

First Year Students' Engagement at the University

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to seek first year students' engagement at the universities. The methodology of this research was survey and correlation. The First Year Experience Questionnaire (FYEQ) of Krause & Coates (2008) employed to gather data. Of the 1921 first year students (girls 1136 and boys 785) 551 samples (girls 313 and boys 238) were elected to questionnaire by the targeted first year students at the University of Sistan and Baluchestan in Iran. SPSS 15 was used to produce Mean; Standard Deviations; Pearson Product Moment Correlation (r); T-test; and ANOVA. The results showed that the first year students relatively scored over average their engagements in five components, and they marked relatively high scores on intellectual engagement and class engagement. The rank order showed that intellectual engagement and class engagement have had outrank in comparison with other components. There was relatively high positive correlation between components of engagement. The highest correlation is related to the online engagement scale with the intellectual engagement, the transition engagement with the student-staff engagement, peer engagement scale with the academic engagement, and the beyond-class engagement scale with the online engagement.

Key words: First year students' engagement, Components of engagement, University

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The concept of engagement is viewed in various ways depending on the philosophical and pragmatic stances taken. Broadly, these stances may be thought of as focusing either on student behavior including effort, time on task, and use of resources (Kuh 2006, Coates, 2006), or on socio-cultural factors, including a perceived sense of belonging to or lack of alienation from the group (Tinto, 1993, Astin, 1999, Kember et al, 2001, Mann, 2001). Kearsley and Shneiderman (1998) used 'engagement theory' as a means to describe times where students are meaningfully engaged in learning activities through interaction with others and worthwhile tasks. They recommended engagement comprises three components, collaboration, project orientation, and authentic focus. In Wenger's (1999) terms students

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have to 'negotiate meaning' in order to experience the world and to believe their engagement in it is meaningful.

The most widely used definition of student engagement is one that was coined by Kuh in 2001: Student engagement represents both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices (Kuh et al., 2008: 542). Kuh was one of the first to develop a framework for student engagement for the National Survey of Student Engagement based on five benchmarks: level of academic challenge; enriching educational experiences; active and collaborative learning; supportive campus environment; and student-faculty interaction.

Student engagement is dynamic and is dependent on many factors, both within, and outside, the institution's sphere of influence. In the first year student engagement is influenced by the students' prior experiences of education, their expectations and aspirations which influence their perceptions of various measures of engagement. In addition, integration into both the academic and social community at university is important for instilling a 'sense of belonging' or 'sense of being a student' which is a precursor for engagement (Hardy and Bryson, 2009).

Student engagement, then, is a complex construct. It is not easily defined, although the attempt by the Australian Council of Educational Research - "students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning" (ACER, 2008:vi) - comes close to a working definition. It has the virtue of inclusiveness and thus enables numerous factors such as student background and circumstances, institutional structures and cultures, teaching practices and approaches to learning to be considered. While some engagement research, such as that drawing on results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the United States can "provide a direct measure of students' involvement in key educational processes" (Coates, 2007:122), such research can only provide an indirect measure of overall student outcomes.

The concept 'student engagement' has increasingly gained currency over the last decade (Krause & Coates, 2008; Kuh, 2003; Kuh et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). It broadly refers to students' engagement in activities that contribute to their learning achievements and their sense of belonging to the academic community. These activities include interaction between staff and students and between students. It also includes activities other than those directly related to course work, such as non compulsory peer learning activities and service activities such as leadership roles in student mentoring or study group facilitation.

In this way, the first year experience in higher education is known to be important to students' outcomes, such as retention, persistence, completion and achievement (Hillman, 2005; Krause et al., 2005; Kuh et al., 2006). One factor that influences students' first year experience is engagement, "a broad phenomenon which encompasses academic as well as certain non-academic and social aspects of the student experience" (Coates, 2006:4). There is a growing body of literature on student engagement, particularly in the USA (Kuh et al., 2006), increasingly in Australia (Krause & Coates, 2008) and the UK (Yorke, 2006). In this study we will describe a conceptual organizer which developed from student engagement literature, how we evaluated it using data from a student engagement project, how it was modified and how it might be used by teachers, programs and institutions to enhance student engagement.

