The salience of social relationships and networks in enabling student engagement and success

Christine Hardy and Colin Bryson
Nottingham Trent University and Newcastle University, UK
Dr Christine Hardy: Christine.hardy@ntu.ac.uk
Colin Bryson (please contact for correspondence): colin.bryson@ncl.ac.uk

Dr Christine Hardy is a Principal Lecturer and Learning and Teaching Coordinator in the School of Art and Design. She is one of the co-founders of RAISE.
Colin Bryson is the Director of the Combined Honours Centre and a UK National Teaching Fellow. He is the co-founder of RAISE and the Chair of RAISE between 2010-2018.

Abstract

The successful transition to and through higher education calls for academic and social integration, and for this to occur students need to establish close and supportive networks with peers and teaching staff. This paper examines levels of support, from social networks and academic staff, using six in-depth student case studies from a longitudinal study which covered the whole length of their degree. It was found that social networks and relationships with staff are not static but constantly changing, depending on several factors, but they do have an impact on student engagement. Stronger social networks and relationships with teaching staff offer a buffer and resilience in periods when other factors threaten persistence, and are a positive factor in their own right to enhancing engagement. Those with weak relationships in both areas are at risk of withdrawal. It is imperative that universities find ways to strengthen relationships between the staff and the students, and the students and their peers, through methods of fostering these relationships.

Keywords

Affective student engagement; social integration; persistence.

Introduction

The focus of this paper is on student social integration, and how students perceive levels of support from social networks and academic staff, and the influence of this on their engagement with persisting with their degree. We draw on empirical evidence gathered from a longitudinal study of students in a range of subjects at a large teaching-intensive UK University over a 4 year period spanning the whole of their undergraduate studies. We analyse findings on peer and tutor support, and the relationship between the two.

All the students were undertaking degrees in the Arts, Humanities and Business. These degrees involve around 12 hours contact time (taught in class) with academic staff per week. The degrees involved three years of study although three Business students undertook a placement year between their second and final year. One student undertook an applied Business degree which involved the first year being at university, and the remaining two years working on placement interspersed with three week study blocks.

The importance of academic and social integration on student persistence in higher education is well documented (Astin, 1993, Tinto 1975, 1993, 1997). Academic

integration relates to academic performance, self-perceptions, academic progress and belief that lecturing staff are personally committed to teaching and supporting students. Social integration embraces self-esteem and the quality of relationships established with teaching staff and peers (Tinto, 1993). Regarding the link between them, Abdul Mannan (2007) found a compensatory relationship. Thus a strong negative relationship between academic and social integration, whereby less social integration was compensated for by higher academic integration and less academic integration was compensated for by higher social integration was sufficient to enable students to continue with their studies. However, Tinto (1997, p. 618) argues that "the social, is, for many students, a developmental precondition for addressing the need for intellectual engagement", and Astin (1993, p. 398) claims that peers are "the single most potent source of influence" in the lives of college students. Bryson and Hand (2007) found that one of the key influences on student engagement was trust relationships between students and staff and students and peers, and without this, student engagement was weakened profoundly for many students. For Dubet (1994) too, integration into university life was one of three dimensions in successful "ways of being a student".

