

Friendship supported learning – the role of friendships in first-year students' university experiences

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Abstract

The student experience at university is impacted by student and institutional factors that combine to influence student wellbeing and engagement. This paper contributes to existing literature on student engagement by exploring friendships that are formed with other students. The qualitative study followed students at an Australian regional university throughout their first year of study. Drawing on Kahu and Nelson's framework of student engagement, this paper reports findings on the influence of friendships on students' psychosocial experiences, and on learning engagement outcomes. Findings indicated that students establish friendships with people with common interests, increasing a sense of belonging. Friendships also improve student wellbeing through increasing comfort in attending class, reducing stress, and providing opportunities to relax. Through initiating student supported learning opportunities, friendships also lead to opportunities for students to deepen their engagement: enhance student interest, develop positive learning behaviours, and increase cognitive understanding.

Introduction

Friends play multiple roles in how life is experienced. In their simplest form, friendships provide little more than company. At their richest and most complex, they offer a sense of belonging (Baumiester & Leary, 1995; Wrench, Garrett, & King, 2014), support (Hartup & Stevens, 1999; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005), and psychosocial wellbeing (Buote et al., 2007; Hartup & Stevens, 1999). For first-year students navigating the unfamiliar territory of university (Morton, Mergler, & Boman, 2013; Wrench et al., 2014) friendships offer a range of psychosocial benefits and engagement opportunities. This paper adds depth to current understandings of how friendships contribute to psychosocial and engagement experiences for first-year university students.

The positive impact of peer support by way of institutional initiatives has been well documented as highly successful to student emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). Peer-supported learning provides rich opportunities for students to achieve a sense of belonging (Einfalt & Turley, 2013), and in doing so enhances both persistence and retention (Hillman, 2005; Tinto, 1975; Wilcox et al., 2005). DeAngelo (2014) found that students were more likely to progress to their second year when they engaged in discussions about course content outside of class. In moving beyond peer support as exclusively an institutional initiative, friendships also have substantial benefits for positive psychosocial student experiences. Establishing friendships is an important aspect of developing a sense of wellbeing at university, and in life. Through providing a range of social support mechanisms, including feedback, reassurance, encouragement, and a sense of social belonging (Buote et al., 2007), friendships mediate pathways to student wellbeing (Stanton, Zandvliet, Dhaliwal, & Black, 2016). In this paper, wellbeing draws its

conceptualisation from Kahu and Nelson’s (2017) framework, which sees wellbeing as both an influence and an outcome of engagement. Wellbeing is a spectrum of experiences encompassing, at one end stress, and at the other positive wellbeing. Student wellbeing is positively associated with student engagement and success and therefore enhancing wellbeing is important (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). While the benefits of friendships to student wellbeing has been widely reported (Buote et al., 2007; Hartup & Stevens, 1999; Wilcox et al., 2005; Wrench et al., 2014), the benefits to student engagement have not.

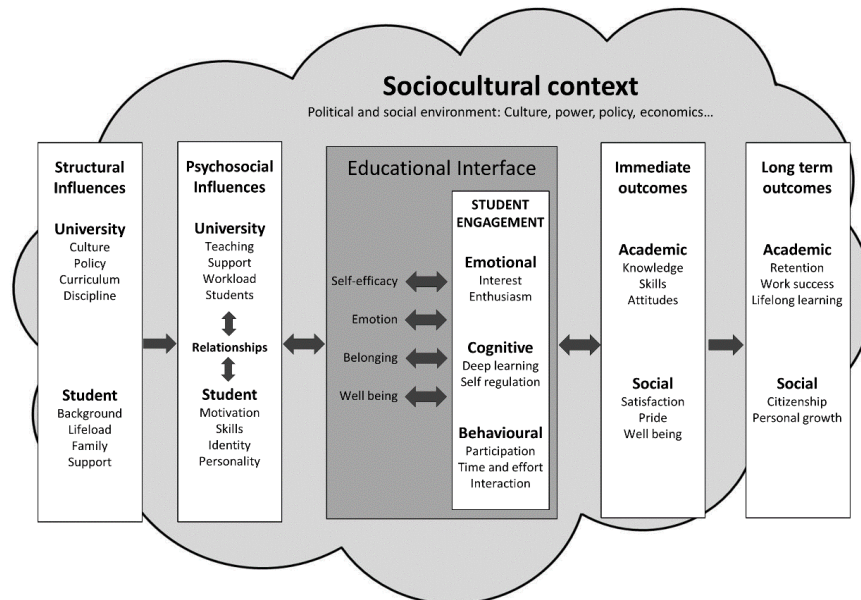


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of student engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2017, p. 8)

