Perceived Social Support and Well Being: First-Year Student Experience in University

Mohd Mahzan Awang[1], Faridah Mydin Kutty[1] & Abdul Razaq Ahmad[1]

[1] Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

Correspondence: Faridah Mydin Kutty, Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia. Tel: 603-8921-7965. E-mail: faridah_mydin@ukm.edu.my

Abstract

The current study explored first-year student experience in receiving social support and its relation to their ability to adapt with university ethos. It also explored how social support on academic adjustment, social adjustment and emotional adjustment among students were significantly associated with student well-being. This qualitative research utilized individual semi-structured interview protocols to gather narrative data from 16 university students. All students were interviewed twice in order to see changes and developments in receiving social support from university community, peers and family members. Data were tape-recorded, transcribed and analyzed by using thematic approach. It was then coded by independent coders. It has been found in this study that academic adjustments, social adjustment and emotional among new students are dependent on their abilities in receiving socio-educational support from friends (supportive friendship) and families. Results also revealed the powerful influence of parents and the importance of socio-relationship for student wellbeing. This study suggests that the concept of social support should go further than simply identifying it within the context of a university. Findings of this study also indicate the importance of student community, senior students and family-networks in adapting to a new learning environment. There are cumulative evidences from this research to suggest different types of networks in a multicultural university. Students' self-management skills are found to be vital for smoothness of transition to universities.

1. Introduction

Enhancing the quality of student learning experience has become national priority in most higher education institutions. Positive learning experience not only shape students' cognitive, feelings and behaviour but also improve their satisfaction. First-year at the university is situated within the broad conception of student experience. Ideally early years' experience of university has featured strongly as a time for students to develop the attitudes, behaviour, skills and knowledge that subsequently determine their overall assimilation into higher education (Harvey et al., 2006, Krause & Coates, 2008; Reason et al., 2006; Tumen et al., 2008). Therefore, it is always emphasized in the literature that students must be inspired, supported and developed in their sense of belonging. This is because students' initial experiences have an impact on the long-term process of cultural, social and academic assimilation into the world of higher education (Reason et al., 2006; Woosley, 2003; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

The first year best exemplified as transitional period, a time that bridges the gap between students' previous identities and new learning context. The meaning of transition varies with the context in which the term is used. Within educational field transition best viewed as a process-oriented phenomenon that involves individual response to change. According to Briggs, Clark, and Hall (2012, p. 2) 'transition involves learner creating for themselves a new identity as higher education students. Transition involves a passage of change (Lam & Pollard, 2006), a process in which individuals shift from one constructed identity to another that bring shifts in culture, identity, role and status, routines, and relationships (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Van Gennep, 1960).

There is an international trend towards more complex understanding of the learner, accompanied by growing consensus on the need for more support to facilitate the differences that students bring to university. Efforts to

improve student experience, and the ways in which the quality of learning experience are concerned about and can be improved are fundamental research topics by scholars across the USA (e.g. Kuh et al., 2008; Upcraft et al., 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996), the UK (e.g. Yorke & Longden, 2008; Adnett, 2006), Australia (e.g. Krause & Coates, 2008) and several other countries. In the Malaysian context, the dramatic changes in higher education and impact on the student experience are beginning to receive steady attention. Issues related to transition and experiences of student suggest that students, especially those in first-year, face an adjustment problem in this transitional period. Findings indicate that many university students do not do well in terms of coping and adjusting to the demands and challenges of university life (Abdullah et al., 2009; Elias et al., 2009; Nordin et al., 2009; Thang, 2009; Thang & Alias, 2007). However, there is limited research which examines the relationship between social support and adjustment during transition in Malaysian universities.

Given the paucity of information available about first year student experience in general and the social support in particular, a gap has been identified which requires immediate address. Building a firm understanding of student experience is important in order to understand the effects of social support on student academic, social and emotional adjustment. The present study examines how the multiple supports interact to influence the transition process of first-year students during first-year. A better understanding of these factors will not only endow higher education institutions with the knowledge and evidence-based framework to underpin their policies, but would be immeasurably beneficial for the institutions for creating learning environments that support students' well-being.

