Support from Extended Family in Higher Education: A Narrative Literature Review

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Abstract

Although the support provided by extended family (EF) members to university students has recently been more investigated, EF support in Higher Education (HE) is rarely considered as an element worthy of analysis in its own right. Situated in an international context and looking across diverse HE systems, this narrative review has two main aims. First, to provide a map of research on the influence of EF members in HE. Second, to link research to HE practitioners and policy makers as a way to promote diversity within universities. The main argument is that by considering students' networks of support outside university, more effective diversity policies can be implemented at the institutional level. Employing the concepts of extended family, funds of knowledge and social support (SS) as a foundational background, the paper identifies SS that achieves positive outcomes and support which outcomes are less effective. Fifty-three studies employing different methodologies were considered. Selected articles (22) were then classified, synthesised and analysed by the author. The paper discusses the role of EF in HE in relation to four sub-groups of students: traditional; non-traditional; international and dropout. Four main constants were identified in the literature: a) SS is a cultural-based practice; b) research emphasises positive effects of SS; c) research tends to focus on ethnic minorities, and d) there is an unclear separation between parental and the support provided by EF members. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for further research and practice.

Keywords: social support; extended family; diversity, higher education.

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Introduction

Socio-biologists have demonstrated that, in addition to a traditional nuclear family, young people live in a wide variety of social structures. However, research on cooperative rearing arrangements (in which group members other than parents are allowed to care for offspring) is rare (Hrdy, 2009), particularly in Western educational research. While parental involvement has been widely investigated, little is known about the role of the extended family (EF) in education and particularly regarding student participation in higher education (HE). A review on the economics of EF and kinship networks and their contribution to societies (Cox and Fafchamps, 2007) demonstrates that help from EF networks, particularly in developing economies, affects the distribution of economic well-being, thus affecting public income redistribution.

In the context of increasing pressure on Western social welfare systems and HE budgets, understanding the role of the EF is important, although, unlike the role of nuclear family arrangements, it has been largely absent from public debate (McGlone, Park, and Roberts, 1999). For example, UK studies on the kinship relationship (e.g. Broad, 2004; Grundy, Murphy and Shelton, 1999; McRae, 1999; Mitchell, 2007) have not looked at its influence on HE participation, despite the inclusion of students from diverse backgrounds being a major priority for successive UK governments (Brooks, 2005; Gates, Coward and Byrom, 2007). In the context of high tuition fees in diverse HE systems around the world, investigating the influence of EF and the extent to which it provides emotional, financial and/or academic support for HE students is crucial. This knowledge could help HE practitioners and policy makers implement effective diversity policies that take into account students' support networks. This review is situated in an international context and looks across diverse systems of HE. Hence, the implications of this literature review are not tied to a particular national

context. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. *What is the role of EF support in higher education?*

2. *Does support from EF members vary across ethnicities?*

3. *Do different student-types in HE experience different kinds of social support?*

4. *What are the changes that Higher Education institutions (HEIs) need to make to take advantage of what is known about social support networks?*

Research relating to HE access has generally focused on the impact of individual institutions, ethnicity and social class of prospective applicants and their attainment (Lasselle*, Keir and Smith., 2009; Reay, David and Ball, 2005; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009; Watt and Paterson, 1997). This research shows that, while low socio-economic groups and minority ethnic groups have lately had better access to HE (Basit and Tomlinson, 2012), they are still under-represented (Boliver, 2013; Croxford and Raffe, 2014). To cite just one example of the limited access of one of these underrepresented groups, 'only 10% of the most disadvantaged working-class white British males progress to HE' (Baars, Mulcahy and Bernardes, 2016: 7). Access initiatives such as summer schools to bridge the gap between university and students from non-traditional backgrounds acknowledge that most such students come from families with little or no experience of HE. However, research and policies have not considered the role that EF can play in supporting (or not supporting) the necessary transition (Briggs, Clark and Hall, 2012; MacDonald and Stratta, 2001; Watt and Paterson, 1997). Lasselle *et al.* (2009), for example, consider how students' attitudes toward university are affected by their family, peers, school environment and financial considerations, but make no mention of EF.

