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STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE POST-SOVIET UNIVERSITY:

The current state and prospects in post-Soviet countries - Azerbaijan and Estonia

Acta electronica Universitatis Lapponiensis, 386

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Academic dissertation to be publicly defended with the permission
of the Faculty of Education at the University of Lapland in lecture hall D156
on the 4th of October 2024 at 12 noon

LAPIN YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY OF LAPLAND

Rovaniemi 2024

UNIVERSITY OF LAPLAND
FACULTY OF EDUCATION

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Taitto: Minna Komppa, Taittotalo PrintOne

Acta electronica Universitatis Lapponiensis, 386

ISBN 978-952-337-443-0
ISSN 1796-6310

The permanent address of the publication will be
https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-337-443-0

Dedicated to my father Rufat Isayev

ABSTRACT

This study arose from the necessity to explore student engagement with in-class and out-of-class activities in post-Soviet countries. Student engagement is one of the most widely researched areas in education, particularly in the developed and English-speaking parts of the world. However, in contrast, its conceptualization and measurement have not been addressed in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Student engagement has been a topic of scholarly debate for many years and is recognized as a proxy for the quality of education. Although there is debate that it has not been theorized enough, many authors have defined student engagement.

The present study is designed to investigate the state of student engagement with in-class and out-of-class activities and find ways to improve student learning experiences in post-Soviet countries. The worldview for this study is dialectic pluralism, a metaparadigm allowing one to see a larger picture, which provides a basis to look further than is possible with empiricism alone, explore individual perspectives, and investigate different paradigms and theories using multiple research methods.

The study is an amalgam of three independent original studies showcasing two different post-Soviet countries—Azerbaijan and Estonia. Study I explored the linkages between student activities, institutional variables, and student outcomes in higher education (HE) in Azerbaijan through bivariate correlation and regression analysis of 266 students from five universities located in the capital city. Study II explored variations of student engagement across eight universities (N = 433) and disciplines, as well as students' perspectives on improving their educational experiences. Finally, in Study III Estonian students (N = 27) were interviewed. The study explored how student engagement in out-of-class activities, namely, the quality assurance process in one Estonian university, will likely improve if university–student dialog is facilitated.

Study I revealed that student success, identified in terms of GPA, is related to the quality of interactions they have with academic and non-academic staff; a supportive environment predicts perceived gains and student satisfaction. However, in contrast, it also revealed that collaborative learning negatively impacts students' GPAs. Along with this, students' engagement with academic learning was largely predicted by student–faculty interactions. The study revealed that the campus environment and student–faculty interactions are critical elements of student learning, success, and satisfaction.

Another key finding came from Study II, which revealed that student engagement varies across universities and disciplines; although there are no fundamental differences across the universities located in the capital city and the regions or universities of a particular size, collaborative learning is better established in two universities located in the capital in comparison to many other universities. Surprisingly, the study revealed that student–faculty interactions at regional universities are generally better than at the universities in the capital. Students from science disciplines seemed to be more dissatisfied with the conditions created at the universities than their counterparts from other fields. Finally, students perceived higher education in Azerbaijan as weak, requiring essential changes focusing on improving the quality of teachers, teaching, and the curriculum.

Study III, conducted at a university in Estonia, revealed that students are eager to participate in in-class and out-of-class activities, such as an internal quality assurance process, if they know the expectations and responsibilities. The study exposed that students are likely to build a dialog in solving the issues related to their studies. Students would eagerly receive early information about the university development plan to provide feedback and build collaboration. Data analysis also generated a set of preconditions for universities to improve their student engagement in quality assurance.

This research contributes to the knowledge of student engagement by bringing in how student engagement is constructed and implemented in HE in post-Soviet countries, where student engagement as a phenomenon has yet to be conceptualized. The study adds value by uncovering different aspects of student engagement in a new context. Nevertheless, the theorization of student engagement in a different context could be a new study to explore in the future for other researchers.

Keywords: Student engagement, post-Soviet area, National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), stepwise regression analysis, analysis of variations, content analysis

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tämä tutkimus sai alkunsa tarpeesta kartoittaa yliopisto-opiskelijoiden sitoutumista (engl. student engagement) entisissä neuvostomaissa. Sitoutuminen on yksi tutkituimmista koulutuksen näkökulmista erityisesti kehittyneissä, englanninkielisissä maissa. Entisissä neuvostomaissa käsitettä ei ole kuitenkaan määritelty tai mitattu. Opiskelijoiden sitoutuminen on ollut akateemisen keskustelun kohde vuosia ja sen on havaittu olevan myös yhteydessä korkeakoulutuksen laatuun.

Tässä tutkimuksessa opiskelijoiden sitoutumista tutkittiin formaalin opetuksen sisällä ja sen ulkopuolisissa toiminnoissa sekä etsittiin keinoja parantaa opiskelijoiden opiskelukokemusta entisissä neuvostomaissa. Tutkimus edustaa dialektista pluralismia, joka mahdollistaa sekä yksilöllisten näkökulmien tutkimuksen että hyödyntämään eri paradigmoja, teorioita ja tutkimusmenetelmiä samanaikaisesti.

Tutkimus koostuu kolmesta itsenäisestä osatutkimuksesta, jotka kohdistuivat kahteen entiseen neuvostomaahan, Azerbaidžaniin ja Viroon. Osatutkimuksessa I tutkittiin opiskelijoiden aktiviteettien, yliopistokohtaisten muuttujien ja opintomenestyksen välisiä yhteyksiä azerbaidžanilaisissa yliopistoissa kahden muuttujan korrelaatioiden ja regressioanalyysin avulla. Aineisto koostui 266 opiskelijan vastauksesta viidestä pääkaupunkialueen yliopistosta. Osatutkimuksessa II analysoitiin opiskelijoiden (N = 433) sitoutumisen variaatioita kahdeksassa azerbaidžanilaisessa yliopistossa ja eri tieteenaloilla. Lisäksi kysyttiin opiskelijoiden näkökulmia heidän opiskelukokemuksensa parantamiseksi. Kolmannessa osatutkimuksessa tarkasteltiin miten opiskelijoiden (N = 27) sitoutuminen formaalin opetuksen ulkopuolisissa toiminnoissa, erityisesti laadunvarmistuksessa, tuki yliopiston ja opiskelijoiden välistä vuoropuhelua virolaisessa yliopistossa.

Osatutkimus I paljasti, että opiskelijoiden menestys keskiarvolla mitattuna on yhteydessä opiskelijoiden sekä yliopiston akateemisen ja muun henkilökunnan välisen vuorovaikutuksen laatuun. Kannustava ilmapiiri ennusti havaittuja hyötyjä opiskelusta ja opiskelijoiden tyytyväisyyttä. Tutkimus osoitti kuitenkin myös, että yhteistoiminnallinen oppiminen oli negatiivisesti yhteydessä opintomenestyksen keskiarvoon. Opiskelijoiden sitoutumista ennusti suurelta osin opiskelijoiden ja henkilökunnan välinen vuorovaikutus. Tämän ja yliopistokampuksen ilmapiiri näyttäytyivät kriittisinä opiskelijoiden oppimiskokemusten, menestyksen ja tyytyväisyyden takeina.

Osatutkimuksen II päähavainto oli, että opiskelijoiden sitoutuminen vaihteli yliopistojen ja oppiaineiden välillä. Vaikka pääkaupunkiyliopistojen ja maakuntien yliopistojen tai eri kokoisten yliopistojen välillä ei löytynyt perustavanlaatuista eroa,

yhteistoiminnallinen oppiminen näytti toteutuvan parhaiten kahdessa pääkaupungin yliopistossa muihin yliopistoihin verrattuna. Tutkimus myös osoitti, että opiskelijoiden ja henkilökunnan välinen vuorovaikutus oli yleisesti parempaa maakuntien yliopistoissa kuin pääkaupunkiyliopistoissa. Luonnontieteiden opiskelijat olivat tyytymättömämpiä yliopiston opiskeluolosuhteisiin kuin muiden alojen opiskelijat. Opiskelijoiden näkemysten mukaan azerbaidžanilainen korkeakoulutuksen taso oli heikkoa ja he toivoivat parempaa laatua opetushenkilöstöön, opetukseen ja opetussuunnitelmiin.

Osatutkimus III toteutettiin virolaisessa yliopistossa. Tutkimuksen tulokset paljastivat, että opiskelijat olivat innokkaita osallistumaan erilaisiin yliopiston sisäisiin laadunvarmistusprosesseihin, jos osallistumiseen liittyvät odotukset ja vastuut sanoitettiin selvästi. Opiskelijat rakensivat dialogia ratkaistakseen haasteita opinnoissaan. He myös toivoivat saavansa riittävästi tietoa yliopiston kehittämissuunnitelmista, jotta voisivat antaa palautetta ja rakentaa yhteistyötä yliopiston suuntaan paremmin. Analyysi tuotti myös kuvauksen siitä, miten yliopistot voivat parantaa opiskelijoiden sitoutumista laadunvarmistukseen.

Tutkimus tuotti ainutlaatuista tietoa siitä, miten opiskelijoiden sitoutuminen rakentuu ja toteutuu entisten neuvostomaiden yliopistokoulutuksessa. Kyseessä on pioneeritutkimus, sillä opiskelijoiden sitoutumista ei ole näissä maissa tutkittu systemaattisesti. Tutkimus avaa opiskelijoiden sitoutumisesta uudessa kontekstissa, ja tuottaa paitsi tietoa koulutuksen kehittämiseen entisissä neuvostomaissa myös syvempää ymmärrystä yliopisto-opiskelijoiden sitoutumisen merkityksestä kansainväliseen tieteelliseen keskusteluun laajemminkin.

Asiasanat: opiskelijan sitoutuminen, entiset neuvostomaat, kansallinen opiskelijan sitoutumisen kysely (NSSE), askeltava regressioanalyysi, variaatioanalyysi, sisällönanalyysi

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Making my PhD way through the World

I begin this acknowledgment with the words of Margaret Archer, who argues that "*actively making our way through the world pivots upon the presence of reflexivity*" (Archer, 2007, p. 42). This writing reflects not only my own reflexivity but also that of everyone involved in this project, which explores the significance of institutional conditions for student learning within a context I have closely observed over many years. Therefore, I thank deeply all the participants of this project. Although my PhD way through the World was exceptionally challenging—marked by years of dreaming, hard work, and education in multiple countries — I was lucky to encounter many brilliant individuals who made it possible for me to complete this journey.

Primarily, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Professor Erkko Sointu from the University of Eastern Finland and Associate Professor Aliya Kuzhabekova from the University of Calgary, Canada, for their thorough analysis, insightful readings, and diligent feedback.

I owe particular thanks to Professor Satu Uusiautti, my first supervisor, for her immense support, understanding, and meticulous feedback. Her prompt responses and genuine care for my research were instrumental throughout this process. I am also in debt to Professor Ilkka Ratinen, my second supervisor, for his precise and critical guidance throughout my journey. Both of my supervisors were always available to support me, quickly addressing my inquiries and encouraging me along the way.

I am profoundly grateful to Professor Eve Eisenschmidt from Tallinn University, who supported and guided me from the beginning of my journey. Her invaluable assistance was crucial in helping me start my research at Tallinn University and publish my first article. I also want to extend my thanks to Professor Paul Gibbs from Middlesex University, London, for his contributions to my development as a researcher.

I am fortunate to have received invaluable feedback from two groups of reviewers (internal and external reviewers) from the very beginning, which greatly contributed to the development and improvement of this manuscript. I extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Satu-Maarit Korte, University Lecturer and Roosa Karvonen, PhD researcher at the University of Lapland, for their critical appraisal of the initial version of the manuscript. Their insightful reviews led to significant enrichment of the work.

Throughout my professional journey, I have been supported by many people, people who believed in me earnestly, sometimes even more than I believed in myself. Their unwavering support was especially crucial during challenging times. I am deeply grateful to my friends Lyudmila Sotova for her constructive critical stance on everything I do, Elza Semedli for her inspiration and insight, and Vlad Vernygora for the support and his critical eye on my sometimes eccentric writings. Although separated by distance, their virtual presence and encouraging messages were incredibly heartwarming.

In Finland, I met another supportive group of friends who were encouraging, loving, and cherished our time together. I especially want to thank Pilvikki Lantela, my first Finnish friend, whom I met in the researcher corridor over coffee. I also appreciate the support and understanding of my other Finnish friend Ella Autti for her being always there for me. We shared many wonderful moments, and both of them were always there to listen, support, cry with me and even share in my struggles with immigration issues. I thank Pilvikki and Ella for giving my children and me the comfort of home and for the chance to closely explore and fall in love with Finnish culture. I would like to thank Zhuoyan Lu for her comforting conversations about challenging political situations around the world and for her patience with my complaints about the complexities of PhD life.

A special mention goes to Professor Hamlet Isaxanli, founder and chairman of the Board of Directors and Trustees of Khazar University, my direct supervisor for many years. His encouragement, support, and persistent push for PhD education have been invaluable. His leadership has been a constant source of inspiration for personal and professional growth not only for me but also many people he is working with. I am also grateful to Professor Mahammad Nouriyev, Vice-rector for Academic Affairs at Khazar University for his guidance, and readiness to support me throughout this journey.

My deepest thanks go to my family, especially my beloved children - daughter Alsu and my son Rasul, for their unconditional love, support, and patience throughout my mental and physical preoccupation for many consecutive years. I am also grateful to my husband, Jamal Mammadov, for his unwavering support, courage, and encouragement during my absences and mental preoccupations. My heartfelt appreciation extends to my loving and caring parents: my father, Rufat Isayev (my first teacher) who did everything he could to educate me, who is always more stressed than I am in every critical step of my life and my mother, Shahraya Isayeva for her unconditional love, care, understanding, support.

I would also like to acknowledge Khazar University's leadership for providing me with a one-and-a-half-year paid sabbatical to finalize my PhD, and the Rector of the University of Lapland for the four-month grant that helped me complete my dissertation.

All these relationships and circumstances have enriched my journey with learning experiences, prompting deep reflection and a lifelong pursuit of learning as I navigate my way through the world.

Baku, 13.08.2024
Razia Isaeva

TABLES

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

CL	Collaborative Learning
DD	Discussions with Diverse Others
DP	Dialectical Pluralism
EI	Engagement Indicator
ET	Effective Teaching Practices
GPA	Grade Point Average
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HO	Higher-Order Learning
LS	Learning Strategies
NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement
PG	Perceived Gains
QA	Quality Assurance
QI	Quality of Interactions
QR	Quantitative Reasoning
RI	Reflective and Integrative Learning
SE	Student Engagement
SF	Student-Faculty Interaction

LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

The following articles, denominated as Studies I–III (Appendix I) in this study, are the original articles integrated and synthesized into the thesis.

Publication I: Isaeva, R., Ratinen, I., & Uusiautti, S. (2023). Understanding student success in higher education in Azerbaijan: The role of student engagement. *Studies in Higher Education*, *48*(12), 1918–1936. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2217208

Isaeva prepared the preliminary design of the study and collected and analyzed the research data. She also prepared the first draft of the article. Ratinen and Uusiautti participated in writing the article.

Publication II: Isaeva, R., Uusiautti, S., & Ratinen, I. (2024). Student Engagement Variations across Institutions and Disciplines: Findings from Azerbaijan. *International Journal of Educational Psychology*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.17583/ijep.13735

Isaeva, Uusiautti, and Ratinen planned the article. Isaeva prepared the first draft of the study. Uusiautti and Ratinen participated in writing the article.

Publication III: Isaeva, R., Eisenschmidt, E., Vanari, K., & Kumpas-Lenk, K. (2020). Students' views on dialogue: Improving student engagement in the quality assurance process. *Quality in Higher Education*, *26*(1), 80–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2020.1729307

Isaeva, Eisenschmidt, Vanari and Kumpas-Lenk planned the study. Isaeva prepared the first draft. Vanari and Kumpas-Lenk gathered and analyzed the data for the first stage. Isaeva gathered and analyzed the data for the second stage together with Eisenschmidt. All four authors participated in writing the article.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the Research

This thesis is based on exploratory research looking at the issues of student engagement with in-class and out-of-class activities in higher education (HE) in post-Soviet countries. My research interest lay in the question of finding ways to improve student engagement with in-class and out-of-class activities, as well as the interlinkages between student engagement, study success, and institutional factors. Moreover, I was interested in looking at the variations in student engagement found across institutions and disciplines due to its dynamic and contextual characteristics, especially considering that this study took place in a different context than student engagement investigated up to now.

Higher education institutions (HEI) are facing challenging times brought about by global trends such as the intervention of technology in learning and teaching, climate change, and migration (Scott, 2021). Alongside with this, in HE globally research is overshadowing the teaching mission making educators to sacrifice their teaching for research output (Rogers & Swain, 2021; Macfarlane, 2011). Although the idea was to make teaching a research-based and research linked, one comes at the cost of other (Macfarlane, 2011). These internal and external tensions bring many more challenges for teachers and HEIs in keeping the balance between roles, at the same time meeting the growing needs and expectations of the current and upcoming student body. Under such circumstances, understanding the importance of student engagement in learning and improving relationships between the key actors of HE, especially in emerging countries where the pursuit of teaching and research excellence is yet to be formulated and the issues of student engagement with in-class and out-of-class learning activities have been largely overlooked, becomes crucial.

The importance of student engagement has been extensively discussed, and its positive impact on student learning outcomes (Nelson Laird et al., 2014), grades, and satisfaction (Webber et al., 2013) and personal development has been demonstrated in numerous studies over the past several decades. This body of research shows the impact student engagement has on student learning, outcomes, retention, and success (Hu & McCormick, 2012; Kuh et al., 2007, 2008). Student engagement remains one of the most widely studied topics due to its being a predictor of learning and personal growth in HE. Thus, engaging students in learning appears to be one of the primary responsibilities of HEIs. In this vein, HE is known to have the potential

to be transformational for students (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Astin, 1977; Bowen, 2018; Kuh, 2010; Mayhew et al., 2016), which makes HEIs' role critical in providing quality learning opportunities for students to become successful.

Student engagement can take many forms depending on the way it is positioned in the institution's mission statement and vision. Studies have demonstrated how institutional and disciplinary variations impact the student engagement that universities have provided for them (Pike et al., 2012; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Students are more likely to learn effectively if there are conditions created for them to be engaged in academically purposeful activities. If universities provide support and conditions, students are likely to perceive their universities as engaging places to learn, will be more satisfied, and will demonstrate more achievements (Kuh, 2003). Similarly, Kahu et al. (2019) highlight that both students and universities are responsible for student engagement. They further argue that by promoting the advantages of interactions with other students and staff, and active participation in class, the university helps students to become more engaged in learning experiences. Student engagement is critical to the quality of student learning and is interlinked with the students' perceptions of the learning environment. For example, Lizzio et al. (2002) stated that institutional factors influence students' perceptions of their learning environment as they are strongly related to reaching outcomes such as student satisfaction, academic achievement, and the development of transferrable skills.

Universities can also benefit in terms of increased learning motivation and a sense of belongingness of students, thus contributing to the building of trust and confidence in the student–university partnership (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Marquis et al., 2017; McCulloch, 2009). While universities care to engage their students as partners, they must be active as consultants rather than informants of the quality assurance process (Carey, 2013). If students feel engaged, they become more active participants, which involves them in being responsible for the quality of education (McCulloch, 2009). Moreover, students engaged in the quality assurance process are more likely to develop and be motivated to learn (Gvaramadze, 2011; Kuh, 2009; Kumpas-Lenk et al., 2018). However, this assumes that the university takes a responsible role in keeping students informed about the roles and responsibilities of co-creating the quality they are likely to carry out throughout their education at the beginning of their journey (Krause & Coates, 2008; Stalmeijer et al., 2016). This will increase the likelihood of being engaged in their studies. Related to this, student learning is positively correlated with the expectations of the HE system, similar to the interlinkages between expectations of the state on HE where the latter is regulated based on the state's expectations of it (Dalmon et al., 2019; Marginson, 2013). Consequently, how student engagement is shaped within an institution will positively correlate with how student learning is positioned within national and institutional policies.

In this study, student engagement is defined as the effort students and universities spend to lead student learning to success. Here, it is identified that student engagement with in-class and out-of-class learning is a responsibility of both parties, where universities are responsible for creating conditions and students are responsible for being engaged in deep learning and understanding. Although such factors as personality, behaviors, emotions, and cognition, as well as situational, economic, and social factors, contribute to student engagement, making it a "meta" construct (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 60), in this study I concentrate on contextual factors impacting student engagement considering that student engagement as identified by Zepke (2018) happens within a context. The study explores student engagement with in-class and out-of-class activities in two post-Soviet countries—Azerbaijan and Estonia.

1.2 Recent Developments in Higher Education in post-Soviet Countries

Although the value and importance of student engagement and its impact on student and institutional outcomes have been widely discussed in the literature over the past several decades (Coates, 2009; Kuh, 2009), the majority of these studies were conducted in developed countries where student engagement at the policy level is streamlined and implemented at institutional levels. The discussion of student engagement in post-Soviet countries is rather rare and only occasionally appears in the literature. The qualitative study conducted by Beerkens and Udam (2017) discusses a stakeholder (students as one of them) engagement in quality assurance in Estonian Higher Education. They have concluded that the process of engagement helps to accomodate the varied prospects and to enhance the quality. While an interesting dynamic of student–academia relationships is observed in these countries, scholars rarely publish much empirical data exploring how student engagement is organized within HE. This project is built on the experiences of two post-Soviet countries, Azerbaijan and Estonia, which have a lengthy association with being part of the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. Although the changes after the collapse of the Soviet Union have been implemented differently in each country due to differences associated with culture, political agenda, demographics, and geographical location, there are some commonalities (Ivanov& Zviagintsev, 2023).

Although the collapse of one of the largest bureaucracies in the world, the Soviet Union, brought the revival of many countries, it also caused a major disbalance in the education systems of all the republics, identified by a shortage of resources, a lack of control over quality, and a trembling system with new university types having no adequate strategy in place at the national level. Due to the extensive centralization

during the Soviet period, a vast amount of academic capital accumulated within the Soviet system was inherited by Russia after the collapse (Chankseliani, 2021).

Despite a mild reconciliation due to the effects of the Bologna process, the turbulence still exists (Gibbs et al., 2023). The Bologna process started with the Sorbonne Declaration, signed in 1998 when the higher education ministers of four large European countries met in Paris and agreed on the harmonization of European higher education (Huisman, 2019; Vogtle, 2019). In 1999, the Bologna Declaration was signed by representatives of 29 countries and regions; this reformulated the objectives of the Sorbonne Declaration, and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was established (Huisman, 2019; Vogtle, 2019).

The Bologna process, as an exclusive harmonization process, has 10 action lines: adoption of a system with easily readable and comparable degrees; adoption of a European Credit Transfer System (ECTS); establishment of three-degree cycles—bachelor's, master's, and doctoral; promotion of academic mobility; promotion of a European dimension in HE; building cooperation in quality assurance; promotion of lifelong learning; inclusion of HEIs and students in the reform process; promotion of HE attractiveness capacity in EHEA and finally, promotion of synergy between EHEA and the European Research Area by reforming doctoral studies (Huisman, 2019; Soltys, 2015; Vogtle, 2019).

Currently, the Bologna process has 49 signatories and has the following history of post-Soviet countries joining the process: three Baltic states joined the process together with other Western countries in 1999, followed by Russia in 2003, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in 2005, Kazakhstan in 2010, and Belarus in 2015. Despite the fact that four of the central Asian countries—Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—are not yet members of the EHEA, the Bologna elements are implemented and considered in the higher education systems of these countries (Huisman, 2019). Almost all post-Soviet countries have established necessary changes enforced by the Bologna process; while some were slow, others were very active in implementing these changes.

Although the shift brought in by the Bologna process can undermine the role of knowledge in higher education, the process brought a major shift from conventional educational values to economic imperatives focusing on skills and employability (Petkute, 2016). Yet, focusing only on outcomes like skills, undercuts the transformational role of Higher Education underpinned in university education (knowledge advancement) and research (knowledge creation). However, with the balance created between knowledge development, creation and skill development, the process has the means for revitalizing the transformational role of Higher Education. Although the present study is not a comparative one, a study exploring the level of differences in the Bologna process implementation within post-Soviet countries would provide insight into the level of sustainable changes that happened because of the Bologna process.

The post-Soviet countries encounter numerous challenges while implementing the Bologna process. Although inclusion of HEIs and students in the reform process is one of the action lines of the Bologna process, student engagement in the quality assurance process remains rather formal. Communique (2003) emphasized the role of students during the reforms, student engagement in quality assurance was one of the conditions necessitating students to be accepted as partners in the process of quality assurance.

Some studies have shown that higher education faces challenges in accepting students as partners (Coates, 2005; Gvaramadze, 2011); this process remains formal, whereby students are kept as informants rather than as partners. Furthermore, universities lack consistency in keeping students informed of the results of such participation, making students skeptical and ignorant of engagement in quality assurance (Harvey, 2003). This issue is more severe in the countries of the former Soviet Union, where student involvement in the quality assurance process is a formality, let alone engaging students as partners. Considering that the above-mentioned studies were conducted in emerging countries, the situation with student engagement in quality assurance remains relatively unexplored in these countries.

One common feature related to the topic of this study is the need for student engagement measurement at the national level in both countries. Moreover, the issue needs to be addressed in the educational reform processes, especially in Azerbaijan, where student engagement in external quality assurance has only recently become a requirement (Ilyasov et al., 2023). In Azerbaijan, access to data is another challenge. To my knowledge, no financial or impact study reports have been published on the success of the reforms or institutional variables and investments made internally. Access to such data would allow us to look at the interplay of institutional variables and student engagement. Such research would shed light on how institutions are making decisions to improve the situation with student learning.

The purpose of this study is to provide an analysis of student engagement in post-Soviet countries, where student engagement has yet to be defined and articulated clearly in policy documents. Although the Bologna process requires institutions to involve students in the quality assurance process, its conceptualization as a complicated phenomenon impacting student learning and success, and institutional outcomes, needs to be addressed in the reform processes in those countries. Research has shown that student engagement's "dynamic and situational" character means that it varies across countries, universities, majors, and years of study (Zepke, 2014). Additionally, institutional variations in finances, human resources, ownership, leadership, and student positioning in the institution's mission statement significantly impact student learning and development. In the case of the post-Soviet countries, such a tool to measure student engagement at the national level would allow institutional leaders and policymakers to see the variances across the country and be decisive about further improvements.

The post-Soviet countries took different roads of development after the collapse, however, their economic and democratic developments demonstrated relatively slow and varied movements (Chankseliani, 2022; Gibbs et al., 2023). Although this study explores student engagement in post-Soviet countries, due to the fact that there is a tight association between political and economic indicators I decided to provide some similarities and differences across 15 countries of the post-Soviet realm based on Chankseliani (2022), at the same time carefully reviewing reports with similar indicators. According to different reports, these countries had considerable differences in the Human Development Index (HDI) and the Democracy Index, and each of these 15 countries belongs to different categories. The HDI for all post-Soviet countries has improved since 2000; for example, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Georgia are categorized as having very high human development (UN, 2023/2024), whereas Belarus and Russia belong to an authoritarian regime group, according to the Democracy Index (Chankseliani, 2022; EIU, 2022). Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Moldova, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan belong to the group of countries with a high human development index (UN, 2023/2024), while according to the Democracy Index, Moldova, Armenia, and Ukraine are in the hybrid regime category, whereas Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan belong to authoritarian regime category (EIU, 2022). Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan belong to the medium human development group, and democratically, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan belong to the authoritarian regime category of countries. Economically, there is a larger gap between these countries since Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are classified as higher-income countries. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan are classified as upper-middle-income, whereas Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan are classified as lower middle-income, and only Tajikistan is classified as a low-income country (World Bank, 2022). However, none of the countries of the former Soviet Union are classified as full democracies (Chankseliani, 2022; EIU, 2022).

When it comes to the government expenditure of these countries, as well as investment in education, it again varies, with Estonia being at the top of the list. Azerbaijan and Estonia, as case studies in this research representing two distinct cultures as well as two different approaches to their development after the Soviet demolition, represent the best cases to look at student engagement in learning, since learning—both pace and quality-wise—has transformed differently in these two countries.

As per student engagement research output in these countries, I used the SSCI database in the Web of Science to investigate publications between 2000–2020. The decision to investigate through this specific database lies within its gained reputation and thoroughness in international peer review (Oleksiyenko, 2023b). I analyzed the SSCI database with words such as "student engagement" AND "higher education"

AND [the name of a specific post-Soviet country]. Table 1 shows the number of SSCI research papers on student engagement in the post-Soviet countries published during 2000–2020. It shows that SSCI journals have very limited coverage of student engagement in higher education in post-Soviet countries. When reading those available publications from the region, it becomes clear that none of them has covered student engagement, similar to my study where an in-depth literature review has been conducted and student engagement has been analyzed through the specific indicators.

Table 1. *SSCI papers on student engagement in higher education in the post-Soviet countries (2000–2020)*

	Country	Student Engagement* AND "higher education" (abstract)
1	Armenia	0
2	Azerbaijan	0
3	Belarus	0
4	Estonia	4
5	Georgia	0
6	Kazakhstan	2
7	Kyrgyzstan	0
8	Latvia	1
9	Lithuania	0
10	Moldova	1
11	Russia	2
12	Tajikistan	0
13	Turkmenistan	0
14	Ukraine	0
15	Uzbekistan	0

The lack of studies or reports exploring the effectiveness of new reforms or investments in educational reforms in the countries discussed makes the contributions made by this study valuable. Thoughtful investment in education for economic and social growth in developed countries has changed the pace and volume of mass higher education. Many studies, for example, have been conducted in the USA and internationally to examine the impact of university investments on student outcomes (Mayhew et al., 2016). Nevertheless, in the countries of the former Soviet Union, there is a need for such publicly available reports and studies contributing to the transparency of cost, price, and student outcomes. While thinking about the "value for money" in student learning, it is worthwhile to consider tools to measure student engagement to understand the mistakes and uncertainties in the reform processes.

2. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

This chapter presents the literature review on student engagement. First, it outlines the theory guiding this study, then it presents the summary of definitions of student engagement. Next, it discusses how institutional structures are impacting student engagement. Furthermore, it provides a review of the recent developments in student engagement in quality assurance as a type of student engagement in out-of-class activities. Finally, the chapter summarizes the importance of the preconditions and outcomes of student engagement.

2.1. Student Engagement Theory

Student engagement has been recognized as a complex phenomenon relying on two fundamental theories: Alexander Astin's (1984) theory of involvement and Pace's (1980) concept of quality of effort. The theories underline that HEIs are likely to impact students' improvement at both their personal and professional levels, and there are inputs in student engagement. Although initially he talks about how much effort students should put in, later in the same article Astin includes the conditions to be created at the university that can increase or decrease the degree of involvement. Involvement is not yet student engagement, as Astin (2014) refers to motivation when he talks about involvement. The definition I use in this study goes beyond the theoretical assumptions of Astin and Pace, as it implies that there are inputs from both—a student and a university, which is a collaborative responsibility for the quality of learning that transcends traditional accountability. I believe such a view encompasses going beyond neoliberalism and performativity (Matthews et al., 2019). Higher Education should play more transformative role making students more mindful, life-long learners with continuous personal and professional development aspirations (Ashwin, 2020). I do not see students as customers or clients but rather as co-creators or partners in learning (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Such a partnership can be built in class and grow out to be a partnership for quality of learning in different aspects of institutional provision. I see HE students as adult learners who can be shared in all the upcoming changes of the university or the entire system, and furthermore, they can be engaged in a dialog to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of any forthcoming changes.

Thus, the overarching theory for the conceptualization of this study is the transformative learning theory by Mezirow (1981). In describing transformative

learning, Mezirow refers to Habermas (1979) and explains that there are two forms: instrumental and communicative learning. Instrumental learning is hypothetical-deductive, whereas communicative learning is analogical-abductive. Transformative learning theory, as described by Mezirow (2009, p. 93) "is a metacognitive epistemology of evidential (instrumental) and dialogical (communicative) reasoning." He explains that when instrumental learning is *task-oriented*, transformative learning is likely to occur, whereas in communicative learning, transformational learning occurs when *critical self-reflection* happens. He defines transformative learning as a process of changing the mindsets, habits of mind, set of assumptions, and expectations to make them "inclusive, open, reflective, and emotionally adaptive" (Mezirow, 2009, p. 92). In many ways, student engagement, once built appropriately, can be transformational; for example, student engagement in academically challenging activities built into the curriculum develops critical reflection, as well as professional knowledge and skills through instrumental learning. Communicative learning is built through engagement in collaborative learning and interactions with others, including instructors, staff, and students. Concerning the importance of engagement with others, Tinto (2017) argues that it matters to pay attention to whom the student engages, as he refers to recent studies that found that a friend's decision on retention impacts student retention more than the background variable. In the same vein, Taylor and Snyder (2012) note, "... transformative learning does not happen in a vacuum solely through the free will of an autonomous learner; rather, it is contextually bounded and influenced by relationships with others" (p. 44).

Mezirow (2012) argues that *frames of reference* have two dimensions: *a habit of mind* and *resulting points of view* (p. 83), described as the predispositions we have that step in when we experience something new and want to make sense of it. He names six habits of mind—*sociolinguistic*, *moral-ethical*, *epistemic*, *philosophical*, *psychological*, and *aesthetic*. Habits of the mind transform into a point of view when we want to express ourselves. Transformations in frames of reference happen in two ways: "*epochal*—a sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight—or *incremental*, involving a progressive series of transformations" (Mezirow, 2012, p. 86).