2. Adjustment to University

Being and becoming a learner is explained as the outcome of complex interrelation between students' individual characteristics and physical context of the experience of learning. Learning is a process, the capacity of a human living independently and adjusting to new institutional norms and a sense of belonging (Christie et al., 2011; Wilcox et al., 2005). Studies on student adjustment at university are underpinned by the constructivist view which explains adjustment as a process, the capacity of a human being for growth and change, personally, emotionally and cognitively. Adjustment involves person-environment interaction towards an achievement of the fit between the two. Adjustment can occur in different domain: academic, social and emotional. There is a strong relation between the quality of social relationships and adjustment during the transition to university and throughout first year (Demaray et al., 2005). The greater the support received, the better was their emotional adjustment (Jindal-Snape, 2010). At university, Friedlander et al. (2007) found increased social support in first year at college had improved social and emotion/personal adjustment. It is also reasonable to expect that more supportive friendships would be associated with better adjustment.

Theory of transition by Van Gennep (1960) points out that transition refers to the period between separation from a known community of culture where norms, values and behavior are familiar and transition to a new culture where norms, behavior and values are unknown. The concept of 'rites of passage' introduced by Van Gennep describes that the transitional phase in human life is marked in three stages: the pre-liminal (rites of separation); the liminal (rites of transition); and the post-liminal (rites of reincorporation). To facilitate a discussion of theoretical issues in the concept of adjustment, a brief discussion of separation stage is presented.

In stage one, the separation stage; individuals dissociate themselves from community membership of the past such as family, the community and previous school friends and adopt new norms and values associated with the culture of the university environment. The separation can occur symbolically, physically or emotionally. This phase demonstrate that transition is about how individuals gradually disengage from their native cultural realities in order to assimilate into university life. Letting go of old self-images, leaving their contact and build new membership and acceptance in the new learning community university is a key to succeed in university. However, de Anda (1984) challenges the notion of separation and proposes a concept which explains that individual separation should not disengage them from their old world in search of membership in a new setting. The process of transition also recognizes that successful transition is often linked to the development of relationships and connections between these two worlds. These two worlds should interact, thus an individual can function more effectively and less stressful in both worlds. When entering university, students are aware that they are exposed to communities of practices which are different from their own distinct characteristics.

From this standpoint, adjustment also depends on internal and external support that stimulates and encourages student involvement. Certain resources that students bring with them to university, apart from intellectual aptitudes and attitudes about education, is social networks important to sense of learning and skill development throughout the university experience. Higher level of social support is related to better adjustment. There is a significant link between the quality of social support and adjustment during the transition and throughout the

university year (Friedlandar et al., 2007)

3. Social Support and Student Well-Being

Social support is frequently used in much socio-psychological and socio-educational research that emphasizes the importance of social relationship among community members (Peters, 2010; Topping & Foggie, 2010; Yaeda, 2010, Demaray et al., 2010, Awang, 2012). It includes inter-personal and inter-group interactions. Social support is one of the focuses in transitional studies in these days. Jindal-Snape (2010) highlights the importance of social support in educational transition for promoting wellbeing and a smooth transition among students across ages, cultural identities and educational levels. Demaray (2005) conceptualizes 'social support' as "transpiring from multiple sources (parents, teachers, close friends, classmates, and school) and consisting of multiple types (emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental), which may serve to improve a student's adjustment and outcomes (p. 691)". However, the concept of social support is considerably vague and requires further investigation. It can be divided into three categories namely perceived social support, enacted social support and social integration. Perceived social support refers to subjective judgment of the assistance quality provided by family members and close friends; perceived social support stresses on a person's action; while enacted support stresses specific supportive actions. Although, there is a close link among all three types of social support, the supportive orientations are different. On the other hand, social integration is more likely to focus on social relations and kinship instead of social action and social interactions. By taking these elements into consideration, the current study uses the term of supportive social support that refers to assistance provided by society, community, peers and family members.