Hockings et al. (2007) discuss the uncertainties of students before they come to university. They identify key themes to do with settling in and achieving a sense of belonging: money, debt and work; making friends, being alone and fitting in; identity; fair and equal treatment. Lowe and Cook (2003) identify a gap between expectation and reality. In most cases students adapt to the unexpected but some students find it difficult to bridge the gap between expectations and reality. The engagement literature, then, uses a number of lenses to investigate influences on engagement. These focus variously on student motivation, teacher-student interactions; learners interacting with each other; the role of institutional policies;

sociopolitical factors and the role of non-institutional influences such as family, friends, health and employment (Krause & Coates, 2008).

This assumes that students are learning agents, able to achieve their goals. Self-belief is reported as a key attribute in motivation. An extensive literature explores how teachers and higher education institutions influence student engagement. Kuh et al. (2006), for example, assign to teachers and institutions a dominant influence in engaging students. Institutions are expected to be welcoming, to respect students coming from diverse backgrounds (Johnson et al., 2007; Gavala & Flett, 2005), offer a wide range of learning support services (Porter, 2006; Pike, Smart, Kuh, & Hayek, 2006), and be prepared to adapt to changing student expectations (McInnis, 2003; Yorke, 2006). Not so plentiful is research investigating influences on engagement originating in students' external, non-institutional environment. A different lens again is used by McMahon and Portelli (2004), who critique engagement research as conservative and too student-centered. They want engagement to include social dimensions, expecting engagement research to add a democratic-critical conception that goes beyond strategies, techniques or behaviors; a conception in which engagement is participatory, dialogic and leads not only to academic achievement but success as an active citizen (Barnett & Coate, 2005).

Research into how to achieve student success has been extensive; for example in retention and completion studies. Major syntheses have been completed over the past three decades, primarily in the United States (Astin, 1993, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2004) but also in Australia (McInnis et al. 2000), the United Kingdom (Yorke, 1999) and New Zealand (Zepke & Leach, 2005). Another well researched area since the 1990s focuses on how students engage with their studies and what they, institutions and educators can do to improve student engagement and hence student success (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007). Approaches to engagement research have varied. The sociopolitical context in which education and engagement take place is one focus (McInnis, 2003; McMahon & Portelli, 2004; Yorke, 2006); the effect on students of environmental factors such as family background and economic

status has been another (Law, 2005; Miliszewska & Horwood, 2004). Student motivation as a factor in engagement has also been studied extensively (Schuetz, 2008), as have the roles of institutional structures and cultures (Porter, 2006) and the way educators practice and relate to their students (Kuh, 2001; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Understanding the first-year experience plays a critical role in managing transitions to tertiary study, in retaining students, and in setting up the educational foundations for academic success (Krause and Coates, 2008:3).

One of the key factors related to success and retention of students at university is the experience of the first year. Several studies have reviewed the first year experience, particularly in relation to the expectations of what studying at university will be like (Stavrianopoulos, 2008; Pritchard, 2008). Student engagement and the first year experience (FYE) have received a lot of attention in recent years, with Krause and Coates (2008) stressing the complexity of first year engagement and arguing that student engagement, as well as being related to academic outcomes, is a key outcome in its own right.

In recent years, there has been considerable interest in the nature of students' online engagement (see for example Coates, 2006 & Krause, 2006). Kennedy and colleagues (2008) have challenged the notion of the 'digital native' as it relates to first year students. Just because a student falls within a particular age bracket does not mean that they are digitally literate nor digitally fluent when it comes to using information and communication technologies (ICTs) for learning.

