

Student Engagement in a Transnational Master's Program in TESOL in Vietnam

ID: #2263

Nguyen Quang Hung
Thuyloi University

etwannabe0919@tlu.edu.vn

1. Introduction

There has been a boom of **transnational education** worldwide. Transnational education is also known as cross-border, offshore, and borderless education (Knight, 2016). There are two main **approaches to transnational education**: an independent or a collaborative approach (Knight, 2016; Knight & McNamara, 2017). In the former approach, a higher education institution of the sending country could establish an international branch campus in the host country (Knight & McNamara, 2017). Collaborative transnational education involves joint cooperation of local and foreign partners in designing, delivering, and monitoring the program curriculum (Knight, 2016). This latter approach is sometimes realized in distance education via several study modes: face-to-face, online, or blended learning (Knight & McNamara, 2017).

As students of transnational programs seek high-quality academic training and good service, their satisfaction is an essential factor in determining the sustainable growth of these programs (Bhuiyan, 2016). Traditionally, **student satisfaction** has been viewed as an important indicator of a higher education program's quality (Bowden, Tickle, & Naumann, 2021). However, student satisfaction cannot sufficiently measure the performance of an educational institution; therefore, according to Bowden et al. (2021), a more comprehensive perspective in scholarly works concerning student satisfaction mentions terms such as "student engagement", "student experience", and "student collaboration".

Student engagement is associated with multiple success factors, including student well-being, lifelong learning, personal growth, and institution reputation. It is present in various contexts (inside and outside the classroom): at home, university, interaction with peers, community. (needs citation). Synthesizing the concept of student engagement from numerous works from behavioral, psychological, and education dimensions, Bowden et al. (2021) describe student engagement as investments in social, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects that students make when they interact with their institution and all the related stakeholders (i.e., peers, academic and administrative staff). This definition was adopted for this study.

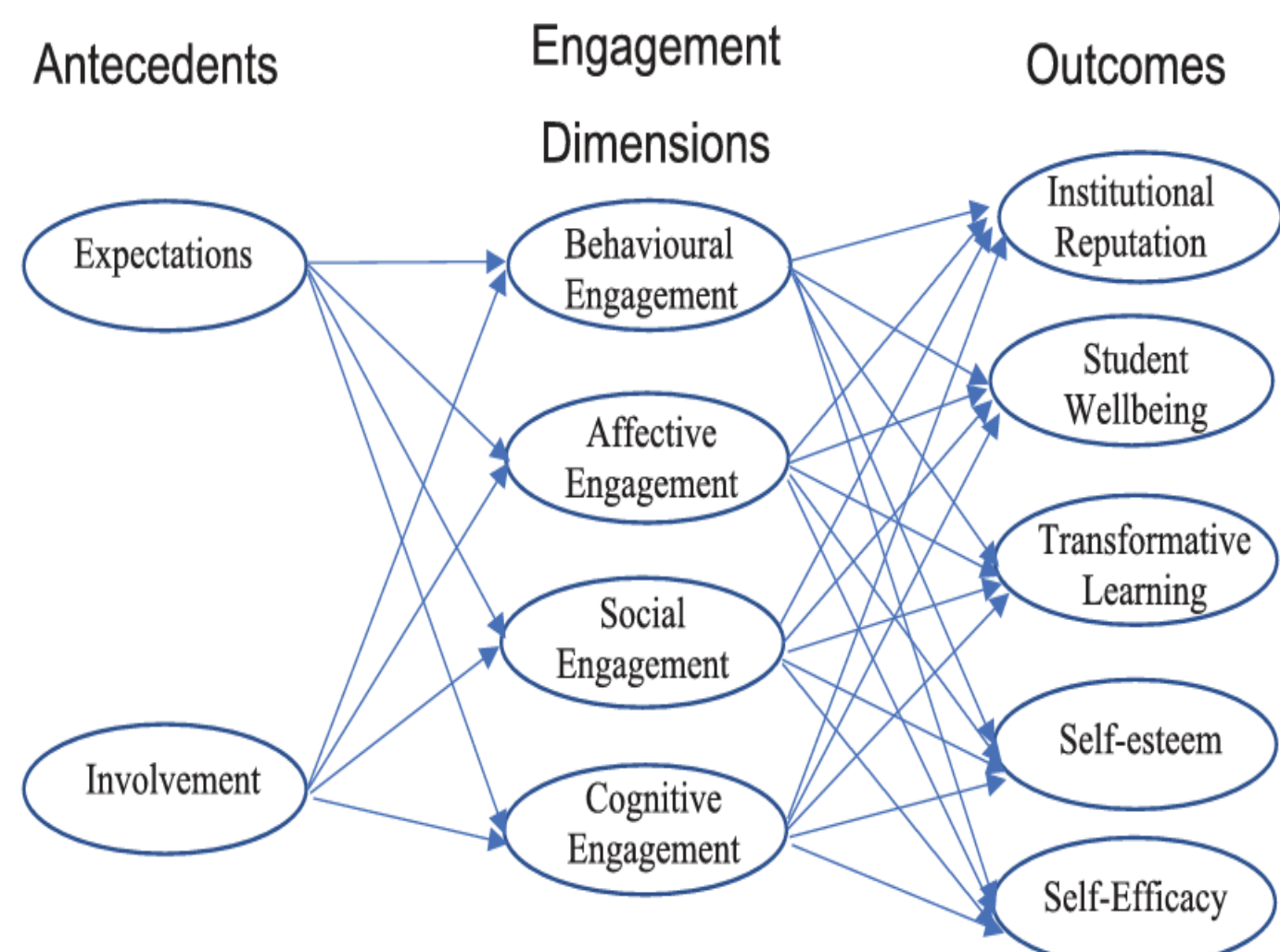
In recent years, enrolling in transnational postgraduate degrees has become increasingly common among English language teachers in Vietnam. However, few studies in the Vietnamese context explore the student experience in post-graduate transnational programs, particularly ones of Master in TESOL. Therefore, the study aims to investigate how students of TESOL describe their student engagement in a transnational post-graduate program of TESOL.