A body of research criticizes the concept of transformative theory and calls it theoretically loose to explain the concept of transformation (Dirkx, 2012; Eschenbacher, 2019; Newman, 2012). Newman (2012), for example, says that the theory has no connection with reality and challenges the substance of transformative learning by arguing that "transformative learning" is only "good learning" (p. 41). Dirkx (2012) argues that transformative learning is more of a self-formative process that is deeply entrenched in the teaching and learning process. Mezirow (2012) clearly shows that transformative learning is mindful learning; it is contextual, as the context changes in an incremental or epochal way. As learners, we transform our *frames of reference*. Especially, in the context of HE, learning goes beyond only

providing instrumental knowledge. Considering that HE as a context has been recognized as transformational (Dewey, 1938, 1997), with colossal effort invested by students and other stakeholders (three or four consecutive years of studying around 45 or more subjects), the HE context should be able to provide more than "good learning."

Using qualitative research with 24 students enrolled in one introductory course, and with Mezirow's theory of transformative learning as one of the theories, Robinson and Levac (2018) concluded that some students experienced transformative learning changes. These changes were related to the *philosophical, psychological, epistemological,* and *moral-ethical* habits of mind identified by Mezirow (2012) (Robinson & Levac, 2018, pp. 112–113). As the study indicates, students changed their *frames of reference* through the reflective activities, which helped them to reconceptualize major concepts, their social status, and the roles they were playing as engaged citizens. Moreover, collaboration with peers and teachers, namely feedback provided by them, helped students to improve their projects.

Student engagement is defined as a "phenomenon created as a condominium of academic, non-academic and social aspects of the student experience" (Coates, 2006). Multifaceted character of student engagement implies it has a transformative potential (Bass, Dompierre & McAlister, 2023; Cottafava, Cavaglia & Corazza, 2019). Kahu (2013, p. 763) identifies student engagement as situational—it happens on the "interplay of context and individual." Furthermore, defining student engagement as multi-dimensional recognizes psychology to be one of the dimensions of student engagement (Fredericks et al., 2004). In other words, student engagement is a psycho-social process influenced by institutional and personal factors. Kuh (2009) argues that a highly engaged student usually studies long hours, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts with teachers and students. Therefore, student engagement is the time, energy, and effort they devote to the academic experience (Trowler, 2010). Many have defined student engagement as the time, effort, and energy students devote to learning knowledge and skills, and institutional input as institutional resources, enhanced educational activities that support and promote student learning, and, most importantly, enriched and challenging curricula that encourage student learning (Kuh, 2003, 2009; McCormick et al., 2013). Moreover, Kuh et al. (2007) theorize student engagement as an academically challenged in-class and out-of-class learning experience leading to quantifiable outcomes.

Research shows that students' social belongingness, former qualifications, and personality play a role in student engagement. For example, Kahu (2013) has contributed to the understanding of the antecedents and consequences of student engagement by bringing to the fore the importance of the interplay of student and institutional variables for student engagement. Other studies have looked at student engagement from motivation theory perspectives, such as self-determination theory,

achievement goal theory, achievement motivation theory, attribution theory, self-efficacy theory, and the expectancy–value theory of achievement (Eccles & Wang, 2012; Zepke & Leach, 2010).

Nick Zepke (2013) highlights that university teachers need to engage students in learning to teach in a more student-centered way. He argues that this requires academic developers to discuss the approach, the content, and the assessment with learners. He further argues that by engaging learners in the planning, they are also treated as adults and competent; opening a discussion with learners gives them a sense of belongingness. This conceptualization assumes that universities are responsible for assuring students are in comfortable but still challenging surroundings to achieve their learning results. The challenge may be provided by adding different learning designs to meet the various learning needs in the classroom and outside-classroom experiences, which adds to the university's engagement climate.

Student engagement is largely impacted by the university "climate" (Gunuc et al., 2022). As a "climate," here, I refer to the shared beliefs and value system that significantly depends on university leadership. Engaging students in an out-of-class activity profoundly depends on the university leadership's attitude, values, and visions, how much the "value of a student" is understood by the constituent parts of the university, and how much it is a part of the organizational culture and the value system of the institution. Carey (2013) emphasizes that along with the direct instruction in the class, student engagement in out-of-class activities contributes to their learning as well. Student engagement in a plethora of activities is likely to turn them into more thoughtful learners. Aside from this, such a "critical engagement" is essential for improving quality (Harvey & Newton, 2007, p. 232). "Student participation in decision-making plays a role in the creation of an atmosphere of openness and trust in universities, leading to a positive organizational climate" (Menon, 2005, p. 169). Love and Miller (2003), for example, indicate two rationales for students to be engaged in institutional governance: first, students have a right to be involved, and second, the research has demonstrated the positive correlation between student involvement in out-of-class activities and their learning and development. Students engaged in committees and teams to ensure quality are likely to enrich their learning experience and gain new insights into institutional governance. Such processes are likely to provide students with peculiarities of quality provision where students conceptualize the process better, and there is a likelihood that they become even more engaged in their studies. In this study, one of my basic assumptions is that there is a need for students to be considered as partners in the learning process, which will nurture them as more responsible parties for their own learning as well as enhance the quality of the studies at the university in general. Despite the fact that student engagement in out-of-class activities is being recognized as an essential component of quality education and a body of research contributed to the development of a concept, engaging students in quality assurance, let alone

in institutional governance, remains a formal act rather than a necessity (Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014; Stalmeijer *et al.,* 2016).

As Lizzio and Wilson (2009) indicate, student engagement is a strong factor defining the success of any given HEI as it positively correlates with student retention, the quality of the program, and institutional governance. Research shows the high impact that student engagement has on the quality of student learning and personal development (Carini et al., 2006; Coates, 2005; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Trowler & Trowler, 2010). However, during the university years, it is important for students to gain knowledge and skills to feel accomplished, and it is fundamental to their success. For many, the success factor will be gaining marketable skills to succeed in their personal and professional lives, which provides them with a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2017). It is important that universities, in this scenario, understand that student learning, gaining knowledge and the acquisition of marketable skills and success measured by retention, grades, GPA, or any other measurement should remain one of the ultimate goals. Although many have defined student engagement as the time and effort students devote to participating in activities leading to desired outcomes, this study assumes that both parties of the education process have responsibilities—students, as major stakeholders, are obliged to engage in purposeful learning activities, and universities are obliged to create the conditions essential for such engagement. Concerted efforts by students and institutions have a strong potential for transformational impact on student learning and becoming.

2.2. Contextual and Dynamic Nature of Student Engagement

The institutional context has an undisputable impact on student learning. Student engagement has been recognized as being dynamic and contextual (Kahu, 2013; Zepke, 2014). Multiple research results indicate that student engagement and student learning outcomes are highly correlated with institutional variables such as mission, structure, size, institutional governance and culture, leadership, selectivity, students living on campus, and emphasis on graduate education, as well as the amount of investment in institutional development (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Kinzie & Kuh, 2004; Kuh et al., 2008; Mayhew et al., 2016; McCormick et al., 2009; Pike et al., 2006, 2010). Student engagement is determined by the institutional variables being highly dependent on an "authentic partnership between students and their universities" (Carey, 2018, p. 12).

Engagement levels vary as institutional and national level policies differ. Another aspect of institutional variables impacting student engagement is the power dynamic, since it will define the way student engagement is shaped within an institution (Carey, 2018). A university's vision to entrust and empower students improves

their learning experiences and shapes the culture of engagement (Carey, 2018). This brings out the importance of student engagement set out in the institution's mission statement (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006, p.169). As they further argue, for institutions to be effective and have a consistency of purpose and direction, it is important to align their "espoused" and "enacted" missions. Further, they conclude that learning activities planned more comprehensively and strongly tied to a mission of student learning will lead institutions to be more successful. It is important that this vision also embraces the approach of being sensitive to social, economic, and cultural inequalities. As a result of students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement, they will have more ownership, commitment, and attachment to their studies (Bowden et al., 2021). Nevertheless, student engagement is more receptive and mutual when it is organized with a degree of flexibility (Carey, 2018), autonomy, and empowerment.

Universities, as places of new idea development and the formulation of new visions, provide learning and transformation opportunities for students, given that an engagement culture provides equal and equitable opportunities for everyone. Students with diverse cultural and academic backgrounds make different contributions to the learning process; thus, equal opportunities provided by the university will help to formulate fairness in student participation and contributions. Student engagement in learning is impacted by such institutional conditions as learning communities, student–faculty research, study abroad, and internships (Kinzie et al., 2004; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Mentorship and supportive classroom conditions, for example, are likely to contribute to student success, specifically from low-income and under-represented classes of society. Furthermore, student engagement improves subject knowledge, employability, and meta-cognitive skills development and positively impacts student attitudes toward lifelong learning (Coates, 2005; Tomlinson, 2017). It is important to create conditions for divergent needs and expectations for students to succeed in their learning, which is supported by numerous studies indicating that if students consider learning meaningful, they will work more and be engaged more deeply (Nygaard et al., 2013).

Although a body of research shows that student engagement positively correlates with grades, satisfaction, perceived learning outcomes, critical thinking, and students' professional and personal lives after graduation (Nelson Laird et al., 2014; Rocconi et al., 2020), there is an ongoing debate over the impact of student engagement on student outcomes and the underestimation of the necessary degree of institutional input (Baron & Corbin, 2012; Brint & Cantwell, 2014). Institutional investment in student support systems, recruitment, and professional development is likely to positively affect student learning and educational quality, celebrated with student satisfaction and improved institutional reputation in the longer run. Pike et al. (2011) concluded that investment in undergraduate education

is likely to impact student engagement in learning. For example, investment made to hire more academic staff, which advances access to academic advice and makes smaller classes affordable, will lead to better quality (Pike et al., 2006). Furthermore, Dahlvig et al. (2020) showed that investment in instruction and academic support is strongly correlated with retention and graduation rates. Some studies have found a positive relationship between institutional support and students' self-reported gains in learning or knowledge and persistence (Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006; Toutkoushian & Smart, 2001; Webber et al., 2009). However, considering financial limitations, HEIs are likely to face a challenge to have enough funding to support this expenditure, which might require attracting funds from alternative sources thorough planning and sometimes reallocation of resources.

Alternative sources of funding are likely to present a solution to improve the financial capacity of HE, enabling it to invest in instruction. One of the alternative sources, widespread in the US but less so in other Western countries, is alumni donations. Research has also shown that student engagement is positively correlated with the alumni's long-term commitment to their alma mater (Liang et al., 2022). Campus experiences students had during their studies impact alumni donations, affecting their long-term commitment to their alma mater (Drezner & Pizmony-Levy, 2020; Monks, 2003; Pedro et al., 2020). Moreover, student experiences related to academic and social interactions are interlinked with their sense of belonging to the university (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Wilson et al., 2015). Related to this, Cownie and Gallo (2021) indicate that student–faculty interactions serve as an impetus for being appreciative of one's alma mater and establishing alumni relations. Liang et al. (2022) indicated that student engagement, especially in extracurricular activities, positively impacts alumni giving. This strong interdependency can help overcome the financial barriers that HE around the world is facing, especially in emerging countries, and enable universities to actively seek alternative funding sources once set, planned, and invested properly.

Student engagement is dynamic and contextual; hence, it varies across institutions. Nevertheless, student engagement is "neither wholly flawed nor a panacea for the higher education system—it is something in between" (Eagle & Brennan, 2007, p. 56) until it is thoroughly contextualized, conceptualized, and implemented at national and institutional levels. Nonetheless, it is the institution that is responsible for creating conditions for better student learning (Krause & Coates, 2008; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

2.3. Student Engagement in Out-of-Class Activities

Numerous studies have identified student engagement as "a broad construct" that involves students' academic and non-academic experiences (Coates, 2007, p.

122). However, student engagement in the teaching and learning process is more widely discussed than student engagement in out-of-class activities. In the same vein, although student engagement has been considered mostly as engagement in academic learning happening in the classroom (Giang et al., 2022), student engagement in learning is not necessarily happening solely within the classroom (Kuh et al., 2007). Student engagement in out-of-class activities is potentially impacting student success, retention, and personal and professional development (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2012; Kuh, 2008, 2009; Miller et al., 2018; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pike et al., 2012).

Students learn better when they experience different ways of learning, for example, through interactions with peers (Coates, 2007). Chetty and Bhagwan (2023) argue that students engaged in volunteer activities become more socially responsive. The experiences students gain while at university, namely, working with new ideas, practicing communication, engaging with peers and scholars in civic activities, and in university governance, form a very important part of what they will take from university life (Coates, 2005). By providing in-class and out-of-class learning opportunities for students, they will be equipped with the necessary skills to succeed in their personal and professional lives. Moreover, students provided with out-of-class learning opportunities will socialize, which will enforce the creation of memories highly important for interactions between students and universities after students become alumni.

One of the most recently acknowledged out-of-class student engagements is in quality assurance (QA) processes, which have increased only after the reinforcement brought about by the Bologna process, especially in the post-Soviet area. Student engagement in QA processes has created tension over univocal acceptance by the academic community. The academic hegemony and iniquitous attitude toward student agency were the primary reasons for student engagement in QA processes being rather formal.

The importance of student engagement in QA is a relatively young phenomenon discussed in the literature, whereas quality, in general, has been the topic of literary discussion for many decades now. Harvey and Green (1993) offered a conceptualization of quality as "exception," "perfection," "fitness for purpose," "value for money," and "transformation quality." While quality discussions started many years ago (Harvey & Green, 1993), improvements in quality assurance processes in HE were slow up until the changes imposed by the Bologna process (Gvaramadze, 2008).

Some authors define quality assurance as compliance between requirements, standards, and achieved results (Borahan & Ziarati, 2002), whereas others see monitoring, assessing, and improving quality as consequent actions. Many definitions are based on managerialism (Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001), putting aside the concept of "quality" being identified as "transformative" by Harvey and Green

(1993). However, the "transformative" concept of quality, which requires higher education to enhance or empower student experiences, is the central concept of this study.

Students are likely to be involved in the QA process if they are knowledgeable and confident about the changes that will follow the process (Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014). Effective communication is fundamental in reassuring students to be engaged in co-creating (Bovill et al., 2016). To make sure that this communication process does not contribute to alienation, it is important to build this in the form of dialog, rather than one-way communication, at different levels: between students and university leadership, students and academic staff, and students and non-academic staff. Building a dialog at different levels is critical to meeting students' expectations and thus encouraging them to be engaged in QA processes. Universities should strive to engage students as primary stakeholders in the education process to contribute to improving the quality of teaching and learning processes.

2.4. Preconditions and Outcomes of Student Engagement

If a university envisions student engagement in QA as a necessity, it requires several preconditions. Students and staff working together help improve quality (Williams, 2016), which may improve the trust between students and academia (Gvaramadze, 2011). Due to the academic hegemony and power distance between academia and students, students may be considered less important or mature to contribute to quality improvements, yet these changes are meant to impact students. Consequently, students should be the most important part of the decision-making process and be involved in university change processes (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). For example, the Deming cycle, widely used in traditional quality assurance, consists of four repetitive steps—plan, do, check, and act. It is an iterative process that depends on systematic feedback collection (Deming, 1986; Kettunen, 2011), thus requiring student involvement at every stage, not only through the feedback surveys implemented during the checking phase. Student–university partnership will be shaped by the impact of the way students are involved.

Student–university partnerships can be built and become more trustworthy if universities envision students as potential partners and involve them in the QA process not as a requirement of the contemporary QA process but because they rely on them as partners (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Stalmeijer et al., 2016). Such an approach, working with students in partnership, will contribute to the "democratic-critical conception of learning that is participatory and dialogic" (Zepke, 2015, p. 1317). There is a need for universities to understand that to build this partnership, students have to perceive this process as fair, where their ideas are taken seriously, and their feedback makes a difference to the quality of education. Furthermore,

when students are invited as partners and are aware of the requirements, they are likely to take on more responsibility (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Stalmeijer et al., 2016). In contrast, when students are not envisioned and entrusted as equal partners by university leaders, this negatively impacts their motivation and embeds distrust in the system (Love & Miller, 2003).

Research indicates the importance of student–faculty interaction in the form of dialog in-class and out-of-class, which leads to improved student outcomes (Isaeva et al., 2020; Kuh & Hu 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). Additionally, faculty providing supportive and friendly relationships provides students with a feeling of support, which fosters a better understanding of the subject matter. The integration of students into social and academic communities as equal members is one of the first activities HEIs are expected to promote during the first year of student enrolment (Kahu, 2013; Zepke, 2018).

The outcomes of student engagement for HEI in regard to its reputation and ability to achieve its most critical and measurable goals are student learning, students collaboratively learning with each other and faculty members, and fast graduation (Bunce et al., 2016; Määttä & Uusiautti, 2016; Trowler, 2010). Student engagement remains an important element to improving the quality of education (Coates, 2015). Related to this, Kuh (2003) indicated that institutions able to create conditions to engage their students in academically purposeful activities can be considered of higher quality than other universities where students are less engaged. Consequently, providing student engagement opportunities improves well-being, satisfaction, behaviours, and civic-mindedness, as well as the development of students as academic community members (Ansala et al., 2015; Winstone et al., 2017), which are also factors contributing to the development of a stronger community (Chankseliani et al., 2021).

Theoretically, student engagement has been recognized as a "meta construct" (Fredricks et al., 2004), advancing students personally and professionally. It is a complex construct (Kahu, 2013; Lester, 2013), requiring investment to be made by students and institutions for student learning, outcomes, and institutional reputation (Trowler et al., 2021) and being both contextual and dynamic (Zepke, 2014). A body of research has identified it as contributing to educational quality to a great extent while remaining one of the most widely discussed topics in the HE research discourse for the last three decades due to its impact on student learning and achievement (Coates & McCormick, 2014).

3. THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aims to investigate student engagement with in-class and out-of-class experiences in post-Soviet countries, showcasing two countries—Azerbaijan and Estonia (Table 1). The task of the research arises from a lack of conceptualization of student engagement in the reform and development processes at post-Soviet universities, as explained in Section 1.2. As argued, there is an observable deficiency of any conceptual papers on the topic of student engagement in the area of reporting on the state of student learning and conditions created in the HEIs of these countries. Along with this, the small number and unsystematic character of the research conducted across the countries make this research necessary, having the potential to grow into a larger project. The research is planned to be implemented in three stages, looking at the dynamics of student engagement and responding to one overarching question: What is the state of student engagement with in-class and out-of-class experiences in the post-Soviet countries of Azerbaijan and Estonia?

First, Study I aims to look at student engagement experiences impacting students' perceived gains, success, and satisfaction and institutional factors impacting student engagement in academic learning in Azerbaijan. Study II will examine student engagement variations across the country and disciplines. Moreover, Study II will contribute to understanding student engagement problems by examining students' views. Study III aims to learn about student engagement experiences in the quality assurance process in the case of Estonia, which has reformed its education process in line with Bologna process requirements.

To respond to the main research question, the three independent studies ask the following questions:

Study I:

1. What are the specific engagement factors affecting student learning and success?
2. What are the institutional factors affecting student engagement in academic learning?

Study II:

1. To what extent do universities and disciplines in Azerbaijan present differences in the student engagement indicators identified in the NSSE?
2. How do students perceive the changes required to improve their experiences?

Study III:

1. What are students' experiences with the existing internal quality assurance process?
2. What are the preconditions for a dialog that improves student engagement in the quality assurance process?

Table 2. *Research Design*

	Study I	**Study II**	**Study III**
Aims	To explore how student engagement impacts student success and how institutional factors impact student engagement in Azerbaijani universities	To explore the variation in student engagement at different universities across Azerbaijan and inform policymakers and institutional leaders about student perceptions of ways to improve student engagement in learning.	To explore student engagement experiences in out-of-class activities
Main research questions	How is student engagement linked to study success, and how do institutional factors impact student engagement in Azerbaijani universities?	How does student engagement vary across universities and disciplines, and how do students see the way to improve student engagement?	How can student engagement in the quality assurance process be improved through dialog between the university and students?
Participants	266 students from five universities located in the capital city	433 students from eight universities across the country	27 students in one Estonian university
Data collection methods	Quantitative data from the NSSE questionnaire	Quantitative and qualitative data from the NSSE questionnaire	Focus group interviews Semi-structured individual interviews
Data analysis	Pearson correlation analysis Stepwise regression analysis	One-way ANOVA Content analysis	Content analysis
Publication	Isaeva, R., Ratinen, I., & Uusiautti, S. (2023). Understanding student success in higher education in Azerbaijan: The role of student engagement. *Studies in Higher Education*, *48*(12), 1918–1936. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2217208	Isaeva, R., Uusiautti, S., & Ratinen, I. (2024). Student Engagement Variations across Institutions and Disciplines: Findings from Azerbaijan. *International Journal of Educational Psychology*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.17583/ijep.13735	Isaeva, R., Eisenschmidt, E., Vanari, K., & Kumpas-Lenk, K. (2020). Students' views on dialogue: Improving student engagement in the quality assurance process. *Quality in Higher Education*, *26*(1), 80–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2020.1729307

4. METHODOLOGY

This chapter frames the research approach and methodological foundations of the study and further discusses how these foundations guided the research process. The chapter first outlines the philosophical foundations of the research, followed by a description of the research approach. Then, it discusses the context in which the research was conducted. Further, it provides a detailed description of the process and procedures in each of the sub-studies, namely, describing the data collection, data analysis, and the participants. Next it covers the reliability of the study and finally, ethical considerations and the researcher's position are described.

4.1. Epistemological and Ontological Foundations

The current research's epistemological and ontological foundations are guided by dialectical pluralism (DP) (Johnson, 2017). It is also based on the assumption that there is an ongoing debate over the paradigmatic stance of mixed research, where many doubt if one paradigm can suffice to uncover a complementary strength (Mertens, 2012). Dialectical pluralism has been recognized as a metaparadigm "concurrently and equally valuing multiple perspectives and paradigms" (Johnson, 2017 p. 159). DP has been developed as an extension of Greene's "dialectical stance" (Greene, 2007; Greene & Caracelli, 1997; Greene & Hall, 2010) with complimentary additions by Johnson (2017).

DP values the perspectives of different people contributing to the research, which was the case in this study where multiple researchers from different countries contributed with their ideas and thoughts, helping to create a larger sum. One of the main characteristics of DP and why it fits well into the assumptions of this study is that multiple paradigms can be used equally and concurrently, as this study is a combination of studies having equal status. The DP position accepts all other positions; it is encouraged to use mixed research to better understand the phenomenon studied (Johnson & Schoonenboom, 2016). DP accepts that there are multiple realities and multiple ways of conceptualizing reality (Johnson, 2017). Furthermore, it recognizes the significance of the researcher's values on the research process (Johnson & Stefurak, 2013), although it is important to keep a "reflective stance" to warrant the inferences so that the research is not merely a result of the researchers' biases (Greene & Hall, 2010).

Johnson (2017) explains that dialectically, dialogically, and hermeneutically, DP is distinct. Dialectical reasoning is based on the logic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The dialogical characteristics distinguishing it are equal dialog, discussion, and continuity. Hermeneutics comprises interpretations that are continual and built on past interpretations. As Johnson points out, it is intimidating to have a "singular unity" as a concept (Johnson, 2017, p. 160). This study, as depicted in Table 2, is based on three equal-status independent studies researching the same issue, implemented with different theoretical stances. The study brings in the findings from culturally different countries as one of the positive characteristics of the study and thereby creates added value.

Study I, as a quantitative study, is epistemologically guided by postpositivism. Postpositivism is deterministic in nature and assumes a cause–effect predisposition (Creswell, 2014). One of the uniting characteristics of postpositivism is statistical testing (Corman, 2004). This worldview has a tendency to reductionism, identifying cause and effect between variables embraced in the research questions, which has been the case in this study. The ontological dimension of the postpositivist is the belief that the nature of reality is constructed (Corman, 2004). Furthermore, he argues that when we theorize and reference, we see things to be real and not real depending on who we are and that there are things that we do not see. However, postpositivism also assumes that we need to develop ourselves to be able to discover what is unseen at the moment, which is conceptualized as a *transformational* feature of postpositivism (Corman, 2004). Study I conceptualized student engagement and introduced new findings as a way to improve teaching and learning in HE, which might serve as a transformation of the unseen (or ignored) into a new reality. At the same time, the study recognizes that there is a reality conceptualized differently by other stakeholders, such as institutional leaders; however, it does not change the reality students are facing. A more holistic approach—a combination of reality, knowledge, and context, as this study promotes—is necessary to have a full picture of what is really happening in a given context.

In Study II, epistemological guidance was based on pragmatism, which does not rely on one philosophical stance or reality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Pragmatism also envisages the free choice of methods, techniques, and procedures by the researcher (Hoshmand, 2003). It implies that the world is not in an unconditional unity that undermines the choice of one single method to collect and analyze the data (Creswell, 2014; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Pragmatism views knowledge as being constructed as well as based on the experiences we live. This is very evident in Study II, where I used quantitative and qualitative data, which I believed would provide a better answer to my research questions. Along with the figures, it was important to examine what students think about their learning experiences.

Finally, the last study, Study III, is epistemologically based on constructivism. As a qualitative study, it builds on the broad conversations/dialogs with the

participants to construct meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Moreover, it is important to grasp the full conceptualization of students' perspectives to complete them in a meaning-making process (Mertens, 2015; Schwandt, 2000). In constructivism, researchers are seen as instruments; therefore, they need to be aware of their values and how these values impact and shape meaning-making (Mertens, 2015). Multiple researchers in the study were utilized to interpret the meaning students were having about the reality of HE. In many ways, the research was shaped by the backgrounds of the researchers (Crotty, 1998), as stated by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p.16): "*researchers are embedded in communities, and they clearly have and are affected by their attitudes, values, and beliefs*."

Dialectical pluralism provided a greater capacity to investigate student engagement in a new context to its full potential due to its strength in encompassing different epistemologies present in student engagement research (Shannon-Baker, 2016).

4.2. Research Approach

The study employed the mixed-method approach (methods, data, and design) first to explore and understand how student engagement enhances student outcomes, how institutional factors impact student engagement, and how student engagement varies across institutions and disciplines in a contextually different country, and second to examine how students perceive student experiences could be improved and how their participation in QA could be facilitated by an institution. The research is a composite of three independent studies conducted to learn and explore the same phenomenon. The study was designed using a mixed-method approach to shed light on the research problems more broadly and holistically (Creswell & Creswell, 2005; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Although the mixed method is not new in the context of social sciences, there is an ongoing debate about the value of the method (Tashakkori et al., 2021). Mixed-method research (I use "*mixed research*," following Johnson, 2017) is a powerful method to build on and counterweigh the weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative research methods (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008). Mixed research goes beyond one-way and linear thinking. Quantitative and qualitative methods are equally essential, and often times in empirical research it makes more sense to use them together. The value of the mixed research for this study is grounded within the defined research question, which underlies exploring students' lived experiences, their dynamics, variations, and differences in a new context (Greene, 2008). The mixed research method provides better insight as quantitative data generates systemic tendencies, and qualitative data brings in the views of an individual student on learning experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2000). The context of this study requires "generality" and "particularity" that could be

only provided by the mixed research approach (Greene, 2008, p. 7). Furthermore, only a combination of methods could provide deep insight and rich data for such a meta-construct as student engagement, given that the study takes place in different educational contexts.

Through the quantitative data gathered among students, Study I explores student engagement in HE in Azerbaijan utilizing bivariate correlation and regression analysis. Furthermore, Study II, a mixed-method study, examines student engagement variations across the institutions and disciplines and enriches the knowledge with students' perceptions of improvements needed. In Study III, which involves the qualitative research method, I argue that building a dialog with students is essential to engaging students to continuously improve HE. Three sub-studies discover the answer to this central question with deliberately designed sub-questions. Ultimately, the study informs policymakers and institutions about the factors affecting student engagement in meaningful learning experiences.

4.3. The Contexts of Studies I–III

The post-Soviet area is an interesting and challenging area in which to conduct the research. When it comes to reporting a student's success in a formerly isolated, once one of the best in the world HE area, it encompasses an interesting synthesis of multiculturalism and multiple realities while being unified with socialist history. Since all these countries have culturally, historically, and geographically emerged differently, it adds value to multiculturalism, at the same time making single unity a complicated matter. Considering that the transition from socialism to capitalism was implemented rapidly, it brought major chaotic and unsystematic changes (Chankseliani, 2022; Grant-Friedman, 2014), and the education field was no exception. Even such features of socialism as redistribution and social justice were not considered as important while reconceptualizing such a transition. Thus, such a rapid and chaotic transformation into "capitalism" (with a very vague understanding of it) (Farazmand, 2003) eventually led to the establishment of tens of private HEIs in many of the republics, although few survived after decades when quality provisions were established in these countries (Isakhanli & Pashayeva, 2018).

4.3.1. Studies I and II: Eight Azerbaijani Universities

Studies I and II cover eight universities in the higher education (HE) system of the post-Soviet republic of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan is becoming a geostrategic regional powerhouse with a rapidly developing economy, while its education system is falling behind despite perpetual reforms bringing a few noteworthy changes, leaving the quality of education uncertain (Guliyev, 2016; *Isaeva & Aliyev, 2023*). In Azerbaijan,

universities rarely enjoy the academic freedom to design their curricula (Isakhanli & Pashayeva, 2018). Most importantly, public institutions and HEIs rarely have collaborative relationships.

HE in Azerbaijan is contextually different from many Western countries progressively emphasizing the importance of student engagement on a policy level and measuring it at the national level. The context is challenged by lengthy association with the Soviet legacy, which brought about major difficulties with resource inaccessibility, the quality of teaching, and support staff, as well as their readiness to conceptualize student engagement and the level of infrastructural development. There is no record of measuring student engagement at the national or institutional levels, and engaging students in decision-making is rare, which is associated with an educational culture relying on centralized decision-making, power distance, and academic hegemony. Along with the educational culture challenge, Azerbaijani students face challenges from the dominant national culture of having stronger ties with their families, which distinguishes them from their Western counterparts. In a collectivistic society, by which Azerbaijan is characterized, families enjoy more authority over the behavior of children, providing the latter with lesser autonomy in decision-making (Asgarova & Tsang, 2022; Rothon *et al.,* 2012; Schlee *et al.,* 2009). In collectivistic cultures, people tend to be more inclined to experience joy and satisfaction in interpersonal relationships (Triandis, 2000). Such a disposition stemming from cultural aspects makes the relationships complicated at different levels. For example, in most cases, universities do not have dormitories on campus because Azerbaijani students traditionally stay with families. These aspects may explain the reasons why students are not engaged in decision-making or collaborative learning to a larger extent.

Despite the criticism, there are certain changes the Azerbaijani HE system has achieved since the collapse of the Soviet Union. An interesting dynamic was gained in the beginning when an excessive number of newly established state and private HEIs were established in the country, diversifying the way those universities were providing quality teaching and learning as well as in management (Isakhanli & Pashayeva, 2018). Following the internal changes and improvements in the quality assurance process during the following years, the number of universities halved. Currently, 11 private and 40 public universities with more than 200,000 students qualify as HE for the mass stage, assuming Trow's massification stage division (Smolentseva et al., 2018; Trow, 1972), with a 36% enrolment rate in 2021. In comparison, the investment in education has significantly improved, reaching 4.3% of GDP in 2020 compared with 2.7% in 2019. It is worthwhile to mention that the Bologna process contributed to many changes related to quality assurance, internationalization, teaching and learning, and institutional governance in general, but nevertheless the effect was somewhat slow in light of the strong and long-lasting Soviet legacy. A series of policy-level documents, such as the State Strategy

for the Development of Education in the Republic of Azerbaijan approved by the President (2013), the National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2018), the Regulation of the Agency of Quality Assurance in Education (2019), and the Accreditation Rules for Educational Institutions, are significant benchmarks of the change process. Although some of these documents highlight the involvement of students in the quality assurance process, they largely overlook the necessity to define student engagement and set the standards for measuring it at the national level.

4.3.2. Study III: An Estonian University

The third sub-study looked into ways to improve student engagement in one Estonian university. This university has more than 8,000 students and is characterized by constantly monitoring its outcomes and implementing its internal self-evaluation through the four phases of the quality assurance cycle.

As a former Soviet country, Estonia, situated in northeastern Europe, has regained its economic power gradually, nowadays serving as a success story for many other former Soviet countries (Feldmann, 2006). Its success in education and its internationalization of HE, information technology, and digitalization are the results of political and economic will to achieve progress similar to neighbouring Western countries.

Estonian HE has gone through rapid changes since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, although academic liberation started quite early compared to other Soviet countries when, in 1989, Tartu State University adopted new by-laws allowing it to change its name to Tartu University and declared academic autonomy (Tomusk, 2001). One of the changes was the increasing number of HEIs established as a sign of transition from a planned economy to a market economy (Saar & Motus, 2013). The country quickly adopted the changes set out in the Bologna Declaration, which led to subsequent changes in the quality assurance process and improvements in the funding, structure, and dynamics of HE. The current number of HEIs in Estonia is 18, compared to the 7 it had during the Soviet era and 49 in 2002. Student enrolment has increased by 2.7 times from 1995 until 2009, with more than 44,000 current students. Another characteristic of Estonian HE that distinguishes it not only from post-Soviet countries but also from continental European countries is the absolute autonomy given to HEIs, in that the university is free to contract with professors and nominate full professors (Tomusk, 2001). The autonomy given to HEIs in Estonia is fundamental to the changes the system underwent after the collapse of the Soviet Union in terms of internationalization and quality provision. Internationalization has been strategically set as a goal for HEIs in Estonia more actively since 2020 (Tamtik & Kirss, 2016).

