

## NAVIGATING CONTRADICTIONARY EXPECTATIONS: CHALLENGES IN PREPARING FOR THE GAMES, ANIMATION AND VFX INDUSTRIES

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

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

### Abstract

The European games, animation, and VFX industries, along with related educational institutions, are shifting towards sustainable practices due to growing awareness of workforce well-being, however, layoffs and increased interest in these fields has intensified competition in an already saturated job market. This has created contradictory expectations for prospective employees: the ideal *employee*, an adaptable team player, team-fit, with strong interpersonal skills; but also the ideal *applicant*, characterised as standout, highly skilled, competitive, and self-promoting. Using Study Demands-Resource Theory, this study examined how educational institutions and emerging talents navigate these contradicting demands. Thematic analyses highlighted the extreme nature of the overall industry, job market and academic demands placed on students, as well as how peer support, messages of reassurance, and well-meant advice can be both resources and stressors. Educational experts and students face critical decisions with significant implications for well-being and career prospects.

**Keywords:** *Games, animation and VFX industry, student well-being, burnout, study demands, study resources.*

---

### 1. Introduction

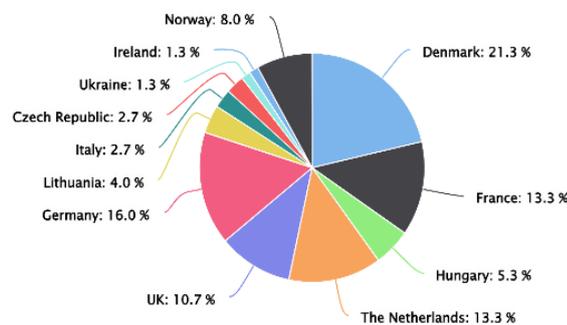
The video games, animation and VFX (visual effects) sectors are rapidly expanding industries; however, this expansion has been associated with systemic issues perpetuating a crunch-culture for many employees with demands for high-quality outputs under tight deadlines and high-pressure work environments (Edholm et al., 2017). This has contributed to toxic and unsustainable work environments that marginalise communities (e.g., women; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015) and are detrimental to staff wellbeing, with reports of increased stress, burnout, and staff turnover (Cote & Harris, 2021). Awareness and open discourse concerning this toxicity has promoted initiatives prioritising collaboration, diversity, and wellbeing in these sectors (Hassreiter et al., 2024). Our recent findings demonstrate an industry drive towards favouring ‘adaptable team-players’ as ideal employees where soft skills are valued over technical skills (Hassreiter et al., 2024).

There are challenges to becoming the ‘ideal’ workplace, education, or (future) employee despite efforts and aspirations towards achieving an ideal characterised by balanced, collaborative work cultures. Challenges underscored by the games, animation, and VFX industries, the competitive job market, and educational institutions related to these industries continue to foster high-pressure work environments (Hassreiter et al., 2024). While these industries value team-oriented and adaptable individuals, they continue to pursue highly skilled, compliant, and hardworking talents during hiring. This duality creates tension between embracing sustainable workplace ideals and meeting the competitive demands of such fast-paced, results-driven industries. The over-saturated job market exacerbates this challenge, placing added pressure on talents to stand out, favouring competitive self-promotion and exceptional portfolios over softer, team-oriented skills. For emerging professionals in these fields, such pressures sit over typical study activities that are part of higher education, including attending lectures, group work, and assignments. This places additional demands on students aiming to join these industries compared to other skilled sectors. Simultaneously, the rise in educational offerings in games, animation, and VFX, has intensified competition among universities, resulting in them emphasising outcomes that showcase graduates’ technical capabilities using standout student portfolios as marketing tools (Hassreiter et al., 2024). These dynamic places pressure on both educational institutions and students to reconcile these conflicting expectations, and navigate a complex landscape where collaboration is publicly championed, but individual technical expertise and self-promotion remain intrinsically paramount.

The Study Demands-Resource Theory (SD-R; Bakker & Mostert, 2024) proposes student life to be characterised by *demands* costing physical, mental, and emotional distress, and *resources* that buffer these demands and motivate students, leading to better outcomes. Educational institutions must therefore pay close attention to the balance of demands and resources placed on students as they are prepared for these competitive and rapidly evolving games, animation, and VFX industries which exist in a saturated job market. They should be proactive in adapting curricula and support mechanisms aimed at reducing stressors and supporting students as needed. This may prevent performance decline, stress, and burnout, while fostering greater workforce sustainability in these industries (Salanova et al., 2010). Based on the SD-R theory, this study examined how higher educational staff and students navigate conflicting industry demands and the resources available to them. Despite its demanding nature, to our knowledge there is no evidence considering the applicability of SD-R theory to higher education sectors in games, animation, and VFX. By exploring student and staff experiences and coping strategies in this sector, this study aimed to provide in depth and nuanced insights into the demands, resources, and potential stressors for educational institutions to consider when promoting productivity of their staff, employability of their students, and the well-being of both.

