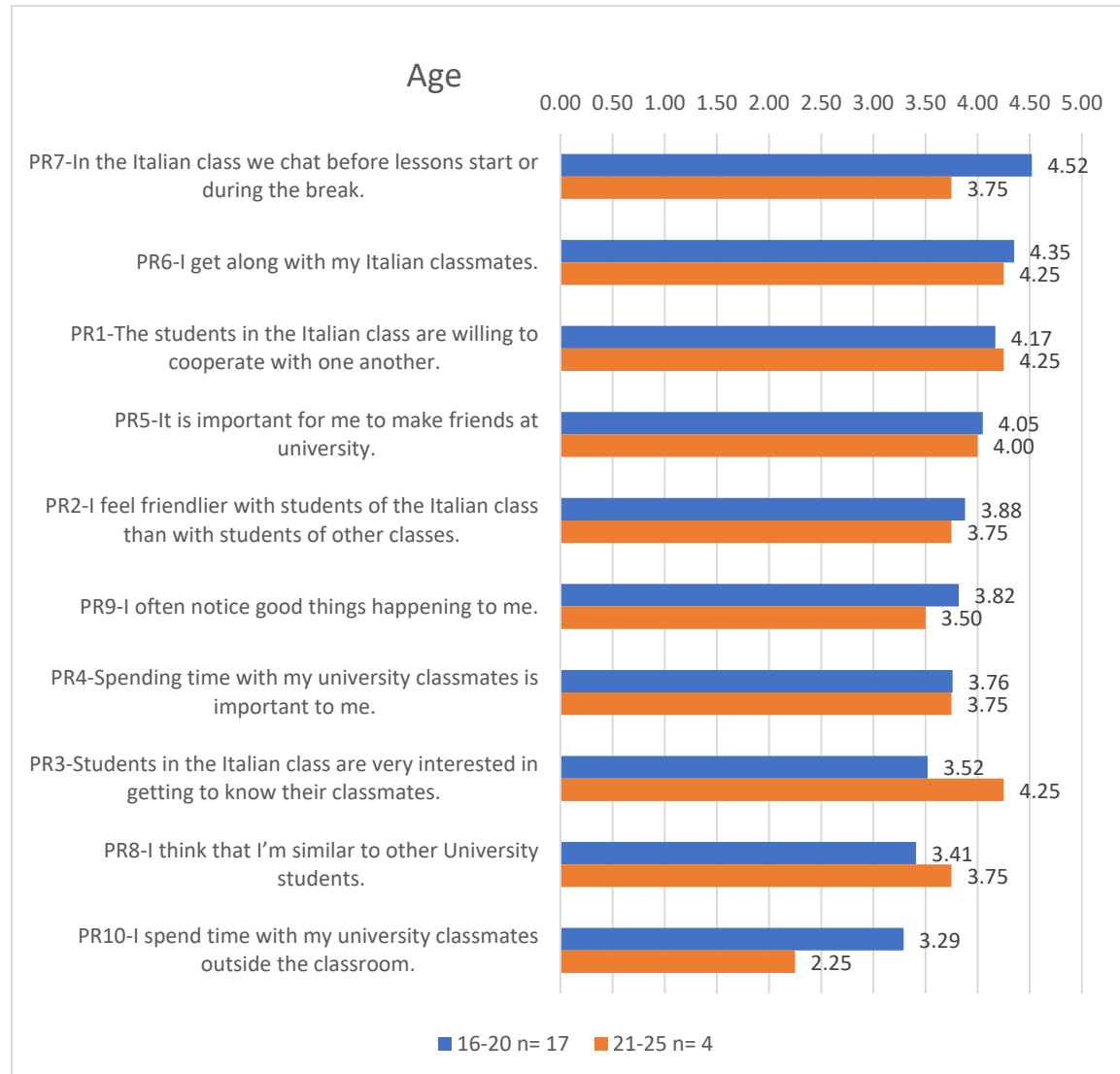
5.3.3.3 Concluding remarks

In S2/2021 respondents particularly valued the positive atmosphere, inclusion, and sense of security within the Italian classroom. Sociodemographic analysis reveals a consistent positive trend in CC perceptions across all cohorts. The most positive perceptions were found amongst younger students, those in their second year of study, those who were not employed, or had friends from school. The analysis of the perceptions in relation to the teaching modalities underscores the benefits of in-person classroom experiences in both the face-to-face and the Hyflex groups, which was supported by student interviews.

5.3.4 Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships

5.3.4.1 Results according to the participants' sociodemographic characteristics

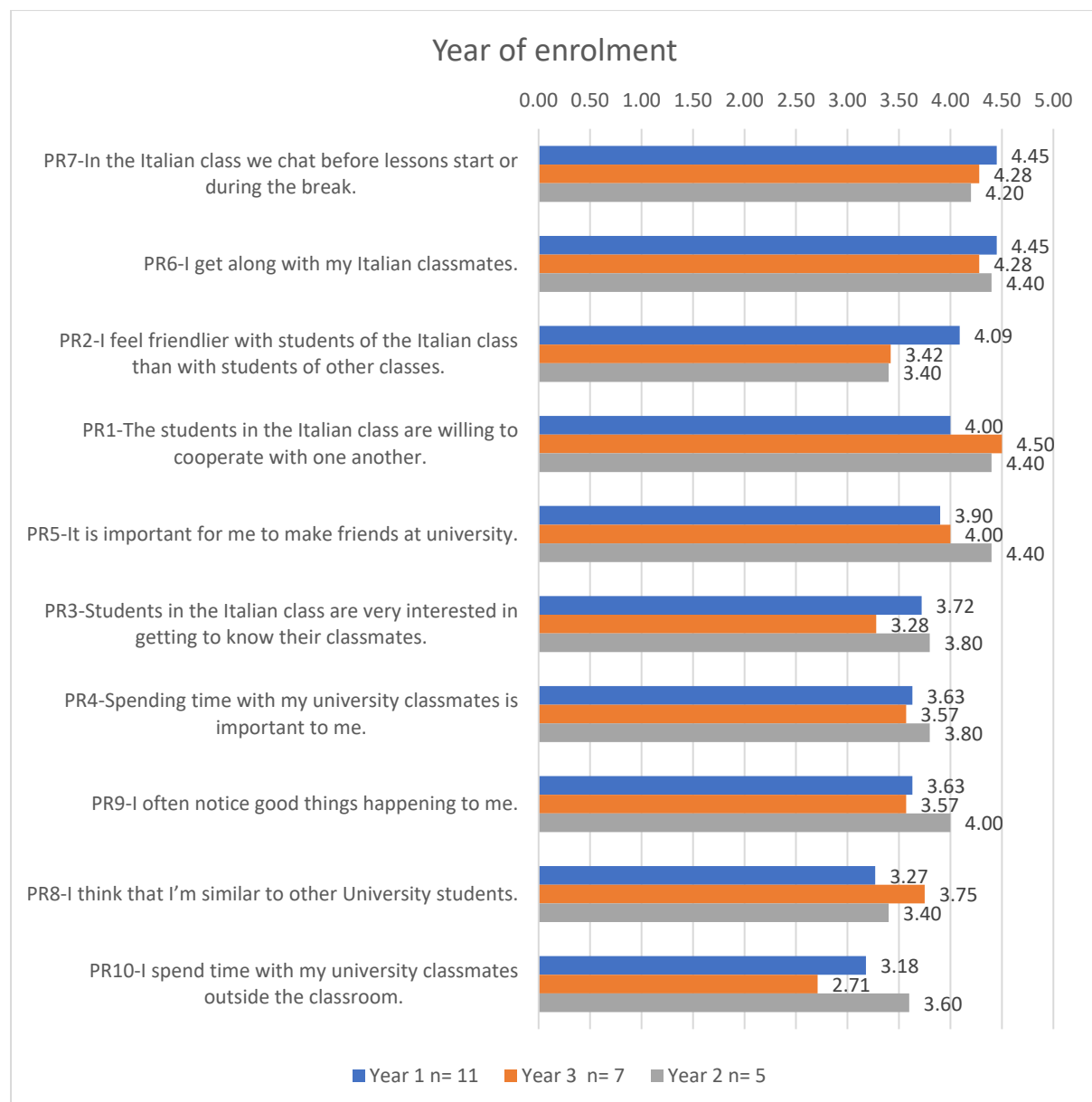
Figure 66: Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships by age.



Across both cohorts only four out of the ten items reach agreement. The youngest cohort aged 16-20 (n=17, mean=3.97), exhibits both the most respondents and the highest mean score, indicating greater satisfaction. In contrast, the older groups (21-25 years, n=4, mean: 3.70) showed slightly lower levels of agreement. Across age groups, positive perceptions are found particularly in recognizing peer amicability (PR6= 4.25 – 4.35) and collaborative learning attitudes (PR1=4.17 – 4.25). Both groups valued forming new university friendships (PR5=4.00 – 4.05), with the youngest groups notably perceiving higher ease in initiating social

interactions (PR3=4.25). The positive perception of Italian 1 classmates and emphasis on social interaction were underscored by general agreement on enjoying chats outside class (PR7). Despite this, time constraints for outside-classroom interactions (PR10=3.29 – 2.25) were reported as a challenge. Some of these trends are consistent with earlier responses (S1/2021), particularly the cooperation inside the classroom (PR1) and the desire to make friends at university (PR5).

Figure 67: Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships by year of enrolment.

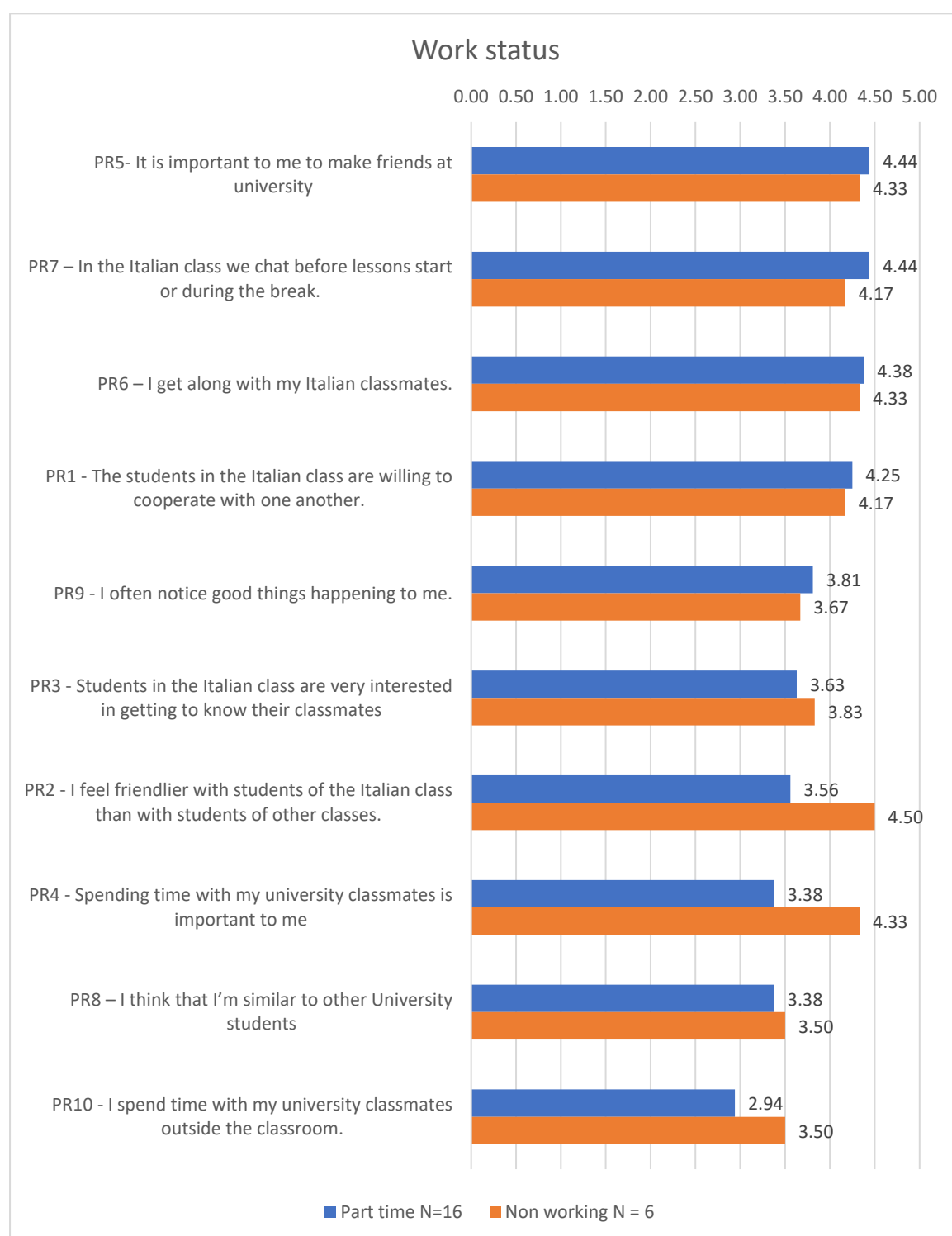


As per previous surveys, first-year students (Y1, n=11, mean: 3.83) emerge as the largest group, with third years (Y3, n=7, mean: 3.76) following, and second years (Y2, n=5, mean: 3.94) consistently being the smallest cohort across all surveys, however, emerged as having the highest levels of agreement with the PR statements.

Across the cohorts, there was unanimous appreciation for collaborative learning (PR1=4.00 – 4.50), and the effort made to socialize with peers (PR6=4.28 – 4.45), likely driven by active participation in informal discussions outside class (PR7=4.20 – 4.45). The lowest levels of agreement were for spending time with university classmates outside the classroom (PR10=2.71 – 3.60) and for the PS statements (PR8=3.27 – 3.75 and PR9=3.57 – 4.00).

Y2 students valued spending time with their university classmates more (PR4=3.80 and PR5=4.40), spent more time with them (PR10=3.60), noticed more good things happening to them more (PR9=4.00), and found their Italian classmates friendlier (PR3=3.80). Y1 students chatted more to (PR7=4.45) and got along better with their Italian classmates (PR6=4.45), who they found to be friendlier than others (PR2=4.09 and PR3=3.72).

Figure 68: Participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships by work status.