Culturally, Estonians are associated with being quiet, persevering, and individualistic (Boman, 2020; Rausing, 2004). Some scholars associate this

with Finnish *sisu* (Boman, 2020; Bruggemann & Kasekamp, 2008). Despite this peculiarity, the socialist concept is still present in the cultural identity of Estonia (Boman, 2020).

4.4. Data Collection Methods and Participants

Data collection for this research took place in two countries during the same year. From February through April 2018, qualitative data was collected through focus groups in Estonia. During April and May of the same year, the NSSE instrument was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data in Azerbaijan. During June and July 2018, data were collected using individual interviews. Finally, in September and October, more data were collected using the NSSE. Further details of the data collection are provided below.

4.4.1. Studies I and II: The NSSE survey

The first and second studies utilized the National Survey of Student Engagement (Appendix III) instrument licensed from Indiana University, USA, for data collection. The data were gathered from 433 students from eight universities in Azerbaijan in 2018. The survey collected information on the year of study, gender, age, major, and student status. The average age of the students was 21 years (M = 21.37, SD = 1.43). The gender distribution was 42% male and almost 58% female (M = 1.58, SD = .495). A total of 13% were junior, and 87% were senior students (M = 3.59, SD = 1.06). In terms of academic performance (out of 100), 57 students (13%) had a GPA below 70, 65 (15%) students reported having a GPA above 90, and the remaining majority, 311 students (72%), had a GPA between 71 and 90.

The NSSE was developed in 2000 with the aim of measuring how well universities designed their learning experiences for students to be engaged (Kuh, 2009). The updated 2013 instrument measures student engagement with ten engagement indicators (EIs), united under the four themes presented in Table 2. The NSSE questions, formulated clearly, concern regular and familiar activities in which students are involved at the university. The survey was conducted anonymously to avoid embarrassment and to prevent the respondents' privacy from being threatened or violated (Kuh et al., 2001).

Table 3. *NSSE engagement indicators*

THEMES	ENGAGEMENT INDICATORS
Academic Challenges	Higher Order Learning (HO) Reflective and Integrative Learning (RI) Learning Strategies (LS) Quantitative Reasoning (QR)
Learning with Peers	Collaborative Learning (CL) Discussions with Diverse Others (DD)
Experiences with Faculty	Student–Faculty Interactions (SF) Effective Teaching Practices (ET)
Campus Environment	Quality of Interactions (QI) Supportive Environment (SE)

The NSSE's main themes cover academic challenges, learning with peers, experiences with faculty, and campus environment, presented using precise and consistent language (Fosnacht & Gonyea, 2018). Moreover, the questions organized around each engagement indicator accurately assess the effectiveness of educational practices (McCormick et al., 2013).

The questionnaire contains questions about student engagement in various educationally purposeful activities, the challenge embedded in the curriculum, the university environment, and how the university promotes students' personal development (NSSE, 2022). The NSSE has been used in the United States, Canada, and other countries worldwide, and, more recently, Australia, New Zealand, the UK, China, and some other countries have developed their own national instruments to measure student engagement using NSSE. Moreover, the NSSE results are used by university administrators and faculty members for making significant decisions related to the effectiveness of educational practices provided on campuses (Fosnacht & Gonyea, 2018; McCormick et al., 2013; Pascarella et al., 2010).

Variables

The analysis in Studies I and II is based on the variables provided by the NSSE instrument. Ten EIs, grouped under the four themes, are addressed using different numbers of questions.

Academic Challenges

The **Higher-Order Learning** (HO) indicator is composed of four questions related to the way students apply, analyze, evaluate, and form facts, theories, ideas, experiences, and points of view and is rated on a four-point Likert scale (Very much = 4, Quite a bit = 3, Some = 2, Very little = 1).

The **Reflective and Integrative Learning** (RI) indicator is composed of six questions measuring how students combine ideas, connect their learning to societal problems, have diverse perspectives, try to understand someone else's ideas better, and have learned something that has changed their way of understanding, rated on a four-point Likert scale (Very often = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, Never = 1).

The **Learning Strategies** (LS) indicator contains three questions asking whether students identify key information, review their notes, and summarize what they have learned, rated on a four-point Likert scale (Very often = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, Never = 1).

The **Quantitative Reasoning** (QR) indicator has three questions related to the frequency with which students reach their calculations, learn about real-world issues, and assess other people's assumptions using numerical information and is rated on a four-point Likert scale (Very often = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, Never = 1).

Learning with Peers

The **Collaborative Learning** indicator (CL) asks four questions related to the frequency of help students offer to others, explain course material, prepare for exams by discussing or working through the course material, and work on course projects with others and is rated on a four-point Likert scale (Very often = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, Never = 1).

The **Discussions with Diverse Others** indicator (DD) asks four questions focusing on how often students have discussions with people of different races and ethnicities, economic backgrounds, religious beliefs, and political views and is rated on a four-point Likert scale (Very often = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, Never = 1).

Experiences with Faculty

The **Student–Faculty Interactions** indicator (SF) is composed of six questions asking how often students talk to and work with faculty members and discuss topics, ideas, concepts, and academic performance with them, rated on a four-point Likert scale (Very often = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, Never = 1).

The **Effective Teaching Practices** indicator (ET) asks six questions related to the extent to which students' instructors clearly explain the course goals, teach in an organized way, use examples and illustrations to explain difficult points, provide feedback on drafts, and provide prompt and detailed feedback on tests or completed assignments and is rated on a four-point Likert scale (Very much = 4, Quite a bit = 3, Some = 2, Very little = 1).

Campus Environment

The **Quality of Interaction** (QI) indicator asks five questions focusing on students' interactions with other students, academic advisors, faculty, student services, and administrative staff members, rated on a four-point Likert scale (Excellent = 4, Good = 3, Fair = 2, Poor = 1).

The **Supportive Environment** (SE) indicator asks eight questions related to how much students' institutions emphasize spending significant time studying, the provision of support to help students succeed academically, the use of learning support systems, encouraging contact between students from different backgrounds, providing opportunities to be involved socially, supporting their overall well-being, helping to manage non-academic responsibilities, and students attending campus activities and events that address important social, economic, or political issues, rated on a four-point Likert scale (Very much = 4, Quite a bit = 3, Some = 2, Very little = 1).

Dependent Variables – Student Outcomes

Study II used some of the variables from the NSSE identified as student outcomes, which were also determined as dependent variables.

GPA: The students self-reported their GPA on a scale of 1 to 100 in response to an open-ended question.

The Perceived Gains scale (PG) is based on ten student responses to the question, "How much has your educational experience at this institution contributed to the following: To your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the areas of writing and speaking clearly and effectively; thinking critically and analytically; analyzing numerical and statistical information; acquiring job-related knowledge and skills; working effectively with others; developing or clarifying a personal code of values and ethics; understanding people from other backgrounds; solving complex real-world problems; and being an informed and active citizen?"

Student Satisfaction (ST) was developed based on students' responses to the question, "How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?" rated on a four-point Likert scale (Excellent = 4, Good = 3, Fair = 2, Poor = 1).

Considering that I am a native Azerbaijani and fluent in English, I have translated the questionnaire into Azerbaijani with the support of a team of experts whom I have invited to examine the initial translation. My expertise in working and teaching in HE for more than 20 years and being knowledgeable about the way to present the data in Azerbaijani allowed me to do this with a high degree of accuracy. I also invited a team of experts from the Social and Educational Sciences and Humanities and the Graduate School to examine the translation for cultural and linguistic validation (Behr, 2017).

Students were approached using an official letter addressed to each participant university (Appendix II). Convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling

method, was used since the collection of the data was conducted among students available on the agreed date (Bornstein et al., 2013). Although the goal was to reach at least 80 respondents from each university, it was difficult to guess the number of actual students willing to participate. Despite controlling for sociodemographic variances being one of the disadvantages of convenience sampling, it was agreed to be appropriate for the purposes of this research since the universities were readily accessible to the researcher (Bornstein et al., 2013).

A response rate of more than 70% of the 640 questionnaires distributed equally among the eight universities was considered enough for analysis (Babbie, 2020). While entering the data, 27 entries were excluded in cases when students left most of the questions unanswered. In seven universities, students filled in questionnaires using hard copies, whereas in one case the questionnaires were responded to using an online version.

All questions were answered based on a four-point Likert scale except for questions on the quality of interactions (QI), where the responses were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (poor =1 to excellent = 7). Nevertheless, the responses were replaced with a scale ranging from 1 to 4 during the analysis. The data on student demographics covered questions such as GPA, desired highest education level, age, and gender. Before data collection, I asked each participant to sign an informed consent form to participate in the research voluntarily.

The second study was based on mixed method research (MMR) using the quantitative and qualitative data from the NSSE. The MMR was the most suitable to respond to the posed research questions and provided rich and multi-layered views from students as the main stakeholders of the education process (Creswell, 2015). The NSSE questionnaire, in addition to the multiple-choice questions, contained an extra open-ended (based on the choice of the researcher) question asking: What single change would most improve the educational experience at this institution?

4.4.2. Study III: Semi-structured Interviews

The purpose of Study III was to learn more about students' experiences in quality assurance, what problems they encountered, and what their perceptions were to improve the experience. Themed interviews for Study III took place in two stages: the first stage explored the experiences students had with the current quality assurance processes at the university, whereas the questions for the second stage covered topics related to university–student communication and dialog during the change process.

The first stage of the interviews explored the students' perceptions of the quality assurance of teaching and learning as the main stakeholders in the process. Hence, it was interesting to build linkages between the experiences students had with the teaching and learning process and the internal quality assurance process. Although the main interview question asked about the problems they encountered in the teaching and learning process throughout their studies, the questions were not

limited to only this one. Hence, they were asked questions concerning issues such as (1) the changes they wanted to implement at the university, (2) the main problems they experienced during their studies, (3) the problems students discuss among themselves, and (4) the initiatives they expect from the university.

Five focus group interviews with two to five students were conducted between February and April 2018. The study participants were 22 students aged 20–45, 6 males and 16 females. The students' study areas were as follows: arts (n = 3), humanities (n = 6), educational sciences (n = 5), natural sciences (n = 3), social sciences (n = 3), and IT (n = 2). Bachelor's level students (n = 13) outnumbered the master's level students (n = 9). The university Student Union (n = 9) was well represented, whereas international students were not involved in the first stage. Each focus group was conducted in 76 minutes on average.

The second stage of the data collection involved semi-structured individual interviews. The basic concern was to involve students in discussing the university–student dialog during the change process and ask questions (Appendix IV) including (1) How do the students participate in the change process? (2) In what ways does the university communicate with students? (3) How effective are the means of communication? and (4) If the change they are asking for is not taking place, what do they do?

The interviews involved five students and were carried out between June and July 2018. The interviews involved two males (n = 2) and three women (n = 3), as well as local (n = 3) and international students (n = 2) from different subject areas (three from educational sciences and two from multimedia sciences) to ensure the variability of the sample. The students represented different age groups (17–29) as well as different study levels (bachelor's and master's). The sample also included students with activist experience (n = 2), which contributed to the diversity of perspectives. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. When the data were transcribed, the students were coded to provide anonymity.

4.5. Data Analyses

4.5.1. Study I: Bivariate Correlation and Regression Analysis

The first study utilized bivariate correlation and regression analysis to look at institutional support variables contributing to student engagement and the linkages between student engagement and student outcomes such as perceived gains, student satisfaction, and GPA. Stepwise regression, which is powerful in selecting and revealing important independent variables to predict dependable variables, was chosen to best respond to this study's posed research questions (Fu-Hsiang & Hu, 2015). This method is convenient if the researcher wants to avoid collinearity and find the best set of independent variables to predict dependent variables using

forward selection and backward elimination (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2013). The analysis then looked at the correlation between the EIs and the regression analysis to examine the interdependency of GPA, perceived gains, student satisfaction, and student engagement. The statistical analyses in this study were generated using SPSS 28.0 (IBM Corp.).

Since the first question was designed to explore the interdependencies between the EIs and perceived gains, identified as learning outcomes, and success, identified by GPA and student satisfaction as a factor strongly related to students' attachment to their university, we utilized correlation and regression analyses to establish the interdependencies.

The second research question involved identifying the impact of institutional factors on student engagement. To respond to this, I built a stepwise regression between EIs with Higher order learning, Reflective and integrative learning, Learning strategies, and Quantitative reasoning as dependent variables and Collaborative learning, Discussions with diverse others, Student–faculty interactions, Effective teaching practices, and Supportive environment as independent institutional variables.

The first study based the construct validity analysis on assumptions built by Pike (2013), who referred to the construct validity framework of Messick (1989), arguing that the construct of NSSE does not allow to make factor analysis and generalizability over items. Furthermore, while a factor analysis helps in analyzing the interactions of a measure and external variables, it does not help in assessing "structural component validity," as argued by Pike (2013, p. 151).

4.5.2. Study II: One-Way ANOVA and Content Analysis

In Study II, I was interested in looking at differences in student engagement across universities and disciplines and what improvements universities need according to students. Separate one-way ANOVA was chosen to explore the differences across the universities and disciplines in 10 EIs of the NSSE. One-way ANOVA was premised to tell if the means across the universities and disciplines were statistically significantly different (Cohen et al., 2011). Next, post hoc tests were conducted to determine specific group differences in the ANOVA. Games Howell adjustment was chosen because the response rates across the universities and disciplines were varied (Field, 2005).

To respond to the third question of this study, the qualitative data were gathered through one open-ended question we asked during the survey. The data analysis was based on content analysis, which revealed students' perceptions of pitfalls in how universities organize student engagement in learning in response to a question asking one aspect that needed to change for their respective universities to improve student experiences.

Explicit coding rules were used to create fewer content categories (Mayring, 2014) using NVivo 8. First, I read the data several times to conceptualize and

highlight related, meaningful passages, and labeled them (Creswell, 2014). Second, to downsize the number of concepts, I combined the labels under the related categories. As a result, I had 11 inductive categories. Next, I grouped 11 categories under the four themes of the NSSE. As a last stage of the analysis, I integrated the quantitative and qualitative analysis, where variations in EIs across the universities and disciplines are explained along with the students' perceptions of the issues with learning experiences and ways to improve them.

4.5.3. Study III: Qualitative Content Analysis

The third study utilized content analysis to make deductions. To safeguard all valuable and meaningful student ideas, the data were transcribed in strict verbatim. Two of the researchers read the transcriptions several times before they started analyzing them through the lens of content analysis. The text was analyzed in response to the research questions and carefully revised within the process, leading to the formulation of the categories (Mayring, 2000). The researchers implemented open coding and experimented with categories and their properties. Constantly comparing the data generated groups and allowed them to be divided into categories (Ezzy, 2002; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The first stage of the analysis consisted of four phases; the researchers used a quality assurance cycle for analysis. First, the problems of quality assurance in the teaching and learning process addressed by the students were identified and agreed. Second, the identified problems were linked to the four phases of the quality assurance process—plan, do, check, and act. Third, the two researchers discussed and agreed on the codes. Finally, similar meanings were grouped and named.

The second stage of the data analysis involved the two researchers analyzing the data separately and inductively identifying codes about the student–university dialog. Systematic coding and classification were used as a basis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). When I started creating categories, they emerged from the codes bearing a similar meaning. For example, the category "*distributing information*" emerged as a result of systematically identifying and integrating codes conveying similar messages such as "*targeted communication*," "*mode of communication*," and "*trustworthiness of communication*." Similarly, when creating the category "*establishing a relationship*," codes such as "*trustful human interactive communication*," "*openness for dialog*," and "*respectful communication*" were integrated and later became subcategories. Next, the analysis involved the co-author discussing and agreeing on the codes. The discussions and agreement on the codes led to the following categories being identified as pre-conditions to improve a dialog for better student engagement: (1) distributing information, (2) establishing a relationship, (3) building a partnership, and (4) partnering for improvement.

4.6. Legitimation of Mixed Research

Mixed method research has a specific legitimation process that is different from that used with monomethod designs. Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006) identified nine typologies of mixed method legitimation types. However, I will be referring to the recent revision of Onwuegbuzie and Johnson's legitimation typology described in Tashakkori et al. (2021, p. 328). I provide an examination of the most important aspects for this particular research: emic-etic, weakness minimization, and political. However, there is a "package of validities" for each of the separate projects included in this study, which requires the implementation of multiple validities legitimation (Tashakkori et al., 2021, p. 329).

4.6.1. Emic-etic Legitimation

Emic-etic legitimation, also called inside–outside legitimation, is how well the researcher uses the insider's view and observer's views to describe and explain (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Emic is the point of view of the participant group, and etic is the viewpoint of the observer, who is an outsider to the group (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006; Pike, 1967). I started this research with my professional interest in improving student engagement in learning experiences. As an insider to the education system in Azerbaijan, working and teaching for more than 20 years, exposure to the international world, my educational background in economics and management, and education and training received abroad provided me with a broader perspective on the issues of the education system of post-Soviet countries. This perspective provides the ability to steer away from ethnocentrism and not compromise the research by "going native" (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). On the contrary, the duality of roles in the research, being insider and outsider, gives a perspective seeing the phenomenon under study from multiple perspectives. My current position as a PhD student allows me to understand students' positions and the issues they currently face. My involvement in multiple roles in HE in an emerging country allow me to claim that my educational and professional background increased the legitimacy of this study through my personal and professional development since I have experienced being both a student and a teacher in multiple universities and countries.

The acceptable etic viewpoint in this research was reached by collaboration on writing all three articles. Co-authors were able to provide outsider examination and critically evaluate the connections between the data and conclusions reached (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Moreover, all three articles underwent a peer review process, which allowed the insider–outsider legitimation of the study. Additionally, some parts of the data analysis for Study II were presented in the 2nd Paris Conference on Education (PCE2023), June 16–19, 2023, with the title "Does Student Learning Depend on the Teacher's Perception of How Quality Teaching

Relates to Student Learning? Insight From Azerbaijan" for peer feedback as a part of the outsider legitimation strategy.

4.6.2. Weakness Minimization Legitimation

Mixed method research is proclaimed as the third methodological movement (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003), providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem rather than a standalone quantitative or qualitative method (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Thus, mixed research is one of the best ways to reach weakness minimization legitimation because there is the potential to compensate for the weaknesses of one method with the strength of another (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Table 4 was developed to illustrate this potential.

The data for this study were gathered using a survey with multiple-choice and open-ended questions, interviews, and focus groups. The survey is licensed by Indiana University, USA and is used by multiple countries to measure student engagement at the undergraduate level. One of the strengths of using a survey, which provides quantitative and qualitative data, is that "each validates the other" (Arnon & Reichel, 2009, p. 193). Although one of the weaknesses of surveys has been recognized as providing socially desirable answers (Greene, 2007), gathering data with one single instrument helps to reduce biases. In many ways, surveys are convenient to conduct as they are easy to implement, have a higher speed of return, and are cost-effective (Drew et al., 2008).

Interviews, on the other hand, are able to provide a platform for respondents to express themselves freely. The interviewer can ask a variety of questions, including open-ended questions in an attempt to clarify any issues that are not clear. There is a potential that the interviewer will have an influence over the dynamics of interview settings; however, they allow for greater depth in comparison to other methods (Cohen et al., 2011). To achieve this, interaction with participants should also be based on a dialog and conversation rather than a short question-and-answer session. Such an approach invites participants to engage and thus become more motivated to share; in this sense, interviews have strengths over questionnaires (Cohen et al., 2011; Oppenheim, 1992).

Focus groups are a type of interview focused more on the interactions within the group of participants rather than between the researcher and the interviewee (Gibbs, 1997; Morgan, 1988). Another feature that distinguishes the focus group is that it is an effective method to contact multiple respondents at a time, which generates a collective view of the issue that is hard to get through other methods of data gathering (Hyden & Bulow, 2003). One aspect that makes its position weaker than that of the individual interview is that it generates ideas slowly, sometimes due to interaction and coordination issues (Acocella, 2012).

The statistical and content analysis implemented in this study are evaluated for their strengths and weaknesses. Descriptive, correlation, and regression analysis

in Study I provided a clear picture of the relationships between variables and the specific factors impacting the dependent variables.

The one-way ANOVA analysis conducted in Study II concentrated only on the differences across the universities. Nevertheless, a post hoc test was conducted to find exactly where those differences are. A content analysis was conducted in Study II and helped to achieve a more holistic perspective on the state of student experiences would be possible solely by quantitative analysis. Although it is mechanical and time-consuming, its objectivity is provided by the involvement of several coders and a thoroughly documented process.

Meta-inferences in this study also utilized content analysis, which worked best to illustrate similarities, differences, and key elements.

Table 4. *Strengths and weaknesses of the data collection methods and analysis used*

DATA COLLECTION			
DATA	**SOURCES**	**STRENGTHS**	**WEAKNESSES**
Quantitative	NSSE	+ Reduces biases + Easily quantified + Generalization can be reached + Cost effective + Provides anonymity + Rapid returns + Easy to implement	- Missing data - Socially desirable response - Low response rate
Qualitative	NSSE	+ Asks for opinions on the issue + Able to validate the quantitative part + Respondents own phrases	- Depends on the writing ability of the respondents
Qualitative	Interviews	+ Allows to utilize different formats and length of questions + Allows to clarify + Higher response rate + Yielding collective view	- Low anonymity jeopardizes the sincerity - Socially desirable biases - Labor intensive
Qualitative	Focus groups	+ One time contact with multiple respondents + Quick to gather and low cost + Dynamic conversation among multiple participants enriches quality and quantity	- Moderator biases
DATA ANALYSIS			
ANALYSIS		**STRENGTHS**	**WEAKNESSES**
Cronbach's Alpha		+ Provides basis for internal consistency	- Not considering the number of items might lead to false interpretation
Pearson Correlation		+Shows direction and strength of a linear relationship	- Decreases if there is homogeneity of the sample
Stepwise Regression		+ Can avoid collinearity + Can find the best combination of IV predicting DVs	- Some variables in the model may lose their predictive ability
One-way ANOVA		+ Good to compare two or more group means	
Post Hoc Test		+ Good to check means varying significantly	
Content Analysis		+ Offers a close reading of content + Rearticulates the text critically	- Subjectivity - Time consuming

4.6.3. Political Legitimation

Yet another step in the validation of the mixed method, as per Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009), is *political legitimation*. This assumes identifying beneficiaries, their interests and needs, along with the ways their needs are served (Greene, 2006). In Section 6.3, I have identified theoretical and practical implications that assume the theoretical and practical contributions the study makes and the value of the findings

for policymakers and institutional leaders to improve the situation. Moreover, this study aimed to emphasize the importance of student feedback through surveys or other means, as well as students as major stakeholders to be informed and engaged in current and/or forthcoming changes. By identifying the stakeholders of the study and elaborating on the value of the findings for them, I argue that *action validity*—if the findings are used by decision-makers and policymakers—is provided (Johnson & Christensen, 2020; Kvale, 1995). Additionally, open access to the publications of this study provides a greater opportunity for those stakeholders to use the material as evidence. Moreover, my role as an ERASMUS+ Higher Education Reform Expert for Azerbaijan and participating in a network of educators from former Soviet countries allows me to enhance my position of finding a political voice to advocate for the implications (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009).

4.6.4. Multiple Validities Legitimation

Multiple validities legitimation entails that each methodology should have its own validity, based on Onwuegbuzie & Johnson (2006). Based on this assumption, the methodology utilized in each separate study is evaluated using the applicable validity concept.

Validities and Reliability of the Quantitative Research

The validities and reliability of the quantitative portion of this study are evaluated on the basis of the approach used by Yin (2003). Construct validity, according to Yin (2003, p. 34), is "establishing correct operational measures for the concept being measured." Study I and Study II used the same instrument to measure student engagement. The instrument has been in use since 2000, and various studies have demonstrated that the NSSE instrument is a valid and reliable tool to measure what it has been constructed to measure (Pike, 2013). Construct validity is suggested to be addressed by convergent and discriminant techniques (Cohen et al., 2011). Convergent validity is when two or more components of the construct are demonstrated to be related, and this was demonstrated by the correlation analysis conducted within Study I, where all the components of the instrument exhibited low to moderate correlation. The study also tested how various student engagement indicators are related to different learning outcomes, such as perceived learning outcomes (Zilvinskis et al., 2015). More specifically, the study found that engagement indicators are differentially associated with self-reported outcomes; for example, GPA had a stronger association with the quality of interactions and learning strategies, whereas perceived learning outcomes were associated with the support environment and higher-order learning. Moreover, when the data were tested for analysis of variance within Study II, this demonstrated significant differences across the institutions as a test for discriminant validity. Mixed methods research is one way of addressing convergent and discriminant validity effectively, as

demonstrated in this study; data gathered quantitatively and qualitatively support each other (Cohen et al., 2011).

Internal validity is defined as "establishing a causal relationship whereby certain conditions are shown to lead to other conditions" (Yin, 2003, p. 36). Yin argues that internal validity is not a concern of exploratory studies. However, there is a consistency of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data in this study. The following techniques were used to overcome the threats of internal reliability: low inference descriptors, multiple researchers, and peer examination.

External validity is related to a circumstance when the findings from the study can be generalized. This study makes generalizations about the HE in post-Soviet countries, which are facing similar issues in teaching and learning, although economically, politically, and socially, each of the 15 republics belongs to different categories. This study brings together the data from two countries—Estonia and Azerbaijan—that belong to different global income groups, but there is a more comparable pace when it comes to Human Development Index indicators (Chankseliani, 2022). Student learning in these countries, at least countries grouped as authoritarian and hybrid regimes, as they count for the majority of these countries (11), is constrained by teacher-centeredness, weak teacher–student relationships, and many other causes discussed in this study. Moreover, the study used a survey that measures student engagement in the United States and other countries, asking questions related to teaching and learning experiences that are universal.

Reliability as internal consistency, specifically the alpha coefficient of reliability to see the inter-item correlations, was conducted (Cohen et al., 2011). This measure allowed to check the internal consistency among the items of the NSSE construct. Multiple studies have also demonstrated that the instrument was built to generate data on the status of student engagement organized by the universities, thus being suitable for analyzing the universities rather than students (McCormick & McClenney, 2012; Pike, 2013). Based on this assumption, the analysis of Study II is based on its generalizability over universities as a unit of analysis.

Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of the construct in the study. A construct was reliable in cases where an alpha (α) value was greater than 0.70 (Hair et al., 2013). The reliability analysis included the NSSE data from eight universities in Azerbaijan to diagnose the instrument's reliability. First, EI scale scores for samples of 25, 50, 100, 200, and 433 sequentially selected students were selected to utilize a Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis, which showed that the scale's reliability did not change as the sample size altered. Second, it has been noticed that some EIs such as Learning Strategies, Quantitative Reasoning, Student–Faculty Interactions, Quality of Interactions, and Supportive Environment yielded similar results in different cases. Finally, when a randomly selected student sample was analyzed for reliability, it demonstrated that only the Quality of Interactions and Supportive Environment EIs improved as the number of students changed in the sample.

Nevertheless, when the reliability analysis was performed based on the institutions, it demonstrated that only data from two universities generated a high-level α coefficient for almost all indicators. One possible reason to explain the relatively low internal consistency could be attributed to the small number of items each scale has (McCormick et al., 2013). The basic deduction here was that α improved across the universities rather than across various samples. The analysis also revealed significant differences in α coefficients generated by urban and regional universities. It revealed that the scales generated by urban universities were more reliable based on the alpha coefficients that exceeded the accepted cut-off scores ($\alpha > 0.6$). The alpha reliability criterion was set as good if it met $0.9 \leq \alpha < 0.8$, and acceptable if it met $0.8 \leq \alpha < 0.65$ (Nunnally & Bernstein 1994; Vaske et al., 2017). Urban universities with 266 students demonstrated relatively stronger internal consistency.

Validities and Reliability of the Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative data for this study was derived from the qualitative part of the NSSE and interviews and focus groups. The assessment of the reliability of the qualitative part of the study is based on Guba's (1981) construct discussed in Mertens (2010), specifically *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*.

Credibility or internal validity is one of the criteria to confirm that the study measures what it is intended to measure (Shenton, 2004). According to Mertens (2010, p. 256), as she discusses Lincoln and Guba (1985), *prolonged and persistent engagement* provisions of credibility entail that a researcher is deeply and closely involved in the "community of interest." This study aimed to explore the state of student engagement with in-class and out-of-class activities in post-Soviet countries. Although the data collection methods used in this study do not assume prolonged observation of the phenomenon, as an insider (a HE teacher with more than 20 years of experience), I have *prolonged* and *persistent* observation of the transition in the post-Soviet countries. In Study II, I was interested in learning what kind of specific changes students anticipate from their universities to improve their learning experiences in general, and in Study III, I was interested in learning about specific out-of-class activities among students. When it comes to *peer debriefing*, all articles included in this study were co-authored, which means that plans, strategies, findings, and conclusions in each of those cases were discussed and agreed upon with peers. Triangulation of methods used in this study, such as open-ended questions in the survey, focus groups, and interviews, helped to achieve consistency. Additionally, multiple researchers involved in the study, multiple methods of data collection, and multiple theoretical analyses improve the validity of the claims made in this study (Freeman et al., 2007).

Transferability, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), provides such a detailed description of similarities and differences in the research context that it becomes easy for a reader to relate them to their own context. Transferability is provisioned

through *thick descriptions* and *multiple cases (*Mertens, 2010*)*. In this study, a detailed description of time, place, context, and culture is provided partially in the Introduction and more thoroughly in the Methodology under the context of the study in Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2, which also serve as *multiple cases*. Presenting multiple cases is likely to improve the external validity of the results (Yin, 2009).

Dependability, otherwise called *reliability*, is equal to the process of examining the quality and relevance of the study process, which is the subject of Section 4.5 of this chapter.

Conformability is provided by the condition when the "researcher's judgement is minimized" (Mertens, 2010, p. 260). As described in the triangulation under the *credibility* criteria of this section, a dependability audit was performed with both studies when the peer authors of the two articles involving qualitative data and analysis reviewed and confirmed the findings.

Validities for Meta-inference

Meta-inference is the interpretation drawn from the integration of the conclusions of separate individual projects of the study (Tashakkori et al., 2021). Based on the assumption made by Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006), who argue to question the extent to which the quality of meta-inference (the whole) is greater than the sum of separate inferences of individual articles (parts), this study presents the greater sum of the conclusions drawn as a content analysis of the conclusions of each study. To test the validity of the meta-inference, Tashakkori et al.'s (2021, p. 323) approach to "assessing and maximizing interpretive rigor" of mixed studies, specifically, interpretive consistency, theoretical consistency, interpretive agreement, interpretive distinctiveness, integrative efficacy, and interpretive correspondence, was utilized.

Interpretive consistency asks two main questions of if the inferences made are closely related to the data analysis and if "different inferences made on the same set of results support each other" (Tashakkori et al., 2021, p. 323). Inferences made in separate articles as well as in the meta-inference are highly related to the data analysis. Moreover, only findings with significant relationships were reported.

Theoretical consistency checks if the conclusions are in line with the contemporary theories and empirical conclusions made by other researchers. Each article, as well as the meta-inference, discusses the consistency of the findings with theories and demonstrates the relations with the findings of other researchers.

Interpretive agreement requires two questions to be answered: What is the likelihood that another researcher comes to the same conclusion given the same findings? Are the conclusions made based on the participants' constructions? The results of each study are peer reviewed and developed jointly with multiple scholars. Each of the articles in this study is peer reviewed, and direct quotations from participants are used in the qualitative portion of the research.

For *interpretive distinctiveness*, Tashakkori et al. (2021, p. 322) ask if "each inference distinctively more credible than other possible conclusions that might be made based on the same results." Each of the studies involved in this research investigates different aspects of the same phenomenon, where peer debriefing was used to reach the agreed conclusions. However, concluded together they make a greater whole.

Integrative efficacy checks whether the conclusions made in each separate strand are synthesized, contributing to a theoretically dependable meta-inference. This study has generated consolidated and meaningful conclusions based on the inferences of each separate study, while the findings of each study are presented separately. Such an integration presents a richer understanding of the phenomenon. In the meta-inference, I demonstrate how well the findings are linked to the theory, contrasted and compared with the findings of other studies.

Interpretive correspondence is concerned with the extent to which meta-inferences meet the purposes of mixed-method research. The purpose of using mixed methods was to incorporate the findings of the different components to reach a fuller picture to complement one finding with another. The study clearly elaborated on the findings from each separate study in a complimentary way, constructing and complementing one finding with another, which provides *interpretive transparency* (O'Cathain et al., 2010).

4.7. Ethical Considerations and Researcher's Position

Considering that this research has been implemented in several institutions from different countries, the ethical concerns of subsequent institutions were considered. When I started this research in 2017, I decided to use an existing tool for gathering the data. Consequently, I received agreement from the committee at the university and signed a license agreement requiring the signature of my supervisor and the committee member along with me.

