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Transnational Student Engagement: The Invisible Students?

Master's Thesis

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Abstract

Transnational education initiatives are on the rise across the globe as universities seek to further their internationalisation strategies. In Scotland, student engagement is at the heart of the higher education system, be that in the classroom or through quality enhancement practices at the institutional level. The focus of this research is in the area of student engagement and transnational education. In essence, this thesis sets out with the aim to find out how student engage at transnational initiatives of Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs). A conceptual framework is introduced with the most common student ‘identities’: consumers, citizens, co-creators and partners. The research approach adopted in this thesis includes in-depth interviews with eighteen transnational students through phenomenological lenses. The findings from this research provide evidence that transnational student engagement mostly occurs at course-level, and that the majority of the respondents define student engagement as staff-led, as opposed to student-led. The main conclusion drawn from this research is that transnational student engagement is low. Finally, recommendations are offered in the form of an action plan to help improve transnational student engagement.

Keywords: Student engagement, Transnational education, University, Consumers, Partners.

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Foreword

I could never have completed this thesis without the help of so many people. So I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the following.

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And finally a special, loving thanks to my family: Mum, Dad, Craig, Jack, Kirsty and Michael.

This thesis is dedicated to my Aunt Angela who sadly passed away one week after the commencement of this Masters. I hope I have done you proud.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND

Interest in the student experience, particularly student engagement, has grown considerably over the last three decades. Student engagement has essentially become a buzzword across the higher education sector, with researchers, policy makers, institutions and students often using this term to help enhance the overall student experience. Researchers analyse this concept in a variety of ways, with some considered the factors for engagement such as student motivation and effort (Schuetz, 2008; Zepke et al. 2010). Others consider the roles of institutional structures and cultures and their impact on student engagement (Porter, 2006; van der Velden, 2012). Yet some considers various contexts such as socio-political and environmental factors that influence how students engage (Law, 2005; McInnis, 2003; Yorke, 2006; Zepke et al., 2011). Moreover, some have analysed the benefits of student engagement, such as Ramsden (2003) who declares that it's benefits include enhancing student learning, retention and achievement. Bryson & Hand (2007) further this notion by saying that improving student engagement is a desire by almost all educators.

If we are to consider student engagement, it is also important to understand the various circumstances that this occurs. For this research, it is important to understand transnational education. Transnational higher education also known as 'franchised provision', 'offshore education', 'international collaborative provision', or 'cross-border' education, has become an important part of higher education in recent years (Huang 2007, Naidoo 2009, Smith 2010, and Woodfield et al. 2009). Scholars detailed that there are several drivers that have shaped transnational higher education and its associated quality assurance policies: first is the incorporation of more international elements into research and teaching at universities; secondly, is the ability to enable engagement in the globalized knowledge economy; thirdly, is the growth of transnational higher education in countries that used to have restrictions in place, but no longer due to trade liberalization policies; fourthly, the rise in globalization; and lastly, the capacity-building role assumed by developed higher education systems in underdeveloped or low demand tertiary education in regions

(Altbach 2010, Dunworth 2008, Doorbar & Bateman 2008, Ziguras & McBurnie 2008, and Smith, 2010).

It has been observed that the trend of higher education and research is moving east (British Council, 2013). This is clear when looking at where the highest levels of TNE are being provided, such as China, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Malaysia. However, not all these countries deliver the same types of TNE as China's main modes are partner branch campuses and joint programmes; in Malaysia, the main modes are franchise arrangements and full branch campuses; and the UAE focuses more on full branch campuses in order to up-skill the labour force and increase access to the growing expatriate population (British Council, 2013).

Kuder & Obst (2009) found that for both European and Northern American universities, the most popular subjects for collaborative degree programmes, or TNE initiatives in general, are business, management and engineering. It is believed that the focus on these disciplines is due to demand from both students and employers, and that high tuition fees can be set with low costs on delivery, especially with business related subjects.

1.2. RESEARCH FOCUS

Moving on, the portrayal of students having an increasingly valuable voice for educational development is becoming more evident, with scholars emphasising that student perceptions are both valid and valuable (Hu & Kuh, 2003).

The reason for this research focusing on the students' perspective of student engagement at transnational initiatives is due to the lack of qualitative research studies on current students within these courses. The use of quantitative research methods for research into transnational initiatives is increasing (Wilkins & Huisman, 2013; British Council & DAAD, 2014; Avdjieva & Wilson, 2002), yet there is a certain gap of qualitative research in this area. This study has been designed in the hope to address this gap and to offer an insight into an often-invisible type of student.

