



# The Tertiary Experience: Of Social Integration, Retention and Persistence – A Review

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## Abstract

In addition to illuminating personal and institutional factors that facilitate social integration of students in higher education, the current study delineates their effects on retention and persistence. The systematic literature review approach is employed to broach and synthesize seminal studies conducted between 2010 and 2021. Among other prominent factors, the study outcomes underscore not only peer interaction, student-faculty interaction, extracurricular and residential activities, but also, other attributes like financial opportunities, language proficiency and communication skills as imperative underpinnings and correlates of social integration and retention in higher education. In view of these findings, the study proffers suggestions for policy and research.

**Keywords** Social integration · Student retention · Institutional factors · Personal factors · Higher education

## Introduction

The imperativeness to build a human capital base for the benefit of global societies has informed the formulation and implementation of liberal policies across polities. Quite significantly, this has substantially reformed global education in diverse ways that have facilitated the exchange of not only expertise, but also, more particularly,

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opened avenues, hitherto impossible or non-existent, for students to gain knowledge and skills without any form of restriction. The globalization and extension of education notwithstanding, challenges however remain. Precisely in relations to global higher education, students' attrition persists; and this has been a source of worry for educationists and stakeholders around the world (Beekhoven et al., 2004; Wendler et al., 2012; Maphosa et al., 2014).

The detrimental impacts of this sprawling phenomenon have consequently elicited sufficient research attention which has largely unraveled, and established factors converging around voluntary and forced (i.e., dismissal) factors - primarily caused by low socialization and poor academic performance (low grades), and/or the violation of existing regulations surrounding proper social and academic conduct (e.g., student strikes, cheating in exams, etc.). From a binary perspective, other scholars (Wilcox et al., 2005; Rienties et al., 2012; Braxton et al., 2013) have also identified a dearth of social integration and institutional commitment as potential precipitants of students' departure.

Conversely, coupled with institutional commitment (before, during and after enrollment), Braxton and McClendon, (2001), Jones (2010) and Bean (2005) among other things delineate and subsequently anchor college students' persistence tendency on their ability to freely interact with peers and faculty staff. Invariably, the feeling of association with peers and instructors contributes to entrenching students' sense of belongingness to the academic community (Milem and Berger, 1997). To this end, the imperativeness of tertiary students' sufficient social integration has recently gained prominence in scholarship. With Severiens and Wolff (2008) predicating students' graduation success on their engagement in extracurricular activities, sense of belonging and connectedness to a larger community, Wilcox et al's (2005) seminal attempt at illuminating students' retention in higher education unearth significant correlates like students' belongness to social network, persistence and the existence of social protection.

Unanimously, these scholars elucidate housing sharing and other informal interaction forms with students and university staff as significant underpinnings of social integration. Actually, owing to students' pre-entry expectations regarding social well-being, Reisinger (2016) highlights students' expectation confirmation as significant to retention and persistence, and by extension, social integration salience. Importantly, social integration is cardinal to students' institutional commitment – another significant influencer of retention and persistence. Much as growing streams of literature have broached students' social integration, there exist a dearth of a comprehensive study synthesizing erstwhile studies.

More particularly cognizant of the reported attrition rates in higher education and the scholarly unraveled undergirds of students' integration and retention, it becomes crucial to gain an understanding of these factors to provide guidelines for the creation and implementation of enhancing measures targeted at countervailing students' departure, whilst augmenting retention and at the same time, improving and sustaining graduation rates. Therefore, this study attempts to fill the lacunae in literature by reviewing and analyzing studies to furnish policy stakeholders and practitioners with results-oriented recommendations. The current review paper is segmented into four sections. The ensuing section illuminates the concept of social integration. The next

part explicates the study methodology; followed by the third section thematically presenting prior study analysis and findings. The final part highlights the conclusion and recommendations for both policy and further research.