My position as a researcher harmonize with the philosophy behind this research, which is dialectical pluralism. To gain insight into any enquiry, one must realize the importance of a discourse through which we engage in a dialog to better conceptualize the lived experiences (Mezirow, 2012). DP and transformative learning theory, in this sense, are two matching approaches for going beyond self-reflexivity and being able to listen to multiple perspectives. For me, knowledge creation is a participatory act, a democratic process representing the perspectives, ideas, thoughts, and feelings of many (Johnson, 2017). Student engagement itself has a democratic foundation. It necessitates students to be in dialectical and dialogical interactions not only with the material (spending time and effort to learn new material and build reflections) but with others (engaging with students, teachers, and staff). In light

of the multiplicities of reality (my internal and the external), it was interesting for me to see how two education systems, one with a low understanding and practice of democracy (Azerbaijan) and another one with a relatively higher practice of democracy (Estonia), are experiencing student engagement, which requires new, transformed *habits of mind* of leadership, academic, and non-academic staff.

My interest in this research came from my own background of working for a HEI in Azerbaijan for more than 20 years as a teacher and in different leadership positions. The duality of professional roles, working with international projects for many consecutive years and teaching various leadership subjects, provided a rich background to see the deficiencies and prospects from different angles. Such exposure to a HEI allowed me to critically evaluate the quality provisioned by many HEIs where the student-centeredness, student agency, and conditions created for student learning were highly undervalued, whereas these aspects of the teaching and learning process have been promoted by the Bologna process for many years.

Considering so many encountered problems, awareness of the student engagement phenomenon made me think of exploring student engagement in contextually different countries with a Soviet legacy. It was interesting for me to look at how, statistically, this would emerge, showing significant variations in conditions created across the universities, since I was teaching and working for a university varying from the rest in leadership, international exposure, number of international students and teachers, and the languages of instruction. Therefore, utilizing the quantitative method was important to explore specific elements of student engagement that were impacting student learning and success. Because student engagement is recognized as a meta-construct consisting of psychological, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions, it was interesting to learn what students perceive, think, and feel about their experiences in out-of-class engagement, I also designed a qualitative study.

When I started gathering the data, I received consent from the universities to conduct a questionnaire within their premises, and I signed a consent with every single participant of the research. To assure the confidentiality of each university and participant, codes were given to each of them. No extra information (which might help to identity an individual) on the participants was collected to avoid harm to any of the participants. Although the data contains some sensitive information that might help to identify the university, I withhold that information so as not to cause harm (Creswell, 2014). While reporting the results, I was deliberate with the findings and reported them as they appeared, even if the analysis brought up a negative result, to avoid overly positive tendencies in the research report (Creswell, 2014).

Yet another issue with the ethics in student engagement research relates to the individual researcher's positionality. Positionality has been identified as the values and beliefs of the researcher, which sometimes misleads them in designing the research, ignoring some other alternative ways of conducting it (Hammersley, 2007;

Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017). Nevertheless, my longevity of years working in HE and my exposure to an international HE arena helps to overcome this ethical issue of "insiderism" with strongly developed strategy-driven abilities to maintain in-depth knowledge of local and international regulatory information on academic teaching and research.

Considering all the above-mentioned ethical considerations, this study was designed with a multi-method approach conducted in multiple realities controlled by multiple researchers to gain the trustworthiness of the data gathered from students and promote their voices to achieve democratic goals respecting learners' rights.

5. FINDINGS

The chapter on findings is divided into seven subsections organized around the responses to the research questions. First, the chapter discusses how student learning and success are impacted by student engagement by showing the associations between different engagement indicators, elaborating on the deficiencies in learning happening with peers and demonstrating what engagement indicators are the best predictors of student outcomes. Second, the chapter uncovers the institutional factors impacting academic learning. Third, it discusses how student engagement varies across the country. Fourth, it sheds light on student engagement variation between the disciplines. Fifth, it presents students' views on possibilities for improving student engagement. Sixth, the chapter discusses problems students identified with being engaged in QA. Finally, the chapter completes with discussions on how to improve student–university dialog and partnership by creating preconditions.

5.1. Student Learning and Success as Predicted by Student Engagement

In the first study, the analysis was carried out in different stages: at the first stage, it was important to look at specific engagement factors affecting student learning and success through correlation analysis and stepwise regression analysis. The analysis compared the degree and patterns of correlation and regression between the 10 EIs and student success identified as GPA, perceived gains, and student satisfaction.

Disagreements with Collaborative Learning

The analysis revealed that there is a highly significant correlation between the indicators of the Academic Challenge theme identified in the NSSE. For example, higher order learning has a significant correlation with reflective integrative learning ($r(264) = .203$, $p < .001$), learning strategies ($r(264) = .352$, $p < .001$), and quantitative reasoning ($r(264) = .205$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, higher order learning has a significant correlation with the indicators of Experience with the Faculty theme: student–faculty interactions ($r(264) = .263$, $p < .001$) and effective teaching practices ($r(264) = .252$, $p < .001$). In contrast, higher-order learning showed reverse or no association with the indicators of the Learning with Peers theme of discussions with diverse others and no correlation with collaborative learning. When it comes to the association of higher-order learning with the Campus

Environment, it shows no correlation with the quality of interaction and a positive correlation with the supportive environment at a very significant level ($r(264) = .214, p < .001$). Reflective and integrative learning show a very significant level of correlation with almost all EIs except with effective teaching practices or perceived gains. The associations are comparatively low but statistically significant except in the cases of learning strategies and quantitative reasoning ($r(264) = .413, p < .001$) and reflective and integrative learning and student–faculty interactions ($r(264) = .427, p < .001$), which demonstrate very significant level correlations.

Supportive environment demonstrated a significant correlation with all other EIs. In contrast, collaborative learning had no correlation with any other indicator except supportive environment ($r(264) = .162, p < .001$) and student–faculty interactions ($r(264) = .176, p < .001$) and a negative correlation with GPA ($r(264) = -.125, p < .005$) at a significant level.

When it comes to student learning and success, perceived gains have a very significant level association with all EIs and with GPA except with learning with peers; namely, it has no association with collaborative learning and discussions with diverse others. Furthermore, it has no association with reflective and integrative learning. GPA, as an indicator of student success, has no association with higher-order learning, discussions with diverse others, or effective teaching practices. As anticipated, student satisfaction demonstrated a correlation with almost all EIs except collaborative learning.

Best Predictors of Student Success

Student success has been identified by GPA, perceived gains, and student satisfaction in this study, and the analysis through stepwise regression analysis provided the best predictors of each success indicator.

When investigating the best predictors of the GPA through the stepwise regression, the quality of interactions ($R^2 = .107$) ($\beta = .24, t = 4.76, p < .001$) was found to be the best predictor of self-reported GPA. This provides an assumption that students who had assessed their interactions with their professors, faculty, student services, and other administrative staff achieved higher grades. The model also predicted that collaborative learning ($\beta = -.13, t = -2.23, p < .026$) has a negative impact on GPA, meaning that students considered the contribution of their fellow students insignificant and preferred to study individually.

Perceived gains were explained by a supportive environment and higher-order learning ($R^2 = .157$). Supportive environment ($\beta = .323, t = 6.31, p < .001$), specifically, was the best predictor of students' writing and speaking effectively, thinking critically, analyzing data, and understanding and supporting others. The result shows that the supportive environment for student learning and mastery of skills remains very significant. Students considered being involved socially, attending campus events, and using support services as important contributors to their ability

to write and speak effectively, as well as their ability to think critically and analyze numerical and statistical information.

With regards to student satisfaction (R^2 = .288), the results indicated that a supportive environment is also a good predictor of student satisfaction (β = .269, t = 7.67, p < .001). Nevertheless, student satisfaction is also explained by the quality of interactions (β = .241, t = 4.87, p < .001) and learning strategies (β = .231, t = 4.12, p < .001). Therefore, students engaging in quality interaction, working hard after classes, reviewing their notes, working on their assignments, and summarizing what they have learned in courses experience more satisfaction with their universities.

5.2. Institutional Factors Impacting Student Academic Learning

Study I further explored institutional factors affecting student engagement in academic learning. Student–faculty interactions, effective teaching practices, discussions with diverse others, collaborative learning, quality of interactions, and supportive environment were identified as institutional factors, whereas the Academic Challenge indicators (HO, RI, LS, and QR) were identified as student engagement factors in academic learning. Subsequently, the most solid models generated for each indicator are discussed.

Student–faculty interactions (β = .227, t = 4.43, p < .001) and effective teaching practices (β = .213, t = 3.60, p < .001) predicted approximately 11% of higher-order learning (R^2 = .107). The model demonstrated that students analyze the data, apply them to various situations, evaluate divergent views, and form original ideas more effectively if they experience positive student–faculty interactions and effective teaching practices.

When it comes to reflective integrative learning (R^2 = .192), the results show that students tend to learn in a reflective and integrative way if they experience positive student–faculty interactions (β = .328, t = 7.66, p < .001) and a supportive environment (β = .136, t = 2.32, p < .021).

With regard to learning strategies, Model 2 shows (R^2 = .141) that it is predicted by the supportive environment (β = .356, t = 6.19, p < .001) and student–faculty interactions (β = .153, t = 2.53, p < .001). This result shows that a supportive environment and student–faculty interactions formulate and improve students' learning abilities.

Finally, quantitative reasoning (R^2 = .254) shows that it is predicted by student–faculty interactions (β = .245, t = 6.93, p < .001), a supportive environment (β = .238, t = 4.83, p < .001), and discussions with diverse others (β = .185, t = 3.40, p < .001). Hence, to make conclusions, students tend to engage with statistical and numerical information. Above all, student–faculty interactions, discussions with diverse others, and a supportive environment associated with academic support

and participation in other services and activities organized at the university are contributors to the quantitative reasoning skills that students use. Surprisingly, though, effective teaching practices, when teachers organize and explain clearly, use illustrative examples, and use formative and informative feedback, had a low effect on students' quantitative reasoning (< .041).

5.3. Student Engagement Variations Across Institutions

With Study II, one of the purposes was to analyze student engagement variations across the universities. One-way ANOVA conducted with each NSSE indicator separately showed significant differences among 9 out of 10 student engagement indicators. Four NSSE themes—*academic challenge*, *learning with peers*, *experience with faculty*, and *campus environment*—laid the foundation for the presentation of the analysis.

Analysis of the academic challenge embedded in the curriculum gave ground to assume that it is organized relatively weaker in one university in comparison to others, provided that the curriculum is centrally provided. For example, tasks requiring students to analyze, evaluate, and apply information across universities is organized weaker at U2, a mid-size urban university, than in U1, a small urban university (mean difference = - .38, p = .05); U5, a large urban university (mean difference = 39, p < .05); U6, the large regional university (mean difference = 37, p < .05); and U8, the mid-size regional university (mean difference = 36, p < .05). Furthermore, U2 performed again weaker in organizing learning strategies, it is weaker than U6 large regional university (mean difference = 44, p < .05) and U8 mid-size regional university (mean difference = 52, p < .01). Although reflective and integrative learning showed no differences across the universities, quantitative reasoning, asking students to process the information for making conclusions and judgments, demonstrated a significant difference across the universities: $F(7, 425) = 5.29, p < .001, \eta^2 = .080$, with a medium effect size.

Learning with peers assumes learning in collaboration and discussion with diverse others. Collaborative learning analysis with the post hoc test demonstrated that two universities in the capital city outperform other universities in the capital as well as in the regions. Despite the fact that U2, a mid-size university, was the weakest in providing academic challenge, it outperforms—together with U1, a small-size urban university—universities U3, U5, U6, and U7 in collaborative learning. Thus, U2 outperforms U3 (mean difference = .53, p < .05); U5 (mean difference = .51, p < .01); U6, a large regional university (mean difference =.34, p < .005); and U7, a mid-size regional university (mean difference = .50, p < .001). Nevertheless, one mid-size regional university also generated a significant difference from another regional university of the same size in how students help each other by explaining

materials, preparing for exams, and seeking help to understand the material, where U7 is weaker than U8 (mean difference = - .25, $p < .05$).

In experiences with faculty, students have exposure to student–faculty interactions and effective teaching practices. Student–faculty interactions demonstrated a significant difference across the universities: $F\ (7, 425) = 4.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .065$, with a medium effect size. The post hoc test of the effective teaching practices demonstrated that there is only one difference generated between U7, a mid-size regional university, and U2, a mid-size urban university (mean difference = .33, $p < .05$). This means that teachers clearly explain the materials, use visual aids, and deliver feedback effectively at the mid-size regional university.

Campus environment implies the quality of interactions and a supportive environment. U2, a mid-size urban university, again demonstrated a weaker position in terms of how students marked fulfilment with the quality of interactions. U8, a mid-size regional university, outperformed U2, a mid-size urban university (mean difference = .37, $p < .05$). Furthermore, U5, a large urban university, was rated higher for the quality of interactions in comparison to U4, a small-size urban university (mean difference = .66, $p < .05$). Interestingly, U4, a small urban university, was rated poorer for quality of interactions in comparison to a large regional university (U6) (mean difference = -.60, $p < .05$) and U8, a mid-size regional university (mean difference = -.57, $p < .05$).

The supportive environment indicator generated a significant difference across universities: $F\ (7, 425) = 6.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .091$ with a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988, pp. 283–287). Nevertheless, only 9% of variance comes from institutional differences.

5.4. Student Engagement Variations Across Disciplines

In the second stage of Study II, a separate one-way ANOVA with each NSSE indicator was conducted to look at variations across disciplines. The analysis showed that 8 out of 10 indicators vary across the disciplines. The equality of variances was tested by Levene's test.

The results revealed that the science students were less satisfied than their counterparts from education and social sciences when it comes to the variation in academic challenge indicators. For example, students from science showed less satisfaction with their coursework challenges, practical problems, and assignments asking for analysis and evaluation than their counterparts from education (mean difference = .31, p = .006) and social sciences (mean difference = .30, $p = .013$). Furthermore, students in the sciences field did not evaluate reviewing, reading, and summarizing notes after classes, something that happened more often in comparison to their fellow students in education (mean difference = .43, $p < .001$). Significant

differences were found in reflective and integrative learning across the disciplines: $F(3, 429) = 7.12$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .047$, with a medium effect size. Also, significant differences were found in quantitative reasoning: $F(3, 429) = 3.15$, $p < .025$, $\eta^2 = .022$, with a low effect size.

Collaborative learning was better organized according to students from economics, education, and sciences, whereas students from social sciences were not satisfied with the conditions created for them to learn from peers. Students from social sciences were less engaged in asking for help, explaining the learned material to peers, working together on projects, and getting ready for exams than students in economics (mean difference = .27, $p = .011$), education (mean difference = .19, $p = .027$), and the sciences (mean difference = .34, $p = .003$). The ANOVA showed significant differences for the discussions with diverse others across the majors: $F(3, 429) = 2.27$, $p = .080$, $\eta^2 = .016$.

Experiences with faculty entail student–faculty interactions and effective teaching practices. The ANOVA did not show any significant differences for student–faculty interactions across majors: $F(3, 429) = 1.75$, $p < .156$, $\eta^2 = .012$. When it comes to teachers' ability to explain and organize the material, use illustrative materials and examples, and provide feedback, which are the parts of the effectiveness of teaching practices indicator, students from sciences were less satisfied than their fellow students from economics (mean difference = .26, $p = .046$), the social sciences (mean difference = .27, $p = .014$), and education (mean difference = .30, $p = .006$).

Campus environment implies the quality of interactions and a supportive environment. The post hoc test for the quality of interactions demonstrated that economics students rated their learning environment as relatively weaker than their colleagues from the education field (mean difference = .38, $p < .001$). In contrast, students from economics were more satisfied with their learning environment in comparison to students in the sciences (mean difference = .38, $p = .004$). A one-way ANOVA demonstrated a significant variance for the supportive environment across disciplines: $F(3, 429) = 3.40$, $p < .001$, and $\eta^2 = .057$, with a medium effect size.

5.5. Ways to Improve Student Engagement According to Students

According to students, academic challenge was one of the major concerns, receiving the largest number of remarks (N = 95) on matters such as curriculum, assessments, internships, and practical classes. All these issues, according to students, could be built into the curriculum to challenge and provide them with higher-order, reflective, and integrative learning and quantitative reasoning skills and enhance their capacity to utilize different learning strategies.

Students repeatedly raised an issue about the curriculum, which seemed to them not to reflect contemporary needs and expectations and thus was in severe need

of revision for the quality and quantity of the major-related subjects. For example, students thought that it was old-fashioned Soviet-style to be asked to memorize information within different classes. Note that students were clear on the design of the curriculum, which they think needs to be more academically challenging, such as when one student (U1, S208) indicated the importance of an "[i]*ntegration of critical thinking into teaching and learning.*" Students also elaborated that there was a deficiency of the major-related subjects in the curriculum to provide students with the expertise. For example, student (U5, S398) emphasized the need to "*review the curriculum to add more major subjects*." Students felt that assessment policy needs a thorough revision at each particular university, as they raised issues of objectivity, rules and regulations, and plagiarism. One of the ways, they thought, would be to exclude multiple-choice exams and attendance requirements and to emphasize individual assignments and interactive teaching. Another fragile component of the academic challenge students mentioned was internships, where they emphasized that universities should take these more seriously. As a way out, they proposed building stronger ties with enterprises and thus increasing student internship opportunities. As one student mentioned: "*I would build excellent relationships with the industry to take students there for practice*" (U7, S130). Students also raised issues concerning the balance between theory and practice, as they referred to classes being more theoretical, envisioning that in majors such as engineering there should be more emphasis on the practical classes: "*Having more practical classes*" (U3, S67).

Regarding learning with peers, which entails collaborative learning with other students and discussions with diverse others, the analysis revealed that students were aware of the situation and thus could offer ways to improve it. They clearly articulated how other students, indifferent to the learning process, create impediments during the class, and suggested that changes should happen in students when they have to become more hardworking, devote more time to reading, and take class learning seriously. One student indicated that: "*I would change classmates hindering the learning process during the class*" (U2, S12). Another concern students raised was about their interests and expectations, asking for more autonomy in selecting subjects. Students felt that universities took them seriously when they came to complain about the quality of teaching and provided more opportunities for social life. Students asked to be informed about university rules and regulations right at the beginning of their journey since this has an impact on their motivation. They also need to be clear on the requirements of the GPA, as one student mentioned: "*To inform students about GPA during the induction*" (U4, S27)**.** As a responsible action, the university should clarify all of this information and the expectations from the first day of the student's journey.

Experiences with faculty are another dimension of student concern, with many remarks (N =70) about teaching quality, which entails the effectiveness of teaching and communication with students. As per the effectiveness of teaching, students

reported that teaching did not require any analytics, just retelling the assigned reading in a very old-fashioned way. Students offered that "*Teaching should be research-based and research-driven*" (U1, S425). Students also complained about the professionalism of teachers: "*Do not allow someone who barely speaks English to teach it*" (U1, S428). One student proposed: "*To change teachers with Soviet-style, old mindsets*" (U2, S284) to ones who would treat their teaching and students with dignity and respect.

Concerning communication with the faculty, students mentioned they encounter discrimination and subjectivity. Students' expectations in terms of better, open, more sincere communication were not met as they encountered many issues when teachers had not tried to build friendlier relationships with them. As one student put it: "*Building more closer relationships with students*" (U5, S388). Students demand more dignity and respect toward themselves and the variety of opinions and ideas they have. As it was phrased by another student: "*Communicating with students like individuals and personalities*" (U8, S189).

While analyzing the campus environment theme, which entails the quality of interactions and supportive environment, it was found that academic facilities were a major concern of students. They complained about not having appropriate laboratories and a lack of books in the libraries—especially books in English—along with the quality of learning materials and tutoring. As one student put it: "*Laboratories and libraries to be improved*" (U6, S335). Another aspect again leads us to assume that students were very pragmatic and foresaw the usage of advanced technology in teaching and learning as a must: "*Advanced technology must be used in teaching and learning*" (U7, S159). Another concern students raised was the organization of the out-of-class activities contributing to student learning and motivation. As one indicated: "*Organize seminars to increase student motivation*" (U1, S418). Such activities as going to museums and planting trees (biology students for learning purposes) in the university yard would positively impact student learning. More prominently, students indicated a necessity to organize development programs with the participation of famous people and people from different industries, as well as programs allowing them to develop their emotional intelligence. Students urged universities to engage students in university research. As one indicated: "*Engage students actively in research*" (U7, S144).

5.6. Problems Students Encounter in Being Engaged in QA

The data gathered within Study III, where student engagement in QA and the problems students encounter were identified, shows that there are various problems students face with each of the QA cycles, but mainly with the planning phase. Students indicated that the problems they encountered were related to poor

communication, vague goals, low competence of teaching staff, and low integration of study programs. Students named timing problems, mainly related to schedules that often conflict with university deadlines, which impacts the quality of decision-making and constrains the discussion. According to the students, they have observed low competence and overestimation of university capacity during the planning process. Students indicated that no or little co-operation between teachers and units impacts the low integration of a new study program, teaching, and learning. They also stated that students were never clear about new changes.

In the "do" phase, students mentioned that they encounter problems with the complexity of systems, incompetence, affective reactions, and pressure. Students argued that time had constrained their learning and made it more superficial.

When talking about quality, students were inclined to compare it with other universities and identify it as being of lower quality than in other cases. According to them, quality assurance is rather formal. When there is a contradiction between their obligation within the course and participation in university life, they choose to have more of a course focus. Consequently, to be successful, they choose to complete their course tasks rather than participate in university life. Students repeatedly mentioned the negative affective reaction of not meeting expectations.

In the "check" phase, students mentioned that their participation is rather formal rather than some kind of deep analysis of the feedback. They named some of the obstacles that constrained them in providing suggestions for improvement. Examples of the obstacles mentioned include the inaccessibility of IT systems during the feedback period and the similarity of questions. As students admitted during the interviews, they tend to make their feedback superficial and there is no motivation to make it substantial, which makes their feedback worthless to contribute to managerial decisions, which the students recognized. The university is not investing enough to analyze student feedback, which makes it unworthy to consider and publicize. They also mentioned that over the years this tendency has worsened. As this shows, the requirements of the "check" phase are not fulfilled.

Students associated the "act" phase problems as partially improving and also having contradicting values and little stability. They considered it partially improved because the process is very rigid. At the operational level, they shared that no impact of student feedback is observed. It was shown that feedback is provided superficially, irony is felt in the feedback of students, and improvements made as a result of student feedback seem to be taking place on the surface. It was evident that there is a contradiction within the institutional value system, and changes made are only temporary. Moreover, students perceive there to be little stability, that changes are superficial, and that multiple stakeholders have not been considered while analyzing the changes.

5.7. Preconditions for Student–University Dialog and Partnership

Numerous studies have recognized the importance of university–student dialog for student learning (Blair & McGinty, 2012; Thomas, 2002). Student–university dialog can take place at different levels—student–student, student–teacher, and staff–student (Baer, 2008; Gorsky et al., 2007). The university could change student engagement in quality assurance through more skillful and effective dialog. Such a low level of engagement in the quality assurance process happens when the information is insufficient and contradictory. Students feel that their engagement is formally meeting the requirements; they do not consider themselves to be treated as equal partners in discussions or in the improvement process. As the data revealed, there were preconditions for a dialog improving student engagement in the quality assurance process: 1) distributing information, 2) establishing a relationship, 3) building a partnership, and 4) partnering for improvement.

Distributing Information

Distributing information can be the first step in building a trustworthy and open relationship atmosphere for engaging students. There are four main aspects to be considered while distributing information: the means of communication, the trustworthiness of the information, targeting the communication, and efficient time scheduling.

One main channel of communication for the university is email, but since such information is usually general it is ineffective:

> There is so much information everywhere, it is just a text, the emails don't mean anything, 80–90% of them are not meant for you ... I receive many emails, they are long, I never read them. If I receive an email from any of our study consultants, I understand that it is important.

This shows the extent to which the communication is unplanned, which influences the trustworthiness of the information. Students receive emails from multiple sources. During the interviews, students mentioned that they were expecting to receive information from a trustworthy source. If the messages come from an official source and it is not long, then the message has a chance to capture students' attention. Quite often, the messages are long, which apparently makes students skip them. Along with this, one student mentioned that the message coming from the heads of the university would make the information more acceptable:

> If an authority comes that you respect, and feel close to, that will be definitely better. If the Rector comes to the class and says, there is something going on ... Then we say, if the Rector says it, we will look at it.

Concerning the distributing of information, being efficient with timing is one of the main preconditions to engaging students better. One student mentioned that if the message arrives too early or too late, it becomes irrelevant:

> The study advisor wrote to us that it is the final date to submit. It was so sudden, just two weeks to find the topic and supervisor. It turned out that this information was also sent at the beginning of the semester, but none of us paid attention to it. It was too early to think about it.

Nowadays, students are more inclined to search for information using modern technology. Nevertheless, they still value interaction with others, especially when they receive very significant information, despite the fact that they are technologically savvy. An effective channel of communication when one wants to communicate significant information about changes and innovations would be face-to-face communication, which demands that complicated problems are handled in person (Swaab et al., 2012).

Establishing a Relationship

In this step, the emerging aspects were the readiness for continuous collaboration, communication competence, and face-to-face interaction. It is important that students receive information clearly stated and timely addressed, inviting them to engage in a dialog to provide feedback. This allows us to assume that both parties are ready for collaboration.

University staff should be trained for quality collaboration with students; however, it is important that students be competent to engage in a dialog, as well. Moreover, students need to know the university structure and processes to be able to engage in a dialog:

> In the beginning you do not know the system, who are the study advisers and what are their tasks. You do not know who to turn to. You only dare to ask anything from these familiar faces from the admission period.

Students were very clear about the obstacles they face as juniors, which shows again how it is important for the university to familiarize students with the activities, key persons, and when and how to raise questions, and to make recommendations.

Building a Partnership

In building partnerships, such aspects as meaningful involvement, interaction at different levels, and collaboration competence emerged as being essential.

When students are not provided with explanations or provided with full information about expectations, they will be in a state of ambiguity, thus ending up

with a formal engagement of students in the quality improvement process, as one student mentioned:

> Sadly, the principle is that students are involved in the decision-making but only to make a tick. It is rather formal ... They have a mentality that students need to be everywhere, but they do not listen to them.

It is also important that interaction is built at different levels to receive sincere feedback. Such an interaction can be built by any staff or academic member who is able to build a trustworthy relationship with students seeking genuine feedback. Students having interactions at different levels are provided with better learning opportunities (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Students expect to be given equal rights during the dialog to discuss issues and share ideas. Information from an official source urges students to have a better understanding of educational improvements (Men, 2014). Another aspect of student–university interaction for quality improvement is meeting with university leadership, which motivates students, improves their self-confidence, and gets them more engaged. Making this dialog more regular, clear, and targeted sends students a signal that they are accepted as valuable and equal partners in quality improvement. Dialog, as argued by the students, helps to build trust, enabling students to be engaged in their studies as well as university activities and, above all, in the quality assurance process.

Nevertheless, some students again raised the issue of students being trained to gain collaboration competence and be ready for such an interaction. According to them, this also shows that student engagement is also preconditioned with students' willingness—few active students are ready to initiate the dialog about the change process. University staff, leadership, and students have to have up-to-date thinking to accept students as partners (Carey, 2013). To nurture this, the dialog should be built in a more regular, clear, and open way. This concept places more responsibility on the academic and non-academic staff building a collaboration with students on an equal basis ready to accept and value students' ideas, contributions, and participation.

Partnering for Improvement

Both parties' commitment to continuous development (Carey, 2013), as well as the trustworthiness of the quality assurance procedures, are important to have a partnership for improvement. This requires a university to explicitly express its expectations and try to make students experience a feeling that their participation is meaningful. Students being aware of the improvement processes at the university contributes to the interaction between the university and students. Students experience satisfaction and accomplishment if their feedback is heard and considered:

> We gave feedback during the lesson, and the teacher changed the number of hours; one topic of the subject was left for another year. She listened to us, and we were happy that she listened to us ... I do know that for my program, they are always looking for how to improve it. What I heard from other students, it was a little different for them, and now it is different.

Above all, students' voices being heard enables them to experience a sense of meaningfulness and satisfaction that the course or other requirements have been changed to fit their needs and expectations. Such a scenario affects students' motivation to be part of the feedback system and trust in its fairness and makes them participate in it repetitively with the belief that students' ideas and suggestions help the university to improve.

Despite the fact that the literature suggests that three years of academic life cycle is very short to witness any proposed changes, this cannot serve as a justification for HEIs to delay implementation. Witnessing a change as a result of their feedback is likely to stimulate students to show more commitment to the university and advocate for the university.

Student engagement has the potential to become a partnership for improvement once set with a value for a student. High expectations set and expressed publicly are likely to motivate students to engage in partnership with the university.

6. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

6.1. Summary of Findings

The overall goal of this study was to explore the state of student engagement in in-class and out-of-class activities in post-Soviet countries and find ways to improve it. The responses to the research questions, or the findings, are discussed below as a result of meta-inference. Conclusions integrated from three studies present a more complete understanding of student engagement in a new context. Integration presents comparison, contrast, and interchangeable use of the deductions from studies to support one type of deduction with the other (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007; Tashakkori et al., 2021). This research has found support for the major assumptions: 1) Institutional support (identified by quality interactions with academic and non-academic staff and a support system) is crucial for student engagement in academic learning, student success, and satisfaction; 2) Variations across universities and disciplines have shown that student engagement is very sensitive to each university context; and 3) Students are eager to be partners in QA improvements conditioned with properly designed and implemented student–university dialog.

Links between Institutional Factors, Student Engagement, Learning, Success, and Satisfaction

This study demonstrated that students are more likely to learn new skills, achieve higher marks, and feel satisfied if they engage in quality interactions with the faculty and staff, experience university support, and use learning strategies. In contrast to Zilvinskis et al. (2017), who found a strong association between all measures of the NSSE and perceived gains, this study found that PG had a significant correlation with only 7 out of 10 SE indicators. One surprising finding of this study was that collaborative learning had a negative effect on students' self-reported GPA. Access to any other control variables would assist in diagnosing why, however, in Study II, students reported that their fellow students hindered in-class learning and they needed to be changed. One possible explanation for this finding is that students are seeking quality out-of-class engagement, which would contribute to their learning rather than being engaged in social loafing. This tendency is also supported by the positive association between the quality of interactions and GPA and student satisfaction. Nevertheless, in Study II, students reported that collaborative learning is better in relation to two urban universities, which shows that some universities were able to build better conditions for collaborative learning. In relation to this,

discussions with diverse others had no association with any of the student outcomes, such as PG and GPA, similar to the findings of Zilvinskis et al. (2017), where collaborative discussions with diverse others had no association with PG.

This study also reveals that the frequency of meaningful interactions with the faculty improves higher-order learning, reflective and integrative learning, and learning strategies, as well as quantitative reasoning (Van Alten et al., 2019). However, in the qualitative part of Study II, students expressed a concern with the quality of the relationships with teachers. Universities might reconsider engaging students in feedback sessions to learn more about the quality of such relationships since it has the potential to impact student engagement, student achievement, academic performance, and sense of belonging (Klem & Connell, 2004; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005; Wong et al., 2019). In this vein, the study conducted by Snijders et al. (2020) concluded that universities and faculty should consider the quality of relationships between teachers and students as important, which was presented as impacting student engagement and student loyalty. Furthermore, teachers' consideration of student learning by designing teaching materials using visual aids and the ability to provide effective feedback enhances students' higher-order learning and quantitative reasoning (Filippello et al., 2020)

A supportive environment organized at the university to provide students with academic learning, social and campus activities, and health and wellness assistance helps students improve their reflective and integrative learning, learning strategies, and quantitative reasoning. Finally, deliberately organized conditions where students have an opportunity to have discussions with diverse others positively impact students' quantitative reasoning as opposed to collaborative learning, which had a negative impact on students' GPAs. This study reveals that students are likely to be satisfied if they experience quality interactions with other students, teachers, and support staff, as well as if they are engaged in academic support programs, diverse interactions, and provided with social and welfare support, a finding similar to those of Sojkin et al. (2012). In the same vein, a study conducted by Duque (2014) demonstrated that higher student satisfaction helps students to be persistent and continue their education.

Dynamic and Contextual Nature of Student Engagement

Study II found that student engagement varies across universities and disciplines, and students have a clear explanation of ways to improve student engagement across universities. The findings demonstrated that one university had generated the greatest number of negative differences with academic challenges. One urban university was identified as the weakest link in providing higher-order learning, learning strategies, and quantitative reasoning. Academic challenges also varied across the disciplines—this showed that science students were less satisfied and less challenged with the way higher-order learning, learning strategies, and quantitative

reasoning are embedded into the curriculum. The findings from the qualitative data showed that the HE curriculum needs revision to equip students with critical thinking, quantitative and analytical reasoning, and learning strategies to advance their employability.

Learning with peers varied across the universities—only two universities in the capital city were able to organize collaborative learning better than other universities involved in the study, whereas only one large urban university generated positive differences in organizing discussions with diverse others. Interestingly, the finding revealed in the qualitative data reports that students do not learn effectively in collaboration in many universities due to unknown reasons, leaving us to assume that the curriculum and/or the teaching staff lack the capacity to engage students in collaborative learning as was demonstrated in a recent study conducted by Chang-Tik (2023), who concluded that it depends on the lecturers' abilities to design the tasks and provide supportive materials. Across disciplines, social science students reported weaker collaborative learning in comparison to fellow students from education, economics, and the sciences.