Social integration, therefore, is important for success in higher education for many reasons, most notably the transition to and through university, which can cause feelings of alienation or isolation (Mann, 2001; Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003). A well-documented aspect of 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 (Kuh, 1995; Tao, Dong, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Prancer, 2000; Stuart, 2006; Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007). These networks can also function as a safety net that helps students to cope with stress and difficulties during their study (Thomas, 2002; Buote, Prancer, Pratt, Adams, Birnie-Lefcovitch, Polivy, & Gallander Wintre, 2007; Eggens, van der Werf, & Bosker, 2008). The nature of the networks can change over time at university, as can involvement with social activities, for example Abdul Mannan (2007, p. 155) found that for first and second year students it was important to participate in clubs, organizations, cultural and sporting events and to integrate into the social system of the University, whereas senior students appeared to attach less importance to extracurricular activities of this type. One reason for this is the need to make friends (Ulriksen, 2009) and establish new networks in the first year. In addition to making new friends, students maintain old friendships and networks as they navigate this "betwixt space" of transition to university (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Palmer, O'Kane, & Owens, 2009), which is both a stressful period of time (Bewicka, Koutsopouloub, Milesc, Slaad, & Barkhame, 2010) and an active time with respect to social network development (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002). One common method of retaining friends at home and making new ones at university is the use of social networking sites, particularly 'Facebook' (Madgea, Meekb, Wellensc, & Hooleyd, 2009; Ulriksen, 2009), but over time support needs are met increasingly by friends they live with at university and less from home contacts (Tao et al 2000; Wilcox et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This support takes the form of having people to rely on, to trust and confide in (Mackie, 1998). In terms of academic work, however, support from friends on the course becomes increasingly important (Wilcox et al., 2005).

In addition to the importance of relationships with peers and the development of social support networks, engagement with academics is also essential for student satisfaction, achievement and persistence (Krause, 2005; Torenbeek, 2010) and academic integration (Tinto 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983). These relationships, and the manner of them, affect the student's perception of the institution's commitment to their welfare (Braxton & Hirschy, 2004) and if positive, can improve student self-confidence, motivation and improvement in their work (Thomas, 2002). Students who perceive that teaching staff are willing to assist them may be more likely to ask for help when they need it (Braxton & Hirschy, 2004) and students who feel respected by staff are more able to take problems to staff, and thus resolve them (Thomas, 2002). However, with increasing student numbers (Read et al., 2003), growing involvement in a variety of non-teaching functions (Cook & Leckey, 1999) including administration and the requirements of more academic research (Perry & Allard, 2003), academic staff have less time for direct contact with and support for students. This has led to some students feeling isolated (Ulriksen 2009; Yorke & Longden, 2008), and distanced (Read et al., 2003) from the teaching staff, having anxieties about approaching teaching staff for fear of being seen as stupid (Booth 1997; Krause, 2001). The lack of time spent with teaching staff, due to them being too busy, leads to a negative experience of higher education (Hixenbaugh, 2006). Increasingly online interactions are being used within the academy but student views on the efficacy and success of online interactions are mixed (Krause, 2001), some students appreciated being able to use e-mail, particularly if it meant avoiding face-to-face contact with lecturers who seemed a little threatening, but for many it did not make up for the lack of face-to-face contact (Bryson & Hand, 2007).

Recent studies have linked social integration to a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012; O'Keefe, 2013; Masika & Jones, 2016) arguing that this is key to stronger student engagement. This concept links with complex notions of students feeling a sense of affiliation to other members of the university community (Kember, Lee, & Li, 2001), habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and situated learning in communities of practice (Wenger, 2009). These ideas cover wider territory than their scope to discuss here but this research demonstrates that relationships; student to peer; and student to staff, are important in fostering belonging.

With an increasingly diverse student population in a massified system with staff stretched in so many directions (Bryson, 2004), social integration may be harder to achieve for at least some students. So just how important is this social integration for students? What are the consequences of a lack of social networks? So much of the previous research has focussed only on the first year of study and transition to university; but does socialisation, or weak or deteriorating social networks, impact at a later stage in the degree? We draw on detailed accounts from students themselves to explore this.

Methodology
The nature of the research enquiry requiring exploration of unfolding student perspectives and experiences across time called for the gathering of rich individual accounts. Therefore a qualitative longitudinal approach was used, drawing on similar traditions to the narrative research on first year students by Fung (2006) or

multi-method evidence collection from mature students over two years of their degrees by Askham (2008).

All the research was conducted in the same large post 1992 institution in the UK. Students were chosen at random from Business (3 courses), Art and Design (2 courses) and Humanities (2 courses) and invited to participate in the study. Twenty-four students eventually agreed, therefore they were self-selecting. Table 1 indicates the process and content of the interview schedule.