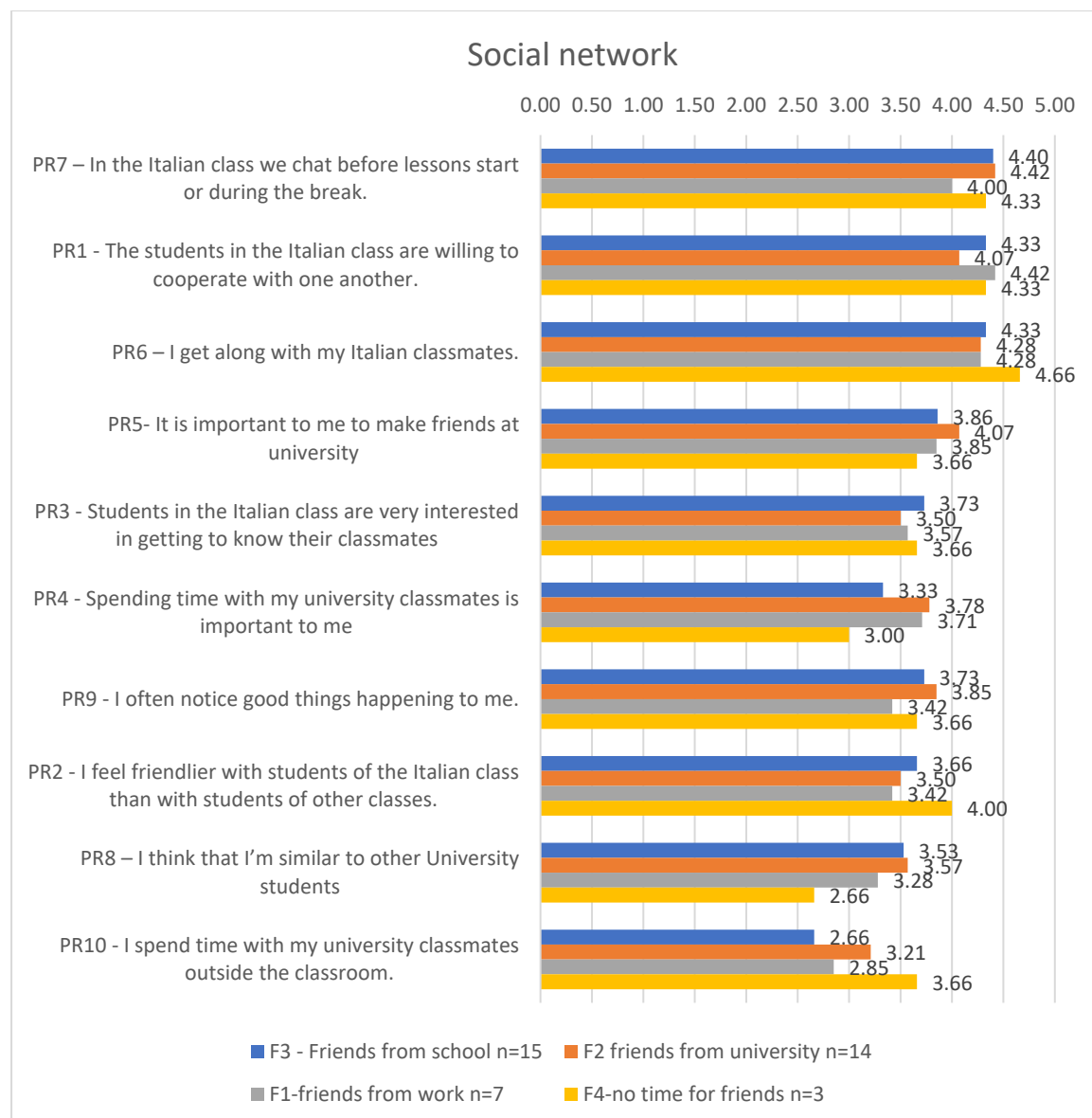


Once again, the non-working students (n=6, mean: 4.02) emerged as having more positive perceptions of PR than their part-time working counterparts (n=16, mean: 3.82).³⁷ Both cohorts

³⁷ Since only one full-time working student answered the survey, their data were not taken into consideration.

valued forming university friendships (PR5=4.33 – 4.44), saw their Italian 1 classmates as cooperative (PR1=4.17 – 4.25), and friendlier than others (PR6=4.33 – 4.38). Conversely, the non-working students exhibited stronger positivity in friendliness (PR2=4.50 vs. 3.56), and engagement with peers (PR4=4.33 vs. 3.38), possibly due to lack of work commitments. Their part-time working colleagues showed a slightly greater tendency for informal conversations outside class (PR7=4.44 vs. 4.17).

Figure 69: Participants' perceptions of peer-relationships by social network.



Very few of the PR statements displayed strong agreement across all social network cohorts.

The statements achieving agreement level were primarily related to classroom cooperation

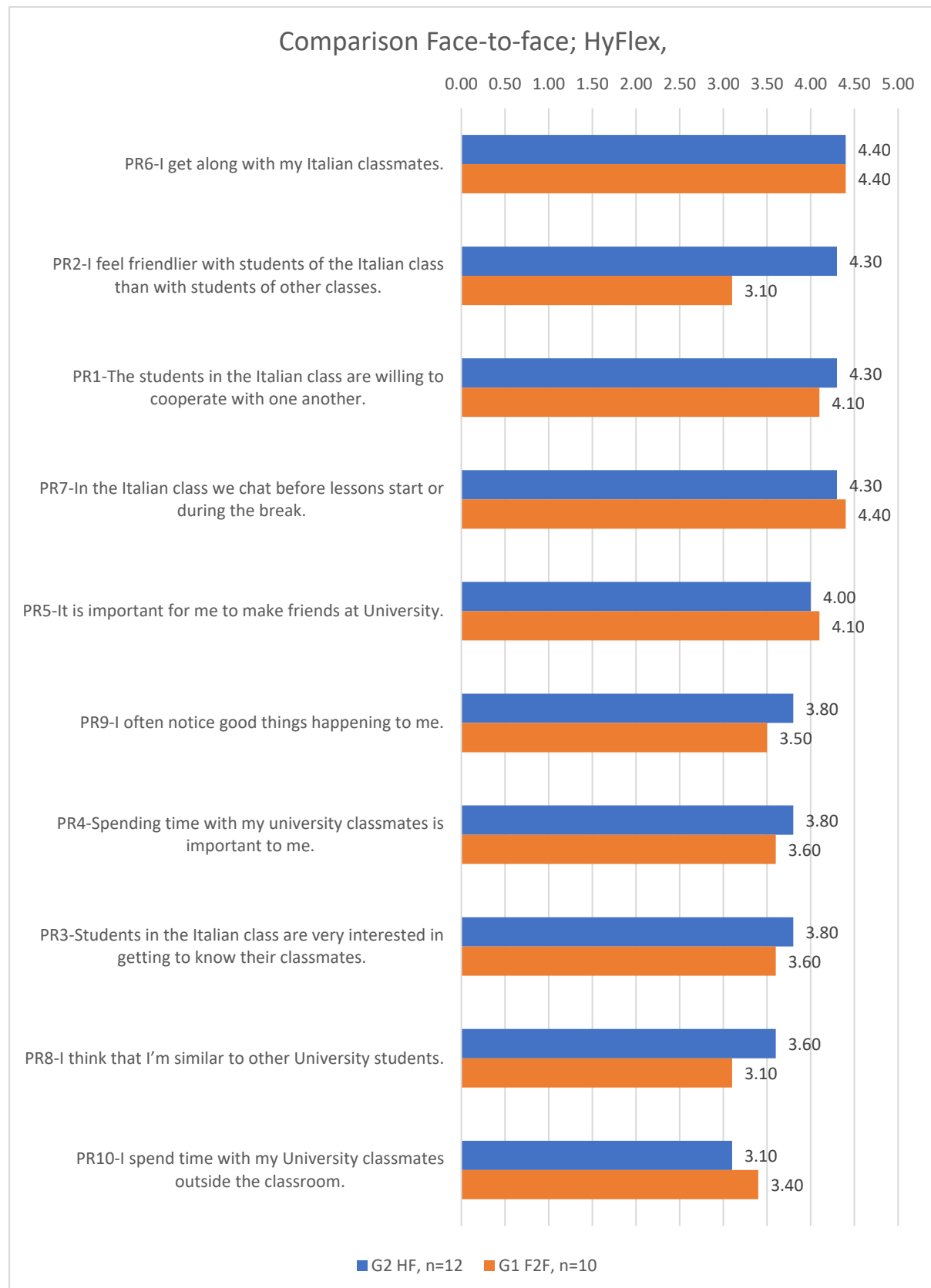
(PR1=4.07 – 4.42) and peer interactions (PR6=4.28 – 4.66 and PR7=4.00 – 4.42). In terms of ranking, students with university friends (F2, n=14) garnered the highest mean (=3.98), followed by those with school friends (F3, n=15, mean 3.84), those with no time for friends (F4, n=3, mean: 3.80), and finally those with workplace friends (F1, n=7, mean: 3.68).

The F2 cohort showed the strongest agreements for the SC statement (PR7=4.42), along with the SU statements (PR4=3.78 and PR5 = 4.07) and the two PS statements (PR8=3.57 and PR9=3.85), reflecting their strong social integration. F3 students showed the highest agreement for the SU statement regarding the perceived amiability of their Italian 1 classmates (PR3=3.73) and placed slightly less emphasis on making new university friends. F4 students garnered the highest level of agreements the SC statements (PR2=4.00 and PR6=4.66) as well as the SU statement (PR10=3.66). The CD statement regarding collaborative learning was given the highest agreement by the F1 students (PR1=4.42).

In conclusion, the data suggest that having a supportive social network at university significantly influences students' attitudes towards peer interactions and academic engagement, especially in the areas of classroom cooperation and peer interactions. The F2 cohort's positive outlook not only highlights the value of university friendships but also suggests these connections enhance broader socialization aspects, contributing to a supportive academic atmosphere. Similarly, the F3 cohort's strong responses indicate that pre-existing friendships from school can also contribute to a supportive academic atmosphere, although with a slightly different emphasis on forming new connections.

5.3.4.2 Results according to learning modality

Figure 70: Comparison for the three different teaching modalities and S2/2021.



The investigation of students' perceptions in relation to the two teaching groups reveals that both groups display overall negative perceptions regarding PR with the HyFlex (G2) displaying a mean of 3.75 and the face-to-face group (G1) 3.77.

The two groups concur on some items, specifically, the cooperation within Italian classes (PR1 = G2:4.30, G1: 4.10), efforts at socialization with the Italian classmates (PR6 = 4.40), and a proclivity for informal exchanges (PR7 = G2: 4.30, G1: 4.40), underscoring the establishment of positive interactions. A notable divergence can be seen on PR2, where students in HyFlex exhibited a stronger affinity for Italian class peers (4.30) in contrast to those exclusively in class (3.10).

Regarding university-wide socialization and friendship building (PR5), both G2 and G1 expressed strong intentions (G2: 4.00; G1: 4.10), with face-to-face students slightly more inclined, likely reflecting the influence of direct campus experiences, as discussed by Snow and Scherman (2021). They argue for the importance of maintaining campus culture and face-to-face learning experiences in higher education, and central to their argument is the unique role of physical campuses in cultivating social interactions that are essential for personal and intellectual growth. These social opportunities help students develop a sense of identity and belonging, enhancing their overall educational experience.

Nonetheless, actual engagement with the broader campus community was minimal for both groups (PR4 and PR10), and lack of agreement is found also regarding the other PR statements.

In conclusion, while there is a clear emphasis on friend-making and classmate friendliness, the face-to-face group is particularly keen on forming university friendships, and the HyFlex group feels most at ease within the Italian class.

Interviews (see section 5.4.2) support these insights, highlighting the central role of class interactions in shaping students' social landscapes and their limited involvement in extensive university activities, emphasizing the classroom as a primary site of social

engagement while noting the challenges of extending these connections to the wider university community. Laura, a second-year student, initially engaged in clubs and societies during her first year to build friendships, but she later found tutorials and classroom interactions more conducive to forging lasting connections; “...*you see the same people [...] and so you do forge that connection longer term.*”. Leonora also supported the significance of classroom experiences in creating social bonds, as she did not join any clubs or societies but found meaningful connections through class interactions.

5.3.4.3 Concluding remarks

Concerning PRs, the end-of-semester survey has shown that across all demographic groups, only 3-4 out of 10 PR items display strong agreement, primarily those related to classroom cooperation and peer interactions.

The youngest cohort (16-20) shows the highest satisfaction. First-year students emerge as the largest group, showing strong appreciation for collaborative learning and socializing with peers. However, all groups, regardless of age or year of enrollment, report challenges in finding time for social interactions outside the classroom.

Employment status influences PR perceptions, with non-working students showing more positive responses overall (agreeing with 6 out of 10 items) compared to part-time workers (4 out of 10 items). Both groups value forming university friendships and appreciate classmate friendliness.

Students with university friends (F2) and those with school friends (F3) represent the largest groups, both exhibiting generally positive responses to items related to cooperation and getting along with classmates. The F2 group particularly emphasizes the importance of making new campus friends.

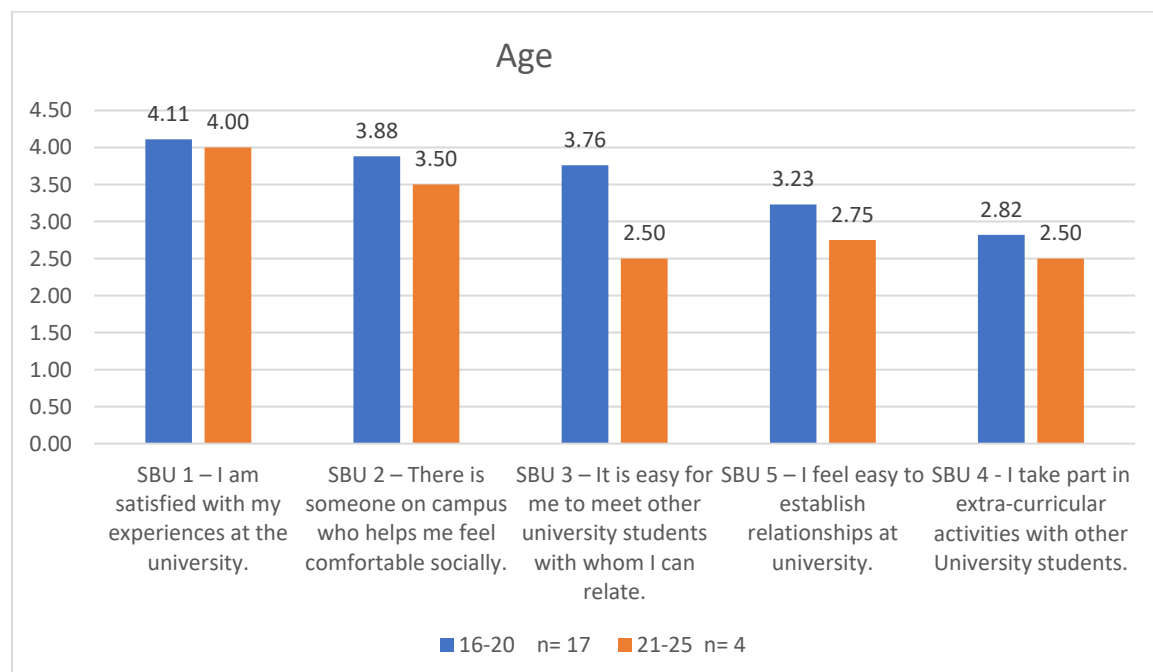
The analysis of two learning modalities—face-to-face (F2F) and HyFlex (HF) - concur on positive interactions within Italian classes. F2F participants prioritize forming university friendships slightly more, while HF students feel most at ease within the Italian class.

In conclusion, the data suggest that having a supportive social network significantly influences students' attitudes towards peer interactions and academic engagement. While there is a clear emphasis on friend-making and classmate friendliness across groups, actual engagement with the broader campus community remains limited. The classroom emerges as the primary site of social engagement, with challenges in extending these connections to the wider university community

5.3.5. Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging

5.3.5.1 Results according to the participants' sociodemographic characteristics

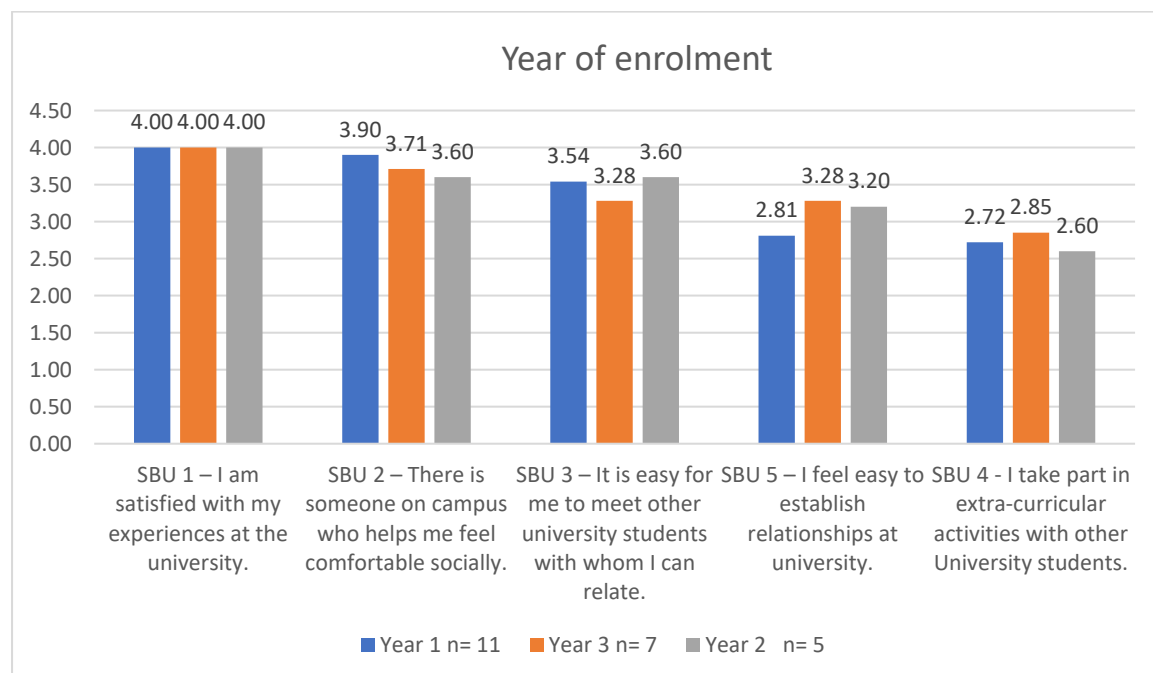
Figure 71: Participants' perceptions of Sense of belonging by age.