Kahu and Nelson’s (2017) framework, as shown in Figure 1, seeks to understand the student experience from a socio-cultural perspective and conceptualises engagement as having three dimensions (emotional, behavioural, and cognitive). The framework views the student experience as occurring in an educational interface – a dynamic space at the point of intersection between student and institution. The framework locates other students within the psychosocial influences of the university and shows the importance of relationships, between students and students, as well as students and staff as an important influence on the student experience. The four psychosocial constructs of self-efficacy, wellbeing, belonging, and emotion act as potential pathways to deepening engagement through influencing students’ experiences within the educational interface. The aim of this paper then is to explore if and how friendships affect those psychosocial constructs, and ultimately student engagement.

Method

This research explored the experiences of students in their first year at university. A longitudinal qualitative approach added depth to understanding the links between friendships and student experience. Nineteen students (11 female and 8 male) from arts, health, and business disciplines volunteered to participate in weekly interviews on their experiences at university. Participants were offered a small gift voucher incentive to be issued at the beginning and conclusion of the study. All participants were recent school-leavers and initially enrolled full time. The students were interviewed one to two weeks prior to starting university to determine their expectations of university. Ongoing weekly interviews then explored inductively derived themes such as motivation, support, self-efficacy, and personal growth providing in depth and reflective data. The interviews were semi-structured to enable the

student to talk about what was important to them. It is possible that the act of engaging in weekly reflective interviews impacted upon the students' experiences including their friendships.

The data were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006), using students' narratives to construct meaning around experiences within the educational interface. After an organisational and substantive phase of data analysis, where early coding led to the identification of themes, the data was further refined through a theoretical phase of analysis (Maxwell, 2013) using Kahu and Nelson's (2017) framework of student engagement. All data is non-identifiable and participant pseudonyms have been used. This paper explores the theme of friendship and presents the analysis of that subset of the data. In particular the aim of the paper is to examine how friendship influences student psychosocial constructs, and learning engagement.

Findings

The research findings illustrate how friendships shape university engagement experiences. Aside from social outcomes, students had not deeply considered other potential benefits of friendships. In this paper, the thematically structured findings depict a journey of friendship. Firstly, the expectations students had of friendships prior to starting university, and what mechanisms facilitated the establishment of friendships. Secondly, the psychosocial benefits of friendships and finally, the role of friendships in deepening student engagement.

Early friendship development

Prior to commencing university, students held expectations about their university experience. Forming friendships was one such expectation, with students anticipating meeting others studying the same course and whom had common interests (Kahu, Nelson, & Picton, 2016). Meeting others was part of what excited students about commencing their course.

Felix: I guess I'll be able to meet people who are into, you know, similar things as me because they're doing the same course.

Rose: I think that's what I'm excited for and excited to meet people that are doing the same thing as me and really interested in it and just meeting new people really.

An important aspect of the transition to university was meeting new friends as a way of feeling comfortable, as Claire explains: "I just kinda wanna make, like, new friends and feel comfortable in, like, going to classes and stuff".

In initiating friendships, a range of meeting mechanisms were reported, including prior relationships, in-class contact (such as sitting next to someone or participating in group work), or attending university initiated social activities. The opportunity for repeated meetings played an important role in the on-going development of the friendship.

Mia: Yesterday I had an OT barbeque so I went to that and I saw this girl that I introduced myself to last week. Forgot her name but she was nice so it was good to see her and she still remembered me so that was nice.

Matthew: A stranger helped out and then we bumped into each other in the next class because we just happened to have media together and yeah now we're friends.

Repeated in-class experiences provided opportunities to initiate friendships. After establishing a connection, further development of friendships involved broadening the scope of common interests, as John explains: “There have been a few cases where I’ve sat down and one of my friends that’s in my group assignment came and sat next to me and we’ll just talk not necessarily about the group assignment but just like games or common interests or whatever”.

For some students it was hoped that friendships would support and encourage their learning behaviours and identities.

Peter: Hanging around people that are likeminded, having study groups and stuff that are formed and being able to stick with them.

Elisabeth: The people I talk to more are the students that want to try hard and so I associate with the students that want to try hard, as opposed to the ones that don’t really want to be there at all.

Psychosocial benefits of friendship

Friendship support promoted a sense of wellbeing through a range of mechanisms: an outlet for relaxation and socializing, promoting belonging, and reducing stress. In managing challenges and stress at university, friends provided avenues of recreation and emotional support. Isaac describes himself as burning out and highlights how his friendship and the relaxation he experiences from being with friends helps to mitigate that stress: “Just generally hanging out really, it’s not too much more in depth than that. It doesn’t sound like much but it goes a long way when you’re just constantly working and really burning yourself out, to be able to just sit back and have a laugh”.

