Students’ negotiations, challenges and strategies

Critical perspectives on agency and social justice in transitions and career development,

DPU/Aarhus University 24 October 2019

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Transitions, trajectories, practices

Most of the research with Henriette Tolstrup Holmegaard and Lene Møller Madsen

High School

Bachelor (BSc)

Master (MSc)

Working life


2014 - 2018

2017 - 2021
Background and approach

- Choices, transitions and completion
- Previous research (cf. Ulriksen, Madsen, Holmegaard, 2010)
  - Recruitment
  - Students’ preparation, frequently quantitative
- Focus on the students’ perspectives and experiences
- Longitudinal and qualitative approach
- A particular focus on natural sciences and engineering
First part: Transitions and challenges
Christian’s story

- During gap year, he looked up information about different computer-science programmes he could imagine studying
- Entered software engineering
  - Struggled with self-discipline: ‘I’m lazy’ – continued the ‘high-school style’ with not studying consistently and ‘getting by’ rather than learning
  - ‘What is the most interesting? Nothing, really.’ But also, the math was difficult
  - Experienced the courses as mostly irrelevant
Christian’s story

• Involved himself in maintaining the computer network at his residence hall
• Set up an IT security club with a friend, made penetration testing and attended a private course about that during the Easter break
• Less time for ordinary classes. He had to reduce the time spent on the alternative curriculum

Ulriksen, Holmegaard, Madsen, 2017
Transitions, gaps and cultures
Transitions, gaps and cultures

Education is also a socialisation into a culture
A way of
• Thinking
• Seeing
• Talking
• Doing
• Being blind

Students enter with
• Expectations and anticipations
• Prior knowledge and competences
• Repertoire of how to be a student

It is in how this meeting is managed from both sides that student opportunities and success are decided
What is challenging?

The content
• Toolbox courses, the sequencing
• Different and difficult
• Legitimate interests

I would say that right now I learn more from sitting grabbing with the computer those Mondays and Thursdays than I do coming to class. Because my classes have no disciplinary relevance at all (Christian)

That there is so much math in it – I had a notion of it, but not to this extent (computer-science student)
What is challenging?

The content
• Toolbox courses, the sequencing
• Different and difficult
• Legitimate interests

The form of studying
• The pace – taking in with no time to understand

In high school there is no real homework [...] You need to spend the first half a year figuring out what works better for you
What is challenging?

The content
• Toolbox courses, the sequencing
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Organising time
• Pulling yourself together
• Dealing with the amount of content

The form of studying
• The pace – taking in with no time to understand

To prioritise. [In high school] you could do it all. There wasn’t so much reading. It was more occasionally, here it is all the time there is loads to do. That has been a bit difficult
The week schedule for a third-year high-school student

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Måndag (16/4)</th>
<th>Torsdag (17/4)</th>
<th>Onsdag (18/4)</th>
<th>Torsdag (19/4)</th>
<th>Fredag (20/4)</th>
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<td>1. modul 8:00 - 9:30</td>
<td>3mt tIA • pla • 4213</td>
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<td>3g byg1A • hhkr • 108</td>
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<td>3g byg1A • hhkr • 108</td>
<td>3mti daA • many • 109</td>
<td>3g byg1A • hhkr • 108</td>
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<td>3. modul 11:50 - 13:20</td>
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<td>3g byg1A • hhkr • 108</td>
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<td>4. modul 13:35 - 15:05</td>
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<td>5. modul 15:15 - 16:00</td>
<td>3g byg1A • hhkr • 108</td>
<td>2-3g itkC • kben • 504 Eksamensprojekt</td>
<td>2017 2g idC id h217 id • mri</td>
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Identity
- Who am I becoming?
- Different realms of students’ lives

Maybe I find it a bit difficult to see myself as a biotech-person
(from PhD project by Andrea Gregersen)
Reflection

Before I move on to identity and the rest of the presentation

- Have a short discussion with your neighbour about what you heard so far
- Is there anything in particular of relevance to your own research and practice?
- Do you have any questions or comments at this stage?
Second part: Identities and practices
Identity work and the implied student

• Students negotiate and balance their expectations with their experiences

• The implied student
  • The tacit assumptions about the students’ interests, aspirations, practices, prior experiences, knowledge and preferences that are embedded in the curriculum, the pedagogy, the institution and in the reactions and interactions of teachers and peers (Ulriksen 2009)
The identity of being a university student

*From an interview about time spent studying (with Christoffer Nejrup)*

INT: Are you satisfied with the effort you put in?

