UNDERSTANDING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract
"The mark of higher education isn't the knowledge you accumulate in your head. It's the skills you gain about how to learn." -Adam Grant
Education is instrumental to the development of a society, which needs transformation with time and the changing scenario of the world. It provides an opportunity to critically reflect upon the social, economic and cultural issues. To develop India as a source of innovation in learning, India needs to qualitatively strengthen its policy concerning research. This aspect is quintessentially related to student performance, which is in turn related to student engagement. Student engagement is a strong proxy of learning of students, and hence it becomes relevant to assess the student's perception of University education. This paper primarily focuses on giving meaningful insights into the meaning and ambit of student engagement and what are the various surveys that assess student engagement.
Keywords: Higher education, Student engagement, legal, student experience, Law schools

1. The theoretical framework of Student Engagement

Educational research affects retention and learning. Despite the importance, assessing engagement in higher education has remained a challenge. Institutions must define their scope of engagement in an innovative context and align all assessment metrics with the learning outcome. It requires a multi-faceted approach to capture the student's perception in behavioural, affective and cognitive dimensions.

There are about 197 million students today globally; UNESCO's prediction says that this number will rise to 262 million by 2025.[1] If higher education institutions do not create thinkers because they do not have sufficient knowledge of how students learn and develop, the opportunity cost will be enormous, not only for individual students but also for the society and economy. Such introspection is of prime significance for the university, prospective students as well as for the state. Quality education and a systematic learning environment can produce rewarding experiences.

The student experience is a central tenet of the quality assurance in higher education.[2] However, the attention has not shifted to student engagement (Klemenčič 2015) which perceives students as active cohorts in the educational process. In this context, student education is understood as "a process of student self-formation: the activities students engage in are all in some way or another geared towards changing themselves and their life circumstances."[3] (Marginson 2014). In a broader perspective, it is also related to achieving societal objectives. Hall and Lamont (2009), define a "successful society" as "one that enhances the capabilities of people to pursue the goals important to their own lives, whether through individual or collective action". Consequently, education, which enables students' agency, leads to a successful society. The student experience is thus understood as to be able to develop interventions that enhance "student agency towards self-formation."

2. Defining Student Engagement

It has been a challenge to define Student Engagement. For example, the UK Higher Education White Paper 'Students at the Heart of the System' stresses that student engagement acts as a key element of developing a learning community in higher education.[4] Further, Kuh [2009] and Trowler [2010] have discussed that student engagement refers to learning activities, developing curricula, quality assurance, governance etc. There have been

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[1] Igor Chirikov & Manja Klemenčič, *How Do We Know How Students Experience Higher Education? On the Use of Student Surveys*, in Curaj, Adrian & Matei, Liviu & Pricopie, Remus & Salmi, Jamil & Scott, Peter & Smidt, Hanne. (2015). The European Higher Education Area: Between Critical Reflections and Future Policies.

[2] Buckley, A., *How radical is student engagement? (And what is it for?,)* Student Engagement and Experience Journal, 3 (2) (2014).

[3] Klemencic, M., *Student representation in European higher education governance: principles and practice, roles and benefits.* In Egron-Polak, E., Kohler, J., Bergan, S. and Purser, L. (eds.) Leadership and Governance in Higher Education: Handbook for Decision-makers and Administrators. Berlin, RAABE Academic Publishers, 1-26 (2011a).

[4] Boland, J., *Student participation in shared governance: A means of advancing democratic values?*, Tertiary Education and Management, 11 (3), 199-217 (2005).

different meanings given to student engagement that had led to critical discussions (Zepke 2014). It is interesting to note that earlier researchers, later adopted by policymakers, used the term 'student engagement'.

Student engagement means something in contrast with passivity where it is the active nature of engagement that is highlighted [Mann 2001), which gives a sense of having a stake in the institution. To some extent, it can be said that engagement has similar properties to those that Klemenčič (2015) ascribes to student 'agency'. It can be said that the meaning of student engagement has changed over time in the context of focus and degree of engagement. Past studies linked student engagement with 'measurable outcomes both inside and outside the classroom and with high-quality learning outcomes' (Krause, 2008; Kuh, 2007). Kahu (2013) recognized that engagement is both "a process and an outcome". Much of the literature exists on identifying the factors, which are important for the generation of student engagement. For example, Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013) highlighted the importance of student determination and resilience to good engagement.

