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How academic streaming churns students' social networks: Evidence from students in an elite Chinese university

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Biographies

Dr Jinjing Fang is a doctoral graduate from the University of Auckland. Her research resides within the exploration about multidimensional factors that contribute to students' motivational beliefs and psychological wellbeing, and the consequences of educational assessment.
Dr Gavin Brown is professor specialising in quantitative data analysis and psychometrics at the University of Auckland. He is also an affiliated professor at Umeå University. His research focuses on the relationship of assessment qualities and purposes to student and teacher responses around assessment including learning outcomes across a variety of cultural and social contexts.
Dr Richard Hamilton is currently an Honorary Academic within the University of Auckland. His research is focused on the application and evaluation of cognitive psychological theory and research within important instructional contexts.

ABSTRACT

Background: Streaming policies may impact students' study- and/or social-based connections. Social network analysis can examine effects of an academic streaming mechanism on student connections.

Aims: This study investigates how students' study and social networks changed in a high-prestige Chinese university, where the top 10% of the cohort are streamed into an honours college and students are assigned to dormitories based on faculty rather than performance. A second sorting system at the end of the first semester moves students into or out of the honours college, without changing their dormitory situation.

Samples: 382 freshmen completed online surveys in first and second semesters (i.e., 6 months apart) before and after the second streaming mechanism.

Methods: Strong study and social ties were distinguished from four sources: class, dormitory, room and other. Name nominations were used to collect data via self-reported questionnaires. Network size, turnover (i.e., replacement rate of old ties with new ones), multiplexity (i.e., overlap between tie functions) and diversity (i.e., degree to which connections consist of people with different characteristics) were evaluated.

Results: Findings suggested similar network sizes between programmes. As expected, honours students had significantly higher network turnover in the learning environment across time. Students who started and remained in the ordinary group had increasing multiplexity between classroom and dorm-room environments. Contrarily, honours students' study and social ties were much less overlapping, especially after the second academic streaming. Honours students had greater tendency to connect with peers from their own academic programme or other students in the honours college. The distinct network circles and less versatile functions of network members for honours students may indicate less satisfied social support.

Conclusions: This study contributes substantially to the understanding of potentially negative impact of academic streaming on students' social connections by revealing different network patterns in honours and ordinary cohorts after re-streaming.