2. Research question

How do former students describe their engagement with their transnational Master's program of TESOL?

3. Theoretical framework

Figure 1: *Four-pillar student engagement by Bowden et al. (2021)*



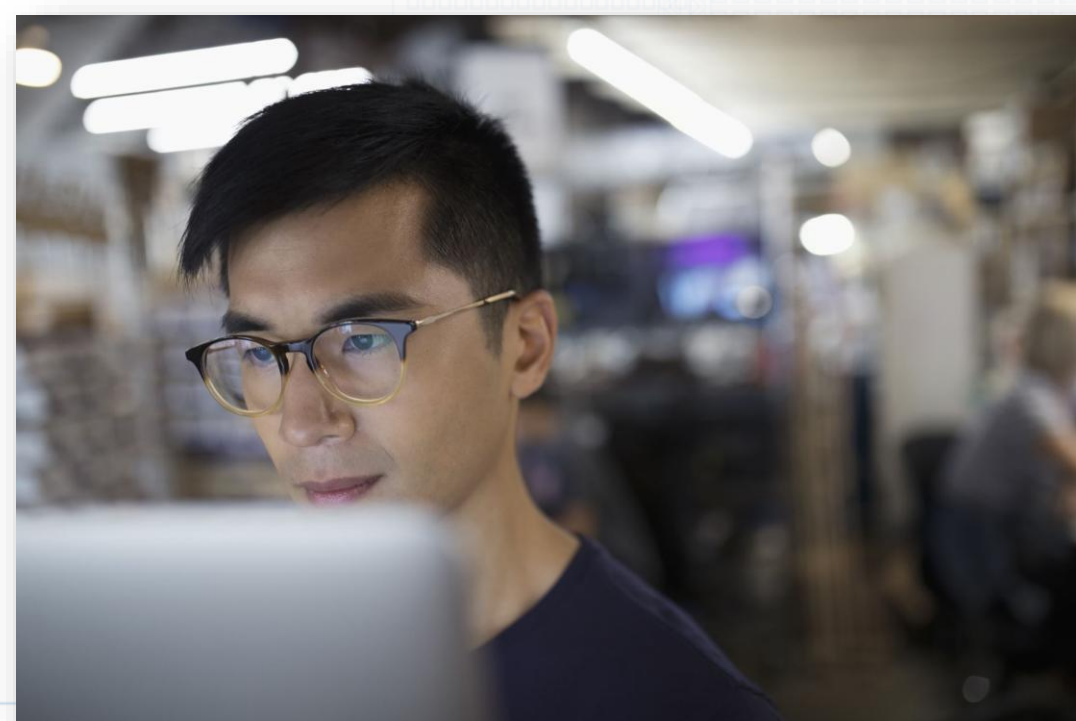
According to the framework, a student's expectations and involvement may influence and determine their engagement with a tertiary institution **four dimensions: behavioral, affective, social, and cognitive engagement**. Subsequently, student engagement may result in five outcomes, four of which concerning the student (i.e., student wellbeing, transformative learning, self-esteem, and self-efficacy). The other outcome is institutional reputation.

The present study focuses on engagement in four respects. Behavioral engagement refers to students' observable attendance and participation in learning activities and tasks, and their resilience against challenging tasks. Affective engagement concerns students' heightened emotions and passion for learning. Having social engagement, students experience a sense of belonging and connection with other their peers, teachers, and staff in in-class and out-of-class interaction. Finally, cognitive engagement could be specified with students' attending to tertiary communications, planning in their academic goals, organizing thought processes and learning strategies.

4. Methodology

4.1. Context of the study

This study explores **student engagement of five former students** who have completed their studies on a transnational **Master's program in TESOL (MTESOL)**. The program is jointly offered by an **Australian university and a Vietnamese university** based in Hanoi. The program is designed for Vietnamese students who aim to obtain internationally recognized degrees at an affordable cost. Taking the **collaborative approach**, the program was delivered in an intensive mode at the host university in Vietnam. The cohort in which the participants enrolled lasted from **June 2021 to December 2022, a time period influenced by Covid-19** social distancing measures.



