CLASSROOM EFFECTS: SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND THE PERSISTENCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

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Presents a mixed-methods case study examination of the effects of classroom based social integration on the intentions' of higher education students to persist in higher education. The theoretical framework of the study is the adaptation of the social integration approach of Tinto (1993, 1975) to a classroom context (Tinto, 1997). Student-to-student and student-to-teaching staff contact, two aspects of social integration that are the focus of the present study, have received empirical support (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). However, the critiques of Tinto's (1975, 1993) model have been significant including its applicability in different educational contexts (Longden, 2004) including for non-residential and commuting students. Consequently, the core research question of the study is 'Will classroom based social integration with classmates and teaching staff influence the intention of students to persist in Higher Education?' Qualitative and quantitative data from focus groups, interviews and a questionnaire (n=254) provided evidence that classroom based social integration influences the intentions of higher education students to persist. The research supports an amendment of Tinto's (1993, 1975) model to include classroom based social integration as an influence on persistence.

INTRODUCTION

Student non-completion of higher education is not an insignificant problem. The significance of the issue can be viewed from a student, educational institution and societal perspective. Mooney et al. (2010) report an average non-progression rate by new entrants in Irish higher education of 15%. Furthermore, when examined by the educational sector 'non-presence rates' varied from 22% in Institutes of Technology (IoTs) to 9% in the Universities. While it is acknowledged a student's departure may also be in their best interests (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008) a degree of non-completion is preventable and it is the responsibility of the college to retain their students (Yorke, 1999).

Berger and Lyon (2005) explain that student persistence and retention studies are in the thousands thus making it one of the most studied fields in higher education. However, a theme that can be identified from the factors influencing student persistence is how few of them are under the control of the individual educator in a Higher Education Institution (HEI). This study investigating the influence of classroom based social integration provides a research context for the individual educator in addressing student withdrawal.

The study is of further particular relevance with the changing nature of higher education, which has moved to a mass enterprise with an associated diversification of the student population with increased numbers of mature students and low socio-economic status students, all of which could be described as non-traditional students (Mooney et al., 2010; Fleming et al., 2010; McCoy et al., 2010; HEA, 2011, 2008). Further, the student body includes more commuting students, students in increased levels of employment and a much less college integrated student body (Kuh, 2001-2002). Thus the classroom context becomes ever more important as a point of contact with students.

In, addition it can also be argued at this point in time that the body of research on student persistence in an Irish context needs development (Mooney at al., 2010).

LITERATURE

**Tinto's model of student persistence**

Tinto (1975,1993) developed a theoretical model to explain the process of persistence or withdrawal of students from a HEI. It can be used to highlight the particular student and environmental factors that influence retention. Tinto's (1975, 1993) model, which has proven highly influential in the field has reached "near-paradigmatic status" (Braxton et al., 2000:569).

Broadly, Tinto's (1975, 1993) model proposes that students enter college with a variety of personal characteristics, pre-college school experiences and family backgrounds, which influence the development of educational goal commitments and educational institutional commitments and thus persistence or withdrawal from college. Furthermore, the model proposes that given the prior characteristics of the student, and their prior educational commitments it is the individuals level of academic and social integration into the college that directly relates to new educational goal commitments and institutional commitments and thus to persistence or withdrawal from college (Tinto, 1975).

Academic integration is made up of structural and normative dimensions. The structural dimensions refer to the academic standards of the educational institution. The normative dimensions refer to the individual's identification with the academic structures of the educational institution. Social integration refers to the congruence between the individual and the social system of the educational institution. It reflects a student's perception of their congruence with the attitudes, values, beliefs, and norms of the social communities of a college, as well as his or her degree of social affiliation. Social integration has been proposed to occur at an educational institutional level and a sub-cultural level (Braxton et al. 2008;

Tinto, 1975). The level of academic and social integration influences the subsequent educational goal and institutional commitment. That is the greater the integration the greater the educational commitment. The student's initial institutional and educational goal commitment also influences the subsequent commitment. The greater the subsequent institutional and educational goal commitment the greater the likelihood the individual will persist in college (Braxton and Hirschy, 2005). Figure 1 presents a graphical illustration of the model.

