

Social optimism during studies supports school-to-work transition

February 28 2011

Students' social skills and behaviour in social situations during their university studies contribute to their success in the transition to work. The social strategies adopted during university studies also have an impact on work commitment and early-career coping with working life. These results have been uncovered in a research project investigating the relationship between the social strategies students show at university and how well they cope with work-related challenges. The research has been carried out with funding from the Academy of Finland.

"The higher the initial level of social optimism and the bigger the increase during university studies, the greater the level of early-career work engagement, dedication and career-related commitment," explains Professor Katariina Salmela-Aro, the principal investigator of the research project, from Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. Work engagement is defined as a positive, motivating work-related state of mind characterised by vigour, enthusiasm and dedication. The results of the research project also suggest that [social withdrawal](#) and avoidance during university studies are indicative of a distant attitude towards work and an increased likelihood of exhaustion and [burnout](#) after the transition to working life.

The [longitudinal study](#) spanned 18 years and involved a sample of 292 students at the University of Helsinki, investigating the social strategies young adults adopt and how they make the transition to adulthood. The study is part of the ongoing Helsinki Longitudinal Student Study (HELS).

Little research has been carried out on the role of social strategies adopted during university studies in coping at work and work burnout. "Our findings indicate that social optimism during university studies translates into a high level of work engagement up to 10-15 years after the study-to-work transition. On the other hand, [pessimism](#) and social avoidance seem to increase the likelihood of work burnout and exhaustion during the 10-15 years after the studies," says Salmela-Aro.

According to Salmela-Aro, the ways in which people deal with [social situations](#) may have far-reaching implications for future life success. "Good interpersonal skills, an active social approach and a sense of community and involvement can equip students with the personal resources necessary in making the transition to everyday work and the competitive world of career-making."

The results of the study suggest that more attention should be paid to students' community engagement and the development of their social competence, since these are factors greatly facilitating a successful study-to-work transition.

More information: Salmela-Aro, K., et al., Social strategies during university studies predict early career work burnout and engagement: 18-year longitudinal study, *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (2011)

Provided by Academy of Finland

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