4.2. Participants

Table 1: *Participant information*

Participants	Age	Gender	Years of teaching experience	Teaching qualifications	Teaching context
P1	35	Male	3	Master of TESOL Bachelor of English Studies TESOL certificate	Teaching English language skills and academic literacy to university students at a public university
P2	29	Female	5	Master of TESOL Bachelor of English Studies Self-paced course certificates	Teaching communicative English for young learners at self-organized classes
P3	30	Male	8	Master of TESOL Bachelor of TESOL IELTS certificate	Providing test preparation to highschoolers at a private center
P4	28	Female	8	Master of TESOL Bachelor of English Studies	Providing IELTS preparation & Teaching communicative English to high schoolers and young adults at self-organized classes
P5	30	Female	10	Master of TESOL Bachelor of Economics IELTS instructor's certificates	Teaching English language skills to university students & Providing IELTS preparation in self-organized classes

4.3. Research instruments

Semi-structured interviews explore students' expectations prior to the program and their involvement in the program's activities. The questions concerning their involvement follow the four-pillar student engagement model by Bowden et al. (2021).

4.4. Data collection & analysis

An Information sheet and invitation was sent to a Zalo group of MTESOL alumni. Five students agreed to participate in the study. Before the interviews, the five participants received an interview guide which might help them reflect on their Master's study. An online audio-recorded interview was conducted with each participant. The interviews lasted from 1 hour to one hour and 20 minutes.

The audio files were stored in a password-protected laptop and subsequently uploaded to an online transcribing platform. The recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were then edited by the researcher for accurate spelling of names, speaking turns, punctuation, and sentence completion. Both deductive and inductive coding were used, and keywords that recurred in the conversations were underlined and themes were annotated, following Braun and Clarke's 2019 thematic analysis.

5. Findings

Choosing the program due to its internationally recognized credential, most participants expected to gain knowledge and practical insights about TESOL and enhance their teaching skills.

As for **behavioral engagement**, all the students actively invested plenty of time in in-class and out-of-class discussions with their peers. The discussions enabled them to complete group projects (i.e., presentations) and brainstorm ideas for written assignments. Some reported their enjoyment in pair work and groupwork because they also allowed them to learn from the teaching-related insights shared by their fellow colleagues. Adaptation was reported by two students. One student adjusted his initial expectation (thinking all lecturers would be foreigners) to appreciated the overall outcome he benefited to the program. Another student emphasized adaptability and resilience.

Regarding **emotional engagement**, most participants appreciated the online learning mode because it demonstrated the institution's flexibility in response to continued Covid-19 social distancing measures. Also, it provided them with flexibility and convenience in managing time among work, study, and family responsibilities. Two students felt more confident when participating in online synchronous sessions. However, for some, online learning created obstacles for them to interact with their lecturers and peers.

A range of emotions from positive to negative emotions were reported. Positive emotions such as excitement, (when learning about new concepts/sharing, when completing an assignment, a sense of belonging (when receiving support, sympathy, and encouragement from staff and peers), pride (when receiving good grades or compliments by lecturers). Conversely, anxiety, nervousness, and panic were reported as the consequence of the program's intensity (heavy study loads, tight learning schedules) combined with personal circumstances (caring for family members or experiencing financial hardships).

In terms of **social engagement**, most students were willing to interact with lecturers in in-class and out-of-class communication, but their opinions toward them differ. Some preferred discussing course-related questions with their foreign lecturers who were perceived to be friendly and make students feel comfortable. By contrast, one student found it easier to interact with Vietnamese lecturers due to cultural and language familiarity. All students valued interactions with their peers during and after class hours due to multiple benefits: support & practical insights. (Interaction)

Concerning **cognitive engagement**, all each student devoted significant amounts of time to reading required and extensive materials, staying focused during learning sessions, highlighting the link between theory and practice in their written assignments (i.e. a critique or reflection). Most of the students invested time in planning ahead for units (e.g., studying a unit outline of contents and assessment description, setting timelines and due dates for tasks or assessments).

6. Implications

Findings in this study may serve as recommendations for providers and managers of transnational MTESOL education programs to enhance student learning experience. Student wellbeing (i.e., mental health) may need more attention from providers of transnational education programs. Students may be encouraged to connect with staff and peers for learning-related support, and each may plan their own strategies for sustaining motivation and resilience.

7. References

- Bowden, J. L. H., Tickle, L., & Naumann, K. (2021). The four pillars of tertiary student engagement and success: a holistic measurement approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(6), 1207–1224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1672647>
- Bhuiyan, S. N. (2016). Sustainability of Western branch campuses in the Gulf Region: Students' perspectives of service quality. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 49, 314–323. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2016.05.001>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, 11(4), 589–597.
- Knight, J. (2016). Transnational education remodeled: Toward a common TNE framework and definitions. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 20(1), 34–47.
- Knight, J., & McNamara, J. (2017). Global: The impact of transnational education in receiving countries: International Higher Education, Fall 2015, Number 82. In *Understanding Higher Education Internationalization: Insights from Key Global Publications* (pp. 57–60). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.