

## Friendship networks and curriculum design

Many employers seek graduates with experience in working in teams; it is therefore imperative that educational institutions, especially in the field of management, incorporate teamwork and problem solving into their curriculum. Today's marketing industry needs individuals that can help reduce costs, shorten product development cycles and improve customer service and quality. One aspect to help attain these needs is teamwork and team learning. Furthermore, teamwork not only prepares students for the job-market, but also contributes to students building stronger social networks that in turn, provide students with various positive educational outcomes such as knowledge sharing.

A team of researchers, including [Dr Melanie Wiese](#), [Dr Gene van Heerden](#) (staff members in the [Department of Marketing Management](#)) and Mrs Elsamari Botha, investigated how a new curriculum design implemented in a honours programme, based on teamwork, could have possibly influenced the students' social networks. A descriptive research design was followed and a census was done on the entire post-graduate class (42 students) in order to get a complete picture of the students' social network. Social network and demographic information were obtained through the use of a self-completion survey.

The results of the social network analysis clearly indicate that the co-operative learning strategies incorporated into the new curriculum created an educational environment where social networks occurred. Social network of students at the beginning of the year showed that not all students were represented in the network, implying that there were some students who were completely isolated from the group and thus reflecting a sparse social network with structural holes. However, the social network of students after completing the year's curriculum is much denser than at the beginning of the year. There are no structural holes and information flows freely between nodes.

Both these types of social networks provided challenges as well as advantages in terms of the educational outcomes, specifically when team-based learning is at the core of the curriculum design. When focussing on the structural analysis, a sparse social network leads to idea generation, but co-ordination is difficult. On the other side, a dense social network may lead to a high level of student satisfaction, but could hinder idea generation. From a student point of view, the new curriculum design did not merely increase satisfaction and improved team skills, making them more employable, but the team-based challenges also contributed in creating a friendship network which did not exist previously.

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