‘It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people’: the role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education

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‘It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people’: the role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education

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This article argues that to understand higher education student retention, equal emphasis needs to be placed on successful integration into the social world of the university as into the academic world. To date, sociological research reflecting first-year students’ perceptions of the processes involved in developing social lives at university is scarce. Here the concept of ‘social support’ is used to analyse interviews with 34 first-year students, investigating the processes through which social integration (or lack of it) influenced their decision as to whether or not to leave university. Our data support the claim that making compatible friends is essential to retention, and that students’ living arrangements are central to this process. Such friends provide direct emotional support, equivalent to family relationships, as well as buffering support in stressful situations. Course friendships and relationships with personal tutors are important but less significant, providing primarily instrumental, informational and appraisive support.

Introduction

Recently in the UK there has been much interest in the retention of undergraduate students, motivated in part by the government’s target to ‘bear down on rates of non-completion’ (Department for Education and Skills, 2002, p. 14) and the financial consequences for institutions of student withdrawal, and in part by universities’ concerns about the quality of the student experience in the context of expanding student numbers and resource constraints. Deciding to withdraw from university is usually a complex process influenced by a number of interacting factors (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Parliamentary Select Committee on Education and Employment, 2001; Thomas, 2002). Studies that have explored the processes involved in

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deciding to leave have generally confirmed Ozga and Sukhnandan’s (1998) findings: that the predominant reasons for non-completion are a lack of preparedness for higher education and incompatibility between the student and their chosen course and institution.

Lack of preparedness for university life encompasses a range of factors (see, for example, Davies & Elias, 2003; Lowe & Cook, 2003). Compatibility between the student and his or her course and institution partly depends on adequate pre-entry information, but is more concerned with students’ experience once they begin their degree. At this stage key influences on retention include: the learning, teaching and assessment strategies employed (McInnis, 2001; Tinto, 2002; Yorke & Thomas, 2003); the quality of relationships between academic staff and students (McGivney, 1996; National Audit Office, 2002; Thomas, 2002); and the process of establishing friendship networks (Rickinson & Rutherford, 1996; Thomas, 2002). The approaches most widely advocated for improving retention during the early part of the course focus on learning and teaching strategies such as an extended induction period (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Yorke & Thomas, 2003) and the use of interactive and collaborative learning methods to facilitate the development of peer group and staff-student relationships (McInnis, 2001; Tinto, 2002; Yorke & Thomas, 2003).

The literature exploring students’ experiences once they arrive at university frequently employs the concepts of academic and social integration to describe the extent to which students gain meaningful membership of the academic and social worlds of the university, and it is thought that successful integration in both of these spheres reduces the likelihood of student withdrawal (Tinto, 1975; Beder, 1997). However, these concepts are rarely discussed in detail, and analyses of how such academic and social integration takes place are lacking. This article aims to contribute towards filling this gap in the literature. Whilst all aspects of the first-year experience were explored, social support emerged as a significant theme in the analysis.

**Social integration and social support**

The term ‘social integration’ is most often used to describe the structure of social relationships, such as the size and density of a social network (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1991). A closely related concept is social support. Social support has been theorised in different ways and a broad definition is sometimes used, encompassing social integration (Weiss, 1969, 1974). Weiss’s early work conceptualised social support as comprising six functions of personal relationships – attachment, social integration, opportunity for nurturance, reassurance of worth, a sense of reliable alliance and the obtaining of guidance – each ordinarily associated with a particular type of relationship. However, House and Kahn (1985) usefully distinguish between social integration and social support, so that whereas social integration refers to the structural aspects of social relationships, social support refers to the functional content of relationships such as the perceived or actual support received. A number of different types of social support
have been identified, including emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisive (House, 1981).

Theorising social support has been a lively area of debate within the health field, starting with a number of influential papers in the 1970s which suggested that social support was beneficial to health (Cassel, 1974; Weiss, 1974; Cobb, 1976), and there is now a voluminous literature on the effects of social support on individual well-being. Studies that have investigated social support in relation to the transition to university have usually taken a psychological perspective, and have shown that social support is vital for successful adjustment to university life (Lamonthe et al., 1995), and that support from different sources, such as peers, tutors and parents, play different roles (Tao et al. 2000). However, there is little sociological analysis of the structural and material aspects of social support, and we have been interested to investigate these as well as the more personal aspects. Therefore, we explore our empirical data through the theoretical lens of social support, looking at the types and sources of support that students receive.

