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Social Integration in First Year Undergraduates: The Role of Peer Learning

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This paper investigates the social integration (in relation to academic integration) of first year students during the first semester at university. Sixteen focus group sessions and 37 individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with 154 first-year Psychology and Educational Science students from a Dutch-speaking University in Belgium. Through the lens of appreciative inquiry, student-facilitated strategies such as welcome activities, campus tours, workshops and extra-curricular and co-curricular activities seemed important in enhancing both social and academic integration. Contact with older students was highly valued, but this did not involve all students and could have negative side effects for some. Participants emphasized the need for inclusivity of activities. Information technology such as Facebook could provide an important informal bridge. Participants also valued onward opportunities to develop age-peer friendships which sustained their well-being and academic motivation throughout the first year. However, the peer interaction and learning provided did not fully address the social developmental needs among all newcomers. The consequences of these findings for future research, peer learning practices and institutional policy are discussed.

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Author Biographies and Current Themes of Research

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Specimen reference:

Struyven, K., Gheysens, E., & Byl, E. (2014). Studying at campus during study- and examination periods in the company of other students/Studeren met anderen op de campus tijdens studie- en examenperiodes: verkenning van ‘massa-studie’ in hogeronderwijs” *Pedagogische Studiën*, 91(3), 186-207.

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Social Integration in First Year Undergraduates: The Role of Peer Learning

Abstract

This paper investigates the social integration (in relation to academic integration) of first year students during the first semester at university. Sixteen focus group sessions and 37 individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with 154 first-year Psychology and Educational Science students from a Dutch-speaking University in Belgium. Through the lens of appreciative inquiry, student-facilitated strategies such as welcome activities, campus tours, workshops and extra-curricular and co-curricular activities seemed important in enhancing both social and academic integration. Contact with older students was highly valued, but this did not involve all students and could have negative side effects for some. Participants emphasized the need for inclusivity of activities. Information technology such as Facebook could provide an important informal bridge. Participants also valued onward opportunities to develop age-peer friendships which sustained their well-being and academic motivation throughout the first year. However, the peer interaction and learning provided did not fully address the social developmental needs among all newcomers. The consequences of these findings for future research, peer learning practices and institutional policy are discussed.

Keywords: university, socialization, social development, social learning, academic integration, transition

Social Integration in First Year Undergraduates: The Role of Peer Learning

Contemporary perspectives on learning in higher education highlight the need to foster students' transition processes in order to reduce drop-out rates (e.g. Brown, Nairn, Van Der Meer, and Scott 2014). Tinto suggested both social and academic integration were important, particularly during the first months after arrival (Tinto 1975, 1993). Integration was considered as the way students form relationships with peers and staff, and reflected the sense of belonging students should develop (Meeuwisse, Severiens, and Born 2010).

Social integration is the degree to which students share attitudes, beliefs and non-intellectual interaction with peers and staff, as well as involvement in extra- and co-curricular activities (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). *Astin (1999) noted that considerable research suggested that student commitment of time and energy to academic work was strongly influenced by student peers. Similarly, Strayhorn (2016) found that the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of individuals were influenced by the presence of others, and discussed student belonging and collectivism, and their impact on self-esteem. Beyond this, Bronkema and Bowman (2019) noted that friendships were an essential part of life in university, and examined both the number of close campus friends and the emotional connection students had with these friends. Both of these attributes of campus friendships were significantly related to graduation rates, while only the number of close campus friends significantly predicted Grade Point Average.*

Thus, peer interaction, learning and support might be helpful in developing both social and academic integration. Peer learning can be defined as “the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions” (Topping and Ehly 1998). This might be in relation to the formal curriculum or the hidden curriculum, which latter may be a complete mystery to newcomers. The present

study primarily investigated social (and consequently academic) integration in out-of-classroom contexts via a student-run initiative during the first months at university, and in particular the role of peer interaction and learning in facilitating this integration. It sought to do this through qualitative measures in the tradition of appreciative inquiry, a novel methodology in this application.

Context

This project took place in the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at a moderately sized private university (total enrolment = 15,000, of which 15% are from other countries) in Brussels in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Belgium is a small country, about the size of Maryland, with a population of about 12 million. As in America, both public and private universities exist, although private universities are also to an extent supported by the state. In Belgium bachelor's degrees take three years, unlike the US system which takes four years. The percentage of government education funding that goes to post-secondary education is smaller in Belgium (22% vs. 26%), but addresses fewer students - 57% of young people go to university in Belgium, compared to 73% in the USA. Thus, the spending per student is 52% more in Belgium than the USA, and Belgium spends more of its GDP on education than the USA (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2020).

