

RESEARCH ARTICLE



The Discourse on Student Engagement and Motivation Among Foreign Students in Finland

Kevin Fuchs^{1,*}

¹*Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism, Prince of Songkla University, Thailand*

Abstract: Student engagement in higher education is a complex construct that encompasses the active participation, involvement, and investment of students in their learning experiences. However, foreign students, who bring unique cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds, face distinct challenges and experiences in adapting to higher education environments. This research aimed to fill a practical research gap by exploring how foreign undergraduate students in Finland perceive student engagement and motivation in higher education. Moreover, it sought to advance the ongoing discussion about student engagement in academia. This inductive research adopted a qualitative research framework and gathered interview data with foreign degree students in Finland. The semi-structured interviews with foreign undergraduate students were analyzed thematically and yielded four primary themes. First is the theme of peer interaction and cultural stereotypes, followed by the second theme, which revolves around integration challenges. The third theme highlights challenges viewed as opportunities, and finally, the theme of institutional support. Moreover, the study contributes to the body of knowledge by providing valuable insights about a group of students that is often marginalized. The article concludes by providing implications for research and practice.

Keywords: student engagement, motivation, foreign student, higher education, Finland, peer pressure, qualitative research

1. Introduction

Student engagement and motivation are crucial elements in higher education that significantly impact the learning outcomes and overall educational experience of students (Halif et al., 2020). Extensive research has been conducted to understand the interplay of these factors and their influence on students' academic performance, retention, and personal development (Abuhassna et al., 2020). However, it is important to recognize that a marginalized group of students, specifically foreign students, has often been overlooked in these studies (Lambrechts, 2020). This gap in the literature calls for further research to explore how foreign students perceive and experience student engagement and motivation in higher education (Wekullo, 2019). Student engagement refers to the active involvement, participation, and investment of students in their learning process (Berry, 2020). Motivation plays a pivotal role in driving students' commitment, effort, and persistence toward their academic goals (Feng & Papi, 2020). Subsequently, success in higher education incorporates leveraging motivation to drive academic growth and achievement (Meens et al., 2018).

Understanding the dynamics of student engagement and motivation is crucial for educators, policymakers, and institutions to design effective strategies and interventions that enhance the learning experiences and outcomes of all students (Rajabalee &

Santally, 2021; Sobaih et al., 2021). While there is a wealth of research on student engagement and motivation, studies often focus on domestic students within a specific educational context (Bond et al., 2020). Foreign students, who bring unique cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds, face distinct challenges and experiences in adapting to higher education environments (Gong et al., 2021; Rivas et al., 2019). Their perceptions and interactions with student engagement and motivation factors may differ from those of domestic students (Gong et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential to examine the experiences and perspectives of foreign students to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and nuances surrounding these crucial aspects of their educational journey (Chiocca, 2021).

1.1. Research objective

This study aims to fill a practical research gap by exploring how foreign undergraduate students in Finland perceive student engagement and motivation in higher education. By adopting an inductive research approach, this study seeks to identify underlying issues, challenges, and opportunities that shape foreign students' experiences and perceptions of these factors and contribute to theory. Creswell and Creswell (2017) note that an inductive approach is well-suited for this study as it allows for the exploration and discovery of new insights and patterns that emerge directly from the data. Given the limited existing research on the perceptions and experiences of foreign undergraduate students in Finland regarding their engagement and motivation, an

*Corresponding author: Kevin Fuchs, Prince of Songkla University, Thailand. Email: kevin.f@phuket.psu.ac.th

inductive approach is crucial in capturing their unique perspectives and identifying underlying issues and challenges (Gong et al., 2021; Rivas et al., 2019).

This study sought to develop an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences without imposing preconceived notions or theoretical frameworks that may limit the exploration of novel insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). It is important to give a voice to this marginalized group; therefore, the findings of this study can contribute to the development of inclusive and tailored strategies to support the engagement and motivation of foreign students in higher education (Lambrechts, 2020). Specifically, the study aims to examine the perceptions and experiences of foreign undergraduate students in Finland regarding their engagement and motivation during their degree studies in Finland. Moreover, the study seeks to identify underlying issues and challenges that shape the perceptions and experiences of foreign students regarding student engagement and motivation.