Extensive past studies suggest that there is a strong association between perceived social support and student well-being. For instance, Asante (2011) found that social support reduces stress level and depressions among youth with challenging behaviour. Past empirical comparative research on social support for student wellbeing in Europe (Burholt et al., 2003) revealed that there are differences and similarities in social support between the United Kingdom, Italy, Sweden, Netherlands, Luxembourg and Austria. It was found that age impacts on satisfaction with socio-relationship and gender was a strong indicator of social resources in those countries. Ethnicity, living arrangements, working status, educational level and household incomes were found to be significant factors for promoting student wellbeing. This indicates that a contextual-based investigation on social support and student wellbeing is vital. Indeed, there has been an accumulation of evidence to suggest a strong association between social life and human wellbeing (Demaray et al., 2005). Student well-being has diverse dimensions including academic attainment, happiness and enjoyment, ability to adapt with the campus life, and social life in- and out- of university compound (Awang, 2014).

4. Aims of the Study

The main goal for this study was to explore university student experience in receiving social support and how it relates to their ability to adapt with university ethos. It also investigated social support on academic adjustment, social adjustment and emotional adjustment among university students and how it affects student well-being. In order to achieve this objective, two main research questions were developed to guide the study. The first research question is how social support relates to student adjustment to university. The second research question is how support from different sources was perceived as important to student adjustment.

5. Methodology

A longitudinal approach was adopted to see the changes comprising the transition, allowing the researchers to see how students adjust, and how they cope with such changes. In order to explore the nature and range of support that student experience, the methodological design of the study was based on qualitative methodology. The semi-structured interviews were chosen for the study because of their value in providing a deep insight into the issues investigated (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Interviews are found to be an effective method for gathering descriptive data as the interviewees had a firsthand experience (Kvale, 1996). By using student voices, this study expected to explain how and why these close social support are beneficial by describing specific features that are associated with adjustment and well-being. Since a key objective of this study is to capture the narrated experiences of the first-year students, the use of interviews is considered an appropriate method.

The study was conducted in a top public research university in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. Participants in this study were 16 first year undergraduate students. The samples were selected using purposive sampling to reflect wide variation across social identity of gender, ethnicity and programmes in the university. Ultimately, the students included in the study were aged between 19-20 years old, with an equal number of male and female participants. Of the 16 participants, six were of Malay, four of Chinese, and six of Indian ethic groups. They are from diverse study programmes.

The sampling process began with a submission of a written request by the university administration office for permission to conduct the research. At each college, flyers were distributed detailing the title of the research and its purpose and who could be involved. In total, 35 students contacted the researcher by email and telephone, stating that they agreed to participate in the study. Due to academic obligations such as lectures and assignments, only 16 students finally agreed to participate in the study.

Data were collected through individual interviews, which were conducted two times during the first semester and the second semester of the participants' first year (July 2011-March 2012). Interviews were conducted privately at the venue that was easily accessible and agreed with the interviewees. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into separate interview files for each participant. The transcripts were coded using pseudonyms. Throughout the data collection process, on-going verbal checks were conducted with the participants in order to clarify and confirm the researchers' understanding of their comments and meanings. The data were analysed through a process of thematic analysis.

6. Findings

An important aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between social support on academic adjustment, social adjustment and emotional adjustment by using student narrative data. All cases reported in this section are pseudonyms.

6.1 Academic Adjustment

Quality of student experience in university is positively enhanced through greater participation and achievement in academics. Students generally agreed that interaction with others is important in learning process and contribute tremendously to academic adjustment. Students believed that learning is not totally an individual process or achieved exclusively in a classroom, but it happens through communication and exchange within or outside academic trajectory. Three main resources highlighted by students were peers and seniors, and the support they received from siblings and school friends. Results from the current study revealed that four main themes determine students' abilities to adjust with university ethos:

6.1.1 Supportive Friendship

Overall comments from students were similar in their perceptions about positive peer relationships, as useful support networks in terms of study, as resources of discovery and sharing, as well as group discussion. In addition to their learning through lectures and tutorials, students also recognized the significant learning at university also occurs outside of the classroom setting through the conversation with peers. Support from other students was very important and was a necessary response to the autonomy of students and undergraduate learning expected by the university. Students helped each other in various ways and were seen to be '*helpful*', '*always accessible*', and '*reliable informer*'.

Seven students in this study agreed that their high achievers peers were more knowledgeable in certain academic subjects and therefore were always a reference. As Abby said, she was grateful to have friends who helped her to understand thoroughly and familiarized her with the terms and practices on the Law course. Students described the support that they received from peers was perceived as the best opportunity for them, especially when some subjects were new and confusing for them.