In the university in question there are 44 *student-led* organizations, rather fewer than would be the case in the USA, focused on subjects and leisure interests. Only one of these was involved in this peer learning project (the Psycho-Ped'Agogische Kring). For comparison, the *faculty-led* orientation process for incoming students involved optional study skills and statistics courses, welcome speeches from the head of the university and the Dean of the Faculty, and a welcome reception and a concert in the evening, i.e. all on one day.

Effects of Social and Academic Integration

Transitioning from secondary school into university, students tend to experience high amounts of stress, due to the numerous changes, conflicts, and frustrations experienced (Christie 2009). A higher degree of social and academic integration leads to greater quality of effort, meaningful learning, a higher level of intellectual development and student success (Severiens and Wolff 2008; Tinto 1975, 1993). Thus, these are important educational objectives (Brown, et al. 2014), particularly for students in the first year.

Formal or informal strategies which encourage and stimulate social networking are considered helpful for students' social transition and adjustment (Masters and Donnison 2010). Community gatherings, meetings or organized social activities are said to contribute to personal growth and positive attitude development, and promote psychological well-being (McGee, Williams, Howden-Chapman, Martin, and Kawachi 2006; Foreman and Retallick 2016). Social interaction strategies that stimulate peer collaboration and reciprocal social support show positive outcomes for students settling into university life (Pittman and Richmond 2008) and help students acquire relevant social skills (Hayes 2014). Collaborative learning environments not only help students in their academic transition, they can also lead to social integration (Loots 2009).

Theoretical Perspectives

Peer learning is related to Social Constructivism (Vygotsky 1978; Wertsch 1997), which proposes that individuals construct new knowledge when they interact with fellow students on shared problems or tasks. Vygotsky (1978) saw learning as socially and culturally mediated (Reed, Evely, Cundill, Fazey, Glass, et al., 2010; Winter and Cotton 2012). From another perspective, Bourdieu (1984) linked cultural capital to social capital and integration (Choudry, Williams and Black 2016). He suggested that cultural capital arises from one's own knowledge, dispositions and interpretative perspectives, while social capital arises from

the social contacts and knowledge that are embedded in networks of affiliation (Andersen and Jæger 2015; Bourdieu 1984).

Tinto (1975, 1993) suggested that social resources can be used to further attainment. In his theory, three phases occur when an individual joins a new group: (a) separation from past old communities, (b) transition in interaction with the new setting/people, and (c) incorporation of the norms of the new communities (Wolf-Wendel, Ward and Kinzie 2009). The seminal work of Tinto remains a benchmark for understanding social and academic integration (Davidson and Wilson, 2013). More recently, Tinto (2012) has focused attention on extra-individual or structural constraints in institutional environments, such as between-group differences or class barriers in opportunities. This shows how components such as the hidden curriculum and the social organization of education contribute to social integration.

Relevance and Contribution of This Paper

Most of the integration research on new first-year students focuses on classroom settings, explores student-faculty interactions and does not make the role of peers explicit (Archambault, Pagani, and Fitzpatrick 2013). By contrast, this study focuses on social integration and peer interaction, learning and support, especially as they impact students' feelings about themselves and others. However, much of the evidence on peer learning stems from cognitive research (e.g., Topping 2005), and does not explicitly address socialization processes. Also, research on learners' social integration through spontaneous informal peer interactions remains scarce. In this paper we examine these issues and draw implications for how peer interaction and learning might be developed to be more thorough, consistent and inclusive – maximizing the advantages for all.

Research Questions

The research questions were:

- 1 To what extent are the social and emotional needs of first year undergraduates met on entry to university?
- 2 What are the effects of these needs being met/not met?
- 3 How can these needs be better and more widely met, especially through peer interaction and learning?

Methodology

Research Design

Qualitative data were collected in two phases, with full-time students in the first year of a bachelor program in the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science at a Dutch-speaking University in Belgium. In the first phase, focus group sessions were conducted (Lunt and Livingstone 1996), and again later to investigate perceptions after some experience of higher education. Participants were asked in the second term to reflect post-hoc on their experiences in the first term. In the second phase, follow-up individual interviews were conducted, to obtain a deeper understanding of the social dynamics involved.

Research Ethics

The research ethics advisory committee at the university under study reviewed and approved the research design, measures and procedure. All participants gave informed consent, their confidentiality was protected and they had the option to refuse to participate/withdraw at any time.

Sample

Participants were first-year students coming directly from secondary school, with no earlier experiences at university. Other kinds of students were excluded. In Phase 1, recruitment proceeded in four ways, essentially through a snowballing procedure. The researchers attended informal social gatherings held by the faculty student organization, engaged students and then sent them invitations to participate in the study through e-mail.