2. Literature Review

Student engagement in higher education is a complex construct that encompasses the active participation, involvement, and investment of students in their learning experiences (Zhoc et al., 2019). The concept of student engagement extends beyond mere attendance (Astin, 1999) and encompasses emotional, behavioral, and cognitive aspects of engagement with academic content, faculty, peers, and the overall learning environment (Bowden et al., 2021; Fredricks, 2011; Wolters & Taylor, 2012). Moreover, Fredricks (2011), Wolters and Taylor (2012), and Bowden et al. (2021) categorize student engagement into three clusters, i.e., behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement.

The first cluster, known as *behavioral engagement*, pertains to aspects of student involvement such as attendance, active participation, and displaying positive behaviors (Bowden et al., 2021). This encompasses their active engagement in classroom activities, academic tasks, and university-related events or initiatives (Bowden et al., 2021). The second cluster, *emotional engagement*, centers on the nature and intensity of students' emotional responses within the educational context (Bowden et al., 2021; Wolters & Taylor, 2012). This involves evaluating the degree of positive emotions like happiness, interest, and excitement, as well as negative emotions such as anxiety or boredom, in relation to their experiences at university, interactions with teachers, and participation in various activities (Wolters & Taylor, 2012). Lastly, the third cluster, *cognitive engagement*, is about the level of intellectual investment that students make in their learning journey (Fredricks, 2011). Drawing insights from self-regulation and strategy use theories, cognitive engagement encompasses students' capacity to be reflective and purposeful in their learning endeavors (Bowden et al., 2021; Fredricks, 2011).

Similarly, emotional engagement is sometimes also defined as an encompassing feeling of belonging and the perceived value of the school environment (Wong & Liem, 2022). For foreign students, the sense of belonging within the academic community and the perceived value of the educational environment may be particularly relevant (Gong et al., 2021; Rivas et al., 2019). The degree to which foreign students feel welcomed, accepted, and integrated into the university community can significantly impact their emotional engagement (Rivas et al., 2019). In some cases, foreign students may grapple with feelings of isolation or

marginalization, which can hinder their emotional connection to the institution (Koo & Nyunt, 2023). Koo and Nyunt (2023) reported that "limited opportunities for social interactions" are a potential factor contributing to low student engagement.

Moreover, the perceived value of the university environment can influence foreign students' motivation to engage academically (Yasmin et al., 2022). If foreign students perceive that the educational environment is inclusive, supportive, and culturally sensitive, their motivation to actively participate in learning activities, seek assistance when needed, and persist in their studies may be enhanced (Yasmin et al., 2022). Conversely, a negative perception of the school environment can lead to disengagement and decreased motivation (Gong et al., 2021; Rivas et al., 2019). Research by Rivas et al. (2019) and Gong et al. (2021) underscores the significance of these factors in the experiences of foreign students. Foreign students' unique backgrounds and the interplay between emotional engagement and motivation can result in distinct challenges and outcomes compared to those of domestic students (Glass & Westmont, 2014).

Therefore, understanding and addressing the emotional dimensions of engagement are crucial for creating inclusive and supportive higher education environments for all students, regardless of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds (Guo & Jamal, 2007; Wekullo, 2019). Finland's national public broadcasting company, abbreviated as Yle, reported in March 2023 that nearly half of foreign students plan to leave Finland after graduating (Finnish Broadcasting Company, 2023). Moreover, their article noted that many foreign degree students and workers in Finland plan to leave the country after graduation. Common difficulties faced by immigrants include employers not valuing foreign-acquired skills and limited access to networks. Integration challenges, particularly the lack of Finnish friends, affect adjustment. The study highlights the importance of social networks in finding jobs and suggests reevaluating language requirements for some positions (Finnish Broadcasting Company, 2023).

As illustrated by Finnish Broadcasting Company's study (2023), the concept of student engagement has gained considerable prominence within the realm of educational research and practice. This has heightened the attention and is attributable to its profound and far-reaching effects on various aspects of the educational landscape (Groccia, 2018). At its core, student engagement represents a holistic approach to learning and involves students' active participation, emotional investment, and cognitive involvement in their educational experiences (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Engaged students are not only more satisfied with their educational experiences but are also more likely to persist in their studies, leading to improved retention rates and employment opportunities (Bond et al., 2020). Furthermore, institutions that actively promote engagement often cultivate a culture of continuous improvement, seeking innovative pedagogical approaches and support structures to enhance student involvement (Bond et al., 2020; Groccia, 2018).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The study aimed to examine the perceptions and experiences of foreign undergraduate students in Finland regarding their engagement and motivation during their degree studies in Finland.

