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# The development of students' motivation in the transition from secondary to higher education: A longitudinal study

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study is to investigate the development of students' motivation across the transition from secondary to higher education. Data regarding students' motivation as conceptualised by the self-determination theory was collected at five measurement moments, over a period of 25 months, starting within the final year of secondary education up to the second year of higher education. In this study, 630 students participated who made the transition to higher education. After establishing longitudinal measurement invariance, the development of students' motivation was assessed by means of multiple indicator latent growth analysis. The findings show a positive development of motivation across the transition from secondary to higher education. Autonomous motivation increased across the five measurement moments. The increase in controlled motivation is limited but mostly takes place during the transition from secondary education to higher education. Although amotivation increased within secondary education and remained stable within higher education; it was significantly lower at the start of higher education than at the end of secondary education.

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## 1. Introduction

When students advance from secondary to higher education, they are confronted with several challenges. Besides the fact that students have to make an important choice in terms of the study area in which they want to become knowledgeable, the context of higher education differs considerably from the context of secondary education (e.g., Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012; Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008). Although institutional and cultural differences exist in terms of what higher education institutions expect from students, in general literature shows that, in comparison with secondary education students, higher-education students are expected to be more independent and work autonomously (Brooks & Everett, 2008; Leese, 2010). When proceeding to higher education, students often experience feelings of social displacement as they enter a new social context with new peers, lecturers and staff (Briggs et al., 2012). The confrontation with new learning and teaching methods, in a new environment, urges students to create a new identity in terms of learning and autonomy (Briggs et al., 2012; Christie et al., 2008; Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007).

Despite the interesting challenges students face in the transition from secondary to higher education, few researchers have undertaken longitudinal empirical studies to investigate this important phase in students' educational career. Research that can be situated around the transition to higher education has devoted its attention foremost to the study choices students make when entering higher education (e.g., Tolstrup Holmegaard, Ulriksen, & Møller Madsen, 2014). In addition, the few studies that do investigate the actual transition can be located in the area of school effectiveness or sociology of education, as they often focus on the characteristics of the secondary school students attended (e.g., Pustjens, Van de Gaer, Van Damme, & Onghena, 2004) and the effects of students' socio-economic status (e.g., Tieben & Wolbers, 2010).

Extensive prior research has established that students' motivation for learning plays a pivotal role for the quality of learning and different educational outcomes within the different educational levels (e.g., Gegenfurtner, 2011; Kyndt, Dochy, Cascallar, & Struyven, 2011; Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). In addition, prior research has shown that students' motivation is not a stable trait, as it can vary across contexts depending on the contextual characteristics (e.g., Kyndt, Dochy, et al., 2011). Changes in students' motivation can be expected because the context of higher education offers both challenges as well as opportunities (e.g., Briggs et al., 2012; Christie et al., 2008). Besides the opportunity to choose their own study area, the increasing flexibility within higher education offers students the possibility to shape their own educational programme in accordance with their interests which might result into more (qualitative) motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002). At the same time, students are increasingly responsible for their own learning, and expected to work independent and autonomously which might overwhelm students and consequently negatively influence their motivation (Leese, 2010).

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Prior studies on the development of motivation from elementary to high school, or junior to senior high school, have also shown that motivation develops over time (e.g., Müller & Palekčić, 2005; Pan & Gauvain, 2012). However, studies investigating the development of motivation during the transition from secondary to higher education longitudinally seem to be lacking, even though it is to be expected that students' motivation might play an important role in handling the challenges during the transition from secondary to higher education. It would be presumptuous to assume that the development across the transition from secondary to higher education would be the same as the development of motivation across the transitions from (and within) elementary to secondary education, as the context of higher education differs considerably from elementary and secondary education. Therefore, the current study will examine how students' motivation develops over the transition from secondary to higher education and whether a differential growth in students' motivation exists. The importance of students' motivation within education, and the lack of research on the development of motivation across the transition to higher education, warrant the need for the current study.

## 2. Theoretical background

In line with the longitudinal studies of Otis, Grouzet, and Pelletier (2005) on the transition from junior to senior high school, and Pan and Gauvain (2012) following students in the first three years of college, this study conceptualises motivation from the perspective of the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The self-determination theory approaches motivation as a multidimensional concept, in which the different types of motivation can be placed on a continuum in terms of more or less self-determination, depending on the degree of internalisation (Otis et al., 2005; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). This internalisation refers to the individuals' experience of the regulation of their own behaviour as coming from themselves. One of the strengths of conceptualising motivation within the self-determination theory – and the rationale for selecting this theoretical framework – is the fact that it considers both the quality and quantity of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). In general, studies distinguish between two different types of motivation, each containing two types of regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