In addition to the relative paucity of analysis of the concepts of social integration and social support in the retention literature, most research on the first-year student experience has focused on social support within the academic environment, perhaps understandably so, but this has inevitably meant that less attention has been paid to students’ experience of the wider social world of the university (Haselgrove, 1994). Those authors who have investigated aspects of students’ lives outside their course have found that the wider student experience plays a significant role in their decisions about staying at university or leaving. For example, Mackie (1998) found that leaving in the early part of the course frequently resulted from a failure in social integration, such as difficulties in making friends or homesickness, and Thomas (2002) demonstrated that students’ new social networks at university often provided support to overcome such difficulties.

These findings chime with the two main hypotheses about the link between social support and well being. These are the ‘direct effect’ hypothesis (Mackie, 1998) and the ‘buffering’ hypothesis (Thomas, 2002). The former argument is that the perception that others will provide aid in stressful situations (or as a result of membership in a social network) leads people to have higher self-esteem and feel more control over their environment (Cohen & Syme, 1985, p. 6). The latter is that social support is beneficial in stressful situations, as it may intervene between the stressful event and a person by attenuating or preventing a negative stressful response (Cohen & Syme, 1985, p. 7). Although these hypotheses are often posed as though only one mechanism is correct, further research has provided evidence for both (see, for example, Barrera & Ainley, 1983).

In this study, we explore the experiences of a group of first-year students to try to capture their social development over time. We use the concept of social support to investigate the processes through which social integration (or the lack of it) influenced students’ decisions to stay at university or withdraw, our aims being to identify factors that lead to withdrawal and to explore ways in which the student experience can be enhanced.
Methodology

The research employs a qualitative approach to explore students’ experiences of university life and, for those who withdrew, the process they went through in deciding to leave. A sample of 22 students who completed their first year and 12 students who withdrew was drawn from the first-year undergraduate programme in Applied Social Science at the University of Brighton. Students on the programme are studying a range of degrees in Criminology, Sociology, Social Policy and Applied Psychology, and most study two of these subjects for a joint honours degree. In the 2002–2003 academic year, when the research was conducted, 215 students entered the first year. The student population is predominantly female (80%), white (90%) and aged under 21 (77%), although there is a substantial minority of mature students (16% are aged 25 or over).

For the students who completed their first year, we aimed to obtain an interview sample that was broadly representative of the student population in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and whether or not students were required to contribute to their tuition fees. Just over two-thirds of the sample were living away from home. Information about these characteristics was collected as part of a student satisfaction questionnaire in which students were asked whether they were willing to take part in an interview. The sample of students who left their degree was obtained by contacting students who withdrew during the year and interviewing all who were willing to participate. Qualitative interviews lasting between 45 minutes and one hour were carried out during the summer term and were tape-recorded and transcribed in full. Interviews with students who completed the first year took place on the university campus and those with students who withdrew were conducted by telephone. All interviewees in this article are identified by pseudonyms. Table I summarises key characteristics of the interviewees.

Questions on the interview guide were grouped into the following sections: induction week; learning and teaching experiences; student support and guidance; personal tutor; student services; friends and social networks at university; home networks; thoughts about leaving at any time or the process of leaving (if a student had left); and anything else students wished to add. Different factors assume priority at different points in the academic year (McGivney, 1996; Mackie, 1998), and we attempted to capture this process by encouraging students to narrate their experiences within specific time frames, such as their first day, the rest of the first week, a typical week, occasions when they may have thought about leaving and (for those who left) stages in the process of deciding to leave. Each interview transcript was analysed using the constant comparative method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 2001), for the factors students identified as positive or negative in contributing to their decision to stay or leave the university.

