FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: A MODEL OF HOW AND WHY STUDENTS LEARN

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Abstract
Student engagement has been considered as one of the most important issues faced by the contemporary educational system in general and independent educators in particular. Such attention to the concept of student engagement easily understandable, as students who are engaged into the learning process are more likely to succeed academically and less likely to drop out of school. Engaged students usually pursue academic degrees, while those, who do not engage in learning, are more likely to drop out of school. Evidently, educators are primarily aimed in enhancing student engagement because it is one of the major strategies for student retention and academic performance improvement. This study aimed to investigate factors affecting student engagement in learning and the model depicting how and why students learn through those factors. The instrument of the study was the questionnaire adapted from the College Student Report of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) of the United States. The participants of this study including 919 second-year and fourth-year undergraduate students of Vietnam National University, Hanoi were selected by stratified sampling technique. The collected data were summarized and analysed by using SPSS software and other statistic software. The findings of the study shows that the student engagement in learning of the students participated in the study was presented in six engagement scales, namely: academic challenge, active learning, student-staff interactions, enriching educational experiences, supportive learning environment, work integrated learning; and five educational outcome scales including high-order thinking, general learning outcomes, general development outcomes, career readiness, and overall satisfaction. Lastly, a proposed model of student engagement using the Structured Equation Modeling (SEM) procedures was accomplished. This model depicts how and why students learn and engage in learning.

Keywords: student engagement, engagement scales, educational outcome scales, model of student engagement.

1 INTRODUCTION
Since the middle of 1990s and up to the present, student engagement has been considered as one of the most important issues faced by the contemporary educational system in general and independent educators in particular [1], [2]. Such attention to the concept of student engagement easily understandable, as students who are engaged into the learning process are more likely to succeed academically and less likely to drop out of school [3], [4], [5]. Engaged students usually pursue academic degrees, while those, who do not engage in learning, are more likely to drop out of school. Evidently, educators are primarily aimed in enhancing student engagement because it is one of the major strategies for student retention and academic performance improvement [1], [2], [5]. More specifically, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) studies by Kuh have shown that student engagement in the following effective educational practices, namely: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment, have all contributed to the overall desired outcomes in college [6].

Student engagement refers to the level of a student’s active involvement in learning activities [7] or in institution more generally [8], [9]. It is a multidimensional construct that consists of several distinct and highly inter-correlated aspects of involvement. According to different engagement theorists, student engagement ranges from behavioral engagement to emotional engagement, to cognitive engagement, and to agentic engagement. For the past more than twenty years, the concept of student engagement has been recognized as one of the major factors contributing to desirable collegiate outcomes [10]. However, the definition and the method used in measuring student engagement vary from studies to studies [11]. Student engagement can be defined as involvement or commitment. Consequently, student engagement can be defined as student involvement or student commitment. Similarly, Astin’s theory of student involvement noted that students learn by the concept of being involved. Beyond this definition, student engagement is also said to be multidimensional by nature [12]. Such multidimensional nature of student engagement has slowly shaped the concept into both a strategy for improving educational
achievement and as an independently valuable outcome of schooling [11]. Student engagement is also used to describe students’ willingness to participate in routine school activities, such as attending class, submitting school work, and following class instructions. Some researchers considered student engagement to include students’ participation in lesson and curriculum planning, classroom management, and other pedagogical involved tasks [13]. Other studies even defined engagement in terms of interest, effort, motivation, time-on-task; the time student spent on a particular learning task [14]. More recently, the concept of student engagement has placed much interest in the influence of school context, more specifically in the relationships between campus climate and students’ experience of engagement.

According to studies in the United States, the quality of students’ university experience is more important than who they are or which institution they attend [6]. Similarly, student engagement or involvement in educational activities positively is said to contribute to a range of outcomes including persistence, satisfaction, achievement, and academic success [15]. In reality, the student engagement idea is actually quite simple and easy to understand. Obviously, the more students spends time on and engage with a subject, the more they understand and comprehend about it. In addition, the more students interact with faculty and staff members with regards to their studies and lessons, the more the students can apply their learning to concrete situations and tasks.

Recently, the concept of student engagement has been attracted a lot of attention from higher educational institutions and scholars in Vietnam. With a primary aim of understanding the Vietnamese university students’ learning behaviours and experiences, the student engagement survey is really a source of valuable information. From the NSSE construct being an empirically proven framework of student engagement, therefore, this study aimed to investigate factors affecting student engagement in learning and the model depicting how and why students learn through those factors.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative research model, wherein data was collected from a survey. The instrument of the survey was the questionnaire adapted from the College Student Report of the NSSE of the United States. The participants of this study including 919 second-year and fourth-year undergraduate students of Vietnam National University, Hanoi were selected by stratified sampling technique. The collected data was statistically analyzed using the mean, standard deviation, frequency and percentage, correlations, T-tests, regression analysis, and other cross-tabulations to determine the various descriptive summaries by using SPSS software and other statistic software. Then, a proposed model of Vietnamese student engagement using the Structured Equation Modeling (SEM) procedures was accomplished. The SEM analysis can be viewed as a combination of path analysis and factor analysis. Items from the six effective educational practices, and five educational outcome gains were included and tested.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Educational practices and outcome gains

The collected data form the survey was analysed by using the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) in SPSS. The findings from the analysis are consistent with the conceptual framework of NSSE mentioned by Kuh regarding to the effective educational practices and educational outcome gains [6]. There are 6 key clusters of activities that are linked to desired outcomes in education. They are academic challenge (AC), active learning (AL), student and staff interactions (SSI), enriching educational experiences (EEE), supportive learning environment (SLE), and work integrated learning (WIL). These indicators are well supported with not only the findings of the NSSE, but are also noted in findings of various student engagement studies [11].