The study utilized an inductive reasoning approach through qualitative data collection, aligning with the fundamental characteristics of grounded theory methodology (Hussein et al., 2014). It adhered to best practices by collecting data, analyzing it meticulously, and then engaging in the process of theorizing (Fuchs, 2022). Qualitative research offers a rich and nuanced understanding of participants' perspectives (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017), allowing for an exploration of the underlying complexities and contextual factors that influence their experiences (Bryman, 2017). To gather in-depth and comprehensive data, semi-structured interviews will be conducted, as they provide a flexible yet guided approach that enables participants to share their thoughts, perceptions, and narratives in their own words (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

3.2. Participants and sampling

The lead researcher purposively approached potential participants and invited them to join the study. These invitations were made in person, and contact details were exchanged to schedule interview times. Out of the 40 undergraduate students approached, 21 expressed their willingness to participate. Additional sociodemographic information, including gender, year of study, age, academic major, and nationality, is detailed in Table 1 based on the empirical survey data. The sample size of 21 is deemed adequate, following Malterud et al. (2016), and the author believes that data saturation, as defined by Fusch and Ness (2015) as the point at which “the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained, and when further coding is no longer feasible,” has been reached.

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants

Characteristic		Frequency	Percentage ¹
<i>Gender</i>	Male	10	48%
	Female	11	52%
<i>Age range</i>	18–20 years old	12	57%
	21–23 years old	2	10%
	24–26 years old	3	14%
	27 years (or above)	4	19%
<i>Year of study</i>	First-year student	5	24%
	Second-year student	8	38%
	Third-year student (or above)	8	38%
<i>Academic major</i>	Business administration	21	100%
<i>Nationality²</i>	European	10	48%
	African	3	14%
	Asian	6	28%
	American	2	10%

¹European inclusive of the following nationalities: German (3), French (2), Spain (2), Estonian (2), and Poland (1); African inclusive of the following nationalities: Nigerian (1), Kenyan (1), and Moroccan (1); Asian inclusive of the following nationalities: Vietnamese (2), Chinese (2), Filipino (1) and Nepalese (1); American inclusive of the following nationalities: United States (1) and Mexico (1)

²Due to rounding, numbers presented throughout this and other documents may not add up precisely to the totals provided and percentages may not precisely reflect the absolute figures

3.3. Data collection tools

A total of 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted with full-time degree students at a large university of applied sciences in southern Finland. Finland has two higher education institution types: research-based universities and universities of applied sciences (UAS). UAS focus on practical, real-world applications, while research-based universities prioritize theoretical study (Aarvevaara et al., 2009). These interviews, which took place in September 2023, were led by the primary investigator and assisted by a research assistant. The researchers conducted the interviews off-campus, in close proximity to the university. The interviews were carried out in English, and the recruitment of students was exclusively from English-based degree programs. The semi-structured interviews followed a 14-item interview guide (Table 2), which was established by the researchers following an extensive review of the literature. The guide labels questions into mandatory and optional categories (the former were asked of every participant while the latter were used frugally depending on how the conversations developed). The interview duration ranged from 18 to 52 min, with an average duration of about 30 min.

3.4. Data analysis

The empirical data were analyzed thematically following good practice by Braun and Clarke (2021). The thematic analysis seeks to identify common themes within the responses of the interviewed students and serves as a flexible qualitative method for researchers to explore participants' perspectives (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). After obtaining participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded, then transcribed verbatim, and finally organized based on the questions posed to them. The thematic analysis involved utilizing the data extracted from the interview transcripts to establish groupings and patterns. Throughout this analysis, keywords were identified by manually highlighting significant sentences in the transcripts.

Importantly, a manual analysis (instead of using software to process the transcripts) was preferred as it allowed the researchers to better familiarize themselves with the data. These keywords were generated using an inductive open coding approach and then shortened into codes. These codes were used to organize the data into clusters and conduct a thematic evaluation of the content (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This process continued until the researchers reached a consensus on the results. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the identified categories and patterns related to the perceptions and experiences of foreign undergraduate students in Finland toward their engagement and motivation during their degree studies in Finland.