Findings

Findings from our qualitative interviews support research showing that influences on retention are complex and multifaceted. For our interviewees there was rarely only
one factor involved in deciding to leave. Withdrawing from university was a process which occurred over time, and none of the students interviewed took the decision lightly:

It was tough because I told everyone when I’d left home, you know, ‘I’m going to university’ and everyone was quite pleased at what I was doing, and then to get down here and think, ‘Oh god, I’ve got to give up university now’. It was quite frightening. (Karen, 25, withdrew)

Of the 12 interviewees who withdrew, only one student (Richard) was clear that his decision to leave was due solely to having made the wrong choice of subject. The remaining 11 students discussed between four and nine different factors, each of which contributed to their ultimate decision to leave, and three themes emerged – social support, academic and material factors:

- difficulties in making compatible friends (social support) – 9 students
- accommodation (material factor, social support) – 9 students
found independent study problematic (academic factor) – 6 students
university was not as expected (academic factor, social support) – 4 students
unhappy with subject/course (academic factor) – 4 students
failed to connect with personal tutor (social support) – 3 students
friends withdrew from university (social support) – 3 students
out-of-town location of campus (material factor, social support) – 3 students
finances (material factor, social support) – 3 students
failure to get first choice of subject (academic factor) – 2 students
poor attendance (academic factor, social support) – 1 student
personal issues: bereavement; lack of confidence; came out as gay (social support) – 3 students
distance from home (material factor, social support) – 1 student.

The first of the three themes that emerged from our data, the creation of social support, ran through the majority of our interviews. The second theme was predominantly about problems with independent learning. The final theme, material factors, included the out-of-town location of the campus and finances, and was the least frequently cited. This often linked with social support: for example, the location of the campus, four miles from Brighton city centre, can restrict students’ social lives because of the cost of accessing the city centre and, as we discuss later, accommodation issues were strongly related to students’ friendship networks.

Much of the existing literature addresses academic influences on retention, and so here we focus on social support, teasing out the strands which contributed to this being problematic for students who withdrew. Making (or not making) compatible friends, our students tell us, is of paramount importance in their decision to stay at university or withdraw; many younger students perceiving their first year as being primarily about their social lives:

... and my friends back home said, 'Don’t worry too much about the first year, enjoy yourself as much as you can, make some friends, have some fun and next year work properly'.
(Ben, 22, stayed)

Making compatible friends

Becoming a student is about constructing a new identity and a sense of belonging, as well as acquiring new academic skills (Beder, 1997). Ozga and Sukhnandan argue that we need to understand non-completion as a ‘process of student-institutional negotiation’ (1998, p. 319). We agree, but argue it is also about students negotiating between the old life they have left behind (family, home and friends) and the new life they have ahead of them. This is a complex process and ‘finding your place’, as one student expressed it, between old and new creates tensions which have to be resolved. Making and maintaining social support with peers and (to a lesser extent) staff is central to this process. Scheff (1990, p. 4) argues that the maintenance of social bonds is the ‘most crucial motive’ for humans and threats to social bonds generate intense feelings. Indeed, survival is threatened when they do not exist, as Zoe explains:
Looking back now I think why did I get so upset? Because you do feel really lonely and I think that really plays on your mind, so that you feel so bad, that you feel so, you know, you are just so desperate to go home, you really are desperate. … I think I went home for the half-term or something like that, I think I remember driving back up again thinking please, crash the car so that I didn’t have to go back. Just thinking ‘I so don’t want to have to go back’ so, and that’s how bad it got, wanting to crash the car so I didn’t have to go back. (Zoe, 20, withdrew; her emphases)

When new students enter university, feeling lonely and homesick is a common experience. In this early stage, before students establish new friendships, emotional support from family and friends at home can act as a buffer against the stress of feeling alone in a strange environment:

… there used to be times when I felt really down and I just got on to the phone to [my mum] and cried and said how much I hate being here … she acted like saying well, tough love really, saying you need to go and deal with this and be independent and it’ll get better. And now she knows that I’m happy, she’s happy. (Suzanna, 21, stayed)

In this transitional phase students have an urgent need to belong, to identify with others, to find a safe place and to negotiate their new identities as university students, and friendship is about having friendly faces around and making initial contacts which may or may not develop into friendships. The majority of our interviewees expressed intense anxiety about it and, although nervousness was mixed with excitement, fear about the social side of university life predominated:

Q. What made you nervous?

Erm, not the course, this is like you know social wise. More like ‘Am I going to get on with people?’ (Grace, 20, withdrew)

As students make contacts at university, their developing friendships begin to replace their reliance for support on family and friends at home:

