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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching outcomes in higher education

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ECONtribute
Discussion Paper No. 073

**The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on
Teaching Outcomes in Higher Education**

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching outcomes in higher education*

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced much of the world to adapt suddenly to severe restrictions. In this study, we attempt to quantify the impact of the pandemic on student performance in higher education. To collect data on important covariates, we conducted a survey among first-year students of Microeconomics at the University of Cologne. In contrast to other studies, we are able to consider a particularly suitable performance measure that was not affected by the COVID-19 restrictions implemented shortly before the start of the summer term 2020. While the average performance improves in the first term affected by the restrictions, this does not apply to students with a low socioeconomic background. Trying to identify more specific channels explaining this finding, interestingly, our data yield no evidence that the average improvement results from the altered teaching formats, suggesting instead that the enhanced performance stems from an increase in available study time.

JEL Codes: I24, I230, I310, I240, A220

Keywords: COVID-19, Higher Education, Wellbeing, Education and Inequality, Introductory Economics.

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1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has enormous effects on our economy and social life.¹ Partial and full lockdowns and social distancing forced universities to offer nearly their full teaching portfolio in a digital format. Among many other challenges the pandemic implies less social contacts and forces students to cope with more autonomy due to the new online teaching formats.² Survey results of [Aucejo et al. \(2020\)](#) indicate that the effects on students are multifaceted. Many students lose their jobs or internship opportunities. Moreover, some decrease their weekly study time, while others report an increase. The impact also seems to differ with respect to the socioeconomic background. Given these results and the ongoing debate in politics about the continuation of university closures, it is natural and important to quantify the effect of the pandemic on students' learning outcomes.

In this paper, we evaluate empirically the effect on students who participated in the courses *Principles of Microeconomics* and *Microeconomics for Business* ('Grundzüge der Mikroökonomik' and 'Mikroökonomik für BWL', respectively) in the Bachelor programs at the University of Cologne in Germany since the 2019 summer term. Our outcome of interest is the students' performance in weekly online exercises, which allow them to improve their final exam scores. We complement our data on the students' performance with data from a survey to control for important confounders. Our survey shows that students tend to be more depressed, have worse employment opportunities, and are more likely to live with their parents during the pandemic. We find that the students' performance increases on average. Next, we try to identify the causal channels leading to this outcome. Thus we are especially interested in the effect the switch to online learning had on performance. In order to isolate this effect of the pandemic from the other outcomes, we use an *Difference-in-Differences*-inspired approach. While we find that overall the switch to online learning had no measurable effect, we find the best quartile of students to profit less from online teaching than from conventional lectures. Also, when considering the results of each exercise individually, we do find that online teaching was less effective especially at the beginning of the semester. When considering other channels, we find that students with a low socioeconomic background fared worse during the pandemic.

Our paper contributes to the literature dealing with the impact of the pandemic on students, which can be further divided into two strands. The first one mainly looks at the impact on students in schools, while the second one focuses on higher education. Moreover, we add evidence to the general literature in economics analyzing the impact of online teaching on student outcomes. Studies by [Grewenig et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Agostinelli et al. \(2020\)](#) analyze the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of school closures on students in schools. They both argue that low-skilled students are particularly negatively affected.

[Gonzalez et al. \(2020\)](#) is one of two other studies so far to measure the impact of the pandemic on students' performance in higher education. In line with our results, they find a positive effect and trace this back to more efficient learning strategies. However, our study extends their analysis, as our survey results, as well as other confounders, allow us to go beyond a simple

¹See [Baldwin and Weder di Mauro \(2020\)](#) for a book discussing the multifaceted impact of the pandemic.

²First studies show that the pandemic leads to psychological distress for university students. See, for instance [Cao et al. \(2020\)](#).

mean comparison of treatment and control group.³

Rodríguez-Planas (2020) analyze the effect of the pandemic on students' performance as well. Assuming parallel trends of both groups they apply a difference-in-difference approach to calculate differences in performance changes of high-and low-income students. Thus, they rather focus on the analysis of heterogeneous effects. In line with our results, they find a positive overall effect. However, in contrast to their study, we are able to use an objective performance measure, which has not been subject to change during the pandemic.

Moreover, our study complements the one of Aucejo et al. (2020) and Rodríguez-Planas (2021). They issued a survey and find large negative effects for students in terms of experiences and future expectations (i.e., employment opportunities). Our study supplements the survey results with quantitative evidence in terms of impact on students' performance.

The effect of online learning methods in higher education on teaching outcomes has already been studied for a long time in the economic literature. There exist many descriptive studies (see Means et al. (2010) for a meta-analysis), which in their majority suggest a positive relationship between online teaching methods and student outcomes. However, many of these studies do not account for self-selection effects, as a result of which students with characteristics that are particularly important for success in digital learning environments choose to participate in online courses (see Coates et al. (2004)). To overcome this drawback, newer studies use instrumental variable approaches, quasi- or experimental settings to estimate causal effects. Coates et al. (2004), Bettinger et al. (2017) and Xu and Jaggars (2013) all use IV approaches. While the latter two studies suggest negative effects on student outcomes, the study by Coates et al. (2004) finds positive effects. Experimental evidence is provided by Figlio et al. (2013), Joyce et al. (2015), Bowen et al. (2014) and Alpert et al. (2016).⁴ Their results are ambiguous as well. Figlio et al. (2013) and Alpert et al. (2016) conclude that live teaching is superior to online formats in terms of student performance, while Joyce et al. (2015) find no significant difference. According to Bowen et al. (2014), hybrid systems have the potential to achieve at least equivalent outcomes. Another recent study is conducted by Cacault et al. (2019). They find that online livestreaming of classes increases the performance of high-achieving students, while the opposite is true for low achievers.

However, it should be noted that our approach only yields a second-best estimation of the effects of the switch to online formats. Although the pandemic is clearly an exogenous shock, it is not a clean natural experiment that allows researchers to evaluate causal impacts of the newly introduced educational policies in universities around the world. As pointed out by Bacher-Hicks and Goodman (2020), the shock affects the outcome of interest (students' performance) not only via online teaching, because it is likely that the pandemic causes changes in other factors that are equally important in determining student performance as well.⁵ Nevertheless, it is possible to measure the impact of the pandemic as a whole and to estimate the effect of online teaching in times of COVID-19. Given the high relevance of the topic, we think it is important to examine the effects of these policies ex-post notwithstanding the empirical drawbacks and challenges.

³Furthermore, our outcome variable is more objective because Gonzalez et al. (2020) need to normalize their test scores across terms. In contrast, our bonus point questions are identical across terms and thus easily comparable.

⁴The studies by Figlio et al. (2013), Joyce et al. (2015) and Bowen et al. (2014) analyze the impact of online teaching on students in a Microeconomics course, too.

⁵In econometrics this is known as a violation of the so-called exclusion restriction for instruments.

Our study design has three advantages compared to other studies. First, we have an objective outcome measure, as weekly online exercises are identical in the treatment and in the control group and are thus easily comparable. Second, in contrast to other studies, we observe the students' performance repeatedly, which allows us to analyze time effects as well as a more precise measurement.⁶ Third, the high response rate in our survey allows us to control for important confounders as well as the analysis of heterogeneous effects. In contrast to other studies, this allows us to analyze heterogeneities which go beyond differences in performance, but rather focus on differences in the personal background of students.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the next section, we describe our data and explain the different teaching formats. Section three contains the main analysis as well as the analysis of heterogeneous effects. Section four concludes the analysis.

2 Online teaching and data

To understand our research design better, we provide more information in this section about the groups of students we consider and explain the different teaching formats that are applied in the courses.

2.1 Students

Both courses are organized by the same lecturers in the University's Department of Economics. The majority of the participants were undergraduate students at the Faculty of Management, Economics and Social Sciences at the University of Cologne. While *Principles of Microeconomics* is a mandatory first year course in the Majors *Economics* and *Social Sciences*, it is also an elective course in the Majors *Mathematics* and *Mathematical Economics* at the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences. *Microeconomics for Business* is a mandatory first-year course for students of *Business Administration*. Our data set consists of 664 observations, mainly comprising students of Business (66%), Economics (19%) and Social Sciences (14%).⁷

2.2 Teaching

While *Principles of Microeconomics* and *Microeconomics for Business* were distinct courses in the terms we are considering, in previous years all students were jointly taught in one course. Since both modules are still organized by the same lecturers, the way of teaching does not differ between the groups. There are minor differences in the focus of contents which, however, do not affect our analysis in this paper.⁸ In particular, our measure for the students' learning progress during the term, which will be discussed in more detail in the following subsection, is identical for both groups. Hence, in the following we will treat our data as if all considered students took the same introductory course in Microeconomics and simply refer to it as *Microeconomics*.

⁶Most other studies use the grade in the final exam as an outcome measure which is only observed once per student.

⁷More details on the students' majors and the University's Bachelor programs can be found in the Appendix.

⁸In all considered terms, the differences are mainly restricted to a differing emphasis on some of the concepts. In particular, note that in every written examination, which accounts for 100% of the final grade, at least 96% of the points to be achieved were awarded for solving the exact same exercises.

The course consists of several complementary teaching formats. As is standard practice for most introductory courses at the University of Cologne, a ninety-minute *lecture* held by the Professor is offered twice a week for all students participating in the course. The lectures are conducted as “chalk and talk” teaching and present the concepts covered by the course in a rather abstract and theoretical manner. After the students have seen the material for the first time in the lecture hall, they can review it in voluntary online practice questions that are conducted via the university’s online learning platform. Apart from their own learning benefit, there is no explicit incentive for the students to take part in these questions regarding the final grade.

Additionally, students have the opportunity to visit a *tutorial*. Tutorials are ninety-minute sessions taking place once a week in smaller groups. In this teaching format, students are expected to work on themselves on basic exercises about the material covered in the previous lectures. They work on the exercises on their own or in groups of up to four students, presenting their results to the group. Tutorials are supervised by student teaching assistants, who are more experienced students in at least their second year of studies. They receive detailed teaching instructions directly from a senior lecturer. The prerequisite to get the position is, in addition to a good overall grade point average, a very good exam result in Microeconomics.

After the tutorial, students can participate in *online exercises* on material already covered in other formats. Correct solutions to these exercises are awarded with bonus points for the exam, which can possibly improve the students’ final grade. Since the number of correct solutions in this teaching format is our main measure for the students’ learning progress, the following section explains these in more detail.

The last teaching format in this course is the *exercise session*, which is a ninety minute session that usually takes place every second week during the term conducted by PhD candidates at the Department of Economics or senior lecturers. The main purpose of this format is to discuss solutions of the online exercises and generally to review the covered material by solving more sophisticated exercises on the presented concepts.

Due to the pandemic, it was not possible to have any sessions in a lecture hall since March 2020 and therefore the teaching formats were adapted immediately at the start of the summer term in April 2020. While the online review questions as well as the incentivized online exercises were already conducted via the university’s online learning platform, the former classroom events moved to digital formats. Live tutorials and exercise sessions were offered via the video conference software Zoom without changing the teaching style in these sessions. On the other hand, the lecture format changed slightly. Instead of the professor talking in front of the students at the university, the lectures were replaced by uploaded and prerecorded video shots in which the professor explained the concepts as he would in a ‘real’ lecture, but without any interaction with the students. While the content of the lecture remained unchanged in the adaptation to the online teaching format, a stronger emphasis was placed on advising students to read a standard text book on Intermediate Microeconomics, which had already been recommended in previous semesters however.

