

# **Social skills for new students: Giving students the skills today to make friends tomorrow**

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## **Abstract**

The degree to which students are able to form social connections during transition to university has been shown to have a significant impact on a student's experience and whether they are retained or not. While some students will handle social adjustment with ease, others will not. The most at-risk group of these students are those that, in combination to their inability to form social connections, believe that it is outside of their power to change their ability to socialise and form connections. This paper presents one way in which Curtin University of Technology has begun to address students in this group.

## **Background**

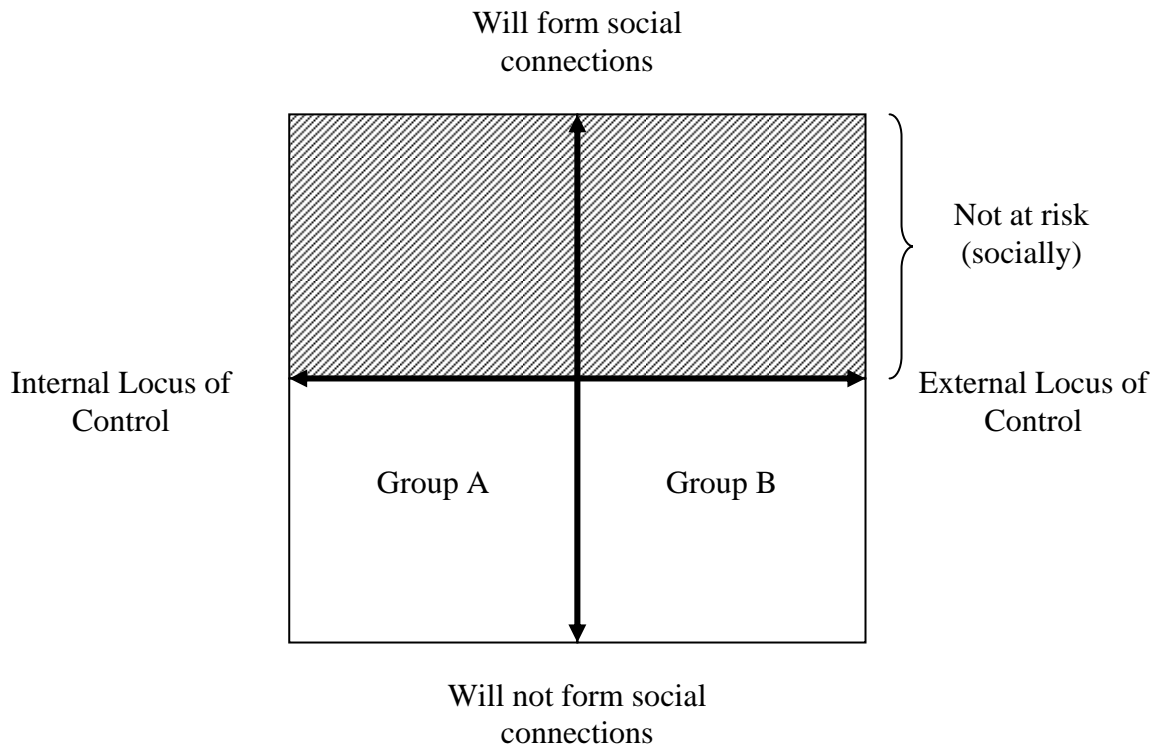
Various factors affect how smoothly a student transitions to a university environment and subsequently, overall retention rates. One such factor is an individual's sense of connectedness, or ability to form social ties (Asmar et al, 2000; DEST Higher Education Series Report No. 36, 1999; Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004). Social events are becoming an increasingly important part of university orientation programs. For example, the University of Queensland has included hosting social events, to enable students to form social and support networks, as one of four major elements amongst its faculty induction programs (Burnett, 2006).

Interestingly, Asmar et al (2000) report that "opportunities to meet new people" and "developing new friendships" ranked most highly in what students defined as the most enjoyable aspects of University life (22.0% and 21.6%, respectively, of a sample size of 523 students). With a sample of 141 students, they also found that "friends and peers" were rated as most helpful (48%) in facing the challenges of University as opposed to the second most helpful as "personal resources/personal growth" (15%). Clearly, social connections are extremely important to many new students. This is often true of people in general.

## **Problem**

In light of this, a particular group of students can be identified as being at greater risk – those that cannot form social connections because they do not possess the necessary skills. Some are aware that they do not have these skills while others are not. Awareness, however, is only one part of the equation – the willingness and ability to take action and change one's circumstances also forms a crucial part.