Typically, first year progression rates are lower than second and later years, and this may be due to the significant change in culture from secondary school to university. The style of classes is different, the number of students is generally more, and students are expected to manage their own learning environment. Sometimes the new found freedoms of clubs and societies, on-campus activities and lack of monitoring of student class attendance distract students from the task of being responsible for their own learning. This can lead to students

dropping out of class and out of programs after the first few weeks. Some reports on student progression at university have indicated that students who feel part of the class or part of a community of fellow learners are less likely to withdraw or drop out of class (Jones, 2000). Orientation needs to extend into the classes beyond week activities. First year classes are often taken by students in multiple programs and, as a result of their general introductory nature, tend to have large numbers of students. This may exacerbate the feeling of isolation for students and be an impediment for some to successful transition. Additionally, many universities are increasing student numbers and this leads to even larger first year classes.

In sum, much of the empirical research to date cautions against making assumptions about how first year students want or expect to engage with technology-enhanced learning and the extent of their skill set for doing so. Evidence to date also supports the fact that the effective use of technology in learning, teaching and curriculum design requires a more informed understanding of the expectations of students, staff and institutions, along with preparation for and induction into the use of technology to foster positive learning and student outcomes (Gilbert et al., 2007; Ipsos, 2007, 2008; Owen & Moyle, 2008; Sharpe & Benfield, 2005; Yorke, 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

Based on the above mentioned, the first year experience is pivotal in determining whether university students will persist with their studies, and engage with peers, faculty, and the learning environment. There are several facets of the first year that work together to constitute the experience of individual students during their commencing year in higher education. These facets include such aspects as students' induction and orientation experiences; academic and course advice; peer and staff interactions; formal in-class learning encounters and out-of-class activities. Together, these dimensions amount to what has come to be known as engagement. Krause & Coates (2008) propose seven dimensions of engagement, an important one of which is online engagement.

The purpose of this research was to seek first year students' engagement and seven components of it, namely, Transition Engagement Scale (TES), Academic Engagement Scale (AES), Peer Engagement Scale (PES), Student-staff Engagement Scale (SES), Intellectual Engagement Scale (IES), Online Engagement Scale (OES), Beyond-class Engagement Scale (BES), and also the relationship between them. Next, the researcher further investigated how first year student engagements differ in terms of their background, such as sex, faculties and semester.

Research Methodology

The methodology of this research was survey and correlation. The first year Experience Questionnaire (FYEQ) of Krause & Coates (2008) employed to gather data. Internal consistency reliability was estimated by Cronbach's alphas. Table 1 reports summary measures of construct validity and reliability for each of the seven engagement scales. Of the 1921 first year students (girls 1136 and boys 785) 551 valid samples (girls 313 and boys 238) were elected to questionnaire by the targeted first year students at the University of Sistan and Baluchestan in Iran. SPSS 15 was used to produce mean; standard deviations; pearson product moment correlation (r); T-test; and ANOVA.

Table 1 Summary measures of reliability

Variables	N. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Transition Engagement Scale (TES)	7	.71
Academic Engagement Scale (AES)	10	.72
Peer Engagement Scale (PES)	9	.78
Student-Staff Engagement Scale (SES)	11	.83
Intellectual Engagement Scale (IES)	5	.67
Online Engagement Scale (OES)	13	.83
Beyond-Class Engagement Scale (BES)	6	.67
Total	61	.92

Results

The instrument of this research included items intended to function both as discrete indicators of student learning processes, and as elements of calibrated components of engagement. This section reports the psychometric and empirical properties of the seven components of engagement. It also records the relationships among the components and how first year student engagements differ in terms of their background, such as sex, faculties and semester.

Table 2 presents information on the distributions of first-year engagement. It shows scale means, standard deviations, minimums and maximums. The first year students relatively scored over average their engagements in five components, and they marked relatively high scores on intellectual engagement and class engagement. The rank order showed that intellectual engagement and class engagement have had outrank in comparison with other components.