Table1: Interviews undertaken with students

Date	Areas for focus	Notes
Sept/Oct 2007 (pre-teaching week)	Their background, why they entered higher education and chose this university and course, their aspirations, their expectations about all aspects of university life.	24 students were interviewed
Jan 2008 First week after Christmas	Their experience thus far including a focus on intellectual development (Perry, 1999; Baxter Magolda, 1992) with the intention of examining the relationship between intellectual development and engagement.	Coincided with a time that previous research has identified as important in student withdrawal decisions (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1997). One student declined to take further part in the study.
May 2009	Developed our previous themes further and sought to review the first year both in terms of how they were doing and how they had changed.	Four students chose not to participate
March/April 2010	Focused on social and academic transition, both for the first and second year, including how they had changed and ways of knowing.	14 students were interviewed (2 dropped out of the study and 3 withdrew from university after the first year)
March/April 2011/2012	The themes remained the same as in the second year, with the addition of an oral Self-characterisation, "… to see how the [student] structures a world in relation to which he must maintain himself in some kind of role." (Kelly, 1991, p. 243). In 2012 with those students who did a placement, there was also a discussion about their placement experiences.	7 students were interviewed in 2011 and 4 (placement students) in 2012.
June 2011	A focus group to review the whole degree including achievement of goals and professional formation and the future.	Only 3 students from Fine Art attended, their work was also reviewed and discussed.

We lost some students along the way, as it was their right to withdraw from the study (some just stopped responding). We ended up with fourteen who took part throughout their undergraduate journey in HE. Table 2 summarises these students.

These are all pseudonyms as we followed standard ethical procedures during the study.

Table 2 – the students

Student	Start Age	Course	
John	18	English	Graduated
Keith	18	History	Graduated
Ella	18	Applied Business	Graduated
Frances	19	General Business	Graduated
Kevin	18	General Business	Graduated
Martin	18	General Business	Withdrew after first year
Jack	18	General Business	Graduated
Terry	25	General Business	Withdrew after first year
Nathan	19	Fine Art	Graduated
Ryan	32	Fine Art	Graduated
Natalie	23	Fine Art	Graduated
Sarah	23	Fashion Textiles Management	Withdrew after second year
Chloe	19	Fashion Textiles Management	Graduated
Octavia	19	Fashion Textiles Management	Graduated

These interviews have produced rich, thick detailed accounts and brought out the diversity of perspective. The interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. The primary analysis was based on emergent themes. That analysis has been disseminated elsewhere. Bryson and Hardy (2012) explores the academic engagement of the students and Bryson and Hardy (2014) considers their journey and experience in depth. However, for the purposes of this paper, the empirical evidence was revisited for the individual cases that we present here. This entailed assigning relevant pieces of text to the categories of social integration as identified by Tinto (1975), particularly the *longtitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college* (p. 94), focusing on peer-group and faculty (academic) interactions and support.

A dilemma that any quantitative researcher faces when presenting evidence from such a study, with over 120 hours of recorded interviews and such a diverse range of participants, is how to permit the reader to become familiar with the participants as individuals, but also to capture the range of perspectives from the participants on a complex set of themes. Given the scope available here, we have opted to present this as a selection from the study of six individual case studies. We contend that these six students represent key themes relevant to this focus, with both shared and diverse experiences and perspectives. We chose at least one at least one from each degree and drew from a range of the age group (18 to 32 years) and other features such as gender, nationality and ethnicity. For a more complete picture of the other students, and a longer article that explores their experience, becoming and transformation across their undergraduate degrees, see Bryson and Hardy (2014).

A short description of each case is presented below; pseudonyms are used for all participants:

Ella. Ella was 18 years old when she started the applied business degree which involves the first year being taken on campus with the second and third years being industrial placement interspersed with study blocks. The students are sponsored by companies, with fees paid and salaries while on placement. Her family lived locally and she was keen to move not too far from them (although she stayed in halls). Drama was her first choice but she would have to move too far away to do that, business was "a spur of the moment decision". She was concerned that she would not get a lot of support from teachers. Ella completed her degree in three years.