Before and during the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all teaching formats, including the incentivized online exercise sessions, were voluntary. As it is common practice in introductory courses at the faculty, the only mandatory appointment for a student to pass the module is the final written examination which constitutes 100% of the final grade. It is not

monitored either whether students attend any of the classes during the term.⁹

2.3 Online exercises

Within a teaching project initiated by the Department of Economics at the University of Cologne, voluntary, but incentivized, online exercises have been part of *Microeconomics* since the summer term 2018. During the whole term, usually once per week, students can hand in solutions to twelve exercises via the university's online learning platform. Although feedback regarding the achieved points is immediately given by an automated evaluation system, it is not possible to copy solutions to these exercises from fellow students in the course, as the exercises are randomized.¹⁰ Depending on the number of correct answers, students receive up to six bonus points, that is, up to six points which are automatically added to the score of the final exam in case the exam is passed.¹¹

Since these online exercises have not changed due to the pandemic, the students' achievements in these exercises serve as an objective outcome measure, which ensures comparability between terms that are affected by the adaptation of the teaching formats due to the COVID-19 restrictions and terms before the pandemic. It should be emphasized that using the students' success in the bonus point exercises as the outcome variable has many advantages compared to the perhaps more common approach of using the exam results. While final examinations vary not only regarding the difficulty and the choice of content between terms, they also differ regarding the date the exam takes place and therefore are subject to possibly severe differences in the students' time to prepare for the examination.¹² Since the online exercises have to be solved during the term given a fixed (and, between terms, identical) syllabus, our outcome measure is not subject to any such differences.¹³

Throughout our analysis, the terms before the pandemic serve as a control group, while the following terms serve as a treatment group. In order to make sure that our results are not affected by any seasonal effects, in the main part we restrict our analysis to a comparison of the summer terms, which are the summer term 2019 as the control group and the summer term 2020 as the treatment group.

⁹In fact, it is explicitly communicated that attendance is not mandatory in any of the classes. Although in higher years, in some courses, it is at least implicitly expected from students to participate actively in classes, this is not the case in first-year courses of undergraduate programs considered here.

¹⁰In one of the exercises, for example, students had to derive the optimal supply function of a firm, but for each student the firm faced a slightly different cost function.

¹¹In summer term 2019 and winter term 2019/20, a total number of ninety points could be achieved in the final exam, while only sixty points could be achieved in the following summer term 2020 and winter term 2020/21. This means that the percentage of the maximum number of exam points increased during the pandemic. However, it seems plausible that from the students' point of view the incentive to work on the exercises is not affected by this change, since usually students are not aware of the total number of points in the exam and even less aware of a change over time. Furthermore, the only relevant grade for the GPA is the final grade, for which the scale from achieved exam points to the final grade changes between terms and is not published in any term.

¹²At first, this might not be considered too much of a major problem when comparing the number of days between the exam and the lecture; however, at least in our anecdotal experience at the University of Cologne, in some terms the majority of the students have to take several exams in a short period, while in other terms students have no other exam to prepare in a few weeks.

¹³Although we believe that our outcome measure has some distinct advantages over analyzing exam results, in a later section we also consider the share of achieved points in the final exam as an outcome variable.

	Mean	Std.Dev.	P25	P75	N
Summer Term 2019					
Attendance lecture	3.41	1.36	2	5	228
Attendance exercise	3.36	1.31	2	5	228
Attendance tutorial	3.32	1.40	2	5	228
Intensity using book	1.44	0.78	1	2	228
Online resources	2.28	1.05	1	3	227
Summer Term 2020					
Attendance lecture	3.38	1.47	2	5	256
Attendance exercise	3.22	1.46	2	5	256
Attendance tutorial	3.27	1.50	2	5	256
Intensity using book	2.61	1.33	2	4	256
Online resources	2.25	1.09	1	3	256

Table 1: Summary statistics for attendance-related questions

2.4 Survey

To be able to control for important confounders that may have influenced the performance of students, we conducted a survey. This survey was sent to all students from the summer term 2019, winter term 2019/2020 and summer term 2020. In total, we sent an invitation to 2,068 students and received 664 replies. This yields a response rate of 32.1%. The survey is designed to control for attendance in different teaching formats, exchange with fellow students, socio-economic status, and changes in psychological wellbeing.¹⁴ As our main analysis is restricted to both summer terms, the following description and summary statistics exclude data from the winter term 19/20.

Since attendance is not mandatory in any classes at the University of Cologne, we ask students to provide information about the frequency of their attendance in lectures, exercise sessions and tutorials.¹⁵ Moreover, since a stronger emphasis was placed during the pandemic to read an additional standard text book, we used the survey to ask students about the use of additional literature and online resources. Table 1 shows summary statistics for the aforementioned questions. For lectures, exercise sessions and tutorials, we do not see a large difference in terms of average attendance. However, we observe that students on average nearly doubled the use of a textbook as an additional resource.

It is well known in the literature that peer effects play an important role in academic success (Sacerdote, 2011). Learning groups are a specific channel via which peer effects may occur. We also collected information about whether students were part of a learning group, whether they perceived it as difficult to form one, and about the frequency of exchange within this group. Additionally, we asked about the frequency of general informal exchange with fellow students. The percentage of students who were part of a permanent learning group is four percent lower in the summer term 2020, compared to the summer term 2019. Moreover, nearly five percent of the students perceived it as more difficult to form a learning group in the summer term 2020. However, when students were part of a learning group, the frequency of their meetings did not

¹⁴The whole survey can be found in the Appendix.

¹⁵All questions on frequency use a five-item Likert scale, which means that questions can be answered with *never*, *rarely*, *often*, *very often* and *always* (see Robinson (2014)).

	Mean	Std.Dev.	P25	P75	N
Summer Term 2019					
Engagement for studies	3.61	0.95	3	4	228
Cancel studies thoughts	1.87	1.16	1	2	228
Exchange with peers	4.16	0.86	4	5	228
Intensity learning group	3.89	0.95	3	5	61
Summer Term 2020					
Engagement for studies	3.57	0.98	3	4	256
Cancel studies thoughts	1.90	1.24	1	2	256
Exchange with peers	4.12	0.96	4	5	256
Intensity learning group	3.69	0.90	3	4	58

Table 2: Summary statistics for engagement and exchange

seem to change. We observe the same for informal exchange (see Table 2).¹⁶

Table 2 shows summary statistics for two more survey items. We asked students about their subjective perception of effort spent for studying as well as about the frequency of thoughts spent on canceling their studies. We observe no significant difference for either of the survey items across terms.

It is well-known that the socioeconomic background is an important determinant of academic success in higher education (Jury et al., 2017). Social economic status only plays a role in our main analysis in case there is an imbalance between treatment and control group.¹⁷ Table 3 shows that this is not the case. We measure socioeconomic background by the highest educational achievement of at least one parent. Table 3 shows the results. We see that in both terms roughly 60 – 70% have at least one parent with a university degree, while only roughly 5% of the students have parents without a university diploma or vocational training. Even though this is not important for the main part, it allows us to check for heterogeneous effects.

	Summer 2019		Summer 2020	
Parents' level of education	Absolute value	in %	Absolute value	in %
University diploma	137	60	173	68
Vocational training	79	35	66	26
None	11	5	16	6
Sum	227	-	255	-

Table 3: Survey results on SES

Many studies show that the pandemic and especially the social distancing has an influence on psychological wellbeing. In case the students' performance decreases during the pandemic, one may think of a decrease in subjective wellbeing as a potential channel. To account for changes in mental state, we conducted the positive and negative affection schedule (PANAS), as well

¹⁶We have no information about particular groups that were formed. Thus, we are not able to estimate any kind of peer effects. As we asked students about the frequency of their meetings and assumed that the selection process was the same across terms, we may overcome associated endogeneity problems and are able to estimate whether the effectiveness of group meetings may change. However, this is not the main objective of our analysis.

¹⁷Additionally, the GPA in university entrance exams is typically strongly correlated with social economic status.

as the PHQ-4 questionnaire.¹⁸ However, we lack status-quo inquiries of the students before the pandemic started and it is difficult to measure psychological wellbeing retrospectively (see [Kahnemann and Krueger \(2006\)](#)). To tackle this problem, we adapt this framework, asking instead for the relative change in the frequency of certain feelings and thoughts compared to before the pandemic started.¹⁹

Figure 1 represents the relative frequency of feelings or thoughts described in each of the four questions of the PHQ-4 compared to the point in time before the pandemic started. We see that roughly 50% of the students of the summer term 2020 feel more nervous or anxious. The same pattern can be observed for worrying, interest or pleasure in doing things, and feeling depressive in a more narrow sense. This can be seen as suggestive evidence that the pandemic in general caused an increase in depressiveness.

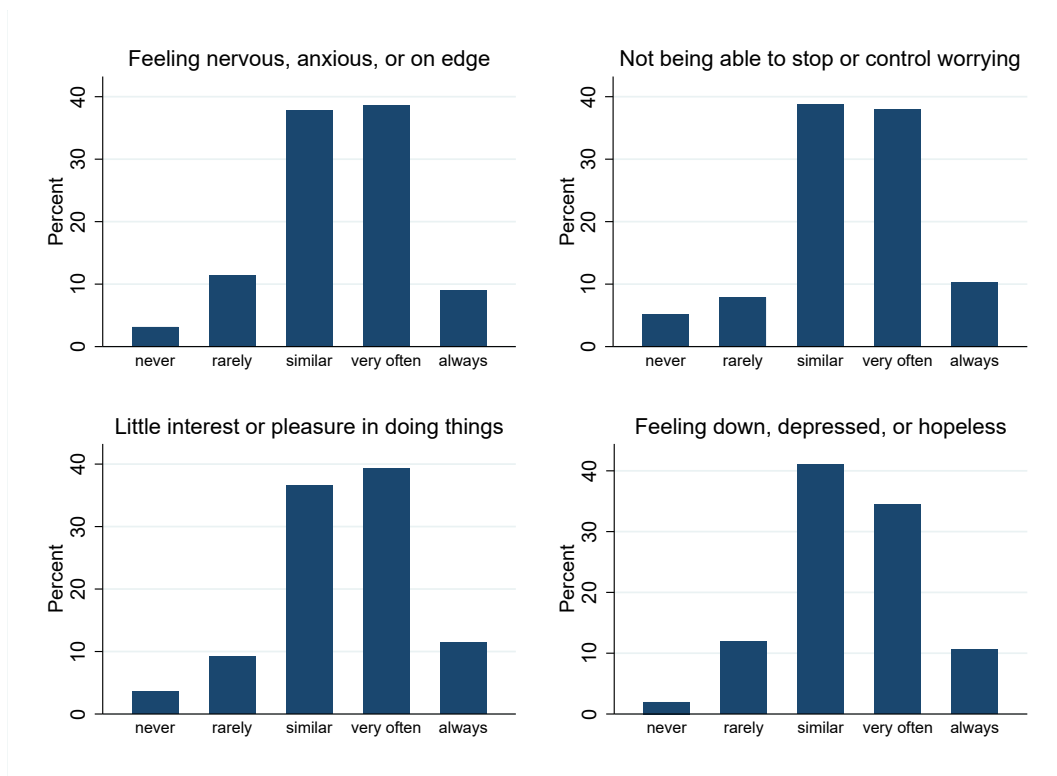


Figure 1: PHQ-4 summary for students of the summer term 2020.