Figure 1   Tinto's model of student persistence
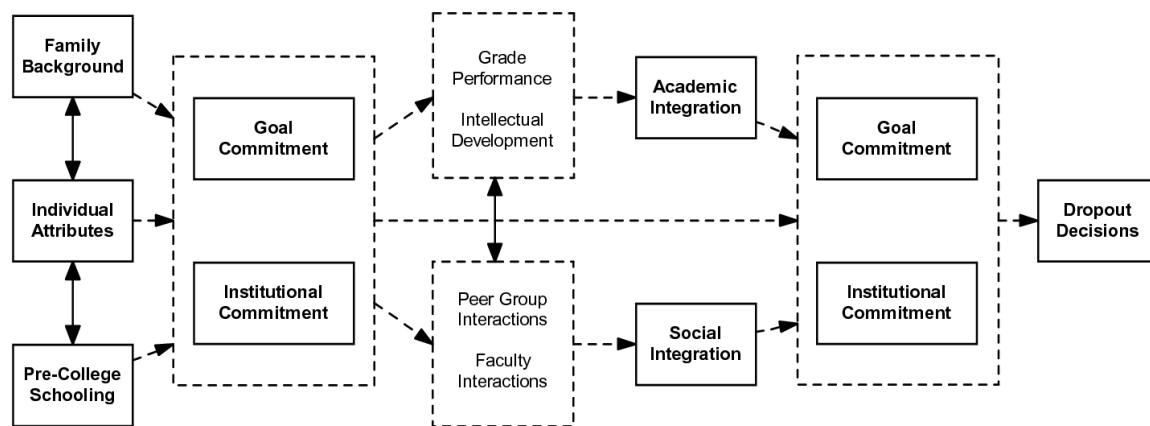
(Tinto, 1975)

Stage (1989) elaborates on the implication of Tinto's model by explaining that if two students with similar backgrounds and similar educational goal commitments were to enter college at the same time, then the level of academic and or social integration of a student into the college would be predictive of college persistence or withdrawal. Stage (1989:385) summarises that "there is agreement that the model as described by Tinto explains the attrition/persistence process in general".

The critiques of Tinto's (1975, 1993) model have been significant and wide ranging (Kuh and Love, 2000; Rendon, 2000; Tierney, 1992; Attinasi, 1989). This critique includes the empirical relevance of the Tinto model for non-traditional students and its applicability in different educational contexts (Longden, 2004). Longden (2004) in a paper questioning the appropriateness of the Tinto model makes two related and valid points. The first point is that the data used in the development of the model were analysed in the early seventies. The second point is that the model is based on data from private, full-time, residential universities and colleges in the United States and thus may not have the applicability and portability to other cultures and higher education systems. This critique of Tinto's model has resulted in its need for development for different educational environments (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Yorke, 2004; Braxton et al., 2004). For example, Braxton and Lee (2005) conducted a review of single institution studies on Tinto's model in which none of the thirteen testable propositions drawn from the model were supported for commuter educational institutions. Commuter institutions have an enrollment that is primarily comprised of students who live off-campus and thus have less developed social communities and students who have family and work obligations (Braxton and Lee, 2005) characteristic of non-traditional students. Thus, the authors called for further research in testing theory in commuter educational institutions.

With critiques significant and wide ranging (Braxton, 2000) scholars may select one of two courses of action; the revision of Tinto's theory or the pursuit of new theoretical perspectives. This study focused on a modification of Tinto's model (1993, 1975).

Classroom based initiatives

Tinto (1993) in revising his model synthesised it with research not dealt with in his original 1975 work including the role of classroom experiences as an influence in student departure decisions (Braxton and Hirschy, 2005). Tinto (1993) observes that classrooms are at the very centre of educational institutions and thus of persistence. However, classroom based initiatives leading to social integration and to educational commitment and thus to persistence are under-researched (Demaris and Kritsonis 2008; Tinto, 1997, 2000).

A study supportive of a classroom focus in persistence research is Karp et al. (2010-2011), who similarly have identified Tinto's model as not applicable to community college students who are typically non-residential and commuting, in a US context. They explain the rationale for this argument is social integration is often not possible for community college students due to their living elsewhere, work commitments and family obligations off-campus. The authors (2010-2011) found for many students the ability to connect with fellow students and teaching staff through classroom discussion was important for developing social relationships. Furthermore, the relationships grounded in the academic environment helped students feel part of the academic community. For community college students academic and social integration were not distinct concepts but intertwined and developed through the same processes. The student-centered pedagogies appeared to help students develop social networks that created a sense of belonging and encourage persistence.

