

Proposal for 2010 SRHE Conference

Forms part of symposium on student engagement

Title

The Social Life of Students: support mechanisms at university

(0095)

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The successful transition to and through higher education calls for academic and social adjustment and integration. The importance of academic and social integration on persistence are well documented (Astin 1984; Tinto 1993, 1997). Social integration includes the formation of social networks, comprising friends, peers and family which provide support, promoting self-esteem and a sense of well-being leading to improved academic outcomes (Cutrona et al 1994; Levitt et al 1994; Lackey and Cohen 2000; Robbins et al 2004). They can also function as a safety net that helps students to cope with stress and difficulties during their study (Wentzel 1999; Thomas 2002; Eggens et al 2008). Regarding the link between social integration and academic achievement, Tinto (1997, p618) questions whether *the social, is, for many students, a developmental precondition for addressing the need for intellectual engagement?* Engagement with academics is also important in student satisfaction, achievement and persistence (Krause 2005).

This paper examines student social integration and levels of support, from social networks and academic staff, and the relationship to academic outcomes. Twenty-four students from six undergraduate degrees in a large East Midlands university took part in a longitudinal study comprising individual in-depth interviews (three in year one, one in year two and one in the final year). The results from six students are presented. In year two five students continued (one leaving to go home to Korea) and in year three, three students remained (one left education and one went on placement).

Social networks

At the start of the first year all students expected to make new friends and feel part of a community, although they were apprehensive moving from a small culturally homogeneous environment to a much larger culturally heterogeneous environment. Most students wanted to maintain established networks, particularly with friends and family, and so chose a university within easy commuting distance. During Freshers' Week students acquired larger, more diverse networks of friends, which were pruned during the year, consolidating friendship groups that consisted of students with whom they identified and felt they had something in common, often wanting to share accommodation in year two.

During the second year all students, with the exception of one whom stayed at home throughout his degree, moved into shared houses of varying size from four to ten. Within a short time the living arrangements had deteriorated mainly due to lack of consideration; cleaning and having parties, which caused arguments. All students were 'locked into contracts' but two moved out

and continued to pay the rent. Martin stayed in his house, but was isolated, staying in his room to study. He was put under pressure to go out with his housemates and when he refused was excluded.

Throughout the year most students consolidated existing networks and established new ones, socialising with them all. Martin was the exception, he had a couple of close friends, whom he rarely saw, and *drifted* between friends. Parents were very supportive, and their relationships had improved with their increasing independence.

All students found the *pressures increased dramatically*, in the second year, but that their networks helped them to 'cope'. *This year [it is] especially important to have friends to help you through it more than anything.* Martin did not have the support of peer networks to help him through the second year and became ill with depression, which he put down to the accommodation and the teaching situation (see below).

Those that stayed in the final year continued with the same networks, consolidating them. They also sorted out their accommodation, focussing on their studies rather than socialising.

Relationships with staff

Relationships with staff in the first year were weak. Tutors seem to remain in the background, dialogue was limited and e-mail exchange offered no conversation, which was sharp difference from relationships with staff experienced at school.

In the second year, all students, with the exception of Martin, had improved relationships with tutors. They found that the seminar groups were smaller which meant that they could get to know the tutors better. They felt that they were more 'connected', they were invited to speak to the tutor on an individual basis about their work, they were more confident in approaching them. They felt that the tutors had changed their attitudes, they were more accepting and willing to give help, they felt more accepted as tutors approached them saying things like 'Hi, how are you doing'. Martin, on the other hand, was in tutorials with 30 students (different students for different subjects) and lectures of 300 students. He felt that he had not got to know the staff any better, and that the staff were always changing so there was no opportunity for either the tutors to know the students or visa versa.

By the final year, the relationship with tutors, particularly the dissertation tutor, had changed dramatically and there appears to be more equality and mutual respect. The student and tutor work in partnership.

Richard sums up the changed relationship with tutors:

We used to look at the tutors speaking to the third years when we were first years and think 'oh god, look how tight they are', you know 'they're really in with them' ... however will I have a relationship with my tutors like that? And this year it just seems natural

Conclusion

The social networks students have at university, both established and new, are very important for them achieving their academic goals. The positive, supportive role of peers and tutors is essential to their academic outcomes. Without support students will find the academic challenge difficult, but if both are lacking then the student may not persist in higher education. It is imperative that universities find a way to engender relationships between the tutors and the students, and the students and their peers, by finding methods of propagating these relationships.

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150 word summary

The successful transition to and through higher education calls for academic and social adjustment and integration and for this to occur students need to establish close networks with peers and tutors. This paper examines levels of support, from social networks and academic staff, using six in-depth student case studies from a large East Midland University.

It was found that social networks and relationships with staff are not static but constantly changing, depending on several variables, but they do have an impact on academic outcomes. The stronger the social networks and the more equality in the relationships with tutors, the healthier the academic outcomes are. Those with weak relationships in both areas are at risk of withdrawing from higher education.

It is imperative that universities find a way to engender relationships between the tutors and the students, and the students and their peers, by finding methods of propagating these relationships.