I literally said to myself I can’t just sit here in my room like this, I’ve got to go out, and I made myself go out and I mean it sounds bad, but go out for a few drinks and then you break down the barriers a bit more and that just gave me a bit of confidence. And then after that you are just fine with people. (Chantelle, 18, stayed)

In this way initial feelings of anxiety and loneliness are overcome for most students, and the balance struck between contact with home (old life) and university (new life). Over time it becomes imperative to make good friends, whom students describe as their ‘new family’. As Thomas argues: ‘This represents the importance of the interaction between the institutional habitus and the familial habitus of the student, and indicates how friendship helps to bridge gaps and overcome difference’ (2002, p. 436):

… because at home you have got the support of your family and stuff and your friends aren’t so important I guess. But like here your friends are like your friends and your family and everything really. … But yes I guess making good friends is really important, rather than making like loads and loads of friends it’s making ones that you really care about is really important here. (Beth, 20, stayed; her emphases)

What Beth says about making good friends is central to students’ integration into university, and for students who were successful in establishing friendship networks
these new relationships became their principal source of social support during term-time. Students who fail to make compatible friends, or who continue to spend too much time with former friends or existing boyfriends/girlfriends, are far more likely to report being homesick and, as Mackie (1998) found, they are likely to go home frequently and thus become more socially isolated at university. In our sample, three-quarters of the students who withdrew talked about the difficulties of making friends.

A key finding in our data is the significance of friends made through students’ living arrangements. Of course students can, and do, also make friends on their course, but it is the former who, for the majority of students, are the first people they meet when arriving at university, which helps to ease the stress of the first ‘proper’ day at university:

Basically, it [making friends] was through halls at first and the people I was living with and then you got to know the people they were with, then it was people on the course. (Stella, 18, withdrew)

**Accommodation and social support**

You don’t know who you are going to live with and that’s the most scariest thing ever, that you are going to have to live with seven other people that you have never met before in your life … I was so scared, it was like going into the Big Brother house or something. (Caroline, 19, stayed; authors’ emphasis)

For young students, problems in making compatible friends are tied up mostly with accommodation issues around halls of residence. Accommodation is also important for students who live with their parents and mature students, but for different reasons as they often live some distance from the campus and hence encounter difficulties in having a social life at the university. We found, as did Thomas, that students not living in student accommodation were ‘more likely to feel marginalised from their peers and that they occupy a lower position’ (Thomas, 2002, p. 436). Failure to get a place in halls of residence, students feel, adversely affects their opportunities to make friends. For example, Karen (25, withdrew) found it difficult to make a social life for herself at the university as travelling to and from her own home took up a lot of time and effort.

For the majority of students this will be the first time they have lived away from home, and sharing housing with unknown people can be daunting. Those who found themselves living with compatible others, such as Beth quoted in the previous section, were the most positive about university life. However, for students who had more difficulty settling in to university life, it was often people in their accommodation who provided emotional support when they were feeling uncertain about their new situation:

… she helped me settle in loads and if I was ever having doubts or anything she’d come and sit with me and say, ‘Look everyone’s in the same boat’, and she was really sweet. (Christine, 20, withdrew)

Students who left university often experienced problems with shared accommodation. Some students perceived their direct social support as inadequate because they and their flat sharers preferred different levels of socialising:
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... but I remember it was so hard to get people to go out with me in my flat and in the end... I had to eventually go upstairs, to the people upstairs, and ask if I could tag along with them. I remember that was a bit of a shock because I'm quite used to going out loads at home and then I thought they'd be up for it... So that was the only negative thing, it was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people. (Christine, 20, withdrew)

Over time most students work out an optimum balance between social and academic lives, but for some, like Christine, this issue remains unresolved. Other issues which affected students’ feelings of being supported or not in their living space were levels of cleanliness and smoking:

It’s very difficult to please other people in such a small place and try to keep it to everybody’s liking, try to keep everybody happy... like smoking, for instance, if you are a non-smoker it is really difficult to have people smoking round you when you eat, when you’re definitely not used to it. (Zoe, 20, withdrew)

Some students felt that the university could do more to provide support in this area and encourage greater compatibility of sharers:

... the people personally I was put with, I don’t think I was very compatible with, because we weren’t asked any questions, it was just a matter of pot luck really... So I think there could have been a lot more support in that, with maybe asking questions about, you know, the type of person you are, because so much of your university life is dependent upon the people you make friends with. (Fiona, 18, withdrew)