Second, via network analysis on Facebook, other students were contacted by telephone, informed about the research and asked if they would come to a meeting and bring some classmates with them. Third, respondents referred friends, often making introductions at events or via Facebook. Fourth, the researchers introduced themselves to first-year undergraduates at academic lectures on campus and personally invited them to participate.

The resulting 93 participants were obviously self-selected volunteers and therefore potentially somewhat biased. Of these, 54% (N=50) were in the department of Educational Sciences and 46% (N=43) in the department of Psychology. The majority were female (N=83; 89%), which applied to both departments (males in ES N=6 12%; males in P N=4 9%). Sixteen separate focus group sessions were then conducted. Seventy-two of the 93 students participated in these (77%).

In Phase 2, recruitment proceeded in two ways. First, we invited all students who had participated in the focus groups by email. After three weeks, they were sent a reminder (if they had not refused to participate). After six weeks, they were reminded again. After nine weeks, they were sent a personal text message. Second, respondents referred friends and we sent invitations to participate in the study through personal text messages. Through both routes, a total of 37 students volunteered and interviews were subsequently conducted with them. Again, half the participants were from Educational Sciences (N=18 48%) and 50% from psychology (N=19 52%). The majority (N=31 84%) were female, which applied to both departments (males in ES N=3 17%; males in P N=3 16%). This partial snowball sampling is likely again to have resulted in a somewhat biased group of self-selected volunteers.

Thus, the focus groups quite deliberately focused on two time intervals during the implementation of the programme, but the whole sample participated in all aspects. The interview on the other hand was a one-off retrospective look back at the whole process, with a smaller and somewhat different sample.

Measures

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is an action research approach, rooted in the idea that our realities or social worlds are created by the language, interactions and relationships amongst us, including non-verbal communication and actions. AI aims to discover what gives life to a system, what energises people and what they most care about. The deliberately affirmative assumptions of AI about people, organisations and relationships are in contrast to more traditional forms of research that seek to analyse or diagnose problems (Hammond, 2013). There are clear links between AI and strengths-, asset- or solutions-focused approaches to learning and the professions.

For the construction of our instruments we used the three main stages of Appreciative Inquiry (AI): Discovery, Dream, Design (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros 2003; Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2010). We used AI for three reasons: (a) it enabled students to give direct feedback on the central research questions; (b) it afforded an appreciative lens to make personal sense of an educational change; and (c) it engaged students to think of improvements in future practices.

The first AI instrument for the focus groups investigated themes of both social and academic integration (see Table 1). Initially participants were asked to focus on stories of best practice, positive moments, greatest experiences and successful processes (Discovery). In the second step participants were called upon to imagine an ideal future, to determine how it could be even better and to create a positive vision (Dream). During the last step participants were questioned about their expectations regarding actions and decisions which might make their vision become reality (Design). Each question lasted on average 10 minutes, and each step 30 minutes. The Phase 1 AI instrument was pilot tested with a small sample of master's students, investigating appropriateness of questions, clarity and duration.

No problems were found, so no adaptations were made. A detailed step-by-step protocol was produced to facilitate consistent application.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The Phase 2 interview instrument (see Table 2) explored the concepts of both social and academic integration with four questions in each, each question taking three minutes on average. It then investigated the student's perception of the importance of social and academic integration in personal wellbeing and in academic success, asking for a score on each on a scale from 0 to 5 and reasons why that score was given, each question again taking on average three minutes. The instrument was pilot tested with a sample of first-year students, examining it for appropriateness of questions, clarity and duration. Additionally, an independent researcher familiar with the literature and the research area examined each question. No discrepancies were found, so no adaptations were made. Again, a detailed step-by-step protocol was produced to facilitate consistent application.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Procedure

Both the focus groups and the interviews were digitally audio-taped for later analysis. Additionally, the researcher conducting them made hand-written notes of verbatim quotes related to frequently occurring issues. In Phase 1 the transcripts were produced manually, while in Phase 2 they were produced by speech recognition software. Data analysis was based on the transcripts and hand-written notes.

Data Analysis

Phase 1 transcripts were analysed using content analysis technique within MAXQDA version 11.2.5. This facilitated axial coding by ordering, dividing and clustering codes into categories, and recognizing structures or patterns. For instance, under Discovery, Support, Who Supports? codes were available for: Fellow Students, Friends and Faculty Members. For

Phase 1, three researchers each transcribed one session and additionally assessed one transcript from each of their colleagues. Inter-rater reliability was 90% and discussion ensured a consensus was reached.

For Phase 2, we used Hycner's (1985) systematic procedures to identify essential features and relationships: repeatedly reading each interview, identifying pertinent statements, grouping units of meaning to identify significant topics, checking back to ensure the content had been correctly captured, summarizing each interview, and identifying themes common to many of the interviews.