3 Effects of the pandemic

As a baseline model, we estimate the overall effect of the pandemic on students learning outcomes, before later trying to disentangle the different causal channels. We use a simple linear

¹⁸See [Breyer and Bluemke \(2016\)](#) for details on the PANAS questionnaire and [Löwe et al. \(2010\)](#) for details on the PHQ-4 questionnaire. Both papers show the respective German versions. While the PANAS questionnaire tries to measure subjective wellbeing in terms of the emotional state, the PHQ-4 questionnaire measures the level of depressiveness.

¹⁹We are aware that this comes with measurement errors. However, we believe that this is the best we can do under the given circumstances. We still ask these questions to the students of the control group and check that the distribution of answers is not much different compared to the answers of the treatment group. This justifies the assumption that the counterfactual of the treatment group would have been the baseline score, i.e., assuming that the average psychological wellbeing of students of both cohorts would have been the same without the rise of the pandemic.

regression model of the following form:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \mathbb{I}_{C,i} + \gamma \mathbf{x}_i + \varepsilon_i. \quad (1)$$

Here, y_i denotes the share of online exercises student $i \in N$ solved correctly, $\mathbb{I}_{C,i}$ is a dummy for whether these points were achieved in times of the pandemic, \mathbf{x}_i are exogenous controls, and ε_i denotes the error term. The results can be found in Table 4.

	(1) Points (in %)	(2) Points (in %)	(3) Points (in %)
COVID-19	0.077** (0.033)	0.067** (0.032)	0.057* (0.031)
High-school GPA		0.200*** (0.027)	0.143*** (0.027)
Advanced math in school		0.005 (0.032)	0.007 (0.031)
Parents w/ college			-0.017 (0.033)
Male			0.032 (0.030)
Economics [‡]			-0.234*** (0.061)
Social science [‡]			-0.185*** (0.047)
Other [‡]			-0.506*** (0.073)
Constant	0.588*** (0.024)	-0.010 (0.085)	0.215** (0.089)
Observations	451	451	451
Adjusted R^2	0.010	0.114	0.203

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

[‡] Reference category is business studies

Table 4: Baseline model: OLS results

Just including the COVID-19-dummy, we find a sizable and significant positive effect on learning outcomes, suggesting that overall students performed roughly 8% better during the pandemic compared to the previous summer term. However, this model has almost no explanatory power, as suggested by the very low adjusted R^2 . As soon as we control for some students' characteristics such as GPA²⁰ or whether they took an advanced mathematics class in high school, the effect shrinks to 6.7%. This suggests that the positive effect is partially driven by a difference in student-body composition in terms of ability. In particular, the GPA is a very good predictor for student performance, as the significant better fit also suggests. The regression presented in the third column includes further controls such as gender, subject of study,²¹ as well as socioeconomic background, proxied by whether at least one of their parents has a college degree. The point estimate for the effect of the pandemic shrinks a little further, and is now only weakly

²⁰The German grade scale goes from 1, being the best, to 5, being the worst. However, for a more intuitive interpretation and to make it more easily comparable with international grading scales, we have converted it to the US GPA scale from 0 to 4. Hence, now a better grade is associated with a higher number.

²¹In the German university system, students have to decide on their major and minor when applying for admission, and their studies almost exclusively consist of courses of that major and minor.

significant, but the additional controls lead to a much better model fit. Interestingly, neither gender nor the SES-control has a significant effect on the performance.

It is possible that these linear regression models are misspecified, as the outcome variable y is a share, and as such bounded between 0 and 1. Yet, in the first two regressions, all predicted values fall into the respective range and in the last model 98.74% of the predictions do. Nevertheless, we repeat the regressions presented here using a GLM with a logit link and the binomial family, as suggested by [Papke and Wooldridge \(1996\)](#), in a robustness check. The GLM estimation results are qualitatively the same, suggesting that the boundedness of y is not a serious source of bias, which can be seen in [Table 10](#) in the appendix.

3.1 The effect of online teaching

The baseline results suggest that, overall, the pandemic has a small positive effect on students' performance. However, it is unclear which channels are responsible for these results, as many aspects of the students' lives changed simultaneously. As noted before, besides the switch to online learning, the psychological wellbeing of students has especially changed, but also their employment situation and whether they live on their own or with their parents. All of these factors are not only outcomes of the pandemic, but also very likely affect students' performance. Furthermore, as noted in [Section 2.2](#) above, a significant share of students does not attend lectures or other teaching events. It stands to reason that those students cannot possibly be affected by the switch to online teaching, but of course the attendance measure itself could be impacted by the pandemic. To try first to isolate the effect of online learning, we estimate the following model:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \mathbb{I}_{C,i} + \beta_2 \text{attend}_i + \beta_3 \text{attend}_i \times \mathbb{I}_{C,i} + \gamma \mathbf{x}_i + \varepsilon_i. \quad (2)$$

The model now includes an interaction term between attendance (*attend*) and the pandemic-dummy. This, in some sense, can be interpreted as a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) model. Here, the 'treatment' is the COVID epidemic, and the 'control group' are those who do not attend the lectures. The interpretation should not be taken too literally, however, as we do not in fact have a true natural experiment here. For one, it is possible that attendance is in itself affected by the pandemic. For another, the sorting into high and low attendance is not at all random; rather it is likely that better students are also more likely to attend. This gives rise to the possibility that selection effects matter here, i.e., that only the better students attended during the pandemic, thereby biasing our estimate. To make sure this is not the case, we first plot the attendance measures by GPA, where we find no systematic difference between terms (see [Figures 5-8](#)). Secondly, we also estimate a regression with attendance as the dependent variable, where the pandemic term has an insignificant effect, both statistically and economically, on attendance. Therefore, the interaction term should give us a proper measure of how much attendance mattered with online teaching compared to the lecture hall.

As mentioned before, we measure three dimensions to attendance: Whether students attended the lecture or watched the lecture videos, whether they attended the (online) exercise sessions and whether they attended the (online) tutorials. Yet, including them all in a regression would be unwise, for two reasons: first, this would presumably result in collinearity because a student's

attendance in different parts of the module is likely to be highly correlated.²² Second, including all three measures, each of which has five parameter values, would lead to a total of 12 interaction terms, making the model very unwieldy and lowering the degrees of freedom. Instead, we use principle component analysis (PCA) to construct a single variable, which retains most of the original variables' variance, the results of which can be found in Table 11 in the Appendix. Using the loading of the first component as weights, we calculate a linear combination of the three attendance measures, which does capture about 73% of their variance²³ and is therefore used as the attendance measure from here on.

Using this, we estimate the model in Equation (2), while controlling for other possible outcomes of the pandemic, the results of which are shown in Table 5. It seems we have indeed effectively controlled for all kinds of outcomes of the pandemic, as the coefficient estimates for the COVID dummy are all very close to zero, and far from statistical significant. As one would expect and hope, higher attendance does lead to better teaching outcomes. Specifically, a 1% higher attendance does lead to about 0.4% more points, *ceteris paribus*. The interaction effect between attendance and the pandemic-dummy on the other side is positive in all specifications, but never statistically significant and also very small. The point estimates range between 0.01 and 0.07, implying that the effect of 1% higher attendance is only about 0.06% percentage points more effective during online teaching compared to offline teaching, which is very close to a null result, especially given the statistical uncertainty.

It therefore seems likely that the enhanced performance of students in the first COVID term had different causes. One likely reason is students having more time on their hands to study, since many popular pastimes, such as partying, team sports, or going to the cinema could not take place during the pandemic. We will explore this hypothesis in more detail later. However, it is substantiated by the fact that having a part-time job does indeed have a negative effect on performance. In terms of psychological wellbeing, only the change in positive affection seems to affect a student's performance. This is interesting, as we found a significant change during the pandemic in all three measures, although this might be due to multi-collinearity, as unsurprisingly all three measures are highly correlated. To circumvent this issue, we only include the change of positive affection in the following regressions, as it has the highest explanatory power of these three measures.²⁴ It is also possible that the pandemic could have affected how much students interact with each other. We therefore control for this with a dummy indicating whether the student reported to have talked *often* or *very often* about the content of the course with others (*High interaction*). Indeed, this seems to matter. Students who talked a lot with others about *Microeconomics* received about 8% more points than those who did not. The domestic situation, however, does not seem to matter much. All other controls behave as one would expect from the baseline model (Equation (1)). It should also be noted that even just including attendance increases the fit of the model significantly, while all other controls improve the adjusted R^2 only marginally.

²²This is indeed the case; the correlation between attending the lecture and attending the exercise/the tutorial are 0.58 and 0.54, respectively. The correlation between attending the exercise and attending the tutorial is 0.67.

²³The first component is also the only one with an absolute eigenvalue above one, satisfying the Kaiser criterion. The linear combination is then scaled such that all values lie between zero and one, allowing for an easier interpretation.

²⁴We believe this to be a valid strategy to deal with multi-collinearity, since we only want to control for possible psychological effects of the pandemic, not explain them.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Points (in %)	Points (in %)	Points (in %)	Points (in %)	Points (in %)
Attendance	0.456*** (0.074)	0.450*** (0.075)	0.421*** (0.074)	0.404*** (0.074)	0.398*** (0.073)
COVID-19	0.064 (0.070)	0.096 (0.071)	0.098 (0.070)	0.086 (0.071)	0.083 (0.071)
COVID-19 \times Attendance	0.023 (0.098)	0.003 (0.098)	0.007 (0.096)	0.010 (0.095)	0.009 (0.097)
High-school GPA	0.104*** (0.024)	0.109*** (0.024)	0.114*** (0.024)	0.099*** (0.025)	0.099*** (0.025)
Economics [‡]	-0.242*** (0.058)	-0.255*** (0.055)	-0.223*** (0.056)	-0.214*** (0.058)	-0.230*** (0.059)
Social science [‡]	-0.131*** (0.045)	-0.143*** (0.045)	-0.141*** (0.044)	-0.137*** (0.045)	-0.142*** (0.045)
Other [‡]	-0.462*** (0.077)	-0.469*** (0.079)	-0.470*** (0.079)	-0.480*** (0.077)	-0.489*** (0.078)
Change in neg. affection		0.003 (0.048)			
Change in pos. affection		0.125*** (0.043)	0.089*** (0.033)	0.094*** (0.034)	0.092*** (0.034)
PHQ4		0.010 (0.010)			
High interaction			0.078*** (0.028)	0.086*** (0.027)	0.083*** (0.027)
Part-time job				-0.076*** (0.028)	-0.080*** (0.029)
Parents w/ college				-0.005 (0.030)	
Gender				0.021 (0.028)	
Adv. math in school				0.022 (0.027)	
Living alone [§]					-0.061 (0.043)
Shared flat [§]					-0.005 (0.029)
Constant	0.062 (0.084)	0.054 (0.083)	0.021 (0.084)	0.096 (0.097)	0.142 (0.091)
Observations	438	438	438	438	438
Adjusted R^2	0.356	0.366	0.376	0.383	0.387

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

[‡] Reference category is business studies, [§] Reference category is living with parents

Table 5: The effect of online teaching: OLS results

There are several reasons to believe, however, that the results from Table 5 do not capture all of the effects online learning had on teaching outcomes. First, as many more students sat the exam in the COVID term than before, it is possible they were more incentivized to work on the bonus-point exercises, causing the better performance. We do not think that this is a serious issue, however. It seems unlikely that students already decided at the start of the term not to take part in the exam, as that would make taking the course pointless. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that all students had the intention of taking the exam while working on

the online exercises. To make sure this is the case we re-estimated the model from Equation (2), controlling for whether a student participated the exam, which resulted in qualitatively similar estimates (see Table 12 in the Appendix). We do not include this variable in our main estimations, however, as it is possibly endogenous, since students may decide whether to take the exam depending on how many bonus points they achieved. Second, the regressions above ignore the time dynamics of the pandemic and the online exercises. Furthermore, it seems likely that people in different performance quantiles are affected differently. To examine the latter, we utilize quantile regressions in the next section; the former is discussed in section 3.3.