Sharing experiences of stress at university, and finding common ground were also reported as a benefit of friendships. Both Sienna and Tony found that sharing the stressful experiences of university with a friend who could relate to those experiences provided reassurance. For Tony, more general feedback from friends provided significant value while for Sienna, having a friend sharing the same experiences of stress gave her a sense of comfort.

Tony: Well, my room-mates, they’ve been a great help because just talking to them, getting a bit of feedback, how they’re going – yeah, they’re a good group to talk to and they’re sort of in the same boat as me but they just have managed it really well. So that’s definitely one huge contributing factor.

Sienna: It’s nice to have her, because she’s doing the same thing that I’m doing, we’re going through the same things, we have the same assessments, we’re going through the same stressors. It’s just nice having her.

For Matthew and Tony, friendships provided a sense of belonging and promoted self-confidence. As conceptualised in Kahu and Nelson’s (2017) framework, belonging refers to students’ connection to institution, staff, other students, the discipline and the people associated with it. In this case, a sense of belonging to others mediates a pathway to positive wellbeing.

Matthew: It makes you feel more confident in yourself when you have people around you that you know care about you.

Tony: I find myself that I actually am fitting in really – well I've made a lot of friends just in my Paramedics tutorial, and the fact that they actually sort of come over and sit with me on Thursday, that was a real confidence booster.

University itself can be stressful, and the lifeload challenges that students experience contribute to that stress. Having established and deepened friendship connections, students utilize friendships to provide broader support not just with challenges at university but also with other life challenges. Matthew describes the role his friends played in a recent relationship breakdown, providing emotional support and so contributing to his wellbeing:

Matthew: My main support group at the moment is probably my friends. I couldn't do much without them. During the whole break up last week, they were just – they were brilliant. My flatmate came and started to basically fill a bowl in front of me full of German chocolate and gummi bears and said start eating and don't stop until you're happy. That's what I would do. Then my other flatmate bought me my favourite pizza and a bunch of lava cakes and said eat these until you're happy, as well <laughter>.

Friendships contributed to a positive university experience for most students, but not all. For instance, Alex found trouble finding her place within a friendship group, challenging her sense of belonging: "When I see people in groups I feel like I can't be part of the group or something but I don't really feel like I belong in that like a friendships group or something because I've never really been able to conform to one".

Deepening engagement through friendship

While institutionally initiated peer support learning improves engagement, this research found that informal friendships also make a valuable contribution to engagement. The findings indicate that friendships contributed to the deepening of engagement in several ways, including through friendship support, feedback, increased enthusiasm, and reciprocal learning.

Friendships played a role in students' emotional engagement, how they felt about attending class. For Alison, the absence of in-class friendships detracted from her general interest and enthusiasm towards the class: "At the lecture I had no friends and I was like, aw this is boring".

In contrast, anticipating seeing a friend in class evoked enthusiasm for Sarah. She wanted to use the class as a launching pad to further elevate the relationship outside of the class environment:

Sarah: She came late so I didn't get to sit with her so I was really disappointed. I talked to her a bit throughout because we have little class discussions but hopefully she comes in on Wednesday and I can hang out with her. I am going to say, can I ask you questions about the assignment, can I add you to Facebook please. Be my friend.

Friendships have greater benefits than just motivating students to come to class however. As Felix illustrates, feeling a sense of belonging in class makes him capable of deeper engagement in the class – both in terms of his behaviours (sitting and listening) but also his cognitive engagement – his learning: "I'm starting to make friends, which is great. Making friends in class has helped me feel comfortable enough to sit and listen, and learn, and engage in the class".

While much is made of friendship support through institutional activities (such as orientation activities, peer learning groups, and in-class group tasks) friendship-supported engagement also flourishes in a more spontaneous and informal space where friends can provide support and feedback, promote enthusiasm, and operate in a role model capacity. It is in the space outside of university manufactured peer learning opportunities that students talk about how friendships have contributed to deepening engagement at university, as Tony explains: “Most of the friends that I’ve made here, they’re in that tutorial. So it’s good to see them again, plan out the week, are we going to meet up in the practice labs?”

For Sienna and her friend, utilising their friendship in a structured capacity provides opportunities to initiate and self-regulate learning. Their meet ups are planned in advance and are conducted on a regular basis. The interest shared by Sienna and her friend contribute to the value of the peer review and feedback, which is offered in a more informal capacity.

