

# HOW STUDENT ENGAGEMENT CAN IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION USING COURSE EXPERIENCE AS A MEDIATING VARIABLE

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## SUMMARY

*The intent of this paper is to analyse the correlation between student engagement and course experience as a mechanism for improvement of the quality of undergraduate education. Traditionally, research focused separately on student engagement or course experience but it is to be argued that the later can be perceived as a mediating variable onto assessing student engagement as a tool for measurement and improvement of the undergraduate education. Additionally, is to be argued that the critique upon the student engagement and course experience concepts contributes to their further development.*

**Keywords:** *quality assurance, accountability, undergraduate education, student engagement, course experience.*

**Introduction.** The inexorable growth of the higher education field in the past few decades has led to the rapid growth of the interest and concern regarding its quality. Stensaker (2007) as cited by Hongbiao Yin & Zheng Ke (2017) argues that the Quality of Higher Education is one of the most impactful “meta-ideas”. A large part of attention directed to the quality concept is focused on the accountability dimension, student engagement, and course experience as a tool for its assessment (Coates, 2005; Coates and McCormick, 2014).

This paper assesses how Student Engagement contributes to the development

of undergraduate education quality by using course experience as a mediating variable and argues the necessity of continuous development of the field as a significant concept but not as an absolute guideline. While it has flaws and debated influence, student engagement research still brings an irrefutable contribution to the development of education. The paper will assess its key concepts in a gradual zooming method, starting with the quality of higher education, moving to the accountability dimension, which massively focuses on student engagement. The next chapter displays the argumentation regarding the

question of how Student Engagement improves the Quality of Undergraduate Education by using Course Experience as a mediating variable. The following chapter continues revealing the debates and relativity of student engagement and course experience as a quality assurance tool in undergraduate Education. The final chapter presents the author's conclusions.

### **Quality of undergraduate education.**

The quality of undergraduate education is one of the most influential concepts, however, there is a lack of concurrence when it comes to defining what quality is. Certain individuals state that it cannot be quantified and defined while others state that quality is a subjective matter and it depends on the specific perspective. (Bobby, 2014; Martin & Stella, 2007; Westerheijden, Stensaker, & Rosa, 2007).

Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, and Crawford (2015) identified three main challenges to defining quality. The first challenge concerns the fact that quality is an elusive concept and it may have a multifariousness of interpretations influenced by the interests of different stakeholders. For creating a stable vision and traditions of quality in higher education, it is crucial to include and consider the stakeholders' visions in order to secure the multi-perspective aspect of the quality concept (Bobby, 2014). The second challenge identified is the multidimensionality of the quality concept (Green, 1994; Vlăsceanu, 2007; Westerheijden, 2007 as cited by Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, and Crawford, 2015). Due to this aspect, the Quality of Higher Education cannot be diminished to a typical, short definition since it would be overly generalist for having usability in practice. The third challenge identified is the dynamicity of the quality concept due to the fluctuations of the influences from a multitude of factors such as the educational, economic, political, and

social landscape (Bobby, 2014; Ewell, 2010; Harvey, 2005; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Opre & Opre, 2006; Singh, 2010).

These challenges might be interpreted as a difficulty but it can be argued that they actually contribute to a stronger and more practical concept of quality. Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, and Crawford (2015) identified four comprehensive conceptualizations of quality: accountable, purposeful, exceptional and transformative. All these conceptualizations revolve around the different stakeholders' interests, which are positioned at the core of the concept of quality.

Quality in the conceptualization of accountability means that institutions are accountable to stakeholders for the optimal use of resources and the delivery of accurate educational products and services with zero defects. Quality as purposeful assumes institutional products and services to conform to a stated mission/vision or a set of specifications, requirements, and standards, including those defined by accrediting and regulatory institutions. Quality as exceptional involves institutional products and services achieving distinction and exclusivity through the fulfilment of high standards. Quality as transformative means that institutional products and services effect positive change in student learning and professional potential (Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, and Crawford, 2015).

Considering the significance that governments and institutions started giving to accountability, there is a constant increase in universities practicing surveys that determine the students' perceptions of the teaching process and their learning experiences (Coates 2010; Ewell 2010; Coates & McCormick 2014; Yin & Ke 2017; Zhang & McNamara 2018). Despite the bifurcation of these two crucial elements, they do present tight connections and signs of symbiosis in

some newly developed conceptual frameworks such as the overarching framework by Zhang and McNamara (2018).

