FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDY ENGAGEMENT AMONG TERTIARY STUDENTS

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Abstract: This study is to examine study engagement among Vietnamese undergraduate students and the factors affecting it. A self-administered questionnaire survey was conducted with the participation of 964 undergraduate students from 13 universities in Vietnam. Results show that the dispersion of students' study engagement scores is currently quite high, showing significant differences between students in terms of study engagement. The higher level of students' engagement with their study promotes positive learning behaviors, and reduces delinquent behaviors in study. Data shows that personal factors (specifically, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, student mental health, and goal-oriented study attitude); family factors (specifically including family expectations for students' study, family support for future employment, family financial support) have impact on study engagement, however at very different magnitude.

Keywords: *Delinquency in study; Positive learning behavior; Study engagement.*

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Introduction

Study engagement plays a crucial role in determining student's academic performance and educational program quality (Boulton, Hughes, Kent, Smith & Williams, 2019). In recent decades, the concept of study engagement has received a growing concern from educators, education managers and researchers (Bowden, Tickle & Naumann, 2019). Students engaged with their study tend to exhibit more positive learning behaviors, such as actively participating in classroom discussions, collaborating with peers to accomplish assignment, and setting clear academic goals (Boulton, Hughes, Kent, Smith & Williams, 2019; Hart, Stewart & Jimerson, 2011).

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These behaviors, in its turn, create a more dynamic and interactive learning environment, benefiting both the individual and their classmates. Conversely, students with low level of study engagement may struggle with motivation and engagement, leading to poor academic performance and a lack of interest in their studies. This disengagement also manifests in negative behaviors, such as skipping classes or procrastinating on assignments, further exacerbating their academic challenges (Fredericks &McColskey, 2012).

Understanding the interplay between engagement to learning and academic outcomes is essential for educators and institutions. By fostering a culture of engagement with study, they can promote better academic performance and encourage positive learning behaviors, ultimately contributing to a more successful educational experience for all students and the quality of the education institutes.

For years, research in higher education in various countries has concentrated on student engagement, identifying it as a crucial factor in understanding challenges faced by educators and institutions, including training quality, dropout rates, and instances of deviant behavior in school settings. In Vietnam, while there has been some attention paid to students' engagement to learning, the body of literature remains limited. A systematic investigation into university students' engagement, utilizing a standardized scale to assess engagement to learning, has not been adequately pursued. This gap in research highlights the need for a comprehensive understanding of the current state of student engagement and the factors influencing it in the Vietnamese context. Such insights could be invaluable for improving educational strategies and enhancing student success.

Method

The study was conducted with a sample of 964 students from 13 universities in Vietnam, of which 593 students are from the Vietnam National University, Hanoi (61,6% of the total participants), 224 students from other public universities (23,2%), and 147 students from private universities (15,2%). Due to the survey being administered during the COVID-19 pandemic, the questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms.

Variables and Corresponding Measures

1. Engagement to Learning: Measured using the UWES-9S scale developed

by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), consisting of 9 items. Cronbach's alpha reliability = 0,927.

2. Goal-Oriented Learning: Developed by the research team, this scale includes 4 items, Cronbach's alpha reliability = 0,734.

3. Proactive Learning Behavior: Developed by the research team, this scale includes 4 items, Cronbach's alpha reliability = 0,781.

4. Deviant Learning Behavior: Developed by the research team, this measure includes behaviors such as: Working on unrelated tasks during class; Skipping classes without valid reasons; Arriving late to class; Using invalid methods to pass courses; Copying materials without proper citation. Measured on a 4-point scale: 0 = never; 1 = occasionally/once or twice a semester; 2 = frequently, but only in subjects I dislike; 3 = frequently, in almost all subjects. Cronbach's alpha reliability = .840.

5. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation in Learning: Measured using the MSLQ scale (Pintrich et al., 1991), consisting of 8 items (4 for intrinsic motivation and 4 for extrinsic motivation). Cronbach's alpha reliability = 0,844.

6. Family Expectations: Developed by the research team, this scale includes 2 items, Cronbach's alpha reliability = 0,751.

7. Mental Health: Measured using the PHQ-9 scale, adapted for the Vietnamese population, consisting of 9 items. Measured on a 4-point scale: 0 = almost never; 3 = nearly half the time. Cronbach's alpha reliability = 0,919.

8. Loneliness: Measured using the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996), consisting of 20 items on a 4-point Likert scale: 0 = completely untrue of my experience; 3 = completely true of my experience. Cronbach's alpha reliability = 0,773.

These measures collectively provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the various factors influencing students' engagement to learning, mental health, and overall academic engagement.