Learning communities is a current area of study where the focus is on the classroom and its influence on persistence. The term learning community is broad in meaning and implementation (Andrade, 2008). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) explain that learning communities can involve the block scheduling of students so they take the same two or three

courses or modules at the same time. The courses are tied together by a common theme, there is shared learning on the courses with students working cooperatively (Tinto, 1997). Andrade (2008) adds learning communities typically have 20-25 students although students may attend lectures with a large group of students. Further connected learning, that is integrating knowledge, from different disciplines is an aim (Andrade, 2008). Andrade (2008) explains academic assistance may be provided and students may have shared residence. The aim of learning communities is to increase students learning and persistence. Learning communities share common features of the class or course/programme structure used in many IoTs – block scheduling, courses with a common theme, relatively small class groups, cooperative and connected learning, faculty providing academic assistance as part of the course. Tinto (1997) contrasts the learning community model with students as 'detached individual units', explaining learning communities allow students to socially integrate and meet academic needs.

Tinto (2000) conducted a multi-method study of several learning community programmes over multiple years. The results of the study were organised under three themes. The first theme makes the point that learning communities helped students make the transition to college and integrate into a community of peers. This was especially true of younger students and in commuter institutions. The student groups extended beyond the classroom, provided support and influenced persistence despite the challenges of college. The second theme was that learning communities helped students' bridge the academic social divide by meeting the demands of social integration and academic integration without sacrificing either. The third theme was the involvement that developed as a result of learning communities resulted in increased academic effort, greater perceptions of intellectual gain and increased persistence.

The finding for persistence remained even after taking account of "individual and contextual data" (Tinto, 2000:88).

Further studies support the learning community concept (Zepke and Leach, 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Johnson, 2001). Similarly, Andrade (2008) reviewed thirty empirical studies and reported positive outcomes under four headings 1) persistence, 2) academic achievement, 3) involvement and 4) satisfaction. The author (2008) further claims a finding of the review is, that learning communities can be equally successful for a variety of institutions and for students of different backgrounds – including technical and commuter institutions and non-traditional students. The author (2008) also explains that the simple learning community models have outcomes similar to complex learning community models. Thus common residence halls, academic mentoring and academic assistance may not be necessary to achieve the positive outcomes.

Conclusion

The limitations to Tinto's (1975, 1993) model require revisions. The revision suggested in this study is to examine the influence of classroom based social integration on student persistence. Classroom based social integration is argued as an adaptation of Tinto's (1993, 1975) model that will have increased relevance for commuting and non-residential students. Specifically the research question arising from the literature is: Will classroom based social integration with classmates and teaching staff influence the intention of students to persist in Higher Education?

METHODOLOGY

Overview

The present researcher took a pragmatic philosophical position. This pragmatic position allows for an outcome focused mixed methods case study approach to answering the research questions (Whittemore et al., 2001). A case study approach was chosen on the grounds of the potential it has towards an understanding of the research questions posed (Yin, 1994). The justification for utilising mixed methods in this study was to achieve a complementarity and triangulation on research findings (Greene et al., 1989).

Sampling

The present case study is a non-probability convenience sample of students from a campus of a HEI; essentially a sample that is accessible to the researcher and willing to participate in the study (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). The non-probabilistic form of purposive sampling was used to select the qualitative and quantitative samples from the population of students within the HEI campus. As argued by Bryman (2008:375) "this type of sampling is essentially to do with the selection of units … with direct reference to the research questions being asked".

Research Methods

A quantitative survey, focus groups and interviews were utilised in the present study. The quantitative survey questionnaire was distributed at the end of an academic year and garnered a response of 254 completed questionnaires, 63% of students attending the campus. Four Course Directors were additionally interviewed. Details of the questionnaire tool developed are presented in table 1.