3.2 Quantile regression

We perform quantile regressions in order to provide a richer characterization of the relationship between teaching outcomes and relevant regressors. The results in Section 3.1 indicate that the sudden switch to online teaching at the beginning of the pandemic did not affect teaching outcomes on average when controlling for the relevant confounders. While this is a valuable insight with respect to the effect on the conditional mean of teaching outcomes, we use quantile regression to provide a more comprehensive picture about the conditional distribution of the outcome variable. In contrast to the least squares procedure for estimating the conditional mean of the dependent variable, quantile regression estimates conditional quantiles, using a *least absolute deviations* estimation. The quantile regression estimator for the q th quantile solves the minimization problem

$$\text{Min}_{\beta_q} \sum_{i: y_i \geq \beta'_q \mathbf{x}_i^*} q |y_i - \beta'_q \mathbf{x}_i^*| + \sum_{i: y_i < \beta'_q \mathbf{x}_i^*} (1 - q) |y_i - \beta'_q \mathbf{x}_i^*|, \quad (3)$$

where y_i denotes the dependent variable, β_q is the coefficient vector for the q th quantile and \mathbf{x}_i^* is a vector comprising the pandemic dummy variable $\mathbb{I}_{C,i}$, the attendance variable attend_i , the interaction term $\text{attend}_i \times \mathbb{I}_{C,i}$ and other relevant covariates \mathbf{x}_i (cf. Equation (2) in Section 3.1).

Evaluating the conditional distribution of teaching outcomes at various quantiles has an additional advantage in our case. The distribution of the dependent variable is bimodal, with peaks at zero and at the upper end of the distribution. This leads us to believe that the conditional mean fails to capture the full pattern in the data. Although students were not obliged to participate, excluding students who did not solve any of the online exercises correctly (e.g., $y_i = 0$) does not provide a valid solution, since the non-participating share could be affected by the switch to online teaching and/or the pandemic. Using quantile regression to evaluate the conditional distribution at different points prevents the peak at $y_i = 0$ from blurring the effects at the higher quantiles.

In Table 6, we report OLS estimates next to the results for the quantile regressions at the 0.25, 0.5 and 0.75 quantiles. In this specification, we include the most relevant control variables in the regressions, as stipulated in the previous section²⁵ (cf. Columns (4) and (5) of Table 5). The OLS regression estimates mirror the results in Section 3.1. Higher attendance, a better high-school GPA and interaction with fellow students lead to better teaching outcomes, while having

²⁵The variables that are statistically insignificant and, in addition, are not of particular interest in this analysis are not included.

a part-time job affects the teaching outcomes negatively, *ceteris paribus*. The coefficient of the average positive affection is positive and significant at the 5 percent level. As expected from the previous section, the effect of the pandemic and the interaction effect between attendance and the pandemic dummy are statistically insignificant.

	(1) Points (in %)	(2) 75% Quantile	(3) Median	(4) 25% Quantile
Attendance	0.400*** (0.073)	0.341*** (0.046)	0.385*** (0.068)	0.642*** (0.132)
COVID-19	0.075 (0.070)	0.218*** (0.047)	0.048 (0.092)	-0.059 (0.120)
COVID-19 \times Attendance	0.029 (0.096)	-0.204*** (0.055)	0.008 (0.105)	0.130 (0.152)
Change in positive affection	0.094*** (0.033)	0.047*** (0.014)	0.049 (0.032)	0.043 (0.034)
High-school GPA	0.103*** (0.025)	0.021 (0.015)	0.093*** (0.026)	0.126*** (0.037)
High interaction	0.087*** (0.027)	0.031*** (0.011)	0.068*** (0.024)	0.062 (0.040)
Part-time job	-0.081*** (0.028)	-0.029*** (0.011)	-0.056* (0.029)	-0.121*** (0.043)
Economics [‡]	-0.220*** (0.057)	-0.118 (0.075)	-0.383*** (0.113)	-0.228*** (0.038)
Social science [‡]	-0.138*** (0.045)	-0.092*** (0.035)	-0.172*** (0.062)	-0.178*** (0.062)
Other [‡]	-0.478*** (0.076)	-0.675*** (0.181)	-0.560*** (0.064)	-0.403* (0.237)
Constant	0.112 (0.089)	0.574*** (0.061)	0.228** (0.097)	-0.197 (0.153)
Observations	445	445	445	445

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$
[‡] Reference category is business studies

Table 6: The effect of online teaching: Quantile regression results

Turning to the coefficients of the quantile regression, the results reveal important differences across different stages of the conditional distribution of teaching outcomes. The coefficient of the pandemic dummy changes from negative to positive when moving from the 0.25 to the median quantile, although the estimated standard errors are twice as high. On the other hand, the estimate for the 0.75 quantile is positive and of considerably higher magnitude. One possibility is that students in the upper end of the conditional distribution could particularly focus on their studies during the pandemic and thus successfully accomplish the online exercises. While higher attendance has a strong and positive impact on all considered conditional quantiles, the effect is most eminent at the lower end of the conditional distribution, indicating that weaker students benefit most from attending classes. Although the point estimate of 0.34 for the 75% quantile is considerably smaller than for the 25% quantile (0.64), the interaction effect between attendance and the pandemic dummy displays a significant negative effect for the 75% quantile, while the estimates for the median and 25% quantile are positive, but insignificant. We observe that the regression at the higher quantile attaches great weight to the most active students in

the course,²⁶ and we suspect that these students were particularly affected by the sudden change in teaching format and the resulting adaptation to a completely altered teaching environment.

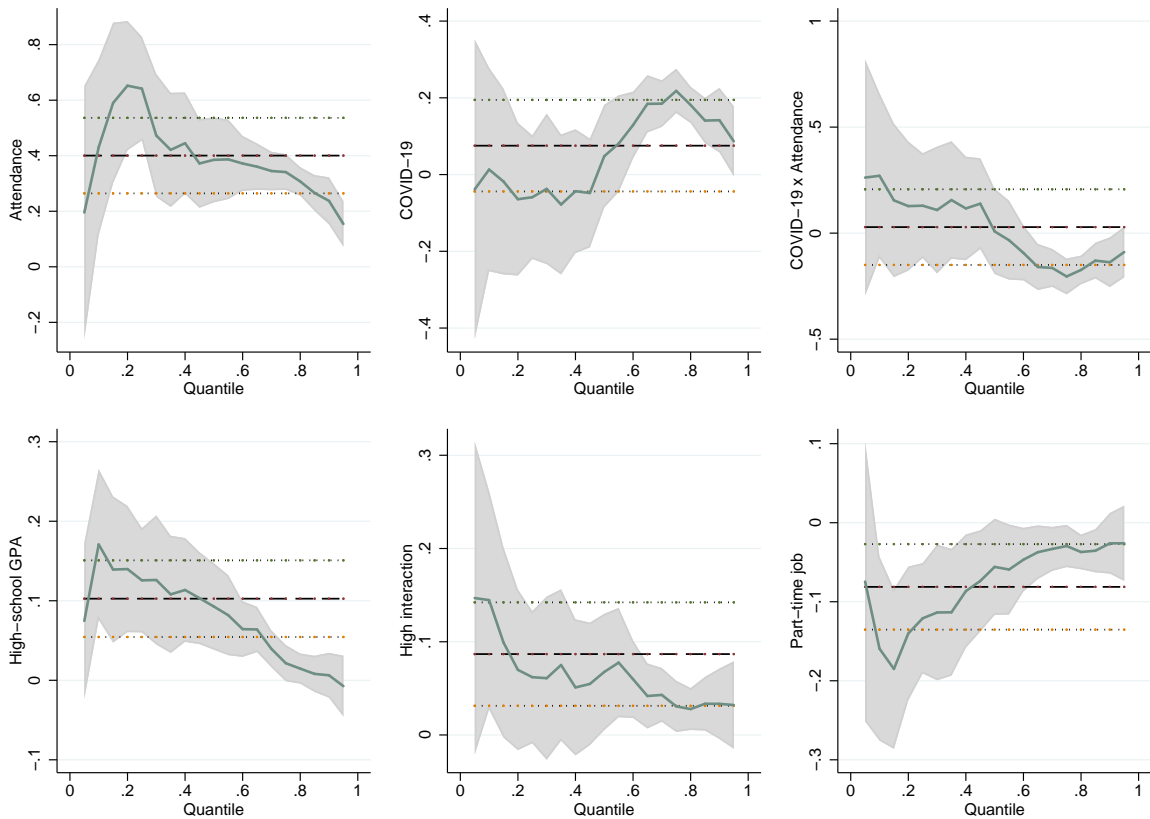


Figure 2: Quantile regression

The results shown in Figure 2 substantiate these conjectures. The figure displays the estimates of the quantile regression for several of the covariates across the different quantiles. For comparison purposes, the respective OLS estimates are included as dashed lines. The figure illustrates a positive coefficient for attendance across all conditional quantiles, which peaks around the 20% quantile and considerably exceeds the OLS coefficient at this point. The positive effect gradually decreases for higher quantiles, reaffirming the relevance of attendance for weaker students. The quantile regression coefficient of the pandemic dummy changes from negative to positive above the median quantile and reaches the maximum around the 80% quantile, while, interestingly, the interaction effect between attendance and the pandemic acts vice versa and changes from positive to negative above the median quantile. As mentioned above, we suspect that the quantile regression coefficients at the lower quantiles are somewhat blurred by the large number of zero observations. As a consequence, the coefficients are estimated with large uncertainty at the lower quantiles, displayed by the wide confidence bands. On the other hand, the confidence bands tighten at the higher quantiles. The better teaching outcomes in the summer term of 2020 are reflected in the positive coefficient for the pandemic dummy beyond the median quantile, while the altered teaching environment seems adversely to affect the performance of students

²⁶As reported in Section 2.4, we ask students about the frequency of their attendance in lectures, exercise sessions and tutorials. The mean of the attendance variables corresponds to 2.61 for students in the lowest performance quartile and equals 4.18 for students in the highest quartile. The attendance-related questions use a five-item Likert scale (see Section 2.4 for more details).

in the higher quantiles. As mentioned above, the students in the higher quantiles are also the most active students and hence mostly affected by the sudden switch to online teaching.

The quantile regression coefficients of the control variables displayed in the second row of Figure 2 feature the same signs as the coefficients of the conditional mean regression, but differ in magnitude along the conditional distribution. Interestingly, the positive effect of high school GPA and the negative effect of having a part-time job are most pronounced at lower quantiles and diminish in size when moving towards the upper end of the conditional distribution. However, the coefficients for these covariates are likewise estimated with large uncertainty at the lower end of the conditional distribution. The pattern for high interaction with fellow students looks similar, with the maximal coefficient at the lower end and a decreasing tendency when moving to the upper part of the conditional distribution.