6.1.2 Socio-Educational Support

In a similar vein, Ying described how knowledge was transferred in classroom activities when doing lab work.

I learnt from my friend... sometimes some of the steps I am not clear about it, but my friends who did before at her school she will explain it to me and tell me how to do it based on what she did at her school, as told by her teacher… she did have more knowledge compare to me.

Knowledge was only transferred when students were willing to share. In a similar vein, students themselves found that by helping others they became more assured and understood the subject better. For example, according to Azif, having some foundation in 'Syariah' gave him an advantage in the subject, and helped his course mates.

Students also identified the benefit they received from senior students especially in terms of familiarizing themselves with the university system and generating a sense of confidence. Strong supportive community shown by senior students in helping the freshmen to adjust to the university in the early weeks of the transition process is one of the important findings in this study. According to the students, their seniors assisted the newcomers in overcoming several of the perceived barriers in academic life through advice and guidance. In another example, the involvement of the senior students in the newcomers' adjustment process became more

formal when a faculty introduced a 'buddy system', which requires each senior to assist two or three students. In Law faculty for example, two or three first-year students were assigned to a senior student in third year. Through this process, students feel more comfortable as there is someone to whom they can refer if they do not understand or need further assistance with their academic exercise or studies. Apart from developing a valuable social network, it is important to have a positive connection with senior students because new students gain an advantage from their experiences: As described by Erma:

We have to build good relationship with the senior because they are experienced, and the can help us..and advise us about university life.

In a similar vein, students also gained benefits from the high school friends in different universities. For example Mia contacted her high school friend to share subject knowledge. In this context, Gibson, Gandara, and Koyoma (2004) posit that peers can be ideal sources of university knowledge and social capital through social networks and value orientations.

6.1.3 Family Support

Furthermore, some parents also play a role as academic assistant. This is dominant among students whose parents have post-secondary education qualification. Emma, for example, told that she contacted her parents who were also lecturers to assist her with her assignments. Emma was fortunate to have close reference, so she could receive consultations from them on any problems relating to academic work, and in other senses the support she received is quick and convenient. The literature suggests that students are highly likely to be successful at university because they benefit the support they receive from their parents (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005, Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005)

Students also obtained support from their siblings. Seven students reported that their siblings were studying at university, or who had graduated and had a successful career, formed important social networks and acted as role models. In Ting's case, she asked for help from her sister to assist her with Economic subject. As she said *'I will call my sister and ask her every time I don't understand'*. This cross-family network allowed them to acquire some degree of support and share information and resources about university.

6.2 Social Adjustment

Narrative data from the current study suggest that the support students receive from their parents remained a positive indicator in student social adjustment. Acquiring and adapting to a new group of friends was of profound importance in the first year and helped student to adapt quickly to the new learning environment.

6.2.1 Adaptation

Acquiring and adapting to a new group of friends was profoundly important and helped students to adapt quickly to university. In this study, all students perceived meeting the right people and building good relationships with them to be important factors. The growing sense of confidence was aided by a sense of connection to other students at the university and was especially noticeable in their reflections. This study also observed that in social relationship at university, students were more comfortable being with friends who shared similar experiences. Students consistently reported that they had two distinct sources of peer support: first, their university friends and second, their friends outside of university. Students stated that it was often helpful if they knew someone whom they had previously known in the same university, like close friends since high school. For these students, they feel a release because they feel they do not have to search for new friends. In this sense, they feel more secure. Students from same school or matriculation tended to develop strong relationship because they were already acquainted. For example, from Aina views:

I feel so lucky because my schoolmates enter to same university. Even though we take different courses, but I still have someone that I familiar and close. Most of the time we were together, sharing our experience, we help each other, I feel more confidence…I think it is hard if we don't have any close friends.