Results

Phase 1 – Focus Groups

The results will be presented according to perceptions in relation to the timeframe: the first week after arrival, after the first week, and during the last weeks (see Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

First Week: Welcome ceremony, campus tour, other introduction activities. Sixty-five per cent of students (N=100) declared their satisfaction with the welcome activities. These events were felt to bolster feelings of self-esteem and create a sense of identity and collegiality within the university.

“I really liked the academic opening reception. I felt that students are not considered as numbers in this university because they organise something for students.” (Student 28: woman)

Participants indicated that these activities specifically helped them with finding their way on campus and feeling connected with fellow university students. Approximately three-eighths of the respondents (N=57, 37%) indicated that these activities resulted in peer companionship that made them feel happy and enjoy student life. One eighth of the respondents (N=20, 13%) indicated that these activities were a way to mitigate isolation and reduce personal anxiety.

“I spent the first day together with my friends from secondary school. But when I went to my own faculty, I knew nobody. The first semester I felt really bad.” (Student 9: woman)

Sixty-five per cent of the students (n=100) declared satisfaction with the personal qualities of the student facilitators and felt that student facilitators created networking opportunities.

“During the reception they approached us. They asked what we studied and what our interests were, for example: Why did you choose this direction? What are you doing??

They wanted us to feel more at ease and listened intently to us.” (Student 18: woman)

However, only 16% (n=25) felt they were confident enough to ask questions of staff, stating they were more likely to discuss problems with student facilitators.

Sixty-five per cent of the participants (n=100) indicated satisfaction with this support for social integration. However, 73% (n=112) felt that more introduction initiatives were needed on arrival to bring students of the same subject of study together informally.

“In the first semester all lectures are provided in a mass group learning context with students from varied directions. You do not know who your classmates are. It would be great if we also had a moment in the first week where I could meet and greet fellow students from my course.” (Student 14: woman)

After the First Week: Social events and extra-curricular activities. Participants were questioned about their satisfaction with regard to support activities after the first weeks. Positive experiences were mainly related to forms of social support, in terms of making friends and feeling more at home at the University. For example:

“I feel I’m really integrated. And then you feel more at home at the University. I also know really a lot of people here. And after some time, you can’t cross the campus anymore without seeing someone you know.” (Student 11: woman)

Forty-eight students (31%) were satisfied with the activities organized for and by students.

They highly valued initiatives that contributed to meeting new students. Parties organized by members of student organizations also scored highly. These students felt pleased about activities organized by higher-year students of the same department, as a way of getting to know their classmates or “potential friends”.

“I really liked the receptions organized by the higher-year students of our department.

Because indeed, I knew that there were also other first-year students that went there.

They were my potential friends.” (Student 38: woman)

A small group of respondents (N=15, 10%) asserted that Facebook provided opportunities to get in contact with other students.

“Yesterday in the late evening for example, someone came to me and asked me to dance.

While we were dancing, he asked me ‘Are you Lana?’ He told me that he had checked my personal Facebook page.” (Student 17: woman)

Some students (N=48; 31%) believed that the student organization was a great tool for improved social integration and that participating in these kinds of activities was important. Participants pointed to the fact that membership of a student organization created a better bond, not only with students of the Faculty but also of other faculties. They believed this created a feeling of stronger connectedness to the University:

“I am baptized in different student associations and then you feel to be one of and with the University. It really feels like it’s your university.” (Student 11: woman)

However, 12 per cent of the first-year students (N=18) stated explicitly that they did not feel welcome by experienced members of the Faculty student organization. Respondents argued that membership posed entry obstacles for newcomers and social pressure to be included only made things worse.

“The problem is that they organize it only for the student organization members. But if you don’t have membership then you don’t feel really invited. As a consequence, you do

not feel attracted to participate in activities.” (Student 61: woman)

It was generally felt that more student-facilitated social networking activities were needed that were initiated and supported by the institution and operated in an atmosphere where all students were welcome.

“A perfect example of what should be organized is a kind of event where you can meet people with the same interests but without pressure, obligations or group formation. And yet with a certain cosiness; so that you know who is present.” (Student 18: woman)

During the Last Week: Workshops, study sessions and co-curricular activities. Around two-thirds of the participants stated that peers played a unique and supportive role. These students believed that friendship relations with higher-year students helped to keep their learning process constant. Higher-year students with whom they built friendships helped respondents to be more aware of the prerequisites and appropriate behaviour.

“If you are not studying, then you get some critical remarks from your friends that you aren’t studying. Then they always give you a fair warning and remind you once more that the exams are coming soon and that you have to study.” (Student 24: woman)

Twenty-two per cent of students (N=34) reported their appreciation for the study sessions organized by members of student organizations. These increased their feeling of integration by sharing experiences and knowledge with peers. The impact was principally expressed as examination support.

