

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT & ACADEMIC SPHERE

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ABSTRACT

Academic and social engagement can be used to better motivate students to get involved with their Curriculum and other campus activities. Engagement can help students stay in university and graduate, help make the university experience a pleasant one, and help get good grades and learn. Though there is much information in the literature about the many benefits of being engaged and the characteristics of students' academic engagement, there is little about students' social engagement in a non-learning context. Even more, many changes may occur during university years but there is little research on how academic and social engagement may change for university students. This Paper presents a new measure that assesses social engagement in university students; it evaluates students' academic and social engagement, and models how the two engagement types may change across two academic quarters as a function of students' personality and daily activities. The findings show academic and social engagements are strongly related to each other. Academic engagement was predicted by conscientiousness, extraversion, openness to experience, time students spent studying and going to class. Additionally, those students who started off high on extraversion and openness showed an increase in academic engagement over time, and those students who started off low on each of the two traits showed a decrease in academic engagement. Social engagement was best predicted by extraversion and openness to experience, as well as time spent on activities with friends, exercising, and housework (negative relation). This preliminary exploratory information can help with a better understanding of what engages and motivates students for future studies.

Keywords: Academic Sphere, Social Engagement, Negative Relation

Introduction

The term "social engagement" is commonly used to refer to one's participation in the activities of a social group. The term has also been defined as "the extent to which an individual participates in a broad range of social roles and relationships." and as "the commitment of a member to stay in the group and interact with other members".

The term has not always been used consistently in literature, and can be sometimes confused with

several other similar (but distinct) concepts from social sciences. Engagement is different from the concept of a social network, as social network focuses on a group, rather than the activity. Social engagement also differs from social capital, with the latter defined as "resources available to individuals and groups through their social connections to communities Civic engagement is also different, as it refers to political activity, and to membership and volunteering in civil society organisations.

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Social engagement can be evidenced by participation in collective activities, which reinforces social capital and social norms. Key elements of social engagement include activity (doing something), interaction (at least two people need to be involved in this activity), social exchange (the activity involves giving or receiving something from others), and lack of compulsion (there is no outside force forcing an individual to engage in the activity). For the most part, social engagement excludes activities for which one is getting paid, or family obligations. A common metric of social engagement is the quantifiable volume of activity. A traditional form of social engagement, such as church going, may be measured by the number of one's visits to the church. In the Internet setting, a metric of social engagement on a discussion board may take the form of the number of posts made. One of the main questions about social engagement explored by social scientists has been whether individuals are more or less engaged with various communities. Some studies have suggested that modern information and communication technologies have made it easier for individuals to become socially engaged in more distant or virtual communities, and thus have decreased their involvement in local communities. Promotion of positive behaviour in, and opportunities for, social engagement also serve as key goals in the field of positive youth development.

Objective of the Study

- To study the Development of Social Engagement in the Academic Sphere.
- To study the Importance of Social Engagement.

Methodology of the Study

In the presented research paper, the researcher has used the content analysis method. For this purpose, in the presented research paper, information was collected from various reports and articles published by national and international organisations and through analysis and synthesis of information, the collected information was edited conclusively and the conclusions were presented.

Student Engagement

When students are engaged with the university experience, it acts as a motivator helping them persist, improve their academic performance, and increase their general well-being. That is, when students are encouraged to interact meaningfully with their curricular, their professors, their classmates both inside and outside the classroom, when they are encouraged to feel proud of their university, and to do things to contribute to the university community, they generally have better learning outcomes and higher life satisfaction outcomes. In the university setting, performance is important, and much research has been done to find the things students and universities can do to improve performance outcomes (i.e. better grades, persistence, and graduation). Student engagement has often been used to predict these performance outcomes. Engagement has generally been defined as the physical and psychological energies students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that will lead to desired outcomes (Astin, 1984; Huh & Kuh, 2002). Student engagement is a multidimensional construct, and it includes behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement components (Krause & Coates, 2008). According to Krause & Coates (2008) behavioural engagement is a variety of behaviours related to the university experience, such as studying, being involved in clubs, and attending classes. Cognitive engagement involves the values students hold about their education, and their opinions about their university, other students, faculty, and staff. Finally, emotional engagement includes variables such as how enjoyable the students feel their experience is. All of these components have been examined mostly in the domain of academic engagement or the learning context. There is a need to examine engagement in other engagement domains (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). This can lead to better interventions as engagement characteristics can be changed for each domain. In the current work we seek to expand the examination of student engagement within the academic domain and we seek to better develop knowledge in the social domain.

Importance of Social Engagement

The programme found that students are more likely to remain in higher education, and to succeed, when they have a strong sense of belonging. This is most effectively nurtured at the departmental or programme level, and is achieved through

- Supportive peer relations.
- Interaction with staff.