Linked to the issue of compatibility, students also identified the design of their halls of residence as potentially problematic since at the University of Brighton many students live in small flats which can reduce students’ opportunities to make friends:

It felt each of the little halls were very secluded and I think if you got a huge big hallway of people then you’ve got what at least twenty, thirty people that you’ve got the opportunity to make friends with... [here] you’ve got a choice of eight people... if there’s not someone that you know really has the same taste as you, which you’re quite lucky to find, then you’re a bit stuck. (Dawn, 20, withdrew)

Another issue that had a significant impact on students’ feelings of integration was whether or not they had made friends who then withdrew from the university. This could be extremely disruptive and unsettling and caused students to question their own position at university. Christine, for example, had several friends who transferred to a university in London and she eventually decided to join them. Nicole talks about friends leaving as being a clinching factor in deciding to leave:

Unfortunately one of the girls who I made friends with, was closest with, she left university because she decided she didn’t like her course...

Q. How did your friends leaving make you feel about doing the degree?

Erm, it definitely affected me, I think so. I just really didn’t see the point in sticking around if everybody else was dropping out. (Nicole, 20, withdrew)

To summarise this section, our data reveal that during the early weeks at university students need to start making friends, whilst still relying heavily on home support. Their strongest friendships are made with those they live with, highlighting the need
for accommodation which encourages social interaction, whilst preserving quiet spaces to work and sleep in. Over time students’ support needs are met increasingly by friends they live with and less from home contacts. This is not to suggest that ongoing home support is not helpful or needed, but that it becomes more of a background factor relative to friends’ support at university. These friends become, in effect, surrogate family members, a key source of social support, both enhancing students’ general sense of well-being and belonging and providing a buffering effect when students experience difficulties. Finally, the dismay and disruption caused if their friends withdraw suggests that improving retention itself enhances students’ experience of university life.

The course and social support

There are clearly aspects of the course itself which, as with student accommodation, can facilitate or impede students in their quest to develop workable and supportive friendship networks. The key issues raised by students in relation to social support in the academic side of their new lives were relationships with staff, especially personal tutors, and relationships with other students on the course.

Students’ relationship with academic staff are an important part of their integration into academic life (McGivney, 1996; Tinto, 2002). Students’ impressions of staff were mostly positive, and this applied to those who withdrew as well as those who stayed on the course. In the School of Applied Social Science we organise students into personal tutor groups of approximately 12 students, which meet in induction week and weekly thereafter. A module called ‘Personal Development’, which encompasses a range of activities to support students’ active and independent learning, is delivered through these groups:

Yeah that was good, it was good because it like helped you fit in during the first few weeks of term and you could like get to know people in your own group … so it’s more like getting used to everyone and settling in. (Ben, 22, stayed)

Students found this early introduction to one member of academic staff and a small group of students very helpful. They commented on the high standards of teaching they experienced, and identified the importance of having approachable academic staff, particularly personal tutors:

She is brilliant, [my personal tutor] is really, really, good actually, if I have had any problems, because I was quite confused about whether I was going to change my course or not and I’ve had quite a few meetings with her … She fills you with confidence. When I had my exam results and stuff, I mean they’re OK but I wasn’t that pleased with them and she’s still like, ‘Well, you’ve done pretty well’. (Louise, 21, stayed)

As well as the appraise support of the sort Louise describes, tutors could be a source of assistance when students faced difficulties or had doubts about continuing at university. For instance Suzanna, who experienced a number of personal problems during her first year, said that her tutor played a central role in her decision to stay on her course:
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I felt that I could tell her things and just and she helped me so much. Like if it wasn’t for her I would have just left uni, I would have. (Suzanna, 21, stayed)

However, a number of those who withdrew failed to get on well with their personal tutor. These students identified problems around lack of approachability, failure to listen and lack of availability of the personal tutor:

My personal tutor, I wasn’t particularly impressed with, in that he intimidated a little and I don’t, I felt that he didn’t particularly listen and I don’t think he would have been my first choice to have gone to about anything then. (Fiona, 18, withdrew)

As other research has suggested (e.g., Tinto, 2002; Yorke & Thomas, 2003), another way in which the structure of a course can encourage students to get to know each other better is through small-group work:

