

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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'Hack my Support Networks' App: Enhancing Student Support Provision in Higher Education

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract:

This paper draws on a large-scale research project that investigates undergraduate student support networks for academic and wellbeing purposes. By drawing on the social network analysis methodology and implementing and evaluating an innovative app '*Hack my support networks*' in one UK university, we will discuss the ways in which student support networks differ across students' social backgrounds (e.g., home/international; study year, ethnicity, gender, age, disability), and how informal and formal support intersects in student experience. Furthermore, we will introduce and reflect on the value of this innovative app (and opportunities for sector-wide collaboration) in raising student awareness of support available and improving university practices in student support provision.

Paper:

Context and objectives

It is widely known that higher education is socially stratified with those from more affluent backgrounds generally accessing and succeeding in universities at larger scale than those from disadvantaged sectors of society (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Reay, 2018). The latest statistics (2018/19) show that students from most affluent areas of the UK are twice as likely to progress to HE as those from the most disadvantaged areas; similarly, the private school students are nearly three times more likely to attend high tariff universities than state school graduates (UK Government, 2020). In addition to statistical inequalities, the widening participation research has highlighted several concerns related to non-traditional student experiences. For example, students who are among the first in their family to enter university tend to struggle with confidence, support and role models that would ease their transition to and experience of HE (Meuleman et al., 2015; O'Shea, 2015, 2016; O'Sullivan et al., 2019). The reasons for such experiences are explained in relation to students' shortage of social and cultural capital that would help to negotiate their transition to university and make most of the support available (Meuleman et al., 2015).

There is extensive research on student support provision in HE, aiming to facilitate successful student progression through university education. The widely promoted approach to student support draws on Tait's (2000, 2014) work, explaining support in relation to its cognitive, affective and systemic functions. Jacklin and Le Riche (2009) problematise such functional views of support as encouraging a

deficit-view of students, particularly of those from non-traditional backgrounds. They promote a shift to 'supportive' cultures, and define support as 'a socially situated, complex and multifaceted concept' (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009, p.735).

Inspired by the ideas above, we propose that student support is best conceived as comprising social networks. We define social network as a set of relevant actors connected to each other by one or more relations (Daly, 2010; Wellman, 1983, 2001). These relationships vary depending on the context of meeting, strength, frequency, direction, and type of exchange. All of which, dictate how resources flow and illustrate how certain students can be more connected than the others (Kanagavel, 2019; Wilcox et al., 2005).

This paper introduces emerging findings from our project that centres around the development/evaluation of an interactive app '*Hack my support networks*'. The app enables undergraduate students to visualise their support networks and receive further advice on available support. We propose the following questions:

- How do student support networks differ across students' social background (e.g., home/international; year, ethnicity, gender, age, disability)?
- How do students' informal and formal support networks intersect?
- To what extent can the interactive app facilitate student support provision in HE?

Methodological approach

This project is funded by the ESRC Impact Acceleration Fund (July 2021-April 2022). The Stage 1 forms the basis of this paper, and it includes a rigorous development/evaluation of the app at XXX University. The aim is to develop a strong proof of concept for Stage 2 that contains customising the app for use across the UK HE.

Guided by SNA, the app includes a) anonymised questionnaire on student background; b) activities for students to input the support received. It will provide the student with their visualised support network, including signposting to further support. It will also provide the researchers with aggregated data to identify patterns of support across the population. The methods include:

- Two focus groups on student expectations to the app.
- Launching the app to approx. 16,000 undergraduate students at XXX University. Data is aggregated using SNA to identify patterns across student population.
- Five focus groups with students to evaluate the app.

Expected results and significance

While the project is ongoing, we will have important findings to share at the SRHE conference. Our software engineers are finalising the app, and we have conducted two focus groups to gather student views on the app development and design. Students have provided useful input to make it user friendly and attractive. We have conducted numerous consultations with our partners: XXX Students' Union, XXX Student Support Services, Advanced Research Computing, Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland, Wonkhe.

We expect the findings from the app launch and evaluation to highlight how formal and informal support intersect in student experience and where differences exist across student population. The significance of our paper derives from:

- an evidence-based understanding of the academic/wellbeing support networks that students from a variety of backgrounds draw on;
- an overview of how formal support and personal resources intersect in facilitating students' studies.

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