While the effect sizes for attendance, high-school GPA, high interaction and part-time job decrease when moving towards the upper part of the conditional distribution, the pandemic and the interaction between the pandemic and attendance seem to have the largest impact on the best performing students. Although teaching outcomes improved in general during the summer term of 2020, the results of the quantile regression indeed indicate an adverse effect of the interaction between the pandemic and attendance on teaching outcomes for good students. In order to analyze further the impact of the pandemic on teaching outcomes, the following section considers the interaction between the pandemic and attendance on the individual online exercises.

3.3 Effects of online teaching over time

The results of the quantile regression already show that the simple conditional mean obscures some of the effects of the switch to online teaching. Another reason for this might be the existence of time dynamics in our data. First, not all bonus point questions have the same difficulty. Teaching and ability likely matter more for some than for others. Second, there is a discontinuity in incentives. As mentioned, only ten of the twelve questions have to be answered correctly to get all six bonus points in the exam. This implies that students are no longer incentivized as soon as they have answered ten questions correctly. Together, this means the aggregate of points is likely to suffer from measurement error, as for example, a student who answered the first ten questions correctly and then stopped working on the exercises would have the same aggregate number of points as a student who answered all twelve questions, but failed to answer to correctly, even though these two students are likely to be different in terms of ability and learning outcomes. Since the questions vary in difficulty, it is further possible that some, likely high ability students, skipped the difficult questions, anticipating they would be able to answer the easier ones. Third, the pandemic has time dynamics of its own that could affect teaching outcomes. The first half of the summer term 2020 took place during lockdown, meaning that all businesses except supermarkets and pharmacies were closed, while on 11 May 2020²⁷ many of these restrictions were lifted again. Bars were allowed to re-open, small concerts could be held, shops were opened, etc. This roughly aligns²⁸ with the fourth online exercise, which

²⁷See https://www.mags.nrw/sites/default/files/asset/document/200506_coronaschvo_ab_07.05.2020.pdf for details (only in German, last accessed on 7 December 2020).

²⁸This is only a rough alignment. While the deadline was a fixed date, students were allowed to hand in their solutions at any point before that. However, only very few did so, the vast majority handing their solutions in on

had to be handed in by 7 May 2020. Lastly, it is also possible that the effectiveness of online teaching changed over time, as all parties had time to get used to the new teaching methods. To examine these time dynamics, we slightly modify the model from before and estimate it separately for each of the twelve questions:

$$\tilde{y}_{k,i} = \beta_{0,k} + \beta_{1,k} \mathbb{I}_{C,i} + \beta_{2,k} \text{attend}_i + \beta_{3,k} \text{attend}_i \times \mathbb{I}_C + \beta_{4,k} \text{incentive}_i + \gamma_{\mathbf{k}} \mathbf{x}_i + \varepsilon_{k,i}. \quad (4)$$

Now, $\tilde{y}_{k,i}$ denotes whether student i solved the k -th online exercise correctly, $k \in \{1, 2, \dots, 12\}$. Because of the change in incentives after ten correct answers, we also include a dummy indicating whether this is already the case (*incentive*). As $\tilde{y}_{k,i}$ is a binary outcome variable²⁹, we estimate Equation (4) using probit, the results of which are displayed in Table 7. As a robustness check, this estimation is repeated using logit, which does not qualitatively change the results (see Table 13 in the Appendix).

Overall, the results are qualitatively similar to those presented before, using the aggregate share of points as the dependent variable. One stark difference is that now the pandemic is highly significant across the board, with the exception of exercise ten. This suggests that the time dynamics of the pandemic itself did not affect teaching outcomes much. More importantly, the interaction between attendance and the COVID dummy still has a negative sign, but is now statistically significant for some, in particular for the first four questions. Possibly, this is because it took a while for everybody involved to get used to the new teaching methods. However, another explanation could be that students were more reliant on the online teaching during the lockdown, when they had fewer possibilities to form learning groups or were generally less familiar with how one studies effectively at a university, considering that they are mostly first-year students. Lastly, it is also possible that early on all students actively participated in the online exercises, while only the more disciplined, who do not rely on online teaching as much, actually tried to hand in correct answers to later questions. Either way, this suggests that the switch to online teaching negatively affected outcomes at the beginning, while mattering a lot less towards the end. It further seems unlikely that this pattern is just due to varying difficulty. For one, the first online exercises are considerably easier by design than the later ones. More importantly though, our control for ability, the high school GPA, only seems to matter a lot for the first of these four early questions, while being more important for many later ones, likely because they were more difficult. Interestingly, whether students actually had an incentive does not seem to matter, the likelihood of handing in a correct answer remains essentially unchanged. Having thus found some evidence that the switch to online teaching did negatively affect outcomes especially early in the semester, the question arises whether these effects are homogeneous across the distribution. This is especially relevant, since, as mentioned before, the time patterns shown in this section could be partially a result of numbers of students actively trying to participate over time. This question will be explored in the next section.

the day of the deadline.

²⁹For some online exercises, it was possible to get 0.5 or 0.25 points out of a maximum of one. In order to ensure that $\tilde{y}_{k,i}$ is binary, we round these partial points down and hence only differentiate between providing a fully correct answer or not.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
	Ex. 1	Ex. 2	Ex. 3	Ex. 4	Ex. 5	Ex. 6	Ex. 7	Ex. 8	Ex. 9	Ex. 10	Ex. 11	Ex. 12
Attendance	0.219** (0.093)	0.209** (0.091)	0.263*** (0.096)	0.395*** (0.106)	0.262** (0.112)	0.414*** (0.103)	0.343*** (0.107)	0.325*** (0.090)	0.227*** (0.084)	0.458*** (0.103)	0.350*** (0.079)	0.404*** (0.115)
COVID-19	0.358*** (0.089)	0.229*** (0.087)	0.199** (0.085)	0.344*** (0.101)	0.171 (0.114)	0.296*** (0.103)	0.273** (0.109)	0.268*** (0.093)	0.386*** (0.083)	0.315*** (0.098)	0.358*** (0.087)	0.566*** (0.117)
COVID-19 × Attendance	-0.293** (0.141)	-0.170 (0.137)	-0.296** (0.133)	-0.276* (0.156)	-0.040 (0.167)	-0.114 (0.158)	-0.146 (0.165)	-0.137 (0.149)	-0.319** (0.138)	0.041 (0.155)	-0.103 (0.145)	-0.409** (0.175)
High-school GPA	0.106*** (0.035)	0.053 (0.037)	0.032 (0.034)	0.024 (0.041)	0.109** (0.042)	-0.026 (0.041)	0.175*** (0.038)	0.003 (0.036)	0.075** (0.034)	0.061 (0.039)	0.002 (0.033)	0.007 (0.045)
Change in positive affection	0.008 (0.060)	0.049 (0.053)	0.124*** (0.043)	0.109** (0.055)	0.098 (0.065)	0.057 (0.065)	0.073 (0.062)	0.023 (0.064)	0.073 (0.049)	0.093 (0.060)	0.065 (0.076)	0.126* (0.074)
High interaction	0.073* (0.040)	0.055 (0.041)	0.023 (0.039)	0.120*** (0.044)	0.030 (0.047)	0.065 (0.045)	0.100** (0.045)	0.096** (0.041)	0.082** (0.038)	0.051 (0.043)	0.074* (0.039)	0.013 (0.050)
Part-time job	-0.041 (0.039)	-0.011 (0.041)	-0.031 (0.038)	-0.018 (0.045)	-0.112** (0.047)	-0.107** (0.045)	-0.039 (0.045)	-0.139*** (0.040)	-0.116*** (0.038)	-0.072* (0.041)	-0.093** (0.041)	-0.020 (0.051)
Incentivized	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.011 (0.062)	-0.044 (0.057)
Economics [‡]	-0.092 (0.096)	-0.204** (0.101)	-0.097 (0.092)	-0.327*** (0.100)	-0.338*** (0.107)	-0.012 (0.094)	-0.042 (0.106)	-0.203** (0.102)	-0.014 (0.077)	-0.196** (0.084)	-0.048 (0.096)	-0.205** (0.099)
Social science [‡]	-0.167*** (0.063)	-0.109* (0.063)	-0.120* (0.065)	-0.060 (0.065)	-0.107 (0.072)	-0.095 (0.068)	-0.064 (0.067)	-0.177*** (0.064)	-0.121** (0.057)	-0.156** (0.066)	-0.125** (0.058)	-0.188** (0.076)
Other [‡]	-0.127 (0.164)	-0.574*** (0.204)	-0.157 (0.174)	-0.090 (0.166)	0.000 (.)	-0.420** (0.198)	0.000 (.)	-0.201 (0.146)	-0.201 (0.158)	-0.303 (0.198)	-0.513** (0.201)	0.000 (.)
Observations	386	388	384	381	366	369	362	366	370	397	365	345

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

[‡] Reference category is business studies

Table 7: The effect of online teaching over time: Probit average marginal effects

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Points (in %)	Points (in %)	Points (in %)	Points (in %)	Points (in %)	Points (in %)
COVID-19	0.082 (0.148)	0.051 (0.036)	0.111*** (0.039)	0.171*** (0.042)	0.053 (0.035)	0.108*** (0.032)
COVID-19 × High-school GPA	0.003 (0.046)					
COVID-19 × Part-time Job		0.074 (0.054)				
COVID-19 × High interaction			-0.049 (0.052)			
COVID-19 × Living alone				-0.058 (0.084)		
COVID-19 × Shared flat				-0.170*** (0.059)		
COVID-19 × Parents w/ college					0.104* (0.057)	
COVID-19 × Financial aid						-0.113* (0.069)
High-school GPA	0.095*** (0.031)	0.094*** (0.026)	0.097*** (0.025)	0.100*** (0.026)	0.094*** (0.025)	0.094*** (0.025)
Attendance	0.405*** (0.054)	0.402*** (0.054)	0.405*** (0.054)	0.401*** (0.054)	0.405*** (0.053)	0.405*** (0.054)
Change in positive affection	0.096*** (0.033)	0.094*** (0.033)	0.098*** (0.033)	0.101*** (0.033)	0.099*** (0.032)	0.094*** (0.033)
High interaction	0.087*** (0.027)	0.090*** (0.027)	0.111*** (0.038)	0.083*** (0.027)	0.087*** (0.027)	0.085*** (0.028)
Part-time job	-0.084*** (0.029)	-0.123*** (0.038)	-0.085*** (0.028)	-0.086*** (0.028)	-0.088*** (0.028)	-0.089*** (0.028)
Living alone [§]	-0.066 (0.042)	-0.069* (0.041)	-0.067 (0.042)	-0.027 (0.059)	-0.075* (0.041)	-0.065 (0.042)
Shared flat [§]	-0.003 (0.029)	-0.003 (0.029)	-0.004 (0.029)	0.085** (0.042)	-0.006 (0.029)	-0.004 (0.029)
Parents w/ college	0.012 (0.031)	0.008 (0.031)	0.012 (0.031)	0.016 (0.031)	-0.039 (0.041)	0.009 (0.031)
Financial aid	-0.052 (0.037)	-0.046 (0.037)	-0.054 (0.037)	-0.057 (0.036)	-0.051 (0.036)	0.006 (0.049)
Observations	445	445	445	445	445	445

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$, [§] Reference category is living with parents
All regressions were estimated with a constant and subject-dummies, which were omitted in this table for brevity.