Sienna: So I’ve got this one friend, and we’re like study buddies, that’s what I call it; We get together at least once or twice a week and we just get our heads stuck in to study, or anything that’s due, you know what I mean? Just stuff like that...Like feedback and yeah, we give feedback to each other, if it’s like an assignment, I’ll ask her to read it, and I’ll ask her what do you think of this? She’ll be like oh yeah it sounds good, but you just need to fix up this and that. It’s nice to have a peer review if you know what I mean.

For some students, friendships offered a more informal mechanism of support. Melanie found opportunities for feedback in a less structured capacity by accessing friend support in class, with the potential to follow up later.

Melanie: obviously my friends as well, with new friends and people that are in my creative industries course kind of thing. They support me with what I’m doing and help me do better at it I suppose. Well right now with the group projects, it’s like I’m doing the script, so I’m writing the script and then I say it to them, or send it to them, and they’re like yeah that’s good. Yeah okay kind of thing.

As friendships become more established through repeated meetings, opportunities to engage in student initiated learning increase. For Sienna, interpersonal relationships provided motivation to put more time and effort into her studying, deepening her behavioural engagement:

Sienna: he’s invited me to come to the library with his other mates and study, which I really need to do. But yeah, I think having those social connections benefits me and maybe that’s what I have to do with my studying, maybe I just need to study with people.

The students met with friends both on and off campus but, as expected for this generation, they also used social media to connect with their friends. This offered a greater level of flexibility as friends did not necessarily need to be on campus to provide support, but if a friend was on campus, electronic media could be used to arrange impromptu study sessions.

Elisabeth: My group of friends that I have, that we have the (Facebook) group chat with, that has been really good because I can ask them questions. A girl just posted on there today and asked if anybody was at uni so I’ll probably message her and tell her I’m at uni and we can go and study together.

In initiating learning opportunities with friends, students have additional opportunities to revise class content. Some students found an outcome of friendship learning was the development of a reciprocal learning relationship. As an informal tool of learning and engagement, each participant becomes both learner and teacher. While it was important for Tony to feel unconditionally supported when participating in friendship learning opportunities, he also recognised his mutual responsibility to offer the same to others.

Tony: a group of friends that I can go to ask for help and feel as though I'm not just going to be judged for it. And they can also come to me to ask for help if they need it.

For Alison, the reciprocal learning opportunity supported the learning of friends while simultaneously deepening her cognitive engagement with the course content: "My uni friends, I more support them, but within helping them explain them something or understand something. It gets in more thoroughly within myself as well".

Having friends at university was largely a positive experience for students. However, some students reported occasional challenges resulting from friendships. For instance, Alison found her friend distracted her while Melanie felt that her friends did not match her standards of behavioural or cognitive engagement:

Alison: I probably rather be alone, because like yesterday I tried to read my textbook with my friend there and I was just talking and it's like doesn't get anything done.

Melanie: I had my best friend and one of my other really good friends come over on the weekend, and we tried to smash out this one damn question for this assessment, but it's so vague...My other two friends are smart, but they just don't critically think as much as I do. I felt like I was leading them all day, and they just didn't really want to do work.

For some students, an absence of friendships presented challenges, impacting negatively on their sense of belonging and reducing opportunities to behaviourally engage. Peter had little motivation to be part of a group but worried that his lack of friendship might lead to difficulties later when class activities would require him to work with someone else:

Peter: I think it's because I'm not willing to go to them or become friends with them. But then again I'm kind of regretting it because I kind of need someone to do OSCE's [Objective Structured Clinical Examinations] with next semester, from next year onwards. So I kind of need to make at least one friend who has the same mind with me.

Discussion

The findings of this study identify friendships as positively impacting on student psychosocial factors, corroborating other research on friendship and wellbeing in the first year of university (Buote et al., 2007; Wilcox et al., 2005). In addition, the study extends findings of a recent Canadian study (Stanton et al., 2016) suggesting that friendships mediate pathways to increased student engagement. Within the Australian context, The findings of this study consider friendship as a key component of psychosocial experiences and student engagement, thus supporting Tinto's (1975) theory that social integration and support improves student retention.

In returning to Kahu and Nelson's (2017) framework, these findings support the idea that the student experience occurs in a dynamic interface influenced by both student and institutional factors. Friendship development illustrates the intertwining of influences that contribute to how students experience university.

