

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Social Networks, social capital and higher education dropout intention

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Abstract:

Based on a nationwide representative Data for Germany, this study analyzes the relationship between social networks and social capital for different student groups (first-generation or migrant students) and their role in higher education dropout. The composition of social network was measured based on accessibility to different contacts, number of positions accessed and upper reachability. Social capital comprises resources (support, information) and norms (parents' aspiration) in the reference group. The findings suggest differences in social networks and social capital of students based on their backgrounds. Students from high academic background have access to a wide range of contacts and positions than their first-generation peers. These students also have parents who have high degree aspirations and expectations related to graduation. The findings also suggested high parental aspirations and expectations for migrant students. The difference in the range of positions was not associated with dropout intention. Instead, resources and norms were relevant here.

Paper:

In the last decade, higher education systems across the world have experienced a tremendous increase in the participation of students (Osborne, 2003). In Germany itself the number of students in higher education has increased more than 3 times between 1975 and 2016 (Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), 2018). This expansion has simultaneously resulted in an increase in the number of students from diverse backgrounds in higher education that were previously underrepresented (Wolter, 2013). However, achievement gap continues to exist between the so-called traditional and the previously underrepresented student groups. In Germany, 29% of Bachelor students drop out of universities (Heublein et al., 2017). The higher education dropout risk is even higher for certain student groups, e.g. first generation learners (Müller & Schneider, 2013; Tieben, 2016) and migrant students (Ebert & Heublein, 2017; Müller, 2018).

University education entails changes in academic, personal and social life of students (Eggens et al., 2007). Many students move away from their families, friends and leave existing support structures to

pursue higher education. The new academic environment accompanied by the changes in social setting could be challenging for students and has often been cited as a reason for dropping out of university. At this time, the continuing support, information and advice that students receive from their network members e.g., family, friends, teachers, professors could help them cope with the challenges associated with higher education and have a positive influence on their academic achievement (Eggen et al., 2007).

The resources that students bring in through their networks can be traced back to Bourdieu's (1986) concept of different forms of 'capital', in our case primarily 'social capital'. Bourdieu first defined social capital as the "aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (pp.248). These resources might include information, financial support as well as emotional support within one's network. The access to network memberships and in turn to these resources (e.g., information, support) is dependent on the socio-economic position of an individual (Lin, 2001). Individuals from high socio-economic status tend to have access to a wide range of contacts and network members from high social status and occupational positions. This places them at an advantage in accessing and mobilizing various forms of social capital. In the context of higher education, students whose parents have a university degree, from the very beginning receive support, guidance, information to pursue university education. As a result, these students enter higher education with a relatively high social capital compared to first-generation learners or migrant students. Thus, social networks and social capital in the form of resources, information, norms and aspirations provide an innovative approach for understanding the dropout behavior/ success of different student groups in higher education and their academic achievement.

Based on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of 'social capital' and Lin (2001) access to various positions within networks', this paper attempts to explore (1) the differences in the social networks and access to social capital for different student groups (e.g. first-generation learners, migrant students); (2) and the relationship between social networks and social capital and dropout intention?

The paper relies on data from the German National Educational Panel Survey (NEPS) student cohort 5 (Blossfeld et al., 2011) which has specially designed measures that capture the role of networks and social capital of students in higher education (Hoenig et al., 2016). NEPS is a nationwide representative sample of Higher Education students in Germany. Students from university starting cohort winter 2010 were followed (almost) every semester throughout their study program and also when they left university. We limit our analyses to Bachelor students as official dropout rates focus on them. The sample for this study included approximately 5,000 students. All incomplete or missing cases were excluded from the analyses.

In this study, the composition of social networks was measured based on Lin (2001): range of accessibility to different contacts, number of positions accessed, and the upper reachability, derived from the position generator indicator in NEPS survey. The social capital comprises resources (support, information) as well as norms in the reference group (aspiration of parents and friends and their expectations related to graduation). Intention to dropout and satisfaction with academic performance were used as dependent variables. The data for this study especially the network indicators are derived from the wave 4 of the survey, which implies that the students were already in the fifth semester by then. As a result, any cases of dropouts that occurred before could not be

included in the analyses. In order to address this problem, we rely on proxy dropout measures e.g., intention of dropping out together with students' subjective assessment of their performance to draw a picture of student's academic achievement. The differences in social network and social capital based on students' background as well as the relationship between network measures and dropout intention were tested using multivariate analyses.

As expected there were significant differences in the composition of social networks of students based on their backgrounds. Students from high occupation status were more likely to have high upper reachability and access wide range of contacts and positions than their peers from low occupation background. Students with high academic or occupational background have more social capital, concerning resources and norms. Their parents had high degree aspirations and expectations related to graduation from their children. They were also more likely to provide information and support necessary for successful degree completion. Migrant parents also had high aspiration for their children, compared to their non-migrant counterparts; however, there were no differences in terms of resources accessed through networks between migrant and non-migrant students.

Despite differences in the range of positions for different student groups, these were not significantly associated with higher education outcomes. Instead, the resources and norms in the networks were relevant here. Friends' and parents' positive opinion on degree reduced the risk for dropout. Similarly, high expectation of network members (parents, friends) related to graduation and high degree aspiration resulted in low dropout intentions.