Table 1   Details of questionnaire

Data collected	Details
Demographic data	Relevant factors identified from the literature related to student persistence.
Classroom based social integration	Two scales to measure social integration with staff and with classmates adapted from Pascarella and Terenzini (1980).
Influence of research variables on intent to leave college	Influence of classroom based social integration on intent to leave college, identified as an indicator of persistence (Pascarella et al., 1983; Bean and Metzner, 1985).
Educational Commitment	Measure of educational commitment (goal and institutional) as an indicator of students' intentions to persist with a scale adapted from Pascarella and Terenzini (1980)

Table 2 outlines a chronological view of the implementation of the research methods.

Table 2   Chronology of research methods

Research tool	Sample
Pilot Focus Group	11 participants
Focus group	5 focus groups held with a total of 24 participants at the start, mid-point and end of the academic year
Student interviews	5 interviews with 10 interviewees over the academic year
Pilot Questionnaire	20 respondents
Questionnaire	254 respondents
Withdrawn students interviews	14 interviews post the academic year
Course Directors	4 interviews

Data Analysis

Miles and Huberman (1994) provided a framework for the qualitative data analysis that can be briefly summarised as a three step process involving data reduction, exploring and describing by displaying the data and drawing conclusions.

In the present study non-parametric tests were used to analyse the quantitative data. Non-parametric tests do not depend on assumptions about the precise form of the distribution of

the sampled populations (Bryman and Cramer, 2005). In the present study no variables were manipulated thus inferences about causality are based on theoretical reasoning (Bryman, 2008). In relation to the directionality, the statistical tests conducted were two-tailed implying no directionality to the prediction (Field, 2009).

Qualitative data quality

The trustworthy criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and objectivity which are parallels of the 'conventional' paradigm criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity were utlised in the study (Lincoln and Guba, 2007). To achieve the trustworthy criteria a number of strategies were utilised in the present study: triangulation; negative case analysis; member checks; a full record of all data, coding and data analysis; field note conventions; interview recordings were re-listened to after transcription to avoid 'drift' in the meaning of codes; and a reflective journal. (Lincoln and Guba, 2007; Silverman, 2005; Creswell, 2009; Teddlie and Tashkkori, 2009).

Quantitative data quality

Robson (2002) identifies participant bias as a cause of unreliability. To limit this form of bias all respondents were given neutral instruction and asked to read the instruction on the questionnaire. Furthermore, only a limited number of the students sampled would have known who the researcher was. Response bias was also reduced by having negatively worded items forcing respondents to read the items carefully (Field, 2009)

Internal reliability asks if each item in a multiple-item scale is internally consistent. The most widely used measure is Cronbach's alpha. The rule of thumb is that it should be 0.8 or above (Bryman and Cramer, 2005). Nunnally (1978) recommends that the lower limit acceptable for

Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.7. However, for some exploratory studies .6 can be tolerated (Hair et al., 1998). The two scales used in the study, the number of items in each scale and the Cronbach alpha's for each scale in the end-of-year questionnaire and the original study from which they were adapted are presented in table 3.

Table 3   Cronbach's alpha scores

Scale	No. of items	Cronbach Alpha End-of-year Sample	Pascarella and Terenzini (1980)
Classroom based social integration teaching staff	5	.67	.83
Classroom based social integration with classmates	7	.70	.82
Educational commitment	5	.70	.71

The number of items is reported as the value of Cronbach's alpha depends on the number of items on the scale. The more items on the scale the greater Cronbach's alpha (Field, 2009). With short scales of less than ten, low Cronbach's alphas of .5 are common (Pallant, 2001).

In the questionnaire the researcher aimed to ensure the measures were a fair and comprehensive representation of the issues they claimed to represent and demonstrated face validity (Bryman and Cramer, 2005). To establish construct validity the concepts of social integration and intentions to persist were rooted in an extensive literature review and adaptations of exiting measures of the concepts (Cohen at al., 2000).

Ethical considerations

A personal code of ethical practice informed by relevant ethical guidelines was brought to a consideration of the following; research which can be of benefit to participants, respecting the

dignity and privacy of all participants, honesty and openness with participants, involvement of all significant individuals, negotiation, reporting of progress, confidentiality, authorisation of access, sensitivity and good relations. A further criterion of ethical research is quality (Bryman, 2008).