Given the nature of the research questions guiding this study, this is a narrative review as its purpose is not to evaluate specific interventions (Evans and Benefield, 2001). The present review has two aims. First, to provide a map of research and consider the role of EF in HE, as

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an element worthy of analysis in its own right. Second, to link research in the field to HE

practitioners and policy makers (Hammersley, 2001). This is important because, in order to

promote diversity in HE, it is critical to understand students' support networks across

different cultural groups. Considering the role that EF members have on supporting (or not)

participation in HE is a timely and necessary step towards achieving diversity. The saying

that 'it takes a village to raise a child' begs the question whether it takes a community of

others, in addition to parents, to enable students from diverse social backgrounds to access

and progress in HE. Such 'village' would include non-parent family members within the

home, such as siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents, as well as a wide range of family

members outside of the home.

The next two sections cover the concepts underpinning this review and its methodology.

Afterwards, the paper analyses the role of EF in HE in relation to four sub-groups: traditional

students; non-traditional students; international students and students who drop out from HE.

Finally, the last two sections explore implications for future research and practice.

Theoretical framework

Three apparently unrelated concepts construct the theoretical framework for this

literature review: extended family, funds of knowledge and social support. These concepts

provide the basis on which the analysis of the support provided by EF members to different

types of university students was undertaken. The classic sociological study by Young and

Willmott (1957) on family and kinship in London shows that an absence of relatives is as

influential as their presence, yet little is still known about their role in society overall.

According to Duranton, Rodríguez-Pose and Sandall (2009: 25), the family – 'one of

humanity's most basic forms of institution' – is under-investigated. From an economical

perspective, they explain that the traditional assumption is that family structures, because of

their small size, tend to have less impact than other social institutions such as the state,

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religion or the law although, according to them, families have an impact on wider economic development. Family structures impact upon individuals' well-being, as well as their educational, work and social environment. Research has shown that families also have a wider impact on the social and economic development of societies. Support from EF is based on mutual dependence and is a key adaptive strategy with a generally positive impact (attenuating disadvantage), although negative effects (accentuating disadvantage) have also been reported.

Pallock and Lamborn (2006) understand EF as the networks of relatives beyond the nuclear family who provide social, emotional, and instrumental support. Typically, these multigenerational networks facilitate adaptive behaviour and allow the sharing of resources, and are often organized around a dominant figure such as a grandmother.

The sharing of resources and mutual dependence characterising extended families connects directly with our second concept. Funds of knowledge refers to the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge, skills and resources available within families (Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez, 1992). Funds of knowledge takes into account the social contexts in which families are immersed and which are crucial for the functioning of individuals of non-dominant backgrounds (especially ethnic minorities and low socio-economic groups). Although families from all socioeconomic background possess funds of knowledge, Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama (2017: 18) explain that funds of knowledge 'are constructed inside an ongoing struggle for and against domination'. As such, funds of knowledge constitute a community resource that enhances social collaboration (Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama, 2017), which takes us to our third concept, that of social support. According to Shumaker and Brownell (1984: 13), social support is 'an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient.' Shumaker and Brownell (1984) identify conceptual gaps in

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relation to social support, but their main contribution lies in the idea that the actual effects of the support may be either positive, negative or neutral, contribution that this paper exemplifies in relation to EF support to university students. According to Shumaker and Brownell (1984), almost all measurement has relied on self-report by the person in question, thus, we know very little about the perceptions of providers an aspect also analysed in this literature review. Similar to Shumaker and Brownell, Schwarzer and Leppin (1991) standing from a health sciences approach, have also claimed that research into social support has dealt only with the recipient perspective, thus studies should consider the interaction between both recipients and providers over a longer period as the relationships forged amongst extended family members tend to be. Schwarzer and Leppin (1991) also argue that although there are plenty of theoretical and empirical studies linking social support to physical health outcomes, few empirical studies have investigated theoretical assumptions more profoundly and, I argue, the same is true of the study of social support in the field of education. Social support has been studied from varied perspectives, such as life course theory, planned behaviour theory, role model theory and social capital theory. However, if analysed from a perspective of funds of knowledge, it would complement psychological frameworks that have been more dominant.

