



Influence of Student Engagement on Academic Challenges: Does Engagement Matter?

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Abstract: *The study was quantitative in nature, and a causal-comparative design was used. Researchers intended to explore the influence of student engagement on their ability to cope with academic challenges. The population of the study was prospective teachers, i.e. students enrolled in B.Ed. (Hons.) at public sector universities of Punjab, Pakistan. The sample was selected in two stages. In the first stage, universities were sampled, and in the second stage, students from these universities were sampled through the purposive sampling technique. Data was collected by using a self-constructed questionnaire (Student Engagement Tool and Academic Challenges Questionnaire). Data were analyzed by using Smart PLS-SEM. The research concluded that students who actively engaged in their studies were more inclined to meet their academic challenges.*

Key Words: Student Engagement, Academic challenges, Prospective Teachers, Prospective Teachers' Engagement

Introduction

[Astin \(1984\)](#) defines engagement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience.” Student engagement has been an emerging phenomenon, but Astin’s work on student involvement became a millstone to the theory of student engagement. Student engagement was comprehensively defined by [Gunuc and Kuzu \(2014\)](#) as “the quality and quantity of students’ psychological, cognitive, emotional and behavioural reactions to the learning process as well as to in-class/out-of-class academic and social activities to achieve successful learning outcomes.” To achieve the prodigious social and economic effects that are usually the result of student engagement, it is advisable for educational institutions they should seek such theories and practical

resources that can enable them to contribute to the execution of the major goal of education in society. [Kuh \(2009\)](#) defines student engagement as the consent of students’ motivation to become part of the class activities. [Salleh et al. \(2013\)](#) define student engagement as the desires, needs and students’ will of engagement in the daily routine of the institution.

Student engagement is the phenomenon that emerges when students are at the institution. It encompasses in-class and out-of-class activities. Hence engagement can consist of two parts; first, in-class enjoyment and secondly, out-of-class, that is, institutional engagement. These are called as class engagement and campus engagement ([Coates, 2006](#)). Typologies of student engagement give a two-dimensional view of the phenomenon; social axes and academic axes. These

typologies are intense, independent, collaborative and passive. Student engagement targets a wide range of audiences. The beneficiaries of student engagement are usually students and their specific learning aspects, extra-curricular activities, learning designs and educational institutions ([Lizzio & Wilson, 2009](#); [Martin & Bolliger, 2018](#); [Coates, 2007](#)).

The concept of student engagement is measured through several dimensions. While discussing the dimensions of student engagement, several researchers focused on multiple dimensions. Among these dimensions are behavioural, cognitive and affective engagements. Cognitive engagement comes in the form of intellectual work; behavioural engagement shows the involvement through behaviour toward learning; while affective engagement refers to the involvement of students' emotions in the learning process ([Christenson et al., 2012](#); [Reeve & Lee, 2013](#); [Dian-Fu & Yeh, 2012](#); [Kraft & Dougherty, 2013](#)).

Challenging intellectual and creative work is essential to student learning. Giving challenges to students while they are at the institute will help them to focus on their abilities to improve and polish their skills. Universities promote a high level of student achievement. It highlights the importance of the academic achievements of students. Academic challenges have an emerging background, unfortunately, yet there is a vast gap in clarity of academic challenges. Different researchers elaborated on them differently. Some took academic challenges as the problems coming in the way of students when they are at the institute, while some took academic challenges as the way and worked that students are confronted during their stay at university ([Schmidt, 2015](#); [Talebloo & Baki, 2013](#); [Kiral, 2016](#)). Specifically, the source of academic challenges is identified in Weiner's attribution theory, which declares it as academic motivation in words of task difficulty ([Hu & Ching, 2012](#)).

A challenge literally means an invitation and call for action. Challenge varies in scope and complexity. [Beghetto \(2018\)](#) gave four

features to understand the challenge. These features include; problem, process, product and criteria. These four features are challenging. A challenge starts with a problem that is processed, and it can result in some product which has to meet the criteria of acceptance. Hence the challenge is not something that needs to be avoided. It is something that calls or invites an individual to perform a certain action. The present study aimed to focus on academic challenges that are the tasks students' has to meet during the course of their study. These challenges are taken as the "assigned tasks, communication and presentation skills, focused learning and achievement results". Researchers argued that academic challenges are the expectations and assessments that proved to enhance student performance ([Hegal et al., 2012](#)). Researchers are also of the view that when students are assigned a task or assignment, they are actually confronted with a challenge ([Beghetto, 2018](#); [Shah et al., 2021](#); [Kabilan et al., 2020](#); [Vo et al., 2018](#)).

The framework for student engagement and academic challenges is supported by the view that learner and staff engagement can enhance the output of the whole process of education ([Pittaway, 2012](#)). Both Academic challenges and engagement of students have a deep link to each other ([Pittaway & Moss, 2006](#)). Students who focus their energies during their stay at the institute are more alert and active in responding to these types of works ([Hu & Ching, 2012](#); [Clair & Hackett, 2012](#); [Wang & Eccles, 2012](#)). Some researchers are of the view that student engagement influences prospective teachers' achievements, socialization, well-being, life satisfaction etc. ([Harris, 2008](#)).