Across different age brackets³⁸, not one of these groups reaches agreement (mean of 4.00) on any of the statements except for SBU1 with the two younger groups reaching the threshold (16-20: 4.11, 21-25: 4.00).

The youngest group (16-20, n=17, mean: 3.56) generally scores higher on the statements compared to the older group but still falls short of agreement. The middle group (21-25, n=4, mean: 3.05) shows even lower levels of agreement. Both age groups expressed strong disinterest in extracurricular activities (SBU4), signaling a widespread lack of engagement outside academic commitments. The data indicate challenges across all age groups in feeling socially comfortable on campus, meeting relatable students, and establishing relationships at university.

Figure 72: Participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging by year of enrolment.

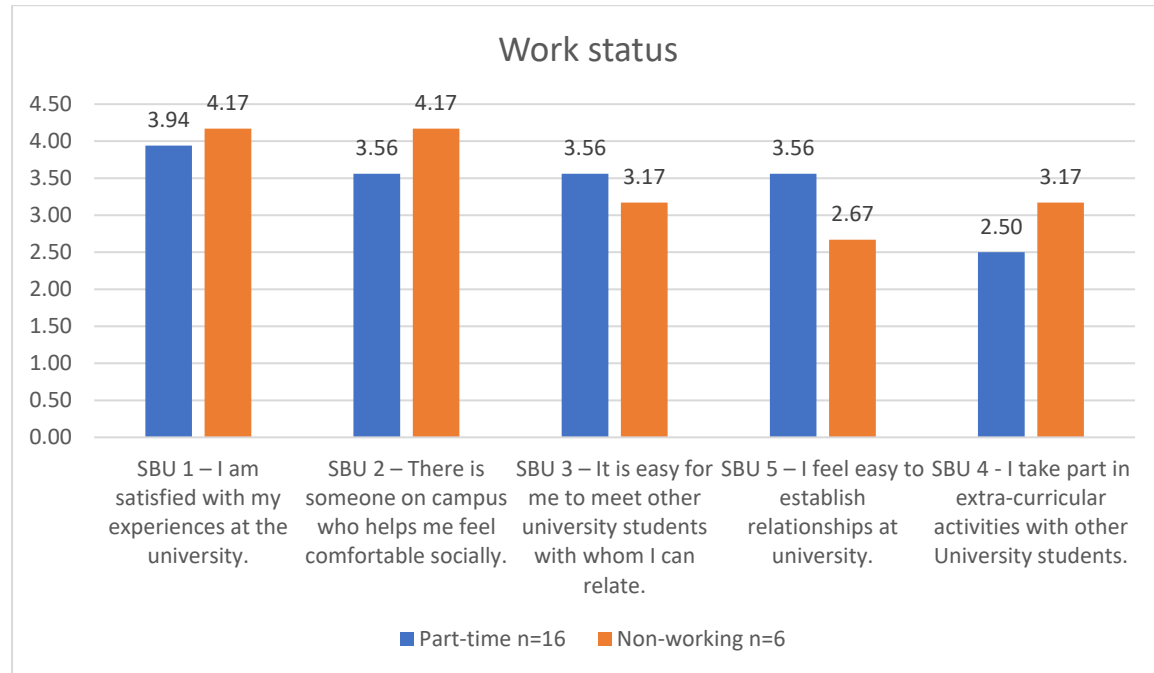


Across different university years, no significant disparities were observed in the overall negative perceptions scores of first-year (Y1, n=11, mean: 3.39), third-year (Y3, n=7, mean: 3.42), and second-year (Y2, n=5, mean: 3.40) students. Students from all university years

³⁸ The oldest participants (+26, n=2, mean: 2.80) were not considered in this analysis.

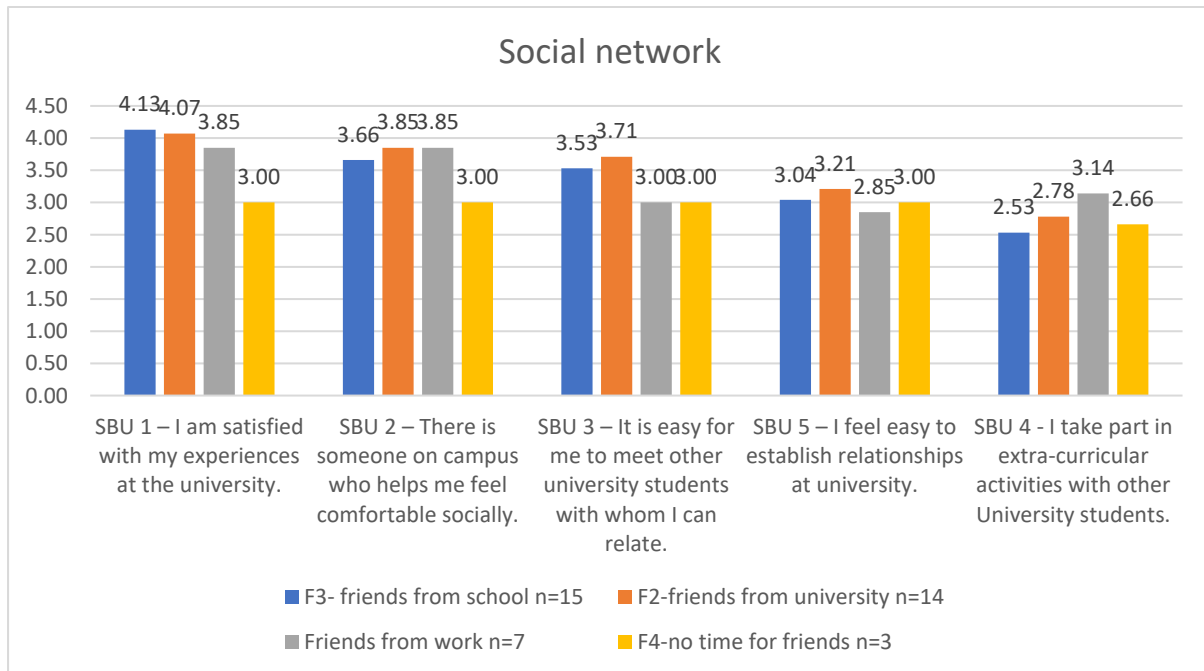
displayed positive perceptions with their university experience (SBU1=4.00) but expressed disagreement regarding the remaining SBU items, particularly, there was a pronounced disinterest in extracurricular activities (SBU4).

Figure 73: Participants' perceptions of Sense of belonging by work status.



The data on work status corroborate previously seen trends, with non-working students (n=6, mean: 3.47) rating SBU statements slightly more positively than their part-time counterparts (n=16, mean: 3.42). Notably, non-working students report satisfaction with their university experience (SBU1 = 4.17) and social comfort (SBU2 = 4.17), possibly due to the additional time they have available for campus engagement.

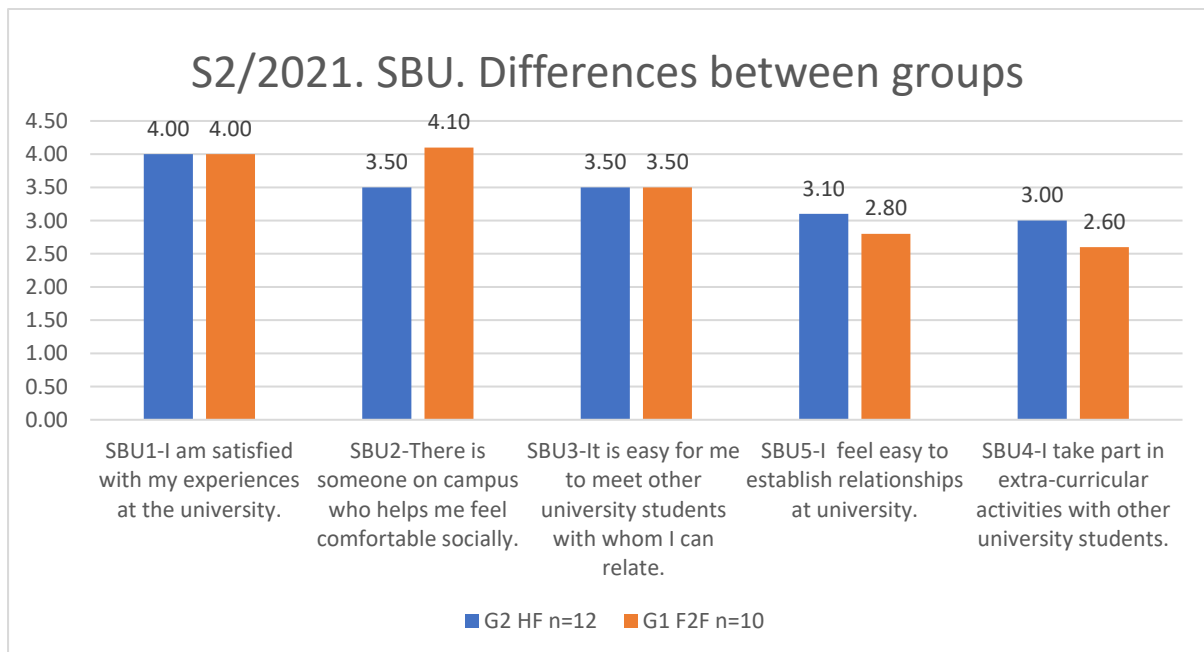
Figure 74: Participants' perceptions of Sense of belonging by social network.



The analysis highlights that students with university friends (F2, n=14, mean: 3.52) and those with school friends (F3, n=15, mean: 3.37) report higher satisfaction levels with their university experience (SBU1=F2: 4.07, F3: 4.13), compared with students with workplace friends (F1, n=7, mean: 3.33) or those constrained by time for socializing (F4, n=3, mean: 2.93). This suggests that having friends from the university or school significantly contributes to students' sense of belonging and overall satisfaction with university life.

5.3.5.2 Results according to learning modality

Figure 75: Comparison for the three different teaching modalities and S2/2021.



Both groups agree only with SBU1 declaring to be satisfied with their university experience. However, face-to-face students agree with social comfort on campus (SBU2 = 4.10), emphasizing the positive impact of campus re-engagement. This preference underscores the importance of on-campus experiences in enhancing connection with the university.

5.3.5.3. Concluding remarks

At the end of the semester, students seemed overall satisfied with their experiences at university, possibly as a result of the end of lockdown and the increased presence on campus. Yet, the data still show negative perceptions of students' sense of belonging to the university, indicating students' limited involvement with the wider university community. Such reduced involvement in extracurricular activities might reflect challenges for the students in socializing anew, also impacted by adjustments to novel learning formats, and a preference for dedicating time to classroom-based interactions rather than extracurricular engagements.

5.3.6 Concluding remarks on Survey 2/2021

At the end of the 2021 semester, the data indicate a rise in positive perceptions of CC, outperforming those of PR and SBU. Almost all demographic cohorts agreed with the CC statements, indicating a positive learning environment (CC1, CC2, CC3) with a supportive, non-judgmental atmosphere (CC4). Around a third of the PR statements showed strong agreement, primarily in classroom cooperation (PR1) and peer interactions in the Italian classroom (PR6 and PR7). Despite these improvements, the broader Sense of Belonging to the University context remained limited.

The initial positive outlook of the HyFlex students decreased by the end of the semester. Face-to-face learners reported stronger social bonds within and beyond the Italian classroom, linking physical presence to increased confidence and satisfaction. This preference for in-person engagement was corroborated by interview findings. Both groups concurred on positive interactions within the Italian class, with face-to-face participants prioritizing university friendships slightly more.

Demographically, a uniformly positive view on CC was noted, with younger and first-year students showing the highest satisfaction and appreciation for collaborative learning. Third-year students displayed greater ease in forming relationships, suggesting a positive progression over time. Non-working students, having more campus engagement time, reported more positive experiences, underscoring the significant impact of employment status on university perceptions. Students with university or school friends exhibited positive responses to cooperation and peer interactions, highlighting the importance of social support within the university environment.

Overall, the classroom emerged as the primary site of social engagement, with students facing challenges in broadening their connections beyond this setting. This trend highlights the

importance of supportive social networks within the university and underscores the need for strategies to enhance a sense of belonging.

5.4 What changes emerge from students' perceptions at the beginning and end of Semester 1, 2021?

5.4.1 Comparing the overall results of the two surveys

This section presents a comparative analysis of data gathered during the 2021 semester. It contrasts the data regarding the three variables – CC, PR and SBU, collected in Survey 1 (S1/2021) with that collected in Survey 2 (S2/2021). As such, it aims to identify shifts in student perceptions from the start of the semester (conducted after the lockdown, where a choice of learning modality was offered), to its conclusion (after a full semester was taught in this manner).

Changes will be explored according to both sociodemographic characteristics and according to the learning modalities. In terms of the latter, an emphasis will be placed on interviews with the students from each of the three tutorial groups. As only one student in the online group (G3) responded to the quantitative survey, the evidence for this modality will be largely focused on the interviews from this group, for which two students participated. However, some quantitative findings for online students will be discernible also amongst the Hyflex tutorial group.

Table 12: Differences between S1/2021 and S2/2021.

2021	Survey 1 N=28		Survey 2 N=23		Changes S1 vs S2	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Difference	SD
Classroom Climate						
CC1 – I feel included in the Italian class.	4.17	0.72	4.08	0.59	-0.09	0.19
CC2 – I feel comfortable in the Italian class.	4.42	0.83	4.39	0.89	-0.04	0.24
CC3 – There is a good atmosphere in the Italian class.	4.62	0.49	4.39	0.58	-0.23	0.15
CC4 – I'm not afraid that somebody in the Italian class will laugh at me when I speak Italian.	3.92	1.11	4.34	0.93	+0.42	0.29
CC 5 – The Italian class makes me feel more comfortable at the University.	3.89	0.62	3.78	0.67	-0.11	0.18
Peer Relationships						
PR1 – The students in the Italian class are willing to cooperate with one another.	4.42	0.57	4.21	0.73	-0.21	0.18
PR2 – I feel friendlier with students of the Italian class than with students of other classes.	3.75	1.04	3.73	1.13	-0.01	0.30
PR3 – Students in the Italian class are very interested in getting to know their classmates.	3.60	0.83	3.60	0.94	0.002	0.25
PR4 – Spending time with my university classmates is important to me.	3.96	1.07	3.65	1.33	-0.31	0.29
PR5 – It is important to me to make friends at university.	4.35	0.86	4.04	0.92	-0.31	0.25
PR6 – I get along with my Italian classmates.	4.14	0.70	4.39	0.58	+0.25	0.18
PR7 – In the Italian class we chat before lessons start or during the break.	3.78	0.91	4.34	0.57	+0.56	0.22
PR8 – I think that I'm similar to other University students.	3.14	1.04	3.39	0.72	+0.25	0.26
PR9 – I often notice good things happening to me.	3.82	0.77	3.69	0.76	-0.12	0.21
PR10 – I spend time with my university classmates outside the classroom.	3.00	1.15	3.13	1.28	+0.13	0.34
Sense of belonging						
SBU 1 – I am satisfied with my experiences at the University.	3.64	1.16	4.00	0.67	+0.36	0.27
SBU2 – There is someone on campus who helps me feel comfortable socially.	3.14	1.14	3.78	1.04	+0.64	0.31
SBU3 – It is easy for me to meet other University students with whom I can relate.	3.25	1.26	3.47	1.08	+0.23	0.33
SBU4 – I take part in extra-curricular activities with other University students.	3.27	1.22	2.73	1.13	-0.54	0.33
SBU5 – I feel easy to establish relationships at university.	2.96	1.23	3.04	1.22	+0.08	0.34
Development of friendship						
DOF – I have made friends in this class.			4.04	0.70		

5.4.2 Changes in participants' perceptions of Classroom Climate

5.4.2.1 Changes according to participants' sociodemographic characteristics

Table 13 presents an overview of the changes in students' perceptions of CC across various sociodemographic cohorts. As in the previous analysis (see 5.3.2.1), only changes above +0.10 are reported since changes below this are considered irrelevant.