Results

1. Current State of Study engagement to Learning

The survey results indicate that students' engagement to learning is at an average level (M = 19.5 on a scale of 0 to 36). However, the relatively high standard deviation (SD= 7,6) suggests significant variability in students' engagement. Some students demonstrate very high levels of engagement to their

studies, while others show very low levels. This situation highlights the need for strategies aimed at promoting greater consistency in students' levels of engagement to learning.

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Study engagement to Learning

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Study engagement to Learning	964	0	36	19.5363	7.60566

When comparing different socioeconomic groups, the results of the One-way ANOVA test indicate that there is no statistically significant difference in the average engagement to learning between female and male students. However, the frequency distribution reveals that the proportion of male students with very high levels of engagement is greater than that of female students. Conversely, among those with low engagement, the percentage of male students demonstrating particularly low levels of engagement is also higher than that of female students. This suggests that polarization within the male student group is more pronounced than in the female group regarding academic engagement.

2. The Relationship Between Engagement to Learning and Academic Outcomes and Behavior

The survey indicates that while students' engagement to learning does not correlate with their overall Grade Point Average (GPA), it does have a significant relationship with their academic behaviors, as illustrated in the table below.

Table 2: Results of Simple Regression Between Study engagement to Learning, Academic Performance, and Learning Behaviors

	Study engagement	GPA	Goal Orientation of Learning	Proactive Learning Behavior	Deviant Learning Behavior
Study engagement	1				
Students' GPA	.050	1			
Goal Orientation of Learning	.510**	.160**	1		
Proactive Learning Behavior	.622**	.092**	.599**	1	
Deviant Learning Behavior	-.130**	-.135**	-.231**	-.192**	1

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

As the survey results indicate, contrary to expectations, there is no correlation between engagement to learning and academic performance. In a follow-up interview, one educator suggested that this may be due to the Vietnamese education system's strong emphasis on grades and academic achievement from the secondary school level. Students are trained in techniques to achieve high scores, meaning they do not necessarily need to be committed to learning or actively engage in their studies to reach their desired grades.

However, the survey supports the hypothesis that engagement to learning is significantly related to proactive learning behaviors. In this study, proactive learning behaviors were measured across four dimensions: (1) actively connecting with peers in their field; (2) participating in school activities; (3) applying knowledge to real-life situations; and (4) seeking help from teachers or peers when they do not understand the material, or independently researching until they grasp the concepts. The relationship between engagement to learning and proactive learning behaviors is not only positive but also strong, with a Pearson's r = 0,622, p < 0,01. Furthermore, students' awareness of the importance and purpose of learning is also positively and strongly related to their engagement to learning (Pearson's r = 0,510; p < .01). Conversely, as students' engagement to learning increases, they tend to exhibit fewer deviant behaviors in their studies (Pearson's r = -0.130, p < .01).

These findings suggest that increasing students' engagement to learning could lead to more goal-directed learning, enhance proactive learning behaviors, and reduce deviant behaviors such as engaging in unrelated activities during class, arriving late, or violating exam regulations

3. Factors Influencing Study engagement to Learning

Several factors influence Study engagement to learning. This article focuses on two main groups: individual factors related to the students themselves and family-related factors.

Individual factors of students

The survey results reveal that among the personal factors related to students, motivation has the strongest positive correlation with their engagement to learning. Notably, Vietnamese students exhibit higher scores in external motivation (motivation oriented towards others) compared to internal motivation, reflecting the Vietnamese cultural emphasis on collectivism and comparison with reference groups. However, when examining the impact of these two types of

motivation on students' engagement to learning, similar to previous studies in other countries, the results for Vietnamese students indicate that internal motivation has a stronger influence on engagement than external motivation (Pearson's r = 0,607 and .336, p < 0,01, respectively).

Table 3: Results of Simple Regression Between Study Engagement and Individual Factors of Students

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Study engagement	1.000						
2. The current major is not the original preferred choice.	-.045	1.000					
3. Loneliness	-.010	.095**	1.000				
4. Mental health	-.125**	.127**	.401**	1.000			
5. Intrinsic motivation	.607**	.030	.001	-.102**	1.000		
6. Extrinsic motivation	.336**	.116**	.100**	-.029	.401**	1.000	
7. Disengagement with study	-.117**	.210**	.235**	.365**	-.113**	-.008	1.000

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

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

In contrast, mental health status is negatively correlated with engagement to learning. This means that students with a higher risk of mental health issues tend to have reduced engagement to their studies, and vice versa. Interestingly, the perception of loneliness does not show a statistically significant relationship with students' engagement to learning. This finding is noteworthy, especially since the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period that many previous studies have shown to increase students' feelings of loneliness. While loneliness does not correlate with engagement, it does promote a loss of engagement to learning (Pearson's r = .235, p < .01) and increases the risk of deteriorating mental health (Pearson's r = .401, p < .01).

