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Student Engagement: A Critical Conceptualisation of the Complexity of the International Students' Experiences

Dangeni
Newcastle University, UK

ABSTRACT

Increasing numbers of international students bring their different cultures, languages, and educational backgrounds to higher education, and they expect their experiences and interactions with higher education institutions to be rewarding journeys. A key issue - the dynamic and multifaceted concept of student engagement as an important indicator of the quality of the student experience - has yet to be thoroughly addressed in conceptual discussions and empirical studies with international students, and thus deserves more attention. This paper aims to conceptualise this buzzword, i.e., 'student engagement', in higher education, by embracing the complexity and diversity of international students' experiences to enable a deeper understanding of international students' experiences and needs, and to inform research and practice that considers all stakeholders through questions and suggestions.

Keywords: international higher education, international students, internationalisation, student engagement

A good educational experience and outcome encompasses several powerful components; for example, students being motivated to learn and to achieve their intended goals when they entered university, as well as their active participation in numerous academic activities. What recurs frequently in the language of educators is students' desire to be engaged with their experience in HE and with their learning (Bryson, 2014; Trowler, 2010). While the concept of Student Engagement (hereafter SE) is acknowledged, there is a lack of clear definition and consistent measures of such, which lead to confusion and inconsistent findings and discussions in both research and practice. In addition, empirical research has primarily focused on domestic, undergraduate students, uncovering their

transitional experiences and identity construction (Solomonides & Martin, 2008), and there is an apparent lack of conceptual discussions in relation to international student engagement in HE. This paper aims to 1) critically discuss the existing definitions and conceptualisations of student engagement, and 2) contextualise SE in an empirical study to seek a holistic understanding of international students' experiences. Each section concludes with some reflective questions that could facilitate future research practice for researchers.

A POTENTIAL CONCEPTUALISATION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ENGAGEMENT?

A search of the literature on SE reveals that it is a relatively well-developed research area that evaluates 'student involvement' (Kuh et al., 2008) in contexts such as US and Australia through survey instruments, i.e., the National Survey of Student Engagement and Australasian Survey of Student Engagement, which offer a means of benchmarking for administrators and policymakers, but the reliance on surveys to provide forms of measure has been considered a key limitation to understanding the complexity of the student experience (Kahu, 2013). In contexts such as that of the UK, which tends to use different terminologies, e.g., student feedback, student representation, and student approaches to learning (Trowler & Trowler, 2010), researchers often employ qualitative approaches to let students have a say in their experiences (Solomonides, 2013). Notably, though these different concepts have helped to identify some orientations, definitions are seldom provided and arguably fall short of capturing the 'joint' interactions described by Coates (2007), i.e., the idea that institutions and students play equally influential roles in learning in HE institutions. One definition offered by RAISE, a UK-based network for those interested in promoting the scholarship and practice of SE, is considered to acknowledge the complexity of SE and shed light on a potential conceptualisation of international student engagement:

Student engagement is about what a student brings to Higher Education in terms of goals, aspirations, values and beliefs and how these are shaped and mediated by their experience whilst a student. SE is constructed and reconstructed through the lenses of the perceptions and identities held by students and the meaning and sense a student makes of their experiences and interactions. As players in and shapers of the educational context, educators need to foster educationally purposeful SE to support and enable students to learn in constructive and powerful ways and realise their potential in education and society (Bryson & Hamshire, 2016).

This definition contributes to an understanding of the concept and highlights the key stakeholders, i.e., understanding that the interaction between international

students and their institutions is inseparable with regard to capturing SE. Therefore, it is equally important to understand the interactional opportunities provided from both staff and universities' perspectives and seek international students' reflections on their interactional experiences. For example, before constructing international students as deficit in academic activities (as widely framed in the scholarly literature), it is vital to consider whether they are informed as to the pedagogical and interactive norm and equipped with the skills to navigate and succeed in a different learning environment (Heng, 2018; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021; Ploner, 2017). This definition also illustrates dynamic and fluid engagement as it can be constructed and reconstructed within different locations and with different stakeholders. For example, the 'lack', i.e., international student's linguistic and academic insufficiencies (as extensively portrayed in the literature) fail to consider their developmental and transformative learning and whether they are able to develop skills and engage with learning opportunities on their journeys. Thus, to understand their experiences at different stages of their learning, it is essential to capture their interactions with peers and staff members to understand and ultimately better support the international learning experience.

Key consideration for researchers: to explore whether there is a developed operational definition that:

- recognises the 'joint' interactions between key stakeholders, i.e., institutions and international students;
- includes what international students bring to the university;
- seeks to understand the international students' experiences within different locations and with different stakeholders and over time.

