

## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT- A PROMISSING SOLUTION TO QUALITY IMPROVEMENT OF VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION

### NỖ LỰC HỌC TẬP VÀ THAM GIA VÀO CÁC HOẠT ĐỘNG CÓ MỤC ĐÍCH GIÁO DỤC CỦA SINH VIÊN – MỘT GIẢI PHÁP ĐẦY HỨA HẸN NHẪM NÂNG CAO CHẤT LƯỢNG ĐÀO TẠO CỦA GIÁO DỤC ĐẠI HỌC VIỆT NAM

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#### ABSTRACT

'Student engagement' defined as the time and the quality of effort students put into their learning and their involvement in educationally purposeful activities, is a prominent and ubiquitous topic in contemporary higher education scholarly literature and practices in the world. Because of its significant influences on students' academic and personal development during university, student engagement is widely recognized as a powerful lever for higher education quality improvement. This theme, however, is quite new to the Vietnamese higher education system. Based on the synthesis and analysis of scholarly literature on student engagement and the Vietnamese higher education system, this paper presents the construct of 'Student engagement', indicates student disengagement-related problems Vietnamese higher education is facing, and explains how 'Student engagement' with its strong link with student learning and student success can offer Vietnamese universities a promising solution to these problems, thus to their quality improvement.

**Keywords:** student engagement; quality improvement; Vietnamese higher education system; student learning; student success.

#### TÓM TẮT

'Nỗ lực học tập và tham gia vào các hoạt động có mục đích giáo dục của sinh viên', được định nghĩa như là thời gian và công sức sinh viên đầu tư cho học tập và tham gia vào các hoạt động có mục đích giáo dục. Đây là chủ đề được quan tâm nhiều nhất trong các nghiên cứu học thuật cũng như trong thực tiễn giáo dục đại học trên thế giới. Do những ảnh hưởng to lớn của 'Nỗ lực học tập và tham gia vào các hoạt động có mục đích giáo dục của sinh viên' đối với các kết quả học tập, rèn luyện và phát triển nhân cách của sinh viên, nó đang được thừa nhận như là một đòn bẩy mạnh mẽ để nâng cao chất lượng đào tạo giáo dục đại học. Thế nhưng khái niệm chất lượng này vẫn còn khá mới mẻ đối với hệ thống giáo dục đại học Việt nam. Trong bài báo này, dựa trên các tổng hợp và phân tích tài liệu về giáo dục đại học Việt Nam và thế giới, tác giả sẽ giới thiệu khái niệm 'Nỗ lực học tập và tham gia vào các hoạt động có mục đích giáo dục của sinh viên', chỉ ra những vấn đề nền giáo dục đại học Việt nam đang đối mặt phát sinh từ hiện trạng sinh viên thiếu nỗ lực trong học tập, và giải thích bằng cách nào 'Nỗ lực học tập và tham gia vào các hoạt động có mục đích giáo dục của sinh viên' với mối liên hệ mật thiết với quá trình học tập và thành tích học tập của sinh viên, có thể giúp các trường Đại học Việt Nam giải quyết các vấn đề trên nhằm nâng cao chất lượng đào tạo của mình.

**Từ khóa:** Nỗ lực học tập và tham gia vào các hoạt động có mục đích giáo dục của sinh viên; nâng cao chất lượng đào tạo; hệ thống giáo dục đại học Việt Nam; quá trình học tập của sinh viên; thành tích học tập của sinh viên.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Student engagement defined as ‘the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities’ [1, p.44], has become the key issue in the contemporary scholarly higher education literature on the enhancement of learning and teaching [2] and the highlight of discussions about higher education policies, and has received increasing focus of attention through the mass media [3]. The interest in student engagement stems from the strong impact of student engagement on student academic and personal development during university. In the Vietnamese context where the higher education system is under pressure to fundamentally reform to improve the quality of educational provision, student engagement is a necessary focus for Vietnamese educators and researchers. The attention to student engagement is more significant when the degree of student disengagement – the lack of effort students devote to their studies – has rapidly increased in recent years.

