

Exploring Social Networks of PG students to Enhance University Learning Experience

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In the times when the society rapidly moves towards more multidisciplinary knowledge, university graduates strive to meet the challenges faced by economic and social organisations. University education being a 'set of interacting ecosystems' (Biggs, 1993) is expected to create a learning environment where students can get the optimal opportunity to learn and achieve the best sustainable economic output. The traditional approach to studying at the University is challenged by the new economy. In addition to specialist knowledge graduates are expected to be equipped with such skills such as self-efficiency, effective communication, organisational proficiency and problem solving competences that are the foundations of success in sustainable career development.

Learning in its complexity has been researched from different perspectives. How one learns differ greatly depending on a person. Each individual brings different approaches that are grounded in his/her past learning experiences and value systems (Laurillard, 1993; Hoban, 2000). Behaviourists believe that learning is not self-initiated but rather a reactive behaviour. Learners gain knowledge by mainly responding to external stimuli (Skinner, 1968 in Fang Yeung Wai-mei, 2001). Supporters of cognitive perspectives believe that learning is natural and hierarchical, and learners come with a certain background of experience and individual value systems (Ausubel, 2000). Constructivists go further and consider learning as a natural and self-initiated process, taking place by transforming new information into personal knowledge where learners independently and critically identify its relevance and usefulness for a specific task (Cobb & Steffe, 1993; Gredler, 1997). Learning through social networks has received significant attention from sociologists and in educational settings has been recognised as one of the pedagogical methods that can stimulate students to share, explain and evaluate information in order to re- and co-construct (new) knowledge (Liccardi et al, 2007; Veerman, 2000). This would indicate that learning success does depend not only on the content, but also on the system of information exchange that allows individuals to effectively learn.

This research is supported by a recognised theoretical framework by Useem and Karabel (1986) suggesting that educational institutions enrich their graduates with three distinct types of human capital – scholastic, social and cultural. Specific focus is on social capital which with its cognitive and structural dimensions has been viewed as the glue that enables cooperative human action (Grootaert & van Bastelaer, 2001). Embeddedness in social networks was also found to be affecting both performance and attitudes of MBA students (Baldwin, Bedell & Johnson 1997). In spite of the importance of networking to promote learning and skills development, some students experience problems in establishing social networks with their peers. Observations of students' behaviour in and outside the classroom, informal feedback on group interactions within several cohorts of postgraduate (PG) students has provided the authors with sufficient evidence of difficulties students, studying on the specific programmes under investigation, experience in establishing networks with peers. Among the reasons mentioned by learners and observed by the authors there are cultural differences, difficulties in managing work, family and study commitments and more general differences in attitudes toward studies. Previous research (Yakavenka & De Vita, unpublished) conducted on those students in the programme undertaking management level internships further confirmed that students find it extremely challenging to communicate constructively with their peers on-line. It is highly likely that the lack of an established network during studies what reduced the probability of establishing vital in on-line communication level of trust among learners, hence preventing them effectively leveraging the power of the networks. Building on previous findings this research intends to investigate in more depth whether social interaction and peer communication within study cohorts is associated with performance of individuals. Two cohorts of students from MA

and MBA International Business programmes will be used as a research sample. Individual characteristics, cultural background, previous experience of learners will be taken into account to question the differences (if there are) in behaviour within networks.

A methodology suitable to achieve the objectives of this study is Social Network Analysis – SNA (Wasserman & Faust 1994). SNA is a powerful research paradigm (Wellman, 1988) capable to take simultaneously into account characteristics of individuals and the social structures they are embedded in. In this specific paper SNA techniques are employed to investigate properties at different levels. At the group level the social phenomena explaining the creation of ties between students, such as having a similar ethnicity, will be described. At the individual level the relationship between academic performance and specific positions in the network will be investigated, testing hypothesis about the association of the two aspects. Data were collected through a roster questionnaire (Wasserman & Faust 1994) administered to two cohorts of students of 188 and 120 learners respectively. Students were asked to identify in the roster those peers with whom they were engaged in friendship, study or support networks. Through the questionnaire also information about individuals' characteristics (gender, age, previous experience) were collected. Response rate to the questionnaire was of 69% and 53% for the two cohorts. This information was enriched with information data available in the university databases. The data obtained were used to build three networks for each cohort and to then investigate properties both at the global and local level in order to better characterise the social networks in which learners are embedded in and to analyse the impact of network properties on academic performance. All the analysis was performed using UCINET 6 (Borgatti, Everett & Freeman 2002).

By the application of this methodology authors aim to evaluate current learning environment on taught MA and MBA International Business programmes at University of Greenwich Business School with the view of enriching it with student social interaction activities by that enabling learners to achieve higher potential learning outcomes.

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