Surprisingly, experiences with faculty did not demonstrate many variations across the universities, but it revealed that student–faculty interactions are better organized in one large regional university. Teaching practices had been evaluated better at the regional university than in one university from the capital. Moreover, students from the sciences were not satisfied with the quality of teaching in comparison to students from other fields. While exploring the findings, it became clear why the experiences with the faculty were so poor across universities. The findings reveal that there were incompetent interactions between faculty and students, where the former lacked the capacity to tolerate a diversity of opinions and the latter did not accept the (un) professionalism of the teaching staff. One way to explain these drawbacks between two major stakeholders is the lack of a systematic internal quality assurance process where students have a seat at the table.

Campus environment varied across the universities and disciplines. It appeared that quality interactions with important people around students were organized better in regional cities than in the capital city. In support of this finding, students from economics and the sciences were the least satisfied with the quality of interactions. Students' dissatisfaction with the campus environment was related mainly to the library services and technologically equipped classrooms. Moreover, the findings from Krause and Coates (2008) were repeated in this study, where students expressed that in order to achieve success, they needed to be well informed at the beginning of their journey.

Student–University Dialog to Improve SE in QA

Finally, Study III revealed the perceptions of students engaged in out-of-class activity, namely in the internal quality assurance process. The results revealed that students

perceive it to be problematic to be engaged in planning and designing the curriculum since it is rare and not systematic. According to students, their engagement in the internal quality assurance process is rather formal and requires it to be rethought and reorganized, similar to what Trowler and Trowler (2010) outlined.

The findings show that for students to perceive their engagement as beneficial, it is worth building relationships in the form of a dialog. For building this dialog, four steps should be implemented. Students believe that a one-way communication channel is not the best way to share information; it is worth reconsidering and finding the channel that suits the situation best. Moreover, according to students, a communication strategy that does not allow random information delivery damages relationships and should be reconsidered. The second step, according to students, is to build trustworthy relationships, as student engagement in the quality assurance process may have the potential to be improved with accurate facilitation. Building trustworthy relationships depends on the ability and willingness of both parties to engage in a dialog as equal partners, where each side's ideas and thoughts are taken seriously. This requires all the parties to be equally good at communication skills. In the next step, the co-operation grows into a partnership where students, as equal partners, are invited to co-create the learning process and/or curriculum. Such a partnership will benefit each party, where the university gains insight into the student perception, satisfaction, and expectations, while students gain insight into how relationships are built and how universities are managed behind the curtain. Finally, all the above steps will lead to becoming partners for improvement. As students step into the partnership, they experience that sharing thoughts is likely to improve quality. Such participation gives a sense that their participation is valuable and taken seriously, and it brings further development, thus making students invest more time and energy and be open and sincere. In summary, the university, as the major responsible partner in this format of co-operation, should strive to equip academic and non-academic staff as well as students with strong collaboration skills mediated by the institutional strategy.

This study, looking at different aspects of student engagement in two different post-Soviet countries, stresses that student engagement with in-class and out-of-class learning needs further improvements in post-Soviet HE. Although these two countries are different economically, socially, and politically, the research generated some similarities in the way students perceive the quality of learning. For example, in both countries, students have a lot of skepticism for the teachers' capacity for improvement. In both cases, students see communication between institutions and students as a problem. In both countries, students see that along with the institutional changes, fellow students need to change their attitudes—in Azerbaijan toward learning and in Estonia by putting more effort toward participation. However, students recognize that there is a way to improve quality once students are seen, perceived, and accepted as important, valuable, and, most importantly, as

equals who can contribute to the learning and improvement process. Thus, this study demonstrates that student engagement as a phenomenon should be reconsidered at the individual, institutional, and national levels in post-Soviet countries to meet the needs of students that go beyond neoliberalism asking for a reconceptualization of "one size fits all" approaches.

6.2. Limitations of the Research

Despite the fact that this study has revealed some outstanding results, there are several reasons why caution should be considered not to overgeneralize it. To begin with, the dataset in this study concerns only some universities from two post-Soviet countries, which would make generalization an issue given that the student engagement phenomenon has not been studied well in many of the former Soviet countries. Furthermore, the data are limited to only those who have volunteered for the study. Access to other students and/or more data would contribute to the outcomes of this study. For example, students' narratives on each of the SE indicators would help to learn more about their experiences.

Additionally, many universities in the former Soviet countries do not run regular student feedback with similar questions. This might have impacted the results differently, although all questions were related to the daily student activities. Students' experience that such feedback provided previously helped to improve the university would add more consideration to their responses, although criticism students expressed throughout the questionnaires and interviews conveys a message that students have been sincere and open. The larger part of this study relied on self-reported data, which might have contributed to the questions related to its reliability, although a number of studies have demonstrated that self-reported data can provide accurate results (Arico et al., 2018; Cole & Gonyea, 2010). Yet, another limitation is that institutional variables such as financial resources, the number of full-time academic and non-academic staff, and others were not considered.

6.3. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study seeks to contribute to the research and practice of student engagement in in-class and out-of-class activities in a number of ways. Theoretically, this study explored student engagement as a new phenomenon in terms of in- and out-of-class activities in post-Soviet countries, which remains underexplored. Although the research was conducted in two former Soviet countries, and they are different culturally, economically, and politically, one aspect that remains constant for both is that student engagement has not been explored more deeply in either of

these countries. In this sense, this study contributes to the knowledge of student engagement by bringing in how student engagement is constructed and implemented in HE in post-Soviet countries, where student engagement as a phenomenon has not been conceptualized. The study adds value by uncovering different aspects of student engagement in a new context.

Numerous studies have revealed that institutional environments (Zepke, Butler & Leach, 2012; Gunuc et al., 2022) and differences have an impact on student engagement (Sainz Sujet, 2022), which was also demonstrated in this study. Thus, student engagement varied across the universities, although many of them are centrally provisioned. Despite having economic, social, and geographical advantages, urban universities did not generate as much difference as was anticipated. A number of differences were identified between urban and regional universities, as well as between universities functioning in similar areas, such as cities or regions. Even though the curriculum is centrally managed, academic challenge indicators were found to vary across universities and disciplines. Another interesting finding was that although student engagement demonstrated a variance across the institutions of one country, they had many common features to improve as suggested by students—teacher quality, teaching approaches, teacher–student relationships, and the support environment.

Practically, by utilizing the NSSE to explore student engagement in different contexts, the study demonstrated that using the NSSE can inform and contribute to decision-making at the policy and institutional levels to improve student engagement conditions. In this context, student engagement has not been conceptualized at any levels: individual, departmental, institutional, or national, although imposed by some international standards. Such knowledge may impact institutions to improve teaching, student–teacher interactions, curriculum, and the supportive environment. Institutions may reconsider downplaying bureaucracy and improving instructional leadership and freedom of action for students.

Another practical implication would be to engage students in the decision-making process and/or quality assurance process to enrich such data with proactive and pragmatic ideas. As this study demonstrated, students did not agree on the quality of teachers, teaching, or their ability to meet technological advancements. There is a huge need for higher education to monitor students' perceptions of quality (Dužević et al., 2018); as such, a conception impacts the sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, further contributing to the reputation of an institution. Another implication is to contribute to the literature on quality assurance by reporting how students perceive their engagement in the quality assurance process. International rankings have largely impacted the understanding of quality in HE (Pusser & Marginson, 2013), although HE should reconsider the organizing of quality learning experiences embedded in the curriculum, which will equip students with higher-order learning and synthesizing skills in a collaborative and supportive environment.

The findings of this study are useful for policymakers, university management, quality specialists, students, and staff. First, policy-level changes with clear identification of the standards will emphasize the importance of student engagement and will provide a ground for institutional leadership to reconsider the conditions. The study urges a more coherent and consolidated approach to a reform process at the national level, which requires learning more about student expectations and needs. Second, entrusting and empowering institutions with curriculum development to meet the requirements of the national qualification framework would challenge higher education institutions to rebuild the curriculum and conditions fostering critical thinking and higher-order and collaborative learning. Thus, bringing the old-fashioned design of the curriculum one step further to meet the needs and expectations of the international HE arena makes such institutions stronger players. The third and final challenge for institutional leaders would be to be conscious of students' proactive and pragmatic attitudes toward learning.

6.4. Suggestions for Further Research

All former Soviet countries have perpetual reforms to improve the quality of education, while having less research reported about the status of student learning mediated by student engagement. In light of such fragmented knowledge on student engagement, research on student engagement of why students consider the curriculum, collaborative learning, a learning support system, teaching quality, and interactions between students and faculty to be weak would shed a light on the matter in depth, considering that student engagement in genuine learning, mediated by the curriculum, teachers, and support systems, has the potential to decrease negative aspects in post-Soviet areas.

Due to limited access, this study was not able to look at the interplay of institutional variables and student outcomes to deeply analyze how, for example, institutional financial inputs or recent trends in investments have impacted student outcomes. Thus, another study examining the interplay between inputs and outcomes would greatly contribute to understanding the key factors impacting student learning and student outcomes.

In many post-Soviet countries, policy documents lack identification of student agency, student engagement, and related indicators. Thus, a critical policy discourse analysis would shed light on if and how student agency and student engagement have been addressed in policy documents. Recommendations created by such research would enhance the knowledge of policymakers and provide grounds for the improvement of policy documents.

Yet another qualitative research area to explore would be the ideas and thoughts of academic staff on collaboration in quality assurance: if they are aware of the

value and the potential such a collaboration has and if they are ready for such collaboration. Furthermore, when it comes to student engagement in quality assurance, it is important to explore what changes in student engagement occurred following the establishment of quality assurance and qualification frameworks in many post-Soviet countries.

Although each of the countries of the Soviet Union built its own path into the development of HE, in many contexts, the region is also known for centralized decision-making and a high level of authority. Under such circumstances, changing tradition to improve student engagement with in- and out-of-class activities comparable to the level observable in developed countries may require a "shift in mindset" (Ergun & Kondakci, 2021), whereas students reported readiness for such a change. Nevertheless, change is inevitable considering the weight students implied on time and the necessity of a change to comply with the globalized world in this study. HE reformers, whether they are policymakers or institutional leaders, need to reconsider student engagement as a tool to improve quality. Student engagement, as this study clearly indicated, having robust linkages with student learning, success, and satisfaction, coupled with student readiness for change and development, shows that HEIs need to reconsider student engagement to meet student learning and transformation needs and requirements.

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Studies in Higher Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cshe20

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To cite this article: Razia Isaeva, Ilkka Ratinen & Satu Uusiautti (2023) Understanding student success in higher education in Azerbaijan: the role of student engagement, Studies in Higher Education, 48:12, 1918-1936, DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2023.2217208

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2217208

STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION
2023, VOL. 48, NO. 12, 1918–1936
https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2217208

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Understanding student success in higher education in Azerbaijan: the role of student engagement

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ABSTRACT

Research on student engagement in higher education (HE) has addressed the conceptualisation, measurement and criticism of the phenomenon over the last two decades, predominantly in Western countries. The conceptualisation of student engagement has received little attention in countries of a lengthy association with the Soviet realm. This study investigated student engagement in Azerbaijani universities using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) tool, under licence granted by Indiana University in 2018, to gather data. The survey was conducted among more than 430 students at eight Azerbaijani universities to explore what universities do to engage their students in learning. After a preliminary examination of the data for reliability, only the data from urban universities comprising 266 students were considered suitable for further analysis. The data were analysed to look at descriptive statistics and to identify linkages between student activities and student outcomes in Azerbaijan through bivariate correlation and regression analysis. The study revealed that, according to the NSSE categories, a supportive student environment and the quality of interactions, combined under the campus environment theme, and student–faculty interactions were essential elements for student learning, success, satisfaction and engagement in academically challenging practices.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 9 February 2023
Accepted 18 May 2023

KEYWORDS
Student engagement; student learning experiences; perceived gains; National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE); stepwise regression analysis

Introduction

Student engagement is regarded as a predictor of student success, retention and personal and professional development (Kuh 2009; Pike, Smart, and Ethington 2012). Universities worldwide are interested in building conditions that engage students in learning experiences in and out of class. Research has shown that student engagement positively impacts grades, satisfaction, perceived learning outcomes, critical thinking and students' professional and personal lives after graduation (Laird et al. 2014; Rocconi, Liu, and Pike 2020). However, the impact of student engagement on student outcomes is still a subject of scholarly debate, and the necessary degree of institutional input is underestimated (Baron and Corbin 2012; Brint and Cantwell 2014).

This research covers higher education (HE) in Azerbaijan, a post-Soviet republic. While student engagement has become a much-studied topic in HE elsewhere due to its high correlation with learning and personal development, it has not received attention at the policy or institutional level in Azerbaijan and has not been extensively studied there (Hasanov et al. 2021). Although

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interactions between students and faculty and active and collaborative learning – driving forces of student engagement – are emphasised as alternative measures of the quality provided within HE (Kuh 2003), in most Azerbaijani universities collaboration between faculty and students is limited to classroom teaching. Learning more about student engagement is thus likely to provide higher education institutions (HEIs) with data that will enable them to judge the quality of student learning mediated by a challenging curriculum, collaborative learning, a learning support system, teaching quality and interactions between students and faculty.

Azerbaijan, having regained its independence more than three decades ago, is becoming a regional powerhouse of geo-strategic significance with a rapidly developing economy, whereas the educational system is falling behind, with perpetual reforms bringing few noteworthy changes and leaving the quality of education uncertain (Guliyev 2016; Isaeva and Aliyev 2023). In Azerbaijan, universities rarely have the academic freedom to design their curricula (Isakhanli and Pashayeva 2018). Moreover, the relationships between public institutions and HEIs are irregularly based on collaboration and dialogue.

While the quality of HE in Azerbaijan is a subject of continuous debate, certain changes have taken place since the collapse of the Soviet Union. These changes came along with an excessive number of newly established state and private HEIs, bringing diversity to the ways in which the universities are managed and provide quality (Isakhanli and Pashayeva 2018). Many of the changes relating to quality assurance, internationalisation, teaching and learning and, in general, institutional governance brought about by the Bologna process were barely enough to improve the HE context, given its strong and long-lasting Soviet legacy. Eleven private and 40 public universities currently have over 200,000 students, qualifying HE for the mass stage according to Trow's massification stage division (Trow 1973; Smolentseva, Huisman, and Froumin 2018), with 36% enrolment in 2021. Government expenditure on education has improved significantly, reaching 4.3% of the GDP in 2020, compared with 2.7% in 2019. The series of changes has also been marked by policy-level documents, such as the *State Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Azerbaijan* approved by the President (2013), the *National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Azerbaijan* (2018), the *Regulation of the Agency of Quality Assurance in Education* (2019) and the *Accreditation Rules for Educational Institutions,* which addresses student involvement in the quality assurance process, while nonetheless overlooking the need for student engagement to be defined and measured at the national level. Thus, a separate critical policy discourse analysis is needed to shed light on how student identity and/or student engagement have been addressed in policy documents.

The HE context in Azerbaijan differs from that of countries using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or other tools to measure student engagement. The context is challenged culturally, but resource inaccessibility, the quality of teaching and support staff, the level of infrastructural development and the readiness of staff to conceptualise student engagement make it even more challenging. Student engagement is not measured at the national or institutional level, and student participation in any decision-making is uncommon, which can be explained by an educational culture characterised by centralised decision-making, power distance and academic hegemony. One of the cultural features distinguishing Azerbaijani students from their Western counterparts is their stronger ties with their families. Family ties are embedded in a collectivistic society, which implies that families have more authority over the behaviour of children, whereas the latter have less autonomy in decision-making (Rothon, Goodwin, and Stansfeld 2012; Schlee, Mullis, and Shriner 2009; Asgarova and Tsang 2022). Research also suggests that in collectivistic cultures, people are more inclined to enjoy and experience satisfaction in interpersonal relationships (Triandis 2000). Azerbaijani students traditionally do not stay on campus and, in most cases, universities do not have dormitories on campus. These aspects may affect the way in which students engage in collaborative learning, because it is a challenge for them to exercise tight control over the time spent on commuting and preparing for the following day's classes. However, as stated by Coates (2007), students learn better when they experience different ways of learning, for instance, through interactions with peers.

Further research would add extra value to the conceptualisation of student engagement at the individual, institutional and policy levels in developing countries. Moreover, measuring student engagement at the national level is likely to provide institutions and policymakers with extensive information on how effective these institutions are in terms of student learning, given that they are regulated and provisioned by the state. Finally, clarifying the interdependence between investment and outcomes, provided that universities use scarce public resources, would inform policymakers on how effectively finances are used (Pusser and Marginson 2013; Pike et al. 2006).

This research aims to analyse how student engagement is linked to study success and how institutional factors impact student engagement in Azerbaijani universities.

Student engagement

As stated by Trowler et al. in 2022, student engagement, at its best, is the result of mutual investments that students and institutions make in quality learning. The ability of HEIs to support student engagement by creating a culture that appreciates and promotes student engagement from various perspectives is likely to bring about multiple positive student and institutional outcomes. Drawing on recent research, the following discussions cover these elements of student engagement.

The basis and manifestation of student engagement

Student engagement has been found to be a complex phenomenon that is based on two underlying theories: Alexander Astin's (1984) theory of involvement and Pace's (1980) concept of quality of effort. These theories are founded on the view that students improve personally and professionally while attending HEIs, and there are two sources of input contributing to student engagement in HE. Student input, according to many definitions, comprises the time, effort and energy students devote to learning knowledge and skills, while institutional input refers to institutional resources, enhanced educational activities that support and promote student learning, and, most importantly, enriched and challenging curricula that encourage students' learning (Kuh 2003, 2009; McCormick, Kinzie, and Gonyea 2013). Student engagement in HE occurs both in and out of class, with students taking on various roles and responsibilities relating to decision-making and involvement in different out-of-class activities (Carey 2013). Consequently, HEIs must respond with investment in curriculum development, faculty and student support development, and the promotion of enriching educational activities. Pike and Robbins (2019) argued that investments in academic and support services are positively related to the student graduation rate.

Human factors such as personality, behaviours, emotions, and cognition, as well as situational, economic and social factors contribute to student engagement, making it a 'meta' construct (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004, 60). Kahu (2013) reported that there are precedents for student engagement, namely, students' social belongingness, former qualifications, and personality. Many studies have emphasised the role of motivation in student engagement, looking at it through the lenses of motivational theories, such as self-determination theory, achievement goal theory, achievement motivation theory, attribution theory, self-efficacy theory and the expectancy–value theory of achievement (Eccles and Wang 2012; Zepke and Leach 2010).

However, the impact of institutional contexts in engaging students in their studies is undeniable. As Zepke (2018) noted, student engagement happens within a context. Numerous studies have reported that institutional and disciplinary variations impact student engagement in the different experiences available to them (Pike, Smart, and Ethington 2012; Umbach and Wawrzynski 2005). Students will learn more as they are engaged in more academically purposeful activities. In addition, universities providing support and conditions for students to successfully reach their learning

outcomes are likely to experience subsequent student perceptions, satisfaction and achievements (Kuh 2003).

The statement by Kahu (2020, 658) that 'student engagement is a critical element of the educational interface' leads us to think that students' learning and their perception of the learning environment are linked. As Lizzio, Wilson, and Simons (2002) concluded, students' perceptions of their learning environment, supported by their motivation and expectations, determine how institutional factors influence their learning strategies. Moreover, they stated that students' perception of their learning environment is strongly related to reaching outcomes, such as student satisfaction, academic achievement and development of transferrable skills.

Outcomes of student engagement

Research has reported a positive impact of student engagement on learning outcomes (Laird et al. 2014), grades and satisfaction (Webber, Krylow, and Zhang 2013). Acquiring skills and knowledge during studies is essential for students to feel accomplished and fundamental to their success. For many students, attaining marketable skills is a success factor in their future studies and professional life. As a result of their achievements, students feel accomplished and satisfied (Maatta and Uusiautti 2017). Whether measured by retention, grades, grade point average (GPA) or completion rate, it is essential that students' success and their learning, along with the acquisition of the necessary skills to meet the demands of the international job market, remain the ultimate goals of HEIs.

Numerous studies have shown that interactions between students and faculty – dialogue, discussions outside of the class and the quality of interactions – lead to better student outcomes (Kuh and Hu 2016; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Isaeva et al. 2020). Furthermore, students feel supported and better understand their subject matter if they have friendly and supportive relationships with the faculty. To foster learning, HEIs are therefore expected to promote students' integration into their social and academic communities as equal members from the first year of their studies (Zepke 2018; Kahu 2013).

With regard to the most critical measurable goals and the reputation of HEIs, the outcomes of student engagement are learning, students' collaboration with each other and faculty members and, ultimately, fast graduation (Bunce, Baird, and Jones 2017; Määttä and Uusiautti 2016; Trowler 2010). Moreover, student engagement has been shown to improve the quality of education (Coates 2015). In this regard, Kuh (2003) noted that institutions that engage their students in various activities leading to valued learning outcomes can state that they are of higher quality than universities where students are less engaged.

Thus, learning experiences and improvements in well-being, satisfaction, behaviours and civic-mindedness, as well as the development of students as academic community members (Ansala, Uusiautti, and Määttä 2015; Winstone et al. 2017), are all factors that provide immense support to the larger community (Chankseliani, Qoraboyev, and Gimranova 2021).

Methodology

This study aims to describe student engagement in Azerbaijani HE by asking the following research questions:

(1) What are the specific engagement factors affecting student learning and success?
(2) What are the institutional factors affecting student engagement in academic learning?

Using the NSSE questionnaire under licence from Indiana University granted in 2018 for research purposes only, the survey was conducted in April/May and September/October 2018 among university students in Azerbaijan to acquire a comprehensive overview of student experiences.

The NSSE

The NSSE survey instrument was used to gather data from students in Azerbaijan. The NSSE has been produced to measure the extent to which universities provide conditions for students to engage in educational experiences (Kuh 2009). Initially designed in 2000 and updated in 2013, the instrument assesses student engagement through 10 Engagement Indicators (EIs) united under the four themes presented in Table 1.

The instrument contains items concerning quantitative reasoning, interactions among diverse populations, learning strategies and teaching practice presented in precise and consistent language (Fosnacht and Gonyea 2018). Moreover, the instrument is accurate in measuring the effectiveness of educational practices (McCormick, Kinzie, and Gonyea 2013).

The questionnaire has questions regarding the extent to which students are engaged in a variety of educationally purposeful activities, the requirements of the university, the extent to which the curriculum is challenging, the supportiveness of the university environment and the extent to which the university contributes to students' personal development (NSSE 2022). The survey has been used in the United States, Canada and other countries worldwide, and it has served as the basis for developing similar surveys in Australia, New Zealand, the UK, China and elsewhere. Furthermore, university administrators and faculty members have used NSSE results to make significant decisions on the effectiveness of educational practices provided on campuses (Pascarella, Seifert, and Blaich 2010; Fosnacht and Gonyea 2018; McCormick, Kinzie, and Gonyea 2013).

Data collection and research participants

The questionnaire was translated into Azerbaijani with extreme accuracy using a team of experts who examined the initial translation by one of the authors, who is a native speaker of Azerbaijani and fluent in English. The author is also an expert on the area, with more than 20 years of experience working in HE, and thus knows how to present data accurately in Azerbaijan. A team of experts from the Social and Educational Sciences and Humanities and from the Graduate School examined the translation for cultural and linguistic validation (Behr 2017).

Students were accessed through the official procedures of the university that allowed the researcher to conduct a survey. A non-probability sampling method, namely, convenience sampling, was used because the survey was conducted among students who were present at each university on the day of the designated data collection and who could thus be contacted for data collection purposes (Bornstein, Jager, and Putnick 2013). As it was difficult to predict how many students would be available to participate, the goal was to get at least 80 respondents from each university. Although convenience sampling has disadvantages, such as the challenge involved in controlling sociodemographic variances, it was considered appropriate for this research because each participating university was accessible to the researchers (Bornstein, Jager, and Putnick 2013).

Table 1. NSSE Engagement Indicators.

THEMES	ENGAGEMENT INDICATORS
Academic Challenge	Higher Order Learning (HO)
	Reflective and Integrative Learning (RI)
	Learning Strategies (LS)
	Quantitative Reasoning (QR)
Learning with Peers	Collaborative Learning (CL)
	Discussions with Diverse Others (DD)
Experiences with Faculty	Student Faculty Interactions (SF)
	Effective Teaching Practices (ET)
Campus Environment	Quality of Interactions (QI)
	Supportive Environment (SE)

In all, 640 questionnaires were distributed equally among eight universities. Of these, 450 were completed (70% response rate), which is considered satisfactory (Babbie 2020). In 27 cases, students did not respond to every question and were therefore excluded from the study while entering the data. Most of the questionnaires were distributed as hard copies, as an online questionnaire was administered only at one university.

The responses to the items were based on a 4-point Likert scale, except for questions relating to the quality of interactions, where the response scale ranging from 1 to 7 was replaced with a scale ranging from 1 to 4 during the analysis. The questions about student demographics concerned factual information, such as GPA, desired highest education level, age and gender. In addition, each participant signed an informed consent form and participated in the survey voluntarily.

Validity and reliability of a self-reported survey

The NSSE was exclusively designed to assess student engagement in sound educational practices and to explore what students have gained during their university experience. The NSSE questions, formulated clearly, concerned regular and familiar activities in which students are involved at the university. The survey was conducted anonymously to avoid embarrassment and to prevent the respondents' privacy from being threatened or violated (Kuh et al. 2001).

To measure the internal consistency of construct in the study, Cronbach's alpha was used, where an alpha (α) value greater than .70 was taken to indicate that a construct was reliable (Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2013). A reliability analysis was conducted to diagnose the NSSE instrument's reliability across eight Azerbaijani universities in Baku, the capital, and other regions. First, a Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis was performed to compare the NSSE EI scale scores for samples of 25, 50, 100, 200 and 433 sequentially selected students; the scale's reliability was not affected by the number of students involved in a sample. Second, Learning Strategies, Quantitative Reasoning, Student–Faculty Interactions, Quality of Interactions and a Supportive Environment were identified as indicators that yielded similar results in different cases (Appendix 1). Finally, a reliability analysis conducted through random selection demonstrated that only two indicators – Quality of Interactions and Supportive Environment – improved as a result of an increase in the number of students.

The reliability analysis performed across the institutions showed that only two universities generated a high-level α coefficient for almost all indicators (Appendix 2). Our basic deduction was that α did not improve as we changed the number of students but improved across the universities. The results revealed that the scales generated by urban universities were more reliable than those generated by rural universities (Table 2). All alpha coefficients exceeded the accepted cut-off scores for urban universities ($\alpha > 0.6$). The alpha reliability criterion of meeting $0.9 \leq \alpha < 0.8$ was characterised as good and $0.8 \leq \alpha < 0.65$ as acceptable (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994; Vaske, Beaman, and Sponarski 2017).

Consequently, only urban universities were chosen for further analysis. A possible explanation for the relatively low internal consistency may be attributed to the small number of items in each scale

Table 2. Reliability Test by Urban and Regional Universities.

Indicator/categories	Number of items	Urban universities (266 students)	Regional universities (167 students)
HO	**4**	**.669**	**.334**
RI	6	.701	.703
LS	3	.749	.614
QR	3	.781	.687
CL	4	.717	**.401**
DD	**4**	**.667**	.682
SF	4	.781	.701
ET	**5**	**.626**	**.317**
QI	5	.823	.728
SE	8	.838	.793

Table 3. Summary of Participants' Sociodemographic Profile.

Sociodemographic	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Age			21.59	1.520
18–20 years	38	14.3		
20–21 years	122	66.5		
23 years	51	20.2		
Gender			1.55	.499
Male	120	45.1		
Female	146	54.9		
Academic major			2.54	1.191
Science	78	29.3		
Education	44	16.5		
Social sciences	67	25.2		
Humanities	77	28.9		
Academic year				
One			3.99	.833
Two	29	10.9		
Three	6	2.3		
Four	169	63.5		
Five	62	33.3		
GPA			80.40	6.689
Below 70	19	6.8		
Between 71–90	218	82.3		
Above 90	29	10.9		

(McCormick, Kinzie, and Gonyea 2013). Nevertheless, in this study, the reliability test revealed somewhat strong internal consistency for the NSSE construct in the case of 266 students representing urban Azerbaijani universities. The study examined how HEI students in Azerbaijan engaged in different activities identified in the NSSE. The participants comprised 266 students representing five universities in Baku. Second-, third- and fourth-year students were surveyed because junior students may have had fewer chances to integrate socially and academically into their courses and institution and because students with low social and academic engagement may have a different perception of student success (Zepke 2018).

Table 3 presents some demographic data on the students participating in the study. The survey collected information on the year of study, gender, age, major and student status. The average age of the students was 21 years. The gender distribution was 45% males and 55% females. Of these, 13% were junior students, and 87% were senior students. In terms of academic performance (out of 100), about 7% had a GPA below 70, 11% above 90, and 82% between 71 and 90.

Variables

The variables used in this study were based on the data provided by the NSSE instrument. There were four themes with 10 EIs composed of different numbers of questions.

Academic challenge

The *Higher-Order Learning* I (HO) ndicator was composed of four questions rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Very much = 4, Quite a bit = 3, Some = 2, Very little = 1) and focusing on how students applied, analysed, evaluated and formed facts, theories, ideas, experiences and points of view.

The *Reflective and Integrative Learning (RI)* indicator was composed of six questions rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Very often = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, Never = 1) and focusing on whether students combined ideas, connected their learning to societal problems, had diverse perspectives, tried to better understand someone else's ideas and had learned something that had changed their way of understanding.

The *Learning Strategies (LS)* indicator contained three questions rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Very often = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, Never = 1) and focusing on whether students identified key information, reviewed their notes and summarised what they had learned.

The *Quantitative Reasoning* (QR) indicator had three questions rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Very often = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, Never = 1) and focusing on the frequency with which students reached their calculations, learned about real-world issues and assessed other people's assumptions using numerical information.

With regard to the second research question, Academic Challenge was identified as the dependent variable designated as 'Academic Learning' because Academic Challenge involves questions about students' experiences of academic learning activities.

Learning with peers

The *Collaborative Learning* indicator (CL) was composed of four questions rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Very often = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, Never = 1) and focusing on how often students helped others, explained course material, prepared for exams by discussing or working through course material and worked on course projects with others.

The *Discussions with Diverse Others* indicator (DD) was composed of four questions rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Very often = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, Never = 1) and focusing on how often students had discussions with people of different races and ethnicities, economic backgrounds, religious beliefs and political views.

Experiences with faculty

The *Student–Faculty Interactions* indicator (SF) was composed of six questions rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Very often = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, Never = 1) and focusing on how often students talked to and worked with faculty members and discussed topics, ideas, concepts and academic performance with them.

The *Effective Teaching Practices* indicator (ET) was composed of six questions rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Very much = 4, Quite a bit = 3, Some = 2, Very little = 1) and focusing on the extent to which students' instructors clearly explained the course goals, taught in an organised way, used examples and illustrations to explain difficult points, provided feedback on drafts and provided prompt and detailed feedback on tests or completed assignments.

Campus environment

The *Quality of Interaction* (QI) indicator was composed of five questions rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Excellent = 4, Good = 3, Fair = 2, Poor = 1) and focusing on students' interactions with other students, academic advisors, faculty, student services and administrative staff members.

The *Supportive Environment (SE)* indicator was composed of eight questions rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Very much = 4, Quite a bit = 3, Some = 2, Very little = 1) and focusing on how much students' institutions emphasised spending significant time studying, providing support to help students succeed academically, using learning support systems, encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds, providing opportunities to be involved socially, supporting their overall well-being, helping to manage non-academic responsibilities, and attending campus activities and events that addressed important social, economic or political issues.

To respond to the second research question, the indicators combined under the themes Learning with Peers, Experiences with Faculty, and Campus Environment were identified as independent variables designated as 'institutional factors' because the requested experiences under these themes mostly focused on the students' experiences of engagement emphasised by the institutions.

Dependent variables – student outcomes

GPA – The students self-reported their GPA on a scale of 1–100 in response to an open-ended question.

The *Perceived Gains* scale (PG) was developed based on ten responses provided by students to the question, 'How much has your educational experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills and personal development in the areas of writing and speaking clearly and effectively, thinking critically and analytically, analysing numerical and statistical information, acquiring job-related knowledge and skills, working effectively with others, developing or clarifying a personal code of values and ethics, understanding people of other backgrounds, solving complex real-world problems and being an informed and active citizen?'

Student Satisfaction (ST) was assessed by students' responses to the question, 'How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution? The responses were rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Excellent = 4, Good = 3, Fair = 2, Poor = 1).

Data analysis

Based on the objectives, the study was designed to examine institutional support variables contributing to student engagement and the linkages between student engagement, Perceived Gains, Student Satisfaction and GPA. A Pearson's correlation analysis and a stepwise regression analysis were used to examine student outcomes in terms of the dependency of GPA, ST and PG on institutional factors.

The design of the research questions in this study led us to choose the stepwise regression method because of its power to select and reveal important independent variables in predicting dependent variables (Huang and Cheng 2013). This method provides the relative advantage of avoiding collinearity and finding the best combination of independent variables in predicting dependent variables with forward selection and backward elimination (Metsämuuronen 2017).