Keith. Keith came to undertake a History degree at 18 years of age. He had been brought up in a local town and chose to stay at home and thus commute – finance was an issue in choosing a local university. He chose this subject because of his strong interest in it. He was confident he could cope with university and determined to work as hard as needed. Keith completed his degree in three years.

Sarah. Sarah came to study Fashion Textiles Management from Korea after spending two years studying law – her father's choice – in a university at home. She was 23 years old and learnt English in Australia. She was attracted to the UK universities by the tutorial system (what she imagined to be small class with more interaction), having disliked the didactic teaching style in Korea. She was concerned about her English language skills and the impact that would have on her participation – in class and socially too. This was undermining her confidence. She shared accommodation with other international students. Sarah did not resume her studies in year two after her summer break in Korea.

Kevin. Kevin came into the general business degree at 18 years old. He was from an Asian ethnic background and attended a school in London with others from a similar background. He considered a degree was necessary to gain his goal of a well-paid job and wished to do a masters "to gain a competitive edge". He intended to work hard and expected to be more independent in study and organisation and that teachers would be more friends and peers – a different relationship than previously. In his first year he stayed in halls and then in private accommodation with friends in the second year. Following year two he gained a full-time paid sandwich post in industry completing his degree after four years.

Martin. Martin entered the general business degree at 18 years old. He had attended school one hundred miles away and was influenced by an aunt and uncle who were successful. He intended to work very hard and believed that he could get a first if he put enough effort into his studies. He was full of plans to take a leading role in university life, staying in halls in the first year and private accommodation with friends in the second, but withdrew after the second year.

Ryan. Ryan was studying Fine Art. He had dropped out of his first degree in science and after doing a foundation course came back to university at 32 years old. In the first year he was commuting from home but went into shared accommodation in

years two and three. He intended to work hard and treat university as a job. He successfully completed his degree in three years.

Findings
Social networks
At the start of the first year all students expected to make new friends and feel "part of a community" [Kevin], although they were apprehensive moving from a small culturally homogeneous environment to a much larger culturally heterogeneous environment, for example Kevin who moved "from a school which is predominately Asian, so it's such a change".

> *I am frightened of the fact that everybody on my course will be new – I suppose everyone is in the same boat. Nobody knows anybody [Keith]*

For Sarah the apprehension was more acute as she felt she could not speak English very well and believed that British students were prejudiced, in addition she was a 'mature' student:

> *Firstly I need to be familiar with other students. I think they are too young, the average age [is] 18 or 19. I am 23 so it is a little bit difficult to communicate as we [have] different interests [Sarah].*

Most students wanted to maintain established networks, particularly with friends and family,

> *I want to keep in touch with my current friends – they know me. I will make new friends – but my old friends really matter [Keith].*

They maintained their networks during their stay at university by using social networking sites, and visiting home on a regular basis. Therefore, with the exception of Sarah, they chose a university within easy commuting distance and many of them had friends who were studying in either of the universities in the city. Although they insisted that it did not affect their decision to study here it did give them a 'safety net'.

Most students, during Freshers' Week acquired larger, more diverse networks of friends. For those in halls of residence making friends was easy,

> *… we've already got a group of us on the third floor and it's just like a hotel … it's very easy to meet people, and that's one of the reasons why I am enjoying it … you grow quite close, quite quickly, especially if they have got similar interests [Martin].*

Those living off campus made friends through those on the course, and all students extended their networks through these new friends which made them feel a sense of belonging,

> *… made a strong friend base, even though at first I did think it would be quite difficult because I'm not living at the university. … but it seems to have brought different friends. I do know some people who are travelling in …*

> *but at the same time I have made friends that live in the university, either through them or through the course [Keith].*

> *… the difference from High School is that you don't really have one or two best friends, you … know people from all over the place so basically wherever you go you see someone that you know and that's quite friendly as well [Kevin].*

Ella felt a particular affinity to the rest of the students in her small cohort of 20. Her course had a more intense induction period which involved a residential two days away. She rapidly bonded and identified with her class-mates and the prevalence of group work on her degree reinforced this social dimension.