3.5. Confidentiality and ethics

The specific goals and scope of the research were explained to the interview participants, and their written consent was obtained before conducting the interviews. The consent form was developed under the guidelines research on ethics by the Research Council of Finland (n.d.). Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time and that their data could be deleted upon request. Additionally, participants were assured that their involvement in the study would have no impact on their academic performance. Furthermore, confidentiality was maintained for all respondents, with only the participating

Table 2
Interview guide for the semi-structured interviews

No.	Question
<u>Opening</u>	
1	Can you tell me about your experience as a foreign student studying here?
2	In your opinion, what does “student engagement” mean to you?
<u>Mandatory</u>	
3	How long have you been studying here, and what motivated you to choose Finland for your education?
4	How do you personally engage with your studies and the university community?
5	Could you share any specific instances or examples where you have felt motivated in your academic pursuits?
6	Can you describe any challenges that you have encountered in your academic journey as a foreign student in Finland?
7	Can you describe any opportunities that you have encountered in your academic journey as a foreign student in Finland?
8	How have these challenges/opportunities impacted your perception of student engagement and motivation?
9	How do you perceive the role of cultural differences and cultural adaptation in shaping your experiences of student engagement and motivation?
<u>Optional</u>	
10	What are some specific practices that you believe contribute to a positive and engaging learning environment for foreign students in Finland?
11	Are there any specific aspects in which you feel that more or less support is needed to enhance your engagement as a student?
12	Have you come across any support mechanisms provided by the university or the local community to enhance student engagement and motivation?
13	Do you have any recommendations for the university to better support student engagement among foreign students in Finland?
14	Do you have any recommendations for policymakers to better promote student engagement among foreign students in Finland?

researchers knowing their identities. Finally, as an expression of appreciation for their time and cooperation, gift cards were provided to the participants after the interviews.

4. Empirical Findings

The analysis of the interviews yielded four primary themes. First is the theme of peer interaction and cultural stereotypes, followed by the second theme, which revolves around integration challenges. The third theme highlights challenges viewed as opportunities, and finally, the theme of institutional support. The subsequent section offers a comprehensive summary of the analysis, complemented by verbatim excerpts from the participants to illustrate the findings.

4.1. Theme 1: Peer interaction and cultural stereotypes

The first theme, peer interaction and cultural stereotypes, can be further divided into two distinct subthemes. The first subtheme is peer interaction, which had a notable influence on students’ motivation levels, consequently influencing their engagement. The second subtheme, cultural stereotypes, served as their frame of reference, shaping their biases and perceptions in the context of peer interactions. Hence, it is crucial to consider both themes in conjunction with each other, as they mutually inform one another to a certain extent.

“The opportunity to participate in events and collaborate with local students has been very motivating” (Participant #7)

“An opportunity I encountered was joining a student association, which helped me meet people and adapt better” (Participant #11)

The aforementioned quotes are representative examples of how the majority of students felt about interacting with local students. They

attested that gathering through formal events assisted them in breaking initial barriers and getting better integrated into the local student culture. The students indicated that many organizations that were arranging events marketed them in English, making the foreign students feel included.

Moreover, the foreign students perceived Finns as a culture with a high barrier to entry, meaning that it would be difficult to socialize with Finnish students in an informal setting. A participant commented that Finnish students “do not chit chat” (Participant # 13) making it harder to socialize with local students. This, in turn, often provides common ground for foreign students and allows them to socialize among each other, thus creating an in-group vs. out-group phenomenon.

“Feeling a sense of belonging within the university community has been a key motivator for me” (Participant #18)

“Finnish people have a very hard shell and it is more consuming to make friends with Finns than with other foreigners, but it is possible” (Participant #5)

4.2. Theme 2: Integration challenges (cultural adaptation, seasonal impact, and language barriers)

The second theme, integration challenges, encompasses three overarching subthemes that emerged during the discussions. Specifically, these subthemes include cultural adaptation, seasonal impact, and language barriers.

Many of the students talked about cultural adaptations and differences to their home culture. Although the majority of students had experienced interactions with different cultures through leisure travel, however, they attested that the Finnish culture is “different from what they are used to” (Participant #13). Interestingly, half of the students indicated that they had fully adapted within a few weeks of arriving in Finland, whereas the other half continued to struggle to adapt to the Finnish culture

throughout their studies. Another noteworthy finding was that about one-third of foreign students stated that they did not fully adapt but accepted the cultural differences (for better or worse).