Rotter's (1996) Locus of Control is a psychological concept which provides a framework for understanding the at-risk group. It is a measure of the extent to which a person believes that internal factors (such as their own personal resources) can change and affect their behaviour and outcomes versus how much these are affected by external factors, such as fate and luck.



**Figure 1 – Students that will or will not form social connections, versus their locus of control**

Interestingly, a study by Njusa and Brockway (1999) found a significant correlation (0.40) between “social locus of control” and the social adjustment of new university students.

Figure 1 shows a two-dimensional representation of whether students will or will not form social connections versus locus of control.

Those who will end up forming social connections will not be at risk socially. How this can be predicted or measured is not necessarily of concern. Rather, what is important is catering towards those that will not form social connections, even if they cannot be identified.

Group A, as shown in Figure 1, are perceived not to be as at-risk as Group B. This is because it is assumed that they already perceive that their lack of social connections is because of their own creation (since they have internal loci of control). Some students also choose not to form social connections. The flip side to this means that these students also understand that they can change their circumstances.

Group B however are likely to be of the opinion that they have not formed social connections because fate, luck or some other external force has caused for them not to – and critically – that there is nothing that they can do about it.

The author believes that behaviour change is possible, as is supported by much psychological literature, and so students in Group B (and Group A) can actually change their social connection situations with the right education and experience.

### **One Solution**

There is no single solution as to providing the support necessary for Group B to successfully form social connections. Given the limited resources and time available with new students before semester, the author decided to create an interactive information session to during Orientation at Curtin.

It is a one-hour session, named *Creating Connections* (Morgan, 2008), that covers:

- Interaction between attendees
- Interaction with the speaker
- Locus of Control, and a self-test for attendees (Locus of Control, n.d.), which is an adaptation of Rotter's original work
- Communication statistics and examples (words, voice tone and body language)
- Sharing positive emotion
- Examples of where to meet people
- An emphasis on taking personal responsibility and practising

One session was also video recorded for later viewing by students, or those that did not attend the session (Morgan, 2008).

The benefit of this approach is that it encourages students to take responsibility for their ability to form social connections and to improve on it, should they choose to. This avoids pairing two complete strangers together, in the hope that they will form a connection, such as is seen in some buddy programs. In essence, students are being taught to fish, rather than simply being given one.

### **Results**

At the end of each session, participants are given a feedback sheet which they can fill out, voluntarily. Four quantitative statements are presented using a Likert scale (Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Neutral = 3, Agree = 4, Strongly Agree = 5). These questions are:

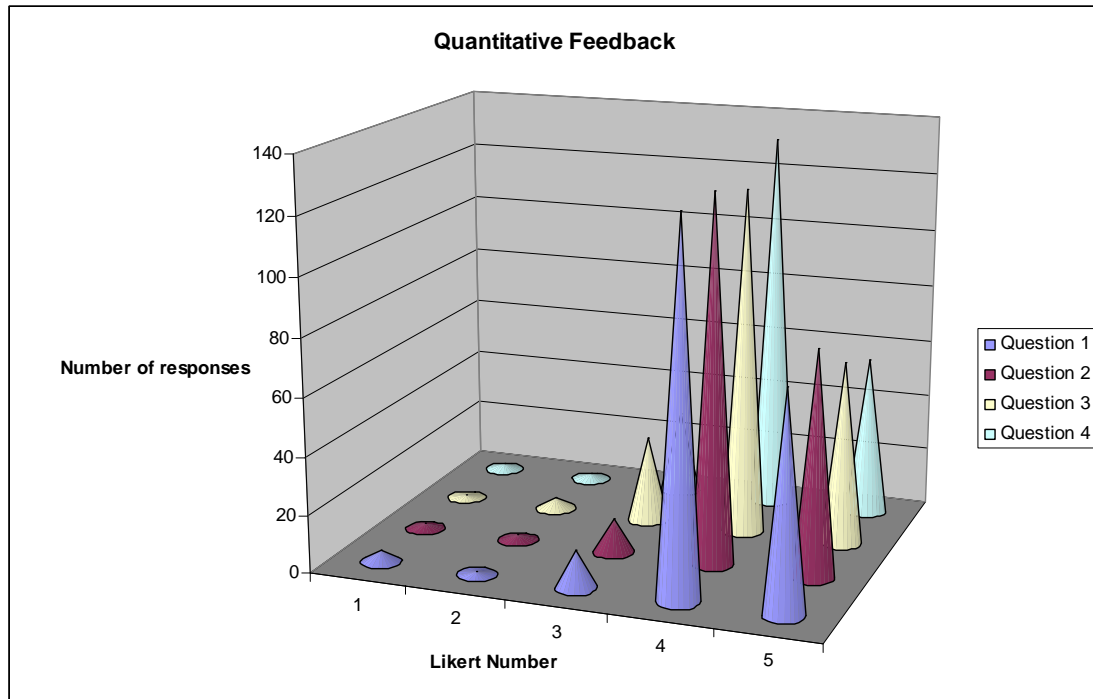
1. I found this session useful
2. I understand how the various concepts and ideas can be applied to my life
3. I think that my ability to socialise and communicate will improve if I apply what I have learnt today
4. I am now more willing to observe and change the ways in which I behave as a whole