Table 2 Distributions of first-year engagement qualities (N=551)

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max	Rank Order
Transition Engagement Scale (TES)	19.4073	4.94812	7.00	33.00	3
Academic Engagement Scale (AES)	24.3654	6.62485	10.00	49.00	4
Peer Engagement Scale (PES)	24.2609	6.60882	9.00	45.00	5
Student–Staff Engagement Scale (SES)	28.3628	7.85220	11.00	52.00	6
Intellectual Engagement Scale (IES)	14.5893	4.08138	5.00	25.00	1
Online Engagement Scale (OES)	35.0400	9.32819	13.00	62.00	7
Beyond-Class Engagement Scale (BES)	18.6550	4.72777	6.00	29.00	2

Table 3 shows there was relatively high positive correlation between components of engagement. The highest correlation is related to the online engagement scale with the intellectual engagement, the transition engagement with the student–staff engagement, peer engagement scale with the academic engagement, and the beyond-class engagement scale with the online engagement.

Table 3 Correlation between the components of engagement (N=551)

Variables	TES	AES	PES	SES	IES	OES
Transition Engagement Scale (TES)						
Academic Engagement Scale (AES)	.318(**)					
Peer Engagement Scale (PES)	.377(**)	.486(**)				
Student–Staff Engagement Scale (SES)	.517(**)	.371(**)	.409(**)			
Intellectual Engagement Scale (IES)	.429(**)	.312(**)	.387(**)	.464(**)		
Online Engagement Scale (OES)	.309(**)	.342(**)	.414(**)	.309(**)	.560(**)	
Beyond-Class Engagement Scale (BES)	.346(**)	.263(**)	.374(**)	.272(**)	.368(**)	.481(**)

**P < .001

In the table 4, the compute of t-test showed that there were no significance differences between boy and girl first year students, however, the first year students who got the higher scores on TES, AES, SES, IES, and OES were those who were girls and on PES were boys.

Table 4 Mean, Std. D. and T-test of components of engagement by Sex (N=551)

Variables	Sex	N	Mean	Std. D.	t	df
Transition Engagement Scale (TES)	Boy	238	19.2998	5.00913	.444	549
	Girl	313	19.4890	4.90769		
Academic Engagement Scale (AES)	Boy	238	24.0716	6.31741	.907	549
	Girl	313	24.5887	6.85099		
Peer Engagement Scale (PES)	Boy	238	24.5931	6.85017	1.029	549
	Girl	313	24.0082	6.41878		
Student–Staff Engagement Scale (SES)	Boy	238	27.8359	8.00600	1.375	549
	Girl	313	28.7635	7.72200		
Intellectual Engagement Scale (IES)	Boy	238	14.4372	4.19630	.762	549
	Girl	313	14.7049	3.99467		
Online Engagement Scale (OES)	Boy	238	34.5216	9.46227	1.138	549
	Girl	313	35.4343	9.22059		
Beyond-Class Engagement Scale (BES)	Boy	238	18.6546	4.72385	.002	549
	Girl	313	18.6554	4.73831		

P > .05

The compute of ANOVA about first year students in eleven faculties at the university showed that there were significance differences between the faculties in the transition engagement scale, student–staff engagement, intellectual engagement scale and online engagement.

Indeed, the first students were at the Faculty of Literature and Humanities and Faculty of Geography and Environmental Planning, who got the higher scores on transition engagement in comparison with other schools. The Faculty of Geography and Environmental Planning students and Faculty of Theology got the higher scores on student–staff engagement. Mean score of Faculty of Theology students was more than other groups in intellectual engagement scale and Faculty of Electrical and Computer Engineering first year students marked higher score to online engagement scale. There were no significance differences between the faculties in other components of engagement.

Table 5 ANOVA of components of engagement by Faculties (N=551)

Variables	Mean Square	df	F
Transition Engagement Scale (TES)	94.961	9	4.074(**)
	23.311	541	
Academic Engagement Scale (AES)	43.111	9	.982
	43.902	541	
Peer Engagement Scale (PES)	53.141	9	1.221
	43.519	541	
Student–Staff Engagement Scale (SES)	207.951	9	3.511(**)
	59.223	541	
Intellectual Engagement Scale (IES)	67.662	9	4.280(**)
	15.809	541	
Online Engagement Scale (OES)	195.507	9	2.294(*)
	85.210	541	
Beyond-Class Engagement Scale (BES)	30.719	9	1.383
	22.213	541	

P > .05 *P < .05 **P < .001

In the table 6, the compute of T-Test showed that there were significance differences between first year students that to study in first and second semester in scoring of transition engagement, peer engagement scale, student–staff engagement and intellectual engagement scale. In the all components scored the students of second semester higher than students of first semester. There were no significance differences between groups in other components of engagement.