Table 8: Heterogeneous effects: OLS results

3.4 Other channels

We have until now mostly focused on one channel, the switch to online learning. In this section, we want to remedy this by first examining whether the pandemic changed the relationships between performance and its other determinants, and secondly how these determinants changed due to the pandemic. To see how the relationship between performance and its other determinants changes, we extend the DiD-inspired approach laid out in Equation (2). Specifically, we are now interested in how our controls for SES, having a part-time job and the living situation affects learning outcomes differently during the pandemic compared to before. The results of these estimations can be found in Table 8. As we can see, the pandemic affected different students differently. In particular, students who receive financial aid or have no parents with a university degree fared worse during the pandemic than those with a higher socioeconomic status. This is very much in line with previous findings, as discussed before. We can speculate that this might be because these students do not have the same access to resources aiding them in the switch to online learning, which is what similar studies in schools have found. Related to this finding, living in shared accommodation negatively affected performance during the pandemic, while having no large effect in general. This makes sense intuitively, as especially during the lockdown it is very likely that most flatmates were also at home and hence negatively affected each other's study environment. On the other hand, we find no heterogeneous effects for ability, proxied by the High School GPA. A part-time job seemed to be less detrimental during the pandemic term, while interacting a lot with other students was less beneficial, although neither of those effects are statistically significant.

Overall, this supports our hypothesis that the switch to online learning was only one of many relevant channels. And it seems likely that, besides affecting the relationship between determinants, the pandemic also affected these determinants themselves. We find three determinants particularly interesting: the positive affection measure, whether they had a part-time job and their living situation. Also, to see whether the models in Sections 3.1 - 3.3 are well specified, we consider whether attendance is affected by the pandemic. To see how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the likelihood of a student living in shared accommodation and whether they had a part-time job, we estimate a probit model and calculate the average marginal effects, reported in Columns 1 and 2 of Table 9. As we can see, students were much less likely to participate in the exam during the pandemic term compared to the previous summer term. This is fairly intuitive, as students often work in restaurants, bars, hotels, etc., which were closed during most of the term. And because they were less likely to have a job and did not have to go to the university, it makes sense they were more likely to live with their parents. Considering the results from Table 8, this suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic indirectly affects performance positively because students are more likely to live with their parents and less likely to have a part-time job, which could explain the overall positive effect of the pandemic we saw before. On the other hand, as can be seen in the OLS-estimates reported in Column (3) of Table 9, the pandemic negatively affected the psychological wellbeing, especially of male students, which in turn would negatively impact their performance. Lastly, from the OLS estimates reported in Column (4) of Table 9, we see that attendance was not significantly affected by the pandemic overall, suggesting that the interpretation of the interaction between attendance and COVID can be interpreted as the effect of online teaching.

	(1) Part-time job	(2) Shared flat	(3) Positive affection	(4) Attendance
COVID-19	-0.153*** (0.049)	-0.145*** (0.045)	-0.289*** (0.040)	-0.033 (0.029)
High-school GPA	-0.160*** (0.040)	-0.059 (0.041)	-0.064* (0.037)	0.091*** (0.024)
Change in positive affection	0.003 (0.056)			0.055* (0.031)
Parents w/ college	0.042 (0.049)	-0.181*** (0.046)	-0.068* (0.040)	
Economics [‡]	0.005 (0.085)	0.002 (0.083)	0.170* (0.099)	0.016 (0.050)
Social science [‡]	0.057 (0.069)	0.147** (0.070)	0.109*** (0.039)	-0.113*** (0.037)
Other [‡]	-0.076 (0.139)	-0.031 (0.140)	0.087 (0.081)	-0.101 (0.083)
Gender			-0.089** (0.040)	
High interaction				0.130*** (0.027)
Part-time job				-0.049* (0.028)
Constant			0.227* (0.121)	0.320*** (0.082)
Observations	445	451	445	445
Adjusted R^2			0.134	0.108

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

[‡] Reference category is business studies

Table 9: Other dependent variables: OLS results / Probit avg. marginal effects

4 Conclusion

In this paper, we study the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching outcomes in higher education, using data on students' performance in weekly exercises within the courses Principles of Microeconomics and Microeconomics for Business in the Bachelor programs at the University of Cologne. Moreover, we issue a survey to collect data on personal characteristics to be able to control for important confounders, as well as for the analysis of heterogeneous effects.

In line with [Gonzalez et al. \(2020\)](#), we find that students' performance increases on average. In terms of channels, different levels of online teaching in times of the pandemic do not seem to affect performance overall. However, especially at the beginning of the term, online teaching was less effective, likely because both students and lecturers had to get used to the new teaching methods and to the overall situation of the pandemic. [Cacault et al. \(2019\)](#) find that high-skilled students benefit more from online teaching compared to low-skilled students; our quantile regressions show the opposite in times of the pandemic. Likely that is because, in our data, student attendance is positively correlated with performance. Thus, low-skilled students are less likely to be affected by the switch to online teaching, simply because they were less likely to attend in the first place. Instead, the data suggest that the better performance may be due to an increased availability of study time, as fewer students are employed in part-time jobs, and social contacts are reduced

overall, the latter also because the students are less likely to live in a shared flat. This is in line with the survey results of [Aucejo et al. \(2020\)](#), where some students report an increase of their time studying during the pandemic, highlighting an additional channel potentially responsible for positive effects. [Gonzalez et al. \(2020\)](#) argue that student performance increases because they were able to learn more continuously, and hence more efficiently, in times of COVID confinement. The positive effect of the pandemic is negated for low-SES students, likely because they lack the resources to use online learning efficiently and are in general more affected by the negative consequences in terms of employment opportunities.³⁰

For future research, it is important to identify the exact channels responsible for the change of performance in times of the pandemic. Moreover, to increase external validity of our results, other researchers may replicate this study with data from other institutions and other subjects. Lastly, many studies show that students' psychological wellbeing decreases during the pandemic. It is still unclear, however, to which extent online teaching formats are responsible, and to which extent this is due to the other restrictions stemming from the pandemic.

Our results imply that the many disadvantages of university closures discussed in the media do not necessarily carry over to student performance. This supports the ongoing closures of universities for the sake of national health. However, universities should increase their efforts to support low-SES students, either through financial aid or other targeted support programs.

³⁰See, for instance, [Berkes et al. \(2020\)](#).