“It was very different from my home country. We often gather but here it is more individualistic. I don’t mean that people are selfish, but they are more introverted than what I am used to” (Participant #20)

In addition to the cultural adaptation, a seasonal adaptation impact was observed. Seasonal adaptation refers to significantly contrasting weather conditions in Finland. For example, the summers were generally described as “long days of sunlight with mild temperatures,” whereas the Finnish winter was characterized as “dark,” “cold,” “daunting,” and “harsh” by many of the participants. About one-third of the foreign students admitted that the weather (during the winter months) had a negative impact on their motivation to study. However, half of that cohort admitted that they had adjusted to the weather by accepting it as a “necessary evil” (i.e., something unpleasant that must be accepted to achieve a particular result). In particular, students originating from tropical or subtropical climates appeared to struggle with the weather conditions during the winter. The same students drew comparisons between the Finnish climate and their home climates and demonstrated the highest level of difficulty in adapting to the new environment as illustrated by the following statements:

“The challenge of adapting to the dark, cold winters here did affect my motivation and engagement” (Participant #3)

“The winter is daunting. I do not like it. I really do not like it at all, but I guess it is a necessary evil for the exceptionally light summer months” (Participant #7)

Furthermore, the impact on mental well-being due to the challenging weather conditions was a concern raised by approximately half of the participants. For instance, some students found it necessary to adjust their daily routines to safeguard their mental well-being, actively seeking activities that “supported a more social lifestyle,” as expressed by Participant #17. Another student emphasized the importance of maintaining a regular workout routine during the winter to prevent social isolation, particularly in a season when outdoor activities were severely limited (Participant #14). This stood in stark contrast to the summer months when most social gatherings and activities took place outdoors.

The majority of foreign students acknowledged that Finnish students generally possess a proficient command of English. However, it should be noted that language barriers need to be interpreted as an in-group versus out-group behavior rather than an actual communication barrier between Finnish and foreign students. The perceived language barrier refers to a perception that foreign students feel excluded when Finnish students communicate in their native language around them. A little more than half of the students shared a sentiment that they felt welcome by Finnish students, however, excluded on a deeper level because they could not communicate with them in their native language. Two students added that their integration challenges eased at the same time when their Finnish language skills improved. During the interviews, a few students shared experiences regarding these perceived language barriers. They shared instances where they felt excluded or startled as illustrated by Participants #1 and #5:

“The language barrier has been a significant challenge for me. Sometimes, it is tough when other students speak Finnish and I feel excluded” (Participant #1)

“I am always shocked when I ask, ‘Do you speak English?’ and they deny [it], but then it turns out they speak perfect English” (Participant #2)

4.3. Theme 3: Challenges as opportunities

Previously, language barriers were reported as a challenge leading to a factor that prevents foreign students from successful integration. However, there have been some students ($n = 3$) who perceived language barriers as an opportunity for personal growth, and therefore, enhancing their level of motivation. Notably, these findings show that the exhibited long-term thinking (and associated commitment to the task) translated to a strong willingness to invest in language courses. The following verbatim from the interview transcripts are exemplary and illustrate the sentiment that was shared among the small cohort of students:

“I have been studying here for two years and the reputation and quality of the education system was a motivation factor for me” (Participant #9)

“I took as many Finnish language courses as I can to learn the language and integrate. It was a challenge, but I think it is worth it [if I want to stay here]” (Participant #2)

4.4. Theme 4: Institutional support

Although institutional support was not at the center of the discussion with most of the participants, it was a reoccurring topic that emerged naturally in most discussions. The foreign students emphasized one key outcome that is noteworthy to share. An intact institutional support system was seen as a fundamental basis for motivation and engagement with their degree studies in Finland. The students hypothesized that the absence of institutional support through academic advisors, course lecturers, and support functions at the university would have a negative influence on their level of (behavioral) engagement. This would manifest through a lack of discipline, inconsistent attendance, or their behaviors (i.e., “If they do not care, then I do not care,” Participant #4). Conversely, the interviewed students reported a good level of perceived satisfaction with their institutional support during their studies as illustrated by the following statements from Participants #8 and #12.

“The student advisor is very helpful and the way the university is set up makes it easier for me to receive information” (Participant #8)

“One example that motivated me was when my professor praised my work, which made me feel valued and motivated to do even better” (Participant #12)

5. Discussion

The study aimed to examine the perceptions and experiences of foreign undergraduate students in Finland regarding their engagement and motivation during their degree studies. Moreover, the study sought to identify underlying issues and challenges that shape the perceptions and experiences of foreign students.