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY TO EXPLORE THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

The sections above argue that a more holistic conceptualisation linked to the specific context in which international students engage with, and the wide range of, educational and sociocultural backgrounds is necessary and urgent. In a recent longitudinal project which explored the experiences of international Chinese master's students at UK universities through a year-long collection of audio diaries with international students and interviews with staff members (Dangeni, 2022), a conceptual framework of student engagement was employed (Kahu, 2013) that sought to explore students' multifaceted, contextual, and dynamic experiences at university. Specifically, in this framework, SE involves an interplay of affect, cognition, and behaviour, located in the centre of the framework. The structural and psychosocial influences in this framework emphasise the influences of university and the relationship between university and student factors (e.g., background and skills). The proximal and distal consequences cover the academic and social outcomes as a result of SE. Finally,

the sociocultural perspective can be found in the overarching sociocultural influences that interact closely with both students and institutions. Embracing such 'multifacetedness' is seen as essential: it includes not only those elements within an institution's control, but also enables a richer and shared understanding of the complexity and dynamics of the student experience.

Arguably, it is important to understand how the different factors in Kahu's framework are translated into practice. For example, participants extensively reflected on the challenges encountered in the initial stages of their learning, e.g., different ways of interacting with staff members (as authority who provide correct answers versus as learning facilitators) and unfamiliar assessment approaches (test-taking versus assignment writing with critical thinking), which were unfamiliar in comparison with what they experienced as undergraduates in Chinese universities. Similarly, staff members also shared observations that "At first, they're generally quite passive, working out what kind of relationship they are going to have", which seemed to be paralleled by existing research, i.e., take a narrow view of their experiences, mostly identifying challenges and barriers, e.g., as passive recipients (Karram, 2013; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021). However, both international students and staff members identified that international students "have a tremendous capacity for [change]" (Dangeni, 2022), i.e., participants in the study were actively engaged with their learning despite the challenges confronting them. They still managed to make the most of their everyday learning by being proactive (e.g., self-initiating study groups, learning skills to manage tasks), and over time they saw themselves develop and grow. For example., one of the participants shared: "With more experience in writing and making arguments, I now have a better understanding of what we call academic writing: you need to provide evidence for every argument you make, and you need to think logically and rationally throughout your writing." A variety of key factors and dispositions enabled such changes, e.g., students' backgrounds and support provisions. Rather than viewing Chinese students as "traditional and passive" learners, as is the case in much of the existing literature, it can be argued that they make the most of the characteristics of the Chinese culture that they bring to their learning, e.g., being hard-working and goal-oriented (Wu, 2014). Participants shared a wide variety of approaches they learned and people they held discussions with to better equip themselves with the skills required to overcome the challenges they encountered during the early stages of their learning, e.g., by forming study groups with peers, by seeking suggestions from their personal tutors (a scheme that students meet up with a member of the academic staff on a monthly basis), and by constantly reflecting on their learning (e.g., using the assignment feedback received). For example, one participant shared:

One thing I appreciate about the feedback that I've received here is that it is very detailed and specific. The feedback I used to receive during my undergraduate study was just a score without any details for ways to

improve. The feedback here enables me to know what can be improved and how to improve.

Similarly, despite being quiet in classrooms when the participants were new to the academic context, they were still active in their learning and thinking (Heng, 2018). For example, in the early-stage reflections, participants reflected that they came from an educational culture in which teachers played the dominant role; hence, there is the innate attitude that what teachers say should be respected as they are the authority, and, as such, their views should not be contested or criticised. Therefore, participating in discussions can be extremely challenging for them and it can take some time for them to become “louder” in classroom discussions. As an academic shared in the interview at the end of academic year: “you see them gain confidence”, which was echoed by participants when looking back on their experiences: “Despite the struggles, now I can see what I learned for my future career.” For research projects that aim to provide a detailed account of the lives and experiences of international students, it is suggested that the dimensions and factors discussed above should be taken into account, e.g., student’s motivations and skills, how they interact with the support provisions, etc.

Key consideration for researchers: When proposing a project that aims to understand the experiences of international students:

- How can we address the complex, fluid, and contextual nature of the student engagement of the international student body?
- What is a possible research design/technique to achieve this aim, e.g., a research design that a) encompasses both institutional and students’ influences from each perspective, b) looks at students’ experiences at different stages of their learning, c) depicts their achievements at the end of their international learning journey?

CONCLUSION

These are examples of the many experiences international students shared in this empirical study, which all indicate the complexity of international students’ experiences and explained the ways in which the lens of SE helped to explore the many dimensions of the student experience. Moreover, the lens also sheds light on the ways institutions and students alike might develop, support, or intervene that can maximise their learning outcomes and optimise their experience. In particular, both the institution and international students will benefit from reflecting on students’ educational experiences, expectations, and skills, jointly and at the earliest stage possible of their learning, which will enable a collaborative learning environment in which supporting schemes and the pedagogical norm and expectations are explicitly explained. Additionally, realising the multifaceted and unique experiences of international students as

individuals will avoid portraying international students through stereotypes, whilst at the same time providing opportunities for institutions to internationalise their teaching and support.

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Author bio

DANGENI, PhD, is a Professional Development Adviser in the Learning and Teaching Development Service at Newcastle University. Her research and teaching focus broadly on the teaching and learning provision in the wider context of the internationalisation of higher education. She is particularly interested in research and practices around international students' access, engagement and success in postgraduate taught (PGT) and postgraduate research (PGR) settings. Email: dangeni@newcastle.ac.uk