The exceptions to this were Sarah and Ryan. Ryan took the decision not to have a social life at the beginning of the academic year and spent the first ten weeks 'settling in'. Sarah found it extremely difficult to make friends with British students on her course, as she found it difficult to communicate with them. Consequently she socialised with other international students outside of the course. In her seminar group she did begin to make some friends by working in a reciprocal way – both mutual and transactional.

> *… to become friendly with them, I try to work more than them so I get them some information, so they help me out as well [Sarah].*

Sarah made few friends on the course in the first two terms; she just worked at her studies and attended classes. She described how she got depressed during the winter months and homesick; she felt isolated and finally she became ill during the second term. Towards the end of the second term she moved into new accommodation and in the final term began to socialise with others from the course both physically and on Facebook. Although she made plans for accommodation in year two, she did not return to the UK citing the financial crisis as her reason (and thus withdrawal of family financial support).

By the end of the first term all students, with the exception of Keith, who decided to live at home during the whole of his degree "as there are less distractions", had begun to plan whom they were going to share accommodation with in the second year based on their friendship groups. Martin found a house to share with eight other people, friends he made in halls, studying a range of subjects:

> *… and I'm living with them 24 hours a day so even if you don't see them all the time you get to know them very well within a short space of time and I've come to the conclusion that if I can live with them this year I can live with them next year [Martin].*

Ryan, Ella and Kevin chose to live with friends from their course, for Ryan "to live amongst other artists" and for Kevin to "use [his] time more purposefully". These shared houses varied in size from four to ten.

During the second year, within a short time the living arrangements had deteriorated mainly due to lack of consideration; cleaning and having parties, which caused arguments.

> … I like a clean kitchen and a clean bathroom it's just not my standard of living … relationships in the house kind of broke down and little factions appeared and it's just all very juvenile to be honest, but it happened quite quickly … [Ryan].

> … it's not very nice when you have to clean up after everyone [Ella].

All students were 'locked into housing contracts', but three partially moved out continuing to pay the rent, Ryan started spending more time at home and commuting, Ella with her boyfriend's parents and Kevin with his girlfriend. Martin stayed in his house, but expressed a feeling of increasing isolation, staying in his room to study. He said he was put under pressure to go out with his housemates and when he refused was excluded.

> I moved in with nine people and immediately everyone started arguing and it all kicked off and although I was never involved with any of the arguments directly I still felt … increasingly isolated when I was in the house … financial problems as well as being in so much debt I couldn't afford to be out of the house for long periods of time [Martin].

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". For the others, parents and 'significant others' were very supportive, and respondents reported that their relationships with parents had improved with their increasing independence.

All students found work pressures increased dramatically, in the second year, and found that, coupled with accommodation problems; they found it difficult to find the motivation to continue with university, 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 … We've decided, as a group, to motivate ourselves, motivate each other; sort of drag ourselves through if it needs be [Keith].

> To be honest, I'm not going to lie; I probably wouldn't have been able to do it without James (boyfriend) [Ella].

Martin did not have the support of peer networks to help him through the second year and reported becoming ill with depression, which he put down to "the accommodation and the teaching situation" (see below). At the end of the second year, he was 60% sure that he would continue to the third year but had reservations

> Obviously if I'm not going to be that happy and I'm going to get anything out of the course, and I literally am doing because I am already in 12 grand's worth of debt I really should finish it off [Martin].

Martin, although eligible to, did not return for the final year. Those that stayed in the final year continued with the same networks, consolidating them. They also sorted out their accommodation, and their focus shifted to study rather than socialising. Thus they were able to rely on a few close friends and/or relatives, which was sufficient sustain them through the challenges of the final year.