FINDINGS

Overview

There were 254 respondents to the questionnaire. The sample had approximately 70% females, 45% mature students, over 50% were in some form of employment and 80% were concerned about educational finances. Over 65% of students resided with their families during the academic year and approximately 50% of students' parents did not attend higher than the Junior/Inter certificate level of secondary education. Furthermore, students had a bias towards lower socio-economic groups and social class status. The demographic data provides a profile of less than traditional higher education students, which research in an Irish context indicates may have lower rates of progression (Mooney et. al, 2010; Eivers et al., 2002; Morgan et al., 2001; Healy et al., 1999). Findings for the research question: Will classroom based social integration with classmates and teaching staff influence the intention of students to persist in Higher Education? are now presented.

The relationship between the classroom based social integration of students and educational commitment (a measure of student persistence) was investigated using Spearman's rank order correlation. There was a low positive correlation between the two variables with high levels of social integration with classmates having a low association with high levels of educational commitment. This correlation is significant at $p = < .01$, $r_s = .20$ and $n = 237$. The researcher also examined the relationship between classroom based social integration with staff and educational commitment. This again was investigated using Spearman's rank order correlation with a low to moderate positive correlation found between the two variables ($p = < .01$ level, $r_s = .35$ and $n = 238$). Thus, high levels of social integration with staff are low to moderately associated with high levels of educational commitment.

Confirmation of a relationship between classmates and teaching staff and intentions to persist was also sought via a direct question. Students were asked if classmates or teaching staff were a reason for considering leaving college. Table 4 presents responses.

Table 4   Influence of classmates on intent to leave

Statement	Major reason %	Minor reason %	Not a Reason %
I do not have a good relationship with classmates	3.7	9.1	87.1
I do not have a good relationship with teaching staff	2.9	10.4	86.7

n=248

The relationships classmates have with each other was cited as a major/minor reason for considering leaving college for 31 or 13% of students. This 13% of students is equivalent to approximately 1 in 8 students. Somewhat comparable Healy et al. (1999) in a study of three IoTs including IT Carlow found 10% of students gave lack of friends as a reason for non-completion. An interpretation of the data also indicates that poor relationships with teaching staff are a major/minor reason for 1 out of every 8 students to consider leaving college. Pascarella and Terenzini (1979) have previously found the student-faculty relationship was the most important positive influence on persistence for first years.

The quantitative results can be interpreted as indicating classmates and teaching staff have an influence on students' intentions to persist in higher education. It is acknowledged that the effect sizes presented are limited however the strength of the relationships between classmates and teaching staff and intentions to persist must be understood in the context of the multiple factors that impact on student persistence such as academic ability and course of study (Astin and Oseguera, 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Eivers et al., 2002; Morgan et al., 2001; Healy et al., 1999; Yorke, 1999; Bean and Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975). As an additional note the questionnaire survey took place at the end of the academic year after it

would be expected most voluntary withdrawals took place. Thus the quantitative data is reflective of those students who persisted and attended rather than the whole student body and thus the quantitative evidence for classroom based social integration may be understated.

Qualitative data provides additional confidence to the quantitative findings as well as an understanding of the classroom based social integration processes. In summary, this data can be interpreted as indicating social integration with classmates and teaching staff did influence persistence and vice versa its absence can contribute to student withdrawal. Data analysis shows classroom based social integration was a difficult and fragile process that began in first year at the induction programme. In addition, classroom based social integration can be interpreted as influencing academic development and can for some students be more important. However, classroom based social integration is identified as just one of the multiple factors influencing persistence. Qualitative data is now presented with the use of pseudonyms.

Social integration with peers provides a support for students that can motivate them in their educational journey. Denise links her motivation and her class attendance to her classmates:

> … I think the class is a big motivation because sometimes when you're just not bothered to go in the fact that you get on so well with everyone and half the time you just go in for the chat, the messing and the laugh. I think that's a big motivation …

Margaret, a mature student, also explains that peers are a motivation:

> I think part of reinforcing [my motivation] is making friends in college, … for me having friends, people that I can work with, with other subjects that we can help each other … that does really motivate [you] when you know that there is somebody there to help if you are stuck with anything …

A start-of-year focus group comment explains the link between student and staff relationships, academic support and completion:

> … I think if you got too bogged down with the course and the assignments and stuff and you couldn't go to someone, couldn't approach someone for help then you would just be likely to say 'well feck I can't do that no one is there to help me, I am out the door' but because of the fact that a lot, all of the lecturers are very approachable that you can go to them and ask them, the girls, … like about assignments and stuff so I think that is a major key for completing the course.