A recurring theme in the literature is the understanding of social support as a culturally based practice. Research on social support shows that students from non-dominant backgrounds are more likely to draw on their support networks. Students in these groups might have regular contact and communication with their EF and friends. As it is demonstrated below, empirical studies can be grouped into studies in which social support seems to achieve positive outcomes (attenuating disadvantage) and those in which social support outcomes are less visible or ineffective (accentuating disadvantage).

Methodology

This paper is the result of document analysis. Following Green, Johnson and Adams (2006), a literature search directly linked to the research questions was undertaken using three main keywords 'extended family', 'higher education' and 'social support'. These were combined amongst them with deviations of the subsequent keywords: grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, family networks, significant others and ethnicity. Specific keywords for HE included: traditional and non-traditional students; international students; access, participation, retention, graduation and dropout. The inclusion criteria were that studies were: a) reported in English; b) published in peer-reviewed journals, as an indication of quality; and c) provided original and relevant findings relating to the research questions. This included articles, books and reports, but excluded working papers, monographs and theses. Empirical studies focusing solely on parental involvement in HE as well as those which focused on more extensive networks of social support in either primary and secondary education were excluded from the sample. The concepts comprising the theoretical framework of this literature review were useful tools when applying the inclusion/exclusion criteria by selecting studies which have explicitly or implicitly incorporated these conceptualisations in their analyses.

A first step was to search online bibliographic databases (Education Resources Information Centre; Social Sciences Citation Index and Web of Science). The search strategy consisted on reading the abstracts and whenever relevant sources were found full contents were assessed. A second step was to undertake citation searches using the reference lists from key articles. The search was from 2000 through 2017 and was not limited to a particular context but included experiences in a variety of countries. Fifty-three articles were considered. Selected articles (22) were then classified, synthesised and analysed by the author.

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Data Analysis

Analysis and classification were based on my own interpretation of the articles' aims, theories, methods and findings. This is considered a limitation in systematic reviews where joint reviewing is necessary (Evans and Benefield, 2001) but, in narrative reviews, judgement and interpretation (Hammersley, 2001) are essential regardless of the number of authors involved. An annotated bibliography was produced for each of the articles selected, this information was later transferred onto different tables. One table showed the different methodologies employed in the studies and another table showed the common themes found across the literature, for example, the positive effects of EF in education; the unclear separation between the support provided by parents and that provided by EF members; social support attenuating or accentuating disadvantage and the focus on specific target groups. This information was then used to create four final tables (shown in the next section) that group the literature according to different types of students: traditional; non-traditional; international and dropout.

The theoretical basis for these classifications was driven by the concepts of extended family, funds of knowledge and social support that were present either implicitly or explicitly in the literature. Although being somehow unrelated and under-investigated in the field of HE, these concepts were chosen because they offer a solid basis for the analysis of literature looking at EF support in HE because of the following reasons. First, the support, or lack of it, that EF members provide can have an impact both at the individual level (enhancing or affecting students' well-being). However, if actively encouraged by institutions, it can also achieve wider social impact by positively contributing to widen access and completion rates at university. Second, the notion of funds of knowledge challenges established perceptions of deficit (Moll et al., 1992; Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama, 2017) amongst students from ethnic minorities and low socio-economic backgrounds who traditionally have not had a dominant
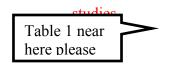
place in HE. Third, the notion of social support expands the research scope by including the perceptions of the providers of social support (in our case EF members of HE students) by acknowledging that the outcomes of their support may be either positive, negative or neutral (in other words, accentuating or attenuating disadvantage). It is under these premises that the academic literature is now presented in the following section.

