Combined Honours: Social Inhibition and Belonging

- ❖ Dr Gemma van Vuuren-Cassar
- ❖ Dr Darren McGee

Project Team:

- Dr Alison Eyden
- Dr Darren McGee
- Dr Jonathan Pratt
- Cathi Fredricks
- Dr Gemma Van Vuuren-Cassar

Overview

❖ Exploring why satisfaction was lower for CH students

- o University Student Survey (USS, 2016)
- o United Kingdom Engagement Survey (UKES, 2016)
- o Derby CH Survey (2017)

❖ Intervention (creation of project team)

- o Student Focus Groups (2018)
- o Staff Focus Groups (2018)
- o Early Childhood Studies - Intervention

❖ Preliminary results from the GMS Education survey

University Student Survey (USS, 2016)

❖ **Aim**: to explore potential differences in satisfaction between Combined (CH) and Single Honours (SH) students

(Five point Likert scale: 1 = "definitely agree" to 5 = "definitely disagree")

❖ **Findings**: CH students scored significantly lower than SH students on all thematic measures, including overall satisfaction

❖ The same was found for overall satisfaction on the most recent National Student Survey (NSS, 2018), with CH students (76%) scoring 6 percentage points lower than SH students (82%)

❖ But, why lower scores on the USS?

Analysis Of Students' Qualitative Comments

- ❖ **Nothing conclusive**, except that CH students were more likely to use impersonal terms (e.g., "seminars" and "lectures") in their positive comments when discussing teaching delivery, rather than terms such as "lecturer" and "teaching"

- ❖ Suggests that the learning context may be more important to CH students than their relationship with teaching staff

Student Engagement (UKES, 2016)

❖ The UKES is an annual survey for all non-final year undergraduate students, which measures how strongly engaged students are with their learning

❖ **Findings:** CH students reported significantly less engagement than SH students on most UKES thematic measures

❖ Importantly, engagement was lowest on questions that were inherently social. Indicating a degree of social inhibition in learning environments, specifically in relation to working with other students and interacting with teaching staff

Student Engagement (UKES, 2016)

(Four point Likert scale: 1 = "very often" to 4 = "never")

- ❖ "Asked questions in taught sessions or contributed to discussions about course material in other ways" (-18)

- ❖ "Worked with other students on course projects or assignments" (-12)

- ❖ "Discussed your academic performance and/or feedback with teaching staff" (-7)

- ❖ "Prepared for exams or assessments by discussing or working through course material with other students" (-6)

Derby CH Survey (2017)

❖ **Purpose**: to better understand the experience of CH students at HE institutions

❖ **Findings**: support from qualitative comments was found for this idea of social inhibition in learning environments, specifically in response to two questions:

   o "What are the worst parts of your learning experience as a Combined or Joint Honours student?"

   o "As a Combined or Joint Honours student, mention 3 things that you DON'T like about your University community?"

Derby CH Survey – Qualitative Comments

❖ CH students reported that, compared with SH students, they have a different relationship and less contact time with staff. For example:

"Not as much contact time with some staff members because I don't do a Single Honours subject"

"Less interaction with the lecturers – they know the names of single honours students but not Combined Honours students, because they see us less often throughout the duration of the degree"

Derby CH Survey – Qualitative Comments

❖ CH students reported that they have more problems in forming friendships with other students. For example:

"Harder to make friends, being in different classes and not often seeing the same person twice"

"Making friends has been harder due to not being in all the sessions/lectures/seminars all the time"

Derby CH Survey – Qualitative Comments

❖ This is possibly because there are fewer opportunities to mingle and fewer shared experiences. For example:

"Not having the same amount of contact time with people who do Single Honours, so not getting to know people as well"

"Don't get as many opportunities to meet new people"

Derby CH Survey – Qualitative Comments

❖ But, also maybe because SH students tend to form closed social groups. For example:

"You don't get the opportunity to make as many friends because single honours students do a lot more together"

"There can be a sense of segregation from other students that are single honours as they only see you on core modules and not the whole time"

Derby CH Survey – Qualitative Comments

❖ This can lead to feelings of isolation. For example:

"Sometimes feel isolated as I'm not in many lectures with the same people and so I miss out on the social aspect"

"Sometimes feel isolated when classmates do not see me as often so I'm not as included within the class"

Derby CH Survey – Qualitative Comments

❖ CH students' suggestions on how to improve things:

❖ **Better integration**: *"Sometimes it would be nice if there was more of an effort made by the Uni to get students to 'gel' together in our classes"*

❖ **More contact time**: *"More face time with lecturers could be beneficial"*

❖ **More awareness** of the kinds of problems CH students typically face: *"More consideration for students who don't study the whole course, in terms of terminology and theories learnt in other modules"*