The present study was about prospective teachers' engagement in their studies. It is important to get engaged in the studies to find better results. Students enrolled in professional courses are supposed to get more engaged as they are going to become a part of the field after completion of the degree. Prospective teachers are supposed to be affected by the locality and circumstances of some countries

where people are getting professional training ([Ali et al., 2013](#)). Researchers are of the view that higher education should update the process of education according to rising scenarios and demands of the situations. It is found in the literature that educational researchers have focused on the engagement of prospective teachers in the studies because they are going to train and educate the generations of a country. Their better training will ultimately result in a strong and productive nation ([Almarghani, 2017](#); [Khan, 2015](#)). It is also considered important to produce effective results in the whole process of teaching and learning. It is very much essential that a teacher should be engaged in the process of education ([Nauffal, 2012](#)).

In Pakistan, various studies have been conducted on the importance and participation of academic challenges. The current study focused on prospective teachers' engagement and their ability to meet academic challenges. Student engagement has been seen as the evolving construct that captures a range of institutional practices and student behaviours related to student satisfaction and achievements. Student engagement having an influence on student achievement is also linked to academic challenges as the achievement results are identified as a part of academic challenges ([Trowler, 2010](#)).

In higher education, students are supposed to be more involved and active, as this is the terminal stage. After completing their studies, students are expected to enter practical life. The involvement of students and their ability to cope with challenges during their stay at the institution will help them to bear the pressure of their practical life and will make them competent citizens ([Artes et al., 2017](#); [Zepke et al., 2014](#)). Student engagement also has

various viewpoints that obviously started with the way to measure student engagement. There is a proper reason to measure student engagement; this very reason will determine many of the indicators and dimensions of student engagement. These dimensions can be academic, behavioural or institutional etc. ([Taylor & Parsons, 2011](#)).

While talking about teacher education, it is important to note that teacher education is the most crucial professional responsibility. Because the teacher is an individual who has more influence on their students, these influential personalities should be trained properly and carefully. Teacher education is considered important around the world ([Bush 2015](#)). Many researchers have associated elements of engagement with the teacher training program. Engagement being part of a teacher training program will help prospective teachers to develop a habit of focusing on activities. Teachers' self-efficacy increases through several factors that include a well-developed program and good and comprehensive training ([Haug, 2017](#); [Pasha et al., 2021](#)).

Student engagement is an important factor in maintaining the efficiency and developing the skills of students that will ultimately help them to work the assigned task properly. These tasks are given to them as a challenge during their academic life.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

The research followed a conceptual framework that included student engagement with its dimensions of cognitive, affective and behavioural, while academic challenges were measured against assigned tasks, focused learning, communication skills and achievement results.



Figure 1:

Objectives of the study

The study aimed at the following objective;

1. To explore the influence of prospective teachers' engagement on their ability to cope with academic challenges.

Research Question of the study

The following research question was addressed in the study;

1. What is the influence of student engagement on their ability to cope with academic challenges?

Methodology

The present study focused on B.Ed. (Hons.) students called as "prospective teachers". All students enrolled in B.Ed. (Hons.) in the public universities of Punjab province was the population of the study. There is a total of 11 universities that are offering the course. Two stage sampling method was used to sample the students. In the first stage, universities were sampled by selecting at least one university randomly from each division. And at the second stage, students from these universities were sampled. A purposive sampling technique was used to select students. Students of 6th, 7th, and 8th semester of B.Ed. (Hons.) were selected as a sample because these students have studied a sufficient number of courses, and they can better answer the questions about their engagement and academic challenges.

Two instruments, Student Engagement Tool (SET) and the Academic Challenges Questionnaire (ACQ), were developed, and

pilot tested. Cronbach's Alpha showed the reliability of the student engagement tool (SET) as .851, and the academic challenges questionnaire (ACQ) was .892. After developing and validating tools, data was collected personally by visiting some universities. While due to the pandemic of Covid-19, some universities were taking online classes, so the researcher created Google Forms to collect data from those universities. Data were analyzed by using Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Smart PLS-SEM was used to analyze data because it is recommended for both formative and reflective models. The present study had a formative model.

Results

At first, data was compiled and arranged properly. A proper data screening was done before performing any analysis. Data had monotone responses and partially filled questionnaires. Both of these types of responses were excluded so that results may not suffer any variation.

The research included questions about the demographic scenario of respondents. Demographic questions included gender, locality and hostelite or non-hostelite. Student engagement was measured against the dimensions of cognitive, behavioural and affective engagement. Academic challenges were measured against indicators of assigned tasks, focused learning, communication skills and achievement results.

Demographic analysis

Table 1. Gender Distribution of Students

		Frequency	Percentages
Valid	Male	81	18
	Female	369	82
	Total	450	100.0

Table 1 shows that in the sample, female students were more in number than male

students. The majority of respondents (369), i.e. 82%, were females.