The first theme of peer interaction and cultural stereotypes aligns with the literature emphasizing the significance of emotional engagement, especially for foreign students (Wong & Liem, 2022). The subtheme of peer interaction illustrates that opportunities to engage with local students can have a positive impact on motivation, which is consistent with the notion that a sense of belonging and social integration are central to emotional engagement (Rivas et al., 2019). Engaging in extracurricular activities and student associations, as mentioned by some participants, reflects the behavioral engagement dimension (Bowden et al., 2021). On the other hand, the subtheme of cultural stereotypes reflects the cognitive engagement dimension. Students’ biases and perceptions, influenced by cultural

stereotypes, can affect their cognitive engagement by shaping their attitudes and beliefs (Fredricks, 2011). The participant who mentioned the challenge of making friends with Finns highlighted the potential cognitive barriers that cultural stereotypes can create (Bowden et al., 2021).

The second theme, integration challenges, encompasses several subthemes, each of which has implications for student engagement. Cultural adaptation, as a subtheme, corresponds to the emotional engagement dimension (Wong & Liem, 2022). The participants' experiences of adjusting to the Finnish culture, especially regarding weather conditions, highlight the emotional impact on motivation and engagement. The participants who described the Finnish winter as "daunting" and "harsh" reflected the emotional aspects of engagement. Seasonal impact, another subtheme, underscores the emotional and behavioral engagement dimensions. The participants who reported the weather affecting their motivation illustrate how environmental factors can influence emotional engagement (Wolters & Taylor, 2012). Additionally, their adaptation strategies, such as accepting the weather as a "necessary evil" or seeking social activities, reflect behavioral engagement (Bowden et al., 2021). Moreover, language barriers relate to both emotional and cognitive engagement. The emotional dimension is evident in the feelings of exclusion mentioned by some participants when Finnish students conversed in their native language. This feeling of exclusion can negatively impact emotional engagement (Rivas et al., 2019). Moreover, previous research identified that the most essential element of engagement was the experiences of belonging and alienation (Korhonen et al., 2019).

When challenges are perceived as opportunities, they have a perspective on the relationship between challenges and engagement. Some students viewed language barriers as opportunities for personal growth, highlighting the cognitive dimension of engagement (Fredricks, 2011). Their commitment to language courses and long-term thinking illustrate their cognitive investment in the learning process. This theme aligns with the idea that cognitive engagement involves students being reflective and purposeful in their learning endeavors (Bowden et al., 2021). Lastly, an institutional support system resonates with the literature emphasizing the role of support structures in enhancing student engagement (Guo & Jamal, 2007; Wekullo, 2019). The presence of institutional support, as perceived by participants, positively influenced their behavioral engagement (Bowden et al., 2021). The student advisor's helpfulness and professors' recognition of students' work were mentioned as key motivators, reinforcing the importance of institutional support in fostering engagement.

5.1. Implications for research and practice

The findings from this study offer significant contributions to the existing body of knowledge regarding the experiences of foreign undergraduate students in Finland. These findings suggest several implications for research and practice. The outcomes of this study make noteworthy contributions to the theoretical landscape by providing empirical insights into the experiences of foreign undergraduate students, a group often marginalized in higher education discussions (Lambrechts, 2020). These findings advance the discourse surrounding student satisfaction, particularly for foreign degree students, within the broader construct of higher education.

The interpretation of the empirical findings provides insights on the complex interplay between peer interaction, cultural stereotypes, integration challenges, and institutional support, offering valuable

evidence to supplement existing theoretical frameworks. Moreover, this study contributes to building a framework that explains how various factors influence the engagement and satisfaction of foreign students in their academic studies. The identified themes – such as social connections, cultural perceptions, adaptation to new environments, and institutional support – form the fundamental components of this framework. These themes collectively illustrate the diverse factors influencing the college experience for foreign students, aiding our comprehension of their integration and enjoyment within higher education.

In terms of practical recommendations, institutions could implement several strategies to address the identified issues. For instance, designing cultural integration programs that facilitate peer interaction and mitigate cultural stereotypes could create more inclusive environments. This might involve organizing inclusive events, language exchanges, and support groups aimed at fostering a welcoming atmosphere for foreign students. In particular, events organized by an official body were described as most accommodating to foster social interaction between domestic and foreign students (and thus improving the overall satisfaction among foreign students). Similarly, previous research has shown that peer support is positively related to faster academic progression, and therefore, an important cornerstone in fostering students' advancement through their academic journey (Sakurai et al., 2016). Additionally, institutions should offer adaptable support services recognizing the diverse experiences of students adapting to new environments.