**Student engagement.** Defining student engagement can be a task as strenuous as giving an exact definition of education quality. The main challenge of defining student engagement is its complex and multi-faced nature. Zhoc, Webster, and King (2018) present student engagement as a 'meta-construct' that unites multifarious themes of research with the aim of elucidating student success.

Probably one of the most prominent personalities in the field, Kuh (2007) argues that student engagement represents two critical features:

The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. The second component of student engagement is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities, and support services to induce students to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation. (Kuh, 2007)

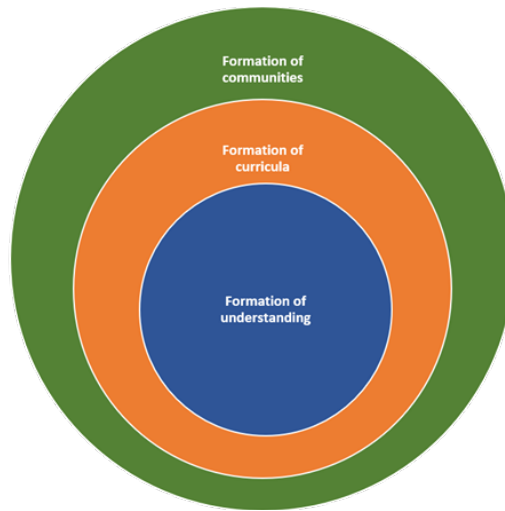
While some early researchers attempted to define student engagement directly, Astin (1984), for example, broadly defined student engagement as mental and physical involvement in the academic experience, others preferred to explore its multidimensional nature and rather focus on its potential usage (Solomonides, I., Reid, A., & Petocz, P. 2012). Axelson and Flick (2011) identify student engagement as a measure for accountability that produces an index of institutional quality and a variable that can potentially explain student learning and development.

A peculiar phenomenon in the student engagement literature is that while many try to define engagement itself, the

"object" of student engagement is left in the shadows in studies like Kahu's (2013) model of student engagement that doesn't state the object of engagement. An efficient way of outlining the objects of student engagement is identified as focusing on what is being created through student engagement, as the meaning of student engagement can change if the object of engagement changes (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). As displayed in Figure 1, three broad objects of engagement can be distinguished: engagement to form individual understanding; engagement to form curricula and engagement to form communities. Ashwin and McVitty (2015) argue that all three formations can occur simultaneously but normally one will be the main focus of student engagement. The authors state that engagement with the object of formation of understanding focuses on how student engagement can help students improve their learning outcomes, engagement to form curricula focuses on how students can help to form the courses they take and engagement to form communities focuses on how students can help define the institutions and communities they are part of (Ashwin, McVitty, 2015).

**How student engagement can improve the quality of undergraduate education by using course experience as a mediating variable.** In spite of the old division of quality assessment tools into course experience research and student engagement research, the necessity of interconnecting them is becoming an arguable reality. A study by Yin & Ke (2017) reveals a significant impact of the student's course experiences on their behavior in university learning. They identified three categories of course experience factors concerning their inter influence with student engagement. The first category incorporates clear goals and standards, generic skills and appropriate

**Figure 1. The nested hierarchy of the objects of student engagement.**



**Note.** Adapted from *The Meanings of Student Engagement: Implications for Policies and Practices* by Ashwin, P., & Mcvitty, D. (2015). *The European Higher Education Area*, 343–359. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-20877-0\_23.