“You’ll feel much more confident then. When you know what to do and how to do it. Otherwise, you are on your own.” (Student 55: woman)

Fifty-four per cent of first-year students (N=83) reported their appreciation for workshops offered by higher-year students. This increased their feeling of integration. “A brief overview of written exams” and “information about how to study for specific exams” were both considered very supportive in increasing first-year students’ understanding and reducing

anxiety.

“It was so nice that they came to support us. I was not able to see my way out of the exams, and then I had the feeling that I was supported.” (Student 34: woman)

Twenty-one per cent of students (N=32) believed the student organization automatically provided peer support. According to these participants, students with questions about any issues were always welcome in the student organization base. Members of the student organization shared tips and tricks about exams or about learning methods and provided summaries.

“Our student organization is like a good information point for everything, both personal problems, or your studies, or ... anything. You can always ask anything of anyone.” (Student 5: man)

Around 67% (N=103) of respondents recognized the importance of studying together with peers on campus, and believed that these peer interactions motivated them to study more.

“Seeing people studying around me really motivated me. And then you also know that you are not alone in studying.” (Student 12: woman)

These students believed that these peer interactions were particularly important during the examination period. They buffered stress. According to some participants, they generated a feeling of safety, because peers who were in the same situation understood each other more and this helped them to persist. Additionally, they believed that these interactions enabled them to calm down. They argued that having a break, taking time together with a peer, and going for a drink or a walk were essential for clearing the head and de-stressing.

“You don’t dare to do something else. You have to study because everybody is studying there. You are looking forward to taking your pauses together which are almost always very nice!” (Student 24: woman)

Some students believed that Facebook was a supportive tool for study. About half of the

participants used Facebook to share summaries, sample exams or student notes with each other, or to answer each other's questions. They believed that this was very useful and handy, because it enabled them to work together effectively without being together face-to-face. They claimed they did not feel alone when they were using Facebook because there were always other students who were using it at the same time. They believed this was a great help because it provided reassurance, especially during the exam period.

“You had your own Facebook page and it was always visible. There were always interactions between students who had done some statistics exercises. And even if you didn't have a question, you were able to read answers to the questions of other people. So basically, you felt that you were together during the exams. That was very positive!”

(Student 52: woman)

Phase 2 - Interviews

Turning to the interview responses, only one quarter of students (n=9) felt that they were given the support required to socialize with their classmates in their first semester, one third (n=12) reporting that they received no support at all. Thirty-seven students (100%) were able to give reasons for what they thought was most important for their personal wellbeing and 36 (97%) were able to give reasons for what they thought was most important for their study success.

Sixty-two per cent of the interviewees (N=23) thought that social connectedness was most important for their personal wellbeing, while 40% (N=15) of the interviewees stated that academic connectedness was most important. Half of the group of students that emphasized the role of social integration for their personal wellbeing (N=12) argued that social contacts and friendship relations were particularly important from the first day, in order to find energy to put effort in their studies.

“I think social contacts and friendships increased my effort to get more things done for

my program of study and increased my sense of belonging to my program. Because once I'd made some friends, I experienced more happiness/wellbeing. When you feel alone, then you do not feel comfortable and your life is unpleasant. I think this has a significant negative influence on how you experience your university time and how much effort you put in your studies." (Student 185a: woman)

Over one third of these students (N=8/23, 35%) believed that social contacts and friendship relations were also of importance for their future academic and professional careers. They argued that this social network could provide emotional support to get them through difficult moments in later life. Supportive friendships offered automatic, spontaneous help, which made the students more able to reach out and maintain self-confidence and self-control. According to them this was strongly related to belief in their own abilities to survive, i.e. their resilience.

"Social contacts and friendships are crucial to enable you to become one with yourself and the environment. To feel secure about what you do, as well as to feel secure about others around you, so you never will be alone. It determines your overall university experience and the effort you put in your studies." (Student 185b: woman)

More than three quarters of the group of interviewees who reported that their social integration was relevant for their academic success (N=14/23; 61%) said explicitly that previous teambuilding activities helped them to work together efficiently with classmates. They said that the university should pay attention to creating connectedness among class groups.

"We have various group-based tasks and projects and then it is crucial to be geared to one another and be able to work together with all members of the group, regardless of individual differences. For example, with the organization "culture week", half of the group had already quarrelled and some felt excluded or were not actively involved."