Ameila similarly identifies classmates and staff as motivating:

> Yeah I think the class is motivating and just if you're feeling even worried about it there's, you know, texting each other and all that coming up to assignments. The lecturers, like I've kind of four main lecturers now and they're very motivating like, their personalities and all.

Jenny explains she withdrew from college as absences due to illness resulted in her not being well integrated socially:

> I missed a lot of the first few weeks as well so I didn't really get on with anyone great either … I don't think I know anybody … I didn't really have anybody that I could kind of hang around with or anything … Because I missed a lot so that was probably a reason as well [for withdrawing] actually.

Mark, a mature student, who also withdrew similarly explains that failure to socially integrate partially lead to his withdrawal:

> I withdrew from the college around Christmas time … because some of the people were, they weren't my kind of people, you know … Ah there was a few personal reasons but most of them were to do with the people around the college, you know.

If social integration is absent it can be interpreted as factor in a student's non-completion. A Course Director agrees that for some students poor integration with their peers is a factor in their non-completion:

> At times, it could be their connection with classmates … That they're not as connected with the class group …

Poor relationships with teaching staff can also be a factor in reducing a student's intention to persist. A withdrawn mature student, Eddie, was asked what influenced his withdrawal:

> … it would be just the total lack of communication between a couple of the lecturers, a couple of the senior lecturers … It's a lack of, just a lack of communication and a certain aloofness.

Tinto (1993:117) highlighted how the presence of interaction or involvement may not guarantee persistence but its absence "… almost always enhances the likelihood of departure".

The positive impact of social integration on persistence began from the induction programme for first year students. The induction icebreakers helped a young Business studies student, Brenda, settle into college:

> The icebreakers [helped] yeah because not only do you know people now, who is in your course you know, other students around the college, like [to] be able to recognise them on the corridors and stuff.

The difficulty of establishing relationships at the start of the year is also commented on by Kate who initially made friends with a student who withdrew:

> Well for the first while it was kind of difficult there was one, one girl [Jenny] was it … she was in the class I don't know where she is gone … I haven't seen her in ages but she was in my induction, so I kind of was hanging around with her she then she kind of disappeared, so I kind of had nobody then for a while and then I started being friends with [Ruby] and [Ruby] was friends with [Layla] you know.

Ameila, a mature student, explains the positive impact a member of staff had on her settling in college, in a start of year focus group.

> … I think the day I was feeling particularly bad I met a lecturer on the stairs and she said like 'good morning [Ameila]', I was like she knows my name and it really helped, it really did help without even, I didn't talk to any of the lecturers about feeling negative about it actually but they just kept being so friendly that I kept [attending], that has helped.

The process of integration is not easy and the initial period can be difficult for students (Yorke, 2000).

The Art Course Director explains how he uses group work to integrate first years with each other which has an academic value:

> I do believe that if they actually get to know each other and get over the politeness of just hello and actually get stuck into a project together then you have the chance of some real bonds happening and out of those bonds those students become their own support network. That as much emphasis needs to be placed on, lots of emphasis needs to be place on the peer-to-peer learning and their environment that kind of gets them talking to each other.

The use of group work was found to aid the process of integration in the Campus, consistent with previous literature (Braxton et al., 2000). Cartney and Rouse (2006) explain that as the diversity of the student body has increased small group activity is one of the few points of contact and becomes increasingly important. Social integration with staff is identified as a factor in the academic support for students. A Humanities student, Aisling, links the approachability of staff to academic support:

> Then some lecturers like they're very easy to talk to and then if you have any problems like you don't, you're not worrying about it like, do you know, because you feel like a bit of a ejeit then asking them and like they're so supportive as well, like if [you have] any queries just go to them.

A Course Director makes the same staff relationship and learning link:

> We actually get know each of our students quite individually … And I think that makes a big difference because I think they feel, it makes them feel part of a community and they realise that the lecturer is part of that community too. It's an exchange of ideas.

A one-to-one interview with a Business student, Margaret, makes a link between the social and the academic:

> I find the tutors here very motivating as well, that they are there if you need them and there's no problem and I never had any problems that way, if you need [an] extra bit of help and that does really motivate when you know that there is somebody there to help if you are stuck with anything so.

