

Understanding Students' Academic Engagement in Learning amid Globalising Universities

Yusuke Sakurai & Kirsi Pyhältö

Abstract

Academic engagement is considered to be a hallmark of an optimal studying experience and a key to academic success for all students, including those from abroad. Accordingly, creating an engaging learning environment for higher education students is among the most pressing issues currently facing universities. This essay firstly summarises authors' research perspectives focusing on international students' engagement in university studies. The authors especially have attempted to understand to what extent international students from different backgrounds engage in their studies and whether the impacts of factors in students' learning environment on their academic engagement vary between different international student cohorts. Secondly, we introduce three emerging perspectives: students' academic engagement in relation to their future self-visions, doctoral education, and short-term study abroad programs, which are all closely tied with international education. Thirdly, the essay proposes several gaps in the literature which the authors find important for future investigation to contribute to students' academic engagement in globalising higher educational institutions.

Keywords: Academic engagement, international students, career orientation, doctoral education, study abroad

Creating Engaging University Learning Communities for All

Our recent work has focused on the academic engagement of international university students with different national backgrounds. Academic engagement refers to students' active involvement in academic activities (Harrison, 2013) such as studying, acquiring skills, exploring knowledge, and even conducting research, as well as more informal learning interactions within academic communities. Academic engagement has been suggested to contribute to students' learning outcomes such as their grade point average (Carini et al., 2006), persistence (Hughes & Pace, 2003), and reduced levels of psychological distress (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Students who are highly engaged in their studies also enjoy faster progression in their program (Ruohoniemi et al., 2010) and good academic grades (Diseth, 2007; Heikkilä & Lonka, 2006). The findings strongly suggest that academic engagement is a central driver of both academic success and overall positive study experience. Hence, gaining better understanding of the agency and factors associated with students' academic engagement enables us to create more engaging learning environments for them, and is thus one of utmost concern for educational policy makers and university teachers (McCormick et al., 2013).

Upon the increasing internationalisation of higher education, universities recognise the significance of international students' success. University teachers are responsible for promoting both local and international students' learning, and are required to be sensitive to their own views on students' learning (Marambe et al., 2012), as well as students' individual needs that may vary depending on several individual and contextual factors, and particularly on dynamics between these two. At the same time, teachers' expectations of their students may influence their own behaviour in a way that causes their expectations to be realised: as was conceptualised by Merton's "self-fulfilling prophecy" (1968). Teachers' biased beliefs about particular student cohorts may inhibit the students' opportunities to sufficiently engage in their studies (McKay & Kember, 1997). For instance, some teachers have shown to entertain the perception that Asian students excessively rely on memorisation and reproduction of knowledge without understanding meanings and applications of the subject matter (Kember, 2009). Yet, recent empirical evidence does not support this view; rather, it implies that Asian students tend to engage in profound understanding of subject matter to a similar degree as non-Asian students do within the same educational context (Kember, 2009; Sakurai et al., 2015; Sakurai et al., 2014).

Dimensions of Academic Engagement

Student academic engagement is often referred to as the multidimensional construct of three major components: *behavioural*, *cognitive* and *emotional* engagement. The behavioural engagement consists of students' observable participation in, and contribution to, various academic activities, such as group work, interaction with faculty, on-task behaviour, and access to learning resources. The cognitive engagement realm includes students' psychological efforts and investment in understanding

the subject matter, acquiring skills, and implementing self-regulated strategies (Fredricks et al., 2004). The emotional engagement, on the other hand, refers to students' feeling associated with their institutions, teachers and peers, and academic tasks (Fredricks, et al., 2004). Relatively more attention has been paid to students' behavioural engagement (McCormick, et al., 2013), while less attention has been paid to university students', particularly international students', cognitive and emotional engagement. Therefore, our recent studies have substantially focused on the cognitive and emotional dimensions of international students' engagement (Sakurai, et al., 2015; Sakurai, et al., 2014).

Factors affecting university students' academic engagement

The teaching-learning environment of universities where students engage in their studies is a social, psychological and pedagogical setting (Fraser, 1998, p. 3). Numerous individual and environmental attributes, particularly the dynamics between the student and his/her learning environment, affect his/her academic engagement (e.g., Entwistle et al., 2003). Research has suggested that students' cognitive engagement in learning can be enhanced through good teaching, clear objectives, appropriate assessment methods, congruent learning content, and autonomous learning opportunities (Lizzio et al., 2002; Parpala et al., 2013). Prior studies have identified some unique factors that may potentially influence international students' academic engagement, for example, challenges in cultural adaptation, foreign language use, and unfamiliar pedagogical norms (e.g., Campbell & Li, 2008). Our recent study suggested that the effects of the factors in the teaching-learning environment on students' academic engagement in learning did not significantly differ in the same university setting between international student cohorts from geographically different backgrounds (Sakurai, et al., 2015).