## 2. Methodology

Figure 1. Percentage of participants by country of residence.



As part of the Paneurama project ([www.paneurama.eu](http://www.paneurama.eu)), a qualitative study was performed, comprising both unstructured and semi-structured interviews, focus groups, expert panels, and informal discussions. These were conducted at FMX (Film & Media Exchange Conference) 2024 in Germany, the International Animation Film Festival in Annecy, France, and the Viborg Animation Festival in Denmark. The study recruited 75 participants, comprising industry experts (connected to educational institutions as guest lecturers, industry panellists, examiners), educational experts (from academic and vocational institutions), and final-year students across 12 European countries (see Figure 1) between January and September 2024, via snowball sampling and leveraging initial contacts to expand the participant pool. All participants provided written informed consent and the students were part of Bachelor's and Master's programs in games, animation, and VFX. Recruitment efforts ensured a balanced sample in terms of gender, work experience, academic year, and levels of experience of industry professionals (less than / greater than two years of work experience). Data was analysed using thematic analysis, allowing us to identify key patterns across responses. Participants were primarily based in Northern and Central Europe; however, the analyses represented all participant voices, and this diversity is reflected in the findings, offering a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complex issues faced by educational experts and students in the field. The findings of this study aim to inform policy discussions and to contribute to future large-scale research and quantification.

## 3. Findings

A detailed analysis of the data revealed several key themes, which are outlined below. These themes emerged as interconnected and compounding factors, creating a chain of escalating circumstances.

### 3.1. Educational experts balancing conflicting demands amid a fragmented approach

In response to changes in the industry and to align with the growing demand for adaptable team players as ideal employees, educational institutions are shifting from modular learning approaches, which honed individual technical skills, to blended approaches including collaborative and project-based learning. However, the reality of conflicting industry demands and the competitive job market has led to educational experts adopting divergent teaching approaches that prioritise either technical skills or a balance of both

soft and technical skills. This has resulted in a lack of unified messaging for students. As one participant explained: *“The tricky thing is that even within our degree programs, we don’t have consensus on this [teaching approach], because there are still industry veterans that say no, this is how the industry works [they need rockstars]. [...] More people are talking about healthy, sane working practices. But that’s not a universal message yet, and I don’t think we can get away with a universal message yet.”*

For instance, some educational experts, especially senior professionals socialised in older workplace conventions, continue to perpetuate outdated standards such as the ‘Rockstar’ mentality, and emphasise the importance of mastering hard skills and building exceptional portfolios over developing soft skills. They advise students to focus on technical expertise and individual achievement while treating scheduled project work as secondary. They justify this by referencing the job market’s competitive nature, and the industry’s ongoing call for highly skilled, compliant workers. As explained by a participant: *“We have a hierarchy problem. Most teachers that come from the industry and teach are seniors, but they rather talk about past experiences in the industry and perpetuate. The ones that talk new practices are the ones that are juniors. That makes it difficult to change overall approaches in Universities due to hierarchy issues.”*

Conversely, other educational experts expressed a desire to focus on the ideal vision of the industry while acknowledging the need to be realistic about the conflicting demands of both industry and the job market. They encourage students to leverage group projects to develop soft skills, maintain healthy work-life balances, and gain creative input through activities outside of their workplaces. Simultaneously, they also encourage the development of competitive hard skills to build standout portfolios. One expert highlighted this tension, stating: *“I think our industry partners would rip us apart in the feedback [if we would only concentrate on group work and soft skills]: Hey, they lack technical skill, they lack to follow orders. [...]. So, that leaves us as an education in an incredibly tricky situation. Do we teach right now for the skills they need to get a job today, or do we teach what the industry should be according to a little more liberal interpretation of what a healthy workforce is? And there is a direct conflict with that”*. Educational experts are therefore faced with an ethical dilemma concerning the potential production of exceptionally skilled and compliant graduates who may have a competitive edge in the job market but are primed for exploitation rather than sustainability – which they describe as *“cannon fodder for the industry”*, or the production of students meeting the new industry ideal, but potentially struggling to break into the industry due to the competitive job market.

In summary, the varying teaching approaches of educational experts add to the already complex set of expectations of graduates. They distort curricula and push students in opposing directions, sometimes transforming educational experts from supportive resources to stressors. Navigating the complex and contradictory expectations of the industry, the job market, and educators can therefore be cognitively and emotionally taxing for students and potentially compromise student well-being and professional growth.