Yorke and Longden (2004) found motivation to be essential for student engagement vis a vis having a clear sense of purpose concerning their studies. Bryson (2010) sees engagement as the result of students' learning experience and integration. Integration means social and academic integration in the sense of emotional connection. Emotional connection is viewed as an important aspect of engagement. [Trowler 2010]. Further, some other researchers relate engagement to self-efficacy, [Bandura 2006). Haggis (2003), Pintrich (2004) discussed that self-efficacy is important for student success. Participation of students in academics and campus activities is indicative of institutional practices and student behaviors. An educational institution is required to create opportunities for academic excellence and development of students' experience. In return, students are expected to show commitment to such opportunities. The ground realities show that when students enter higher education, many of them feel out of place and feel alienated during their studies. Hence, institutions have a responsibility to ensure that students participate actively and do not drop out. Further, the participation has to be a meaningful one; it has to be a vigorous contribution since learning takes place in the mind of the student.

Student engagement is directly proportional to learning and development. The engagement should represent the time and effort students allot to activities that are associated with the learning outcomes of a programme (Kuh, 2008). It is understood that an engaged student connects with the faculty, and institution and is prepared, and curious about the institutional activities. Further, the student collaborates with students and faculty members to learn and experience. An engaged student connects with the institution, faculty and various learning and development-focused experiences. He is prepared, motivated, passionate and curious about academics. The student feels that he belongs to the institution and takes pride. On the other hand, a disengaged student develops negative thoughts about the institution, faculty and staff members including classmates. This is precisely why student engagement should be understood from different facets to attain the outcomes of a program. Kuh (2009) states that the disharmony between the expectations and behaviours of students results in inadequate academic achievement. Educational institutions must have data concerning different groups and devise strategies to engage with them effectively.

Numerous studies present student engagement in three dimensions i.e. "behavioural engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement."(Fredricks 2004, Jimerson 2003). Emotional engagement relates to a" sense of belongingness", behavioral engagement pertains to the active involvement of the students in a meaningful manner and cognitive engagement defines the psychological desire to surpass the requirements and challenges. There have been several empirical studies to strengthen this construct.[5] Newmann states that "Students are engaged when they 'devote substantial time and effort to academic tasks, when they care about the quality of their work, and when they commit themselves because the work seems to have significance beyond its personal instrumental value".

Research shows that disengaged students result in dropouts and lower employability. (Miller, 2003). Most of the surveys concentrate on undergraduate students and specifically in legal studies, there is a dearth of such surveys. Molini and Huonker (2010) found four factors, "Relevance, effort, participation and performance" for SES while doing research based on business school. Similarly, Sharma and Bhaumik (2013) identified five dimensions of student engagement and explored their different predictors. Some researchers have discussed that attendance may be less significant than student attentiveness, while some extended engagement "to embrace students

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[5] Kahu, E. R. *Framing student engagement in higher education.* Studies in Higher Education, 38(5), 758-773 (2013).

involvement in classroom activities"[6] Price, Handley, and Millar 2011). Some authors identify certain non-human factors such as timetabling and course regulation as having an impact on engagements. [Bryson, 20120, Raftery, 2013][7].

Further, Bryson noted that student engagement is both individual and dynamic since it a social construct. Lawson and Lawson (2013) recognise considerations of home and community in addition to academic activity that shape student engagement. Trowler's (2010) literature agrees that engagement enhances achievement and that less prepared students gain tremendously from being engaged properly. However, this is not a universal finding, such as Zepke (2015) suggests that the relation between engagement and achievement may not be present, indeed in certain groups such as international, religious minorities or first-generation student who may feel disconnected because of their socio-political reasons.