Table 13: Changes in students' perceptions of Classroom Climate between Survey 1 and Survey 2 in the first semester 2021, according to participants' sociodemographic data.

S1vsS2 2021 Changes in the students' perceptions of Classroom Climate between Survey 1 and Survey 2 in the first semester 2021, according to participants' socio-demographic data		CC1 – I feel included in the Italian class.	CC2 - I feel comfortable in the Italian class	CC3 – There is a good atmosphere in the Italian class.	CC4 – I'm not afraid that somebody in the Italian class will laugh at me when I speak Italian	CC 5 – The Italian class makes me feel more comfortable at the University.
Gender	Males	-0.40	+0.10	+0.10	+0.70	+0.20
	Females	0.00	-0.26	-0.31	+0.42	-0.26
Age	Age 16-20	-0.13	-0.11	-0.12	+0.49	-0.04
	Age 21-25	+0.25	-0.12	-0.37	+0.25	-0.12
	Age +26	-0.16	0.00	-0.16	+0.33	-0.50
Current University year	Uni Year 1	-0.27	-0.38	-0.04	+0.18	-0.02
	Uni Year 2	-0.20	+0.20	-0.20	+1.00	0.00
	Uni Year 3	+0.04	-0.17	-0.71	+0.04	-0.32
Work status	Part-time	+0.06	-0.15	-0.08	+0.79	+0.19
	Full-time	-0.50	+1.00	-1.00	+1.50	-1.00
	Not working	-0.04	0.02	0.02	+0.31	0.02
Current social life	Friends from work	-1.03	-0.57	-0.71	-0.75	-1.07
	Friends from Uni	-0.35	-0.50	-0.35	+0.36	-0.42
	Friends from school	-0.07	-0.22	-0.23	+0.27	0.09
	No time for Friends	+1.33	+1.17	+0.67	+1.50	+1.00

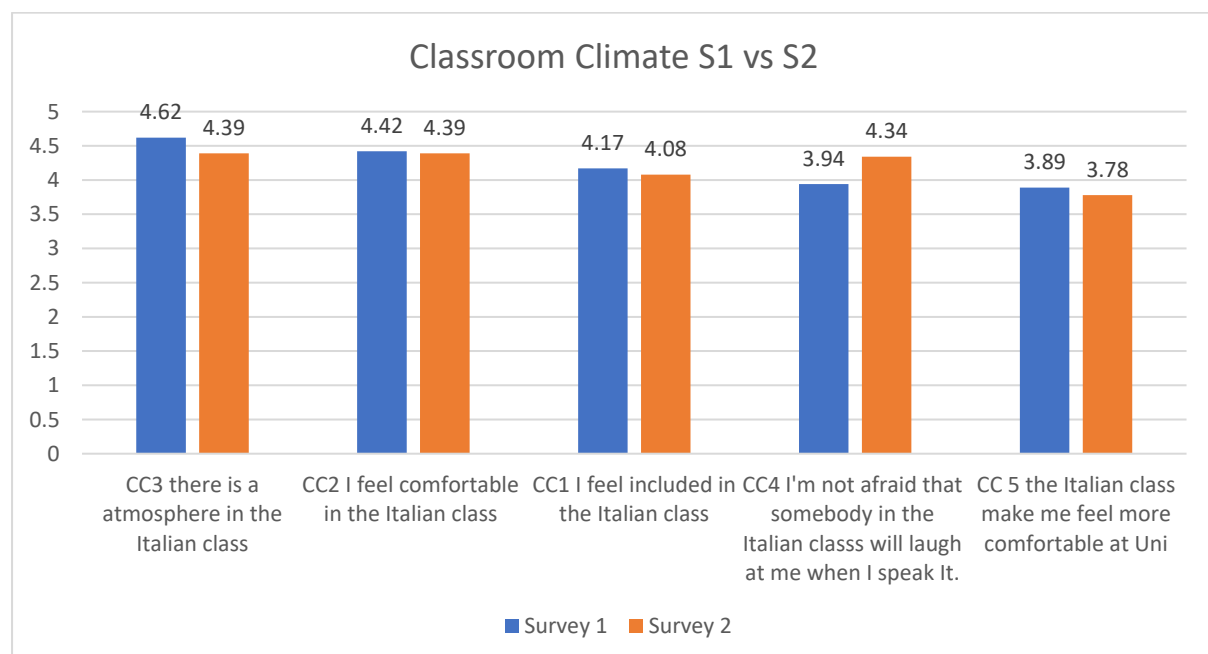
The data reveal a general trend of slightly declining perceptions in four out of the five CC statements, including feelings of inclusion (CC1), comfort (CC2), and overall classroom atmosphere (CC3 and CC5). The most considerable improvements across the semester were observed in CC4, that is, in students' confidence regarding speaking in Italian in front of the class. This increase can be attributed to the time spent together in class, tutors' work in fostering a more supportive environment, and possibly to enhanced language proficiency.

In terms of student cohorts, the group reporting no time for friends exhibited the most remarkable improvement in CC perceptions (+1.13), implying a substantial enhancement in classroom comfort for this cohort. In contrast, students with workplace friends experienced the most pronounced declines in CC perceptions (-0.82). This might reflect the negative impacts of their social connections outside the classroom.

5.4.2.2 Changes according to learning modalities

Group 1 - Face-to-face

Figure 76: Changes between surveys 1/2021 and 2/2021 for face-to-face group.

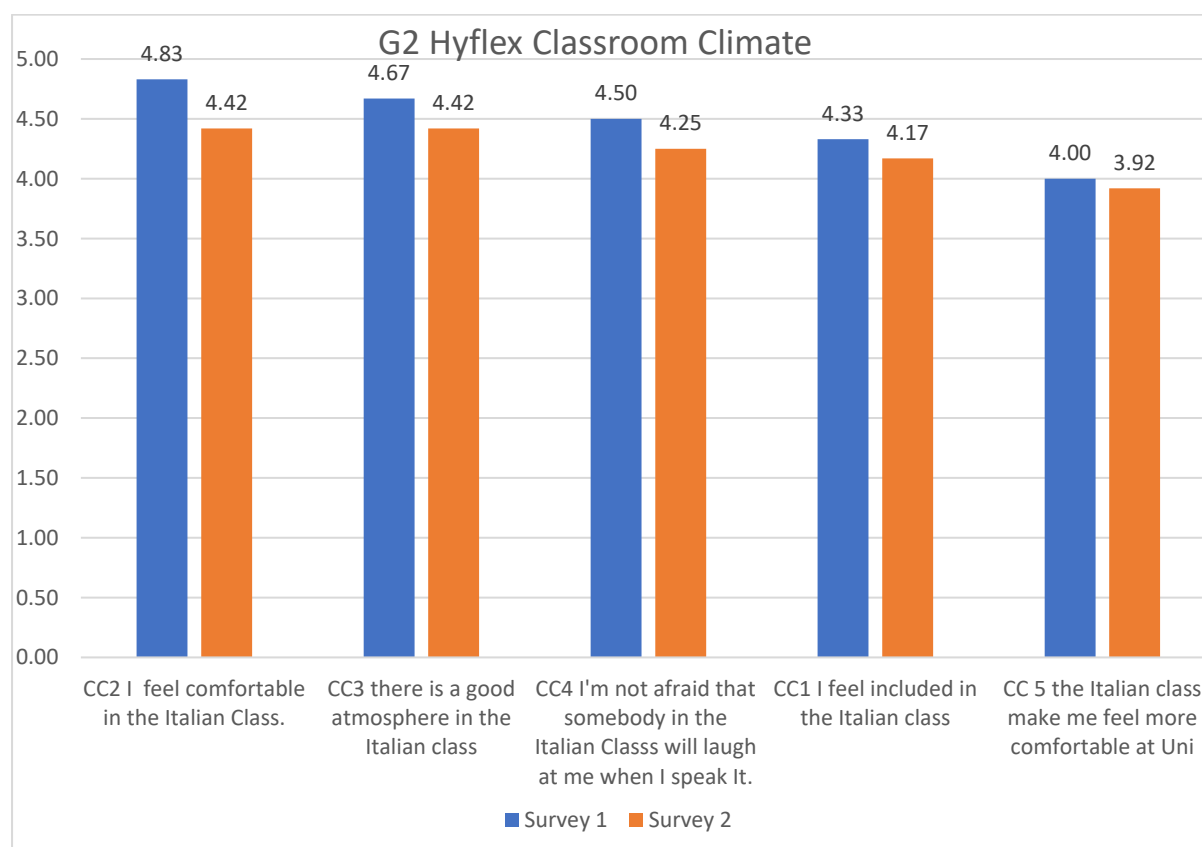


The figure above indicates minimal shifts between the 2021 surveys amongst the face-to-face students, who continued to perceive the Italian class as a secure and welcoming space. One noticeable change is in the increased confidence these students felt in speaking in Italian in front of the class (CC4, +0.40). This perspective is supported by an interview with Leonora, who noted that the language learning process became less daunting:

I think it's made in general language learning less overwhelming for me, if that makes sense, it feels like I do have the capability to learn other languages or continue Italian if I wanted to, which I think was nice.

Group 2 – HyFlex

Figure 77: Changes between surveys 1/2021 and 2/2021 for HyFlex group.



In 2021, the HyFlex group reported a general decline in agreement with the CC statements, possibly due to the challenges of navigating blended learning environments, with students reporting a preference for being in class for better peer interaction and easier nonverbal communication. The online students from within this Hyflex modality exhibited decreased participation and less active involvement in classroom activities, as noted by Margherita:

...would end up participating less just because they didn't really, I mean; they're not really volunteering answers or anything.

A significant challenge was understanding in-class students' comments and the lack of nonverbal cues crucial for communication in a physical setting, as noted by Teodoro, who described feeling disconnected due to the screen barrier:

It feels a bit detached because it's a screen doesn't feel like you're actually talking to someone in person. You can't pick up on, you know, posture clue's verbal cues, body language.

Additionally, Teodoro mentioned the camera's limited field of view as a drawback, restricting visibility of the whiteboard and classroom: *...you don't want the camera. You know, you only see this much. You don't see everything else.*

However, the Hyflex students as a group appeared to appreciate the course's organization and interactive approach, regardless of modality. Teodoro highlighted the class's emphasis on discussion and participation *...about the exercises, how they really provoke you to discuss with other members, that's good...*, while Margherita expressed satisfaction with the overall structure, she found it *...really good...* with no major improvements needed.

Group 3 - Online

In the online group, insights from two interviewees revealed both positive aspects and negative aspects of their experiences.

This format was perceived as more impersonal and less interactive, complicating students' ability to understand and interpret nonverbal signals. Katerina described the anticipation of being called upon as intense and somewhat intimidating compared to the in-person setting:

Oh my God. He's going to call me now. I'm going to be next. This is really intense, you know, whereas if you're in the classroom, you look at the Professor, you kind of anticipate, you know, so that was a little bit frightening.

Laura echoed this sentiment, noting the difficulty in engaging with a screen full of faces without the natural cues of direct eye contact: *If you have just the screen of faces. Hard to keep track of. There's no clear like in looking at their eyes.*

The online modality was also criticized for its time-consuming nature, with technical delays and student behaviors contributing to inefficiencies, as Katerina observed:

...online does hamper that because there's a lot of delay with the teacher asking the question, did the person sort of reacting and then, there's a lot of wastage [....] sometimes people wouldn't put their cameras on, you would tend to remind them all this time wasting.

There was also the unavoidable loss of immediacy to contend with: *...you're in a classroom, you can raise your hand.*

Despite these obstacles, the interviewees expressed general satisfaction with the Italian class atmosphere. Katerina, in particular, praised the camaraderie within the online classroom, noting the overall positive disposition and cooperation among students: *...the camaraderie, definitely very...* This satisfaction underscores the complex nature of online learning, where despite the challenges, a sense of community and positive CC can still emerge.

5.4.2.3 Concluding remarks

Across the semester, the survey data gave a picture of the Italian class as friendly, collaborative, and supportive. In addition, interviewees unanimously expressed contentment with its atmosphere, highlighting it as a welcoming space, devoid of competitiveness. Class activities were acknowledged to be instrumental in fostering this positive environment, encouraging dialogue and connection among students. Face-to-face participants (G1) also emphasized the value of personal sharing, movement within the classroom, and dynamic group work in enhancing social connections and cultivating a positive classroom climate.

Conversely, online (G3) and HyFlex (G2) students encountered distinct challenges. The online modality was perceived as less engaging and interactive, with difficulties in interpreting nonverbal cues and participating in discussions. Online students reported awkwardness in speaking to the class, largely due to the lack of physical presence affecting nonverbal communication. HyFlex students showed a preference for in-person attendance, underlining the challenges of online engagement, and highlighting the benefits of in-person attendance for fostering connectivity and engagement among students.

5.4.3 Changes in participants' perceptions of Peer-relationships

5.4.3.1 Changes according to participants' sociodemographic characteristics

Table 14 presents an overview of the changes in students' perceptions of PR across various sociodemographic cohorts.

Table 14: Changes in the students' perceptions of Peer-Relationships, between Survey 1 and Survey 2 in the first semester 2021, according to participants' sociodemographic data.

S1vsS2 2021 Changes in the students' perception s of Peer- Relationsh ips	PR1 - The studen ts in the Italian class are willin g to coope rate with one anoth er.	PR2 – I feel friend lier with studen ts of the Italian class than with studen ts of other classe s.	PR3 - Stude nts in the Italian class are very intere sted in gettin g to know their class mates	Pr4 - Spend ing time with my univer sity class mates is impor tant to me	PR5- It is impor tant to me to make friend s at univer sity	PR6 – I get along with my Italian class mates.	PR7 – In the Italian class we chat before lesson s start or during the break.	PR8 – I think that I'm simila r to other Unive rsity studen ts	PR9 - I often notice good things happe ning to me.	PR10 - I spend time with my univer sity class mates outsid e the classr oom
Age 16-20	-0.22	+0.35	-0.20	-0.30	-0.34	+0.09	+0.66	+0.01	-0.04	-0.10
Age 21-25	-0.12	-0.37	+0.50	-0.12	-0.37	+0.63	-0.25	+0.88	-0.37	-0.50
Uni Year 1	-0.37	+0.40	-0.02	-0.55	-0.46	+0.33	+0.71	-0.35	-0.11	+0.12
Uni Year 2	0.00	-0.60	+0.20	-0.20	-0.20	+0.20	+0.40	+0.60	-0.20	+1.20
Uni Year 3	-0.32	-0.32	-0.21	+0.82	-0.50	-0.21	+0.04	+1.82	-0.42	-1.03
Part-time	-0.05	+0.06	+0.13	-0.12	-0.52	+0.38	+0.74	+0.48	-0.08	+0.24
Not working	-0.33	+0.71	-0.09	+0.19	-0.02	+0.05	+0.17	+0.07	-0.26	0.00
Friends from work	-0.32	-0.57	-0.17	-0.53	-1.14	-0.71	+0.25	+0.04	-0.57	-0.64
Friends from Uni	-0.57	-0.42	-0.57	-0.28	-0.57	0.00	+0.14	+0.21	-0.28	-0.35
Friends from school	-0.16	+0.10	+0.09	-0.31	-0.41	+0.26	+0.76	+0.32	-0.12	-0.61
No time for Friends	+0.83	+1.00	+0.67	-1.00	-0.33	+1.17	+0.33	+0.17	+0.17	+0.67