Application to Higher Education

In recent years, the study of EF support in HE has increased. Almost a third of the articles in this group (7/22) have labelled EF support generally as 'environmental factors' considering it as one variable amongst many others rather than an element worthy of analysis in its own right, assumption challenged in this paper. Qualitative methodologies predominate in this group, yet only three of twenty-two studies employed mixed-methods. The literature is grouped into four main subcategories: traditional students (18–24 year-olds); non-traditional students (25+); international students; and students who drop out.

Traditional Students

The study of EF in HE, although generally peripheral, has yielded consistent findings in relation to the importance of EF support for traditional students. This category is comprised of twelve studies. The majority of studies within this section show that EF support for traditional HE students achieves positive outcomes especially regarding students' learning approaches, academic responsibilities, choice and attainment. However, other studies within this category show that EF support outcomes for traditional HE students are less effective, for example, with respect to fighting discrimination and accessing quality HE (thus accentuating disadvantage). Studies within this group demonstrate that scholars' inclusion or exclusion of the notion of funds of knowledge is crucial in determining the outcome of support in their studies.

Table 1 near here please

Non-traditional Students

There is a wealth of literature focusing on HE non-traditional students' access and retention, and the institutional support available to them (Wardley, Bélanger and Leonard, 2013). In HE literature, non-traditional students are considered to be aged 25 years or older (Wyatt, 2011) with other responsibilities such as family and professional commitments. This category is comprised of three studies and although all of them demonstrate that support networks are important for non-traditional students, their results show mixed effects.

Table 2 near here please

Students

It is perhaps within the group of international students that social support has been investigated most directly, because of their social isolation from both fellow domestic students and their own networks back home. Despite the fact that they face both social and academic challenges, research shows that these do not necessarily affect completion rates (Curtin, Stewart and Ostrove, 2013), suggesting that they might draw on various types of social support to overcome social isolation and academic problems related to adjustment.

This category is comprised of five studies and all show that social support achieves positive outcomes for international students. An interesting element within this category is the variety of the support provided which does not only come from EF members in the students' country of origin but from peers, online platforms and mentoring programmes

Table 3 near here please

titutions.

Students Who Drop Out

As Barefoot (2004) notes, most research on dropout from HE has focused mainly on student characteristics and the impact of 'external environments'. Very little has been said about the role of EF on the phenomenon of dropout. Hence, this category is comprised only of two studies. Both studies show that social support is crucial especially during the first

Table 4 near here please

in order to attenuate drop out.

Discussion

From the analysis of the literature, four main constants were observed. First, the literature is almost entirely optimistic about the positive effects of EF in education. Second, there seems to be an unclear separation between the support within HE provided by parents and that provided by EF members. Third, the reviewed studies support the view that social support in HE is a culturally based practice that can either attenuate or accentuate disadvantage. Fourth, the literature tends to focus on specific target groups: families from disadvantaged contexts and ethnic minority groups. This section makes recommendations addressed to the scholars interested in expanding research on the topic whereas the conclusions in the next section are addressed to HE practitioners and policy makers.

Emphasis on Positive Effects

In order to answer the first research question, this literature review shows that EF support may attenuate disadvantage, enable participation and progression in HE in some groups, yet it may also accentuate embedded perceptions, fail to act against discrimination or impede access (Heath, Fuller and Johnston, 2009; Juang, Ittel, Hoferichter and Gallarin, 2016; Sahu, Jeffery and Nakkeeran, 2016). However, the majority of studies tend to focus on the positive aspects of social support, namely, those that attenuate disadvantage. Therefore, in future research, the inclusion of both positive and negative effects of EF should be considered. In addition, the majority of studies collect data only from the receivers of social support (students) and fail to take into account the perceptions of the providers of such support (EF members). Amongst the reviewed literature on HE, only four studies included in their sample EF members (Heath *et al.,* 2009; Kiyama, 2010; Khambhaita, 2014; Mwangi, 2017) whereas the rest focused on the perceptions of students alone. Therefore, future research should incorporate data from both receivers and givers of social support.