Student Focus Groups (2018)

❖ Students voiced similar concerns to those identified in the Derby CH survey

❖ Specifically, there was an awareness that SH students tend to form closed friendship groups

❖ In addition, there was a sense that CH students are more isolated, get less attention and support from teaching staff, are less willing to voice an opinion in class, experience some resentfulness from SH students because CH students sometimes offer a different perspective, and have fewer opportunities to provide feedback to staff

Staff Focus Groups (2018)

❖ Staff also recognised that CH students have more difficulties in forming friendships, and that SH tend to cluster together more

❖ There was also some recognition that teaching staff tend to form a stronger bond with SH students because they see them more often

❖ However, there was also an inconsistency: staff reported that CH students are more confident and willing to voice their opinions in class (caveat: this might only occur when there is crossover in subject knowledge)

Staff Focus Groups (2018)

❖ Staff also voiced concerns that CH students might experience an overall weaker sense of belonging, because they invest their time across two (sometimes very different) subjects, spending less time in each compared with SH students

Staff Intervention - Early Childhood Studies

❖ Staff print registers with student faces and course names

✓ Icebreaker type activities at the beginning of each module

❖ Module orientation activities for 3-4 weeks each term

❖ More emphasis on group work and active learning in groups

Preliminary Findings from GMS Survey

❖ **Sample**: 138 GMS Education students (121 female, 17 male). Ages ranged from 18 to 58 years (M = 24.30, SD = 8.96), and most students identified as White (n = 111)

❖ All students were registered on full-time programmes and each year of study was evenly represented, with the exception of foundation year

❖ However, CH students were underrepresented, with only 21 responding to the survey. A post hoc power analysis showed that our study was quite underpowered, only achieving 67% power to detect a medium effect size (recommended power is 80-85%)

GMS Survey - Measures

(Five point Likert scale 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree")

❖ **Sociability** (e.g., "I always find it easy to get on with other people")

❖ **Belonging:** peer relationships (e.g., "I feel connected with other students"); University (e.g., "I feel as if people at University do not care about me"); and staff (e.g., "I feel like staff really know me")

❖ **Identifying with subject** (e.g., "I am proud to be studying this subject area")

(Cronbach Alphas were all above .80, indicating good internal reliability)

❖ **Overall satisfaction** ("overall, I am satisfied with the quality of my course at CCCU")

GMS Survey – Predicting Overall Satisfaction

❖ Feeling as though you belong at University was the strongest predictor, followed by identifying with your subject, and then feeling as though you have a good relationship with staff

❖ The 'peer belonging' measure was not a significant predictor of 'overall satisfaction'

Measures	Overall Satisfaction	
University Belonging	$\beta = .33$	$p = .003$
Identifying with Subject	$\beta = .30$	$p < .001$
Staff Belonging	$\beta = .24$	$p = .01$
Peer Belonging	$\beta = .12$	$p = .25$
Sociability	$\beta = -.09$	$p = .29$

GMS Survey – Differences Between SH & CH

❖ When controlling for 'sociality' and 'identifying with subject', there was no significant difference between SH and CH on the 'University belonging' or 'staff belonging' measures

❖ However, there was a significant difference found between SH and CH on the 'peer belonging' measure, but in a direction opposite to what was expected

Belonging	SH	CH	
University	$M = 3.68$	$M = 3.93$	$p = .13$
Staff	$M = 3.65$	$M = 3.65$	$p = .23$
Peer	$M = 3.68$	$M = 3.98$	$p = .05$

GMS Survey - Results

❖ A separate *t*-test showed that there was no significant difference between SH (*M* = 4.01) and CH (*M* = 4.29) on the 'overall satisfaction' measure (*p* =.12)

GMS Survey - Conclusion

❖ Despite our early assumptions, a sense of peer belonging is unrelated to overall satisfaction

❖ However, feeling as though you belong at the University and feeling as though you have a good relationship with staff is positively related to overall satisfaction. Importantly, our qualitative findings suggest that CH students (compared with SH students) may feel as though they have a different relationship with staff

❖ This requires further exploration

GMS Survey - Limitations

❖ Why the conflicting results regarding 'peer belonging' and the non-significant difference between SH and CH on 'overall satisfaction'?

❖ **The timing of the survey**: there was no baseline, so it is impossible to compare a "before" and "after" the intervention. It's quite possible that the intervention was already working, as efforts were already underway to improve CH students' sense of belonging

❖ **Lack of power**: even if a difference exists between SH and CH on overall satisfaction, our study lacked sufficient power to detect it

Any Questions?