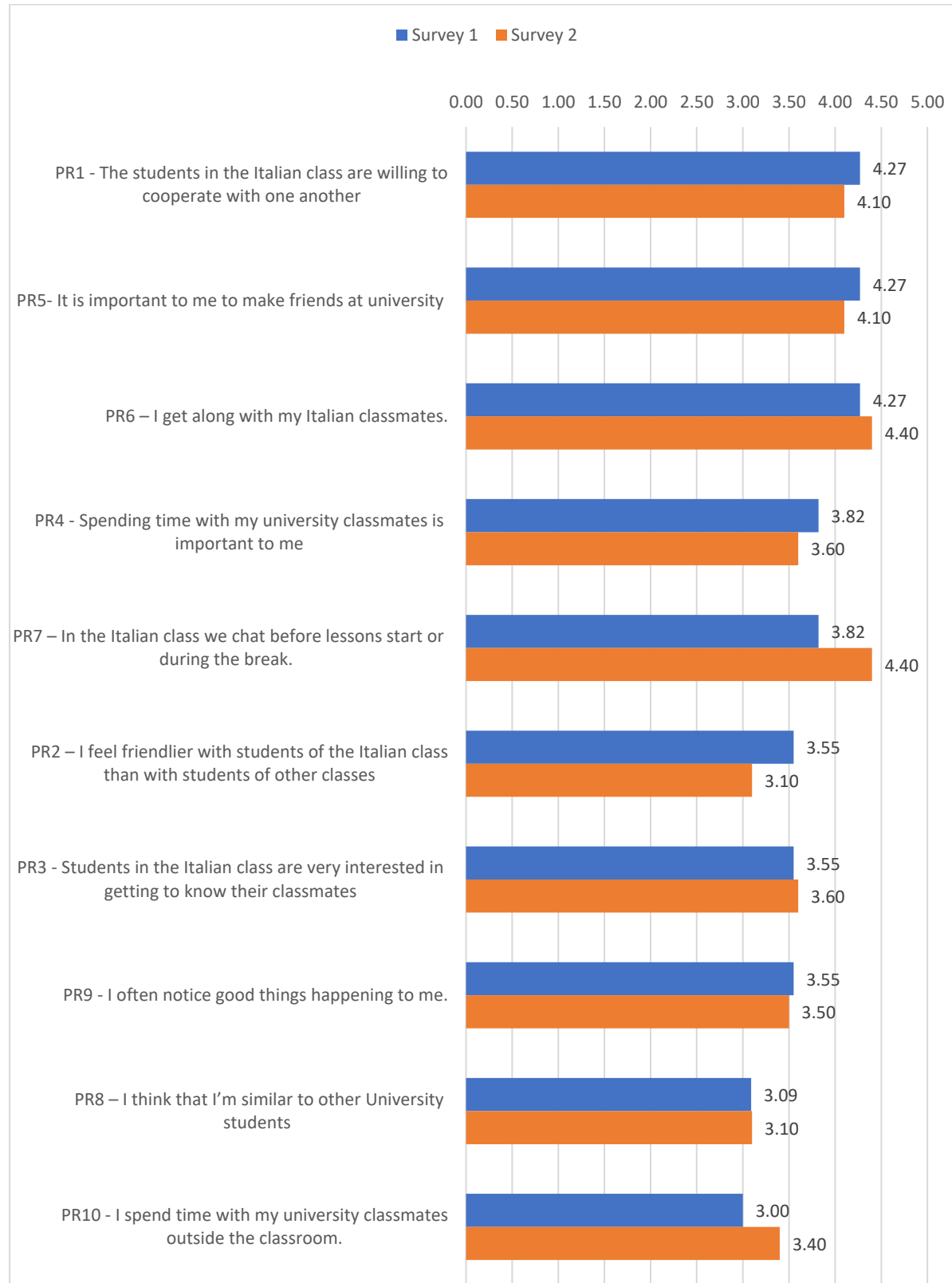
The analysis of PR changes across sociodemographic factors reveals a balance between positive improvements (green) and negative declines (red). A common positive trend included feeling more cooperative (PR2), experiencing increased socialization (PR3, PR7), feeling friendlier with classmates (PR6), and perceiving oneself as more similar to them (PR8).

Y2 students (mean change +0.32), part-time students (mean change +0.25) and those with no time for friends (mean change +0.37) exhibited the highest increases. On the other hand, we notice a broader decline in the value placed on establishing deeper university friendships (PR4; PR5) and life optimism (PR9) with students with friends from work showing the largest overall decrease (0.44). This suggests that while classroom interactions became more positive, broader social connections within the university context diminished. These findings highlight that increased classroom engagement does not necessarily translate into broader social integration or satisfaction with university social life.

5.4.3.2 Changes according to learning modality

Group 1 - Face-to-face

Figure 78: Changes in face-to-face group's perceptions of Peer-relationships.



The face-to-face students showed few changes across the semester in terms of PR. There were some increased positive perceptions regarding engaging in conversations with peers (PR7, +0.58), and a modest rise in positive interactions among classmates (PR6, +0.12). This indicates a stronger camaraderie, with the development of more inclusive and friendlier relationships, demonstrating how attendance on campus can enhance students' ability to form friendships, as previously observed (Scherman & Snow, 2021 p.2).

The interview with Leonora highlighted this sense of camaraderie and collaboration, where people from many different disciplines gathered for a common interest without competition, something that according to her is rare to find in other subjects. She stated that:

I did talk to more people, so that was fun. It was kind of like easier to make a first connection with people if you'd like me to talk to them about something. And yes most the classmates were like approachable. And there was like a very wide variety of people who took it just so fun to, like, get to know other people who are from lots of different disciplines come together in the classroom.

She further highlighted the class activities as crucial for promoting engagement, encouraging personal sharing and fostering social connections, reporting that:

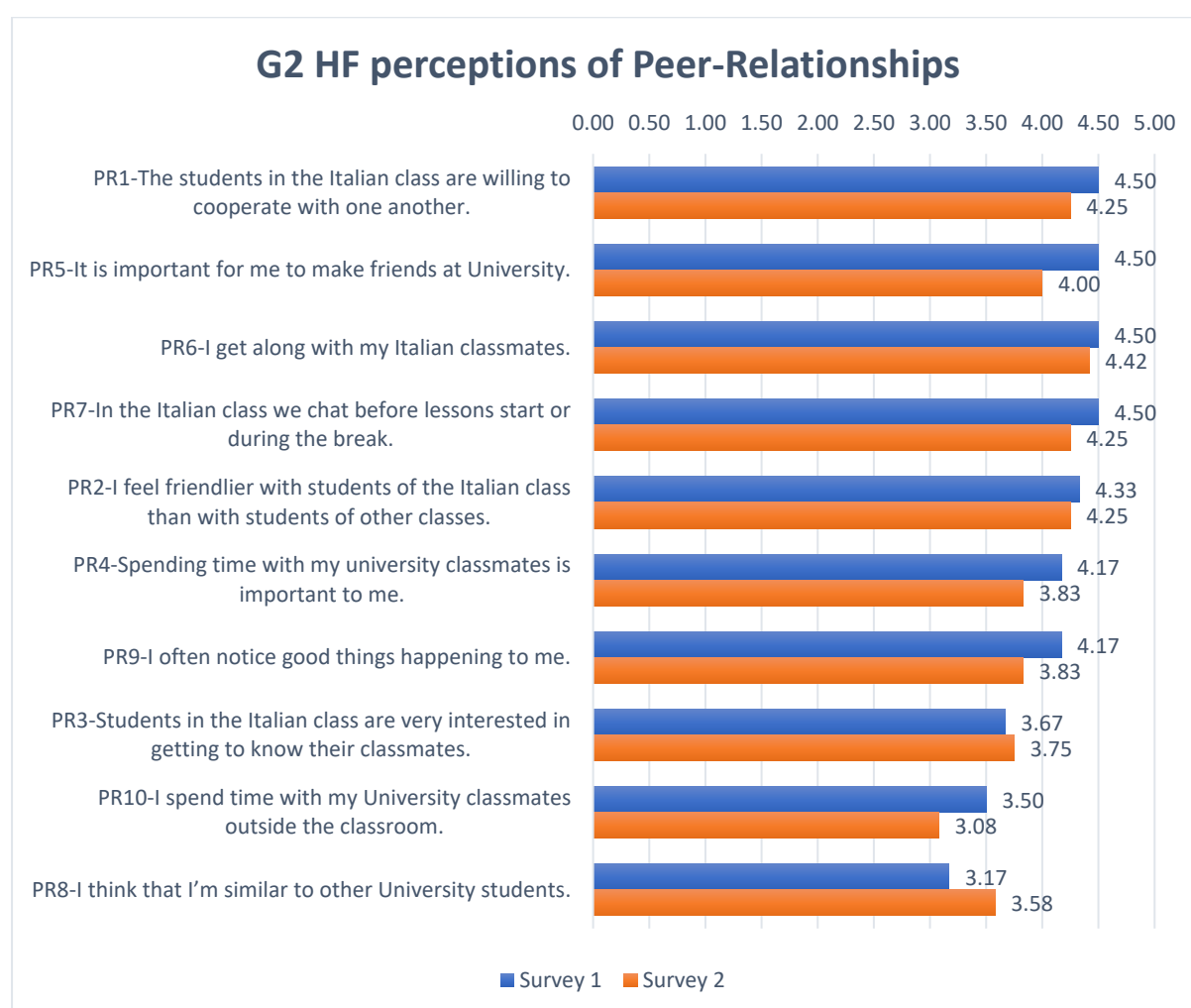
We did lots of activities to do, like about ourselves. So that was good to find things that to learn things that were applicable to you. So, if we had like specific questions about things that we do, we could be like, how do you say this in Italian? And then, oh, this is how you would do it.

These collaborative activities likely contributed to students feeling more at ease with each other (PR6, +0.13), thereby encouraging more dialogue (PR7, +0.58). Leonora also noted the lasting nature of the connections made in class:

I had a friend who I attended the class with, who I am still in contact with. And then, yeah, we had a few people that we met and that were nice, but we haven't had a chance to, like, speak again.

Group2 - HyFlex

Figure 79: Changes in HyFlex group's perceptions of Peer-relationships.



The HyFlex group (G2) of students displayed slightly more negative perceptions of PR at the end of semester, possibly due to the inherent challenges of the blended learning model, with its complex dual attendance mode, as discussed above. All the PR statements showed a decline, with the exception of PR8, that of feeling similar to other students.

Interviews with students from this group provide some explanation for this, attributing it mostly to the online aspects of this modality. For example, Margherita, who attended online, missed the in-person group dynamics, learning from others' mistakes and interacting with students of different proficiency levels:

So, I found it really hard to follow, online [...] you're not physically there [...] I believe it's good to be part of a large group because when you're speaking, you can learn from their mistakes or gain insights into what's happening. Having others around helps you review and understand things better because, at times, there are individuals better at languages. Even among beginners, there are varying levels of proficiency, and some people can explain differently [what the tutor explained].

Teodoro contrasted the online experience with in-person attendance, pointing out the disconnect felt by online students:

...online it feels a bit detached. It really felt like there was a division between online and campus students. It wasn't really enjoyable to be online versus in person.

Students valued in-person classes for peer learning and collaborative opportunities, with classroom activities facilitating natural interactions and friendship formation. Teodoro highlighted role-playing activities as beneficial for both language learning and social connections: *You get used to interacting where not everyone is used to it.* The smaller class size was seen as advantageous for building stronger interpersonal relationships: *... that helps strengthen this interpersonal relationship building.* Overall, the Italian classroom environment fostered meaningful friendships beyond academic collaboration.

Group 3 - Online

Unlike their counterparts in face-to-face (F2F) and in-class HyFlex settings, the fully online students showed limited enthusiasm for forming deep friendships within the class. Laura

mentioned viewing the connections primarily within an academic context, without a strong inclination to extend these relationships beyond the classroom:

It was mostly just for the class. I haven't really felt any strong desire to hopefully catch up with them for coffee or anything like that.

Katerina echoed this sentiment, not actively seeking friendships but remaining open to connections with peers of similar age:

I don't really look for friends that much, although if there was to be a mature age student, another one maybe.

Despite these challenges, students benefited from virtual adaptations like breakout rooms, which enhanced interaction and connection formation. Katerina highlighted these virtual spaces as instrumental in building connections: *...you got to know people better or made better connections with people...* This perspective was echoed by Laura, who observed that even limited interactions in breakout rooms increased mutual acquaintance among students: *...people get to know each other a little bit more.* Also, the activities, especially those prompting students to share personal experiences in Italian, fostered social connections. Katerina, bringing insights from psychology studies, noted the significance of these activities in enhancing peer understanding:

Students are asked to talk about themselves in Italian and also you received homework where you had to talk about what your favorite weekend looks like (and therefore) they got to know people better or made better connections with people.

5.4.3.3 Concluding remarks

The findings reveal that throughout the semester, students from both modality groups continued to view their classmates as cooperative and approachable, valuing the formation of university friendships and enjoying interactions with their peers.

Face-to-face students benefited from the physical classroom environment, showing improvements in conversations with peers and positive interactions. This aligns with the importance of on-campus attendance in fostering friendships and a sense of belonging. However, while there were improvements in classroom socialization, desire to spend time with peers, and making friends, particularly among second-year students, part-time workers, and those with limited social time, there was also a decline in the real time spent developing friendships.

The HyFlex group faced difficulties balancing online and in-person participation, with some students feeling disconnected when attending virtually. This highlights the complexities of dual-mode attendance and its impact on social dynamics. This became even more obvious in the interviews with the online students who, while benefiting from virtual adaptations like breakout rooms, struggled with limited opportunities for spontaneous interactions and practice. They showed less enthusiasm for forming deep friendships beyond the class context, emphasizing the challenges of building strong social connections in a fully online environment.

These findings underscore that even if classroom engagement improves, it doesn't necessarily translate to broader social integration or satisfaction with university social life. The varying experiences across learning modalities emphasize the need for tailored approaches to foster peer-relationships and create inclusive learning environments, regardless of the mode of attendance.

5.4.4 Changes in participants' perceptions of Sense of Belonging

5.4.4.1. Changes according to participants' sociodemographic characteristics

Table 15 presents an overview of the changes in students' perceptions of SBU across various sociodemographic cohorts.

Table 15: Changes in the students' perceptions of Sense of Belonging, between Survey 1 and Survey 2 in the first semester 2021, according to participants' sociodemographic data.