To respond to the first research question, we looked for interdependencies between the EIs and Perceived Gains, identified as learning outcomes, and success, identified by GPA and Student Satisfaction as a factor strongly related to students' attachment to their university. In addition, we performed correlation and regression analyses to establish the interdependencies.

To respond to the second research question about the impact of institutional factors on student engagement, we built a stepwise regression between EIs with Higher Order Learning, Reflective and Integrative Learning, Learning Strategies and Quantitative Reasoning as dependent variables and Collaborative Learning, Discussions with Diverse others, Student–Faculty Interactions, Effective Teaching Practices and Supportive Environment as independent institutional variables.

The construct validity analysis in this study was based on assumptions by Pike (2013), who referred to the construct validity framework of Messick (1989) in relation to whether the nature of NSSE allows for factor analysis and generalisability over items. Furthermore, while a factor analysis helps in analysing the interactions of a measure and external variables, it does not help in assessing 'structural component validity', as argued by Pike (2013, 151). Many studies have proven the validity and reliability of the NSSE instrument in measuring the construct it was designed to measure (Pike 2013). It has been proven in multiple studies that because the construct of the NSSE was designed to provide information on how colleges and universities build student engagement, it is suitable for analysing universities rather than students (McCormick and McClenney 2012; Pike 2013). Thus, the analysis of this study is primarily based on its generalisability to universities as a unit of analysis. It then looks at the correlation between the EIs and the regression analysis to examine the interdependency of GPA, Perceived Gains, Student Satisfaction and student engagement.

Findings

The correlation analysis was utilised to compare the degree and patterns of correlation between the 10 EIs and student outcomes identified as GPA, Perceived Gains and Student Satisfaction.

As Table 4 shows, higher order learning had a very significant correlation with reflective integrative learning (r(264) = .203, $p < .001$), learning strategies (r(264) = .352, $p < .001$), quantitative reasoning (r(264) = .205, $p < .001$), student–faculty interactions (r(264) = .263, $p < .001$), effective teaching practices (r(264) = .252, $p < .001$) and supportive environment (r(264) = .214, $p < .001$). Surprisingly, higher order learning did not have a correlation with collaborative learning or quality of interactions and had a negative correlation with discussions with diverse others. Reflective and integrative learning had a correlation with almost all EIs at a very significant level, but it showed no correlation with effective teaching practices or perceived gains.

While statistically significant, the associations were comparatively low. In only two cases was the correlation between learning strategies and quantitative reasoning (r(264) = .413, $p < .001$) and reflective and integrative learning and student–faculty interactions (r(264) = .427, $p < .001$) relatively high at a very significant level. It is also worth mentioning that supportive environment had a significant correlation with all other EIs. Surprisingly, though, collaborative learning showed no correlation with any other indicator except SE (r(264) = .162, $p < .001$) and SF (r(264) = .176, $p < .001$) and a negative correlation with GPA (r(264) = -.125, $p < .005$) at a significant level. As expected, student satisfaction had a very significant correlation with all EIs and with GPA.

The results of the stepwise regression model for predicting student GPA, perceived gains and student satisfaction are presented in Table 5. Thereafter, we discuss the most solid models.

In the stepwise regression of GPA, Model 3 was the strongest explainer ($R^2 = .105$), showing that QI ($\beta = .24$, $t = 4.76$, $p < .001$), in particular, was the best predictor of self-reported GPA. Hence, students who interacted more with their professors, faculty, student services and other administrative staff achieved higher grades. Surprisingly, however, the model predicted that collaborative learning ($\beta = -.13$, $t = -2.23$, $p < 026$) would negatively impact GPA, meaning that students preferred to prepare for classes individually and did not consider the contribution of fellow students to be significant. The results showed that if students helped other students by explaining the course material or preparing for exams by discussing them with others, they had a lower GPA.

With regard to the stepwise regression of perceived gains, Model 2 showed that PG was explained by 15.7% of supportive environment and higher order learning ($R^2 = .157$). Supportive environment ($\beta = .323$, $t = 6.31$, $p < .001$), in particular, was a predictor of students' perceived gains, such as writing and speaking effectively, thinking critically, analysing data, and understanding and supporting others. This signifies the importance of a supportive environment for student learning and mastery of skills. Students believed that being involved socially, attending campus events and using support services contributed to their effective writing and speaking skills and their ability to think critically and analyse numerical and statistical information.

Finally, in terms of student satisfaction, the stepwise regression analysis indicated that Model 3 was quite good ($R^2 = .288$). The results showed that supportive environment is also a good predictor of Student Satisfaction ($\beta = .269$, $t = 7.67$, $p < .001$). However, student satisfaction can also be explained by the quality of interactions ($\beta = .241$, $t = 4.87$, $p < .001$) and learning strategies ($\beta = .231$, $t = 4.12$, $p < .001$). Thus, students saw that they would be more satisfied with their universities if they had quality interactions, worked hard after classes, reviewed their notes, worked on their assignments and summarised what they had learned in courses.

Table 6 presents a stepwise regression model in which student–faculty interactions, effective teaching practices, discussions with diverse others, collaborative learning, quality of interactions and supportive environment were identified as institutional factors. Here, we analysed how those factors predicted students' Academic Challenge indicators (HO, RI, LS and QR). Finally, we discuss the most solid models generated for each indicator.

The stepwise regression of higher order learning in Model 2 showed that SF ($\beta = .227$, $t = 4.43$, $p < .001$) and effective teaching practices ($\beta = .213$, $t = 3.60$, $p < .001$) predicted quite a bit of higher order learning, ($R^2 = .107$). The model indicated that students who experienced positive student–faculty interactions and effective teaching practices tended to analyse the data, apply them to different situations, evaluate points of view and form new ideas.

Table 4. Correlations between Engagement Indicators, Student Outcomes and Satisfaction (ST).

	HO	RI	LS	QR	CL	DD	SF	ET	QI	SE	PG	GPA	ST
HO	1												
RI	.203**	1											
LS	.352**	.302**	1										
QR	.205**	.205**	.413**	1									
CL	.034	.193**	.084	.049	1								
DD	-.017	.149**	.086	.271**	.009	1							
SF	.263**	.427**	.253**	.393**	.176**	.221**	1						
ET	.252**	.059	.157*	.227**	.009	.003	.172**	1					
QI	.091	.221**	.242**	.284**	-.029	.217**	.322**	.222**	1				
SE	.214**	.261**	.356**	.377**	.162**	.123*	.329**	.287**	.313**	1			
PG	.253**	.073	.242**	.246**	.070	.078	.195**	.217**	.171**	.362**	1		
GPA	.035	.142*	.201**	.170**	-.125*	.048	.107	-.022	.281**	.015	.168**	1	
ST	.253**	.190**	.385**	.332**	.025	.123*	.146*	.236**	.381**	.427**	.309**	.118	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 – tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2 – tailed).

Table 5. Stepwise Regression Predicting GPA, Perceived Gains (PG) and Student Satisfaction (ST).

	Standardised β	Partial Correlation	*p*	Adjusted R^2	F	*p*
GPA						
Model 1						
QI	.281	.281	< .001	.076	22.69	< .001
Model 2						
QI	.247	.245	< .001	.091	14.27	< .001
LS	.141	.143	.020			
Model 3						
QI	.240	.240	< .001	.105	11.32	< .001
LS	.154	.156	.011			
CL	-.131	-.137	.026			
Perceived gains (PG)						
Model 1						
SE	.362	.362	< .001	.128	39.83	< .001
Model 2						
SE	.323	.326	< .001	.157	25.70	< .001
HO	.184	.193	.002			
Student satisfaction (ST)						
Model 1						
SE	.427	.427	< .001	.179	58.84	< .001
Model 2						
SE	.341	.427	< .001	.244	43.81	< .001
QI	.274	.381	< .001			
Model 3						
SE	.269	.427	< .001	.288	36.65	< .001
QI	.241	.381	< .001			
LS	.231	.385	< .001			

The regression of reflective integrative learning presented in Model 2 disclosed ($R^2 = .192$) that students experiencing positive student–faculty interactions ($\beta = .328$, $t = 7.66$, $p < .001$) and a supportive environment ($\beta = .136$, $t = 2.32$, $p < .021$) tended to learn in a reflective and integrative way. The regression model of learning strategies presented in Model 2 revealed ($R^2 = .141$) that a strong supportive environment ($\beta = .306$, $t = 6.19$, $p < .001$) predicted learning strategies. The results indicate that a supportive environment among students helps them formulate and improve their learning abilities.

Finally, the regression model of quantitative reasoning in Model 4 showed that student–faculty interactions ($\beta = .245$, $t = 6.93$, $p < .001$), SE ($\beta = .238$, $t = 4.83$, $p < .001$) and discussions with diverse others ($\beta = .185$, $t = 3.40$, $p < .001$) positively influenced quantitative reasoning ($R^2 = .254$). Therefore, there seems to be a tendency among students to engage with statistical and numerical information to make conclusions. This tendency, though, was conditioned by student–faculty interactions, Discussions with diverse others and a supportive environment associated with academic support and participation in other services and activities organised at the university. However, when effective teaching practices, such as clear explanations and organisation, use of illustrative examples and provision of formative and informative feedback, explained higher order learning to a statistically significant extent, it had a low effect on students' quantitative reasoning (< .041).

Discussion

Research on student engagement has demonstrated that it positively impacts student outcomes, such as GPA, perceived learning gains, and student satisfaction. This study shows that if students experience quality interactions with faculty and staff, receive support and use learning strategies, they learn new skills, achieve higher marks and feel satisfied with their educational experience. This study confirms the research conducted by Zilvinskis, Masseria, and Pike (2017), in which they argued that EIs are positively related to perceived gains. In addition, however, this study found that when students were likely to get support from the campus environment through collaborative

Table 6. Stepwise Regression of Academic Challenge Indicators to Institutional Factors.

	Standardized β	Partial correlation	*p*	Adjusted R^2 for the model	F	*p*
Higher order learning						
Model 1						
SF	.263	.263	< .001	.066	19.68	< .001
Model 2						
SF	.227	.231	< .001	.107	16.79	< .001
ET	.213	.252	< .001			
Reflective integrative learning						
Model 1						
SF	.427	.427	< .001	.179	58.72	<.001
Model 2						
SF	.382	.374	< .001	.192	32.54	< .001
SE	.136	.142	.021			
Learning strategies						
Model 1						
SE	.356	.356	< .001	.124	38.36	< .001
Model 2						
SE	.306	.299	< .001	.141	22.78	< .001
SF	.153	.154	.012			
Quantitative reasoning						
Model 1						
SF	.393	.393	< .001	.151	48.09	< .001
Model 2						
SF	.301	.307	< .001	.217	23.34	< .001
SE	.278	.286	< .001			
Model 3						
SF	.265	.273	< .001	.245	10.74	< .001
SE	.268	.281	< .001			
DD	.180	.199	.001			
Model 4						
SF	.254	.263	< .001	.254	4.23	< .001
SE	.238	.246	< .001			
DD	.185	.206	< .001			
ET	.115	.126	.041			

Note**:** SF, ET, DD, CL, QI and SE are identified as institutional factors, and HO, RI, LS, and QR are identified as engagement indicators making up an academic challenge theme.

learning, that is, meeting with others to get assistance, prepare for exams and work on group projects, it had a negative impact on their GPA. A possible explanation may be that students eagerly seek quality out-of-class engagement, which they identify as repeating what they have covered and helping them to improve their learning (Carey 2013).

The quality of interactions, a supportive environment and learning strategies predicted student success in this study in that students learned better when they were supported with academic arrangements, encouraged to be active in diverse interactions and provided with social opportunities, campus activities, health and wellness. At the same time, a curriculum requiring students to identify essential information, examine real-world problems and summarise course materials contributes to student learning. Based on the study, students' satisfaction is greatly enhanced by a deliberately structured student support system, the amount of help students receive through that system, students' perceptions of the quality of their interactions with staff and teachers, and the approaches students use to learn. These findings are supported by studies of Pittaway and Moss (2006) and Kuh and Gonyea (2003) that support systems are important for student engagement and outcomes.

Institutional factors affect the way students are engaged in academically challenging learning. The study revealed that students' ability to analyse ideas and experiences, evaluate information from different sources and form new ideas depends on the frequency of meaningful and substantive interaction between teachers and students. This finding confirms the earlier finding by Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) that students are affected by academic staff's behaviours and attitudes to a great extent. Furthermore, it is essential for students' higher order learning that instructors offer clear

explanations and organisation, use illustrative materials and provide formative and effective feedback. In addition, student–faculty interactions and a supportive environment are related to reflective and integrative learning, exemplified by the connections students make with prior knowledge, other courses and societal issues, consideration of diverse perspectives and learning strategies, such as identifying critical information to reach conclusions, reviewing notes after classes and summarising class material.

Quantitative reasoning was contingent on student–faculty interactions, a supportive environment, discussions with diverse others and effective teaching practices, which leads us to think that students' ability to reach conclusions, examine real-world problems and evaluate the way others view reality is defined by how well they communicate with faculty and diverse others, how well the classes are taught and how well the campus environment is organised to support their learning.

However, students also apply themselves to learning so as to advance their employability and success in further education and life. Skills such as thinking critically and analytically, speaking and writing clearly and effectively, being able to analyse numerically and statistically, working effectively with others, being able to solve complex problems and being tolerant and supportive of others will enhance their employability and define their success in future workplaces and life in general. Previous research has shown that employability skills can be taught in class using various teaching methods (Pegg et al. 2012; Riebe et al. 2010). In this regard, Zilvinskis, Masseria, and Pike (2017) reported that course effort, learning strategies, writing experiences and reflective learning, identified as in-class forms of engagement, help students to achieve academic learning outcomes and that collaborative learning and interaction with faculty outside of class, identified as out-of-class forms of engagement, help them to develop practical skills. Students' knowledge of the factors affecting the acquisition of the above-mentioned outcomes may encourage them to invest more time, energy and effort in them.

Many studies have shown that human interaction and support are essential in encouraging and motivating students to learn. This study has shown that technologically advanced modern campuses may contribute to students' perceptions of success, but reaching success requires human interaction, dialogue and support. Although the study yielded some strong evidence, its results should be generalised with caution for several reasons. To start with, the analysed data concern only five universities in the capital city, which may not represent the entire education system, given that using the NSSE to gather data on student experiences in the context of Azerbaijani HE may have produced information that differs somewhat from that acquired in other contexts thus far. Furthermore, different results might have been obtained if the participating universities ran similar surveys among their students annually, at the least. If students were certain that their feedback could result in some changes, were more familiar with the types of questions and had experience with long surveys, they would likely give more considered responses to the enquiries. Furthermore, although we relied on self-reported data that may be questioned as to its reliability, numerous studies have shown that such data can provide accurate results. (Arico et al. 2018; Cole and Gonyea 2010).

Student engagement is a complex construct consisting of controllable and uncontrollable variables that influence it. Even so, a heavy responsibility is placed on universities to persuade students to be engaged in their learning, whether by challenges placed on students through the agency of the curriculum or professors or by out-of-class activities enriched with learning practices or by university support systems that enable students' effective learning. Student engagement in genuine learning mediated by the curriculum, teachers and support systems is likely to decrease some negative aspects in post-Soviet Azerbaijani HE (Sadigov 2014).

Despite these limitations, this study offers important implications for university leaders and policymakers reforming HE in Azerbaijan and/or countries with similar educational context.

First, emphasising student engagement at the policy level and identifying its indicators in documentation would provide policymakers data to further assess decisions about the effectiveness of policy-level changes. It would be advisable for institutional leaders to reconsider the conditions and strategies for student engagement and to embed the development of critical employability skills into curricula, regardless of the field.

Second, the study utilised the NSSE in a country outside of its coverage to explore how students learn in a culturally different country, where HE leaders rely on centralised decision-making and a high level of authority. To change this tradition and to engage students in both in-and out-of-class activities to the extent we observe in developed countries may require a 'shift in mindset' (Ergun and Kondakci 2021). The basic deduction is that wherever students are in any given cultural or economic situation, they must be provided with appropriate conditions, support and interactions with other students and faculty to engage them fully in learning and to support them in building the future.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data are available upon request.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Reliability test by the number of sequentially selected student samples

SCALE	25 students	50 students	100 students	200 students	433 students
HO	.642	.753	.517	.494	.587
RI	.554	.528	.678	.678	.677
LS	.810	.705	.749	.714	.709
QR	.728	.771	.708	.709	.750
CL	.584	.688	.741	.584	.648
DD	.731	.720	.564	.725	.687
SF	.713	.728	.709	.730	.750
ET	.566	.442	.682	.433	.558
QI	.778	.711	.778	.755	.792
SE	.783	.777	.798	.818	.822

Reliability test by the number of randomly selected student samples

SCALE	25	50 students	100 students	200 students	300 students
HO	.510	.579	.342	.555	.603
RI	.667	.693	.708	.683	.665
LS	.618	.538	.746	.634	.707
QR	.820	.774	.766	.699	.751
CL	.705	.637	.718	.670	.645
DD	.285	.614	.618	.671	.679
SF	.793	.790	.748	.708	.759
ET	.655	.598	.385	.543	.530
QI	.769	.787	.809	.813	.786
SE	.846	.854	.787	.823	.822

Appendix 2

Reliability tests by universities

	1 (62)	2 (85)	3 (31)	4 (39)	5 (49)	6 (56)	7 (60)	8 (51)
	HO	.704	.701	.455	.761	.604	.379	.322
	.343							
RI	.818	.727	.623	.639	.718	.641	.599	.677
LS	.827	.765	.745	.718	.509	.221	.670	.688
	QR	.878	.649	.796	.777	.828	.592	.725
	.628							
CL	.653	.768	.796	.763	.581	.485	.421	.190
	DD	.788	.702	.577	.647	.547	.814	.537
	.631							
SF	.813	.758	.787	.720	.826	.707	.695	.609
ET	.706	.691	.613	.190	.576	.343	.187	.409
QI	.831	.766	.718	.827	.893	.769	.651	.706
SE	.844	.801	.876	.764	.841	.855	.707	.773

International Journal Educational Psychology
Volume 13, Issue 2, 21th June, 2024, Pages 143 – 168

http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/ijep.13735

Student Engagement Variations across Institutions and Disciplines: Findings from Azerbaijan

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Abstract

Although student engagement has been a widely researched area known to improve student learning and a topic of scholarly debate for many decades now, this has yet to be the case in Azerbaijan. Data from the National Survey of Student Engagement, conducted among 433 undergraduate students of the 18-23 age range (M = 21.37, SD = 1.43) at eight universities in Azerbaijan, allowed us to examine variations in the conditions meant to foster student engagement, as well as students' perspectives on improving their educational experiences. Specifically, we looked at differences related to academic challenges, learning with peers, teacher experiences, and campus environment. Student engagement varied across disciplines. Small universities in the capital city provided better collaborative learning conditions. However, students at regional universities were more satisfied with the quality of student-faculty interactions. Nonetheless, students saw a strong need for fundamental changes in higher education in Azerbaijan, focusing on improving the quality of teachers, teaching and the curriculum. The study provided an overview of student engagement variations across institutions and disciplines and how students conceptualise necessary improvements in student experiences. Institutional leaders must understand the variations for seeking essential changes in the HE system to effectively accommodate students' needs and expectations.

Keywords

Student engagement, differences across universities, policy-level decision-making, NSSE, higher education in Azerbaijan

To cite this article: Isaeva, R., Uusiautti, S., & Ratinen, I. (2024). Student Engagement Variations across Institutions and Disciplines: Findings from Azerbaijan. *International Journal of Educational Psychology, 13*(2) pp. 143-168. http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/ijep.13735
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International Journal Educational Psychology
Volumen 13, Número 2, 21 de junio de 2024, Páginas 143 – 168

http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/ijep.13735

Variaciones del Compromiso Estudiantil entre Instituciones y Disciplinas: Hallazgos desde Azerbaiyán

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Resumen

Aunque el compromiso estudiantil ha sido investigado ampliamente y se reconoce que mejora el aprendizaje de los estudiantes, en Azerbaiyán esto aún no se ha desarrollado completamente. Utilizando datos de la Encuesta Nacional de Compromiso Estudiantil, realizada entre 433 estudiantes universitarios de 18 a 23 años (M = 21.37, SD = 1.43) en ocho universidades azerbaiyanas, se examinaron las diferencias en desafíos académicos, aprendizaje con compañeros, experiencias docentes y ambiente en el campus. El compromiso varió entre disciplinas, siendo las universidades pequeñas de la capital mejores para el aprendizaje colaborativo, mientras que en las regionales se valoraban más las interacciones entre estudiantes y profesores. Los estudiantes expresaron la necesidad de cambios fundamentales en la educación superior, enfocándose en la mejora de la calidad de los profesores, la enseñanza y el plan de estudios. Este estudio proporcionó una visión general de las variaciones en el compromiso estudiantil y las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre mejoras necesarias. Es esencial que los líderes institucionales comprendan estas variaciones para realizar cambios efectivos en el sistema educativo superior y satisfacer las necesidades y expectativas de los estudiantes.

Palabras Clave

Compromiso estudiantil, diferencias entre universidades, toma de decisiones a nivel de política, NSSE, educación superior en Azerbaiyán

To cite this article: Isaeva, R., Uusiautti, S., & Ratinen, I. (2024). Variaciones del Compromiso Estudiantil entre Instituciones y Disciplinas: Hallazgos desde Azerbaiyán. *International Journal of Educational Psychology, 13*(2) pp. 143-168. http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/ijep.13735

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The potential of higher education (HE) to impact the quality of students' education, thus shaping their future personal and professional lives, has been discussed in many studies (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Ashwin, 2020; Astin, 1977; Bowen, 1996; Kuh et al., 2010; Mayhew et al., 2016). The role of universities worldwide is to provide quality learning opportunities for students to become personally and professionally successful. Interestingly, what students learn and what HE systems expect them to learn are usually positively correlated, similar to the relationship between the state and HE, where the latter is regulated based on the state's expectations of it (Dalmon et al., 2019; Marginson, 2013). Moreover, how student learning is positioned within national and institutional policies will impact how student engagement in learning within institutions is shaped.

Many studies, for example, have been conducted in the US and elsewhere to examine the impact of university investments on student outcomes (Dahvlig et al., 2020; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pike et al., 2011; Ryan, 2005). In their study exploring linkages between educational expenditures, student engagement, and learning outcomes, Pike et al. (2011) concluded that money makes a difference in the learning and development of students. Furthermore, Dahlvig et al. (2020) in their study analyzing the impact of institutional expenditures on student graduation and retention using the hierarchical regression analysis, found that there was a strong association between expenditures on instruction and graduation rates as well as associations between expenditures on research and retention rates. Considering that all these studies were conducted in the United States, where HE provisions are streamlined, interactions between institutional factors and student outcomes have been studied largely from different perspectives, such studies in the post-Soviet area are rare. Studies or reports exploring the effectiveness of new reforms or investments made in those reforms are lacking.

The success of educational reform in Azerbaijan – as well as in many other former Soviet countries – is constrained by many factors (Oleksiyenko, 2023). The collapse of the Soviet Union caused major imbalances in the education system of all its constituent republics, such as a shortage of resources, a lack of control over their quality, and an unstable system with new university types, all without an adequate strategy at the national level in place. This turbulence persists, albeit with some degree of reconciliation due to the Bologna process (Gibbs et al., 2023). Yet, streamlining the quality of the HE system needs to receive the necessary policy-level attention to clearly understand the uncertainties and misconceptions prevalent in most of the top-down former Soviet republics.

Azerbaijan, as a former Soviet country, represents an interesting case where economic development is more prominent than any other sector, including education. The educational reforms have been in place since 1991, after Azerbaijan regained its independence, aligning its educational offerings with those of the European and Western worlds, yet being rather slow to secure those changes (Isaeva & Aliyev, 2023; Mammadova & Valiyev, 2020). Despite consecutive changes, the quality of teaching and learning has yet to improve in most higher education institutions (HEIs) in Azerbaijan. However, among the 51 currently existing HEIs, there are several providers of quality education due to their ownership, leadership, size, access to resources, and strong international collaboration. Conversely, this limited access to quality HEIs raises concerns about the quality of mass education, with more than 200,000 current students. Universities in Azerbaijan are facing many challenges, including a shortage of

modern, well-educated teaching and research staff to meet the needs and expectations of pragmatic, technologically savvy digital natives (Isaeva & Aliyev, 2023). With online education becoming increasingly available, prompting a reevaluation of HE offerings, Azerbaijani HE will inevitably be impacted by the changes brought about by globalization because, as noted by Locke (2014), competition among universities goes beyond the national level.

Arguably, the educational reform process in Azerbaijan needs to look into the definition of student engagement and its measurement (Isaeva, Ratinen and Uusiautti, 2023). Student engagement, when measured, is likely to provide information on how effective universities are regarding the conditions created for student learning (Pike et al., 2011). One recent study on student engagement in Azerbaijan, for example, found that student learning, success, and satisfaction are broadly impacted by the campus environment and student–faculty interactions (Isaeva et al., 2023). This study, by analysing the NSSE data through bivariate correlation and regression analysis, demonstrated that institutional conditions such as a supportive student environment, quality of interactions, and student-faculty interactions were significant constituents for students to learn, gain success, get satisfied and be engaged in academically purposeful activities (Isaeva et al., 2023).

Moreover, research has shown that student engagement is divergent across countries, universities, majors, and years of study within a single university due to its "dynamic and situational" nature (Leach, 2016; Zepke, 2014). Differences among universities due to finances, human resources, ownership, leadership, and student positioning in institutional missions significantly impact student learning and development. In this article, we report findings from our analysis of student engagement across Azerbaijani universities to provide a deeper understanding of the conditions created for student learning across universities and disciplines.

Student Engagement

Student engagement has been theorized as a "meta construct" (Fredricks et al., 2004) contributing to student learning and personal and professional development (Kuh et al., 2008; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Student engagement is based on constructivism, and many researchers have defined it as the efforts that students and institutions invest in learning practices (Coates, 2005; Kuh, 2001). Kuh (2001) described it as student effort, energy, and time devoted to educationally purposeful activities. Student engagement has been recognized as a strong factor positively associated with student retention, the quality of the program, and institutional governance defining the success of any given HEI (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). A body of research demonstrated student engagement's positive impact on student learning and personal development (Carini et al., 2006; Coates, 2005; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Trowler & Trowler, 2010).

The construct of student engagement is complex (Kahu, 2013; Lester et al., 2013; Zepke et al., 2012). For example, Zepke et al. (2012) conclude that even student engagement research results from a micro level, such as courses, can be used to improve the quality of teaching and student support systems. Recent research identifies student engagement as an investment made by students and institutions for student learning, outcome, and institutional reputation (Trowler et al., 2022). It depends on the context and situation (Zepke, 2014). In this study, we analysed

student engagement from two perspectives: institutional culture of engagement and investment in student engagement, two crucial factors impacting how student engagement is shaped at any HEI.

Culture of Engagement

There is an interesting interplay between institutional variables and student engagement, which is firmly based on the "authentic partnership between students and their universities" (Carey, 2018, p. 12). As Carey (2018) further argues, this implies that universities are responsible for staying open for student participation and facilitating student active membership. He argues that" universities shape its students' engagement" (Carey, 2018, p.16). Institutional variables, such as mission, structure, size, institutional governance and culture, leadership, selectivity, students living on campus, emphasis on graduate education, and the amount of investment made in institutional development, are associated with student engagement and student learning outcomes (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Kuh et al., 2008; McCormick et al., 2013; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pike et al., 2006; Pike et al., 2011). In more recent research, Gunuc et al. (2022), by analysing the data from 26 universities across Turkiye, concluded that campus climate significantly impacts student engagement. In this study, the campus climate was measured in terms of physical facilities of the campus, campus life, social facilities, entertainment facilities and student clubs or communities. Based on the ANOVA analysis, they found that variations across the universities are related to the conditions created at the universities (Gunuc et al., 2022).

The culture of engagement is grounded in the university's vision of entrusting and empowering students to improve their learning experiences (Carey, 2018), regardless of their social, economic, or cultural backgrounds. Although students come from diverse backgrounds, HEIs are responsible for creating an engagement culture for them to succeed in their learning (Carey, 2018; Cook-Sather, 2009). Students come from different backgrounds, and they make different contributions to the learning process; therefore, providing equal opportunities will help circumvent inequalities in student participation and contributions (Cook-Sather, 2009). Gunuc et al. (2022) have found that students from economically able families are more highly engaged than students from financially challenged families. On the contrary, Tinto (2023) concluded that student background matters less than student engagement with others at the institutional premises. He argues that a student's retention decision, for example, is impacted more by a friend's retention decision than the student background variable. Thus, institutional conditions created equally for all students, such as learning communities, student–faculty research, study abroad, and internships, are more likely to influence student engagement and learning (Cook-Sather, 2009).

Universities, by their virtue, are a place of learning and transformation and are thus seen as a source of new visions and ideas that bring change and development (Marginson, 2013) by providing an equal and equitable culture of engagement for everyone. Different engagement levels can be found due to institutional and policy context manifestations. The position of the students within the university's hierarchy of power and authority shapes forms of engagement (Carey, 2018). This is why student engagement practices and activities must be stipulated in

the institutional mission, as supported by Kezar and Kinzie (2006), who showed that institutions aligning their "*espoused"* and "*enacted*" missions are more effective in achieving consistency between their purpose and direction. Nonetheless, student engagement becomes more responsive and collaborative when there is a degree of flexibility (Carey, 2018), autonomy, and empowerment.

Investment in Student Engagement

The impact of institutional factors, in this case, investment on student engagement in learning has been undervalued (Baron & Corbin, 2012; Brint & Cantwell, 2014), even though student engagement's positive association with students' grades, satisfaction, perceived learning outcomes, critical thinking, and students' professional and personal lives after graduation have been largely discussed in the literature (Nelson Laird et al., 2014; Rocconi et al., 2020). Investment in the development of a student support system, recruitment, and professional development of staff is likely to positively affect student learning and educational quality, improving student satisfaction and institutional reputation in the longer term (Bowden et al., 2021; Pike et al., 2011). Pike et al. (2011) found that expenditures for undergraduate education impact student learning and that this relationship is mediated by student engagement. An earlier study by Pike et al. (2006) found a positive interplay between investment in instruction and student–faculty interactions, leading to outcomes such as hiring more academic staff, better access to academic staff, and smaller class sizes. A study conducted by Dahlvig et al. (2020) concluded that expenditure on instruction and academic support strongly correlates with student success indicators, such as retention and graduation rates. In the same vein, widely available scholarships for students, resources invested in instructional improvement, and low student-faculty ratios are positively impacting students' persistence and graduation rates (Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006). However, considering the financial limitations HE faces worldwide, attracting funds from alternative sources, thorough planning and sometimes reallocation of resources could present a solution to improve the financial capacity of HE. Although the practice of attracting funds from alternative sources such as alumni donations is more widespread in the US than in other Western countries, it can be developed in any university by nurturing a culture of giving (Gallo, 2012; Pedro & Andraz, 2021).

Previous studies have also shown that student engagement impacts the long-term commitment of alumni to their alma mater (Liang et al., 2022). Arguably, alumni donations are interrelated with the campus experiences of students, positively impacting students' long-term commitment to their institutions (Drezner et al., 2020; Pedro et al., 2020; Rau & Erwin, 2015). Furthermore, the positive academic and social interactions students experience at the university are likely to impact their sense of belonging to the university (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Isaeva et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2015). Liang et al., (2022) indicated that student engagement, especially in extracurricular activities, is likely to improve alumni giving. Cownie and Gallo (2021) found that student–faculty interactions encourage appreciation of the alma mater and establishing alumni relations. Ultimately, investing in student engagement by imporving campus culture, quality of interactions with other students and academic staff will return to institution in terms of alumni commitment, donations and strong reputation.

Finally, student engagement is "Neither wholly flawed, nor a panacea for the higher education system – it is something in between" (Eagle & Brennan, 2007, p. 56) until it is thoroughly contextualized, conceptualized, and implemented at national and institutional levels. In countries such as the US and the UK, student engagement is framed and measured at the national level, and the results are used by institutions to improve the learning process. It is the responsibility of educational institutions to create conditions that support student learning (Krause & Coates, 2008; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

To sum up, the literature has widely discussed the value of student engagement and its impact on student and institutional outcomes. Many of these studies were conducted in developed countries, where student engagement at the policy level is streamlined and implemented at the institutional level. In Azerbaijan, the lack of access to data on institutional variables and investments in student engagement makes it impossible to examine the interplay between the two. In this context, this exploratory study, using quantitative and qualitative data, examines variations in the institutional conditions for student engagement and students' perspectives to understand better the overall situation in a country where institutions possess limited freedom to design undergraduate curricula.

Method

This mixed method exploratory study will shed light on how student engagement in learning can be improved in a country with a strong Soviet legacy by responding to the following questions:

1. To what extent do universities and disciplines in Azerbaijan present differences in the student engagement indicators identified in the NSSE?
2. How do students perceive the changes required to improve their experiences?

This exploratory study aims to elucidate how the diverse conditions present at different universities can shed light on variations in student engagement across Azerbaijani universities. It also seeks to provide policymakers and institutional leaders with insights into how to improve student engagement in learning.

