

# Giving chance a helping hand

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Networking among students can be promoted via targeted interventions. Credit: ETH Zurich / Gian Marco Castelberg

New research from ETH Zurich shows that holding events for new students before they enter university is an investment that pays off. Incoming students benefit from the chance to meet, mingle and form friendships at orientation events, which contributes to their long-term academic success.

When students are able to form friendships and build strong networks during their time at university, they benefit in deep ways both during

their studies and later in life. Take students who study for exams with their friends, for instance: they have better odds of passing. Four researchers at ETH Zurich's Social Networks Lab have now built on this insight. As part of the Swiss StudentLife study, they used multiple approaches to tackle the question of how students form networks and what events serve to strengthen their relationship ties. The three-year study was based on an experimental early intervention in students' peer networks, and the findings were published in an article in *Scientific Reports* in late February.

## **Intentionally facilitating first contact opportunities**

How exactly do people meet? Who do they form friendships with and when? It's often down to chance, and this also applies to students during their time at university. Friendships can randomly form when being assigned to the same team for group assignments or simply by sitting next to someone on the first day of class. Even if these initial relationships fade over time, they serve as important first contacts that can decisively influence the future development of one's social network.

Often there is less randomness at play than we might think—for instance, if teams for group assignments are put together alphabetically according to students' last names. Foreign students may tend to have last names towards the end of the alphabet, which can lead to groups becoming more homogeneous. However, more heterogeneity within groups can have a big positive impact. Researchers therefore wanted to pinpoint what happens when first contact opportunities between students are intentionally arranged rather than left to chance.

## **First-ever in-depth examination**

The study used two introduction events for incoming students in an

undergraduate engineering programme at a Swiss university. The events were intended to provide students with information and give them an opportunity to freely network with each other. "But there are a lot of implicit assumptions there. No one had ever tried systematically researching what the actual social impact of these events is," explains Christoph Stadtfeld, one of the authors of the study. The idea was partially inspired by calls from teaching staff to investigate how relationship networks form and develop among students over longer periods of time.

The two information events were identical. Each was two hours long, and they were held either two or three months before the start of the semester. The researchers' intervention took place following a short introductory speech: students were divided into groups—each consisting of five to nine people—for a campus tour, a discussion session and a shared meal. These activities gave them the opportunity to get to know one another. Although students were randomly assigned to the intervention groups, researchers did take care to ensure that the groups had a sex composition similar to that of the students' incoming class and that there were no male-only or female-only groups. After the event, around 200 students—approximately half of whom had participated—were surveyed about their social lives at six different times over the course of roughly a year. Questions touched on points such as which fellow students they were befriending and working together with.

### **Notable differences**

Evaluating the data revealed that up to three months after the intervention, students who were at the introduction event and part of the same group had significantly higher friendship ties with one another. Seven months after the intervention, they were found to have mutual friends more often. After nine months, researchers found evidence of a

higher number of mixed-sex friendships. Researchers also describe how other [social processes](#) play a role in the formation of students' social networks: for instance, the tendency to befriend people with similar characteristics or the attraction that people feel to those who have many friends already. But all of these processes require that first spark—the initial contact—to unfold their potential. This means that early network interventions such as introduction events can be highly effective means of fostering student interactions and relationship ties.

## **Mixing things up**

According to study co-author Timon Elmer, one of the primary goals of a university is to support students who have the potential, talent, will and motivation to succeed in their chosen field of study. "We can't let students who have the potential fail their exams or drop out of school because they didn't manage to integrate well enough into a social network or because they end up socially isolated," he explains. This is most likely to happen to students who come from groups that are underrepresented in the general student body.

Female students are one potentially disadvantaged social group in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and math), as they have an increased likelihood of dropping out of their study programme. Elmer believes that helping female students better integrate into the [student](#) community could create a more equitable basis for the sexes and other groups.

## **Turning theory into practice**

The potential of these kinds of [network](#) interventions is clearly not just limited to the sexes: they can also be used to overcome barriers that arise from having different languages or countries of origin. According to

researchers, more interaction and contact between social groups creates more equal opportunities not only during students' time at university, but also later when they enter the job market. The reason? When students actively maintain relationship and friendship ties with one another, they share more information that is relevant both to their fields of study and their careers.

But what does this mean for ETH Zurich? Stadtfeld says that his research group is in an ongoing dialogue with departments and instructors in order to integrate findings from their multi-year research project into how teaching is conducted at ETH. What's more, ETH's long-established practice of holding pre-semester orientation events has been shown to be a good investment. "Especially now that so many events have gone online because of the coronavirus pandemic, it is important not to lose early opportunities for students' social integration," says Stadtfeld.

**More information:** Zsófia Boda et al. Short-term and long-term effects of a social network intervention on friendships among university students, *Scientific Reports* (2020). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-020-59594-z](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-59594-z)

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