This paper presents the theory of student engagement, then indicates student disengagement-related problems the Vietnamese higher education system is facing. Based on these analyses, the paper explains how student engagement can help solve these problems and argues for the reason why Vietnamese universities should factor student engagement into their quality assurance and improvement activities.

## 2. THEORY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Student engagement was conceptualized through the work of George Kuh, one of the leading figures in the field of university student learning and success, in the late of 1990s [2]. Though recently emerging, student engagement has its roots in several decades of research (mostly in the United States) on tertiary students and the influences of students’ tertiary experiences on their learning and development [4]. The longstanding interest in student engagement arose from the Western

universities’ paramount concern for ‘attracting and retaining students, satisfying and developing them, and ensuring they graduate to become successful, productive citizens’ under ‘increasingly straitened economic conditions’ [2, p.2]. Student engagement is developed from the perspective that suggests what students do during their study at university matters more to their success and development than their pre-university characteristics or the type of the university they attend [5].

Initially, student engagement is defined as ‘the quality of effort students themselves devote to educational activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes’ [6, p.555]. However, accumulative research findings show that this definition does not fully reflect the nature of student engagement. In the most widely accepted definition, student engagement consists two important components: the students and the institution [1], in which:

a. *Students as the agents of student engagement.* The focus on students results from the constructivist view that puts emphasis on the students’ leading role in constructing their own knowledge [7], and the recognition of the importance of student effort and involvement in academic and non-academic activities to the impact of their university attendance [8]. The level of engagement is often associated with the extent to which students learn actively, interact constructively with staff, work collaboratively with other students, or involve themselves enthusiastically in enriching educationally experiences [9].

b. *Institutions as the facilitators of student engagement.* Institutions have to effectively utilize what is called institutional conditions including resources, educational policies, programs and practices and structural features [1] to make students matter and help them get the most out of their higher education experience. The measures institutions can take to enhance student engagement include:

- Presenting intellectual challenges to students. Universities must set high but achievable level of standards and expectations to challenge students to exert themselves to reach a high level of achievement. Without being challenged and challenging themselves to learn, students may not make sufficient effort to broaden their knowledge, or make long-term, significant commitments to their study [7];
- Enhancing students' interactions with peers and staff, both academic and professional. Students are provided with opportunities to collaborate with peers in learning, access to lecturers and consult lecturers about issues related to students' study or career, or work with staff on outside coursework activities or projects;
- Enriching student learning experiences by offering students learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom. The enriching educational experiences include students' interaction with people from different backgrounds and cultures, students' participation in extracurricular activities, such as internships, community service or volunteer work; and
- Creating a supporting environment in which all students feel comfortable, accepted and affirmed, regardless of their abilities and backgrounds. To do this, the institution must develop a culture that strongly commits itself to students' academic and social success and cultivate positive working and social relations among different groups within the institution [3].

Since its emergence, student engagement has received great attention from many researchers and educators around the world. The reasons for the increasing interest in student engagement is the recognition of student engagement as a key factor in student success and the establishment of robust correlations between student engagement and positive outcomes of student academic,

personal, and social development [2] by growing evidence of the crucial role student engagement plays in student achievement and learning. Pascarella and Terenzini [8] assert that 'the greater a student's engagement in academic work or in the academic experience in college, the greater his or her level of knowledge acquisition and general cognitive growth' (p.608). This argument is supported by the findings of many studies that indicate the impacts of student engagement on student cognitive and non-cognitive gains in learning and development [10;11], their grades [10;12;13], their persistence [13], and their satisfaction [12]. The influence of student engagement on student development can extend beyond the academic domain. Researchers have also found the correlation between student engagement and student accrual of social capital, psychosocial development, productive racial and gender identity formation, moral and ethical development, and institutional adjustment [cited in 14, p.3].