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Appendix A

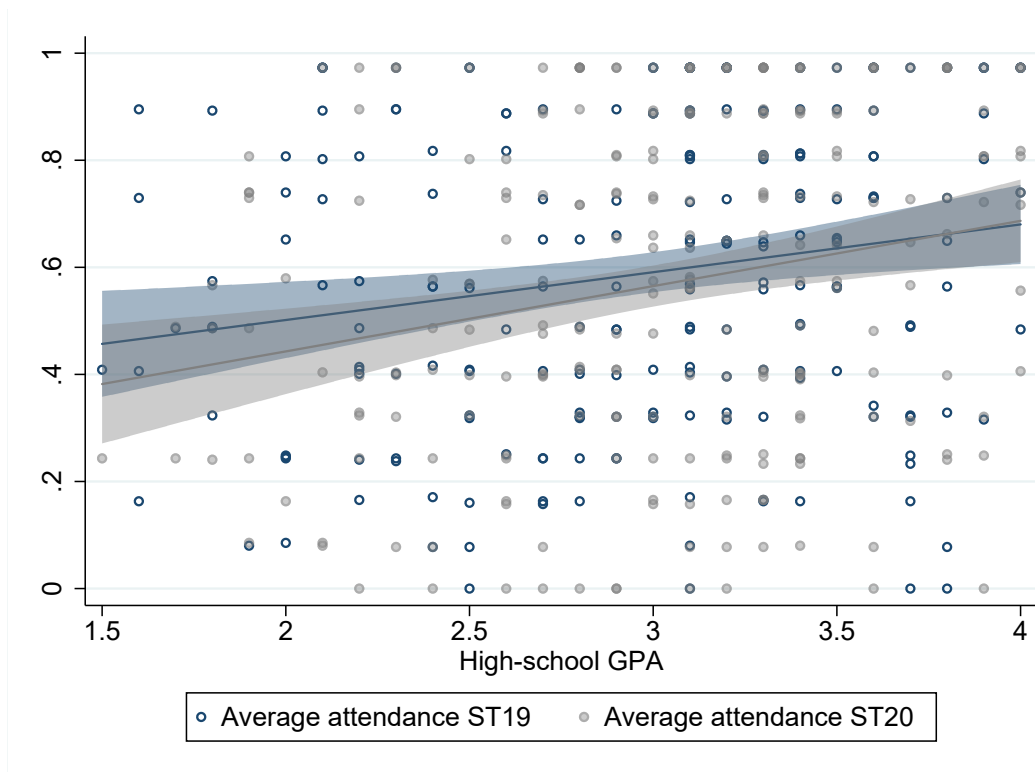


Figure 3: Average performance conditional on high-school GPA by term

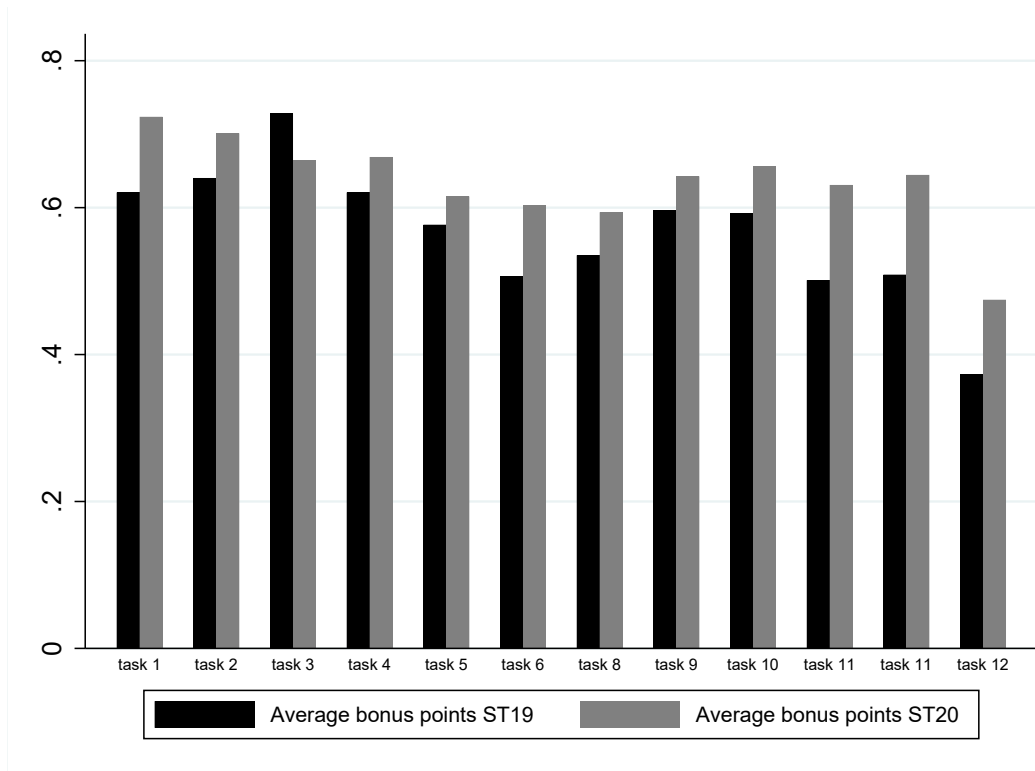
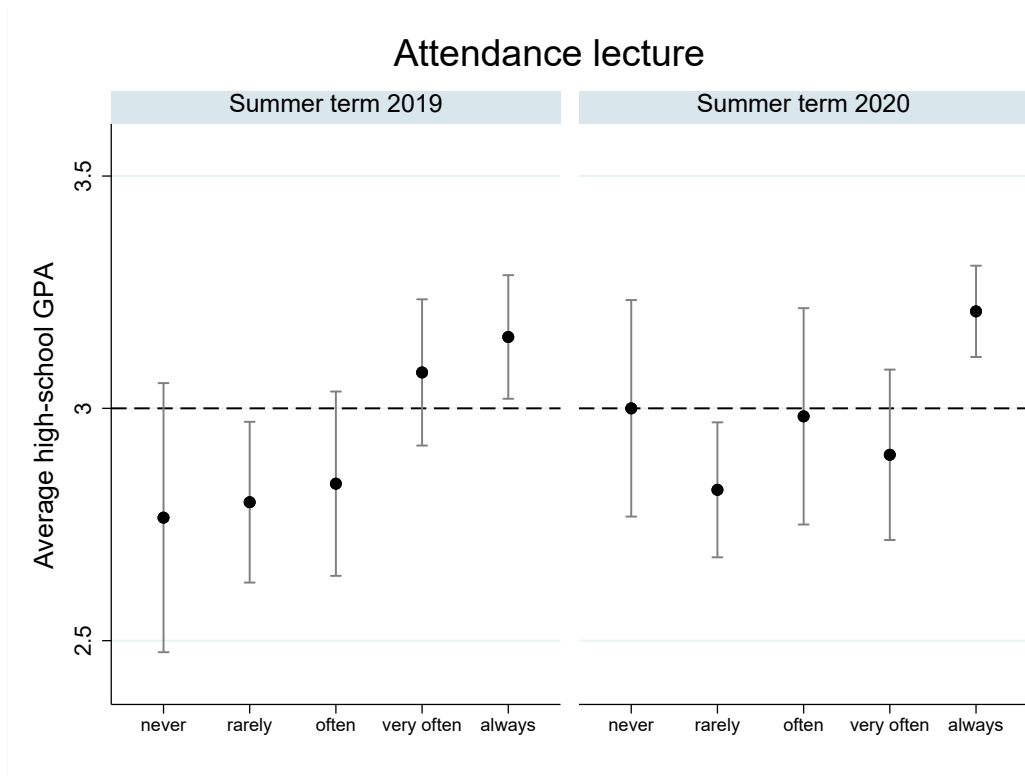


Figure 4: Term comparison: Average bonus points per assignment



Note: This figure shows high-school GPA averages conditional on the frequency of attendance of this event. Additionally, 95% confidence intervals are shown.

Figure 5: Term comparison: Average high-school GPA per participation in a lecture

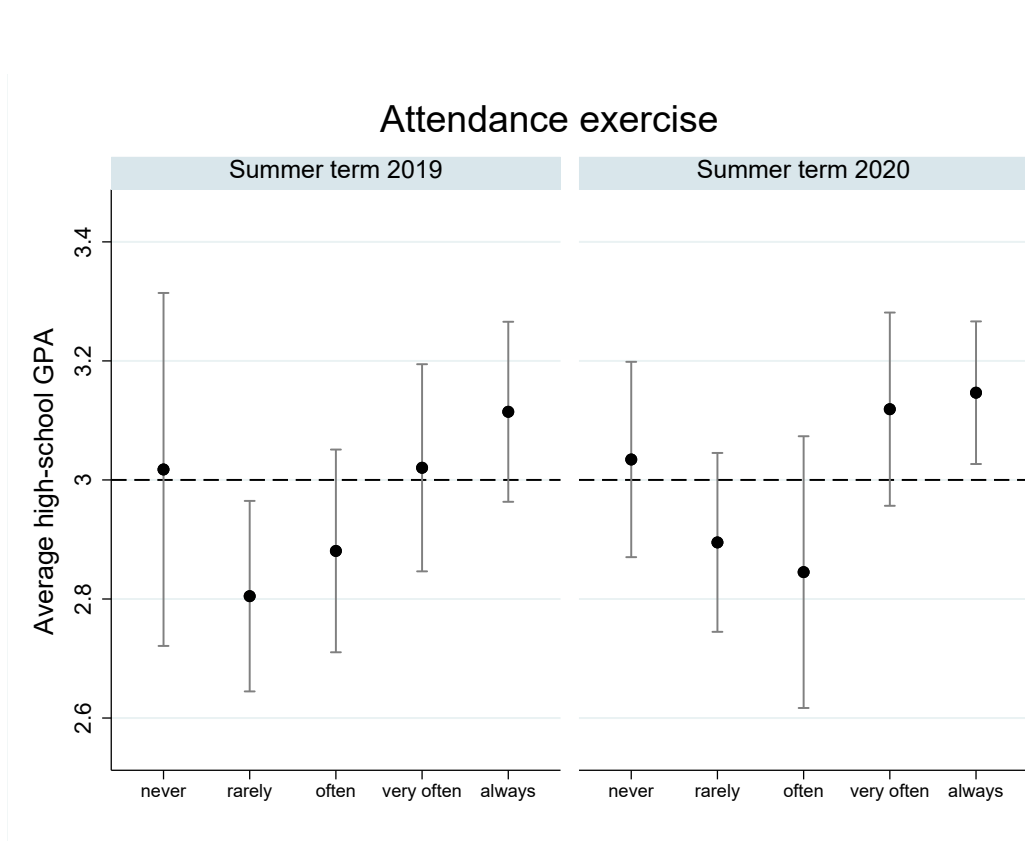


Figure 6: Term comparison: Average high-school GPA per participation in an exercise session

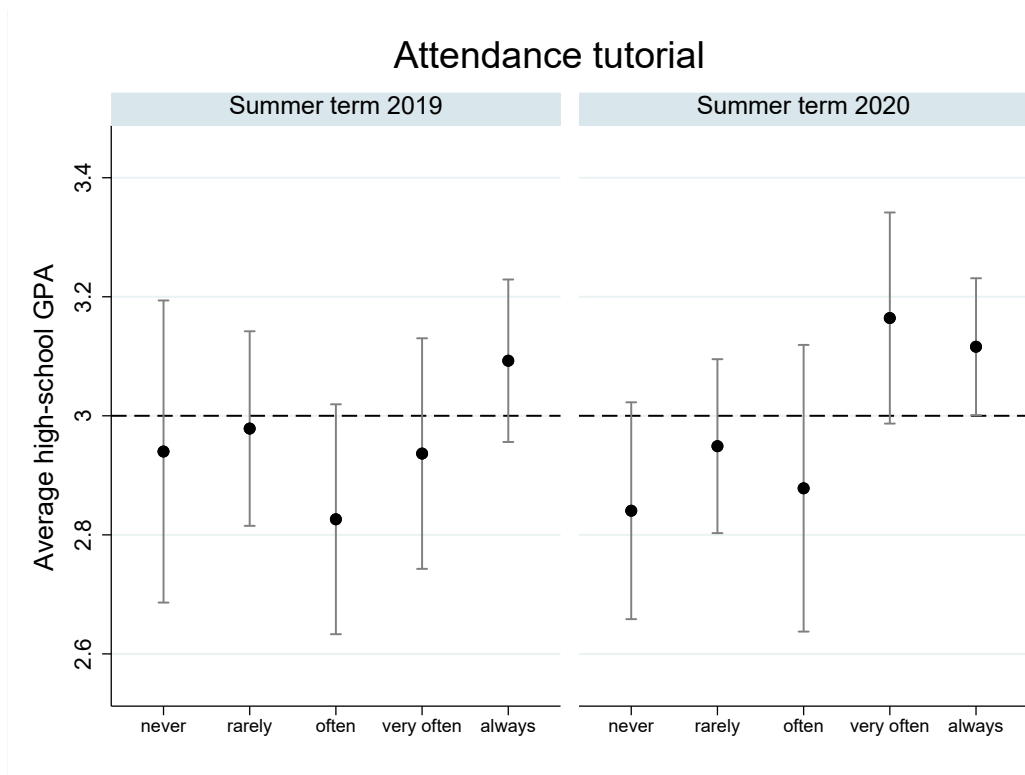


Figure 7: Term comparison: Average high-school GPA per participation in a tutorial

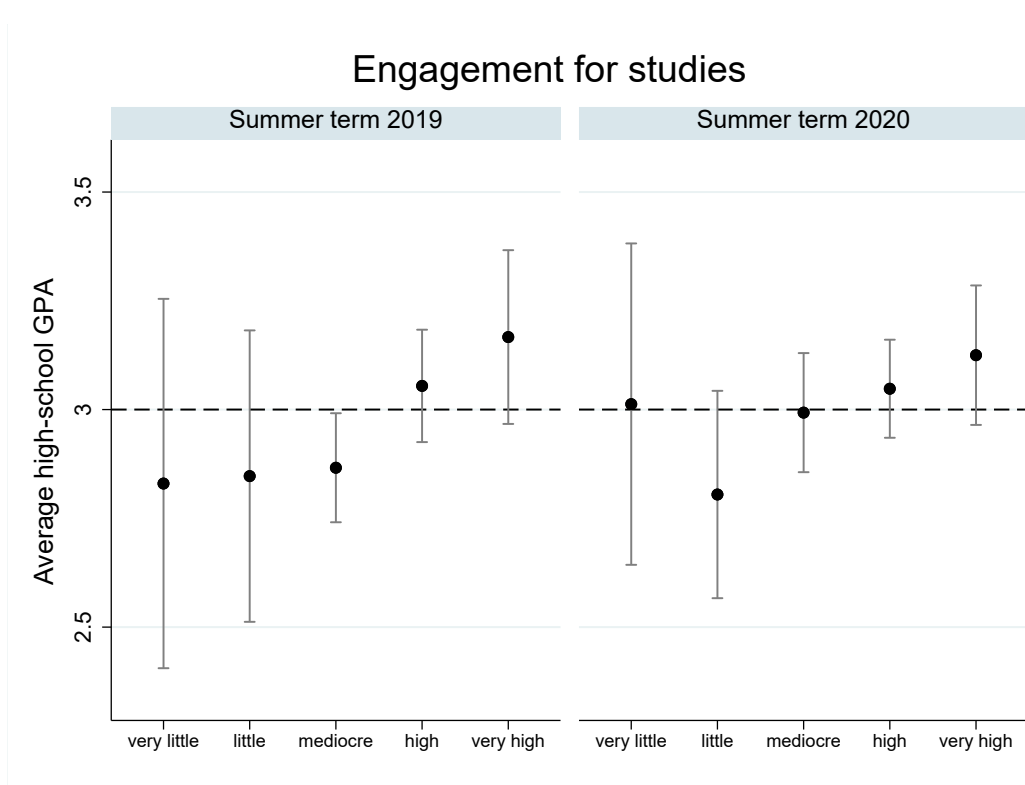


Figure 8: Term comparison: Average high-school GPA per overall engagement in the university