Relationships with staff
At the beginning of the first year the students did not have any common expectations regarding relationships with teaching staff at university, although they did expect some kind of continuation of their previous experiences with regard to the involvement in their learning or to take on a mentoring role, facilitating learning as an equal:

> *… I expect teachers to be on a more personal level …treat each other as friends and not as teacher and student [Kevin].*

However, relationships with staff in the first year were weak. Teaching staff seemed to remain in the background, dialogue was limited and e-mail exchange offered no conversation; a sharp difference from relationships with staff experienced in their previous educational establishment.

> *.. quite good actually to go and see someone face to face [but] it just doesn't happen [Kevin].*

> *… it's hard to say I have a good relationship with [teachers here] as I don't have that much time to connect with them [Keith].*

Due to the lack of relationships with teaching staff, students found it difficult to respond to staff other than of a positive nature "I wouldn't like to confront a lecturer" [Martin]; and they sometimes felt that when they did approach a tutor the feedback they got did not help them to improve or they felt that they received platitudes

> *… when I show my work to tutor and they gave me feedback, but every person just say; 'it's very nice idea, and you can just keep going and you will be fine', and every, actually every tutor said very same ' you will be fine', actually I was not fine [Sarah].*

For all students, relationships with peers became increasingly important, particularly for clarification of what was required of them or for academic support, contacting teaching staff would be a last resort and then it would probably be by email.

> *… I would ask for help from other students any day. I wouldn't hesitate to go and ask … [if I had a problem then] I would phone a friend. I would try firstly myself, but if I was struggling I would have nowhere else to go. I wouldn't ask a lecturer [Ella].*

> *I'd probably think firstly to myself what I could do then I'd probably [try]*
> *a couple of my friends … [to see] what they would do … but we*
> *wouldn't normally ask the seminar tutor [Kevin].*

> *Firstly, I would talk about my problems to … my Professional English*
> *course tutor* (from an English programme attended prior to university)
> *…so yes, I ask many questions of him. Sometimes he is more*
> *comfortable than our course tutors because I have known him quite a*
> *long time since last summer. … Some students always told me if you*
> *have any problems you can send email and actually I send the email*
> *to ask something and they really gave me some advice … [Sarah].*

Relationships with staff began to improve in the second year to some extent. Students found that the seminar groups were smaller which meant that they could get to know the staff better, making them feel more 'connected', being invited to speak to the staff on an individual basis about their work. Many were also more confident in approaching them.

> *Yeah, I suppose there's a better connection with the tutors this year …*
> *we've been told more or less to go and visit the tutor in their office*
> *more. Whereas in the first year that wasn't even mentioned … I've*
> *been to see my tutor a few times [Kevin].*

> *… I tend to get on with him a lot better now and he seems a lot more*
> *encouraging … he seems to be more directed towards helping you*
> *without him necessarily being spoken to first [Keith].*

> *… it seems to be a bit more relaxed, it seems to have become a bit*
> *more adult [Ryan].*

> *… and they ask about you and they know your name … and you can*
> *approach tem, ask them, they help you more [Ella].*

They felt that the teaching staff had changed their attitudes, they were more accepting and willing to give help, they felt more accepted as staff approached them saying things like 'Hi, how are you doing'.

> *I think he's accepted us more now, I think it was the fact that we were*
> *trying to prove ourselves to him before … but I do think it's partly down to*
> *us as well that we've grown more confident … [Keith].*

However, for Martin, on the other hand, relationships deteriorated rather than improved. Martin was in tutorials with 30 students (and different students for each module/class) and lectures of 300 students. He felt that he had not got to know the staff any better, and there was no opportunity to establish a relationship even though he was both confident and gregarious at the beginning of the year.

> *… there were three tutors one for each module and I only met each one*
> *of them for a term or less so it was kind of a case of you don't really have*

> *enough time to get to know them properly … if you ask them for a*
> *meeting or an appointment they will oblige, but no one does … [Martin].*

By the final year, the relationship with at least some teaching staff, particularly the dissertation tutor, had changed dramatically and there appears to be more friendliness and mutual respect.