The positive association between positive relationship and adjustment, negative aspects of relationships may be associated with poorer adjustment. In a situation when some students met with people whom they neither knew nor understood, who also neither knew nor understood them, some emotional distress occurred because both parties did not know each other personally. The impact of peer conflict (e.g., criticizing, bullying, arguing) could damage the adjustment and positive learning experiences. For example, Lily was bullied by her friends emotionally and verbally in several different incidents. She was depressed and shocked because it was different from what has been told about a friendly environment at university. For example in one incident she was scolded by a lecturer during a lecture, when one of her friends in group project provided wrong information about her involvement in a group work. None of other students in this study had such negative friendship experiences as

Lily, and personally she admitted that it had emotionally affected her, as she said,

I am not enjoyed (with) what I gone through here…I quite suffer…To overcome her sadness she contacted her schoolmates and share her problem, to help to reduce her stress and sadness.

Overall students agreed that great friendship developed when students found similar characters, and Gary described several aspects such as common interests, being easy-going, open-minded, and helpful. According to Gary, being open-minded and mingling with everyone without thinking of individual background and ethnicity is what makes him feel more comfortable.

6.2.2 Mentoring System

Students also indicated that support from senior students helped immensely because they had gone through the same experiences. Senior students gave general advice on the do's and don'ts in the university and also helped in academic tasks. Support they received from the senior students is a beneficial factor in terms of familiarizing students with the system and generating a sense of confidence. A shared context provided students with some reassurance that they were not alone in this process.

For example as Man said:

Like we Chinese Students have mentoring system...like each senior take care 3 to 4 juniors…so we don't feel lost…

Students highlighted strong supportive community as shown by the senior students from Indian and Chinese student societies in helping them as juniors to adjust to university life, and this is perceived as very helpful and practical. From the findings, it was noticed that students formed their own associations with the main purpose of helping each other. An activity organized by the organizations such as weekly informal meetings between seniors and juniors was seen as an important platform for them to share their experiences and problems. For Milly, strong community support is highly beneficial:

Here the senior makes me don't feel lonely, they treat us like family members. When I feel stressed, I will share my problem with my senior…so I feel released.

Students see these organizations as providing a network within a community, which serve as a platform to share resources, information, knowledge and experience.

A significant number of students said they found it difficult to make initial approach to establish friendship in new learning context when students are more diverse in terms of educational background, ethnicity, socio-economic background, religion, language, and state. In this context, building sense of trust was crucial in establishing new friendships.

6.3 Emotional Adjustment

Results suggest peer attachment and parental support, strongly associated to student emotional adjustment. The growing sense of confidence was aided by a sense of connection to peers and parents.

6.3.1 Peer Attachment

Being far from family and friends, students find their peers at university as their primary source of emotional support. In Milly's case she felt more secure and confident when her room-mate was a school friend. She found it more comfortable to have someone with whom she was familiar, so they easily accompanied and supported each other. The great value of friendship also appeared in Ain's narrative. As she stated,

'...when you feel down, they will motivate you...they will support and encourage me'.

Furthermore, Ain emphasized the importance of peers as social companions at university because, as she said: '*... at this stage friends are closer than parents'*. At this stage students needed someone closer to share their experiences. The emotional support of peers is personally more crucial for students when they have no confidence to survive alone. This case is true especially for Anna, who personally admitted that she had no confidence to be independent and she needed someone to accompany her, as she said '*I'm afraid to be alone…I need someone.. I have no confident.*'

6.3.2 Parental Support and Affection

The support students received from their parents remained a positive indicator in student psychological well-being. Students seemed closer to their families, and were more likely to view their families as a source of emotional support. This relates to Asian culture in which parents and children are closely bonded. On average, students call their parents every day or up to three times a week. According to students, they felt closely attached

when they could share their experiences with their parents, and they felt a release when someone was listening to them. As described by Milly '*I will share my experience in university with them although sometimes they could not understand what I'm going through*'. While for Abby and others, the close relationships with their parents continue even though they were now at university. As she said '*they are most trusted people I have, and most convenient friends is my mama and papa*'.

Ironically, for parents with no higher education background, this does not prevent parents in maintaining their attention to their child's life at university and their study performance. Some parents show concern about their child's academic progression by asking about their performance. Parents are concerned about their child's education because they have high expectations of them. This is agreed by Mirul, as he said *'my father always asks me about my study, and always advise me to study hard...their expectation on me was high'*. In this case, for most students, meeting parental expectations makes them more responsible for their education. Success not only reflects personal achievement but manifests their parents' hopes and wishes. For example, in Wan's case for instance, fulfilling his father's expectation is one of his academic goals and he is always thinking of how he should work to improve to meet their expectations.