### 3.2. Students navigating complex and contradictory expectations: Emerging approaches

Upon entering higher education, students are confronted with a *“reality check”* as a result of complex and conflicting pressures from their academic environment, industry expectations, and the job market. This is amplified by the context of peers who are equally the best in their fields: *“I think that there’s also a big shock for them, when they enter educational institutions. Because, I am not the best at it anymore. I used to be the best one at drawing [...]. That was my super strength and now I’m struggling to keep up with all of these other people who are the best at what I used to think I was the best in.”* This compels many students to exceed the standard 40-hour study week to upskill themselves and stand out among their peers. At the same time, faculty and industry speakers increasingly advise students to avoid overworking and embrace industry trends toward a healthier work-life balance. Students perceive this as additional stress, as they now feel pressured to meet new industry trends while coping with the overwhelming workload and high expectations. As such, this work-life balance advice is often perceived by students as a demand, rather than well-meaning advice. As described by one participant: *“Every time a lecturer comes into the room, I have the feeling I need to strike a yoga pose.”*

Against this backdrop, this study found students to develop diverse coping mechanisms and work ethics, which impact their academic and career paths. These include, the ‘Rockstar Mindset’, the ‘Self-Preservation Mindset’, and the ‘Competitive Improvement Mindset’.

- **The ‘Rockstar Mindset’:** Rockstar students prioritise standing out and dedicate significant time to mastering hard skills and building exceptional portfolios. This clashes with present curricula emphasising collaboration, and creates tension between personal goals and the team-oriented structure of projects. *“In uni I think my standard week was like 80 hours and then it would jump up to 110 at times. So eventually I also took a break for a year like between my 3rd and 4th year [Then] I felt I lost time. I worked hard again and made up for putting a gap year in.”* According to educational experts, these students run the risk of overworking to create exceptional portfolios

and gain visibility, fostering toxic work habits at university. Despite their potential to gain a competitive edge in the job market, they might struggle with transitioning towards collaborative production teams when they secure a job in the industry.

- **The Self-Preservation Mindset:** Self-Preservation students prioritise personal well-being while pursuing the new industry ideal by developing a solid foundation in both hard and soft skills. The curriculum's emphasis on group work aligns well with their approach, because it allows them to develop collaborative skills and share responsibilities in a way that supports their balanced lifestyle. *"If I think about it too much, then it gets stressful. Then I'm like, oh sh\*t. Maybe I also need to do that [work as hard as them], but I know for myself, I'm not even able to do that kind of stuff, like work so many afterhours and stuff. So for me, I'm kind of accepting it. Like we'll see where I land and I'm not trying to worry about other people."* Some students following this approach face difficulties securing employment despite having a strong portfolio. As a result, they either consider working in other industries or adopt a 'competitive improvement mindset' during Master's studies, using this time next to a full-time study to create a stronger portfolio without creating a gap in their CV. However, participants are concerned about this trend, fearing this focus on work-life balance in educational institutions might lead students to self-limit and choose different career paths too early, potentially missing opportunities to reach their full career potential.
- **The Competitive Improvement Mindset:** Competitive Improvement students focus on individual excellence and creating exceptional portfolios while developing soft skills, actively engaging in peer networking and extracurricular activities for experience and new insights, all while fulfilling educational tasks that require participation in group work. This mindset is outlined in the following quote, *"Game education is something that you have to sacrifice things for. It takes time, not just a regular nine to five. [...] You will do more outside of it because you will want to learn different things. You'll want to make a portfolio, so you gotta put in those hours. You gotta do your research for that in order to get to where you want to go. [...] Talk to those people, make connections right away. [...] Be friendly, be flexible. [...]. You just need to work hard and be nice to get in."* As a result, these students often exceed a 40-hour study week and sacrifice leisure time to meet their goals. Participants expressed concern about the potential negative impact of this approach on student well-being. One young professional, who adopted this approach, compared their study time to working in the highly demanding games, animation, and VFX industry: *"Compared to the stress levels during my studies, a job in the industry feels like a walk in the park."*

### 3.3. Peer networks: The greatest resource for support?

Despite recognising that peers will be future sources of competition, participants identified peers as their greatest resource during their studies. They value peer networks for motivating each other as they complete educational tasks, sharing resources relating to the industry landscape, keeping each other updated on sought-after skills, and potential employment opportunities. Even students with a 'Rockstar Mindset', though selective, support and collaborate with peers of similar skill levels. *"For sure, you kind of still want to be the best. But you also want your friends to succeed as well, right? So we are really pushing each other. We motivate each other. I would not have managed to get where I am right now without my friends and that is really important to me personally. They helped me continue. I helped them push. We all push each other and make sure that we did our best."*