These support services could encompass mental health initiatives tailored for seasonal affective changes and language support programs promoting inclusive communication. Moreover, mentorship programs, language courses, and platforms showcasing success stories of overcoming initial barriers can empower students to perceive challenges as opportunities for growth. Furthermore, enhancing institutional support structures is crucial. Proactive and accessible academic advising, faculty recognition, and streamlined information dissemination can foster a sense of belonging and commitment among foreign students, ultimately enhancing their overall engagement and experience within the educational setting.

6. Conclusion and Future Research

The study on foreign undergraduate students in Finland is significant as it contributes to the growing discussion about student satisfaction. It revealed key themes impacting their engagement: peer interaction positively affected emotional and behavioral engagement, while cultural stereotypes impacted cognitive engagement. Integration challenges, like weather and language barriers, influenced emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. Furthermore, perceiving challenges as opportunities and having institutional support positively affected cognitive and behavioral engagement, respectively. The results of this study add to our understanding of student satisfaction within higher education, yet it also highlights avenues for future research (constrained by the methodology of this study or emerging from its findings). First, while the empirical findings of this study are significant, they might not be applicable beyond its specific context. Therefore, a quantitative inquiry might be necessary to generalize these findings to a larger population and validate the findings across a broader population group. Second, it is important to note that factors influencing satisfaction differ notably between foreign and domestic students. Longitudinal

studies exploring the interplay of these factors (such as cultural adaptation, seasonal impacts, and language barriers) and identifying moderator variables are crucial. Examining foreign degree students over an extended duration could unveil how these barriers change over time.

Funding Support

The Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism, Prince of Songkla University supported the research financially through the Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism Research Fund.

Ethical Statement

The Research Committee of the Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism, Prince of Songkla University approved the study on 27 August 2023 under approval no. FHT66000006. All participants of the study provided their written consent before participating in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

References

- Aarrevaara, T., Dobson, I., & Elander, C. (2009). Brave new world: Higher education reform in Finland. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 21(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1787/hemp-21-5ksj0twnffvl>
- Abuhassna, H., Al-Rahmi, W. M., Yahya, N., Zakaria, M. A. Z. M., Kosnin, A. B. M., & Darwish, M. (2020). Development of a new model on utilizing online learning platforms to improve students' academic achievements and satisfaction. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 17(1), 38. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-020-00216-z>
- Adhabi, E., & Anozie, C. B. (2017). Literature review for the type of interview in qualitative research. *International Journal of Education*, 9(3), 86–97. <https://doi.org/10.5296/ije.v9i3.11483>
- Astin, A. W. (1999). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40(5), 518.
- Berry, A. (2020). Disrupting to driving: Exploring upper primary teachers' perspectives on student engagement. *Teachers and Teaching*, 26(2), 145–165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2020.1757421>
- Bond, M., Buntins, K., Bedenlier, S., Zawacki-Richter, O., & Kerres, M. (2020). Mapping research in student engagement and educational technology in higher education: A systematic evidence map. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 17(1), 2. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-019-0176-8>
- Bowden, J. L. H., Tickle, L., & Naumann, K. (2021). The four pillars of tertiary student engagement and success: A holistic measurement approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(6), 1207–1224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1672647>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>
- Bryman, A. (2017). Quantitative and qualitative research: Further reflections on their integration. In J. Brannen (Ed.), *Mixing methods: Qualitative and quantitative research* (pp. 57–78). Routledge. London, UK. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315248813-3>
- Castleberry, A., & Nolen, A. (2018). Thematic analysis of qualitative research data: Is it as easy as it sounds? *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*, 10(6), 807–815. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cptl.2018.03.019>
- Chiocca, E. S. (2021). Talking with 'Others': Experiences and perspective transformation in a short-term study abroad program. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 33(2), 35–60. <https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v33i2.484>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. USA: Sage Publications.
- Feng, L., & Papi, M. (2020). Persistence in language learning: The role of grit and future self-guides. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 81, 101904. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2020.101904>
- Finnish Broadcasting Company. (2023). *Survey: Nearly half of foreign students plan to leave Finland after graduating*. Retrieved from: <https://yle.fi/a/74-20022258>
- Fredricks, J. A. (2011). Engagement in school and out-of-school contexts: A multidimensional view of engagement. *Theory Into Practice*, 50(4), 327–335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2011.607401>
- Fuchs, K. (2022). An interview study to explore the perceived usefulness of in-house training programs in tourism and hospitality education. *Heliyon*, 8(12), e12547. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e12547>
- Fusch, P. I., & Ness, L. R. (2015). Are we there yet? Data saturation in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(9), 1408–1416.
- Glass, C. R., & Westmont, C. M. (2014). Comparative effects of belongingness on the academic success and cross-cultural interactions of domestic and international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 38, 106–119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2013.04.004>
- Gong, Y., Gao, X., Li, M., & Lai, C. (2021). Cultural adaptation challenges and strategies during study abroad: New Zealand students in China. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 34(4), 417–437. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2020.1856129>
- Groccia, J. E. (2018). What is student engagement? *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2018(154), 11–20. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20287>
- Guo, S., & Jamal, Z. (2007). Nurturing cultural diversity in higher education: A critical review of selected models. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 37(3), 27–49.
- Halif, M. M., Hassan, N., Sumardi, N. A., Omar, A. S., Ali, S., Aziz, R. A., . . . , & Salleh, N. F. (2020). Moderating effects of student motivation on the relationship between learning styles and student engagement. *Asian Journal of University Education*, 16(2), 93–103. <https://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v16i2.10301>
- Hussein, M., Hirst, S., Salyers, V., & Osuji, J. (2014). Using grounded theory as a method of inquiry: Advantages and disadvantages. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(27), 1–15.

- Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development, 37*(1), 58–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197>
- Koo, K., & Nyunt, G. (2023). Pandemic in a foreign country: Barriers to international students' well-being during COVID-19. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 60*(1), 123–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2022.2056476>
- Korhonen, V., Mattsson, M., Inkinen, M., & Toom, A. (2019). Understanding the multidimensional nature of student engagement during the first year of higher education. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, 1056. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01056>
- Lambrechts, A. A. (2020). The super-disadvantaged in higher education: Barriers to access for refugee background students in England. *Higher Education, 80*(5), 803–822. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00515-4>
- Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research, 26*(13), 1753–1760. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444>
- Meens, E. E., Bakx, A. W., Klimstra, T. A., & Denissen, J. J. (2018). The association of identity and motivation with students' academic achievement in higher education. *Learning and Individual Differences, 64*, 54–70. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2018.04.006>
- Rajabalee, Y. B., & Santally, M. I. (2021). Learner satisfaction, engagement and performances in an online module: Implications for institutional e-learning policy. *Education and Information Technologies, 26*(3), 2623–2656. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-020-10375-1>
- Research Council of Finland. (n.d.). *Research ethics*. Retrieved from: <https://www.aka.fi/en/research-funding/responsible-science/research-ethics>
- Rivas, J., Burke, M. G., & Hale, K. (2019). Seeking a sense of belonging: Social and cultural integration of international students with American college students. *Journal of International Students, 9*(2), 682–704. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i2.943>
- Sakurai, Y., Parpala, A., Pyhältö, K., & Lindblom-Ylänne, S. (2016). Engagement in learning: A comparison between Asian and European international university students. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 46*(1), 24–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2013.866837>
- Sobaih, A. E. E., Salem, A. E., Hasanein, A. M., & Elnasr, A. E. A. (2021). Responses to Covid-19 in higher education: Students' learning experience using Microsoft teams versus social network sites. *Sustainability, 13*(18), 10036. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su131810036>
- Wekullo, C. S. (2019). International undergraduate student engagement: Implications for higher education administrators. *Journal of International Students, 9*(1), 320–337. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i1.257>
- Wolters, C. A., & Taylor, D. J. (2012). A self-regulated learning perspective on student engagement. In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 635–651). Springer. New York, NY, US. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7_30
- Wong, Z. Y., & Liem, G. A. D. (2022). Student engagement: Current state of the construct, conceptual refinement, and future research directions. *Educational Psychology Review, 34*(1), 107–138. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-021-09628-3>
- Yasmin, F., Li, S., & Slaninová, G. (2022). Exploring the motivational factors for international students to study in Chinese higher education institutions. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 938986. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.938986>
- Zhoc, K. C., Webster, B. J., King, R. B., Li, J. C., & Chung, T. S. (2019). Higher education student engagement scale (HESES): Development and psychometric evidence. *Research in Higher Education, 60*(2), 219–244. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-018-9510-6>

How to Cite: Fuchs, K. (2024). The Discourse on Student Engagement and Motivation Among Foreign Students in Finland. *International Journal of Changes in Education*, <https://doi.org/10.47852/bonviewIJCE42022224>