7. Discussion

The period of transition can be both challenging and exciting. Some of these experiences are expected but not easily adjusted, while other experiences are surprises which are caused by unmet expectations, which further lead to stress and frustration. Findings from this study suggest that support should be viewed more holistically. Research has linked positive academic adjustment with social and emotional adjustment and noted that students would do the best when they have full support from people whom they know inside and outside the university. The results indicate the value of considering the multidimensional nature of support for students in their academic, social and emotional adjustment processes.

The findings of this research indicate that the nature of support and opportunities for sharing and learning through peer interactions is important for personal and academic development (Lundberg, 2003; Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008). Students are confident when they have a good supporting environment, while assistance from peers emerged as strong support for academic, social and emotional adjustment. There are two key aspects that serve as the tools that determine success for some students: first, interpersonal skill on how to manage the relationship, and second, interpersonal communication on how to interact with students from diverse backgrounds. Without friends, students have fewer available resources to cope with the demands of university life. The value of a strong peer network lies in enhanced study and self-motivation; student feels more supported and secure (Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008). Peers are resources for academic problem, and it was often said that students always approached their peers or seniors first when they had a question about academic matters, besides faculty members.

The findings in this study show a strong attachment to their own ethnic group. This supports the argument in the literature that sharing a similar culture in terms of ethnicity, language and religion was considered as an important factor in creating friendship networks (Kao & Joyner, 2004; Kawabata & Crick, 2008; Levin, Van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003). Students found that the same way of thinking and understanding cultural values and behaviours created a sense of closeness among students, which led them to form ethnic networks. The finding of this study also confirmed Wang and Shan's (2007) findings which affirm the role of culture in creating support that helps the students to adjust to new learning environment. Students tended to interact with a group from the same background because they shared the same feelings and concerns (Levin, Van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003).

At the same time, senior students also have a significant impact with a valuable role as a more experienced peer who serves to mentor new students and enhance new students' sense of belonging and involvement (Allen, McManus, & Russell, 1999). In the psychological sphere, senior students offered role modelling, mentoring, and friendship to help the new students to reduce stress and uncertainty and to develop strong sense of being a university student.

The data from this study revealed the powerful influence of parents. The current study highlights the importance of student-parent relationship because it was found that students communicate and discuss university related issues and problem with their parents. According to Wintre and Yaffe (2009), this factor contributes to 'emotional well-being' (p.31). This study indicates that when parents are involved in their child's educational process, the students have more positive attitudes and behaviours, stronger motivation and greater participation in university life. As mentioned by Wilcox et al. (2005) emotional support can have a 'buffering effect against the stressful experience of being alone in a new situation' (p. 718). Students received significant amount of support from their parents emotionally. This support was primarily evident in encouragement, support and

guidance. For some parents, they may not be able to be supportive in academic situations, like undertaking academic work on university assignments, or helping their son or daughter to understand the subject, but they certainly can be supportive in a variety of other ways that can positively affect a student's university experience.

8. Conclusion

Overall findings indicated that higher levels of adjustment associated with levels of support. This suggests the concept of social support that should go further than simply identifying it within the context of university. An important focus in the future therefore should be placed on the promotion of positive peer group interaction in the first year academic context. As findings indicate the importance of student community, it is vital for the senior students and family-networks to help the new students to adapt to a new learning environment, re-building 'supportive atmosphere' in both university and family. It is important to highlight that students establish their own informal social support to meet their own needs. This reiterates the importance of student ability and competency in positioning and managing him/herself in social-life in university. Socio-cultural norms and values are found to have a great influence on social networks formation as found in the results of the present study which indicated the students' preference to meet peers from the same sociological backgrounds and ethnicity. The benefit of being part of their own ethnic group was the opportunity to discuss freely their academic and social issues. Working together and learning from each other is an important feature embedded in multicultural students in Malaysian universities. This suggests that a multicultural university would have different types of networks. This would suggest new questions for future researchers to bring forward when investigating the social networks of a multicultural university, such as how this network functions and helps in student well-being.

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