Just recently I’ve started to go out with them [friends on my course] actually through the group work which is quite good … so that’s given me a few new friends just from doing that project, so I’d say that was a real positive of group work as well, even though I don’t know if it’s meant to be, but it was. (Chantelle, 18, stayed)

Although most students’ closest friendships were formed in their accommodation, nearly all the students in our sample did make other friends on the course. For students who lived with parents, and for mature students, the course provided the first contact with other students. From these early encounters, social networks could be developed:

Q. And how did you go about making friends when you were there?

That was a bit difficult because I mean I don’t tend to push myself, but I tended to go around the first few days with the people that we actually sat on the table with when we first went in … But as the time went on there was sort of a little group of us. (Sharon, 45, withdrew)

However, the strength of friendships formed in halls made it difficult for some students to break into these groups on the course, as Christine describes:

Q. So was it difficult to make friends on the course?

Maybe a bit. I found that quite a lot of people had their own little groups of friends already and it was quite hard to infiltrate them. (Christine, 20, withdrew)

In terms of academic work, however, support from friends on the course became important. As Amy says, friends in halls were on different courses and hence had different patterns of work and assessment:

… I have got a supportive network of friends. The people that I live with, it’s a bit harder, I get very distracted by them. Because if they are all going out and I’m supposed to be working I’ll probably go out with them … that’s why I go to the library so often to do my work … My friends on my course they are supportive, we all support each other really. (Amy, 19, stayed)

In one case a group of students had set up a study group to support each other in their academic work:

… a few of us said it would be a good idea to have a study group. So what we are doing is we are going in there and just going through the questions, sample exam questions and just discussing them, essay plan ideas and that kind of thing. (Maureen, 31, stayed)
Friends on the course could also be helpful for students who experienced difficulties with their studies. For example, Maria described the support she received when she was worried about her grasp of subjects that were new to her:

... I've got no background in sociology whatsoever and a lot of people have done it at 'A' level or 'A' level Psychology. And they all understand it and have done it before ... And that was quite daunting for the first month until I'd got the gist of it and a lot of my friends sort of helped me a bit through it to kind of make me understand. (Maria, 22 stayed)

In this section we have shown that, although in the first year at university the likelihood is that academic integration takes a secondary position to social integration, support from academic staff is essential in underpinning integration into the course. Experiencing the personal tutor as supportive and approachable helped students to gain confidence within the academic environment, and tutors were also a key source of support for some students who faced stressful situations that affected their academic work. Similarly, friends on the course have a key role to play in providing networks of academic support, and in some cases giving assistance when students encountered problems with course work. Tutors most often provided informational support and appraisive support, whereas friends on the course provided instrumental support for course work.

Discussion

Our findings reveal the importance for students’ integration into the university of making compatible friends, and they illustrate some of the processes by which social and academic integration is achieved. In the first few days at university emotional support from family and friends at home provides a buffering effect against the stressful experience of being alone in a new situation, but as students develop social networks at university these become their main source of social support during term-time. Emotional support from friends provides a sense of belonging and can also help students when they face problems. The type of support that students receive from friends and tutors on their course is different from those provided by the friends in their accommodation, and it is more likely to be instrumental and appraisal support.

Although living in halls facilitates social support during the early stages of the transition to university, it can also present problems for the maintenance of these friendships. Our finding that many first-year students are living with a small group of people with whom they are incompatible corresponds with that of Mackie (1998), who identified accommodation as a major source of student dissatisfaction, and Christie et al. (2002), who found that the initial social advantage of living in halls of residence was later replaced by an experience of claustrophobia and lack of privacy. Flats that house a small number of students are a common form of university-provided accommodation but, for students who experience difficulties in making friends with their flatmates, this design reduces opportunities for developing friendships with other students living nearby. This has implications for the design of student accommodation and the procedures used to allocate students to accommodation.
When new halls of residence are built, careful thought needs to be given to design and layout. Our findings suggest that the conventional model of individual rooms on corridors, or a layout in which flats are not isolated from one another, would enhance students’ social integration into university life. In the shorter term, universities could make greater efforts to identify students’ preferences concerning the characteristics of their flatmates. Many university accommodation services offer applicants the option of single-sex accommodation, and some ask them to indicate whether or not they smoke, but only a minority consider other preferences, such as for lively or quiet flatmates. Although a more complex system of allocating accommodation would increase administrative costs, the large number of students in our sample for whom incompatible flatmates was a central factor in their decision to withdraw suggests that such an initiative could play a vital role in improving retention. It seems likely that the costs would not only be small relative to the social benefits to students, but would also be offset by the financial gains to the institution from increased retention.