### **3. STUDENT DISENGAGEMENT-RELATED PROBLEMS**

Over the three past decades, the Vietnamese Higher Education system has achieved remarkable growth. According to statistics released by Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in 2013, in terms of size, the number of universities and colleges increased over 2.5 times, from 153 in 1999 to 406 in 2010. During this period, there was also a sharp rise in student enrolments which grew by nearly 142% from 893,754 in 1999 to 2,162,106 in 2010 [15]. This dramatic expansion has made the higher education system heavily overloaded. Key factors of the higher education system, including institutions, staff and students have developed in a disproportionate way [16]. A large number of newly established universities fail to satisfy the minimum requirement for human resources, infrastructure, and teaching and learning facilities and equipment. Consequently, many students have to study under unfavorable learning conditions, such as overcrowded

classrooms, inadequate libraries, insufficient laboratories, facilities, and equipment, and poor student services [16]. Moreover, because of the transition from an elite to mass university education, the university entry standards are greatly lowered. Many contemporary students are reported to have lower academic ability than traditional students.

More alarmingly, in recent years, the degree to which Vietnamese students neglect their studies has dramatically increased. It has become one of the hot topics on mass media and educational discussion forums. A large number of newspaper articles reported that students devote more time to playing online games, surfing the internet, or doing part time jobs than studying. During class time, instead of concentrating on the lectures, many students chat or relax. It is also evident that many students come to university without preparing for their classes. This phenomenon results from many reasons. For example, many students consider their first years of university as a time for relaxation. They are gradually distracted from their learning goals and lose their motivation for studying [17], leading to their worsening academic performance and their failure to satisfy academic requirements. The lack of parents' and teachers' strict and constant supervision for their study and less frequent assessment tasks at university than at school are also cited as two contributors to turning school studious students into university lazy ones [17]. In addition, because of financial problems, many students have to do part time jobs. They do not have sufficient time and energy for their study.

This phenomenon is arousing a great worry among educators, parents, and the wider public. Their concern results from two facts. First, the lack of effort students put into their studies surprisingly contradicts the Vietnamese learning culture that places a strong emphasis on the importance of effort to academic pursuits and the traditional stereotype of Vietnamese students as studious and diligent learners [16]. Second, students' decreased diligence and studiousness can lead to negative consequences for students

themselves, their families, and to some extent the society. The first negative effect is students' lowering levels of academic performance. As a result, the number of students who receive academic progression warnings is rapidly increasing. Many of them are suspended from their universities because of their unsatisfactory academic results. For example, in 2015, in Tay Nguyen University, a university in the Vietnam central highlands, more than 1,000 students (out of a total of 20,000 students) were given academic warnings and faced the risk of being expelled from university for their low academic performance. Even in Ha Noi University of Science and Technology, a top Vietnamese university where many excellent students study, more than 700 students are expelled for the same reason every year. The large number of students who leave university without completing their degrees cause a waste of time and money for students and their families. Students' insufficient effort in their devotion to their learning may also lead to another negatively far-reaching consequence: reducing university graduates' employability.

Some public discussions in the media and recent studies on university graduates' employability reveal that it is graduates who are partly responsible for their unemployment. Many graduates admit that they did not devote adequate time or effort to their study during university. Their learning focused on how to get good grades, not on how to master knowledge for their future career. More worryingly, many students consider passing exams as their primary learning motive [16]. This perception makes them learn only what is tested in exams that are mostly designed to recheck knowledge given in lectures and textbooks. They show little initiative in deepening and broadening their professional knowledge by searching information from other sources. Moreover, many students have passive attitudes toward their own skill development [17; 18]. Students expect that skills like knowledge are explicitly taught in the curriculum. They fail to realize that skills are accumulated and developed through their

active participation in both classroom and extracurricular activities [18]. They rarely seek help and guidance from teaching staff, seldom participate actively in class activities, such as class or group discussions, and hardly ever take part in extracurricular activities [17]. Some graduates recognize that their disengagement in both study and educationally purposeful activities is one of the main reasons why their generic skills are underdeveloped and why they lack self-confidence when entering the labor market [17].

High unemployment and underemployment have imposed heavy burdens on university graduates and their families who cannot get return on the time and money they invest on their education. Problems of employment have also caused a big waste of qualified labor force while the economy still suffers a shortage of high-skilled workers.

The low employability of university graduates is producing some negative effects on the Vietnamese higher education system itself. As discussed earlier, university degrees are rapidly depreciating. This makes university education less attractive. Students and their parents are making more careful considerations in their investment in higher education. This is one of the reason why higher education institutions encounter more and more difficulty in attracting students.