Table 6 Mean, Std. D. and T-test of components of engagement by Semester (N=551)

Variables	Semester	N	Mean	Std. D.	t	df
Transition Engagement Scale (TES)	T. 1	283	18.7094	4.9007	3.435(**)	549
	T. 2	268	20.1442	4.8997		
Academic Engagement Scale (AES)	T. 1	283	24.2731	6.7645	.336	549
	T. 2	268	24.4628	6.4852		
Peer Engagement Scale (PES)	T. 1	283	23.5974	6.7473	2.432(*)	549
	T. 2	268	24.9615	6.3973		
Student-Staff Engagement Scale (SES)	T. 1	282	27.3857	7.4217	3.039(**)	549
	T. 2	268	29.4073	8.1769		
Intellectual Engagement Scale (IES)	T. 1	283	13.9895	4.0217	3.582(**)	549
	T. 2	268	15.2226	4.0554		
Online Engagement Scale (OES)	T. 1	283	34.9821	9.2919	.150	549
	T. 2	268	35.1012	9.3833		
Beyond-Class Engagement Scale (BES)	T. 1	283	18.7094	4.9007	.646	549
	T. 2	268	20.1442	4.8997		

P > .05 *P < .05 **P < .001

Discussion and Conclusion

This study was conducted to explore to seek first year student engagements and components of it. According to Krause (2006:1) “the first year of university is, in fact, the culmination of years of socialization and shaping of an individual’s views about whether or not university study is something to which they can and should aspire”. Krause and Coates (2008:8) say: “one of the reasons students find transition to university so tumultuous is that it often challenges existing views of self and one’s place in the world. Transition is a time of re-shaping and coming to terms with whether expectations about university life have been met, or need to be revised, or, in fact, if the mismatch between expectation and reality is too great to warrant persistence. The well-established argument for the importance of academic staff involvement in the lives of undergraduate learners early and often, both within and beyond the classroom cannot be under-estimated”.

In general, the first year students relatively scored over average their engagements in five components, and they marked relatively high scores on intellectual engagement and class engagement. The rank order showed that intellectual engagement and class engagement have had outrank in comparison with other components. There was relatively high positive correlation between components of engagement. There were no significance differences between boy and girl first year students, however, the first year students who got the higher scores on TES, AES, SES, IES, and OES were those who were girls and on PES were boys. Finally, there were significance differences between the faculties in the transition engagement scale, student–staff engagement, intellectual engagement scale and online engagement.

These results are similar with typical findings in similar studies, e.g. transition engagement (Krause, 2005; Tinto, 2002; Vest, 2005; Wilcox et al., 2005; Yorke, & Thomas, 2003; Palmer et al., 2009; Christie et al., 2008), the student–staff engagement (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005), developing knowledge in collaboration with peers (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Hutchins 1995; Laurillard, 2002; Eggens et al., 2008; Peat et al., 2001; Allen et al., 1999), intellectual engagement (Ramsden 2003; Kuh et al. 2005), online experiences (Coates 2006), and activities beyond the classroom, both social and academic (Zhao and Kuh 2004; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Krause 2007b; Zepke et al., 2006; Yorke and Thomas, 2003).

This study confirmed the multifaceted nature of student engagement which, as the psychometric validation and statistical modeling has shown, comprises both behavioral and attitudinal dimensions. However, in order to be most useful for shaping policy and practice, it is important to understand how engagement varies across demographic student groups and how it changes over time during the first year and through the undergraduate years. There would also be considerable merit in determining whether these scales hold true for samples of first-year students in other countries. These issues will be the focus of future research, as will the exploration of qualitative approaches to measuring student engagement in the first year.

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