	(1) Points (in %)	(2) Points (in %)	(3) Points (in %)
COVID-19	0.330** (0.143)	0.304** (0.143)	0.275* (0.150)
High-school GPA		0.883*** (0.125)	0.658*** (0.124)
Advanced math in school		0.031 (0.145)	0.042 (0.149)
Parents w/ college			-0.082 (0.153)
Male			0.159 (0.145)
Economics [‡]			-0.998*** (0.264)
Social science [‡]			-0.790*** (0.199)
Other [‡]			-2.630*** (0.680)
Constant	0.354*** (0.099)	-2.266*** (0.386)	-1.371*** (0.403)
Observations	451	451	451
<i>BIC</i>	509.816	495.506	501.676

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$
[‡] Reference category is business studies

Table 10: Baseline model: GLM results

Component	Eigenvalue	Difference	Proportion	Cumulative
Component 1	2.19212	1.70705	0.7307	0.7307
Component 2	.485071	.162259	0.1617	0.8924
Component 3	.322811	.	0.1076	1.0000

Table 11: Attendance: PCA results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Points (in %)	Points (in %)	Points (in %)	Points (in %)	Points (in %)
Attendance	0.326*** (0.062)	0.320*** (0.062)	0.291*** (0.061)	0.280*** (0.061)	0.280*** (0.060)
COVID-19	-0.037 (0.062)	-0.004 (0.063)	-0.003 (0.062)	-0.011 (0.062)	-0.010 (0.061)
COVID-19 × Attendance	0.079 (0.083)	0.059 (0.083)	0.063 (0.081)	0.067 (0.080)	0.064 (0.081)
Sat exam	0.381*** (0.043)	0.379*** (0.042)	0.380*** (0.042)	0.372*** (0.043)	0.370*** (0.042)
High-school GPA	0.085*** (0.023)	0.091*** (0.023)	0.095*** (0.023)	0.087*** (0.024)	0.086*** (0.023)
Economics [‡]	-0.172*** (0.058)	-0.185*** (0.056)	-0.154*** (0.057)	-0.149** (0.058)	-0.160*** (0.059)
Social science [‡]	-0.127*** (0.041)	-0.139*** (0.040)	-0.137*** (0.039)	-0.136*** (0.040)	-0.139*** (0.040)
Other [‡]	-0.284*** (0.052)	-0.294*** (0.052)	-0.292*** (0.054)	-0.301*** (0.056)	-0.308*** (0.055)
Change in neg. affection		0.010 (0.042)			
Change in pos. affection		0.117*** (0.041)	0.088*** (0.033)	0.091*** (0.034)	0.089*** (0.033)
PHQ4		0.007 (0.008)			
High interaction			0.077*** (0.024)	0.082*** (0.024)	0.081*** (0.024)
Part-time job				-0.048* (0.026)	-0.051** (0.026)
Parents w/ college				-0.002 (0.027)	
Gender				0.016 (0.025)	
Adv. math in school				0.006 (0.024)	
Living alone [§]					-0.036 (0.037)
Shared flat [§]					0.005 (0.026)
Constant	-0.095 (0.078)	-0.103 (0.076)	-0.135* (0.076)	-0.084 (0.087)	-0.060 (0.086)
Observations	438	438	438	438	438
Adjusted R^2	0.496	0.505	0.516	0.516	0.519

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

[‡] Reference category is business studies, [§] Reference category is living with parents

Table 12: Controlling for participation in exam: OLS results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
	Ex. 1	Ex. 2	Ex. 3	Ex. 4	Ex. 5	Ex. 6	Ex. 7	Ex. 8	Ex. 9	Ex. 10	Ex. 11	Ex. 12
Attendance	0.203** (0.091)	0.187** (0.087)	0.252*** (0.096)	0.379*** (0.105)	0.252** (0.110)	0.398*** (0.101)	0.330*** (0.106)	0.305*** (0.087)	0.215*** (0.082)	0.447*** (0.102)	0.331*** (0.077)	0.384*** (0.114)
COVID-19	0.344*** (0.091)	0.220** (0.086)	0.199** (0.083)	0.333*** (0.101)	0.173 (0.115)	0.286*** (0.101)	0.263** (0.108)	0.265*** (0.095)	0.389*** (0.087)	0.308*** (0.100)	0.344*** (0.090)	0.547*** (0.116)
COVID-19 × Attendance	-0.267* (0.149)	-0.143 (0.140)	-0.289** (0.133)	-0.254 (0.158)	-0.036 (0.169)	-0.091 (0.162)	-0.128 (0.167)	-0.114 (0.156)	-0.311** (0.150)	0.059 (0.162)	-0.053 (0.157)	-0.375** (0.176)
High-school GPA	0.098*** (0.035)	0.055 (0.037)	0.038 (0.034)	0.022 (0.041)	0.107** (0.043)	-0.030 (0.041)	0.172*** (0.038)	0.005 (0.036)	0.075** (0.033)	0.061 (0.039)	0.006 (0.033)	0.004 (0.046)
Change in positive affection	0.011 (0.072)	0.053 (0.058)	0.123*** (0.042)	0.112** (0.055)	0.104 (0.072)	0.059 (0.073)	0.077 (0.065)	0.030 (0.072)	0.075 (0.052)	0.108* (0.061)	0.071 (0.095)	0.141* (0.081)
High interaction	0.075* (0.040)	0.056 (0.042)	0.026 (0.040)	0.121*** (0.044)	0.029 (0.047)	0.060 (0.046)	0.099** (0.045)	0.100** (0.041)	0.074** (0.038)	0.049 (0.043)	0.070* (0.039)	0.016 (0.050)
Part-time job	-0.046 (0.041)	-0.012 (0.041)	-0.029 (0.038)	-0.018 (0.045)	-0.108** (0.047)	-0.108** (0.045)	-0.039 (0.045)	-0.137*** (0.040)	-0.116*** (0.039)	-0.074* (0.041)	-0.085* (0.043)	-0.021 (0.052)
Incentivized	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (0.071)	-0.046 (0.056)
Economics [‡]	-0.097 (0.099)	-0.212** (0.102)	-0.097 (0.091)	-0.327*** (0.099)	-0.338*** (0.106)	-0.024 (0.095)	-0.049 (0.111)	-0.205** (0.103)	-0.022 (0.076)	-0.203** (0.083)	-0.058 (0.108)	-0.212** (0.097)
Social science [‡]	-0.163*** (0.061)	-0.104* (0.061)	-0.117* (0.065)	-0.061 (0.063)	-0.106 (0.072)	-0.095 (0.067)	-0.063 (0.067)	-0.169*** (0.061)	-0.122** (0.054)	-0.157** (0.065)	-0.121** (0.057)	-0.185** (0.078)
Other [‡]	-0.133 (0.148)	-0.572*** (0.215)	-0.154 (0.157)	-0.092 (0.149)	0.000 (.)	-0.420** (0.189)	0.000 (.)	-0.206 (0.130)	-0.201 (0.143)	-0.302 (0.208)	-0.505*** (0.185)	0.000 (.)
Observations	386	388	384	381	366	369	362	366	370	397	365	345

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

[‡] Reference category is business studies

Table 13: The effect of online teaching over time: Logit average marginal effects

Appendix B

Survey Questions (Translation)

Questions related to attendance in teaching sessions

1. In which semester did you participate in the module microeconomics for the first time, so in which semester did you edit the exercises providing bonus points for the first time? The following questions always refer to this semester.
 - Answer summer semester 2019
 - Answer winter semester 2019/20
 - Answer summer semester 2020

2. How regulary did you attend the weekly lecture?
 - Never
 - Rarely
 - Often
 - Very often
 - Always

3. How regularly did you watch the learning videos that were provided as a substitute for the lecture?
 - Nnever
 - Rarely
 - Often
 - Very often
 - Always

4. How regularly did you attend the exercise session?
 - Never
 - Rarely
 - Often
 - Very often
 - Always

5. How regularly did you attend the tutorial?
 - Never
 - Rarely
 - Often
 - Very often

- Always
6. How regularly did you rework the units with the textbook 'Varian'?
- Never
 - Rarely
 - Often
 - Very often
 - Always
7. How regularly did you use other sources, such as learning videos on Youtube?
- Never
 - Rarely
 - Often
 - Very often
 - Always
8. How often did you discuss the content of the module microeconomics with other students or how often did you study together?
- Never
 - Rarely
 - Occasionally
 - Very often
 - Always
9. Do/Did you have a fixed study group for the module microeconomics?
- Yes
 - No
10. Was it difficult to find a study group?
- Yes
 - No
11. How often did you interact with your study group?
- Never
 - Rarely
 - Occasionally
 - Very often
 - Always
12. How big was your effort for your study? Relate this to the period in which you attend the module microeconomics.

- Extremely low
 - Low
 - Medium
 - Big
 - Very big
13. How often have you thought about breaking off your studies or changing your major? Relate this to the period in which you attend the module microeconomics.
- Never
 - Rarely
 - Occasionally
 - Very often
 - Always

Psychological wellbeing

Now we would like to ask you a few questions about the change in your general wellbeing.

14. The following words describe different feelings and sensations. Read each word and then write in the scale next to each word how the frequency of the following feelings and sensations has changed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the time before the pandemic.

At this point, students saw a table in which they marked in what frequency

{much scarcer, scarcer, about the same frequency, a little more often, and much more often}

the following feelings and sensations

{active, worried, interested, joyfully excited, angry, strongly, guilty, frightened, hostile, excited, proud, irritated, ashamed, awake, nervous, alert, confused, and anxious}

changed during COVID-19 pandemic compared to the time before the pandemic.

15. To what extent do you feel more frequently affected by the complaints today compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic?

Again, at this point, students saw a table in which they marked the frequency

{much scarcer, scarcer, about the same frequency, a little more often, and much more often}

with which they found themselves exposed to the following complaints

{feeling of nervousness and concern, difficulty to control your own worries or stop worrying in general, little interest or pleasure in your activities, and dejection, melancholy or hopelessness}

compared from the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the time before the pandemic.

SES

Which is the highest educational qualification achieved by at least one of your parents?

- Doctorate
- University degree (Bachelor/Master/Diploma)
- Applied university degree (Bachelor/Master/Diploma(FH))
- Vocational training
- None of them
- I don't know

16. What is the highest school degree obtained by at least one of your parents?

- Abitur
- Vocational technical diploma
- Secondary school certificate
- Completion of compulsory basic secondary schooling
- No school-leaving qualification
- I don't know

17. Do you receive Bafög ((German) Federal Law on Support in Education)? Are you entitled to receive Bafög?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

18. While you attended the module microeconomics, you lived

- With your parents.
- Alone.
- In a shared apartment with 1 flatmate.
- In a shared apartment with 2 flatmates.
- In a shared apartment with 3 flatmates.
- In a shared apartment with 4 flatmates.

19. Did you have a part-time job while attending the module microeconomics?

- No
- Yes, with up to 10 working hours per week.
- Yes, with more than 10 working hours per week.

20. Please indicate your high-school graduation grade.

- 1.0 - 1.7

- 1.8-2.5
- 2.6-3.3
- 3.4-4.0

21. Did you take an advanced course in mathematics at school?

- Yes
- No

22. Please indicate your gender.

- Female
- Male
- Other