As can be seen from the above analysis, student disengagement has caused some problems that have some negative influences on training quality of Vietnamese higher education. Therefore, to increase the quality, it is indispensable for Vietnamese universities to look for new measures to encourage students to expend more effort to their studies.

#### **4. ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT – A NEW SOLUTION FOR INCREASING VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITIES’ TRAINING QUALITY AND COMPETITIVE CAPACITY?**

All above-mentioned problems are imposing urgent needs for Vietnamese

universities to look for new approaches to improve their training quality and competitiveness. In this context, student engagement is worthy of more attention of Vietnamese educational managers, researchers, and educators because of the following reasons:

a. As previously analyzed, the limited effort students devote to study and learning activities is leading to some consequences for students themselves and their families, their universities and the wider society. Increasing levels of student academic effort becomes an indispensable task for the training quality enhancement. Student engagement with its strong focus on student academic effort and measures to improve student effort will provide Vietnamese universities an effective solution to this issue;

b. Student engagement highlights the institutional responsibility for creating favorable conditions for student learning and personal development. The emphasis on the role of the institution as the facilitator of student engagement is based on the student-centered approach and on the American education philosophy ‘No students left behind’, in which every student is offered equal opportunities to study, develop, and succeed in their career and life [3]. Currently, when Vietnamese higher education has transferred from an elite to mass education, the adoption of this approach becomes more necessary than ever. In addition, under the pressure to innovate to catch up with rapid changes caused by the fourth Industrial Revolution, Vietnamese universities start employing new teaching methods that present students more intellectual challenges, which is completely new to high school education that emphasizes memorization, grades, and examinations. Without institutional guide, orientation, and help, many students, especially low-ability ones, cannot adapt to these changes;

c. Data on student engagement will give universities a better understanding of what their students are actually doing, how they evaluate their university experience, and what

universities could do to create a more favorable environment for student learning [3; 7; 9]. Based on this understanding, universities will be able to identify areas to be improved and take appropriate measures to help students engage more in their learning and better utilize learning opportunities offered by their institutions [9]. For example, data on student engagement can help institutions identify student groups who are at risk and design timely and appropriate intervention programs to assist them;

d. The growing competitiveness for attracting and retaining students among universities is another reason for the interest in student engagement. Bradley et al. [19], in their review of Australian higher education, state that as students and their families are bearing most of the costs of their ever-increasing higher education, university education is becoming an individual investment and students are becoming 'customers with a right to good service' (p.71). Students and their families are expecting to be provided with better quality of teaching and services commensurate with their financial contribution to their university education. Data on student engagement will help institutions demonstrate how much effort they have made to live up to the expectation of their 'customers' [19].

e. Last but not least, the concept of student engagement is culturally appropriate to some of Vietnamese teaching and learning values and beliefs. As noted earlier, one of the two main features of student engagement is the effort and time students put into their studies [3]. This feature is consistent with the Vietnamese deeply embedded learning value that highly appreciates the importance of effort to academic success [16]. The

agreement between the concept of student engagement and Vietnamese values may help avoid cultural conflicts or mismatches that, as some researchers [20] state, often occur when foreign teaching and learning methodologies and practices are applied to the Vietnamese educational context. It is likely that some adjustments are needed to make student engagement more appropriate to the Vietnamese higher education context. However, the shared focus on student effort may be a good starting point for an easy and wider acceptance and a subsequently successful implementation of student engagement among Vietnamese universities. The argument for Vietnamese universities' focus on student engagement is also supported by lessons learnt from Confucian Heritage Culture countries where student engagement has become one of the most useful levers for the improvement of undergraduate education.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Research on Vietnamese higher education demonstrate that student disengagement is causing a number of problems to not only students but also Vietnamese higher education institutions, including the decline in training quality, the public dissatisfaction and doubt about university education, and the tougher and tougher competition for student enrolments among Vietnamese universities. This situation suggests an urgent need for Vietnamese universities to seek solutions to these issues. Student engagement with its significant influences on student learning and personal development may offer a promisingly effective approach to increase Vietnamese universities' training quality, accountability, and competitive capacity.

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