[7 sec pause]

No, I’m actually … yes, I mean, I’m pretty satisfied … well, that was two slightly contradictory replies. I’m pretty satisfied with how I have organised my week. I’ve more or less figured out where I would like to be during the year and how much I would like to keep up with the courses during the year compared to how easy it will be to catch up when studying for the exam

(Social sciences)
The identity of being a university student

Actually, I would like to do some more studying, to come a 100 % prepared for every class, with notes and having done the exercises and everything [⋯]

[Compared to what it would take to be a 100 % prepared]
I’m quite satisfied that I have a life besides my studying
If one highlighted the scheduled hours during a week, then I will never be able to organise my days as freely as I can right now [⋯] So, I’m quite happy that I feel I get to benefit from the freedom I have as a student – that I actually get to use it rather than just sitting there studying all night long

(Social science)
Fellow students

Friends from outside the study

Department of Science Education
The countryside, the family

Holiday job
Fitting and less fitting study strategies

• Students adopt and develop study strategies as a way of dealing with what they experience
  • Their available repertoire (cf. Christian)
  • Sense of relevance
    • Interest and cost (cf. Eccles & Wigfield, 2002)
    • Short-term and long-term relevance
  • Perception of what is required (performance approach)
  • Perception of the teacher’s approach and attitude
• Attending classes, studying for class, participation in class
So … Students develop study practices by balancing and making sense of their expectations about the programme, experiences with the implied student, different realms and different interests, different possible identities and futures, and their available repertoire.

What comes out of the balancing and sense-making is not always conducive to learning and completion – sometimes because of the institutional context.
Third part: from integration to navigation
How to conceptualise students’ balancing and sense-making?

• Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model of student departure
  • Occurs over time; social integration and academic integration
  • Criticised for requiring cultural suicide

• Citation search 2000-2014
  • 426 papers citing Tinto and concerned with academic integration

• Thematic analysis

(Madsen, Holmegaard & Ulriksen, submitted)
Thematic analysis

• How students could become integrated through remedial interventions, support initiatives and scaffolding

• How integration could be facilitated in spaces of learning (classroom, interaction with faculty, learning communities)

• Research on minority students and HE privileging particular groups of students (gender, ethnicity, social class)

It is a relevant critique that talking about integration reduces the power element (Tinto has stopped using the word)

Integration is mostly considered a process of students becoming a part of stable cultural context – a process with an endgoal
Integration ⇒ Navigation

- The assumption that the disciplinary and HE cultures are stable is questionable

↓

The concept of social navigation (Vigh 2009, 2010)
- Young men in wartime in Guinea-Bissau
- How they moved and acted in relation to the ‘pulls and pushes of the social forces’, a ‘metaphorical shadowboxing’ as ‘one moves through a social environment in motion’ (Vigh, 2010, p. 150)
- Moving in a moving context
Academic navigation

• Students move in moving context – not a stable cultural landscape
  • Students move
  • Disciplines are not monolithic
  • HE institutions change for numerous reasons
  • Students navigate various interests and expectations.
  • Sailing is a better metaphor for this with the different forces acting upon the ship, than that of a student following a path or trajectory (cf. Vigh, 2009)

• Academic navigation as a way of conceptualising students’ endeavours to balance and negotiate different interests, conditions and requirements
Coda: Teaching and counselling

• The focus on academic navigation suggests that most initiatives should be rooted in teaching and the discipline rather than generic measures
• Counsellors potentially possess important insights into students’ challenges and experiences
• Counselling should be considered a pedagogical rather than an administrative activity – and counsellors and teachers should tap into each other’s knowledge
Thank you for your attention and to my collaborators?

Henriette T. Holmegaard & Lene Møller Madsen

Christoffer Nejrup

Katia Kromann Nielsen & Andrea F.M. Gregersen