Additionally, the fact that students are studying in a major they did not initially choose does not seem to impact their engagement to learning. This suggests that even when students are required to study in an undesired field, other factors may mitigate the negative effects of this forced choice on their engagement to learning. This finding underscores the complexity of student motivation and engagement, highlighting that various influences can play a role in shaping their educational experiences.

Family factors

Table 4: Results of Simple Regression Between Study engagement to Learning and Family Factors

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1)Study engagement	1					
(2) Family Can Help to get a Job related to the major	.235**	1				
(3) I Study This Major under Family Pressure Rather Than Personal Desire	.124**	.276**	1			
(4) Family Has High Expectations for My Studies	.224**	.082*	.186**	1		
(5) I have to bear financial responsibility for my study	.243**	-.077*	.258**	.096**	1	
(6) I have a high pressure for being family's breadwinner	.104**	-.027	.313**	.155**	.520**	1
(7) My study at university is of great meaningfulness to my family	.251**	.090**	.142**	.602**	.133**	.216**

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

The survey results indicate that family factors have a moderate positive impact on students' engagement to learning. Notably, when families are unable to provide financial support, leading students to become financially independent during their university studies, their engagement to learning increases. Similarly, when students feel the need to become the economic backbone of their families, this pressure also enhances their engagement to learning, albeit to a lesser extent than financial independence (Pearson's $r = .243$ and $.104$, $p < .01$, respectively).

Although both of these factors relate to financial circumstances, the influence of financial independence is stronger than that of the pressure to be a family provider. This finding aligns with previous observations regarding the impact of intrinsic motivation versus extrinsic motivation. It is important to note that the financial independence factor represents intrinsic motivation, as students strive for their futures. In contrast, the pressure to support their families reflects extrinsic motivation.

The analysis of family factors further reveals that familial expectations—such as the importance placed on higher education in Vietnamese families—positively influences students' engagement to learning. Family pressures to pursue higher education or specific majors also contribute to this engagement. Among these influences, families' ability to assist students in finding jobs related to their fields of study has a relatively strong impact on students' engagement (Pearson's $r = .235$, $p < .01$).

These findings underscore the significant role that family dynamics and expectations play in shaping students' academic engagement and engagement, suggesting that supportive family environments can enhance students' motivation and dedication to their studies.

Factors related to university and training program

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Study engagement	1					
2. Training program is practical and occupation-oriented	.543**	1				
3. Course is organized towards positive learning	.458**	.736**	1			
4. Positive School Climate	.539**	.609**	.644**	1		
5. Students' voice is often ignored	.039	-.130**	-.221**	-.087**	1	
6. The meaningfulness of major	.472**	.590**	.449**	.547**	-.046	1

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

Among school factors, students' evaluation of the training program (whether the program's curriculum is practical, connected to career and employment opportunities; whether the curriculum prepares students necessary knowledge and skills so that they can confidently enter the labor market) has a positive correlation coefficient with the strongest correlation (Pearsons'r=.543, p<.01), even followed by a friendly and supportive school environment (Pearsons'r=.539, p<.01). Students' positive feelings about the meaning of their major also significantly increase their level of commitment to learning (Pearsons'r=.472, p<.01). Students' evaluation of the positive organization of the course (using diverse teaching methods, transparently organized assessments, reflecting students' abilities well...) also increases their study engagement (Pearsons'r=.458, p<.01).

Conclusion

If we understand Study engagement to learning as the enthusiasm, focus,

and investment that students dedicate to their studies, the findings indicate that, overall, students exhibit a moderate level of engagement to learning. However, there is a notable variation among students, with some demonstrating significantly higher levels of engagement while others show much lower levels compared to the average.

The research reveals that although there is no statistically significant relationship between Study engagement and overall academic performance (GPA), engagement does enhance proactive and positive learning behaviors. While there are no gender differences in levels of engagement, students from rural areas tend to show higher engagement compared to those from urban areas. Among the personal factors influencing Study engagement, motivation-especially intrinsic motivation-has the strongest impact. Additionally, risks associated with declining mental health negatively affect students' engagement to learning.

The results suggest that in order to enhance students' study engagement, school organizational strategies should focus on creating a supportive and friendly learning environment. Academic programs need to develop strategies to promote their image both publicly and among students, fostering positive perceptions and pride in their fields and faculty.

Importantly, course organization strategies should incorporate diverse teaching methods, ensuring fair assessments that effectively classify student abilities, helping them understand their strengths. Teaching approaches should encourage students to showcase their individual skills through activities such as group discussions, presentations, and case analyses. Additionally, emphasizing the practical application of classroom knowledge is crucial. The more students feel that their education prepares them effectively for their future careers, the more likely they are to exhibit higher levels of engagement to their studies.

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