

Academic performance shapes student social networks

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Credit: Vilem Skarolek/public domain

Based on data from the VKontakte social network, researchers at Higher School of Economics and the Vienna Medical University have found a relationship between students' academic performance and their closest social environment. The study results were published in PLOS ONE.

People's tendency to [network](#) socially with those who share their characteristics is one of the key driving forces in building and shaping

[social connections](#).

Academic achievement appears to be one of the areas in which similarities lead to connections. There are two main reasons why friends tend to have similar academic [performance](#). First, they can influence one another academically, e.g. by helping friends who struggle in class. Second, they may choose peers with similar academic performance as friends.

Understanding why a certain group of friends shares the same level of academic performance is not always easy and may require looking at the history of their friendship over time. The authors of this paper found a way to overcome this limitation. Instead of conducting a series of surveys, they gathered data on VKontakte interactions of 6,000 school and college students over 42 months.

"One would assume less differentiation based on [academic achievement](#) in a digital environment where anyone can connect with anyone else. The reality, however, is different. Academic achievement is still an important consideration for making friends online, and students' social circles tend to become even more homogeneous over time," said the study's author Ivan Smirnov, Junior Research Fellow of the HSE Institute of Education.

It turns out that the key reason behind homogeneity is not a change in students' [academic performance](#), but a change in friendship networks. Given the initially even distribution of good and poor performers within a network, over time students tend to establish new connections with peers who perform at the same level and unfriend those who are the least similar to them in terms of academic achievement.

These findings may be important for understanding how social reproduction of inequality works. Being enrolled in a highly selective university gives one access not only to educational resources but also to

social connections which may help one's future career. However, even if a graduate of a less prestigious school gets enrolled in a highly-selective university, they may restrict their opportunities for upwards social mobility by continuing to mix mainly with peers from the same background rather than the most successful and highly performing ones.

This finding can have important implications in the digital age where social networks serve as the main source of information for many young people. For example, more than 70% of young Russians surveyed rely on VKontakte to learn about Russian and global news. By design, social networks mainly tend to show each user content shared by their friends. The study findings suggest that more and less academically successful students may end up being segregated in different parts of the digital space.

More information: Ivan Smirnov et al. Formation of homophily in academic performance: Students change their friends rather than performance, *PLOS ONE* (2017). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0183473](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0183473)

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