## Literature Review - Social Integration

Social integration is described as “a close association with the university’s social milieu: thus, peer group interaction, interaction with faculty (academic staff), and student organizations” (McKay and Estrella, 2008). One of the most influential conceptualizations of social integration was developed by Tinto, who defines it as “the interaction between students with a set of characteristics (backgrounds, beliefs, commitments, etc.) and other people with different characteristics within the university” (Tinto 1975). Moreover, social interaction could be used in reference to the degree of congruence between a person, and his or her social environment. With these interaction forms taking place within and across informal peer associations, semi-formal extra-curricular activities among lecturers, professional, and administrative staff, successful social integration engenders variegated social contacts, relationship and staff support – which are all significant influencers of students and institutional development, and growth outcomes.

Tinto (1993) posits that, given the right level of interaction, goals and institutional commitment, student’s integration into the social structure of their host institution significantly enhances retention and persistence in higher education. A notable aspect of Tinto’s (1993) model is that, social integration requires opportunities for fulfilling informal non-academic related interactions between students and academic staff, as well as the establishment of professional relationships - with at least academic staff members. In affirming Tinto’s (1993) stance, Nunez (2009) and Deil-Amen (2011) emphasize social integration viability and sustenance as contingent on students’ participation in extra-curricular (formal) activities and interaction with peers (informal). From a practical perspective, Deil-Amen (2011) ascertains social integration and captures it as entailing engagements in university clubs and events, as well as sports participation. It also captures the frequency at which students go places with their university peers, peer group interactions, and informal out-of-class interactions and conversations with university teachers and other workers (Deil-Amen, 2011).

Citing feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnectedness as precipitants of students drop-out from tertiary education, Wilcox et al. (2005) elucidates integration and institutional commitment as inextricably interlaced variants - and as such inseparable. In actual fact, early drop out is underpinned by a panoply of factors including, but not limited to integration challenges – notably, difficulties, if not impossibilities to make friends and homesickness (Wilcox, et al., 2005).

## Method and Data

The current review attempts to examine erstwhile studies on higher education students’ experience pertaining to social integration. By this, the research makes a rare attempt to forge a better understanding of both enabling and constraining factors - for

**Table 1** Searched and included literature

Database	Searched keywords	Collected articles	Used articles
Web of Science database	social integration, higher education, student retention, student persistence, student departure, success, failure, completion, graduation, sense of belonging, wellbeing	36	8
ERIC	social integration, higher education, student retention, student persistence, student departure, success, failure, completion, graduation, sense of belonging, wellbeing	58	13
Emerald	social integration, higher education, student retention, student persistence, student departure, success, failure, completion, graduation, sense of belonging, wellbeing	24	8
ScienceDirect	social integration, higher education, student retention, student persistence, student departure, success, failure, completion, graduation, sense of belonging, wellbeing	26	11
Wiley Online Library	social integration, higher education, student retention, student persistence, student departure, success, failure, completion, graduation, sense of belonging, wellbeing	21	7
SAGE Journals	social integration, higher education, student retention, student persistence, student departure, success, failure, completion, graduation, sense of belonging, wellbeing	33	15
GoogleScholar	social integration, higher education, student retention, student persistence, student departure, success, failure, completion, graduation, sense of belonging, wellbeing	66	17

public administration and policymaking purposes. Against the backdrop of this objective, the study reviews literature spanning the period between 2010 and 2021 – as a basis to probe personal and institutional factors underpinning social integration. The research articles used for this review were retrieved from seven reputable databases comprising; ERIC, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Scopus, JSTOR, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and Google Scholar. In conducting literature search, keywords used, and they include; “*social integration*”, “*higher education*”, “*student retention*”, “*student persistence*”, and “*student departure*”. The need to intensify the search for extra literature necessitated the incorporation of additional search words like “*success*”, “*failure*”, “*completion*”, “*graduation*”, “*sense of belonging*”, and “*wellbeing*” (Table 1). Essentially, these keywords are noted to have significant bearing on social integration.