Table 2. Student's Family Background

		Frequency	Percentages
Valid	Rural	170	37.7
	Urban	280	62.2
	Total	450	100.0

Table 2 shows that the majority of students belonged to urban areas, while 37.7 % were from rural areas. 62.2% of the sample

Table 3. Hostelite Students

		Frequency	Percentages
Valid	Yes	97	21.5
	No	353	78.4
	Total	450	100.0

Table 3 shows that the majority of students (353) were not living in any hostel. While only 97 were availing the facility of hostels.

Table 4. Significance Testing Influence of Prospective teachers, engagement in Academic challenges

Path	B	SD	t	p
Pros-teach-Enga > Acda-Chal	0.64	0.04	16.59	0.000

Table 4 shows the influence of students' (prospective teachers') engagement on academic challenges; it (Pros-teach-Enga>Acda-Chal) shows the influence of prospective teachers' engagement on academic challenges. This influence is devised as a coefficient of 64.2%, and its deviance is 0.04. The value of t-testing is 16.59, and the p-value is 0.000. All these values show the acceptance of the influence of student engagement on academic challenges.

For statistical analysis partial least square-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) technique was applied. These results are drawn by using smart-PLS software. The assumption of the analysis is that the t-Statistics value should be greater than 1.96, and the p Value should be lesser than 0.05 (Hair et al., 2014). This criterion for t-statistics and P-Value is the threshold for showing the significant influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable.

The above table shows the significance of the results. The value of the t-test appears to be 16.59, which is greater than 1.96, and the p value is 0.000, which is lesser than 0.05. Hence,

these results of the analysis show a significant influence of student engagement on students' academic challenges.

Discussion

In the study, researchers investigated the engagement of students and its influence on academic challenges. It was focused on whether students' engagement helped them cope with the academic challenges they are confronted with during their course of work at the institute. Student engagement has been considered important since Astin started working on student involvement in 1984. His works on involvement evolved the concept of student engagement. Later on, this concept of engagement became the point of attention for researchers and educationists. The reason was obvious that this phenomenon influences various aspects of students' academic as well as professional life. Many researchers associate the engagement of students with their professional engagement (Westman & Bergmark, 2018; Melvin & Lenz, (2014; Shuptrine, 2013).

The present study was related to student engagement and their ability to cope with academic challenges. While discussing academic challenges, specifically the source of academic challenges is identified in Weiner's attribution theory, which declared it as academic motivation in words of task difficulty (Hu & Ching, 2012). Researchers also considered assigned tasks, focused learning, communication and presentation skills, and achievement results as academic challenges. These challenges were supposed to tackle better if students were involved in the studies. The result of the study indicated that students who were more engaged had a better inclination to cope with these challenges.

It is also considered important to produce effective results in the whole process of teaching and learning. It is very much essential that a teacher should be engaged in the process of education (Nauffal, 2012). The engagement of the teacher is also considered important. This engagement of the teacher will lead to engaging students in their studies. Questions relating to feedback and engagement of teachers were included to ensure this type of engagement. The engagement of teachers is important from the point of view that the sample consisted of prospective teachers. Hence it was important to make a point that engagement in academic life will help them in professional life as well.

The aim to focus on academic challenges was that the tasks students have to fulfil during the course of their study should be challenging enough to make them skilled and motivated individuals in their practical life. These challenges are taken as the "assigned tasks, communication and presentation skills, focused learning and achievement results". Academic challenges are the expectations and assessments that prove to enhance students' performance (Hegal et al., 2012). The more challenges students will tackle during their academic life; they will be more enthusiastic and motivated for their professional life. Burch et al. (2015) referred to this type of theoretical framework that linked Astin's theory of involvement to Khan's (1990) "employee engagement theory". Hence the aspect of

student engagement is pivotal to measure, especially at the higher education level. This engagement can be measured in a different scenario and with different outcomes of the educational process.

Conclusion

Hence the research concluded that students' engagement enhances their ability to cope with academic challenges that are given to them in the form of tasks and assignments. Statistical analysis showed a significant influence of student engagement on academic challenges ($t=16.59$, $p=0.000$). It showed the engagement of students when they approved that their concentration and involvement helped them to cope with the academic challenges. It is the level of their engagement that satisfy their needs and requirements for education. The research concluded that students' engagement positively and strongly influences their ability to meet academic challenges. Engaged students were more confident about their ability to tackle academic challenges. Academic challenges were taken as tasks that were assigned to students during their course of study, and engaged students were more involved in academic tasks that were assigned to them. Thus, the research approved the significance of student engagement. Student engagement works a lot to make students more competent and active.

Recommendations

1. Institutions and educationists may monitor the levels of student engagement and focus on ways to enhance the engagement of the student in their studies.
2. While having a focus on academic challenges, institutions can refine the challenges for students to make them more active and participative in their studies.
3. Supplementary research may be directed on expanding the contribution of academic challenges in achieving the educational objectives.

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