Subsequently, the term has been used in diverse ways (Zepke 2015). The concept has evolved and applied to any of the following: "time spent on task; quality of effort; student involvement; social and academic integration; good practices in education; and learning outcomes". (QAA 2012). Some authors have described student engagement through emotional connection. "Student engagement [is when] … not only students' time and physical energy [are] directed toward learning opportunities, but also the emotional energy required to enter into the adaptive learning process"[8]. Dean and Jolly [2012], discussed that "Engagement occurs when students accept a level of identity-based risk and are willing to experience potentially emotional outcomes associated with learning, both positive and negative."

3. *Models and Student Engagement Surveys*

Several models have been developed by authors to investigate specific issues about student engagement encompassing teaching practices, learning and overall development. Some focused more on emotional issues primarily and not behavioural responses. [Solomonides and Reid 2009]. Some studies use quantitative methods to derive statistical models, whereas, some only test the data (Coates 2007). Lent, Brown and Hackett (1994) designed a model which considers the

relationship between the factors that lead to engagement and success. The model shows that "self-efficacy, outcome expectation, interest and goals collectively support engagement, and that student achievement requires both engagement and self-efficacy."[9]

Further, as discussed earlier, Trowler (2010) and Lawson (2013) identified three dimensions: "emotional, behavioural and cognitive" of student engagement. Interestingly, it does not cover motivation which as per Kahu (2013) seems to be crucial to understanding student engagement. Kahu (2013) identifies four dimensions: "behaviour, cognition, emotion and a will to succeed."[10]

Student surveys have come to be identified as the most used data source for quality assessment in higher education.[Williams 2014] Much of this data is acquired through student surveys. As stated by David Radwin in Chronicle of Higher Education (Radwin 2009) "…the use of surveys is one of the fastest-growing and most pervasive trends on campuses". With the advent of technology, it has become easier to collect data. It is also to be noted that students perhaps are the most surveyed population across the world and it has proliferated rapidly. There are a few most influential student engagement surveys which are discussed by many researchers as having some limitations too. Nonetheless, such surveys present a picture of students' engagement as part of the development of student data analytics, collecting and synthesizing data in the context of institutional research.[11]

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2007) and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE, 2006) are widely known surveys that concentrate on various aspects of student engagement, however, they only concentrate on undergraduate programs. In addition, these are North American surveys, which are more suitable for Western students.[12] Unfortunately, student engagement has been rarely studied and practised in India systematically let alone a study specifically for law schools in India.

[6] Sharma, B.R., & Bhaumik, P.K., *Student engagement and its predictors: An exploratory study in an Indian business school.* Global Business Review, 14(1), 25–42. (2013).

[7] Lisa Payne, *Student engagement: three models for its investigation,* Journal of Further and Higher Education, 641-657 (2019)

[8] Ibid

[9] Fernández Da Lama, R, *Student engagement: a non-systematic review of its conceptualization, models and assessment instruments.* Investigaciones en Psicología, 24(1), 87-95 (2019).

[11] B. Jean Mandernach, *Assessment of Student Engagement in Higher Education: A Synthesis of Literature and Assessment Tools,* International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research 12. 1-14, (2015).

[12] Buckley, A. *Making it count: Reflecting on the National Student* Survey in the process of enhancement. York, Higher Education Academy. (2012).

Thus, an urgent need to comprehend student engagement in the Indian context.

The National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) derived five scales to measure the effectiveness of an engaged student i.e. "academic challenge, students' interactions with faculty, active and collaborative learning, enriching educational experiences and supportive campus environment." (Kuh, 2001). Whereas, the FSSE (2010) measures faculty expectations for student engagement in educational practices. The dimensions include faculty–student interaction, effective teaching and learning strategies, encouraging the student to collaborate and opportunities provided to students to engage in diverse perspectives"[13].

Another similar survey on the same lines is the Classroom Survey of Student Engagement (CLASSE), which is used to assess classroom settings[14]. An Australian survey known as, the Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ) (AUSSE; Coates, 2010) comprises the dimensions like "academic challenge, active learning, student and staff interactions, enriching educational experiences, supporting learning environment, work integrated learning and career readiness"[15]. Another survey, the South African Survey of Student Engagement Scale (SASSE, 2010) consists of 42 questions ranging from "active and collaborative learning, level of academic challenge, enriching educational experiences, supportive campus environment and student– staff interaction"[16].