*Autonomous motivation* comprises 'intrinsic motivation' and 'identification': for both these types of motivation, causality is located internally. *Intrinsic motivation* is situated at the end of the continuum, with the highest amount of internalisation. Students that are intrinsically motivated learn out of a sincere interest, regardless of possible (positive) outcomes (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). The second type of motivation that constitutes autonomous motivation is *identification*. Students that identify with the value of learning experience the regulation of learning as their own, and will engage in learning voluntarily because they see the personal relevance of it. For example, students experience the importance of having a diploma in our knowledge-based society (Kyndt, Govaerts, Dochy, & Baert, 2011). However, in contrast to intrinsic motivation the reason for engaging in the behaviour or regulation – although internalised to great extent – remains extrinsic in nature (Vansteenkiste et al., 2010).

*Controlled motivation* consists of 'introjected' and 'external' regulation. Both types of regulation share the characteristic that reasons for learning have not been fully internalised. Students with an *introjected regulation* for learning, learn because they feel an internal pressure to pursue self-worth or avoid guilt and shame (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). *External motivation* is situated at the opposite end of the continuum from intrinsic motivation. Students learn due to external contingencies like rewards and punishments (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). The locus of causality is perceived to be external and the reasons for learning have not been internalised at all. Both autonomous and controlled motivation refer to the quality of motivation and are often investigated constructs in SDT research. The self-determination theory however also considers the quantity of motivation. It recognises that motivation can be absent and that students do not study because they do not see the reasons to do it. This type of motivation is referred to as amotivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

### 2.1. The development of motivation

As mentioned, only a relative limited number of studies have investigated the development of motivation longitudinally. Generally, they do not offer an optimistic picture (e.g., Eccles, Lord, & Buchanan, 1996; Otis et al., 2005). The studies of Otis et al. (2005), and Gottfried, Fleming, and Gottfried (2001), indicate that intrinsic motivation declines across the transition from junior to senior high school. In addition, identified, introjected and external motivation also declined over time. Amotivation increased slightly from Grade 8 to Grade 9, but declined again to a comparable level from Grade 9 to Grade 10 (Otis et al., 2005). Otis and colleagues concluded: "Students, as a group, are generally less motivated toward school as they move from junior to senior high school" (Otis et al., 2005, p. 178). Corpus, McClintic-Gilbert, and Hayenga (2009) found similar development patterns of motivation within one school year. Within the entire sample (Grades 3 to 8), small but significant decreases were found for both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. However, they did not investigate the development of motivation across the grades longitudinally. Prior longitudinal studies within the first years of elementary education confirmed that students' intrinsic motivation decreases across grades (Bouffard, Marcoux, Vezeau, & Bordeleau, 2003; Spinath & Spinath, 2005). Eccles et al. (1996) investigated the transition from elementary to secondary education. They found that the decline in intrinsic motivation continues across the transition to secondary education; however, according to their study, students do become more extrinsically motivated (Eccles et al., 1996).

As can be noted, the majority of the research on the development of students' motivation is situated within and across elementary and secondary education. However, some studies have also focused on the development of motivation within higher education (Müller & Palekčić, 2005; Pan & Gauvain, 2012; Ratelle, Guay, Larose, & Senécal, 2004). Ratelle et al. (2004) focus on students in the first two years of college. Their results are more positive and show that, on average, students' intrinsic motivation increases, and external and introjected regulations decrease, over time. They also state that the transition to college is associated with lower teacher control, increasing the experience of autonomy in students. However, the development of motivation appears to be more complex. Ratelle et al. (2004) also identify a minority group of students that encounter motivational problems in their first years of college: their amotivation remained moderately high and stable while their intrinsic and identified motivation decreased. Both Müller and Palekčić (2005), and Pan and Gauvain (2012), conducted a three-year longitudinal studies within higher education. In contrast to Ratelle et al. (2004) both studies identify a decrease in autonomous motivation from Year 1 to Year 2 within higher education; however, Müller and Palekčić (2005) found that, towards Year 3, students' autonomous motivation increased again, whereas Pan and Gauvain (2012) did not find a significant difference between Year 2 and Year 3.

## 3. Present study

The aim of the current study is to investigate the development of students' motivation across the transition from secondary to higher education. In doing so, the current study wants to address several limitations of prior studies. First, in contrast to the studies of Müller and Palekčić (2005), Pan and Gauvain (2012) and Ratelle et al. (2004), the current study will include measurement moments in secondary as well as higher education. Secondly, in contrast to the majority of prior research, amotivation will be considered next to autonomous and controlled motivation (Donche, De Maeyer, Coertjens, Van Daal, & Van Petegem, 2013). Furthermore, the few longitudinal studies in higher

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