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The Covid-19 pandemic and the dissolution of the university campus. Implications for student support practice

Abstract

Purpose – This paper problematises student support in higher education during the Covid-19 crisis and proposes an original approach of social network analysis for developing effective support for students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Design/methodology/approach – In this forward-thinking essay, we draw on theoretical ideas from Hannah Arendt in conceptualising the destructive and productive nature of societal crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. We also draw on literature on social network analysis in exploring student support.

Findings – We propose a number of recommendations for university staff to consider when developing effective student support, ranging from nurturing their own professional capital to mapping student support networks and the role of faculty within these.

Originality – This paper emphasises the importance of developing effective student support that works for students from different socio-economic backgrounds. This is essential to avoid regression in widening participation policies and practices, and to promote inclusive university environments.

Keywords: Student support, social networks, widening participation, professional capital, network capital, Covid-19

Setting a scene

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a global crisis in higher education. This crisis is particularly evident in higher education systems that rely heavily on international student tuition fees and where the loss in student numbers equals a significant reduction in university income. The former UK universities minister Chris Skidmore has described the current crisis as ‘a highly anxious time for universities’, particularly in the UK where, due to significant loss of international student tuition fees, universities are expected to experience a £2.5 billion hole in their finances (Skidmore, 2020). The UK Government, like many others across the world, has launched a support package for higher education to respond to these financial concerns, which seeks to regulate admissions and outlines potential support schemes to mediate pressures (UK Government, 2020). Under the current crisis, universities themselves have rapidly introduced new forms of teaching and learning, where shifts to online teaching, new forms of assessment and innovative digital communication tools are all evident (e.g. see Clow, 2020; Clune, 2020; Lederman, 2020). While financial pressures and online modes of teaching are now part of common discourse among university staff, there is

less attention paid to student experience and the specific support needs of students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Universities UK (2020) – the representative organisation for the UK's universities since 1918 – has raised concerns about the implications of the current pandemic and its potential long-term impact on widening participation in UK universities. It argues that ‘cold spots in higher education’ will increase in terms of access and support available to disadvantaged students, and has demanded that the Government puts in place ‘measures to support retention and progression, particularly for those students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who will suffer from prolonged absence from more traditional support’ (Universities UK, 2020). It is especially important that as educators we emphasise this need for student support. Research evidence shows that while online courses can provide increased access to higher education, they can also lack the essential academic and wellbeing support that disadvantaged students need and would otherwise be able to access when studying on campus (Bettinger and Loeb, 2017).

It can be expected, therefore, that the current dissolution of physical and social environment of universities will have a significant effect on students, raising issues around routine and self-discipline, mental/physical wellbeing, study motivation and feelings of isolation. It can also be the case that students from disadvantaged backgrounds will be hit the hardest (Montacute, 2020). In response, we use this forward-thinking essay to explore one possible approach to enabling higher education and university staff to build and deploy their professional capital, ensuring they can more effectively support students during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (as well as similar crises in future). We begin by unpacking the nature of the Covid-19 crisis before discussing the opportunities that the innovative approach to treating student support as a form of a social network can offer. We will conclude with reflections that aim to provide food for thought to university staff when developing and providing student support.

Covid-19: A crisis that is both destructive and productive

Every societal crisis can and needs to be seen as being both simultaneously destructive and productive: they dissolve but also reconstitute human communities. This is wonderfully illustrated by German-American political theorist, Hannah Arendt (1954, 4), who argued that ‘in every crisis a piece of the world, something common to us all, is destroyed’; which rings true when we consider that common individual experiences can only appear where there is a shared objective world of

stable structures, spaces and things ‘which as the table gathers together those who sit around it’ (Bowring, 2011, 25). It is evident that Covid-19 and its effects on universities (as well as society more broadly, of course) constitutes a crisis where rather stable structures, such as university campuses with their shared facilities and face to face communities and practices, are temporarily dissolved and transformed into something less familiar – an online platform. This in turn raises issues around university finances, the modes of education and student support. The use of digital tools or the existence of financial pressures in the higher education sector themselves are not new, but the fact that the whole university experience is transformed into a digital experience deserves attention. This is particularly the case when otherwise well-established student support services, e.g. as relating to academic, social and mental health support, are all either temporarily closed or transformed into less personalised forms of online services.

At the same time, however, it is important to note that every crisis offers an opportunity to explore and find new structures and forms of engagement to critically reimagine educational practices and interactions (Bowring, 2011; Norberg, 2011). Each crisis raises the ultimate question of: ‘what community or form of "human living-together" is possible when its (potential) members no longer have anything [physically] in common?’ (Norberg, 2011, 139). A crisis allows us to see which structures, habitual reactions and forms of engagement are no longer adequate to provide guidance (Norberg, 2011), forcing us to return to the questions where old answers do not provide solutions (Arendt, 1954). Like Arendt (1954), we believe it is the ultimate role of education to embrace novelty and allow new practices to emerge. The current situation therefore provides an opportunity for us, as educational practitioners, to consider and promote new forms of communities, networks and interactions that students can form and engage with to cope with the crisis situation.

Finding opportunities in social networks: The role of student support networks

When attempting to facilitate the best possible student support for academic and wellbeing purposes (e.g. in support of learning/coursework, mental health and stress management), it is essential to start by considering what support networks students develop to reconcile the temporary loss of university campus. For example, who are the key individuals, groups and services that students interact with to support their university studies? It is likely that there is an interaction between formal support provided by universities (e.g. through course teams and support services),

and informal support provided by peer networks and families. It may also be that these informal networks reach beyond local and national boundaries, due to the use of social media, which serves to connect students with a variety of other international networks. In order to capture such complexities, we believe that it is increasingly important to draw on social network analysis as a way to enhance our understandings of effective support practices. This is because such methods can help universities and educators to recognise, develop and promote interactions that exist in times where remote work and practices have become a new normality. Yet social network analysis is likely to be an approach that many university educators are unaware of, let alone have any formal training in.