Unclear Separation between Parental Support and Support from EF

Many studies fail to demonstrate what they understand by family support both theoretically and empirically. In these cases, there often appears to be an unclear separation between support from parents and that from EF members (Ang and Liamputtong, 2008; Juang *et al.,* 2016; Morosanu, Handley and O'Donovan, 2010; Lee and Padilla, 2016). A metasynthesis of qualitative studies on family and community in HE (Mwangi, 2015) supports the view that definitions of family involvement in HE are still limited. In future, research using terms such as family network, relatives and close others should include a wider range of EF members in their samples rather than only nuclear family members.

Social Support as a Cultural-based Practice

In order to answer the second research question, this literature review shows that social support is a culturally based practice that varies according to place and ethnicity (Andrade, 2013; Ang and Liamputtong, 2008; Bang, Muriuki and Hodges, 2008; Khambhaita, 2014; Lee and Padilla, 2016; Palmer, Davis and Maramba, 2011; Román, Cuestas and Fenollar, 2008; Sahu *et al.,* 2016). Research suggests that although some individuals from non-dominant backgrounds might be living in more challenging environments, their social cohesion might help them to attenuate disadvantage. For example, both Andrade (2013) and Lee and Padilla (2016) show that in Amerindian and Asian cultures students value education to honouring their family. Research also shows that particularly in collectivistic societies families are an important source of financial, emotional and practical support (Ang and Liamputtong, 2008; Lee and Padilla, 2016). Therefore, the inclusion of a broader spectrum of socio-cultural backgrounds in the study of EF support in HE will help to shed light on the cultural differences of social support.

Emphasis on Ethnic Minorities

It was observed that studies have focused mainly on ethnic minority groups. Only five of

twenty-two studies reviewed on HE included White working-class populations (Heath *et al.,* 2009; Lent *et al.,* 2002; Nelson, 2016; Strom and Savage, 2014, and Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Therefore, young people from various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, genders, ethnicities and age groups (including non-traditional students) need to be included in order to contribute to a conceptual understanding of how EF works across different contexts, including dominant social groups, in matters of students' access, progression and completion of HE.

Experiences of social support amongst different university students

In order to answer the third research question, this literature review shows that SS varies across the four student-types of HE students here analysed (traditional, non-traditional, international and students who drop out). Research shows that for the majority of traditional and international students the cultural aspects of family ties are important. Generally, traditional and international students who receive social support are able to translate support into educational attainment. Unlike dropout students, traditional and international students tend to attribute their academic success to their EF members. However, across all four student-types the outcomes of support are mixed, ranging from support that attenuates disadvantage to support that accentuates it. It is also worth noting that the majority of studies have been undertaken more amongst traditional than international students. Therefore, future research on EF support in HE should focus on non-traditional and students who drop out.

Conclusions

The previous sections provided a map of research on the influence of EF members in HE. The aim of this section is to link this research to HE practitioners and policy makers as a way to promote diversity within universities. In order to answer the fourth research question, the following suggestions are changes that HEIs could be making to take advantage of what is known about social support networks in HE.

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As Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama (2017) claim, the notion of funds of knowledge challenges perceptions of deficit attributed to under-represented university students. According to them, the actions of faculty and administrators are determined by their own perceptions of HE students (Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama, 2017). For this reason, policies on access and inclusion in HE should be established from a non-deficit approach that welcomes students' diverse support networks. More specifically, HEIs should include prospective students' support networks in their recruitment and widening participation activities by welcoming and listening to them. Once students are enrolled, universities should diversify their schemes of student support. This could be done through allowing diverse ways of communication that include students' own support networks outside university, and inside university, organise buddy schemes, peer mentoring and online platforms in addition to traditional counselling and enabling services already provided. In order to ease adaptation to university life it is also important that academic staff incorporate students' funds of knowledge in their pedagogical practices and curriculum as advocated by Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt and Moll (2011). These initiatives could help to increase recruitment amongst non-dominant groups and achieve a smother adaptation to university life for a diverse range of students. A diversified choice of resources of support at university could also help to mitigate cases where research shows that students' own sources of social support are less effective (Lent et al., 2002; Juang et al., 2016; Lee and Padilla, 2016; Sahu et al., 2016).