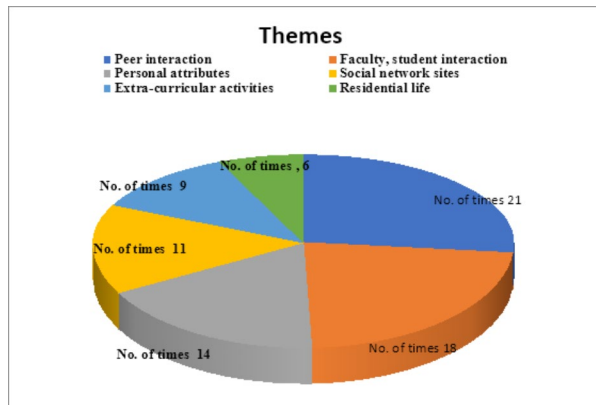
In all, the researchers initially reviewed two-hundred and sixty-four (264) articles centred on tertiary students’ social integration. Given the specificity of the study on on-campus education, the researchers sorted out the literature and later reduced it to 112. Mendeley software was used to further discard duplicate articles and reducing them to 79. The literature was not limited to a specific country; rather, studies from across developed and developing countries were considered. This was intended to offer the study a holistic and generic lens for conceptualization and interrogation of the subject matter under review. Moreover, it was meant to help draw a representative research article sample – one that could guarantee gathering unlimited insights to endear the study findings a certain degree of credibility, validity and reliability. At this point, it is important to reiterate that, much as an extensive search was conducted across credible databases, the search was restricted to peer-reviewed articles written only in the English language. The study also excluded articles focusing online or distance education.

## Analysis

The research analyzed papers using thematic coding. Thematic coding as a qualitative form of study involves documenting or identifying passages of text that are connected by a common theme or concept, allowing text categorization and thus, the creation of a framework of thematic ideas (Gibbs 2007). In this process, the initial set of themes developed included; “*faculty member and student interaction*”, “*residential life*”, “*extra-curricular activities*”, “*student and peer interaction*”, and “*social network sites*”. To identify additional themes, further rounds of scanning were conducted. In this step, some of the themes identified include; “*teaching practice*”, “*peer mentoring*”, “*learning communities*”, and “*friendship networks*”. These were merged with the set of themes derived from the thematic analysis. Themes were counted once – regardless of the number of times they appeared in an article search. The emerging themes and the number of times they appeared are presented in Table 2; Fig. 1 respectively. The following section discusses the various themes identified.

**Table 2** Results

Theme	No. of times
Peer interaction	21
Faculty, student interaction	18
Personal attributes	14
Social network sites	11
Extra-curricular activities	9
Residential life	6

**Figure 1** Synthesis of themes and citation frequency

## Peer Interaction

Peer support is one of the cardinal factors facilitating social integration. It occasions no surprise that it has emerged as one of the most extensively studied correlates of social integration. Peer support does not only bring together people with a shared experience to support each other, it also provides space where people feel accepted and understood, treats everyone's experiences as equally important, by way of exchanging support. A review of literature (Allen-Collinson and Brown 2012; Gilardi and Guglielmetti 2011; Gomez-Arizaga and Conjeros-Solar 2013; Lathrop et al., 2012) projects student-peer interactions as a significant manifestation of social integration. In this context, related studies exploring students' extra-curricular lifestyle, identify experience with peers as relevant to their decision to either continue, or withdraw from an enrolled program of study (Chryssikos et al., 2017; Devos et al., 2017; Zwolak, 2018; Gatz and Bugallo, 2018; Lew et al., 2020; Mohammed and Bryan 2020). Therefore, Chryssikos et al. (2017) inter alia, proffers the organisation of reciprocal befriending scheme in a more "noncommittal" informal setting without any obligations, as a medium to stimulate students' participation and integration. Sub themes identified under peer interaction include peer mentoring and friendship networks.

## Peer Mentoring

As emphasized in the previous section, mentoring programs, precisely peer mentoring, constitute important platforms designed for encouraging and facilitating social

integration – particularly for first-generation students, minority students and others of underprivileged extractions (Flores and Estudillo, 2018). A significant comparative study on peer mentoring in two British universities by Collings et al. (2014) revealed students of non-peer-mentoring university backgrounds as four times more likely to withdraw from tertiary education ten weeks into their first semester. Contrastingly, students with peer-mentoring university backgrounds are not only predicted to be less likely, but also, generally have lower dropout propensity levels. Collins et al., (2014) affirms peer-mentoring as a significant moderator of transitional stress on perceived social support and self-esteem. On this score, peer mentors provide advice and directions pertaining to information that could not be received through handbooks (Collings et al., 2014). Participants in a South African study (Bass, 2011) for instance reported how they found mentorship programs as helpful. Some study participants are reported to have remarked the following: “there are some of the things that you could like to tell your peer, somebody, or a mentor and there is stuff that you can’t go to your lecturer and talk to”. Against this backdrop, Gittens (2014) found mentoring to help contribute to better social experiences among doctoral students.