We define a social network as a set of relevant actors (i.e., persons or groups) connected to each other by one or more relations (Daly, 2010; Wellman, 1983, 2001; Chua and Wellman, 2016; Marin and Wellman, 2011). Like Wellman (2001, 228) we argue that (student) communities function in networks, and these networks of interpersonal ties ‘provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity’. Recent educational research (Brown, 2020; Brown and Flood, 2020b; Fordham et al., 2018; Van Waes et al., 2018) has shown that strong networks can create effective support for learning and more potent opportunities to tackle challenging issues.

In the age of digital capitalism – where global economic relations increasingly rely on digital platforms that connect businesses and consumers across the globe – networked communities are not necessarily confined to a particular place but can stretch out geographically and socially (Urry, 2012). Technological changes have caused a shift from place-based interactions to person-to-person connectivity resulting in what Wellman (2001) terms ‘networked individualism’. Networked individualism is particularly important in a context where, over the past two decades, students in many countries have been constructed both as individual consumers of higher education as well as investors in their own futures (Brooks, 2019; Raaper, 2019; Tomlinson, 2017). Educational reforms have promoted individualised ways of working and interacting, and it can be expected that student support networks are also personalised, relying primarily on individuals and where formalised university services are there to provide additional support.

It is also important to recognise, however, that students from diverse social backgrounds may hold different levels of network capital to engage with support available. Network capital is here understood as an individual's capacity 'to engender and sustain social relations with those people who are not necessarily proximate, and which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit' (Urry, 2012, 27). Society itself is a structure composed of unequal elements (Simmel, 1908), and it is likely that the current crisis amplifies these inequalities even further (Christakis and Fowler, 2010). In the context of student support in higher education, students from different socio-economic backgrounds are likely to have different levels of access to technology and social/cultural capital to seek out for support, and this may place students into disadvantaged positions depending on their family resources (Putnam, 2010). Understanding such differences is particularly important in times of crisis, where individual and societal wellbeing will heavily depend on being able to provide and access support. Emphasis on social networks (e.g. understanding that student support exists and operates within networks) can therefore offer a much-needed lens to recognise and then support the interconnected patterns of relations between individuals (Brown, 2020; Daly et al., 2016).

Concluding reflections: how can we best develop student support networks?

We have outlined the potential of social networks in capturing and understanding the (unequal) support students from different backgrounds may have during the ongoing Covid19 crisis. Our further research in the area aims to trace and map the patterns of support that exist across student groups and identify key areas for student support interventions. In the meantime, however, there are a number of areas for us as educators to consider in developing meaningful and efficient student support. We conclude by identifying for the reader what we feel are the most important points to take away from this analysis of student support:

First, we need to acknowledge the role of our own professional networks and professional capital in developing effective student support. By seeing ourselves as resourceful educators who draw on individual strengths, existing knowledge, our past experiences and, vitally our own collegial connections, we are able to best understand the student support needs and fulfil our role in supporting student learning and thriving. Like Hargreaves and Fullan (2012, 2013) we believe that to effectively develop our professional support in a way that will benefit disadvantaged students

the most, we need to consider the role of social interactions and social capital formation in our work (which itself has been disrupted, with existing social connections shifted to online engagements), and this combined with our individual strengths can lead to successful decision making. It is important to remember that the purpose of our educational work is to engage with ‘expert-driven pursuit of serving [our] students and [our] communities, and in learning, always learning, how to do that better’ (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012, 5). It is therefore crucial to develop and nurture available professional learning networks to support each other in assisting students and their learning (Brown, 2020; Brown and Poortman, 2018).

Furthermore, it is important for us as educators to recognise the systemic inequalities that exist in higher education and the fact that students are unequally placed to succeed in their university studies during the Covid-19 crisis. For example, we need to acknowledge that some students have less access to reliable technological tools which in turn may reduce their opportunities to make use of support that exists online, e.g. either through universities’ official services or informal peer networks that students may develop locally, nationally or even internationally. Some students, e.g. care leavers or estranged students may have limited or no contact at all with their families to receive necessary support (OfS, 2020). It is therefore essential to emphasise the provision of technological devices and online support to students who are in need.

Finally, as educators we need to consider who and what services form the support networks for our students. It is of course difficult in a context where student groups are large and often anonymous as common to online education, but we can start by mapping formal university services and key contacts that are available to our students. We could even ask students to draw a map of support available to them, and keep reminding them that seeking out support, but also providing support to peers is essential in times of crisis. Furthermore, we each need to understand our own role in student support networks. As course leaders, academic or pastoral service providers, we operate as part of various professional networks, but we can also form an important part of student support networks. It is likely that some students are better skilled or prepared to reach out to us and make use of the support available. We therefore need to develop mechanisms through which we systematically engage with all students, enabling those who may otherwise fall between the cracks to also benefit from contact and support that is available.

We believe that by helping higher education staff develop student support networks during the times of crisis, it will be possible to promote new forms of positive engagement and social resilience that benefit both students and their learning, university communities and society more broadly. The current pandemic therefore raises a need and an opportunity for us as educators to consider how to best support student learning and thriving in times of crisis, and what role student support networks play as part of this.

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