Social integration with teaching staff was linked by students to academic support which has been linked to student persistence (McInnis, 2001; Tinto, 2000). Academic and social integration may not be separate processes but intertwined and developed through the same processes, which is especially relevant for non-traditional students (Karp et al., 2010-11). This social interaction adding value to the academic has been suggested as an institutional response to 'modern students' (McInnis, 2001). The classroom is a place for social integration and the academic integration and development of students without the necessity to sacrifice either (Tinto, 1997). However for some students social integration rather than academic integration may be a more important motivation. Joan, explains her peers are motivating her:

> … it's just the people that [are] kind of making you stay here …[the] class and your own little group that you hang around with for lunch and everything … The ones that you can go talk to, they do like, … and the people in your class group are the ones motivating me but otherwise assignment[s] [are] just not my thing.

It is not possible for a student to persist without meeting the academic requirements but social integration also appears key for persistence with the balance may varying depending on the individual. Harvey et al. (2006) report that early departure may be more related to social integration reasons rather than academic reasons. This social integration academic integration link is relevant and important as the classroom can provide a gateway for further and future contact with classmates and teaching staff outside of the classroom thus allowing further social and academic integration (Tinto, 1993).

It is argued here classroom based social integration with classmates and staff are an influence on student persistence however they are not a persistence panacea. For example, a Course Director links completion to the qualification as well as the teaching staff:

> I think one of the biggest motivational factors for them is around gaining the academic qualification, is quite a motivation. The motivation I think is that they do develop relationships with some of the lecturers and they don't want to let the lecturer down in some ways. You know the lecturer has put a lot into their learning, into the outcomes, into the quality of the teaching and they want to stay and for us to be proud of them. I've seen it at graduation.

A Course Director similarly outlines that to believe social integration on its own can influence a student's completion is overstating it but agrees that it has an influence:

> I think it [relationships with classmates as a persistence factor] might be overstating it. I think if they're going to complete it, they're going to complete for themselves … I think if they're involved in the place, if they're coming in here and getting involved in the community of doing work in the studio … they've got a much better chance of getting through because there's a sense of camaraderie that they're all in it together …

Similarly, Kate, a Business studies student, does place importance on social integration but puts the engagement with the course as having equal importance: "If you don't enjoy it, if you don't find it interesting, like if you don't get on [with] everybody, like you're not going to want to come back". Thus staff and students are just two of the multiple factors that lead to increased intentions to persist.

The link between social integration with peers and persistence has been well established (Braxton et al., 2004; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005, Tinto, 1975; Astin and Oseguera, 2005). However, the relationship between social integration and persistence for non-traditional and commuting students is not well established (Astin and Oseguera, 2005; Bean and Metzner, 1985). Furthermore, the specific focus on classroom based social integration is under-researched. Thus, the finding of this research study that classroom based social integration influences persistence is important. The quantitative and qualitative data suggests a student who has integrated well with a classmate and or a member of teaching staff will be more committed to the institution and to their education goals. It supports the amendment of Tinto's (1993, 1975) model to include the classroom as a place where students intentions to

persist can be influenced. It adds to the literature (Tinto, 2000; 1997; Zepke and Leach, 2005) and has positive implications for non-residential and commuter students and as well as HEIs.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the research study indicate support for the role of the classroom in influencing students' intentions to persist. The classroom is therefore a context in which students' intentions to persist can be examined and influenced. Yorke and Longden (2004) provided a schematic of the layered set of influences on student departure. Figure 2 is an adaptation of the Yorke and Longden (2004) schematic with the classroom context added.

