

## **‘You’ll make a great Social Worker’: Friendship, feedback and the formation of a professional identity in Higher Education**

### **Abstract**

*The consumerist construction of students as strategic and competitive individuals interested only in future benefits denies the multi-faceted and provisional motives offered in personal accounts by students themselves. Findings from a three and a half year, longitudinal, mixed methods study of health and care Foundation degree students show the importance of peers and of affirming relationships more generally in overcoming problems and setbacks. A fragile sense of self as a future professional is interwoven with others’ feedback; a supervisor saying ‘you’ll make a great Social Worker’ kept one student going through difficult times.*

*The construction of ‘persistence’ as a decontextualized personal characteristic fails to recognise the social and naturally occurring support mechanisms described by students. In this paper we explore the dilemmas presented by introducing explicitly social components to learning.*

### **Background**

Foundation degrees were introduced in 2001 to widen participation in Higher Education (HE), facilitate employer-led, work-based learning and promote student employability, particularly in vocational areas of skill shortages (HEFCE, 2000). Mature, working learners were consequently attracted to programmes offering new approaches to learning and teaching. However attrition remains high, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2010) reflecting a long-standing problem in certain health programmes, particularly nursing. This has been extensively researched but causal links are

hard to establish within a policy-driven arena and changing labour market (Mulholland et al, 2008).

Student engagement literature offers a more nuanced conception of decisions to stay, or to persist, which has been defined as: ‘..the individual student’s efforts to seek encouragement and support to persevere’ (Horstmanshof and Zimitat, 2007: 705). Large cohort studies tend to be of younger, full time student groups though, rather than mature learners (Brunsdan et al, 2000; Rhodes et al, 2004). The engagement agenda also focuses on greater involvement in extra-curricular activities following Kuh’s (2008) work but mature learners typically have little time, many competing commitments and different priorities. The academic arena is frequently the only means of engaging with such learners, as this is where contact occurs. Hockings (2010) argues that teachers need to create dialogue with students to discover and respect their diverse experiences and knowledge. Bryson and Hand (2007) particularly emphasised the salience of trust relationships between student and teacher.

## **Methodology**

With this in mind, the research, funded by a Lifelong Learning Network, sought to learn about the experiences of Foundation degree students over the course of their education through descriptive, narrative accounts. A semi-structured schedule offered scope for interviewees to direct discussions and introduce issues. A dedicated researcher conducted interviews with 39 mature, working students from different entry cohorts over three and a half years. Interview data were analysed in year groupings, providing themes across cohorts related to the first, second and third year of study.

## **Findings**

Like the definitions of student engagement that call for an understanding of its socially derived and contextualised nature, personal accounts show how

differently each participant approached and negotiated their education. Nonetheless themes emerged around how stressful periods were ameliorated by the support of friendships and social networks, which often formed very swiftly and were often made possible and reinforced through social media. The second year proved to be the most problematic, as expectations increased while support was felt to decrease. Fellow students were generally the first to be consulted for advice and support, while programme and module leads, and even personal tutors, were often seen as the last resort. Despite this, feedback from work-based supervisors and teaching staff was important in developing a positive sense of achievement and direction, particularly to those with unhappy early encounters with formal education. Institutional barriers, often in the form of communication failures or timetabling problems, were felt by some to confirm a sense of having to ‘fight for everything’, reinforcing a sense of not belonging in HE.

A recurrent finding was that the unexpected, often ‘dreamt of’ opportunity to gain a professional qualification, offered by the Foundation degree, provided both a powerful pull and a major source of stress.

## **Discussion**

We would like to take the opportunity to explore further the implications of the findings around the importance of peers as the support of choice, given this is a strong theme of the research and resonates with our own experience and previous research. While we hear from student participants that this was pivotal in enabling them to overcome hurdles and continue through difficult times, we realise that these relationships and arrangements were entirely under the students’ control and freely chosen. Enforced ‘team’ groupings around assignments were discussed but often as problematic relationships and certainly not with the warmth and enthusiasm of their own social networks. Yet the

natural groupings inevitably mean there will have been students not included, whether by choice or accident of circumstance (such as missing the first few days or not using social media). In contrast to peer relationships, and despite positive descriptions of help and support, many participants actively chose *not* to seek out teaching staff for advice or help (for example ‘I only asked my tutor when I knew there was no other choice’). Those interviewees did not describe poor relationships with teaching staff, quite the contrary. They spoke of simply preferring the support of friends and peers. Possibly they feared a negative judgement from those seen as gatekeeping access to further study.

So we are left wondering: should we seek to actively support and promote peer and staff relationships *through* curriculum design and philosophy, or accept that this positive source of engagement and persistence is outside our sphere of influence? If we accept the latter, ought we to abandon it to chance altogether, or seek to create times, places and media through which such an important activity might be possible for more students? For busy, working learners this might mean creating such opportunities in place of teaching. Alternatively we might learn from innovative approaches to student-directed content and assessment.

In conclusion, then, our questions are: to what degree, if at all, can educators support or facilitate social relationships? Are students who are not involved in a social group, whether by choice or circumstance, less well equipped to persist through difficult periods? Finally, do teachers / educators have anything to offer over and above peer advice and support?

## **References**

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