> *… I get on with him really well in the respect that he respect me as a*
> *person and likewise I respect him … [the tutors] they know you now, so*
> *you can have a good talk with them, have a good laugh with them and I*
> *just think it's that that's helped [Keith].*

For all remaining students, they had at least one staff member that they knew well. Ryan sums up the changed relationship with staff:

> *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 [Ryan].*

Discussion

Relationships with teaching staff and peers at university are important for students to persist and succeed in their studies. Although we found, for our participants, that low trust relationships with teaching staff in the first year can be compensated for by supportive social networks, we did not find the reverse; as no student established a relationship with teaching staff in the first year. In subsequent years relationships between teacher and student were established for the majority, and friendship groups were consolidated leading to successful outcomes for those students for whom this held true.

When students commence their studies at university the primary concern and source of anxiety for them is making friends, and although they do expect to make friends at university and become part of a 'student community' they are still anxious about this; particularly leaving behind long standing friendships established over a number of years and the uncertainty about making new friendship groups. In contrast, many students expect relationships with their teaching staff at university to 'mirror' those they have established in their previous educational establishments, where they may have known their teachers over several years and established a 'trust' relationship, whereby they can go to them for help and assistance with their work and the teacher knows not only their name, but also something of their background circumstances.

On arrival at university, most students quickly become part of many social networks depending on situational factors; within halls of residences, on their courses, in clubs and societies and friends of friends. To begin with the bonds are not particularly strong, but over the course of the first term, and definitely the first year, for most students, friendships are consolidated; close bonds are formed with a few whilst maintaining 'looser' networks with others. For those living in university accommodation, these close friendships were primarily developed there (Mackie 1998; Wilcox et al., 2005) early on in 'Fresher's Week' (the week before studies

begin). For those not living in university accommodation, they were developed within their course and then extended during the first few weeks of term.

In parallel with expectations being met over friendships, students are disappointed over relationships with their teaching staff; finding them hard to access, therefore not being able to establish a relationship, let alone one of trust. They feel unable to feedback to their teaching staff or to ask questions. Students then turn to their friendship groups for help with their studies, particularly understanding academic expectations and contacting staff for help becomes a 'last resort'. This academic support network tends to shift toe around friends made on their course of study rather than in university accommodation.

For those students who have not established strong social networks, and with no trust relations with staff, they may begin to feel isolated and depressed, experiencing a lack of belonging, and eventually withdrawing from university. To enable a smooth transition to university, it is imperative that students establish a social network for two reasons: the first one being for emotional support promoting a sense of well-being and self-esteem; the second one for academic support, helping them to cope with the stress and difficulties of their study. In the first year for these students, relationships with staff were weak. E-mail exchange is not enough; it should be face-to-face, in small groups or individually. It would seem that staff need to try harder and initiate this process (Meyer Hoffman, 2014) but generally do not.

There are a host of ways in which social integration could be improved:

- Formal peer support mechanisms such as peer mentoring where students not only gain the benefits of advice and the friendship of a more experienced peer but spend time in a more informal setting with peer groups (Andrews & Clark, 2011). In the US setting, the first year seminar and supplemental instruction has offered similar benefits.
- Enhanced and sustained induction processes which allow staff and students to get to know each other (Thomas, 2012).
- Personal tutoring/academic advising so students get to know well at least one staff member.
- Making more use of the classroom to build relationships, especially in settings where the students spend less time on campus (Dwyer, 2015)

Our students moved to new accommodation in second year with friendship groups where they felt they had something in common. This move was seen in a positive light but within a short period of time communal living in private accommodation can deteriorate. However, they were not able to move out because of contractual agreements, so they found compromises, withdrawing from interactions with flatmates, such as; spending more time at other friends' houses or at the parental home where possible, or spending time in their own room. Therefore, although some students find they are compatible living together, others find they are not. Most students found the academic pressures in the second year increased and so friendship groups were increasingly important for support, both academically and emotionally, particularly for coping with accommodation difficulties.