### **Friendship Network**

The importance of establishing good friendships, which provide sustained social support, particularly in times of difficulty, repeatedly finds credence in a study by Allen-Collinson and Brown (2012). This is consistent with erstwhile research findings (Baker, 2012; Gray, et al., 2013; Tinto, 2015). These studies highlight how student friends became “*new family*” and “*friendly family*” (Allen-Collinson and Brown, 2012), with a participant remarking the following: “If I didn’t have this group of friends I’d probably have dropped out of university,” (Allen-Collinson and Brown, 2012). A Canadian university study at the “Brock Base Camp” introducing students to a curriculum incorporating networking frameworks pertaining to campus life (i.e., canoeing and outdoor living skills) corroborates the relevance of practical teaching as relevant to social life (Lathrop, et al., 2012).

### **Faculty Interaction with Students**

The relationship between faculty members and students is recognized as one of the most important factors, after peer interaction, in facilitating social integration. The faculty is the first point of students’ contact on arrival at, during admission, and entry into the host institution, and the start of the educational program. In relations to these, students’ formal and informal interaction with faculty staff, has a positive impact on student social integration (Settle, 2011; Hixenbaugh et al., 2012; Brooman and Darwent, 2014; Hughes and Smail, 2015). The imperativeness of frequent faculty-students interaction and meetings is buttressed by scholars (Whitten et al., 2020; Mohammed and Bryan 2020; Perkerti et al., 2020; Duran et al., 2020, Brotherhood et al., 2020). These findings are supported by prior research confirming faculty attitudes as an impetus to students’ success (Lynch and Gussel, 1996). As such, it behooves education management and stakeholders to train and encourage faculty members to

prioritize demonstrating professionalism in their interaction with students (Hong, 2015).

## Teaching Practices

As earlier reiterated, another factor that potentially facilitate social integration is teaching practice. In this vein, Baker (2012) demonstrates how innovative icebreaker and classroom karaoke sessions could be used as preliminary mediums to foster students' social support networks in mass lecture environments. According to Baker (2012), whereas karaoke lectures particularly lay the groundwork for student interaction in smaller group settings, students' feedback on icebreaker sessions demonstrates its potential to support first-year students' social integration, and at the same time, reduces their anxiety levels about university life – making them look forward to the ensuing semester. Relatedly, song lyrics help students identify the themes underpinning course contents - in ways that students could relate to their own life experiences. On this score, Baker (2012) contends that, the deployment of classroom karaoke in first year students' first lecture facilitates social integration.

Whiles researching into learning communities, Brooman and Darwent (2014) found small-group model with specified personal tutor or, as in some instances, a variety of staff facilitators, as an enhancer of students' support network development, and by extension, social integration. In this respect, learning community is used in reference to a school transformation initiative designed to achieve high-quality education for all students without any form of discrimination based on students' levels of achievement, or other forms of distinction which may necessitate unequal learning outcomes (Roldán and González, 2010). Precisely, learning communities are noted to enhance social integration among populations including those with psychiatric impairments (Delman et al., 2014).

## Personal Attributes

The review study affirmed students' personal characteristics as an important element in socialization and integration on and off campus. Among some of the features outlined include prior social behavior, student financial background, religious issues, and language. Larose et al. (2015) for instance corroborate students' previous experience in interacting with friends as significant to determining subsequent future behavior and general disposition towards others. In highlighting some of these varying personal attributes, Mohammed and Bryan (2020) recount Saudi students' feelings and perceptions of social integration challenges in U.S universities – owing to unavailable worship places at the university dormitory. Other studies (Liu, 2013; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017; Crowther, 2020; Sung, 2020; Mohammed and Bryan, 2020; Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020) cite students' inability to communicate in host country's widely spoken language as a social integration challenge.