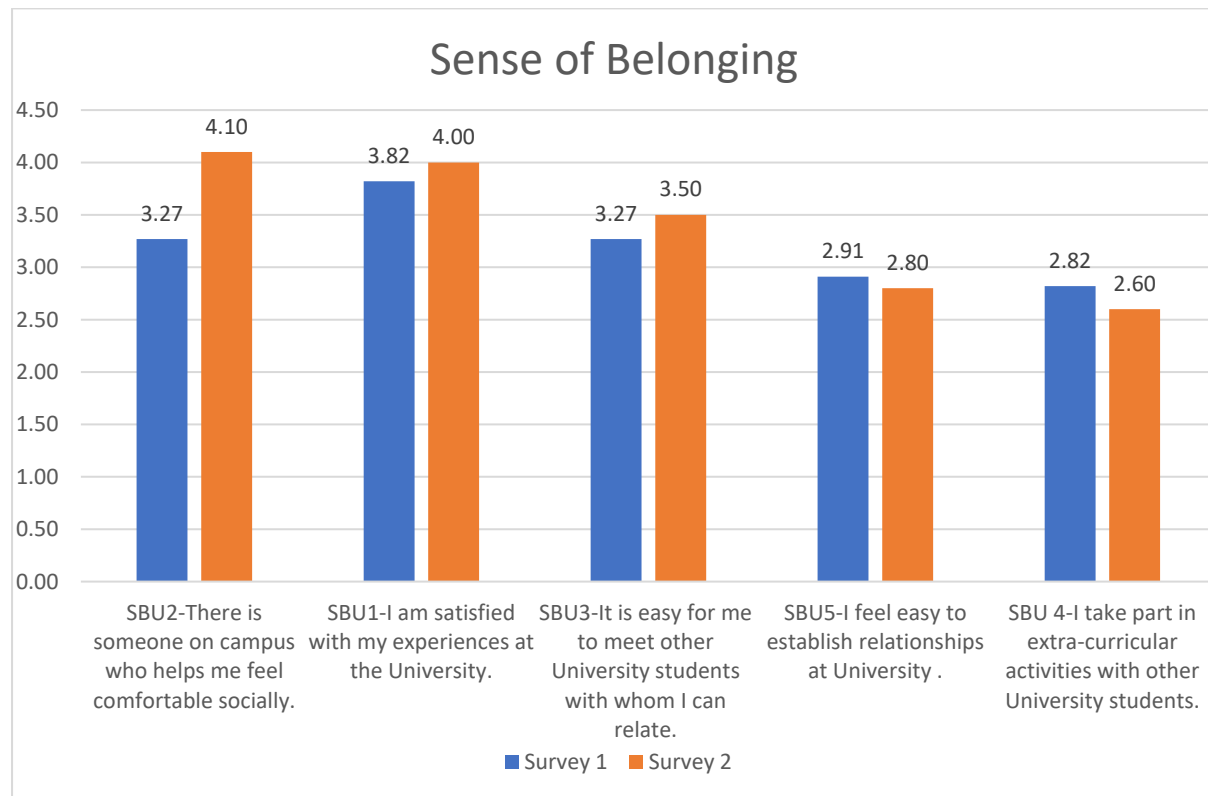
S1vsS2 2021 Changes in the students' perceptions of Sense of Belonging, between Survey 1 and Survey 2 in the first semester 2021, according to participants' socio-demographic data		SBU1 – I am satisfied with my experiences at the university	SBU2 – There is someone on campus who helps me feel comfortable socially	SBU3 – It is easy for me to meet other university students with whom I can relate	SBU4 – I take part in extra-curricular activities with other university students.	SBU5 – I feel easy to establish relationships at university
Gender	Male	+0.80	+0.40	-0.40	-0.60	+0.50
	Female	+0.16	+0.47	+0.11	-0.42	-0.15
Age	Age 16-20	-0.01	+0.48	+0.23	-0.17	-0.09
	Age 21-25	+0.75	+0.63	-0.75	-1.00	0.00
	Age +26	+0.33	+0.17	+0.33	-0.50	-0.66
Current University year	Uni Year 1	+0.13	+0.60	-0.20	-0.46	-0.43
	Uni Year 2	+0.80	+0.80	+0.40	-0.80	+0.60
	Uni Year 3	+0.50	+0.21	+1.04	+0.36	0.04
Work status	Part-time	+0.34	+0.46	+0.46	-0.20	+0.15
	Full time	+2.00	+3.50	+2.00	0.00	+0.50
	Not working	+0.17	+0.60	-0.54	-0.19	-0.61
Current social life	Friends from work	-0.14	+0.36	-1.00	-0.60	-0.64
	Friends from Uni	0.00	+0.29	0.00	-0.28	-0.57
	Friends from school	+0.28	+0.17	+0.32	-0.39	+0.19
	No time for Friends	-0.50	+0.50	+1.00	-0.33	+1.00

The survey data reveal two overall increases and one overall decline in the SBU statements between the two 2021 surveys. Students across all socio-demographics demonstrated an increased satisfaction with their university experience (SBU1), and sense of social comfort at the university (SBU2), and a decline in taking part in extra-curricular activities (SBU4). Full-time working students showed the largest increase in SBU, with an overall mean increase of +1.40, while students with friends from work showed the largest overall decrease, with an overall mean decrease of -0.40. These insights highlight that although students found increased contentment within their university setting, this was influenced by their work commitments and existing social connections.

5.4.4.2 Changes according to learning modality

Group 1 - Face-to-face

Figure 80: Changes in Group 1's perceptions of SBU during the 2021 semester.



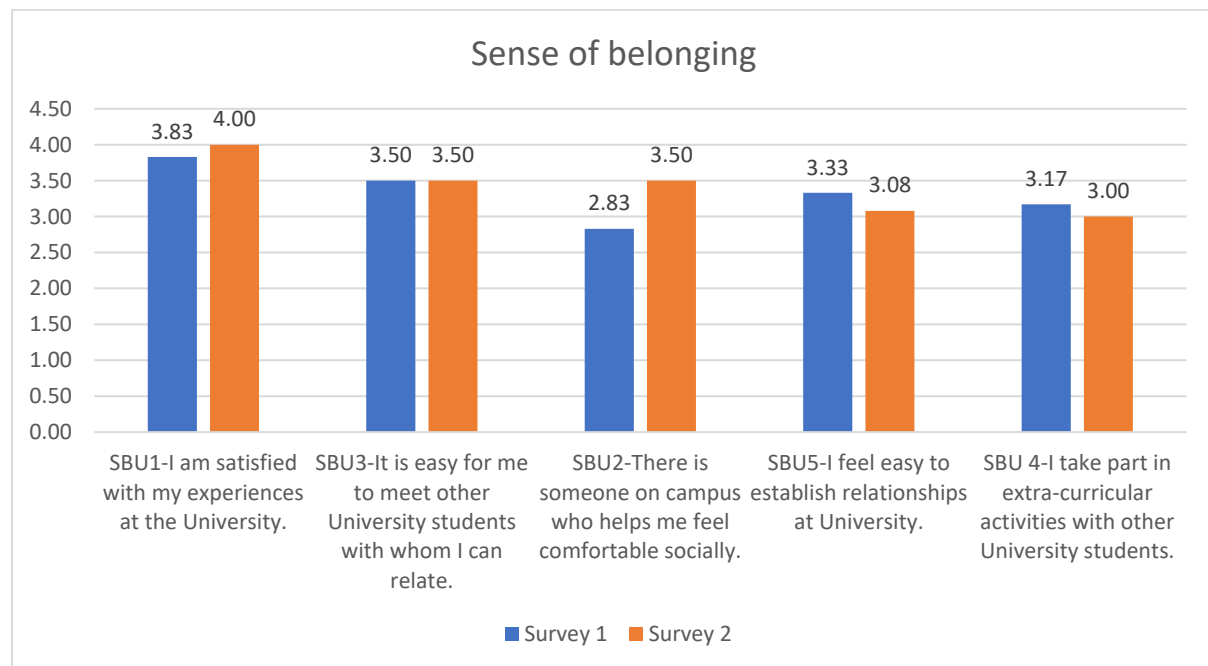
At the semester's close, face-to-face students demonstrated an increase in three of the SBU statements and a small decline in the remaining two statements. They were more likely to have a supportive campus presence, bolstering their social ease (SBU2, +0.83), and found it easier to meet relatable students on campus (SBU3, + 0.23), which in turn likely contributed to an increased overall contentment with their university life (SBU1, +0.18). The decreases were in terms of the ease with which they established relationships on campus (SBU5, -0.11) and in taking part in extracurricular activities (SBU4, -0.22).

This suggests that they found their social interactions within the classroom setting were fulfilling enough to meet their social requirements. Leonora's interview substantiates this inference; she indicated minimal involvement in clubs, finding that her social engagements

were largely confined to interactions within the classroom: *I don't really do any of those. I think I mainly just talk to people I place in class.*

Group 2 - HyFlex

Figure 81: Changes in Group 2's perceptions of SBU during the first semester 2021.



The data reveal similar improvements for the Hyflex group in their satisfaction with university life (SBU1, +0.17), and in having a supportive campus resource (SBU2, +0.68). For this group there was no increase in the ease with which they met relatable students on campus (SBU3), a more marked decrease for the ease with which they established friendships on campus (SBU5, -0.25), and a similar decrease in taking part in extracurricular activities (SBU4, -0.17). Teodoro, an online student from this group, explained this decrease in participation, describing this first semester of university as:

...a big learning curve. So, it really took me the majority of this first semester to get down to business. And because of that, I did enroll in some clubs, but no, I didn't make time to go to them.

Group 3 – Online

A second-year student who attended the online classes, Laura, provided valuable insights into her participation in extracurricular activities and its relationship to PR. She noted a shift from her first year's active engagement, initially being active in clubs, especially those of a social nature, she found over time that they lacked a lasting appeal. She discovered instead a stronger, more organic connection-building in tutorials and classroom interactions: *Seeing the same people in your Major forces you to spend time together, fostering longer-term connections*. Her words highlight the natural bonding that develops with other students completing the same Major through consistent interaction, promoting durable relationships. Her changing perspective, and the resulting decrease in extracurricular engagement suggest that academic commitments took precedence, and the clubs she joined did not align with her evolving interests. Also, Margherita (G2) did actively participate in a film society, however she found that it put extra pressure on her busy schedule and reported occasional social fatigue. Teodoro (G2) experienced a demanding adjustment period to new academic environments, leading to a regrettable but necessary reduction in society engagements. Some students preferred to engage more in class than outside of it, focusing more on PR rather than SBU. Leonora (G1), preferred the direct socialization offered through classes to joining clubs, finding the class setting sufficient for meeting their social needs. Laura (G3), a second-year student, highlighted in-person interactions as crucial for forming enduring connections, favoring face-to-face tutorials and classroom engagements over virtual or club interactions. All these examples illustrate some of the reasons for the overall trend of declining extracurricular activity among students as they progress through their university life.

5.4.3.3 Concluding remarks

While the return to an open campus and in-person classes in 2021 marginally improved student satisfaction, the data still indicate a pervasive low SBU, mostly due to a distinct decline for participation in extra-curricular activities. Interviews with students reveal multiple contributing factors for this decline, mostly to do with increasingly busier schedules and academic pressures.

In summary, unlike the detachment found in 2020, the 2021 students experienced a slight increase in their satisfaction towards their university experience, credited to the open campus and in-person classes. However, responses still indicated a low SBU, mostly due to the overall drop in participation in extra-curricular activities.

5.5 Concluding remarks regarding Research Question 2

Research Question 2 has revealed a complex interplay in students' perceptions regarding CC, PR and SBU in the post-pandemic context of 2021, with the choice of learning modality having some impact over perceptions throughout the semester. Generally, students from all modalities reported positive experiences in classroom environments and peer interactions, while their overall Sense of Belonging to the University context remained limited, even though it increased slightly.

The Italian classroom emerged as a focal point for positive social interactions and academic engagement, with students expressing satisfaction with both CC and PR. Initially, students indicated an eagerness to form peer connections and held a favorable view of the classroom environment. As the year progressed, these feelings intensified, and any earlier concerns about socialization and classroom anxiety dissipated. This shift might reflect a rebound from the isolation of remote learning, underscoring a renewed appreciation for in-person interaction.

While the HyFlex model initially garnered high approval for its flexibility, this enthusiasm waned over time, leaving face-to-face learners, who reported stronger social bonds, the most positive students. Face-to-face students praised the teaching activities, reporting improved interactions and a general increase in comfort within the university setting, highlighting the unique advantages of traditional classroom learning. Conversely, students studying exclusively online indicated a significant gap in forging relationships, and higher levels of anxiety related to classroom engagement, accentuating the social limitations of remote learning. These students reported frustrations with the inefficiencies of the online format and a general reluctance to pursue deep connections with classmates.

Sociodemographic factors played a significant role in shaping student experiences. Younger and first-year students showed higher levels of satisfaction and appreciation for collaborative learning, while more experienced students demonstrated greater ease in forming relationships. Non-working students reported more positive experiences, highlighting the impact of external commitments on university engagement. The presence of pre-existing social networks, either from university or previous educational settings, positively influenced students' perceptions of cooperation and peer interactions.

These positive classroom experiences did not necessarily translate into a robust SBU, with the data suggesting that despite an initial increase in SBU, possibly as students experienced a renewed integration into university life, ultimately students struggled to extend their social connections beyond the classroom setting. This was mostly due to a decline in participation in extracurricular activities, a crucial factor in developing SBU.

In conclusion, while the 2021 cohort showed a slight increase in CC and PR compared to the previous year, largely due to the reopening of campuses and the return of in-person classes, the overall Sense of Belonging to the University context remained low. These findings suggest that while CC and PR are to an extent linked, they are not sufficient in themselves to

foster SBU. The findings illustrate the critical role of physical presence and relational warmth in enhancing university satisfaction. The narrative of a second-year Italian student who opted to live on campus, despite proximity to family, poignantly encapsulates this, citing a desire to reconnect with peers and cultivate friendships lost during the height of the pandemic: *Because during Covid time we couldn't meet other students, make any friends.*

Chapter 6 - Discussion and conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter synthesizes the key findings of the thesis, that has examined the perceptions of students enrolled in a beginners' Italian course in an Australian metropolitan university. The study focused on three core elements of the learning experience: Classroom Climate (CC), Peer-relationships (PR), and Sense of Belonging to the University context (SBU). Using a mixed-methods approach, the study has explored the students' perceptions within and across two fundamentally different teaching semesters, which has afforded some valuable insights into the teaching of second languages at university, and of Italian specifically. Amongst other areas, it has allowed an examination of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its associated closure of the university campus and the impact of the shift to online teaching, as well as the effects of the three teaching modalities (face-to-face, Hyflex and online) offered to students by the university in the post-pandemic period. The interview data provided additional qualitative evidence and context for interpreting the survey results.

The chapter is structured around the two main Research Questions (Chapters 4 and 5) as they were addressed through the findings of two surveys administered at the beginning and the end of each semester, and qualitative data collected through post-semester, semi-structured interviews with students and tutors. The chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the findings related to CC, PR, and SBU, an analysis of the impact of different learning modalities, an examination of the influence of sociodemographic factors, a comparison of changes and consistencies between 2020 and 2021, a discussion of the study's contributions and limitations, and finally, concluding thoughts and suggestions for future research directions

6.2 Research Question 1: Semester 1, 2020

This section discusses the main findings related to Research Question 1, which investigated students' perceptions of CC, PR, and SBU at the beginning and at the end of Semester 1, 2020 (see Ch. 1). It is structured around three sub-sections, addressing perceptions before and after the transition to online learning, as well as the changes in these perceptions over the course of the semester.

6.2.1 Initial perceptions – Survey 1, 2020

After three weeks of teaching in Semester 1, 2020, the survey findings revealed positive perceptions regarding CC, varying results regarding PR, and overall negative perceptions of SBU, with some variations across the sociodemographic cohorts.

Classroom Climate

In the Italian class, most respondents reported feeling comfortable and included, attributing this to several factors, as indicated by both the survey data and student interviews at the semester's end. Firstly, the small class size enhanced instructor-student rapport and allowed more personalized attention, which is consistent with findings by Frisby and Martin (2010) and by Moore and Díaz (2019 section 4.7). Secondly, the collaborative nature of learning a new language fostered camaraderie, as frequently mentioned in interviews (see sections 4.3.3 and 5.3.3), enhancing the supportive classroom environment noted in research by (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003), underscoring the classroom's role in reducing negative emotions such as anxiety. Thirdly, the survey results and follow-up interviews suggested that for the students the immediate academic environment of the Italian class took precedence over broader university context, which likely intensified positive perceptions of the class, aligning with D'Orazzi and Hajek (2021), who found a similar appreciation of the immediate learning environment amongst university learners of Italian. Finally, the role of

tutors in fostering this supportive environment was also highlighted, with students appreciating tutors' efforts to cultivate a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere in the emergency online teaching. This is consistent with findings from Frisby and Martin (2010), who emphasized the vital role instructors play in cultivating a positive classroom climate.

Sociodemographically, students aged 21-25, in their second year at university, not working, and with university friends showed higher levels of agreement with positive CC statements. This suggests that familiarity with the learning environment, lack of work commitments, and a supportive social network may enhance the classroom experience. These findings align with previously cited studies such as Graunke and Woosley (2005) (see section 4.2.3.2), who noted that familiarity with the university's teaching/learning context may contribute to positivity among second-year students; and Pearce (2017), who found that older students often demonstrate greater confidence and achieve better academic results. My findings also confirm the results in Mounsey and Diekhoff (2013), who suggested that working students are more likely to suffer from anxiety, affecting their classroom experience negatively; and in Picton, Kahu, and Nelson (2017), who found that friendships among students help reduce anxiety and promote positive learning behaviors, in line with other studies (See sections 2.4 and 4.2.3.2) that highlight the importance of university-based friendships.

Peer-relationships

In contrast to the uniformly positive perceptions of CC, the analysis of PR revealed a more complicated scenario. While the atmosphere was generally cooperative, highlighted by positive interactions and alignment with cooperative learning principles, challenges persisted. These findings align with the principles of cooperative learning (Clément et al., 1994) and confirm the positive influence of social networks on campus, as noted by Keating, Rixon and Perenyi (2020), who emphasized the positive influence of social networks on campus in their longitudinal study among Australian students and academic staff, and in D'Orazzi and Hajek's

(2021) study, who underscored the importance of social connections for Italian language learners at Australian universities.

However, students reported a lack of interest in deeper personal connections and lower engagement in social activities outside class, indicating a struggle to balance academic and social lives, a finding supported by Kane, Chalcraft, and Volpe (2014) and Richardson et al. (2019) .