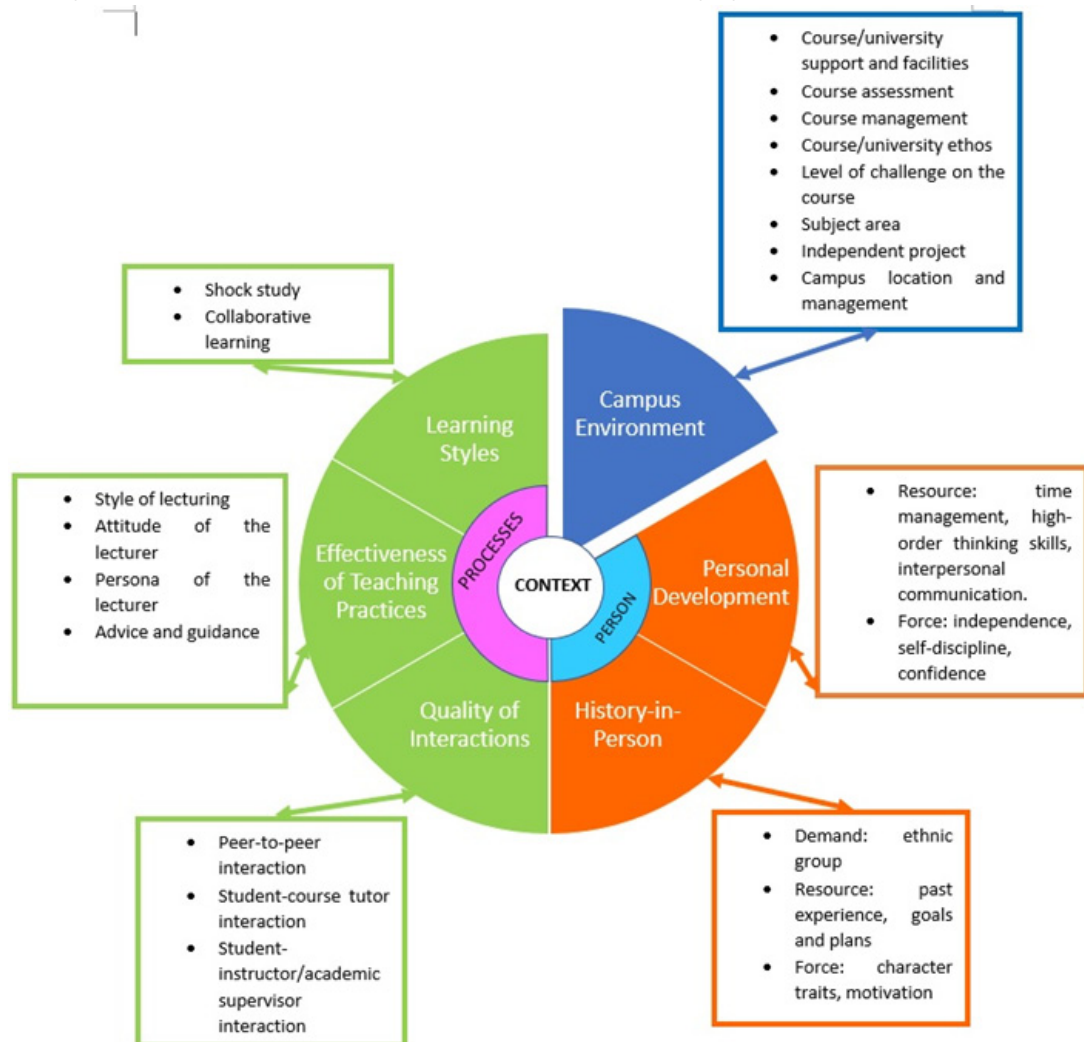
workload. The authors state that according to their study these three course experience factors have desirable effects on student engagement.

The second category consists of appropriate assessment, which Yin & Ke refer to as a “double-edged sword for student engagement” since it can situationally reduce the adaptive engagement. The authors argue that student assessment should focus on testing the comprehension of the materials rather than memorization while instructors incorporate the assessment into the learning activities. Additionally, Yin & Ke state that timely feedback is necessary for the students regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their studies.

The third category is built by the emphasis on independence and good teaching. It is argued that the influence of this category over student engagement depends on the larger context and the nature of local educational habits. Yin & Ke reveal the contrast of study results between western countries such as the USA, Canada, the UK, and China where

the emphasis is put on the independence of weakened students’ adaptive motivation and the intensification of their maladaptive engagement.

In 2018, Zhang Z. and McNamara O. fused the concepts of student engagement and course experience into a complex new framework. Besides the assessed theory and practice in the UK and China, the authors offer a fused analytical framework that works with both quantitative and qualitative datasets, which gives advanced interpretative possibilities to empirical research. Their model, besides assessing the performative aspect of engagement, also appraises the empowerment of students in the attempt to make them into informed, active and fulfilled citizens. This framework displays how students, proximal processes of their interactions with peers, staff, and objects constitute the roots of student engagement while simultaneously presenting course experience elements, mainly institutional support, as a way to mediate student engagement and development. Zhang and

**Figure 2. The themes and indicators of student engagement.**

**Note.** Adapted from Undergraduate Student Engagement. Theory and practice in China and the UK by Zhang Z., & McNamara O., (2018). Springer.