With Kimmel and Volet, (2012) and Brotherhood et al., (2020) bring to the fore the correlates between internal students' attitudes and their depth of interaction with other populations, Rienties et al., (2012) unearth disaggregated nuances and peculiarities in population wide behavior by clarifying that, whereas students of non-



western extractions have less social integration propensity, it is otherwise for those with western backgrounds. More so, another study broaching teacher education and non-teacher education students' experience reported less social integration among the former (Bohndick, 2020). Another personal attribute constraint to social integration is financial stress (Adams et al., 2016). A study conducted to investigate the sense of belonging of different groups of undergraduate students from a white dominated university in the U.S. found non-white, non-heterosexual, and non-Christian students as not only less satisfied, but also, with a weaker sense of belonging – more than those in the majority groups (Fan et al., 2021). In addition, other scholars (McEwan and Guerrero, 2010) have identified international students with good communication skills as more social, and therefore, easily integrate.

### **Social Network Sites**

Social networking platforms provide avenues for people to interact with each other. Used for various reasons and purposes by millions of people including students, social networking sites (i.e., Facebook, WhatsApp, Myspace, WeChat, and Instagram) are touted as gravid with social integration opportunities (Brailovskaia et al., 2020). Bano et al. (2019) also reiterate the social interaction significance of WhatsApp. Kum-Yeboah et al. (2020) on the other hand found that, in addition to connecting with friends and other relations, the majority of participants using social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram, have the opportunity to be exposed to and acquire knowledge across various socio-cultural divides. Though the review findings point out social media platform uses as important for keeping in touch with family and old friends (especially during the period of student transition into host institutions), focusing on social media effects on social integration in the university environment, facebook appears the most widely used in forging and sustaining relations and interactions thereof (Kalpidou et al., 2011; Irwin et al., 2012; Gray et al., 2013; Prescott et al., 2013; Nehl and Smith, 2014; Pang, 2020). Not leaving out Wechat and myspace, Pang (2018) and Strayhorn (2012) unanimously establish the viability of these platforms for increasing interaction among students, and as such tending to enhance social integration.

### **Extra-curricular Activities**

Participation in extra-curricular activities (i.e., sports, clubs, governance, music, art, and drama etc.) are identified as significant to students' socialization and integration into institutions (Zaitseva et al., 2013; Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020; Haverila et al., 2020). Through the already mentioned activities, students make new friends and interact with them, thereby impacting positively on their social integration on and off campus. And not only is students' engagement in sports an enhancer of social integration (Massoni, 2011 and Kane et al., 2014), it also contributes to building their academic persistence. On this basis, Mamiseishvili and Koch's (2011) study identify students who have never participated in social on-campus activities, as less likely to persist into the second year - compared with those who have engaged in at least, any social activity. Students' engagement in any extra-curricular activity forms

injects them with an appreciable dosage of satisfaction in their social life (Gray et al., 2013; Govender, 2014). On the heels of these research expositions, a Turkish study by Balyer and Gunduz (2012), among other things accentuates students' desire for education stakeholders to periodically organize activities of this sort.

## Residential Life

Furthermore, per the study review, residential life was identified as relevant to social integration. With on-campus residency associated with drawing supportive and building networks across social, political, cultural and religious divides, it is also construed as a propeller of social integration. Thus, scholars (Belanger, 2013; Gray et al., 2013; Haverila et al., 2020; Sikhwari et al., 2020) are of the view that, students who live on-campus experience better adaptation to university than those students living off-campus. This is because, students living on-campus may experience increased support due to the proximity of associated ties around them - and as such, are more likely to report being socially adjusted to higher education experience. In addition to on-campus students likely to benefit from social events, study groups, sports, clubs, and volunteering opportunities, with encouragement from roommates and residence leaders, it becomes easier for them to integrate into new communities via social interactions, which eases their university transition and incorporation. In a comparative study, Brooman and Darwent (2014) reported low sense of belonging among first year off-campus students than on-campus students. However, this sense of belonging declined, as the year progressed, suggesting that the interventions offered at university may have been more important and efficacious for off-campus residents – mostly missing out on activities, and support which enhances residential students' settlement and integration.