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- Knowledge, expectations and confidence to be successful learners.
- The experience which is relevant to interests and future goals.

This guide focuses on the first two: developing supportive peer relations and interaction with staff.

Peer relations

The importance of social integration is undeniable (Tinto 1993). Evidence from the what works? Programme suggests that friendship groups have a positive influence on the student experience and on students' sense of belonging. Students with more friends and better social integration are less likely to think about leaving HE. Conversely, those who find it harder to make friends have a more negative student experience, and students who think about leaving feel less like they fit into – and belong within – their academic programmes. In summary, friendships and peer relations can make the following contributions to retention and success:

- Promote academic integration and belonging
- Develop students' confidence as learners.
- Improve motivation to study and succeed.
- Offer a source of academic help and enable students to cope with their study.
- Share tacit knowledge, such as module choice and how to prepare for assessments.
- Provide emotional support.
- Offer practical support.
- Allow students to compare themselves to others and gain reassurance.

In general, students do not fully recognise the value of friends and social integration to their retention and success. For example, in one institutional survey (Foster et al 2012), students gave a low importance rating to the factor 'My fellow students are supportive'. Only 68% of all students thought that factor was important, placing it 13th of 17 Student Experience Factors. However, 70% felt that they had experienced the positive benefits of supportive peers. Nevertheless, students who had thought about leaving were more likely to cite lack of social opportunities as a factor that led them to consider leaving. When students are thinking about leaving they often contact family and friends. Data from one survey (McCary et al 2011) shows the following

Groups are consulted:

- Family – 49%
- Friends – 44%
- Other academic staff – 30%

- Central support services – 23%
- Department administrator / secretary – 19%

Students make friends through:

- Course
- Co-curricular activities.
- Accommodation.
- Clubs and societies.

The following groups of students have been identified as finding it harder to make friends:

- Students with family commitments.
- Those living at home and commuting to participate in HE.
- Mature students.
- Nursing students.
- Part-timers.
- International students.

Interaction with Staff

Research demonstrates the importance not just of engagement with peers, but with academic staff too. According to Foster et al (2012), students who are thinking about leaving feel more distant from their teaching staff than their peers. In a small sample at one HEI over 75% of students said they had 'poor', 'very poor' or 'no relationship at all' with academic staff (Harding and Thompson 2011). Although staff/student ratios are making it increasingly difficult to create supportive, academic environments, students do value being treated as individuals. So, do staff members know students' names? Are they interested in their progress, and not simply any problems they may present to them? It is all a matter of approachability – and the extent to which a member of staff is able (and available) to listen to students. Students seek relationships that are not overly formal, more mentor-like. In short, students find it harder to relate to staff who do not treat them with respect, and who do not (or cannot) respond to emails, or else do so only very slowly. They also value those members of staff who are openly enthusiastic and obviously interested in their teaching work.

Developing Social Engagement in the Academic Sphere

One survey found that more students made friends through their course (87%), than via accommodation (74%) or participation in clubs and societies (36%) (Foster et al 2012). Also, there is a growing consensus that efforts to promote retention and success should concentrate on the classroom which

is crucial to facilitating social interaction with staff and peers, and builds links that extend into wider social spheres. One project (Boyle et al 2011) with a particular focus on undergraduates living at home (and commuting to university) found that they placed an emphasis on the importance of the academic experience of university over the social experience. They were, consequently, less likely to engage in activities aimed at developing social bonds (unless such activities were a requirement of their course). Local students are often less engaged socially than peers living on campus. Both full-time mature and part-time students intimated that the social sphere is often not a driving force behind either their decision to study or in their daily interactions with other students. Participants regularly said that they 'didn't come to university to make friends', that they 'don't need new friends', and that they 'already have an active social life. Staff can play an important role in encouraging positive peer relationships and creating a cohort identity and/or sense of belonging. When social elements are integrated into the academic programme, students from varied backgrounds – and especially those with ongoing caring and/or work responsibilities, and living away from the institution – find it much easier to attend, and thus build the all-important social relations.

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Staff can nurture cohort identity in a number of ways:

- Icebreakers and team building activities in class.
- Assessed and non-assessed group work in class and outside formal teaching time.
- Field trips, residential activities and course-related events.
- Pre-entry and induction activities.
- A space within the academic milieu where students spend time together.
- Staff organised social activities.
- Peer mentoring.

For those students who participate in them, field trips in particular provide good opportunities to develop friendships with both peers and staff. On their return to university, students subsequently feel far more comfortable approaching academic staff. There are however a range of other ways in which peer and student-staff relations can be developed.

Conclusion

Through this research paper, an attempt has been made to find out student participation. Specifically, student engagement definitions, academic and social engagement domains, and the importance of engagement as a motivator for student persistence are presented. A brief definition of students' social engagement and measures to measure student engagement in this area are discussed.