In common with other studies of the transition to university (e.g., Beder, 1997; Kantanis, 2000), our findings indicate that new students need support to deal with not only the academic culture shock of adapting to the higher education environment, but also the emotional shock of moving from the familiar home environment to a very different life at university. If academic staff are aware of the intense anxiety and fear that new students experience in relation to the social aspects of transition to university, personal tutors can play a significant part in conveying to students that these feelings are not unusual. While the majority of our interviewees found their personal tutors helpful and supportive, a number of students who withdrew experienced problems with their tutor. As Johnston (1997) has shown, some tutors do not see pastoral work and the retention of students as part of their academic role. This problem is exacerbated when resource constraints limit the time that academic staff are able to spend with students individually, and when academics are faced with conflicts between their research and teaching roles (James, 1998; Parliamentary Select Committee, 2001). In order to address the dissatisfaction with personal tutors experienced by some of our interviewees, in the School of Applied Social Science we have recently introduced a system that enables students to change their personal tutor easily during the first year. Students are encouraged to discuss a request for a change of tutor with a member of academic staff, but if they do not wish to do so they may change their tutor by following a simple administrative procedure.

Much of the recent work on retention has emphasised the importance of the teaching process for academic and social integration into the institution (e.g., McInnis, 2001; National Audit Office, 2002; Lowe & Cook, 2003). Our findings support Tinto’s view that ‘We must take seriously the importance of classrooms for student retention’ (2002, p. 8). Students who live at home with their parents and mature students benefit particularly from approaches that foster friendships between students on a course, and for other students too social networks on the course provide support in relation to academic work which is not available elsewhere. However, our finding that first-year students’ principal social networks are centred not on their course but on their accommodation suggests that more attention needs to be paid to
those aspects of integration into university life that are not directly connected to students’ academic experience.

Conclusion

The article began by noting the preoccupation with student retention in contemporary higher education policy. A focus on learning and teaching strategies, and the use of interactive and collaborative learning methods, are the most widely advocated approaches for improving retention. We have suggested that this has led to a diversion of attention from the social aspects of student integration into university life. Our data suggest that the presence or lack of social support networks and supportive interactions is a major factor for students in deciding whether to stay or leave.

Levels of fear about the social side of university life predominate in the accounts of students’ early weeks at university. Students made clear their urgent need for both physical and social opportunities, and spaces for making contact with others (social integration). We have argued that integrating into the university is a complex process, and finding a place between old and new social contexts creates tensions for students which are often difficult to resolve; for some students ‘over-attachment’ to social contacts at home can lead to withdrawal from university. We have also documented students’ views on perceived or actual support received; especially important was emotional support for feelings of self-confidence and ease in the self, but instrumental, informational and appraisive support gave students confidence in terms of their academic work. It is clearly the case that, as academic staff, we need to ensure that students have a wide range of opportunities to form alliances with other students and with tutors, but our findings suggest that university estates departments and accommodation services also have a crucial role to play in this respect.

In terms of remaining gaps in research knowledge, we have reported the findings of a small scale study of one course, and we suggest the need for future research focusing specifically on students’ social integration to contribute to a deeper theorising of social integration and social support in the university context. The limitations of our research raise methodological questions around how best to capture the complexity of students’ social interactions over time, and it may be that, whilst our organising device of tracing changes over a time trajectory was helpful, we need to rethink the methods used.

The article has substantial implications for debates about student retention at university. In order to understand how student integration takes place, this article argues for much greater attention to be paid to social aspects of student integration. Social aspects include not only interactions between students in both social and academic settings but also material and spatial aspects of their social lives, such as accommodation contexts, meeting spaces, location of campuses and so forth. What we are suggesting is that any analysis which fails to look at how social relationships are accomplished (or not) cannot give a full account of student retention.
The role of social support in first-year higher education

References