- Academic challenge (AC) is the concept that derived from Weiner’s attribution theory, which mentioned that academic motivation in terms of task difficulty (or having the opportunity of a challenge) is one of the determining factors in the effort a student will expend on that activity [16].
- Active learning (AL) recognizes that learning is collaborative and social. Active learning states that students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education. In general, active learning involves any instructional method that engages student in the learning process, and
requires students to perform meaningful learning activities and think about what they are doing [17].

- Student and staff interaction (SSI) is the quality communication between student and staff. Studies have shown that when students interact with staff inside and outside the classroom, students tend to learn first-hand information and/or knowledge. The transformation of learning environments into places of effective teaching and deep learning requires new ways of looking at the roles of teachers [11].

- Enriching educational experiences (EEE) encompasses learning opportunities both inside and outside the classroom. Besides the more common co-curricular activities found inside the school, some other enriching experiences includes opportunity to learn from and in a culturally diverse atmosphere, technology enhanced learning, internship experiences, and community service opportunity.

- Supporting learning environment (SLE) indicates that students perform better and are more satisfied at institutions that are committed to their success and cultivate positive working and social relations among different groups on campus. In a broader sense, a group or a community is the result of interaction and deliberation by people brought together by similar interests and common goals [18].

- Work integrated learning (WIL) shows the integration of employment-focused work experiences into study. This is very important for students before graduating and entering the labour force.

The findings from the EFA analysis also indicates the educational outcome gains. These are higher-order thinking (HOT), general learning outcomes (GLO), general development outcomes (GDO), career readiness (CR), and overall satisfaction (OS).

- Higher-order thinking (HOT) is related to the participation of students in higher-order forms of thinking.

- General learning outcomes (GLO) reflects the development of students in general competencies.

- General development outcomes (GDO) indicates students’ development of general forms of individual and social development.

- Career readiness (CR) shows the preparation of students for the participation into the professional workforce.

- Overall satisfaction (OS) presents students’ overall satisfaction with their educational experience during learning process.

The findings of effective educational practices and educational outcome gains are well supported with not only the findings of the NSSE, but are also noted in findings of various student engagement studies [11].

3.2 Student engagement model

For the Vietnamese student engagement model, SEM results shows significant correlation among the six effective educational practices and five educational outcomes gains (see figure 1). Previous studies have been focusing their efforts on the different context of student engagements, such as classroom engagement and school engagement [11]. The different context wherein student engagement is undertaken is also seen as a viable contributing factor to the overall experience of schooling. Although, some researchers mentioned that differences in institution types (e.g. public or private, big or small) are small and inconsistent to the students’ level of student engagement [15]. However, what does matter is the school (or classroom), the climate of the institution. The school settings (climate) that provide opportunity for students to participate and develop social relations are in fact more significant than school size.

In a classic study, Barker and Gump mentioned that interactions are found to be greater in smaller schools than in larger ones [19]. In reality, small and alternative institutions are more likely to have the conditions that promote engagement, builds school membership (such as school inclusion and belongingness), and utilizes curriculum that characterized authentic work [20]. In a study of Australian student engagement, Fullarton mentioned that the school where a student attends actually does matter. In institutions that have the resources or willingness to commit and to provide a wide range of co-
curricular activities, and encourage students to participate, generally have a higher levels of engagement than those in schools which do not [21].

Studies also differentiate student engagement in terms of engagement duration and intensity. In some cases engagement might be a criteria, which is practiced religiously, and some are considered as seasonal or strategic or even deliberate by nature [22]. With the complexity of the dimensions involved in defining and assessing student engagement, to keep it manageable, most studies involves variables exclusive within the context of the learning environment of the specific group within where the analysis is being conducted.

Some researchers also mentioned that learning takes place in the classroom or inside the school in general, however, students also learns during their time away from schools [23]. Some studies have actually included the concept of parents’ participation (e.g. family engagement or parents engagement) to improved students’ learning outcomes [24]. Furthermore, family, community, culture, and educational context are all said to have influence engagement. It is also mentioned that the students’ reasons to perform and engage are primarily dominated by reasons such as learning goals, performance goals, obtaining future consequences, pleasing the teacher, and pleasing the family [25]. While some studies mentioned the phenomenon of taking remedial classes (more commonly known in Asia as cram school) during after school hours.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The primary aim of this study is to understand the complex multidimensional indicators that shape the interrelations between the students’ behavioural, affective, and cognitive aspects of learning. Key implications indicate that the Vietnamese student engagement shows significant correlation among the six effective educational practices and five educational outcomes gains including higher-order thinking (HOT), general learning outcomes (GLO), general development outcomes (GDO), career readiness (CR), and overall satisfaction (OS). Furthermore, SEM analysis shows clear relationships between these six effective educational practices benchmark practices and five educational outcomes gains. Such findings should be able to help administrators, educators, and parents alike, regarding what are the proper interventions that would be able to make learning persist in the students of today.

REFERENCES