Emerging Perspectives and Future Trends

Students' future career visions and its relation with their engagement

One of the emerging perspectives that has inspired our work is the interrelation between academic engagement and career trajectories. It has been suggested that students' visions of their future selves are likely to affect the ways in which they engage in studies (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Students' ideas of their future selves and the context of an imagined community may motivate or demotivate them to engage in certain learning opportunities. A study suggested that students without clear future personal goals were less successful in putting good effort into their studies (Mikkonen et al., 2011). In turn, through the engagement in their studies, students may further shape and reshape their visions of their future selves. In combination with students' future visions, we pay close attention to two major pedagogical fields related to comparative and international education research: international doctoral students and short-term intensive study abroad programs.

International doctoral students' academic engagement

Recently, we have focused on exploring the association between international doctoral

students' academic engagement and their future career visions. A recent survey reported that one fifth of new academics in Europe completed their doctoral degree in a country different from that of their workplace (Ates & Brechelmacher, 2013). However, research has suggested that the researcher's mobility does not necessarily enhance his/her career advancement, and doctoral graduates' career prospects are more unstable and diverse than ever (e.g., Auriol et al., 2016). In the demanding and unclear career market, to support international doctoral students' meaningful study experiences, future studies should provide better understanding on how academic engagement can promote PhD degree holders' career trajectories within both academic and non-academic careers. Doctoral students' future self-visions may affect how they engage in their studies, and further their future career trajectories. At the same time, the ways of their engagement may help them reconstruct their imagined future selves as an expert. Owing to international students' unique backgrounds, they may have varied images of their future selves and scholarly communities, but research on this topic is limited. A case study by Chang (2011) showed that, in order to increase their market value, international doctoral students strategically improved their English skills and acquired scholarly knowledge which they thought would be beneficial in their future careers. Turner and McAlpine (2011) suggest that missing opportunities to develop one's academic network in his/her home country may be a potential drawback of staying overseas for a long time. These studies have offered important insight into international doctoral students' career development, but we still lack broader knowledge about the relationship between students' academic engagement and career development, taking into account both academic and non-academic paths.

Apart from career visions, there has been fundamentally less research on the academic engagement of international doctoral students than that of undergraduates. We know little about the engagement and careers of postdoctoral researchers and faculty from overseas. Furthermore, few studies have been undertaken outside of English-speaking and European countries, and comparative examinations between countries and areas would be fruitful to explore new insights for novel educational practices. In addition, we know that international doctoral students often face challenges becoming integrated in local institutional and social communities (Evans & Stevenson, 2011), but little is known about the role of doctoral students' social networks within, as well as outside of, their institution in supporting and inhibiting their academic engagement.

Short-term study abroad programs

Faculty-led short-term study abroad (SSA) courses are one of the emerging pedagogical formats that offer students a unique international teaching-learning environment. Semester/year-long study abroad programs have already been established among universities worldwide. Compared with the traditional programmes, many SSA courses are much shorter: between 10 days to 2 weeks (Koernig, 2007). Despite the short-term nature of these courses, prior studies have shared significant benefits and participants' learning outcomes, such as enhanced personal development, social integrity,

multi-cultural awareness, and future career/study perspectives (Rahikainen & Hakkarainen, 2013), as well as increased subject-matter understanding (Deans, 2011). Many prior works on study abroad programs have focused on participants' satisfaction with the programs and their foreign language development (Durrant & Dorius, 2007), but little has been examined regarding strategies for the measurement of student engagement and pedagogical effectiveness in these courses. Accordingly, we know little about how equivalent courses can be designed to maximise students' academic engagement and learning outcomes, which may have significant impact on their subsequent study and career exploration in the future. There is a richer body of literature on students' engagement in university studies in general, but the utility and applicability of the understanding into the SSA pedagogy require further study. It is, furthermore, unknown how and whether the learning benefits of the SSA courses persist longitudinally, and how they affect students' horizon of academic and career endeavours.

Concluding Remarks

Internationalisation of higher education is no longer a new phenomenon. However, although many studies have examined international students' challenges in their new learning environment, fewer studies have contributed to our understanding of their engagement in learning and learning outcomes. Moreover, as the nature of internationalisation permeates into the teaching-learning environment of higher education, new pedagogical settings that have been ignored by researchers have emerged and play critical roles in students' learning. This essay pointed out the dearth of research into international doctoral students' career visions as well as lack of comparative examination between different areas, and in non-English-speaking/European countries. We then drew readers' attention to a new pedagogical format of international education in higher education, the short-term study abroad program, which is worthy of researchers' attention for future studies. We hope this essay provokes continuous discussions to create a better learning community for all in higher education.

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