McNamara (2018) present six themes of influencing indicators that shape student engagement. Three themes are derived from the proximal processes (learning styles, the effectiveness of teaching practices and the quality of interactions), two derive from the person itself (history-in-person and personal development) and the sixth one has the role of providing the setting in which the engagement is happening.

These recent publications open the

road to perceiving student engagement and course experience as two connected elements rather than separate ones, as practiced in the past. As can be seen in Zhang and McNamara's book (2018), by assessing student engagement in correlation with course experience, researchers can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of how the quality of Undergraduate Education can be approached and improved.

**Are student engagement and course experience the proper tools for measuring quality?**

As a “hot topic”, student engagement is not only to be researched but also can be critiqued. Paradoxically one of the strongest parts of the engagement concept, it’s multidimensionality, is simultaneously debated as a weak point since it makes the measurement problematic (Bryson & Hand, 2007) leading to the necessity of targeted and innovative research in order to facilitate accuracy in assessing student engagement (Bryson 2014). Some argue that the use of the engagement concept is chaotic and its vagueness masks inequalities by those who do it (Trowler, 2014) and that it is often used uncritically (Zepke, 2014).

Although the literature mentions a level of vagueness in defining student engagement (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) which only puts its reliability under question, it is irrefutable that in the past few years there has been a massive development in related research and understanding in details the multiple dimensions of engagement. As a way of fortifying the concept, some researchers build their theories and test them in a multinational context (Zhang & McNamara 2018, Yin & Ke 2017, Yin & Ke 2018). Assessing engagement in multinational contexts reveals certain differences in the way student engagement can be used for assessing quality (Yin & Ke 2017) but simultaneously contributes to a better understanding of the concept multidimensionality.

The critique upon Student Engagement can be accepted not necessarily as an argument against the use of the concept but rather a constructive challenge to the path that the engagement concept will take in the future. It can be argued that a complete consensus of the academia upon such a complex concept would rather do damage to its development and compromise its utility.

The student engagement and course experience concepts have become alluring for research and debates mainly because policymakers around the world use them in an expanding manner (NSSE 2004, 2005). While both types of research, the ones focusing separately on student engagement or course experience, have been used as an assessment tool for quality in undergraduate education, when being brought together they do offer a clearer image of educational realities. Despite the argued imperfections and the necessity to improve the understanding of the concept itself, it is bringing useful data to the interested parties (Bushe 2013; McCormick, A. C., Kinzie, J., & Gonyea, R. M. (2013); Zhang & McNamara 2018; Zhoc 2018).

**Conclusions.** In the quest for assessing student engagement in correlation with course experience and their relevance as a tool for undergraduate quality assurance, it is pivotal to acquire a deep understanding of the numerous dimensions and factors that constitute the concept of engagement and course experience. Considering the complexity of the quality and student engagement in correlation with course experience, the previously discussed frameworks can be presented as a universe within another universe where the multidimensional student engagement concept, through the accountability dimension, is part of the even larger concept of quality.

While in certain cases student engagement and course experience are treated and researched separately, it is arguable that they are deeply interconnected and assessing them in correlation can offer more exhaustive and useful data for quality assurance. Due to the complexity of the concept of quality, assessing and using it from a mono-dimensional perspective only leaves a multitude of grey areas that put under question the validity of the results. A multidimensional approach, while



still not perfect, reveals more data that, according to recent researches, influences the whole education process.

In conclusion, it is argued that by using course experience in the process of assessing student engagement it is possible to obtain significantly better data for quality assurance, which can be less debatable due to its more comprehensive character. The student engagement and course

experience concepts can be treated as a symbiotic one that is still up for development and adaptation to time and contexts. While the combined concept does have grey areas requiring further assessment and does not constitute the absolute guideline for quality assurance, it definitely brings lots of useful data for the policymakers and institutions, respectively being an unignorable element in academia.

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