In light of the limited access to institutional data and the lack of institutional classifications at the national level, like the Carnegie classification, we categorized universities by size and location (Table 1). Universities are considered large if the student number is above 6,600, mid-size in the case of 4,100–6,600 enrolled students, and small for 2,500 to 4,000 students.

Table 1
University Profiles

University	Size	Location
U1	Small	Capital
U2	Mid-size	Capital
U3	Large	Capital

University	Size	Location
U4	Small	Capital
U5	Large	Capital
U6	Large	Region
U7	Mid-size	Region
U8	Mid-size	Region

The concurrent mixed method approach was considered suitable to respond to the research questions and allowed us to gather and analyze rich and multi-layered views from students as the main stakeholders of the education process (Creswell, 2015). Mixed-method research is a strong method because mixing data collection or analyzing methods has complementary strengths that help providing a profound understanding about the phenomenon under investigation (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008). However, the debate on the rigour of the mixed method is continuous, although it is not new in social sciences (Shan, 2022; Tashakkori et al., 2021). The mixed-method research is valuable for this research exploring students' lived experiences, dynamics, variations, and differences in a new context (Greene, 2008). Such a method provides deep understanding as quantitative data produces systemic tendencies, and qualitative data reflects the learning experiences of individual student (Creswell, 2015). Only mixed-method research could provide "generality" and "particularity" considering the context of this study (Greene, 2008, p. 7). Given that the study covers different educational contexts, mixed-method research is considered strong enough to provide rich data and a thorough understanding of such a meta-construct as student engagement (Greene, 2007).

Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) instrument licensed from Indiana University. The data were gathered in 2018 from 433 students from eight universities in Azerbaijan. In addition to multiple-choice questions, one question asked for ideas for improving student experiences: What single change would most improve the educational experience at this institution?

The NSSE, initially designed in 2000, was meant to measure to what extent universities provide conditions for their students to engage in educationally purposeful experiences (Kuh, 2001). It was developed and used first in the US, and its extension was adapted and reproduced in other developed English-speaking countries, such as the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and later in Korea and China. The results of the NSSE, which display differences in student engagement across the nation, are widely used in the US to make decisions at the institutional level (Fosnacht et al., 2020; McCormick et al., 2013; Pascarella et al., 2010).

In 2013, the instrument was updated, and it now includes 10 engagement indicators (EIs) united under four themes: academic challenge, learning with peers, experiences with faculty, and campus environment. These 10 EIs are higher-order learning, reflective and integrative learning, learning strategies, quantitative reasoning, collaborative learning, discussions with diverse others, student–faculty interactions, effective teaching practices, quality of interactions, and supportive environment. Given its extensive usage and the lack of a survey to measure the complexity of student engagement at the national level, the NSSE was chosen to gather data from Azerbaijani students.

Essentially, the instrument was found to be an accurate measurement tool for the effectiveness of educational practice (McCormick et al., 2013). Although there is constant debate over the validity and reliability of the NSSE, many studies have demonstrated its validity and reliability (Pike, 2013). The clearly formulated NSSE questions concerned regular and familiar activities in which students were involved at the university. The survey was conducted anonymously to prevent the respondents' privacy from being threatened or violated (Kuh, 2001).

In a concurrent mixed method design, where the data is obtained simultaneously, but the analysis appears as "mixed analysis", as Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie (2003, p. 352) call it, we analyzed the quantitative and qualitative data provided by the NSSE and reported the results in the following order: quantitative, qualitative, and integrated. Combining quantitative and qualitative data is one of the strong and distinguishing characteristics enhancing the worth of the mixed method (Bryman, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Within the mixed method framework, the qualitative data can be used to evaluate the validity of the quantitative data, which is a case in this study.

Although the quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately, qualitative data was used to support, clarify and understand the findings from the quantitative data. The complementarity of the data added value to make strong inferences (Tashakkori et al., 2021).

Table 2 presents the demographic data of the students participating in the study. The survey collected information on education year, gender, age, major, and student status. The average age of the students was 21 years. The gender distribution was 42% male and almost 58% female. A total of 13% were junior and 87% were senior students. In terms of academic performance (out of 100), 57 students (13%) had a GPA below 70, 65 (15%) students reported having a GPA above 90, and the remaining majority, 311 students (72%), had a GPA between 71 and 90.

Table 2

Summary of the Participants' Sociodemographic Profile

Sociodemographic information	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Age			21.37	1.426
18–20 years	97	22.4		
21–22 years	272	62.8		
23 and above	64	14.8		
Gender			1.58	.495
Male	183	42.3		
Female	250	57.7		
Academic major			2.54	1.122
Economics	92	21.2		
Education	141	32.6		
Sciences	74	17.1		
Social Sciences	126	29.1		
Academic year				
			3.59	1.059

Sociodemographic information	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Two	120	27.7		
Three	6	1.4		
Four	237	54.7		
Five	70	16.2		
University			4.36	2.406
U1	62	14.3		
U2	85	19.6		
U3	31	7.2		
U4	39	9.0		
U5	49	11.3		
U6	56	12.9		
U7	60	13.9		
U8	51	11.8		
GPA				
	<70	13		
	>90	15		
	71–90	72		

To explore the differences between universities in terms of the 10 EIs of the NSSE, we chose a one-way ANOVA with the university as the only factor. One-way ANOVA was a good choice to look if the variations across the universities and disciplines were statistically significantly different (Cohen et al., 2011).

Next, we conducted post hoc tests to determine which groups in the ANOVA differed from each other. The same procedure was repeated to respond to the second research question, concerning whether disciplines impact student engagement. We chose Games Howell adjustment due to the differences in the response rates across the universities and disciplines (Field, 2009).

For the qualitative analysis, which was based on content analysis, we chose the student feedback gathered through the NSSE. The students were asked to share their thoughts on one aspect that should be changed to improve student experiences at their respective universities. Content analysis uncovered what students perceived as impediments to engaging in their learning.

We used explicit coding rules by compressing groups of words into fewer content categories (Mayring, 2014) using NVivo 8. In the first step of coding, we attempted to conceptualize the data by highlighting relevant passages (Creswell, 2014) and labeling them. Then, we grouped the labels to reduce the number of concepts, which eventually resulted in 11 inductive categories. These were later combined under the four themes of the NSSE. We denoted Universities with U and Students with S to identify the participants.

By integrating the findings from the quantitative and qualitative analyses, we obtained a description of how engagement levels vary and how the students' perceptions explain and provide a deeper understanding of their experiences and ways to improve them.

Findings

Student Engagement in Azerbaijani Universities

Separate one-way ANOVA with each NSSE indicator generated results with significant differences in student engagement among 9 out of 10 NSSE indicators (Table 3). The homogeneity of variance test we conducted was significant for 6 out of 10 EIs: higher-order learning, reflective and integrative learning, learning strategies, collaborative learning, effective teaching practices, and quality of interactions.

Table 3

One-way ANOVA of Student Engagement Across Eight Universities in Azerbaijan

Engagement indicators	df	F	Sig	η^2
Higher-order learning	7, 425	3.852	<.001	.060
Reflective and integrative learning	7, 425	1.076	.378	.017
Learning strategies	7, 425	5.033	<.001	.077
Quantitative reasoning	7, 425	5.293	<.001	.080
Collaborative learning	7, 425	8.178	<.001	.119
Discussions with diverse others	7, 425	3.959	<.001	.061
Student–faculty interactions	7, 425	4.198	<.001	.065
Effective teaching practices	7, 425	3.251	.002	.051
Quality of interactions	7, 425	4.417	<.001	.068
Supportive environment	7, 425	6.051	<.001	.091

The results are presented according to the 10 EIs assembled under the four themes of the NSSE: academic challenge, learning with peers, experience with faculty, and campus environment.

Academic Challenge

The post hoc test showed differences in the high-order learning indicator among some universities. For example, a small urban university (U1) was better evaluated in terms of the tasks students were given to analyze, evaluate, and apply information in practice than U2, a mid-size urban university (mean difference = .38, $p = .05$). At the same time, U2 is relatively weaker in organizing conditions for higher-order learning than the large urban university U5 (mean difference = −39, $p < 0.05$), the large regional university U6 (mean difference = −37, $p < 0.05$), and the mid-size regional university U8 (mean difference = −36, $p < 0.05$). When it

comes to learning strategies, significant differences were found between U2 and U6 and between U2 and U8. According to the results, a mid-size urban university (U2) performed worse than a large regional university (U6: mean difference = −44, $p < 0.05$) and a mid-size regional university (U8: mean difference = −52, $p < 0.01$) in creating conditions facilitating the use of learning strategies. A post hoc test conducted for the reflective and integrative learning indicator demonstrated no differences across universities. However, the way students engage with the curricular requirements to deal with information to draw conclusions and judgments – otherwise called quantitative reasoning – showed a significant difference across the universities: $F(7, 425) = 5.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .080$, with a medium effect size.

Learning with Peers

The post hoc test conducted for collaborative learning generated one of the largest numbers of differences across universities. In a mid-size (U2) and small-size (U1) urban university, students were better at helping others by explaining materials, preparing for exams, and seeking help to understand the material than in universities U3, U5, U6, and U7. Hence, in a small urban university (U1), collaborative learning outperforms that in large urban universities, such as U3 (mean difference = .53, $p < 0.05$) and U5 (mean difference = .52, $p < 0.05$), in a large regional university (U6: mean difference =.35, $p < .001$) and a mid-size regional university (U7: mean difference = .50, $p < .001$).

However, two mid-size regional universities also show differences from each other: U8 is better able to organize collaborative learning than U7 (mean difference = .25, $p < 0.05$). Discussions with diverse others demonstrated a significant difference across the universities: $F(7, 425) = 3.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .061$.

Experiences with Faculty

Related to effective teaching practices, the post hoc test generated only one difference: in U7, a mid-size regional university teaching practices are more effective and meaningful than in U2, a mid-size urban university (mean difference = .33, $p < 0.05$). This means that academic staff are more open to discussing students' future career plans and progress outside of class at mid-size regional university U7.

Campus Environment

It appeared that students are satisfied with the quality of interactions at U8, a mid-size regional university, in comparison to U2, a mid-size urban university (mean difference = .37, $p < 0.05$). The quality of interactions was also evaluated highly by students at U5, a large urban university, in comparison to U4, a small-size urban university (mean difference = .66, $p < 0.05$). At a large regional university (U6), the quality of interactions was evaluated as higher than at U4, a small urban university (mean difference = .60, $p < 0.05$), Likewise, at U8, a mid-size regional university, students evaluated the quality of interactions as better than at U4, a small urban university (mean difference = .57, $p < 0.05$).

Regarding how supportive the university environment is, a significant difference was found across universities F (7, 425) = 6.05, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .091$, with a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988, pp. 283–287), indicating that 9% of the variance comes from institutional differences.

Student Engagement Levels between Majors

We conducted a separate one-way ANOVA with each NSSE indicator to determine differences across disciplines. The results revealed significant differences among 8 out of 10 indicators (Table 4). The homogeneity of variance test was significant for 5 of the indicators: higher-order learning, learning strategies, collaborative learning, effective teaching practices, quality of interactions.

Table 4
One-way ANOVA of Student Engagement Across Disciplines

Engagement indicators	df	F	Sig	η^2
Higher-order learning	3, 429	4.911	.002	.033
Reflective and integrative learning	3, 429	7.122	<.001	.047
Learning strategies	3, 429	6.851	<.001	.046
Quantitative reasoning	3, 429	3.152	.025	.022
Collaborative learning	3, 429	6.125	<.001	.041
Discussions with diverse others	3, 429	2.272	.080	.016
Student–faculty interactions	3, 429	1.748	.156	.012
Effective teaching practices	3, 429	5.965	<.001	.040
Quality of interactions	3, 429	6.395	<.001	.043
Supportive environment	3, 429	3.397	<.001	.057

Academic Challenge

In the case of higher-order learning, students in the education field were more satisfied with their coursework challenge than science students (mean difference = .31, p = .006), and students in the sciences were relatively less satisfied with their practical problems and coursework involving the evaluation and analysis of data than students in the social sciences (mean difference = −.30, p = .013). Significant differences across disciplines were also observed in reflective and integrative learning F(3, 429) = 7.12, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .047$, with a medium effect size. Regarding learning strategies, the assumption of equal variance does not

hold: students in the education field review, read, and summarize notes after classes more often than their counterparts in the sciences (mean difference = .43, $p < .001$). Quantitative reasoning also showed significant differences across majors $F(3, 429) = 3.15$, $p < .025$, $\eta^2 = .022$, with a low effect size.

Learning with Peers

In collaborative learning, equal variance is not assumed: students in the fields of economics, education, and sciences are more satisfied with the conditions created for them to learn from peers than their counterparts from social sciences. Economics students more often engage in asking for help, explaining the learned material to peers, working together on projects, and getting ready for exams than students in the social sciences (mean difference = .27, $p = .011$). Students in education reported learning with peers more often than students in the social sciences (mean difference = .19, $p = .027$), and students in the sciences were engaged in learning with peers – helping others and being involved in group projects – more often than students in the social sciences (mean difference = .34, $p = .003$).

Discussions with diverse others generated no significant differences across majors $F(3, 429) = 2.27$, $p = .080$, $\eta^2 = .016$.

Experiences with Faculty

No significant differences were observed regarding student–faculty interactions across majors $F(3, 429) = 1.75$, $p < .156$, $\eta^2 = .012$. Regarding the effectiveness of teaching practices, economics students were more satisfied with the level of teachers' ability to explain and organize the material, use illustrative materials and examples, and provide feedback than students in the sciences (mean difference = .26, $p = .046$). Likewise, students in the social sciences found the employed teaching practices to be effective more often than students in the sciences (mean difference = −.27, $p = .014$). Similarly, students in education were more satisfied with the effectiveness of the teaching practices employed than students in the sciences (mean difference = .30, $p = .006$).

Campus Environment

Finally, the post hoc test for the quality of interactions demonstrated that economics students rated their learning environment as relatively weaker than their colleagues from the education field (mean difference = −.38, $p < .001$). Similarly, students in the sciences were less satisfied with their learning environment (mean difference = −.38, $p = .004$). A one-way ANOVA of how supportive the environment yielded $F (3, 429) = 3.40$, $p < .001$, and $\eta = .057$, with a medium effect size, indicating that only about 6% of the variance comes from the discipline.

Student Perceptions of Factors Improving Their Engagement

Academic Challenge

The academic challenge was students' major concern, with the largest number of remarks (N = 95) related to the curriculum, assessments, internships, and practical classes, all of which should challenge and equip students with higher-order, reflective, and integrative learning and quantitative reasoning skills, as well as enable them to utilize different learning strategies.

According to the students, *the curriculum* needs a deep revision to address the quality and quantity of major-related subjects. Specifically, they mentioned the problem of being required to memorize information in different classes. Students were conscious of the design of the curriculum, requiring it to become more academically challenging. Notably, one student (U1, S208) voiced the importance of an "[i]ntegration of critical thinking into teaching and learning," while another student (U5, S398) emphasized the need to "review the curriculum to add more major subjects." Students also proposed adding more hours for major-related subjects and assignments and were concerned that the number of hours for major subjects was not enough for one to excel in the field.

Assessment received the greatest number of remarks from the students. The students' major concerns were objectivity, rules and regulations, and plagiarism issues. They believe there is a huge need to revisit the assessment procedures at each university and offered ways to improve them. For example, they proposed eliminating multiple-choice exams and requirements for attendance; instead, emphasis should be placed on individual assignments and interactivity during class.

Students mentioned *internships* as one of the weakest points of Azerbaijani HEIs, stating that universities should take them more seriously. To achieve this, building strong relationships with companies is crucial in increasing internship opportunities for students: "I would build excellent relationships with the industry to take students there for practice" (U7, S130). Another option they offered was organizing tours in companies.

Regarding *practical classes*, students believe they should be based on real-life cases. They mentioned that, for example, engineers need to learn in a more practical way. They also underlined that classes are rather theoretical and that there should be more balance between theory and practice: "Having more practical classes" (U3, S67).

Learning with Peers

Learning with peers entails having opportunities for collaborative learning with other students and discussions with diverse others. Our analysis of the students' remarks revealed their strong awareness of the situation and offered insights into their expectations as learners.

First and foremost, students understand that *their peers also need to change.* They clearly formulated the idea and showed that other students' attitudes toward learning should change. Many mentioned that they need to become more hardworking, do more reading, and take class activities seriously, as articulated by one student: "I would change classmates hindering the learning process during the class" (U2, S12).

Concerning *their interests and expectations,* the students raised concerns about not being given the autonomy to choose the subjects they studied. They also mentioned that they must be listened to and taken seriously when complaining about teachers. Another concern regards their social lives, requesting the existence of more clubs.

As students aptly mentioned, instilling *motivation among students* should happen at the beginning of their educational journey, being one of the responsibilities of the university to clarify all information about GPA and its components right at the beginning of their studies, ensuring clarity regarding requirements and expectations: "To inform students about GPA during the induction" (U4, S27)**.** Students also proposed that the system should offer rewards for commendable performance and that classes should be more interactive to meet students' needs.

Experience with Faculty

Students also left a large number of remarks (N =70) about teaching quality, which is divided into two parts: effectiveness of teaching and communication with students. Students indicated that teaching was very old-fashioned, requiring retelling the assigned reading. It was not based on research, as perceptively indicated by one student: "Teaching should be research-based and research-driven" (U1, S425). Students also complained about the capabilities of teachers: "Do not allow someone who barely speaks English to teach it" (U1, S428). They proposed changing the entire teaching staff by substituting old and unprofessional teachers with young and professional ones who would be able to refer to research, communicate with students, be tolerant toward a variety of opinions, and carry on other responsibilities with honour and dignity: "To change teachers with Soviet-style, old mindset" (U2, S284).

The students also identified many problems they had in *communicating* with the universities, largely stemming from their interactions with the teachers; they reported that instances of discrimination and subjectivity among teachers were prevalent. The students expressed a desire for more open and sincere communication and for building closer relationships with teachers. They also mentioned the need for friendlier teachers who would treat students with dignity and respect and help them nurture the ability to freely express their opinions, refusals, and demands. As two students phrased it, this involves "Communicating with students like individuals and personalities" (U8, S189) and "building more closer relationships with students" (U5, S388).

Campus Environment

The concerns students raised related to the campus environment were mainly about *academic facilities:* the lack of laboratories and of a sufficient number of books in the libraries – especially books in English. In addition, they mentioned a lack of quality learning materials and tutoring. Students were also eager to study online and use advanced technology in learning and teaching for quality improvement: "Advanced technology must be used in teaching and learning" (U7, S159) and "Laboratories and libraries to be improved" (U6, S335)**.**

The students reported being very willing to participate in out-of-class activities, such as visiting museums and planting trees in the university yard. At the same time, they proposed having

more development programs for students where they would meet famous people and people from different industries. More precisely, one student urged to "Engage students actively in research" (U7, S144), while another expressed the need to "Organize seminars to increase student motivation" (U1, S418). Finally, students also reported a need for developing their emotional intelligence.

Discussion

The findings showed that there is a difference between urban and regional universities in terms of student engagement related to learning strategies. Surprisingly, urban university U2 received worse scores in higher-order learning and learning strategies than U6 and U8, which are regional universities. In QR, U2 also performed worse than U5 and U6. Among the regional universities, U6 performed better in many ways than the other two regional universities. Qualitative data again support the quantitative findings that the curriculum has a low capacity to help students develop the skills they need to succeed in the job market. Students also repeatedly proposed a number of reforms needed for the HE curriculum to equip them with essential skills.

The analysis revealed many differences among universities. Although a number of differences exist among city and regional universities, there are some evident differences among the universities located in the capital city. For example, universities U1, U2, and U3, and U5 received very different scores for collaborative learning; U1 and U2 received high scores, showing that they are doing very well in creating conditions for collaborative learning compared to U5. The qualitative data showed that some students became alienated during the learning process due to reasons that remain unknown. One way to explain this disconnection is a lack of challenge in the academic curriculum that alienates students, thus impeding the learning of other intrinsically motivated students.

We also found that teaching is more effective in regional universities than in one university in the capital. Qualitative data provided us with massive insights into the discouraging interactions between faculty and students, where differing viewpoints are not tolerated, and teachers are not perceived as pedagogically, technologically, and subject-wise prepared for teaching. It seems institutions do not conduct systematic feedback processes to learn more about the quality of teaching and learning within different classes; otherwise, the internal quality assurance process is not streamlined.

Surprisingly, the quality of interactions does not differ only between urban and regional universities; in fact, a larger number of differences exist among urban universities. Students reported a less supportive environment at U1 in comparison to U2, whereas science students had more quality interactions with the staff than their counterparts from disciplines such as education and social sciences; meanwhile, students studying economics seemed to experience comparatively more support than others. Students also expressed dissatisfaction with the campus environment, wishing for better library services and rooms equipped with technology; as a result, students' expectations were not met in most of the institutions. In addition, students expect to receive guidance and be better informed at the beginning of their educational journey.

This is an important aspect of achieving success during one's undergraduate studies (Krause and Coates 2008).

As a result of this study, institutional effects on student engagement reflect economic, cultural, and practical factors. Economically, HEIs have various avenues for accessing financial resources in Azerbaijan. This gives rise to a range of institutional types and exclusivity levels (Isakhanli & Pashayeva, 2018), while at the same time creating imbalances. Culturally, HE remains entrenched in teacher-centered instructional methods and centralized decision-making. These characteristics are reflected in the quality of the teaching and learning process, instructional leadership, and freedom of action (i.e., the freedom given to students to choose subjects and teachers). Practically, the notion of student engagement remains underexplored and lacks conceptualization at a number of levels: individual, departmental, institutional, and national (Isaeva, Ratinen and Uusiautti, 2023; Hasanov et al., 2021). Knowledge of how student learning differs across universities in Azerbaijan can lead to timely interventions to improve quality. Entrusting and empowering HEIs instead of imposing a single curriculum will contribute to academic freedom and free and critical thinking. Indeed, a one-size-fits-all solution for the education of the entire nation risks damaging its competitive power both nationally and internationally in the context of globalization.

Limitations

Because the present study exclusively relies on student survey data collected from eight universities within a single country, it is possible that the results are not generalizable to all Azerbaijani universities or other countries within the former Soviet sphere. Another limitation of the study is that the survey conducted once cannot portray a full picture of change and development of student engagement at each particular university as it is a continuous and complex process and requires a longitudinal study to observe such a change. Although we used qualitative and quantitative data from one single survey, which is considered sufficient for the mixed analysis, combining different data collection methods, such as surveys and interviews, would probably provide more information about the student experience.

Furthermore, we lacked access to the opinions of students who did not volunteer to participate in this study. In addition, relating students' open-ended answers to their forced-choice responses would provide us with more consistency in understanding their experiences. Another limitation of this study is that although many universities are centrally provisioned, the leadership, resource allocation, and number of full-time academic and non-academic staff were not considered in this study.

Conclusion

The results of this study confirmed an earlier study conducted by Sainz Sujet (2022) and Gunuc et al., (2022), which showed that institutional differences and environments make a difference in student engagement. We identified a number of differences between urban and regional universities and between universities functioning in similar areas, such as cities or regions. The

first set of differences indicates that although urban universities have economic, social, and geographical advantages, allowing them to recruit better-qualified academic and support staff, thus delivering quality classes and services, teaching at urban universities was not weaker than in capital universities. Even though the curriculum is centrally managed, academic challenge indicators were found to vary across universities and disciplines. The findings of this study challenge institutional leaders first and policymakers second to recognize that students are proactive and pragmatic, eager to learn, and ready for change. Understanding the degree of student engagement in a particular university or discipline is crucial in directing HE leaders and policymakers toward the necessary changes in the HE system to effectively accommodate students' needs and expectations.

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to theory and practice in many ways. First, it shows that although student engagement varies across the eight Azerbaijani universities – seemingly owing to the diversity of management approaches – there are also many issues common to all institutions, such as teacher quality, teaching approaches, teacher–student relationships, and the support environment. Thus, a more holistic approach to the reform process, in which issues are addressed in a more coherent and consolidated way, is needed for the process to be accepted and implemented more effectively.

Second, the study shows evident differences between student expectations and teachers' capacities. For example, in 2018, students were already asking for technological advancements, benchmarking internationally and the urgency of changes to improve teaching and learning in Azerbaijan, indicating they are more proactive than institutions and teachers. This result is similar to Carey (2018) suggestions about students being proactive in bringing in change. Student involvement in advising and consulting regarding universities' effectiveness in fostering student engagement in learning would inform and improve decision-making (Isaeva et al., 2020).

Third, conducting a study on the transparency of investments, costs, expenditures, and student outcomes in HE in Azerbaijan by examining the interplay between input and outcome would greatly contribute to understanding the key factors impacting student learning and student outcomes. The NSSE, which measures the effectiveness of universities in creating conditions for student engagement, is a valuable tool for measuring the effectiveness of policy and practices at the institutional level (Pike, 2013). Quantifying and making this data publicly available would inform and assist stakeholders in making educational decisions. In this way, the instrument may play the role of an external quality control tool that measures effectiveness and informs policymakers, institutional leaders, and the public about the quality of learning within HE. Theoretically, using the NSSE adds value by showing that measuring student engagement at the national level for development purposes in culturally, economically, and socially different countries would benefit all the stakeholders.

HEIs are in a greater need to monitor how students perceive education quality (Dužević et al., 2018), which, in turn, fosters a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction among students and contributes to the institutional reputation. What quality is comprised in Higher Education is often dictated by the international ranking system (Pusser & Marginson 2013), whereas its general provisions go around the challenging curriculum that requires students to utilize their high-order learning skills, synthesizing and creating new ideas; and also providing supportive

ecosystem with collaborative and supportive environment for student learning, mediated by strong student-faculty relationships.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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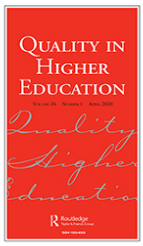

Quality in Higher Education

ISSN: 1353-8322 (Print) 1470-1081 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cqhe20

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To cite this article: Razia Isaeva, Eve Eisenschmidt, Katlin Vanari & Kaija Kumpas-Lenk (2020) Students' views on dialogue: improving student engagement in the quality assurance process, Quality in Higher Education, 26:1, 80-97, DOI: 10.1080/13538322.2020.1729307

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2020.1729307

QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION
2020, VOL. 26, NO. 1, 80–97
https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2020.1729307

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Students' views on dialogue: improving student engagement in the quality assurance process

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ABSTRACT

The university-student partnership during the quality assurance process has gained considerable attention in policy documents as well as in the research into higher education. An effective dialogue is critical for engaging students in continuous improvement of higher education. Therefore, this qualitative study explored how student engagement in the quality assurance process can be improved by an effective university-student dialogue. Based on interviews carried out with 27 students, the study concluded that students were eager to take part in the quality assurance process. However, the students' understanding of what the university expects from them, their roles and responsibilities, should be made clear in order to effectively involve students in the quality assurance process. Students are seeking interaction: they would like to be engaged in the dialogue, collaboratively solve the issues concerning their studies, provide feedback and receive up-to-date information about the universities' development plans.

KEYWORDS

Quality assurance; student engagement; university-student dialogue

Introduction

Although engaging students in quality assurance is strongly recommended by various policy papers (Communique, 2003), studies show that students are not fully accepted as partners in the process (Coates, 2005; Gvaramadze, 2011) and engaging students in quality improvement remains formal rather than substantive (Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014; Stalmeijer *et al*., 2016). Even if such changes are introduced, universities may fail to communicate the results of these changes to students which makes them sceptical and reluctant to participate in the quality assurance process (Powney & Hall, 1998; Harvey, 2003).

Engaging students as important, equal and responsible players in the education process evidently impacts on their learning and motivation, increases their sense of belonging as well as builds trust and confidence in the university-student partnership (McCulloch, 2009; Cook-Sather *et al*., 2014; Marquis *et al*., 2017). Student engagement at partnership level requires them to be constantly active where

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students are referred to as consultants rather than informants of the quality development process (Carey, 2013). Once engaged, students turn into active participants in the education process, which consequently makes them more responsible for the quality of education provided at the university (McCulloch, 2009). Moreover, students' engagement in the quality assurance process positively influences students' learning and development and makes them more motivated in their own learning process (Kuh, 2009; Gvaramadze, 2011; Kumpas-Lenk *et al*., 2018).

Furthermore, the university should communicate to the students their roles and responsibilities in the quality assurance process throughout the whole period of their studies and especially during the first year at the university (Krause & Coates, 2008; Stalmeijer *et al*., 2016). Students' awareness of their roles and responsibilities in co-creating high-quality education will keep them engaged in their studies. Therefore, this paper aims to find out how to improve student engagement in the quality assurance process by improving the dialogue between the university and students.

Theoretical background

The quality and quality assurance in higher education have been broadly discussed. While Harvey and Green conceptualised 'quality' in 1993, the quality assurance processes was slow to improve in higher education institutions (Alzafari & Ursin, 2019) until the Bologna Process reinforced these changes (Gvaramadze, 2008). Harvey and Green (1993) conceptualised 'quality' as 'exception', 'perfection', 'fitness for purpose', 'value for money' and 'transformation quality'. The number of definitions of quality assurance puts forward the idea of compliance between requirements, standards and achieved results (Borahan & Ziarati, 2002), whereas some authors see it as a process of consequent actions of monitoring, assessing and improving quality. Definitions carry managerialism (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001) leaving out the concept of 'quality' identified by Harvey and Green (1993) as 'transformative'. The 'transformative' concept of quality, requiring higher education to enhance or empower student experiences, is the central concept of this paper.

Although, student engagement is seen more widely, as 'a broad construct' that covers students' academic and non-academic experiences (Coates 2007, p. 122), the idea of how student engagement in the instruction process improves their learning is more elaborated. Earlier research confirms that student engagement has a direct impact on the quality of student learning and personal development (Coates, 2005; Carini *et al*., 2006; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Kuh (2009) saw engagement as students' time and effort devoted to activities leading to desired outcomes and the efforts of a higher education institution to persuade students to take part in these activities. Both parties of the education process carry responsibilities: students

as major participants are engaged in university activities and universities have an obligation to create the conditions necessary for such engagement.

Carey (2013) emphasised that not only direct instruction in the class but also students' engagement in out-of-class activities contributes to their learning. If students are engaged in a wider variety of activities, then they become thoughtful learners, this 'critical engagement' is important for achieving quality improvements (Harvey & Newton, 2007, p. 232). When students are involved in different committees and teams to assure quality, they have an opportunity to enrich their learning experience and gain new insights in the management of educational processes. Students will learn about peculiarities of quality provision and will become even more engaged in their studies. In this paper, students are considered as partners of the learning process where they are responsible for their own learning, as well as enhancing the quality of the studies at the university in general.

Several pre-conditions should be considered when building the quality assurance process where students are actively involved. The growing trust between students and academia is one of the primary benefits of student engagement in the quality assurance process (Gvaramadze, 2011). Williams (2016) indicated that students and staff working together contribute to quality improvement. Even if changes are institutional and university heads could consider that students do not have significant knowledge to take part in management processes at the institutional level, students are the ones most affected by the changes. Therefore, according to Luescher-Mamashela (2013) students should be part of the decision-making process and need to be involved in the change processes at university. The way universities involve them influences the university-student partnership. Traditional quality assurance, consisting of four repetitive steps, 'Plan-do-check-act', also known as Deming cycle, is an iterative process that requires a systematic feedback collection (Deming, 1986; Kettunen, 2011). Thus, student involvement should be considered at every stage, not only in the checking phase derived from the feedback surveys.

Contemporary quality assurance, where the roles and responsibilities of students and universities are clearly stated, is based on the concept that students are equal partners who share the responsibility for the quality of higher education (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Stalmeijer *et al.*, 2016). Universities can benefit if student engagement is sought not because it is a requirement of today's quality assurance processes but because the university sees students as potential partners, who need to be informed and engaged in the preparation and implementation of these changes. For the partnership to work, students need to feel that their ideas are taken seriously, and their feedback makes a difference to the quality of education that the university provides. Second, when students feel that they are involved in the process and invited to make decisions as equal partners, they also take on more responsibility (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014; Stalmeijer *et al.*, 2016). If students are not accepted by university

leadership as equal partners, this decreases motivation and creates distrust (Love & Miller, 2003).

Students are willing to be part of the quality assurance process if they are well-informed and confident that changes will follow (Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014). As indicated by Bovill *et al*. (2016), it is crucial to communicate effectively in order to encourage students to participate in co-creation. To avoid student alienation, communication should be in the form of dialogue that is carried out at different levels: between students and university leadership; students and academic staff; and students and non-academic staff. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) suggested that students still want to have feedback from academics in the form of discussion, which proves that dialogue at different levels is critical to meeting students' needs and encouraging them to become more engaged in the quality assurance processes.

Fruitful university-student dialogue can improve student engagement, student satisfaction, performance indicators and university-student cooperation. This article looks at how to encourage student engagement in the quality assurance process and how to improve the dialogue between the university and students by seeking answers to the following questions. (1) What are students' experiences with the existing internal quality assurance process? (2) What are the pre-conditions for a dialogue that improves student engagement in the quality assurance process?

Methodology

This study is based on semi-structured interviews with students from different study programmes of one Estonian university. The university, which has more than 8000 students, constantly monitors its outcomes and implements the four phases quality assurance cycle in internal self-evaluation.