The results for 221 responses collected over three separate *Creating Connections* sessions in 2008 are shown in Table 1. It is estimated that between 400 and 500 students attended a *Creating Connections* session in 2008.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
Q1	4	1	13	127	75
Q2	2	2	12	127	78
Q3	1	4	30	121	64
Q4	2	2	29	132	56

**Table 1 – Quantitative feedback data**

This can also be shown graphically, as in Figure 2.



**Figure 2 – Graphical representation of quantitative feedback data**

These results show that:

1. 91% of attendees agreed or strongly agreed that they thought the session was useful
2. 93% of attendees agreed or strongly agreed that they understood how to apply the various ideas and concepts to their lives
3. 84% of attendees agreed or strongly agreed that their ability to socialise would improve if they applied what they had learnt during the session
4. 85% of attendees agreed or strongly agreed that they had become more willing to observe and change the ways that they behaved overall

Qualitative questions were also asked. These included:

- A. The things that I liked about this session and why I liked them were...
- B. The things that I disliked about this session and why they didn't impact on me were...
- C. Something this session didn't have that I think would have been handy is...

Various comments in regards to Question A included:

- "I liked to hear all what you can do to improve your life and the way you socialize with people"

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- “Useful”
- “Everything. Its very relevant to everybody”
- “Fun, interesting and useful.”
- “Ability to gain confidence just through a single session”
- “It was easy to understand”
- “Useful tips on how to socialise”
- “Scott explained how we can change ourselves and how we can analyse our actions”
- “Everything”
- “Perfect”
- “Because it gives an idea on where to start & what to do on communication”

Comments regarding Questions B and C have been used so far for tinkering and improving the program. The main theme that has stood out so far from these questions has been that students want to interact more with other students during the session. Other comments include that some of the presented ideas were too basic, were just common sense or that the students had heard them before.

On the plus side, some comments made for Questions B and C have included that there was “nothing” wrong with the session or that the session was not long enough.

The feedback data collected for Orientation in Semester 1, 2009, at a glance, reflects these results. It has not yet, however, been entered into a computer and analysed.

### **Discussion**

The results of formulating and running the *Creating Connections* session at Orientation have thus far indicated that there is a need for addressing students’ needs for forming social connections during the critical first few weeks of semester. This has been as a result of feedback from students and from gauging attendance (roughly).

The author believes that his passion for the subject and for public speaking have also influenced how attendees have become and stayed engaged.

It is the author’s opinion that if he can motivate people to adopt the view that they can continuously improve their lives, in whatever area they choose, they will have this as an option should the time come when they most need to change their circumstances. In the context of this paper, those in Group B in Figure 1 will hopefully become aware that they have the power to do something about their situation, rather than just leaving it to fate, luck or similar.

The author is aware, however, that sustained behaviour change requires constant persistence by the individual. Counselling or coaching are thus options that have been recommended for individuals seeking further assistance.

The author also notes that Locus of Control does not correlate as strongly with social adjustment, at 0.40, as “perceived social competence”, at 0.74 (Njusa & Brockway, 1999). While it may be more effective to measure perceived social competence in the context of social skills, the session also looks at development of skills in an abstract way. For this reason, the Locus of Control concept is more easily applied by students to other areas of their life and so serves a greater purpose.

## Future Changes

As addressed previously, the major theme in constructive feedback regarding the session has been for more interaction. The format of the session will be updated for either mid-2009 Orientation, or for the start of 2010. While there is some interaction during the session, refreshments served and time for socialising afterwards, there is room for more peer-to-peer interaction activities.

It would also be interesting to seek attendees' feedback on progress at a time or times after the session. This would give further insight as to its overall effectiveness.

Finally, given the resources, an on-going counselling or coaching program could be established to help those in need of social skills training. This would allow a continuous, rather than one time, source of motivation for the student.

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