Many surveys assess emotional, cognitive and behavioural engagement. Emotional engagement refers to "the positive effect of a student towards his institution", accordingly questions like "Do you feel emotionally connected to your institution"; "Will you recommend your institution for higher study?", "Are you in touch with your faculty or any staff member from your university?" and so on are included.

Cognitive engagement relates to physiological investment in learning, whereas, behavioral engagement means active involvement in the institution. For the same questions like "Did you know the reason for pursuing higher studies?", "Were you apprised of the learning outcomes of the course?", Were you made to think out of the box?", Did you participate in the extracurricular activities?", Did you have good relations with your undergraduates?", Did you do any research work with your faculty?" and so on are included.

To get appropriate responses, different scales of measurement are used depending on the question. The scale of measurement is a classification that describes the nature of information within the numbers assigned to variables. Psychologist Stanley Smith Stevens developed four scales of measurement: i.e. "nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio". Similarly, Stevens also proposed his typology in 1946 in a Science article entitled "On the theory of scales of measurement". He also claimed that all measurements can be conducted using "nominal, ordinal, interval and ratio unifying both qualitative and quantitative".

4. *Salient features of National Education Policy 2020 (India)*

The fundamental principles of the NEP policy requires "recognizing, identifying, and fostering the unique capabilities of each student, by sensitizing teachers as well as parents to promote each student's holistic development in both academic and non-academic spheres; flexibility, so that learners have the ability to choose their learning trajectories and programmes, and thereby choose their own paths in life according to their talents and interests; multidisciplinary and a holistic education across the sciences, social sciences, arts, humanities, and sports for a multidisciplinary world in order to ensure the unity and integrity of all knowledge; creativity and critical thinking to encourage logical decision-making and innovation; ethics and human & Constitutional values like empathy, respect for others, cleanliness, courtesy, democratic spirit, spirit of service, respect for public property, scientific temper, liberty, responsibility, pluralism, equality, and justice; promoting multilingualism and the power of language in teaching and learning; life skills such as communication, cooperation, teamwork, and resilience." Moreover, it reminds that "education is a concurrent subject and full equity and inclusion as the cornerstone of all educational decisions to ensure that all students are able to thrive in the education system."[17]

It further envisions quality universities with a forward-looking vision for a higher education system. It states "Higher education must aim to develop good, thoughtful, well-rounded, and creative individuals; It must enable an individual to develop intellectual curiosity, scientific temper, creativity, spirit of service, and 21st-century capabilities across a range of disciplines; A quality higher education must enable personal

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[13] KAHU, Supra Note 5

[17] National Education Policy 2020.
https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf

accomplishment and enlightenment, constructive public engagement, and productive contribution to the society; It must prepare students for more meaningful and satisfying lives and work roles and enable economic independence"

Currently, higher education in India faces a lot of challenges including meagre emphasis on cognitive skills and learning outcomes, limited access to socio-economic backward areas with few higher education institutions, in adequate infrastructure, lesser emphasis on research, lack of funding, ineffective regulatory mechanism etc.

5. *Conclusion*

The research shows that there is no universal definition of 'student engagement'. The ambit of student engagement has evolved with time but most scholars have analyzed student engagement on three parameters i.e. emotional, cognitive and behavioral.

Students are expected to learn not just inside the classroom but also from the society. They are involved in a lot of discussions and networking. Therefore, students are required to engage themselves extensively and vigorously. As per the UGC and NEP 2020, it can be said that the vision of higher education is to establish institutions of global repute etc. Higher education students are expected to be thinkers rather than just studying. Educational research increasingly highlights the importance of student engagement and its impact on retention, learning and persistence. Despite widespread agreement on the value of student engagement, assessing engagement in higher education remains a challenge. To effectively measure student engagement (and understand its influence on the learning experience), it is essential that each institution defines the scope of engagement within its unique context and selects assessment metrics that align with the target definition. The dynamic nature of engagement mandates a multi-faceted approach to assessment that captures the interactive nature of the behavioural, affective and cognitive dimensions comprising student engagement.

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