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“Lost in transition”: alienation and drop out during the transition to mathematically-demanding subjects at university.

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Summary: This paper explores the reasons why some previously engaged students drop out during their transition to mathematically-demanding university degrees. The concept of alienation is used to explain drop out: alienation occurs when social practices restrict the individuals' agency in such ways that they are unable to transform the social conditions in which they participate, even though they might place a great effort in doing so, hence becoming alienated objectively and subjectively. So, for instance, engineering students that see themselves as 'practical', find that the theoretical/academic practice of university mathematics becomes irrelevant to their aspirations and ways of learning, i.e. alien to their identity as learners. The impossibility of changing this situation becomes recognised and results in their drop out.

Classification: C25 C35 C65

Keywords: drop out; alienation; transition; university mathematics

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