Some of the studies here analysed are clear examples of the implicit understanding of the notion of funds of knowledge amongst the literature. As suggested by Palmer *et al.* (2011), tutors and educational authorities should recognise that especially across non-dominant backgrounds, diverse family members are well equipped at encouraging and supporting students' participation and completion in HE. Similarly, both Ang and Liamputtong (2008) and Morosanu et al. (2010) show that, in many cases, families are students' main source of

support in addition to the support resources provided at university.

There are continual calls in the literature for further research on social support in education generally (Hardgrove, McDowell and Rootham, 2015; Pallock and Lamborn, 2006; Richardson, 2009; Salami, 2008). However, as this literature review demonstrates, there is a growing number of studies on social support in HE.

The limitations of this literature review are the restricted number of studies analysed, the exclusion of potential valuable papers published in languages other than English, and the difficulty in comparing research outcomes from studies employing diverse analytical lenses and methods. This was challenging, given the diverse nature of the selected papers, which varied enormously in terms of focus, perspectives, methodologies, conceptual frameworks and findings. Whenever possible, similarities and differences between studies were highlighted, as well as their particular contributions in relation to the literature review's research questions.

The originality of this literature review resides on three aspects. First, the integration of multidisciplinary knowledge. This will help to advance our understanding on the cultural differences of EF support in HE in order to provide direction for HE practitioners to better support students. Second, the distinction between social support attenuating and accentuating disadvantage is an element that has been generally underdeveloped including in the literature of funds of knowledge. Finally, the consideration of both dominant and non-dominant social backgrounds across a variety of ethnic groups which provides a comprehensive understanding of the different ways in which students studying in diverse HE systems draw on social support.

As research evidence shows (Bang *et al.,* 2008; Menzies, Baron and Zutshi, 2015; Palmer *et al.,* 2011; Sullivan and Kashubeck-West, 2015), a better understanding of EF support can help educational institutions globally to tailor schemes of support to their student

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population according to the support they receive or fail to receive from their support networks

outside of university. It can also clarify the extent to which EF support meets students'

educational and occupational aspirations – or not.

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Table 1 Traditional-aged students

	Author/s	Year	Participants	Context	Data collection methods	Main findings	Outcome of support
1.	Román, Cuestas and Fenollar	2008	553 UG students	Spain	Questionnaires	Support from EF has positive effects on students learning. Cultural aspects of family ties are important.	EF support achieves positive outcomes. The socio-economic and cultural background of EF members does not determine the extent and quality of their support.
2.	Gofen	2009	50 UG first-generation students	Israel	Semi-structured interviews	Students attribute their success to their EF members.	
3.	Kiyama	2010	27 Hispanic families attending an Outreach Programme	U.S.A.	Semi-structured interviews	Families place a high value in education. Their knowledge about choice and preparation for HE is constructed in non-traditional ways but is often incomplete. The Outreach Programme gives families concrete and realistic information about HE.	
4.	Morosanu, Handley and O'Donovan	2010	5 first-year students	England	Audio diaries	Students do not always embrace institutional support and informal networks help them to cope with their academic responsibilities.	
5.	Palmer, Davis and Maramba	2011	11 Black male UG students	U.S.A.	Face-to-face and follow-up interviews	Support from parents, siblings and EF impacts students' ability to succeed in their courses.	
6.	Khambhaita	2014	9 Indian mothers	England	Semi-structured interviews	Working- and middle-class Indian mothers use EF members as a source of knowledge to support their daughters' university course choices.	
7.	Nelson	2016	30 predominately White graduates	U.S.A.	Semi-structured interviews	Family, school and community capital influence financially disadvantaged but academically successful rural students during their university search and application process. Students are able to translate support into educational attainment.	
8.	Mwangi	2017	9 Black sub-Saharan African families	U.S.A.	Ethnographic multi-case study	Motivation for HE is part of a larger family effort towards upward mobility. Families pass the value of education on to their first-generation offspring.	
9.	Lent, Brown, Talleyrand, McPartland, Davis, Chopra and Chai	2002	31 UG and graduate students	U.S.A.	Structured interviews	Although participants cite social support as a critical factor in career choice, students' perception of support and barriers is likely to be affected by their socio-economic status, level of education and culture.	EF support outcomes are less effective. The socio-economic background of EF members determine the extent and quality of their support.
10.	Juang, Ittel, Hoferichter and Gallarin	2016	142 ethnically diverse students	U.S.A.	Self-report survey	Family support is inefficient to disable peer discrimination due to their lack	