Highlighted in the findings is the importance of establishing friendships as a pathway to increased wellbeing. Firstly, student friendships were found to contribute to the level of comfort students had in attending class, satisfying a fundamental desire to obtain belonging (Baumiester & Leary, 1995; France, Finney, & Swerdzewski, 2009). Secondly, friendships also helped to mitigate stress levels for students. Stress has been widely reported as an experience of university students (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015; Gavala & Flett, 2005; Stallman, 2010), and therefore maintaining positive wellbeing is a challenge. Finally, engaging with friends brought a general sense of wellbeing; an opportunity to relax and have fun. The effect of friendship on wellbeing is critical – many Australian university students cite emotional health as their primary reason for considering withdrawing (Baik et al., 2015).

As well as helping students via its impact on their wellbeing, the findings highlight that friendships also have a more direct influence on student learning via the dimensions of emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement. Not only do these dimensions have a bidirectional influence on student psychosocial experiences, they also influence one another. Friendships impact students' experiences at university through increased interest and enthusiasm, encouraging students to develop their learning behaviours and participate in study groups, thus deepening cognitive understanding.

The current findings show that sharing the experience of university with friends, both in and out of class increased students' emotional engagement, their enthusiasm and interest in the course content and in the classroom. Interest in the class content is essential to retention (Thomas, 2012), leading to bidirectional influences on the constructs of psychosocial experiences, and on other dimensions of engagement (behavioural and cognitive).

Alongside increased interest and enthusiasm, friendships also provided opportunities and the motivation for students to increase their behavioural engagement in their studies. When students feel connected, they experience higher levels of enjoyment and are therefore increasingly willing to participate in learning (Stanton et al., 2016). For these students, repeated meetings and escalating the friendship outside of the classroom context raised opportunities to shape the relationship to be a support mechanism of not only wellbeing, but of behavioural engagement also. Students initiated a variety of friendship supported learning opportunities. Friendships presented opportunities to ask questions, receive feedback, and arrange study meet-ups with friends, all of which facilitate self-regulated learning behaviours. These enhanced behaviours then led to improved cognitive engagement through a reciprocal teaching and learning process.

Friendship supported learning was often a highly reciprocal process, presenting opportunities for all participating students to deepen cognitive engagement. The students talked about the benefits of acting as teacher as well as learner; teaching others, answering questions, and providing feedback. Similarly, Boud (2001) found collaborative and cooperative learning experiences to deepen cognitive understanding, making the process of friendship supported learning important to the development of deep learning.

Despite the significant benefits of friendship to wellbeing and engagement reported in this and other research (Buote et al., 2007; Stanton et al., 2016; Wilcox et al., 2005), friendship

supported learning can be problematic. While this study found that initiating study sessions promoted self-regulation and deepened cognitive understanding, it also found that friendships can be a distraction from learning. Friendship supported learning was also a challenge for people who chose not to engage in friendships or who struggled to make friends as they recognised that a lack of friendships posed issues for behavioural engagement. Overall, students in this study wanted to make friends but this can be challenging for some students, particularly outside of university manufactured opportunities (Stanton et al., 2016). This raises the issue of what universities can do to support friendship development.

There are a number of existing institutional initiatives that support both the development of early friendships (such as orientation events and in-class icebreaker activities), and peer learning opportunities (such as peer-assisted learning sessions). However, these initiatives tend to be rigid in both design and delivery. The strength of friendship supported learning is its high level of flexibility and spontaneity. Support can be in-class, on or off campus, or even digital. Support can be informal, planned, or structured. It can be quick questions or long study sessions. What then can institutions do to further develop the initiation of friendships, and friendships supported learning? Stanton's (2016) research generated a number of curriculum design and delivery suggestions that are also applicable within the Australian context, such as explicitly instructing students to talk to each other on breaks, to exchange contact information, and to incorporate the quality of team work into assessment. Institutions could also contribute to the development of friendships through arranging events, with the explicit purpose of meeting new people throughout the semester, rather than just in the first few weeks. Arranging these events around a particular discipline or course major would mean students met people with similar university goals. As friendships progress and study groups are established, institutions could also offer more creative study spaces. For teachers, explicitly highlighting to new students the benefits of friendships as a pathways to wellbeing and academic engagement may illicit a more enthusiastic response to early icebreaker activities. For students, social media may be a useful platform to explore ways to advertise and schedule study sessions both on and off campus.

Friendship at university is important. The findings illustrate pathways by which relationships with other students' impact on student belonging and wellbeing and, as shown in Kahu and Nelson's (2017) framework, this in turn impacts student engagement. Student relationships are more than just social connections. They form part of an engagement pathway that can be enhanced and harnessed by universities to engage and retain students.

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