(Student 165: woman)

That the first processes of social integration were important was argued many times in the interviews. However, a degree of willpower was believed to be one of the keys to becoming socially integrated:

“You can be stimulated to be involved in campus life, but I believe you first need to have the willingness to be involved. You need to want it otherwise you cannot belong or be involved. So, it’s about accepting the norms and values of the group and agreeing with or approving this. How I experienced the campus - the manner of how people think here, the freedom you receive - it was a match for me already from the beginning.” (Student 160: male)

Three quarters of this group (N=17/23; 73%) reported that they needed a phase of orientation first, in which they could find trust, security and acceptance from the class group. Thus:

“It’s about the people within your group - fellow students or classmates, that they are accepting you. That you feel welcome within the group and with them. So that you wanted to be accepted and you were accepted. That you think together. A sense of fellow feeling. I’m not fully integrated but I felt accepted by the group, so that’s all right.”

(Student 127: man)

Many of these interviewees (N=12/23; 52%) also claimed that once both having the willingness and being accepted were reached, in a second phase it was important to do things together or share time together in order to reach a higher level of social integration.

“Some classmates living in the dorms regularly do things together. But I cannot join because I need to be at home on time and I have to travel for quite a distance. It restrains me from getting fully integrated in campus life.” (Student 161: male)

More than one quarter of this group (N=8/23; 36%) particularly referred to the twofold

experience of having positive interactions in-depth as well as community-wide:

“It’s about your sense of belonging to a particular clique of friends as well as getting on well together with other members of the group. You’ve got your friends and your best friends, but you’ve got also good connections with all other people. You’ve got the willingness to work with all of them, and not exclude or ignore anyone.” (Student 141: man)

Student belonging to organizations was reported to have some negative influence on the academic integration of students, also. For instance, some interviewees (N=3) referred to some of their friends who were less able to study since they were very active in membership of and engagement with student organizations. Those students explicitly stated the importance of having a strong supportive peer network.

“My friends do not understand or accept that I’ll put effort and time into student affiliation. When I tell my friends I cannot attend a lecture because of my engagement in the student organization and ask them for help, they refuse to help me. I feel alone many times. It is such a difficult situation for me.” (Student 177: woman)

Discussion

Similar to Jack (2016) and Stuber (2011), we found that introduction and orientation activities were highly appreciated by respondents (Eberle, Stegmann, and Fischer 2014; Nistor, Daxecker, Stanciu, and Diekamp 2015). However, these seemed to matter only when they were student-facilitated initiatives run by higher-year students. As Eberle, et al. (2014) also demonstrated, peer facilitators encourage making new friends and networking communities, but an important feature is that they are unique in generating relevant and sustainable friendships and have the ability to foster gratitude and willingness. Frequent encounters, visibility and pro-activity were highly valued (Leck and Wood 2013). When peers were friendly (Tangwe and Rembe 2014), they gave a continuous opportunity to find

support and new friends, secure favourable long-term contacts and generate more collaborative help after the first weeks.

These findings confirm Masters and Donnison (2010), who suggested that social networking strategies, formal or informal, are important. However, we additionally found that such initiatives seem to matter only when undertaken in the context of a diversity of initiatives. Related to the last four weeks in the first semester, we found that learning and examination activities, study sessions and workshops run by students were seen as highly valuable. This agrees with Richardson and Tate's (2013) argument that it is important for students to be able to approach higher-year students to ask formal and informal questions and get individual assistance (Zacharopoulou and Turner 2013). Our findings also confirm the previous studies of Lamb, Lane, and Aldous (2013) and Riquez and Sanchez-Garcia (2012), which demonstrated that peer facilitators created an intimate atmosphere which generated space for reflection and feedback. They offered first-year students a feeling of reassurance and gave a motivational boost that helped them through examination periods.

Perhaps the most compelling finding is the differential effect of befriending peers among new students. Befriending peers were first-year students' primary support agency. Because friends automatically provided peer support, they relied primarily on this, and less on that of services such as the tutoring or counselling service. These findings can be explained by the Choudry et al. (2016) study, which suggested that social capital is mediated by friendship networks and provides access to further cultural capital. Later, peer friends helped students relax (e.g. when taking a break together) and buffered stress. Moreover, our results suggest befriending higher year students and peers also helped to empower new students and formed a bridge that enabled approaching faculty in a next stage. This is an interesting finding, rather different from what Jack (2016) suggested. Our results suggest that enlisting higher-year students during the first months is a better strategy than approaching faculty, since it can

remove some of the social barriers that respondents found hindered their help-seeking.

Examining potential outcomes of using different support networks for access to institutional resources are important goals for future research.