Sociodemographic analysis revealed nuanced patterns in PR perceptions. Female students, those aged 21-25, third-year students, and those with pre-existing university friends generally reported more positive perceptions, though these trends were not uniform across all PR measures. Female students, showed stronger agreement with statements about camaraderie and sociability, confirming gender-specific trends in social engagement in Richardson et al. (2019), who noted them among first-year university students. Regarding the different age groups, students in the 21-25 age group demonstrated the strongest desire for friendship, potentially due to greater emphasis on networking for career purposes, as suggested by Bridgstock, Jackson, Lloyd, and Tofa (2019) in their study on the significance of university social networks for employability. Third-year students showed engagement with the university community, reflecting Allen et al. (2008), observation of their focus on professional and social networking. Students with pre-existing university friends reported the highest satisfaction for PR, underscoring established social networks' positive impact on campus life, a finding supported by Picton, Kahu, and Nelson (2017).

These findings highlight the complexity of peer-relationships and the interplay with sociodemographic factors in university settings, particularly regarding students' desires for social connections, their perceptions of their peers, and the challenges of developing deeper relationships.

Sense of Belonging

Students mainly disagreed with statements about SBU statements, except for their general satisfaction with the university. These results indicate challenges in forming meaningful personal connections on campus and fully engaging with the university community beyond the immediate academic environment. The low SBU scores early in the semester suggest limited time for students to establish meaningful connections, an observation supported by Kane et al. (2014), who noted that first-year students typically only develop a sense of belonging by the seventh week of the first semester.

Mature-age students and second-year students faced notable challenges. For mature-age students, difficulties in integrating into a younger student body and balancing external responsibilities may hinder their university connection, as discussed by Leder and Forgasz (2004).

The case of second-year students is particularly noteworthy. While counterintuitive, it confirms findings related to the "sophomore slump"³⁹ (Hunter, 2010, p. 38). Schaller (2010) noted that while universities often offer support for first-year students transitioning from high school, these efforts rarely extend to second-year students, leading to feelings of neglect or abandonment. This lack of targeted support, combined with increased academic demands and the waning of initial enthusiasm, can impact their sense of belonging. This issue is critical for retention, as indicated by Berkner, He, and Cataldi (2002). In contrast, third-year students reported the highest SBU scores, likely due to accumulated support and resilience, consistent with observations by Koyuncuoglu (2021) and Schaller (2010).

³⁹ The term "sophomore slump" generally refers to the academic or emotional decline often experienced by second-year college students. Second year students may feel disillusioned, unmotivated, or face more complex academic demands, they may struggle with maintaining the initial enthusiasm and energy that propelled them through their first year.

6.2.2 Final perceptions – Survey 2, 2020

This section addresses the final perceptions of students regarding CC, PR and SBU at the end of what proved to be a tumultuous semester due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated the closure of the campus and the introduction of emergency remote teaching.

Classroom Climate

Despite the challenges of remote learning, students reported strong agreement with CC statements in the Italian classroom. They felt the atmosphere was positive, inclusive, and comfortable, with high confidence in speaking Italian. However, the sense of comfort within the university environment was slightly less pronounced.

Analysis of demographic data revealed some differences among student groups, though overall responses were positive. Older students (21-25 years) rated CC more favorably than younger students, possibly due to greater emotional maturity or appreciation for the flexibility of remote learning. Younger students may have found remote learning less fulfilling, possibly due to fewer life responsibilities or increased anxiety, as suggested by studies like Appleby et al. (2022). Non-working students showed slightly better perceptions of class atmosphere, feelings of security, and inclusion, possibly because they faced fewer external stressors. Interestingly, part-time workers felt slightly more at ease, perhaps due to increased confidence from social interactions at work during the pandemic (see 4.2.4.2). Students with pre-existing social connections demonstrated more satisfaction in the classroom environment, likely reflecting the resilience students demonstrated and the efforts of tutors to create an engaging online learning space. As confirmed by student interviews, tutors played a crucial role in maintaining a supportive atmosphere through effective use of technology (See section 4.2.3.3), aligning with Frisby and Martin's (2010) findings on the importance of instructor-student

rapport in influencing classroom climate and student engagement, and by Fabriz et al.'s (2021) research on the significance of instructor adaptability in online settings.

Peer-relationships

The findings related to PR among students learning in ERT presented a more complex picture. Despite strong agreement on classroom cooperation and positive peer interactions, supported by Dörnyei's (1997) research on group dynamics, students struggled with social connections outside class due to remote learning constraints. A common sentiment was that, had they been on campus, more friendships might have developed (see section 4.2.4), reflecting the findings of Ong (2020) on the lack of community in remote learning. The shift to online disrupted traditional peer interactions, significantly hindering relationship formation, particularly among first-year students who had little opportunity to establish connections pre-lockdown, exacerbating their isolation (Appleby et al., 2022). Despite a supportive and inclusive classroom environment, students reported difficulties in forming connections outside the classroom, with limited in-person interactions and extracurricular involvement, echoing findings from Kaufmann and Vallade (2020), who noted that online learners often feel lonelier than their in-person counterparts.

Sociodemographic analysis showed that younger students (16-20 years old) felt more connected to their Italian 1 (see 3.6) classmates. Suggesting they actively sought online social connections, contrasting with older students (21-25 years), who relied on established external networks to cope with remote learning challenges. First-year students reported more positive PR perceptions, driven by their enthusiasm to form new relationships, while third-year students leveraged their longer tenure for better in-class socialization. This trend aligns with O'Dea's (2021) research suggesting first-year students have a greater need for peer connections, especially during remote learning. Non-working students showed higher levels of agreement. They found it easier to connect with classmates, engaged in more chatting, and displayed

greater optimism (see section 4.3.52). While part-time workers excelled in collaboration, applying work-related skills to their studies. Students with friends from school demonstrated the highest satisfaction in classroom collaboration and socialization, suggesting that long-term friendships positively impact academic and social engagement, even online.

Sense of Belonging

Not surprisingly, students' perceptions of SBU were the most negative with dissatisfaction prominent across all student cohorts due to pandemic-related disruptions, including severe restrictions on extracurricular activities. This situation had significant implications for first-year students who had limited opportunities to establish connections before the transition to online learning as highlighted by Thomas's (2012). Younger and non-working students expressed the greatest dissatisfaction, lacking alternative social outlets and essential pre-existing networks to mitigate the isolation brought on by remote learning, aligning with Darolia's (2014) findings on social integration impacts. First-year and non-working students were particularly impacted, relying more on extracurricular activities for social integration and identity formation within the university, consistent with Ong's (2020) observations. The diminished extracurricular participation underscores the lockdown's varying impact, with the most severe effects felt by those new to university life, younger students, and those without prior social connections, aligning with research by Keis et al.'s (2017) and Stark's (2019) and Bridgstock et al.'s (2019) study on the importance of social connectedness for graduate employability.

6.2.3 Changes in perceptions - Semester 1, 2020

This section examines the changes in students' perceptions of CC, PR, and SBU over the course of Semester 1, 2020, as the learning environment shifted modalities from face-to-face to online. It is important to note that these findings should be interpreted cautiously due to the small

sample size, particularly in the second survey (See section 4.4). Despite these limitations, comparing the results of Survey 1 (S1/2020) with those of Survey 2 (S2/2020) reveals several key trends.

Classroom Climate

Students' perceptions of CC demonstrated remarkable resilience, with students maintaining largely positive views despite the shift to online learning. This suggests that the Italian classroom environment, even when virtual, continued to provide a supportive and engaging space. Both survey data and student interviews indicate that the efforts of tutors in adapting their teaching methods played a crucial role in maintaining this positive atmosphere, as discussed in section 4.2.3.3. This finding aligns with research by Ruiz-Robledillo et al. (2022), which noted that students' perceptions of classroom climate remained stable despite the pandemic when supported by effective teaching strategies, suggesting stability despite increased academic stress. Both my thesis and the study by Ruiz-Robledillo et al. (2022) also highlighted the pandemic's impact on social interactions, especially for first-year students, noting challenges in forming deeper connections despite positive in-class peer-relationships. The adaptability of students and tutors appears to have played a key role in mitigating the negative impacts of the pandemic on CC and, to some extent, PR.

Peer-relationships

The findings on PR are more complex. While students expressed increased appreciation for peer interactions under challenging circumstances, they also faced new difficulties in developing and maintaining these relationships. Although cooperation and friendliness within the Italian class were valued, extending these connections beyond the virtual classroom proved challenging. This reflects the limitations of the online environment in fostering deeper, more meaningful peer-relationships. As Kaufmann and Vallade (2020) noted, online learners often

experience greater loneliness compared to those in traditional learning environments, which aligns with the difficulties students faced in developing connections outside of structured class time.

Sense of Belonging

A significant decline in agreement with SBU statements was evident across all student cohorts, highlighting the profound impact of campus closures and the loss of physical presence on students' connection to the university. This decline is consistent with Thomas's (2012) findings on the importance of physical presence and engagement in extra-curricular activities for fostering a sense of belonging. The widespread impact of the pandemic on sense of belonging and the shift to online learning is further supported by Tice et al. (2021) (see sections 2.5.1 and 4.2.4.1).

Sociodemographic influences

Sociodemographic factors influenced the observed changes in various ways. Older students (21-25 years) reported increased confidence and better peer relations in the Italian class, possibly due to their maturity and prior university experience,, consistent with Pearce's (2017) research on the academic benefits of life experience. First-year students, likely seeking peer connections during remote learning, noted improved peer relations and class interactions, reflecting by Cameron and Rideout's (2022) study on first-year students' adaptation to university life. Third-year students, benefiting from established social networks, maintained positive perceptions across CC, PR, and SBU, as noted by Allen et al. (2008). Non-working students experienced higher increases in CC and PR perceptions, suggesting that free time influenced relationships quality. However, part-time working students showed more resilience in maintaining SBU, possibly due to social interactions at work, reflecting Darolia's (2014) research on work-study balance. Students with pre-existing friendships, reported higher

increases in positive perceptions of CC and PR, supporting Tomas-Miquel & Capo-Vicedo's (2022) findings on the importance of pre-existing social connections in academic settings.

Conclusion

The analysis of students' perceptions over Semester 1, 2020, reveals a complex picture. Perceptions of Classroom Climate remained remarkably consistent, with students maintaining largely positive views despite the shift to online learning. However, perceptions of Peer-relationships were mixed, with the transition to online learning introducing new challenges in fostering social interactions and developing deeper connections, reflecting the limitations of the digital environment. While cooperation and friendliness within the Italian class were positively perceived, extending these relationships beyond the virtual classroom proved difficult.

In contrast, students' Sense of Belonging perceptions became significantly more negative throughout the semester, regardless of their sociodemographic characteristics. Several factors contributed to this negative trend, including the closure of campus facilities, which severely limited students' ability to engage in typical university activities. The online environment also constrained opportunities for spontaneous social interactions and relationship-building outside structured class time. The drastic reduction in extracurricular participation, which traditionally plays a vital role in fostering university identity and community, was particularly impactful for first-year students and those without established social networks. The negative shift in SBU perceptions underscores the challenges institutions face in cultivating a sense of community in a remote learning environment and highlights the potential long-term impact of reduced campus engagement on students' overall university experience.

6.3 Research Question 2: Semester 1, 2021

This section examines the findings related to Research Question 2, which investigated students' perceptions of CC, PR, and SBU in Semester 1, 2021, as pandemic restrictions eased, allowing different learning modalities (See Chapter 5). The discussion is organized into three subsections: perceptions at the beginning and end of the semester, and the changes observed throughout.

6.3.1 Initial perceptions – Survey1, 2021

After three weeks of teaching in a gradually reopening semester, students reported their initial perceptions of CC, PR, and SBU. The semester offered more flexibility, allowing students to choose their preferred learning modality, and revealed a complex interplay between the learning environment, social dynamics, and sociodemographic factors.

Classroom Climate

CC continued to receive the most positive feedback among the three variables studied. Students reported high levels of satisfaction with the classroom atmosphere, comfort, and inclusivity. However, they expressed anxiety about speaking in front of the class and did not view the Italian class as significantly contributing to their overall comfort at university. These positive perceptions of CC align with prior research highlighting the importance of a supportive classroom environment in second language learning (Gabryś-Barker, 2016).

Sociodemographic analysis revealed some nuanced differences. Older students, first-year students, non-working students, and those with university friends tended to report more positive CC perceptions. This aligns with studies like Pearce (2017) which noted that older students often bring greater confidence to academic settings, contributing to their positive classroom experience (see section 6.2.1).

Students across all learning modalities perceived a generally positive classroom environment, with those in the HyFlex group showing the highest satisfaction. The flexibility of the HyFlex format, which combines in-person and online options, and the adaptability of tutors to this format were particularly appreciated in the post-pandemic context. This preference for HyFlex learning resonates with recent studies, such as Athens (2023), which found that 70% of participants preferred the HyFlex option for its convenience and adaptability (See section 2.5.2). Face-to-face learners exhibited less apprehension in speaking Italian in class compared to online learners, underscoring the importance of the physical learning environment on student confidence and classroom dynamics. This aligns with research by Kindred and Bates (2023), who emphasized the importance of physical presence in boosting student confidence during classroom participation.

Peer-relationships

Students' perceptions of PR revealed a disconnect between their strong desire for social interactions and their actual experiences in forming deep relationships outside the classroom. While cooperative behavior and the value of university friendships were rated highly, actual time spent with peers was limited, reflecting Kane, Chalcraft, and Volpe (2014) findings on the challenges in developing a sense of belonging (See 2.4.2).

Sociodemographic factors significantly influenced PR perceptions with younger, non-working students and those with pre-existing university friendships reporting more positive social experiences, aligning with D'Orazzi and Hajek (2021) on the influence of social networks on student motivation and retention.

The HyFlex learning group reported the most positive PR perceptions, suggesting that blended learning models, which mix online and face-to-face interactions, can enhance social engagement according to Athens (2023). However, the challenges in forming deep connections

outside the classroom, especially for online learners, highlight the ongoing impact of the pandemic on social interactions, aligning with research by Snow and Scherman (2021).

Contrary to expectations, the face-to-face group reported lower PR perceptions despite the advantages of physical proximity, indicating that physical interaction alone does not necessarily lead to stronger peer-relationships. This discrepancy highlights the broader impacts of pandemic-related social changes and the need for structured social opportunities and support in overcoming social anxieties, as noted by Gherheş et al. (2021), who noted the persistent impact of pandemic-related social changes on student behavior and Richardson et al. (2019). Who observed that university students often face significant time constraints that limit their ability to socialize outside of structured academic settings. As repeatedly mentioned, these findings suggest therefore that physical presence alone is not sufficient to guarantee strong social connections. Other factors—such as structured social opportunities, time management support, and strategies for overcoming lingering social anxieties—may play crucial roles in facilitating meaningful peer-relationships.

The online group reported the lowest levels of agreement in informal social engagement and feeling connected, underscoring the difficulties of building relationships in fully online environments. However, despite these obstacles, they valued student cooperation, and interpersonal connections at the university.

Sense of Belonging

As in the previous two surveys, SBU emerged as the most challenging aspect for students, with students consistently showing disagreement with the statements related to this variable compared to CC and PR. Overall SBU means were low across all learning modalities, indicating the lingering effects of pandemic-related disruptions and the gradual nature of campus reopening. This also suggests that physical presence on campus alone may not be sufficient to foster a strong sense of belonging.

Sociodemographic insights reveal that females, first-year, younger, non-working students and those with university friends display fewer negative perceptions of SBU.

The findings from the first survey in Semester 1, 2021, tend to confirm several trends observed regarding CC, PR, and SBU, with overall positive perceptions of CC, more varied results in PR, and negative perceptions of SBU. Regarding different learning modalities, a key finding is the consistently positive perceptions of CC reported across all formats, with particularly high satisfaction in the HyFlex group. This widespread agreement can largely be attributed to the tutors' efforts in fostering a welcoming and inclusive learning atmosphere across various formats—face-to-face, online, and HyFlex—demonstrating their adaptability and commitment to student engagement. This confirms the crucial role instructors play in shaping classroom dynamics and student experiences (Frisby & Martin, 2010).