In partial mitigation, most of these students also found that in the second year relationships with teaching staff improved due mainly to smaller seminar groups where they could get to know the teaching staff better and connect with them. This was put down to a change in teaching staff attitudes towards them and also a maturity on the student's part. One student, on a degree with 1400 other students, due to large lecture and seminar groups and lack of continuity of teaching staff, was still not able to establish a relationship with his teachers or other students on the course; and coupled with accommodation difficulties became depressed and did not return for the final year.

It is important to recognise that the second year is also a year of transition for students, with similar but different issues to the first year. Social networks are often untangling and reforming and there is increased study pressure, and although trust relationships with staff are beginning to form, this was only the case in the smaller cohort degrees in our study. The sophomore slump has been an issue for decades, but did not seem to be considered in our case study university. Therefore adapting similar approaches applied to the first year transition to the second year and beyond, can be applied to foster community, belonging and student engagement. There are fine recent examples of this (Thompson, Milsom, Zaitseva, Stewart, Darwent, & Yorke, 2013; Jackson & Livesey, 2014).

In our study the students who persisted to final year had established peer and support networks by this stage. Ironically, trust relations started to flower much more at this point, in large part due to working in different ways together, particularly in project based modules. At last some sort of discourse existed between staff and students (Bryson & Hand, 2007).

Conclusion

This paper has been based on detailed qualitative research with only a few students, who have complex and individual lives in a particular context, therefore it is difficult to generalise to all students as if they were homogenous in similar environments, as they are not. For some students issues are more complex. For example, international and commuting students were present in our study but we have barely touched on the additional dimensions raised by such contexts. We recognise too, the importance of inclusion but cannot do that justice here, which is a major limitation. However, the work has revealed some insights into the lives of students throughout their degree and the relationship between the social and the academic that larger quantitative studies cannot. There are some clear indications of areas of support that should be provided by staff to enable students to persist with, and thrive in, their studies and realise their potential.

There is growing recognition that the affective domain – how students feel – is very important for student retention, persistence and success and of course for the underpinning concept of student engagement. We recognise that without strong engagement students will not develop intellectually and in other ways to enable them to realise and optimise their potential, during and after their experience in higher education (Bryson, 2014).

However, too much of the current focus is on the academic domain and the classroom as the locus of effort to enhance student engagement in the belief that this makes the most difference. Even Tinto (2012) argues this in a recent keynote address and this was backed by many others at the same conference. There is recognition of the importance of a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012) but this can privilege identification with the degree, subject, and university rather than the wider issues of becoming a student and beyond. We hope we have added some evidence to the few studies that focus beyond the course and the academic dimension (e.g. Case, 2007; Zepke & Leach, 2010). In common with these studies, ours too shows that without a fairly stable and sound foundation from the social sphere, engagement with the academic sphere is undermined, sometimes fatally.

This raises some difficult questions and issues around the importance of addressing the personal in a mass higher education system. If social networks including family and friends, really matter, and they do, for educational success what should universities and staff be doing to enable students to maintain and foster these critical means of support. By and large, these are currently ignored except when cases become extreme, and rather too late. There are difficult moral, ethical and practical issues about intervening or 'interfering' in this domain and the vast majority of staff, including pastoral teaching staff, would probably say it was not their responsibility or desire to go there… But it is everyone's responsibility in the academy to aid social integration to ensure academic integration and improved outcomes.

The first area is transition and a recognition that students don't only experience transition issues, both social and academic, at year one, but also subsequent years. A great majority of institutions focus their efforts on first year students' induction, but second and third year inductions and transitions are just as important, though they are often overlooked.

The second is the importance of social networks that students have at university, both established and new, and how important they are for the achievement of academic goals. The positive, supportive role of peers and teaching staff (and other social groups too in some cases), 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 teaching staff and the students, and the students and their peers, by finding methods of fostering these relationships at all levels of study.

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