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Student support as social network: Exploring non-traditional student experiences of academic and wellbeing support during the Covid-19 pandemic

Rille Raaper¹, Chris Brown¹, Anna Llewellyn¹

¹*Durham University, Durham, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a global crisis in higher education, affecting all aspects of university work and practices. This paper focuses on student experiences in particular by problematising academic and wellbeing support available to non-traditional students. We propose an original approach to student support as comprising social networks that are dynamic, reciprocal and involving a variety of formal/informal actors. We draw on interviews with 10 non-traditional students from a UK university to explore the nature of their student support. Our findings suggest that support networks for non-traditional students tend to exclude formal support services, and centre primarily around family (wellbeing support) and fellow students (academic/wellbeing support). While the findings problematise the lack of institutional support in student networks which is likely to further disadvantage these students, it questions the dominant deficit views of non-traditional students and their family interactions.

Paper: Background

Emerging research has highlighted that student challenges during Covid-19 can be broadly grouped into those of an educational, emotional and environmental nature (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). It is the environmental challenges that deserve particular attention for non-traditional student population. Aguilera-Hermida (2020) argues, based on a survey of 270 students from a U.S. university, that their biggest challenge was being able to concentrate on studies while living at home. Similar findings were echoed by Aristovnik et al. (2020) who surveyed over 30,000 students across 62 countries, as well as by the large-scale Student Experience in the Research University consortium survey in the U.S. that found that first-generation and working-class students were less likely to have safe and suitable learning environments. Moreover, they also experienced heightened financial hardships (Chirikov et al., 2020a; Soria et al., 2020). This is unsurprising, given that many non-traditional students tend to work part-time to subsidise their studies (Antonucci, 2016; Hordosy et al., 2017) and may have lost their jobs during the Covid-19 lock down.

Theoretical/methodological approach

This qualitative study included 10 interviews with non-traditional students from a high tariff university in England. We apply the term non-traditional student to capture diverse student

experiences related to being a first-generation student, a student from a lower socio-economic background, or a mature student. We borrow Christie's (2007, p.2446) broad definition of non-traditional students as those 'who would not, in previous generations, have been expected to attend university'. Our inquiry centres around the following questions: *What were the key issues students encountered during the Covid-19 crisis? What support networks did students develop to address these issues?*

We propose an original approach to student support as comprising social networks that are dynamic, reciprocal and involving a variety of formal/informal actors. We define social network as a set of relevant actors (persons or groups) connected to each other by one or more relations (Daly, 2010; Wellman, 1983, 2001). These relationships vary according to the frequency, direction and nature of exchange. All of which, dictate the size of a network, the density of connections and the centrality of actors with certain students more connected to more people than the others (Kanagavel, 2019, Author).

Findings

The students interviewed found their experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic stressful. The phrases such as '*I'm crying like almost every day, but I don't know why*' (Kelly) were common to the participants. Students were also aware of the disadvantage their home circumstances caused:

'cause obviously the middle class they go home, they've got nice offices, top notch Wi-Fi, they have got everything they need, like at home library, or something I don't know. So I think the university assumes everyone is like that rather than acknowledging that not everyone has that privilege. (Lisa)

An ego-centric approach to social networks (Perry et al., 2018) enabled students to reflect on their interactions with available academic/wellbeing support. There was a limited mention of formal university support in student interviews, and the phrases such as '*I haven't used any of them*' (Jenny) were common.

The findings, however, indicated significant wellbeing support from families. This support ranged from small gestures such as '*having my mum around asking if I want a cup of tea*' (Michael) to forms of support that had significant effects on students' mental health. Students highlighted how they were able to talk to their parents about difficult experiences, although there was a tendency to exclude academic details. This was to avoid worrying parents or students thought their parents may not understand if they did not have HE experience (Meuleman et al., 2015; O'Shea, 2016):

Fellow students were described as essential for both academic and wellbeing support, particularly for their similar experiences during Covid-19. However, it is also important to note that the students had a small selection of peers they engaged with and therefore perceived as close friends:

I have a friend who does the same courses as me. So that was quite good to have her, and she was like we were sharing when revising for exams and stuff which was nice. (Jane)

Conclusion

While it is important to recognise the resourcefulness of ‘non-traditional families’, particularly for student wellbeing, the findings draw attention to smallness of student support networks for our participants, and the lack of systemic institutional support experienced. Emphasis on support as comprising social networks offers a much-needed lens to recognise and then support the interconnected patterns of relations between individuals and the resources available.

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