6.3.2 Final perceptions – Survey 2, 2021

This section addresses the perceptions of students regarding CC, PR and SBU at the end of Semester 1, 2021, reflecting consistent trends observed across previous surveys and semesters.

Classroom Climate

One of the most notable findings was the persistence of positive perceptions regarding CC, even as the semester approached a more *normal* state amid ongoing challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of various learning modalities. Students consistently reported high levels of confidence when speaking Italian, particularly in face-to-face and HyFlex modalities, and viewed the classroom atmosphere positively. This contrasted with findings from Semester 1, 2020 (see 4.3), when students initially struggled with the shift to online learning. Students also felt a strong sense of inclusion in the Italian class, which contributed to their overall comfort at the university. These results align with the previously cited Gabrys-Barker's (2016) findings.

Demographic analysis showed that younger students (16-20 years old), second-year students, non-working students, and those with friends from school generally had more positive CC experiences. This could be due to these groups' greater need for peer connections or more free time for campus engagement, aligning with research by O'Dea (2021). The positive impact of not working on CC perceptions supports findings by Mounsey et al. (2013) and Perna and Odle (2020), who noted that working students often experience reduced satisfaction and performance in their academic pursuits. Regarding different learning modalities, the supportive and inclusive atmosphere of the Italian classroom was maintained across face-to-face, HyFlex, and online environments, though with some variations. Face-to-face (G1) and HyFlex (G2) groups reported the highest levels of satisfaction with the classroom climate. The face-to-face group reported the highest levels of satisfaction with CC, particularly in terms of confidence in speaking Italian, slightly higher than the HyFlex group. This suggests that physical presence and interaction enhance students' confidence in verbal participation. HyFlex students reported marginally higher comfort in the Italian class overall, indicating that the flexibility of this format contributed to a positive classroom environment. These findings align with research by Fabriz et al. (2021), which emphasizes the importance of instructor flexibility in maintaining student engagement across various learning settings.

Notably, only one student from the online group responded to this survey, making it difficult to draw meaningful comparisons for that group. Although, this lack of data for the online group is a significant finding in itself, potentially indicating a lower level of engagement or connection or possible challenges in motivating online students to participate in the survey. As in previous surveys, such persistent positive perceptions of CC can be attributed to a combination of factors such as the adaptability of tutors, who effectively adjusted their teaching approaches to different modalities (see 5.3.3), and the resilience of students in adapting to varied learning environments.

Peer-relationships

As in the other surveys, findings related to PR presented a more complex picture. Students strongly agreed that there was cooperation among classmates and reported positive relationships with their Italian peers. However, lower scores were observed for social interactions outside of class and feelings of similarity with peers, suggesting that life commitments or lingering effects of pandemic-related social distancing may have hindered the development of deeper social connections (see 2.5 and 5.2.4).

Sociodemographic analysis revealed that younger students, first-year students, non-working students, and those with friends from school reported more positive PR experiences, possibly due to a greater need for peer connections or more free time. However, older students and those with pre-existing university friendships showed more resilience in maintaining their social connections, possibly due to their having established networks.

Regarding learning modalities, distinct patterns emerged across face-to-face and HyFlex groups. The face-to-face group reported a slightly higher overall mean for PR, suggesting that in-person learning was particularly conducive to fostering peer connections. Both groups reported strong cooperation within Italian classes and efforts to socialize with classmates, indicating that students were able to establish some level of peer interaction regardless of the teaching format. However, HyFlex students exhibited a stronger affinity for their Italian class peers, possibly due to the flexibility of the HyFlex format, which may have fostered a unique sense of camaraderie among students navigating both in-person and online environments. Face-to-face students showed a slightly higher inclination toward university-wide socialization, likely reflecting the increased opportunities for spontaneous interactions that come with consistent physical presence on campus. Despite these positive aspects, both groups demonstrated minimal engagement with the broader campus community. Face-to-face students seemed particularly keen on forming university friendships beyond their Italian

classes, while HyFlex students reported feeling most at ease within their Italian class community. These findings echo Maunder's conclusion (2018), which highlighted the importance of peer-relationships in university adjustment and attachment.

Sense of Belonging

As in other surveys, SBU elicited the most negative perceptions among the three variables across all student cohorts. A noteworthy exception to this overall negative trend was observed among younger participants (aged 16-25), who reported a greater sense of satisfaction with their university experiences. This finding aligns with research by Maunder (2018), suggesting that younger students may be more adaptable in forming new social connections and integrating into the university environment.

Analysis of the different learning modalities revealed nuanced perceptions of SBU. Students in both face-to-face and HyFlex groups expressed agreement only with being satisfied with their overall university experience. However, face-to-face students reported feeling more socially comfortable on campus compared to their HyFlex and online counterparts. This heightened social comfort among face-to-face students emphasizes the positive impact of physical campus engagement and underscores the importance of on-campus experiences in enhancing connection with the university, as supported by research from Strayhorn (2012) and Felten and Lambert (2020).

The limited Sense of Belonging to the University context aligns with findings from the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) survey, which reported a significant decline in satisfaction with learner engagement and a weakened sense of belonging across Australian universities during the COVID-19 pandemic (QILT, 2020).

In conclusion, the end of semester survey in 2021 revealed a complex picture of student perceptions. While Classroom Climate remained consistently positive across different learning modalities and demographic groups, Peer-relationships showed more varied results, with

positive interactions within the Italian classroom but limited engagement beyond it. The Sense of Belonging to the University context remained the most challenging aspect, with face-to-face students showing a slight advantage in terms of social comfort on campus. These findings highlight the ongoing impact of the pandemic and changing learning environments on student experiences, as well as the critical role of in-person interactions in fostering a sense of community and belonging in higher education.

6.3.3 Changes in perceptions - Semester 1, 2021

This section examines the changes in students' perceptions of CC, PR and SBU over Semester 1, 2021, with attention to the different learning modalities.

Classroom Climate

Students' perceptions of CC remained generally positive, though a slight decline was noted in four of the five CC-related statements. These statements touched on feelings of inclusion, comfort, and classroom atmosphere. Face-to-face students maintained stable, positive views of the classroom environment, HyFlex and fully online students reported decreased participation and a more impersonal learning environment. However, despite these declines, the overall perception of the Italian class as a supportive environment persisted across all groups.

Notably, all modalities saw an improvement in students' confidence in speaking Italian, highlighting the consistent efforts of tutors in fostering a supportive environment across different teaching formats. This aligns with the crucial role of tutors noted in 2020, as highlighted in section 4.3.3.3, in maintaining a positive atmosphere despite challenging circumstances. However, students with external social connections, such as workplace friends, experienced the most significant declines in CC perceptions, contrasting with non-working students, who saw the most improvement.

Peer-relationships

PR outcomes were mixed. While students reported increased socialization and desire to connect with classmates, there was a concerning decline in the value placed on deeper university friendships and cooperation. This was particularly evident among second-year students, part-time workers, and students with limited social time (see section 6.2.3). Face-to-face students showed the most positive PR trends, benefiting from direct campus experiences. In contrast, HyFlex and online students struggled with engagement and forming deep connections, reflecting the limitations of virtual environments in fostering meaningful peer-relationships (see section 6.2.3).

Sense of Belonging

SBU continued to be significantly impacted across all modalities in 2021. While students reported increased satisfaction with their overall university experience, they struggled to extend social connections beyond the classroom setting. This trend was particularly pronounced for HyFlex and online students, echoing the profound impact of reduced physical presence on campus noted in the previous year.

The consistent decline in extracurricular participation across all modalities further emphasizes the challenges in fostering a strong sense of university community, especially in non-traditional learning environments. See section 6.2.3 regarding the importance of physical presence and engagement in extra-curricular activities for developing SBU.

Learning modalities and their impact

The introduction of different learning modalities in 2021 provided new insights into how various formats affect student perceptions: Face-to-face students maintained the most stable and positive perceptions across CC, PR, and SBU, underscoring the benefits of physical presence noted in previous research (see section 6.2.3). While initially popular for its flexibility,

HyFlex presented unique challenges over time, including difficulties in maintaining consistent engagement and a widening divide between online and in-person participants. The fully online modality offered convenience but struggled to replicate the social and community-building aspects of in-person education, reflecting the limitations of online environments in fostering deeper connections (see section 6.2.3).

6.4 Consistencies and changes between 2020 and 2021

A comparison of students' perceptions across 2020 with those across 2021 reveals both consistencies and changes with regard to CC, PR and SBU.

Consistencies

One of the most striking consistencies was the maintenance of positive perceptions regarding CC across both years, irrespective of the learning modality. This finding speaks volumes about the adaptability of both students and instructors, who managed to create and sustain supportive learning environments even as they navigated the shift to online and hybrid teaching models. The persistent recognition of the importance of peer interactions within the classroom setting further underscores the resilience of the educational community. Thus, the Italian classroom emerges as a focal point for positive social interactions and academic engagement, with students across various demographics expressing satisfaction with the learning environment.

This finding underscores the importance of the classroom as a microcosm of the university experience, where students form their primary connections and develop their academic identity. The Italian language learning context provided a unique platform for student engagement, possibly also due to the interactive nature of language learning and the inherent intimacy involved in the cultural aspects of its curriculum.

Changes

The introduction of varied learning modalities in 2021 brought to light distinct patterns in student experiences. Notably, fully online learners faced greater challenges in PR and SBU compared to their counterparts in face-to-face or HyFlex settings (Section 5.3). This finding suggests that while online learning offers flexibility, it may come at the cost of social integration and community building. The trajectory of SBU presents an interesting narrative. The sharp decline observed in 2020 (see section 4.3.5) due to campus closures saw a slight recovery in 2021, particularly among face-to-face learners (see section 5.3.5). The analysis reveals several key factors influencing students' SBU particularly related to the timing within the academic year and the unique learning environment. At the beginning of the semester, students generally reported lower SBU scores, likely due to insufficient time to establish strong connections (see sections 4.2.5 and 5.2.5). The sudden shift to lockdown and online learning significantly impacted SBU, with students reporting increased feelings of disconnection (sections 4.3.5 and 4.4.1.3). The gradual return to campus in 2021 saw a slight improvement in SBU, especially among face-to-face learners, highlighting the importance of physical presence (sections 5.3.5 and 5.4.4). Additionally, the specific nature of the Italian language classroom, characterized by its small size and highly interactive teaching methods, played a crucial role in fostering a strong sense of community within the class, even when broader university belonging was low (sections 4.2.3, 5.2.3, and 5.3.3).

A deeper analysis of sociodemographic data provides further insights into these trends. Working students and those reporting a lack of time for friendships experienced the most negative changes from 2020 to 2021 across all three variables - CC, PR, and SBU. This finding suggests that these students, who relied heavily on classroom settings for interpersonal connections, were disproportionately affected by the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Younger and first-year students demonstrated higher levels of enthusiasm and adaptability

regarding the three variables, particularly in classroom dynamic and peer interactions. This could be attributed to their fresh perspective and lack of pre-pandemic university experience to compare against. Non-working students consistently reported more positive experiences across CC, PR, and SBU, likely due to their ability to dedicate more time to academic and social pursuits. Perhaps unsurprisingly, students with established university or school friends showed the most positive outcomes especially in cooperation and peer interactions.

6.5 Contributions and limitations of the study

This thesis has made a modest contribution to the literature on second language learning, and specifically on some factors that influence classroom dynamics and the socio-emotional dimensions of second language learning. In particular, it has provided insights into university students' perceptions of three main aspects of their educational experience, namely, classroom climate, peer-relationships, and sense of belonging to their university context.

Thanks to its timing, this thesis also contributes to assess the impact of the transition to compulsory online learning on students' perceptions of their learning environment. It has highlighted the crucial role that teachers have played in such circumstances, and the resilience demonstrated by the students.

A further contribution of this study concerns the evaluation of the different learning modalities that have been made available to students during and after the pandemic. The findings have indicated the higher engagement of students in face-to-face and HyFlex settings compared with online learning.

Overall, the study has confirmed the centrality of the (in-person) classroom for the second language learner's positive experience together with a supportive learning community, and the much more negligible role played by the broader university context. Such findings also attest to the effectiveness of language teaching methodologies that foster social connectivity and a supportive educational atmosphere, even within the context of online learning.

In terms of limitations, several methodological factors might have had undue influence on its outcomes. The small sample size is not representative of the broader student population and may have sparked some generalizations. In particular, international students attending Australian universities, who are hardly represented in the sample, may have very different perceptions as well as needs and expectations, for example regarding the university context. In addition, the cultural and institutional context of the study is specific to a certain local and educational system and may not be applicable to other universities or educational systems with different cultural, institutional, or pedagogical contexts. Another limitation concerns the temporal context of the study. Being conducted during the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021, may restrict the applicability of the findings to non-pandemic periods or future educational settings. Additionally, the research provides a snapshot of student perceptions at specific points in time, which may not encapsulate the longitudinal impact of the pandemic or the learning modalities on students' academic and social experiences.

These limitations necessitate a cautious interpretation of the study's findings and suggest areas for further research to enhance understanding and generalizability in this field.

6.6 Main findings and conclusion

One of the major findings of this study is the central role of the classroom, particularly the second language classroom, in shaping positive student experiences. The reciprocal roles of teachers and students were highlighted, demonstrating also the effectiveness of learner-centered methodologies. The positive perceptions of CC across various learning modalities underscore the importance of fostering an inclusive and supportive classroom environment. This finding aligns with previous research that emphasizes the need for active student engagement and collaborative learning, where both teachers and students contribute to a positive educational experience.

The study also underscored the importance of developing peer-relationships within the classroom. The cooperative and friendly atmosphere reported by students suggests that peer interactions are crucial for a positive learning environment. However, the challenges in translating these relationships outside the classroom highlight the need for collective efforts in fostering a supportive community. Encouraging students to contribute to a positive classroom climate can enhance their overall educational experience and support language acquisition.

Despite the positive classroom climate, the sense of belonging to the broader university context emerged as a significant challenge. The findings indicate that universities need to take targeted action to foster a stronger sense of belonging among students. These are important findings and represent manifold opportunities for more comprehensive investigations.

The study also revealed the impact of certain sociodemographic variables, such as existing friendship networks and work commitments, on students' experiences. Students with pre-existing friendships from school often relied on these networks for support, potentially reducing their motivation to form new friendships at university. This highlights the need for strategies that facilitate the formation of new friendships within the classroom, as well as beyond. Additionally, students' work commitments influenced their ability to engage fully with the university community, suggesting that flexible learning options might be beneficial. This struggle to balance academic commitments with broader work and social engagement remained a consistent theme across both years, highlighting an area that may require targeted interventions from university administrations.

The findings confirm the impact of the learning modalities, and the importance of offering flexible learning modalities. While face-to-face learning remains crucial for fostering social interactions and a sense of belonging, the HyFlex model has also proven effective in maintaining student engagement, whereas online learning presented challenges in terms of social interaction and sense of belonging.

Therefore, while offering students the option to choose their preferred learning modality could enhance their overall educational experience, accommodating diverse needs and preferences, universities should use online teaching modalities with caution, ensuring they provide plenty of opportunities for meaningful social interactions and support.

Future research could explore alternative methodologies to address the subject of this study, potentially unveiling new insights, for instance, expanding the sample size and ensuring a more diverse participant pool to enhance the representativeness and generalizability of the findings.

Based on the model that was developed here, the findings could be easily expanded on, through the execution of longitudinal studies. Replicating this study in subsequent years could help to assess the long-term impact of different teaching modalities on students' academic and social experiences. Some aspects of the research, such as the long-term effects of the pandemic on educational experiences or the socio-emotional aspects of language learning, were only partially explored due to the scope and temporal constraints of the study.

Future research could also build on the findings of this study to explore the long-term impacts of different teaching modalities on student outcomes. Investigating the specific strategies that most effectively promote a sense of belonging and peer-relationships in various educational contexts would also be valuable. Such research could provide deeper insights into how educational institutions can best support their students, fostering environments that are both academically and socially enriching.

In conclusion, this thesis not only advances the academic conversation about language education and the effects of disruptive external factors, such as the pandemic, but also identifies pathways for future research. It underscores the importance of continual inquiry and adaptation in educational research, especially in response to changing global circumstances. The

implications of this study extend beyond its immediate findings, offering a foundation for further exploration and innovation in the field of second language learning and pedagogy.

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