While peers seem to be a strong resource for many students, in the academic context and later in the work context, an overly deep sense of belonging to these peers can also turn into a stressor. Participants reported the students in these fields often experienced some form of exclusion in previous educational settings for being different. When entering university, they frequently meet like-minded peers for the first time and experience a feeling of deep friendship, which can lead students to push themselves to stay within their peer group and environment, even though they lack the skill level or mental and emotional capacity to remain in education and later in the industry. *"They [peers at educational institution] were my people and it was the first time I felt like I was part of a collective. I've never had that before. [...]. I think it's the people that were a bit ostracised by society because they are nerds, gamers. This even goes with the artists. They were probably doodling in their sketchbooks in high school, and then other people were like: 'Oh, look at that nerd just drawing'. Then you come all of a sudden to this place [university], where everyone has been ostracised at some point and you're like: 'Oh, we've all been going through the same for being different.'" "Often, these students have dealt with loneliness and exclusion, perhaps as loners in school. They weren't on the sports team, they weren't the centre of attention—they've been more in the background. Now, with this education, it is their chance to be seen, heard, and admired. And it's very dangerous [that*

they push themselves too hard].” This intense drive to prove themselves and belong can lead to an unhealthy work-life balance, as the desire for validation from peers becomes a significant source of pressure.

#### 4. Conclusion

The games, animation, and VFX industries are known for their high-pressure work environments, characterised by long hours and tight deadlines. This study found that students training for these fields face similar, if not more complex, demands, putting them at risk of burnout. Specifically, students are placed in the challenging position of navigating conflicting industry ideals, job market realities, and a non-unified voice from educational experts within often contradictory curricula. While many students respond to these demands by working well beyond the typical 40-hour study week, well-intentioned messages to avoid overworking and burning out are often perceived as an additional pressure. Despite the competitive job market, peer networks are seen as strong resources for motivation, staying updated on industry needs, and fostering a sense of belonging. However, these networks can also turn into stressors when the desire to remain within this peer group becomes overwhelming, and the fear of falling behind academically leads to overworking. Overall, the research highlights how these student experiences can normalise unsustainable working conditions during education, creating a paradox where students perceive working in the high-pressure industry as less stressful than studying. This misalignment risks undermining well-being-focused interventions, fostering a performative culture of balance and resilience rather than genuine experiences of these qualities.

#### 5. Recommendations

- **Facilitate Open Discourse:** Encourage transparent discussions about the conflicting demands students face, including those stemming from educational institutions. While industry and job market demands may be challenging to influence directly, universities can help by acknowledging these contradictions and critically reviewing and aligning internal practices to assist students in preparing for these demands without adding more stress. Additionally, allowing students to personalise parts of their academic paths to align with their specific career and self-promotion goals, such as allocating scheduled time to focus on self-directed growth and career-specific skills, can ensure individual development within group-centric learning environments.
- **Position Well-Being as a Core Professional Competency:** Recognise well-being as an essential professional skill and integrate it into the curriculum. This can be achieved through dedicated training in areas like stress management, work-life balance, and resilience building. By framing well-being as integral to professional success, institutions equip students with tools to navigate high-pressure environments while fostering long-term career sustainability.
- **Collaborate with Industry Leaders for Systematic Change:** Use empirical insights to engage industry leaders, raising awareness of the demands placed on students and advocating for more sustainable work practices. This approach can provide both immediate support for students and a framework for systemic change, aligning education with the goal of creating a healthier and more sustainable future for the games, animation, and VFX industries.

#### References

- Bakker, A. B., & Mostert, K. (2024). Study Demands–Resources Theory: Understanding Student Well-Being in Higher Education. *Educational Psychology Review*, 36(3), 92. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-024-09940-8>
- Cote, A. C., & Harris, B. C. (2021). ‘Weekends became something other people did’: Understanding and intervening in the habitus of video game crunch. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 27(1), 161-176. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520913865>
- Edholm, H., Lidstrom, M., Steghofer, J.-P., & Burden, H. (2017). Crunch Time: The Reasons and Effects of Unpaid Overtime in the Games Industry. *2017 IEEE/ACM 39th International Conference on Software Engineering: Software Engineering in Practice Track (ICSE-SEIP)*, pp. 43-52. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ICSE-SEIP.2017.18>
- Hassreiter, S., Haggis-Burridge, M., Clavero, T., & Bouwels, L. (2024). *Work Environment Dynamics and Soft Skills in Animation, Games, and VFX industries*. Retrieved from: <http://www.paneurama.eu>
- Peticca-Harris, A., Weststar, J., & McKenna, S. (2015). The perils of project-based work: Attempting resistance to extreme work practices in video game development. *Organization*, 22(4), 570-587. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508415572509>