## Discussion

The current study conducts a comprehensive literature review of students' social integration. Of the articles reviewed, 38 used the qualitative approach (interviews, expert panel, and appreciative inquiry), 29 used a quantitative method (surveys), and 12 studies employed the mixed-method approach. From the review, it is apparent that the tertiary experience of students is variegated; and while the social integration of tertiary students is increasingly studied in higher education research, there is still much to explore and learn in this research field. To the best of the authors' knowledge, the current study constitutes a premier comprehensive attempt to empirically unravel proven factors that facilitate tertiary student social experiences and social integration in the recent decade. This study provides evidence that the factors facilitating social integration are numerous and diverse. The reviewed articles indicate faculty-student interaction, peer interaction, personal attributes, extra-curricular activities, residential life, and social network site use as the predominantly explored variants. These identified factors are reconcilable with the study findings of Tinto (1975), who broadly identifies institutional and social factors as broad dimensions of social integration.

Aside personal attributes and social network site use which can be classified as personal, faculty, student interaction, peer interaction, extra-curricular activities, and residential life, collectively belong to institutional factors. Taken together both personal and institutional factors, they are significant to students' social integration. Hence, any deficit in any of these factors may invariably impair integration of students. For these reasons, it is ostensible that institutions have a great role to play in achieving institutional goals and assisting students to achieve their personal goals through educational practices that will foster active interaction among students and other faculty members. Several studies on factors that enhance social integration over the past decade have demonstrated increasing concern over students' wellbeing. Some factors such as peer interaction, student-faculty interaction, extra-curricular activities, and residential life are frequently examined, whereas issues of personal attributes such as financial opportunities, language proficiency, previous social behavior, communication skills, etc., warrant greater empirical attention. The overemphasis on institutional factors relative to social integration literature, has unfortunately diminished discourses on the prominence of personal factors. Cognisant of this, it becomes important for stakeholders to give prominence to personal and institutional factors, in their design and implementation of students' social integration policy frameworks. Moreover, to guide future research, it is important that future research initiatives move away from single-factor foci, to consider multiple variables with a variety of participants, such as students and faculty members – to help provide a more in-depth understanding of the undergirding factors regarding tertiary students' social integration, whilst at the same time, providing broader understanding of factors of success and failures in higher education.

## Conclusion and Implications

This study reviews prior study literature on students' social integration, retention and persistence enablers. Literature was elicited from reputable databases like web of science, google scholar, ERIC, science direct and Scopus. Other include JSTOR and Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). A review of existing body of literature broadly identified factors from a binary front; thus, from both institutional and personal and/or individual. At the institutional level, the study identified peer interaction and mentoring, friendship network building, faculty-students interaction and students' teaching practice activities as critical to facilitating their social integration. On the other breadth, thus, at the personal and/or individual level, the study, among other things revealed students' social network as a social integration facilitation medium. Coupled with students' engagement in extra curricular activities, the study prominently buttresses tertiary institutions' provision of on campus residence to students as an avenue for them to socially integrate, learn host country language and further, identify themselves with the broader society. Given these research highlights, the study entreats educational institutions and other stakeholders alike to consider the already stated institutional and personal factors in education policy design and implementation – especially ones that have significant bearing on tertiary students' social integration, retention and persistence.

## Study Limitations and Future Research Alternatives

The current study, like other research studies, has strengths which have been delineated in the preceding section. Nonetheless, it has shortcomings, which the authors feel obliged to illuminate – to help streamline the conduct of future research. The study conducted a comprehensive review of existing studies drawn from credible research data bases. On account of this, and in view of the study findings, we strongly recommend future studies to either employ the qualitative, quantitative, or mixed method approach to further probe the identifies personal and institutional factors pertaining to students' social integration. In the views of the researchers, such research attempts would provide germane grounds for bringing to the fore nuances and subtleties related to the subject matter under review.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** None.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in this study were reconcilable with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. In line with this declaration, which was amended in 2008, study participants were informed about the study purpose.

**Informed Consent** None.

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