Qualitative research design was used in an attempt to identify the factors affecting student engagement. Since it is 'situational and dynamic' it is hard to investigate. Nevertheless, qualitative study makes it possible to look at student engagement by exploring participants' perspectives, and by looking at what is meaningful for the participants within the context of internal quality assurance (Flick, 2014). According to qualitative research design we planned the data gathering methods as well as the data analysis method in a circular way, because it forces researchers to reflect on the research process and sheds light on the following process. We gathered data with semi-structured interviews as a method for targeted communications to capture different viewpoints. Data analysis based on qualitative content analysis helps to explore meanings and their contextual aspects (Flick, 2014). Participants' perspectives were important in understanding how they perceive the reality of student engagement in quality assurance processes (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Research design

The research consisted of two stages. The results of the first stage inspired us to develop the second stage, in order to find an explanation to the problems raised during the first stage (Figure 1).

In the first stage, semi-structured interviews focused on how students experienced the existing quality assurance processes at the university. Giving the fact that students are the key stakeholders in improving the quality of studies, it was important to determine how they perceive their engagement in the quality assurance of teaching and learning. Therefore, the guiding idea of the interviews was to collect the issues that students had experienced in teaching and learning process and to link them with the internal quality assurance processes. The leading interview question was: what are the main problems from the students' perspective in the teaching and learning process and its subprocesses from admission until graduation? The questions were not limited to the main topic, so that students would also feel comfortable expressing their thoughts about other topics relevant to the teaching and learning process. The four main questions asked during the interviews were the following: (1) the changes they want to implement at the university; (2) the main problems they have experienced during their studies; (3) the problems students discuss among themselves; (4) the initiatives they expect from the university.

Five focus group interviews were conducted by one researcher from February to April 2018. The groups consisted of two to five students. Altogether, 22 students, aged 20–45 (average age being 27), participated in the study, 6 of them male and 16 females. The participants represented different study areas: arts (*n*=3), humanities (*n*=6), educational sciences (*n*=5), natural sciences (*n*=3), social sciences (*n*=3) and IT (*n*=2). The year of study varied from first to seventh year; 13 participants were Bachelor's level and 9 were Master's level

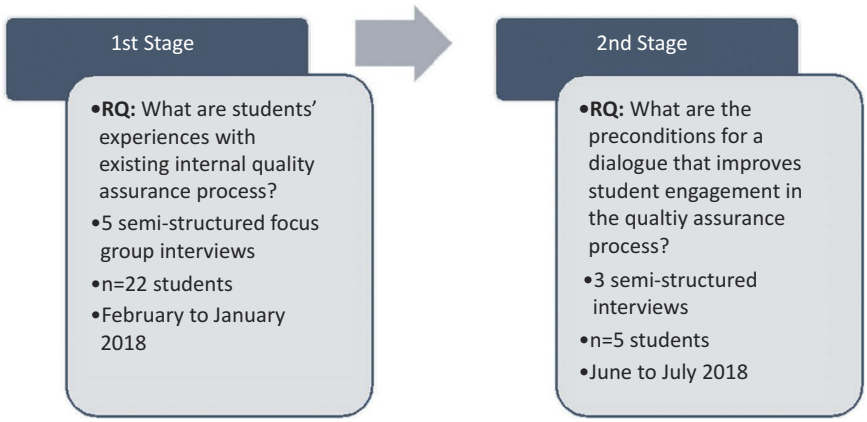

Figure 1. Research design and research questions (hereafter RQ)

students. Nine students had been members of the University Student Union or student representatives in the university's decision-making bodies. No international students were involved in the first stage. The average time of each interview was 76 minutes.

In the second stage, the data were also collected using semi-structured interviews. The leading questions of the second stage covered four major topics based on how the university-student dialogue takes place during the change process. (1) How do the students participate in the change processes? (2) In what ways does the university communicate with students? (3) How effective are the means of communication? (4) If the change they are asking for is not taking place, what do they do?

The interviews were carried out by the second researcher with five students during the period from June to July 2018. The variability of the sample was ensured by including both men (2) and women (3), as well as local (3) and international students (2) from different subject areas (three from educational sciences and two from multimedia sciences). The sample consisted of students of different ages (17–29), different study levels (Bachelor's and Master's), and included students with activist experience (n=2), which guaranteed the diversity of perspectives on the issue.

The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. When the data were as transcribed, the students were coded to provide anonymity.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed in strict verbatim so that the researchers would not miss any valuable and meaningful ideas of the students. The transcriptions were read several times by two researchers individually. Then, the transcriptions were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The text interpretation followed the research questions and the categories were formed and carefully revised within the process of analysis (Mayering, 2000). Inductive thematic coding was implemented; the researchers used open coding and experimented with categories and their properties. The process of constant comparison allowed the data to be grouped and divided into categories (Ryan & Bernard, 2000; Ezzy, 2002).

In the first stage of analysis, which consisted of four phases, the data were analysed using the quality assurance cycle. First, the researchers defined and agreed on the problems of quality assurance in the teaching and learning process addressed by the students. Second, these problems were connected to the four quality assurance phases (plan, do, check, act). Third, the codes of the meanings were discussed by two researchers until the shared meaning was agreed upon. In the final phase, the similar meanings were grouped and named.

In the second stage of the data analysis, the two researchers analysed the data separately and inductively identified meaningful thematic units about

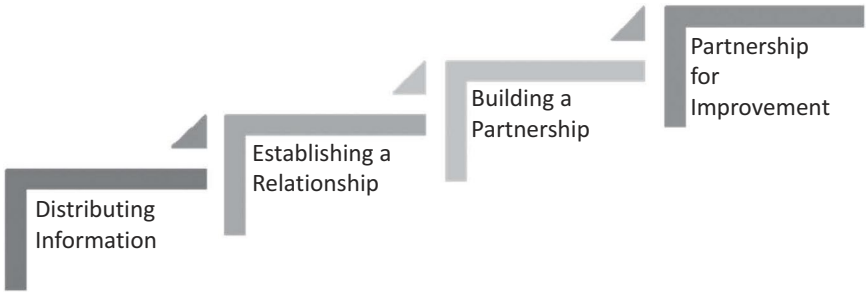

Figure 2. Categories of the second stage of data analysis

student-university dialogue. This was followed by discussions between the researchers together with the preliminary analysis. After discussions, the following categories were determined as pre-conditions for improving a dialogue for better student engagement: (1) distributing information; (2) establishing a relationship; (3) building a partnership; (4) partnership for improvement (Figure 2). Additionally, the data were analysed to explore what the pre-conditions are for a dialogue that improves student engagement in the quality assurance processes.

In order to improve the validity and reliability of findings of the study, the data of the second stage of analysis were re-analysed (Golafshani, 2003). After that, the interviews from the first stage of the research were re-analysed using the main categories of the second stage of data analysis. This iterative analysis revealed that the pre-conditions for student engagement can be grouped according to the main categories; however, these categories were improved and additional pre-conditions for each category were defined.

Results

Students' experiences with existing internal quality assurance of teaching and learning process

Looking at how to support student engagement in the quality assurance process, the aim was to map students' experiences with the current issues in teaching and learning and how these issues have been reflected in the existing quality assurance processes at the university.

Students experienced various problems at every phase of quality assurance and they indicated that most of the issues were at the planning phase. The categories of the problems at every phase are described in Figure 3.

Regarding the planning phase, students' emphasised problems, such as poor communication, bad timing, unclear goals, low competence of teaching staff and low integration of study programmes. For example, the timing problems of the changes and reforms at the university occur as intensive schedules make it

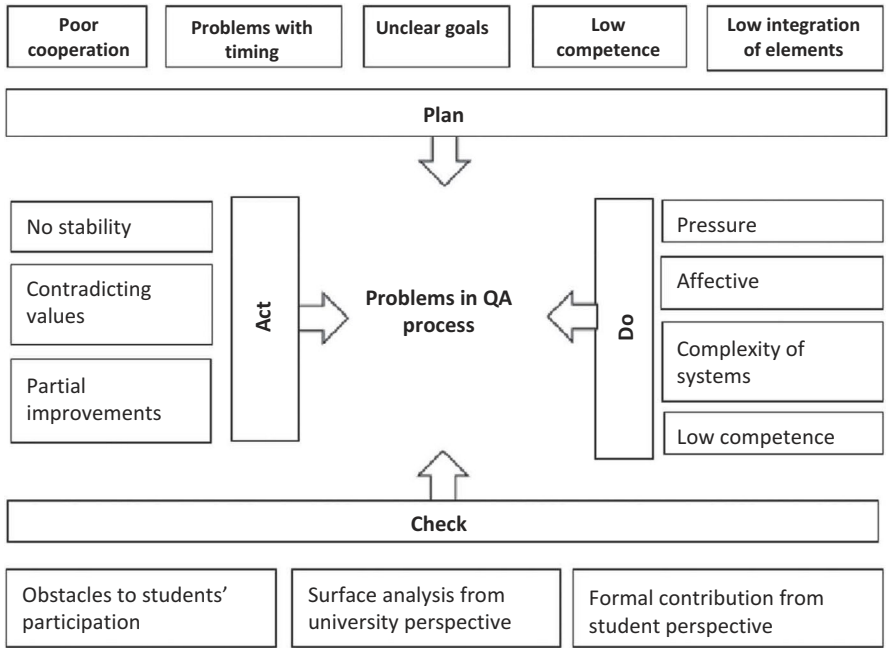

Figure 3. Problem that students' have experienced in quality assurance process

difficult to stay within the universities' deadlines. This reduces the quality of decision-making and limits discussion. In the planning phase, students mentioned cases where they had perceived low competence and overestimation of university capacity. Students expressed dissatisfaction with a lack of co-operation between the teachers and units and its effect on the integration of the study programme, teaching and learning. The interviews also revealed that although changes had been implemented their objectives were unclear to students.

Concerning the do-phase of the quality assurance cycle, the students perceived problems like complexity of systems, low competence, affective reactions and pressure. The time pressure negatively influenced students' attitudes towards the changes and reforms initiated at the university as well as their approach to learning. For example, students reflected that despite the revised deadlines for the supervision, the beginning of the writing phase of the graduation thesis was still vague and loose.

> Many of us chose a topic and supervisor so that it could be done quickly and without any problems. So, we actually didn't have a chance to think or analyse our interest.

Thus, they were forced to take on more tasks from the course requirements rather than participate in university life in other ways. In the interviews, the students also expressed their concerns about the vague quality assurance of teaching and learning at the university compared to that of other institutions. Students said that they often faced exceedingly complicated support systems,

which turned out to be more a means to an end rather than a quality assurance issue. They also noted in the interviews that they had experienced negative affective reactions from the involved academic staff members who were responsible for the improvement of teaching and learning process. Students mentioned cases when teachers expressed negative attitude to students' complaints regarding additional workload (more than officially required) in the joint study programme and refused to change course assignments.

The problems described by the students at the check-phase of the quality assurance process can be grouped as obstacles to students' participation, surface analysis from the universities' perspective and formal contribution from the students. Several of those obstacles narrowed the possibilities for the students to propose improvements as the quality assurance system was not created in a way that would invite students to give constant constructive feedback. Irrelevant elements of the feedback system were mentioned as an example of that kind of obstacle to students' participation. For instance, the student feedback system is designed in a way that students cannot continue planning the next semester study load without filling in certain number of course feedback questionnaires. Moreover, students said that feedback questions are not distinct from each other and they are not motivated to answer similar questions several times while filling in the same questionnaire. This can lead the students to give artificial responses, which will not reflect their opinion of what needs to be improved.

> I can understand and accept the meaning of feedback. But the problem is in the answers. We don't fill it in fairly. We want to have it done as much is required from us by the IT system and get the access to the next module of planning the study load for the next semester.

The students admitted that their attitude to feedback surveys in the IT system or panel discussions is superficial and they are not motivated to substantiate their opinions. The students also acknowledged in the interviews that results of feedback surveys can be inadequate and unreliable for making managerial judgements. From the university perspective, there are not enough resources invested into analysing students' feedback, so the results are not appropriate to consider or discuss publicly. As a result, students have noticed some negative developments in these aspects which used to be satisfactory. For instance, responding to students' complaints in a personal and operative way has decreased rather than increased. Thus, it can be concluded that the quality assurance in the check-phase is more formal.

The problems in the act-phase of the quality assurance cycle were described as partial improvements, contradicting values and little stability. Students consider improvements partial because of the rigidness of processes at the university. Little or no influence of students' opinions at the operational level was noticed:

> They [teachers] also said, that we can't change anything. Why can't you change it?! You can currently change it and make it happen differently. It can be an extra workload. But this attitude was a disappointment for us.

The interviews revealed that partial improvements have been made and institutional development is taking place only on the surface. It seems that management adopts contradictory values when they talk about balancing different viewpoints, as in practice, they prefer uncomplicated and smooth changes and thus the improvements are only temporary. As a result, the students feel that there is little stability, changes are superficial and the possible consequences of those changes have not been analysed from the viewpoints of other stakeholders.

In conclusion, the problems with the student experience of the quality assurance cycle could be changed by means of a more skilful and effective dialogue. The problems in the quality assurance process occur when the information is insufficient or contradictory. Students feel their participation is limited by having to meet formal requirements set internally by the university management or externally by the accreditation body; they do not expect to be involved in discussions or treated as equal partners in the improvement processes.

Pre-conditions for effective dialogue

The second stage of the study continued looking at the pre-conditions for a dialogue that would improve the students' engagement in the quality assurance process. From the analysis, four categories of consecutive activities had emerged: (1) distributing information; (2) establishing a relationship; (3) building a partnership; (4) partnership for improvement (Figure 2).

Distributing information

Distributing information is the first step to building an atmosphere of trust and open relationship for engaging students. It emerged from the data that the following aspects played a role in distributing information: the means of communication, trustworthiness of information, targeting the communication and efficient time scheduling.

The university mainly communicates with students by email, but the information distributed this way is not targeted and, therefore, ineffective:

> There is so much information everywhere, it is just a text, the emails don't mean anything, 80–90% of them are not meant for you. . . . . I receive many emails, they are long, I never read them. If I receive an email from any of our study consultants, I understand that it is important.

This illustrates that the communication is not well-considered, which in turn influences the trust in the information sent, especially when students are

overloaded with information. The students emphasised throughout the interviews that they want the information sent to them to be trustworthy.

Messages from an official source and the length of the message would capture their interest. If the message is too long, which happens quite often, then they tend to skip it. The students also emphasised that they would like to get the information from the heads of the university, as it makes the information even more acceptable for them:

> If an authority comes, that you respect, feel close to, that will be definitely better. If the Rector comes to the class and says there is something going on . . . . Then we say, if the Rector says it, we will look at it.

Students indicated that when it comes to distributing information, efficient timing is a key pre-condition for achieving better student engagement. By efficient timing the students meant that distributing information by the university can be irrelevant, if it reaches students too early or too late. Untimely sent information reduces students' attention to and interest in any messages sent by the university.

Students seek information using modern technology. They also value human interaction when receiving significant information, even if they are technologically savvy. The more complicated a problem is, the more significant the changes are; and an effective channel of communication would mean that complicated problems are handled better in a face-to-face situation (Swaab *et al*., 2012).

Establishing a relationship

In establishing a relationship, the readiness for continuous collaboration, communication competence and face-to-face interaction are important aspects. When students receive clear and timely information and engage in communication with academic and non-academic staff, then they also tend to engage in a dialogue to provide feedback. This pre-supposes that all parties are ready for collaboration:

> The communication within universities is still one-sided, which means that universities tell us what they have done, whereas they should be asking us what we want them to change.

The university has the responsibility for developing the staff to be ready for wider collaboration with students. Also, students' communication competences are important for engaging in a dialogue.

Establishing the student-university dialogue requires that the students know the university structure and processes:

> In the beginning you do not know the system, who are the study advisers and what are their tasks. You do not know who to turn to. You only dare to ask anything from these familiar faces from the admission period.

Students experience obstacles in starting the dialogue if they are not familiar with how the university is operated, who are the key persons, and when and how to raise questions and make recommendations.

Building a partnership

Another necessary pre-condition is building a partnership and it requires meaningful involvement, interaction at different levels and collaboration competence.

If it is not clear to the students what is expected from them and what is their role in improving educational achievements, then they face ambiguity and their involvement in the process is only formal. As students observed:

> Sadly, the principle is, that students are involved in the decision-making, but only to make a tick. It is rather formal. … . They have a mentality that students need to be everywhere, but they do not listen to them.

To build a trusting relationship and receive sincere feedback, interaction at different levels is necessary. The linkage between students and university can be a programme manager or any other university employee who is able to build trust between students and the university so that the students would provide them with sincere feedback.

Students should have interactions at different levels within the university to learn from these interactions (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). They expect a dialogue to have equal rights to share their ideas and discuss the issues. When information comes from an official source, then it stimulates students to have a better understanding of educational improvements (Men, 2014). Holding meetings with university heads would motivate students, increase their self-confidence and engage them in the university's improvements. Building constant, clear and targeted dialogue with students conveys the message to students that they are valued and viewed as equal partners in the university-student relationship. Dialogue, as emphasised by students, is the way to build trust, engage students in their studies and university activities, and especially, increase their engagement in the quality assurance process.

This clearly shows that students also need to gain competence in the collaboration process. In the opinion of some students, one of the pre-conditions is their willingness to take the initiative but they are aware of the scale of the challenge: there are few active students who are ready to initiate any kind of discussion about changes in the university.

> Whatever is organised, there are so few students present. In general, students are so passive nowadays … You can't take them seriously …

The concept of accepting students as partners requires up-to-date thinking from the university staff, leadership and students (Carey, 2013). The dialogue

between these parties should be clear, open and constant. The concept places the responsibility on the academic and non-academic staff to be able to collaborate with the students to accept and value their ideas, contribution and participation.

Partnership for improvement

For partnership for improvement, the parties need to be committed to continuous development (Carey, 2013) and to ensure the trustworthiness of the quality assurance procedures. The university must make its demands explicit to the students and at the same time, make the students feel that their participation is meaningful. Student knowledge or awareness about the improvement processes at the university contributes to the relationship between the students and the university. Students feel satisfied and accomplished once their feedback is heard and considered:

> We gave the feedback during the lesson, and teacher changed the amount of the hours, one topic of the subject was left for another year. She listened to us and we were happy that she listened to us. . . . . I do know that for my programme they are always looking for how to improve it. What I hear from other students, it was a little different for them, and now it is different.

It also provides the students with a sense of the meaningfulness if their voice is heard; they feel satisfied that the course or other requirements have been changed to fit their needs and expectations. This affects student motivation and makes them more inclined to rely on the feedback system so that every year, they will provide the university with genuine feedback that will help the university to improve.

Even if it is argued by several scholars that the academic life cycle of three years is too short for students to witness any changes taking place, it cannot be an excuse for the university administration to delay the implementation. Witnessing the influence of their feedback has a positive impact on students' motivation to study, to commit themselves and to advocate for the university.

Student engagement becomes a partnership for improvement if the university expresses the value of student input.

> Once I was participating there [in the board meeting] and I was so surprised, in a positive way. What they are expecting from us, what kind of input they want from us! It was amazing how the chairman was planning to involve us.

High expectations can encourage students' motivation to engage in partnership with the university.

Concluding remarks and implications

The analysis of students' perceptions of engagement in the quality assurance process revealed that there is a room for development in every phase of quality assurance. Going forward, the biggest obstacle appeared to be in the planning phase. According to students their involvement in the process of planning and designing the curriculum or courses is rare and unsystematic. Therefore, universities should have mechanisms to systematically engage students (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). However, the question is how universities ought to resolve the issues of student engagement in quality assurance processes?

This study reveals that more emphasis should be placed on the dialogue between universities and students. The findings demonstrate that there are four consecutive activities that universities should focus on while building up an effective and engaging dialogue. First, attention should be paid to the distribution of information. Timely, trustworthy and two-way communication with students can serve as an impetus to effectively engage students. Students believe that universities should think of various ways to communicate different types of information to them. They do not feel engaged when they receive email, because it is a one-way communication, which limits interaction. In this case monitoring and investigating student engagement while using various ways of sharing information could help universities improve the dialogue with students. Here experiences from the entrepreneurship sector might be helpful but also the views of students should be considered. In addition, the distribution of information should be part of the university's communication strategy, not just something that happens randomly.

Second, attention should be paid to establishing a trustworthy relationship. Student engagement may improve when the university leader's management style facilitates open discussions and supports the feeling of ownership and responsibility of all parties (Kumpas-Lenk *et al*., 2018). This means that university leadership should focus on the importance of establishing a dialogue between students, academic and administrative staff. In a partnership, dialogue requires that both parties' opinions are taken equally seriously. If students do not feel that their voice is being heard they stop investing in the dialogue. The key to establishing an effective relationship with students requires willingness and efficient skills in communication. This means that universities should ensure that its staff are competent in communication and engaging students. Training sessions for the staff and leaders are necessary to build up those skills. However, along with placing greater responsibility on the university, students should also be trained to improve their collaboration in dialogue skills. On the strategic management level, the idea of keeping and building trustworthy relationships should be part of the universities' mission.

Third, attention should be paid to building a partnership. This implies that university leaders view students as one of the key partners, involve them in strategic planning and management, academic staff invites students for co-creation of the learning process and curriculum. As a result of such a face-to-face interaction, the relationship between the students and the university grows from collaboration into partnership. Well-established co-operation with student unions is valuable in building such partnerships.

Fourth, attention should be paid to using the partnership for improvement. Establishing this foundation is an impetus for students to get involved in the quality assurance process and to take responsibility for its further development. If students are given the experience of co-creating a process with academic staff, then they realise that together there is an opportunity to improve the university and its internal quality assurance system, which in turn would improve their learning conditions. One option is to improve the student's skills of giving meaningful feedback but also enhance various university processes, for example, what happens after the feedback is received, how the university communicates to students how they have used their feedback and how they encourage students to give meaningful feedback. This means that the processes in the university are well planned, transferable and functional to all parties.

The language could be one of the limitations of the study. Part of the study was conducted in English, which was not the students' first language and may have limited the students' ability to fully elaborate on the issues presented during the interviews. Nevertheless, many students contributed to a study during the first interview where they were speaking their native language. In addition, students' views were based on specific questions. The questions that seemed to open up unknown aspects of university management to students may have caused them to limit their answers.

This study aimed to fill a gap in the quality assurance literature by reporting students' perceptions of engagement in the quality assurance process. The outcomes of the study are relevant for the university management, quality specialists, students and staff. The findings create a valuable basis for a further qualitative research project with members of the academic staff to explore their perceptions of collaboration in quality assurance: whether they understand and value its potential, whether they are ready for this kind of cooperation and what is needed for such a partnership to take place. Moreover, the results of effective student involvement need further investigation to determine whether it enhances the quality of studies in universities. It is also important to determine what is quality culture according to students, staff, employers, politicians, and how it is possible to enhance quality culture when universities start to provide more flexible approaches to education, such as nano-degrees, students designing their own curriculum and students as quality managers.

Acknowledgments

This research has been funded by the European Social Fund programme Dora.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix II – Sample permission letter

Date: 31.01.2018

Rector of X University

Dear Professor X,

Our PhD student, Razia Isaeva is conducting research on the dynamics of Student Engagement in Institutional Governance, meticulously examining its profound influence on student outcomes in Azerbaijan. She intends to undertake a survey among students, aimed at learning more about student engagement in learning and evaluating the favorable conditions fostered for student educational experiences.

The survey is designed to target students boasting GPAs exceeding 75, ensuring a focused exploration into the perspectives and experiences of academically high-achieving individuals within the institution. Several universities, including Khazar University, have already participated in this survey allowing students to learn more about student engagement and fostering optimal learning conditions.

We would highly appreciate it if you cooperated in facilitating the conditions necessary for conducting surveys among your students.

For more information about the Survey and the research please contact the graduate School at Khazar University.

Sincerely,

Rector

Appendix III – Survey

NATIONAL SURVEY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

1. During the current school year, about how often have you done the following?

Response options: Very often, Often, Sometimes, Never

   a. Asked questions or contributed to course discussions in other ways
   b. Asked another student to help you understand course material
   c. Explained course material to one or more students
   d. Prepared for exams by discussing or working through course material with other students
   e. Worked with other students on course projects or assignments
   f. Given a course presentation

2. During the current school year, about how often have you done the following?

Response options: Very often, Often, Sometimes, Never

   a. Combined ideas from different courses when completing assignments
   b. Connected your learning to societal problems or issues
   c. Included diverse perspectives (political, religious, racial/ethnic, gender, etc.) in course discussions or assignments
   d. Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue
   e. Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from their perspective
   f. Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept
   g. Connected ideas from your courses to your prior experiences and knowledge

3. During the current school year, about how often have you done the following?

Response options: Very often, Often, Sometimes, Never

   a. Talked about career plans with a faculty member
   b. Worked with a faculty member on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups, etc.)
   c. Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class
   d. Discussed your academic performance with a faculty member

4. During the current school year, how much has your coursework emphasized the following?

Response options: Very much, Quite a bit, Some, Very little

a. Memorizing course material
b. Applying facts, theories, or methods to practical problems or new situations
c. Analyzing an idea, experience, or line of reasoning in depth by examining its parts
d. Evaluating a point of view, decision, or information source
e. Forming a new idea or understanding from various pieces of information

5. During the current school year, to what extent have your instructors done the following?

Response options: Very much, Quite a bit, Some, Very little

a. Clearly explained course goals and requirements
b. Taught course sessions in an organized way
c. Used examples or illustrations to explain difficult points
d. Provided feedback on a draft or work in progress
e. Provided prompt and detailed feedback on tests or completed assignments
f. Explained in advance the criteria for successfully completing your assignments
g. Reviewed and summarized key ideas or concepts
h. Taught in a way that aligns with how you prefer to learn
i. Enabled you to demonstrate your learning through quizzes, assignments, and other activities

6. During the current school year, about how often have you done the following?

Response options: Very often, Often, Sometimes, Never

a. Reached conclusions based on your own analysis of numerical information (numbers, graphs, statistics, etc.)
b. Used numerical information to examine a real-world problem or issue (unemployment, climate change, public health, etc.)
c. Evaluated what others have concluded from numerical information

7. During the current school year, about how many papers, reports, or other writing tasks of the following lengths have you been assigned? (Include those not yet completed.)

Response options: None, 1-2, 3-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, More than 20 papers

a. Up to 5 pages
b. Between 6 and 10 pages
c. 11 pages or more

8. During the current school year, about how often have you had discussions with people from the following groups?

Response options: Very often, Often, Sometimes, Never

a. People of races or ethnicities other than your own
b. People from economic backgrounds other than your own
c. People with religious beliefs other than your own
d. People with political views other than your own
e. People with sexual orientations other than your own
f. People from countries other than your own

9. During the current school year, about how often have you done the following?

Response options: Very often, Often, Sometimes, Never

a. Identified key information from reading assignments
b. Reviewed your notes after class
c. Summarized what you learned in class or from course materials

10. During the current school year, to what extent have your courses challenged you to do your best work?

Response options: 1=Not at all to 7=Very much

11. Which of the following have you done while in college or do you plan to do before you graduate?

Response options: Done or in progress, Plan to do, Do not plan to do, Have not decided

a. Participate in an internship, co-op, field experience, student teaching, or clinical placement
b. Hold a formal leadership role in a student organization or group
c. Participate in a learning community or some other formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together
d. Participate in a study abroad program
e. Work with a faculty member on a research project
f. Complete a culminating senior experience (capstone course, senior project or thesis, portfolio, recital, comprehensive exam, etc.)

12. About how many of your courses at this institution have included a community-based project (service-learning)?

Response options: All, Most, Some, None

13. Indicate the quality of your interactions with the following people at your institution.

Response options: 1=Poor to 7=Excellent, Not Applicable

a. Students
b. Academic advisors
c. Faculty
d. Student services staff (career services, student activities, housing, etc.)
e. Other administrative staff and offices (registrar, financial aid, etc.)

14. How much does your institution emphasize the following?

Response options: Very much, Quite a bit, Some, Very little

a. Spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work
b. Providing support to help students succeed academically
c. Using learning support services (tutoring services, writing center, etc.)
d. Encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds (social, racial/ethnic, religious, etc.)
e. Providing opportunities to be involved socially
f. Providing support for your overall well-being (recreation, health care, counseling, etc.)
g. Helping you manage your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)
h. Attending campus activities and events (performing arts, athletic events, etc.)
i. Attending events that address important social, economic, or political issues

15. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Response options: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree

a. I feel comfortable being myself at this institution.
b. I feel valued by this institution.
c. I feel like part of the community at this institution.

16. About how many hours do you spend in a typical 7-day week doing the following?

Response options: 0, 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21-25, 26-30, More than 30 (Hours per week)

a. Preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, doing homework or lab work, analyzing data, rehearsing, and other academic activities)
b. Participating in co-curricular activities (organizations, campus publications, student government, fraternity or sorority, intercollegiate or intramural sports, etc.)
c. Working for pay on campus
d. Working for pay off campus

e. Doing community service or volunteer work
f. Relaxing and socializing (time with friends, video games, TV or videos, keeping up with friends online, etc.)
g. Providing care for dependents (children, parents, etc.)
h. Commuting to campus (driving, walking, etc.)

17. Of the time you spend preparing for class in a typical 7-day week, about how much is on *assigned reading*?

Response options: Very little, Some, About half, Most, Almost all

18. How much has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?

Response options: Very much, Quite a bit, Some, Very little

a. Writing clearly and effectively
b. Speaking clearly and effectively
c. Thinking critically and analytically
d. Analyzing numerical and statistical information
e. Acquiring job- or work-related knowledge and skills
f. Working effectively with others
g. Developing or clarifying a personal code of values and ethics
h. Understanding people of other backgrounds (economic, racial/ethnic, political, religious, nationality, etc.)
i. Solving complex real-world problems
j. Being an informed and active citizen

19. How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?

Response options: Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor

20. If you could start over again, would you go to the *same institution* you are now attending?

Response options: Definitely yes, Probably yes, Probably no, Definitely no

21. Do you intend to return to this institution next year? [Only non-seniors receive this question]

Response options: Yes, No, Not sure

22a. How many majors do you plan to complete? (Do not count minors.)

Response options: One, More than one

22b. [If answered “One”] Please enter your major or expected major: [Text box]

22c. [If answered “More than one”] Please enter up to two majors or expected majors (do not enter minors): [Text box]

23. What is your class level?

Response options: First-year, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Unclassified

24. What types of courses have you taken at this institution this current school year?

Response options: Mostly in-person courses, Mostly remote courses (online, web-based, Zoom, etc.), Mostly hybrid or blended courses that combine in-person and remote instruction, A balanced mix of the above course types

25. What have most of your grades been up to now at this institution?

Response options: A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, C- or lower

26. Did you begin college at this institution or elsewhere?

Response options: Started here, Started elsewhere

28. What is the highest level of education you ever expect to complete?

Response options: Some college but less than a bachelor's degree, Bachelor's degree (B.A., B.S., etc.), Master's degree (M.A., M.S., etc.), Doctoral or professional degree (Ph.D., J.D., M.D., etc.)

30. How would you describe your gender identity? (Select all that apply.)

Response options: Woman; Man.

39. Prompt for Open-Ended Comments (Institutions select one of four questions for the end of the NSSE questionnaire or writes their own question.)

If you have any additional comments or feedback that you’d like to share on the quality of your educational experience, please enter them below.

Appendix IV – Study III Interview Questions

Interview Protocol
Tallinn, Estonia
June -July, 2018

This interview is conducted to gather data for research on student engagement in quality assurance. This data will be used for an article to be published in a peer-reviewed journal. The results will be published in peer-reviewed journals and the interpretation of what you say during the interview belongs to us as researchers. Your name is not going to be disclosed under any condition. It will be anonymized. Our conversation will be recorded using the voice recorder only for us to be able to listen and transcribe later. If you consent to be part of this research, please say it openly so that we can continue.

Preliminary Questions:

1. Are you satisfied with the quality?
2. What would you suggest improving?
3. Are you aware of university plans?
4. How is the university communicating with you?
5. Do you read messages from the university coming to you through different means?
6. What would be the one thing you would change?
7. Is there any specific way you want the university to communicate with you?
8. If you think that if you knew where to go under different circumstances, would it help to solve the problem you had?
9. At the beginning of your studies, when you first were admitted to this university, do you remember if there was some kind of information session on where you could go in case if you had a problem?
10. Would you go and fight if something is not going to happen?
11. Did you have an example when you have provided professors with feedback, and it worked out?
12. Do you believe if you go to certain places at the university to solve the problem, they will solve it?
13. Feedback system – how does it work?
14. Do you believe if you go to a certain entity within the university for feedback, it will change something?
15. What would be one thing you would like the university to change?
16. Have you experienced this feeling that your feedback counts?
17. Why do you think students are not going and changing things?

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The institutional context has an indisputable impact on student learning. What factors influence student learning and success in terms of engagement? What institutional elements affect student engagement in their academic learning? How do various institutions create more favorable conditions for enhancing student learning experiences? What are students' preferences and needs? How do students perceive their involvement in quality assurance processes? What conditions enhance student engagement in the quality assurance process? Exploring answers to these questions, the current study examines various aspects of student engagement in post-Soviet universities, focusing on two post-Soviet countries—Azerbaijan and Estonia—where this issue has been largely overlooked in educational policy changes, and comprehensive research looking at different features of student engagement in a context having lengthy association with once the biggest bureaucratic machine is rare.