Figure 2   Influences on student departure
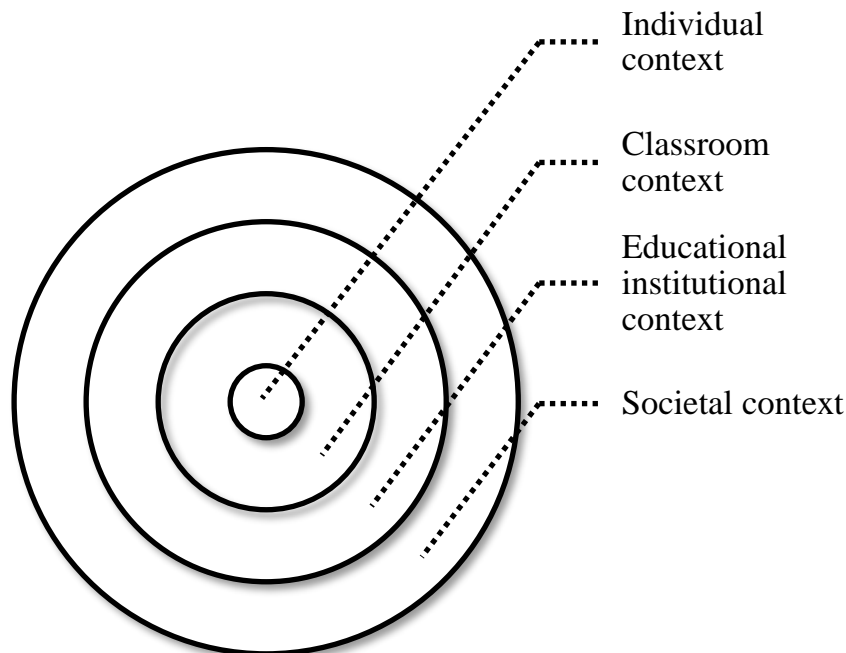
The findings of this study support the addition of the classroom context as an influence on student persistence.

At an institutional level the implications of the study concern a HEI making a commitment to the educational experience of a student through building social and educational communities, providing social supports, aiding the development of teaching staff and focusing on the first year experience

A commitment to the educational experience rather than retention is necessary. The key to successful retention is to focus on the educational and the student experience (Yorke and Longden, 2004). A part of this commitment to education is the building of social and educational communities. For many students the classroom presents one of the few opportunities to interact with teaching staff and classmates (Kuh, 2001-2002). Learning occurs best in social communities which actively involve students (Tinto, 2003b). Students need to be supported in their involvement, teaching staff need to reach out to create links and bonds to develop the classroom as a social and intellectual community (Healy et al., 1999). Thus the focus of teaching staff from early in the first term should be as much on integration as it is focused on education. The teaching and learning strategies used on Campus must be biased towards being student-centred and interactive (Jones, 2008). If students do not involve themselves in the classroom environment they will likely remain uninvolved outside of the classroom in the wider college environment.

Linked to creation of social educational communities is the provision of social supports. Social supports recognise the importance of the social nature of education and attempt to develop the links between students and HEIs. These social supports could provide structured opportunities for students to become involved with peers and staff (Jones, 2008; Braxton et al., 2004) and aid in making the social adjustment to higher education. Thus they could include field trips, academic advising or student-staff feedback sessions. The start of the first academic year for students is difficult for students when the connection between students and the HEI is most tenuous. Expanded induction programmes (Hunt, 2010) of sufficient duration and/or delivered in periodic bursts throughout the first term may offer increased opportunities for students to integrate (Jones, 2008; Crosling et al., 2008; Eivers et al., 2002).

In this study teaching staff were found critical to student persistence whether it was through the pedagogical practises that they employ or the contacts they have with students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). The message that the teaching staff are available and approachable must be communicated to students pre-entry, in the induction programme and through the first term. Further, the involvement of teaching staff in open days, college promotions and induction programmes is recommended.

It is in the first year that students have to undergo the most sudden changes including "... social changes; work/study/student lifestyle balance; curriculum changes; assessment changes; and staff relationship changes" (RANLHE, 2009:31). Thus not surprisingly student withdrawal rates are highest in first year (Mooney at al., 2010). Efforts to improve the first year experience of students, educationally and socially, may have positive persistence outcomes. Thus the actions and the linked resources should be disproportionally focused on this key period (Yorke and Longden, 2004) when student links with HEIs may be tenuous.

These institutional recommendations are linked to the focus of this particular study on classroom based social integration thus are not the comprehensive or holistic solutions to the departure puzzle provided by others such as (Seidman, 2005). Further studies in an Irish context focusing on the influence of the classroom context could add further light on student persistence behaviour. Student withdrawal is not always a negative for students or for the educational institutions. The multi-factorial and unique individual nature of student persistence that sees one student continue and another withdraw in similar circumstances makes any attempt to solve the issue complex. Classroom based social integration can it is argued however make a contribution.

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