Another finding is the ambivalent effect of students' belonging to organizations (Martin, Parker, Pascarella, and Blechschmidt 2015). One needs to be careful with assumptions about such effects, since opposite outcomes might be created to what was intended. Researchers have already suggested that excess participation in student organizations can have negative influences on academic integration (Tinto 1975, 1993), **and this may be particularly pertinent in countries where student organizations are more numerous**. Rather than fostering social cohesion, some respondents may perceive the way members of some communities receive and welcome newcomers as negative, and other respondents may perceive their engagement in some communities as a hindrance. We found that respondents often reported that some student associations or peer groups (e.g. cliques of best friends) posed obstacles for newcomers to enter as legitimate participants (Gardiner 2016). Some respondents reported that higher participation in student organizations weakened the class community and made it less productive (Nistor, Daxecker, Stanciu, and Diekamp, 2015).

Other findings included the popularity of "studying together in public spaces on campus" (Struyven, Gheysens, and Byl, 2014) and "using Facebook". These appear to be important tools for both social as well as academic integration. The overlap of the face-to-face and virtual aspect is striking (Leck and Wood 2013). The introduction of learning environments that enable both virtual and face-to-face interactions may influence their integration, and this might sustain knowledge sharing and construction, extend individual skills and develop a stronger student identity, **particularly relevant in a time of pandemic** (Li, Chen, and Popiel 2015, Woo, Quek, Yang, and Liu 2012).

Participants' sense of community may increase in time due to increasing interpersonal knowledge, or it may decrease due to a less enthusiastic view of the university (Nistor, Daxecker, Stanciu, and Diekamp 2015). Follow-up interviews showed that student willingness and ability is needed to experience a sense of belonging or becoming involved. Those students who reported putting high importance on their academic integration in order to reach the academic success they wanted also labelled themselves as 'at risk' in terms of social integration. For those students, the belief that their success could be reached only when working as hard as they could dominated their behaviour and might not have left energy or time for social contacts. These students became isolated from their social environment, particularly during examination periods, when they experienced feelings of stress.

Thus, the original features of this research were that while peer interaction was highly valued, this seemed to matter only when activities were student-facilitated initiatives run by higher-year students and when undertaken in the context of a diversity of initiatives. The effect of befriending peers among new students was very powerful, and higher-year befriending helped to empower new students and formed a bridge that enabled approaching faculty. Studying together in public spaces on campus and using Facebook were very popular. Students who put high importance on academic integration also labelled themselves as 'at risk' in terms of social integration.

Limitations

Firstly, data came only from full-time students coming directly from secondary school with no earlier experiences in higher education. Supplementing this with data obtained from other types of newcomer students (for example first-year mature, transfer and working students) would be helpful.

Second, the sampling strategy was essentially a snowballing one and self-selected volunteers provided data. The volunteers may have differed in some way from non-

volunteers (in terms of having more motivation or more frustration - seeing the interactions as a chance to vent their grievances). However, Phase 1 encompassed almost 80% of the target student population.

Third, the study was designed to collect post-hoc data over a second-semester timeframe. This might have been inconvenient for some students (e.g. for those who dropped-out after the first semester). A larger sample and an earlier and longer data collection period might have produced somewhat different results.

Fourth, retrospective interviews were used. This required participants to recall and provide accounts of previous integration experiences that they might not have been able to accurately or fully remember.

Finally, this study was limited to two departments in the faculty of psychology and educational science at a Dutch speaking university in Belgium and the results cannot necessarily be generalized to different departments or other universities in Belgium or elsewhere. However, the relevance of means of social integration is possibly relevant for all universities, including online universities.

Implications for Action

From these findings, we can consider the desirable features of a peer support system intended to sustain both social and academic integration. Student-run peer-facilitated programs for newly entrant students that guarantee sustainability (instead of ad-hoc initiatives), openness (instead of initiatives that only welcome members) and inclusivity (instead of initiatives that create exclusion) are desirable integration strategies (cf. Ream and Rumberger 2008). These initiatives could attract and reach a larger group of first-year students, which might ameliorate the negative effects currently present.

Integrated extracurricular programs and ‘meet and greet’ activities (Mitchell and Mitchell 2012) with students of the same course and year would be beneficial, before the academic

year starts and during the first semester. These activities should include social and academic support and opportunities for informal peer support; they should ensure students acquire information about the university system and the content of the program of study; and they should stimulate students to meet and greet their classmates and share experiences with higher year students.

Faculties and departments should stimulate higher year students and first-year students to set up integrated extra-curricular programs and integrated social activities, especially activities for examination support. They should guarantee that there is only one coordinator of all tutoring activities, in such a way that there is one reliable, central contact point which is accessible for all.