	Author/s	Year	Participants	Context	Data collection methods	Main findings	Outcome of support
						of proximity and understanding of university life.	
11.	Lee and Padilla	2016	198 predominately high-achieving students	South Korea	Questionnaire	Students' perception of social support is a predictor of happiness, especially within their close social circles. However, students rely on themselves in times of adversity, decreasing the potential for social support during stressful events.	
12.	Sahu, Jeffery and Nakkeeran	2016	26 university applicants	India	In-depth interviews	Social control from EF in India acts as a barrier to accessing quality HE. EF members tend to influence parents not to send their daughters to university and interfere with or discourage certain career choices considered male-dominated fields.	

Table 2 Non-traditional students

	Author/s	Year	Participants	Context	Data collection methods	Main findings	Outcome of support
1.	Carney-Crompton and Tan	2002	63 female university students	Canada	Survey	Non-traditional students perform at a higher level than traditional students, despite having fewer sources of emotional and instrumental support.	Although support networks are important for non-traditional students, their effect does not guarantee achieving positive educational outcomes.
2.	Heath, Fuller and Johnston	2009; 2010	107 adults	England	Qualitative social network analysis	Although educational decision-making is a network-embedded process, first-hand experience of HE does not necessarily add bridging capital to a network, and can sometimes even act as a reinforcement of existing network perceptions of non-participation in HE.	
3.	Andrade	2013	18 American Indian graduate women	U.S.A.	Online survey	Familial role is critical to non-traditional students' HE dispositions. Family members encourage participants to pursue university admission and, when possible, help with university life.	

Table 3 International students

	Author/s	Year	Participants	Context	Data collection methods	Main findings	Outcome of support
1.	Ang and Liamputtong	2008	7 UG and graduate Chinese students	Australia	In-depth interviews	Families are students' main source of support, which reduces their need to speak to university counsellors in a language other than their own.	Support networks at home and on-campus help international students to cope with studying abroad.
2.	Bang, Muriuki and Hodges	2008	291 international students	U.S.A.	Online survey	Significant gender differences found between female and male international students. Female international students have better social support networks and seek more help than male counterparts.	
3.	Chen and Yang	2015	21 Chinese international students	Singapore	In-depth interviews and qualitative content analysis of 1736 posted messages	Students are able to both seek and provide informational, instrumental, emotional and network support amongst them through online platforms.	
4.	Menzies, Baron and Zutshi	2015	31 postgraduate international students	Australia	Semi-structured interviews	Social support can be effectively provided through a university-based peer-mentoring programme to facilitate transition to HE.	
5.	Sullivan and Kashubeck-West	2015	104 international students	U.S.A.	Online survey	Students with broad-based social support experience lower levels of acculturative stress. Maintaining connection to the home culture and developing positive connections to the host culture, co-national and other international students, helps to increase cultural adaptation in HE.	

Table 4 Dropout students

	Author/s	Year	Participants	Context	Data collection methods	Main findings	Outcome of support
1.	Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld	2005	34 students	England	Interviews	The majority of students who dropout have multifaceted reasons, of which social support is one. Failing to make friends at university is crucial to the decision on whether to stay or drop out.	Social support is crucial especially during the first years at university in order to attenuate drop out.
2.	Strom and Savage	2014	101 first-year ethnically diverse students	U.S.A	Questionnaires	Initial support provided by 'close others' has a significant impact on students' initial commitment to the goal of graduation.	