Conclusions

In response to the research questions, it is clear that first-year undergraduates have many social needs on entry to university, **which should not be overlooked by focusing purely on academic outcomes**. These include a need for affinity with peers of the same age, and also affinity with older peers who have already experienced the potential trauma of university entry and overcome it. **If these social needs are not met, academic integration is likely to suffer**, with consequent effects on academic grades and the likelihood of dropout. These social and academic needs can be met through an initial programme of welcome activities led by older students, followed by a programme of structured events throughout the first year designed to expand circles of friends, especially of students who might tend to be more isolated. This needs to be accompanied by opportunities to develop peer relationships on a more spontaneous basis. However, bearing in mind that our sample was possibly biased, the social developmental needs of the most isolated students certainly need attention, although the first issue is identifying such students.

One obvious concern is that some respondents do not benefit as much as others. Students in smaller classes are likely to be able to engage with peer support more easily than those in larger classes, so the latter need extra thought and planning. The recruitment, selection, induction and training of competent higher year students to promote first-year integration is important. Many of the respondents reflected the importance of 'being valued' – offered security and acceptance, affection and affirmation of personal worth. The impact of these emotional factors and the belief that there are peers available who care and who would try to help if needed may be key factors in the efficacy of peer support in promoting social integration and learning.

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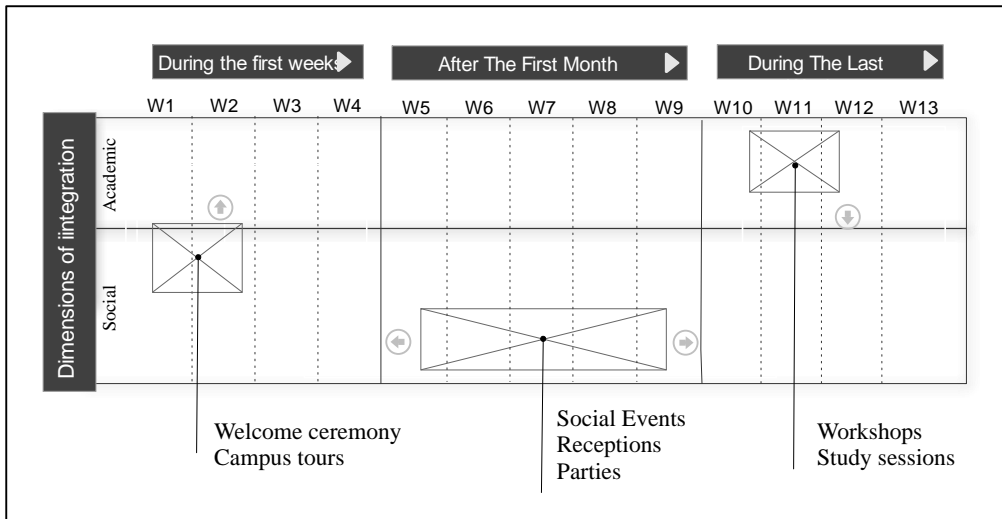


Figure 1: Identified themes related to the timeframe and support for integration

Table 1: Phase 1 Focus Group AI Questions

Social integration

Step 1: Discovery

- What experiences related to peer support do you find successful for your social integration?
- What was working well and why?

Step 2: Dream

- How would you describe the ideal future scenario of peer support for your social integration?
- How would you conceive permanent peer support?

Step 3: Design

- What Actions need to be taken to improve social integration?
- What should be our principles?
- How can we make this happen?

Academic Integration

Step 1: Discovery

- What experiences related to peer support do you find successful for your academic integration?
- What was working well and why?

Step 2: Dream

- How would you describe the ideal future scenario of peer support for your academic integration?
- How would you conceive permanent peer support?

Step 3: Design

- What Actions need to be taken to improve academic integration?
- What should be our principles?
- How can we make this happen?

Table 2: Phase 2 Interview Questions

PART 1: THE CONCEPTS OF INTEGRATION

Social integration

1. What do you think the concept of social integration does mean? Can you describe this or give a definition?
2. What do you think a socially integrated student does mean? Can you describe this or give a definition?
3. To which extent do you think you are socially integrated? Why?
4. Do you know someone who is more socially integrated than you? Why?

Academic integration

1. What do you think the concept of academic integration means? Can you describe this or give a definition?
2. What do you think an academically integrated student means? Can you describe this or give a definition?
3. To which extent do you think you are academically integrated? Why?
4. Do you know someone who is more academically integrated than you? Why?

PART 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATION

1. Give a score from 0 to 5: how important is social integration for your personal wellbeing? Why did you give this score?
2. Give a score from 0 to 5: how important is social integration for your academic success? Why did you give this score?
3. Give a score from 0 to 5: how important is academic integration for your personal wellbeing? Why did you give this score?
4. Give a score from 0 to 5: how important is academic integration for your academic success? Why did you give this score?