1.3. OVERALL RESEARCH AIM AND INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH

OBJECTIVES

The overall aim of this research is to advance the understanding of student engagement in transnational education initiatives from a students' perspective. As the study is based on the Scottish higher education system, student engagement is a significant factor in quality mechanisms at Scottish institutions (Healey et al., 2010; QAA, 2012). Indeed, through the establishment of student associations, the Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) and Student Partnership Agreements students are often considered as partners in the sector (Williamson, 2013). Therefore the research questions is as follows:

From the students' perspective, how do students engage at transnational initiatives of Scottish higher education institutions?

As there have been little studies into transnational students' experiences, this study would give a unique insight into this area. There are many studies into how students are involved at home institutions; but what is lacking, is the knowledge of how transnational students can engage with the HEIs in order to enhance the quality of provision and the overall student experience.

Specifically, within the context of higher education, the objectives of this study are to:

1. Identify the various levels of student engagement.
2. Outline the different identities that students can have in regards to student engagement.
3. Explore student views and practices related to student engagement, by focusing on students at transnational education initiatives
4. Evaluate critically transnational student engagement practices in line with the overall sector.
5. Based on the empirical results, create a framework for transnational student engagement.

It is important to understand the purpose and value of each of the above objectives, objectives 1 and 2 focus on the definitions, reasons and characteristics of student engagement, whereas it is in objectives 3, 4 and 5 where this research will make contributions to the field of student engagement. The reader should understand that the listed objectives are not to be seen as separate, but rather they are interlinked to help detail the fluidity of this research, so that each objective supports the following objective and so on. The first objective – on the levels of student engagement – will

cover the vertical and horizontal levels of student engagement. For example, vertical considers the levels within the university, from the classroom to University Senate (the academic governing body); while horizontal will look at the stages of engagement from passive to active, alienated to engaged. Objective 2 will develop the first by specifically considering the various student identities that relate to student engagement, and how these identities are matched to the various levels that are evidenced. In essence, the first two objectives will be addressed by the literature review, but will be compared and developed in the conclusions with the findings of this study. Objective 3 will provide the opportunity to gain meaningful insight into the views of students on what student engagement means, and their overall student experience studying at a transnational initiative. Following on from this, Objective 4 will consider how the views on student engagement, from transnational students, relate to the Scottish higher education system. Finally, objective 5 will bring together the discussions in this thesis by creating a series of recommendations for the Scottish sector to improve transnational student engagement, in the form of a transnational student engagement framework.

This research will contribute to the development of student engagement practices at transnational initiatives in the following ways; firstly, by providing an overview of the various levels of student engagement; secondly, by critically examining student identities that are often associated with student engagement; thirdly, by obtaining the views of transnational students, in relation to their overall experience at a transnational initiative, with specific detail on how they engage, and what identity they feel most appropriately summarises their engagement; fourthly, to examine transnational student engagement practices in comparison to the overall sector; and lastly, to offer recommendations to help support stakeholders in developing and enhancing student engagement at transnational initiatives.

1.4. OUTLINE STRUCTURE

An Outline Structure of the following chapters of this thesis is provided to give a quick summary of each (Biggam, 2012).

Chapter 2. Literature Review & Conceptual Framework

This chapter defines student engagement, discusses the various levels associated with the concept and clarifies the terms student voice and students as partners. It combines the literature review into a conceptual framework, which depicts various participation levels (at institution and student level) and also includes the four student identities most prevalent in the literature: consumer, citizen, co-producer and partner.

Chapter 3. Research Methods

This chapter discusses and justifies the research strategy (phenomenology), the data collection technique used (interviews). Also, the method of data analysis is provided. In addition this chapter details the limitations associated with the study.

Chapter 4. Interview Findings: Description, Analysis and Synthesis

This chapter is laid out in a series of categories that were discovered during the analysis through coding. They are: (a) Student engagement; (b) Student identities; (c) Quality; (d) Learning and teaching; (e) Support; (f) Feedback. Each category is presented according to the following structure. First, a description of the empirical results that is associated with the categories. Second, the analysis of the empirical data and how it relates to the objectives. And third, a synthesis to show how the findings relate to the literature and the overall conceptual framework.

Chapter 5. Summary, Conclusions and Reflections

This chapter will summarise the research findings, alongside the literature review, and offer conclusions based on the results. After summarising the first four objectives, other significant findings that were discovered during the study will be introduced. An action plan will be examined to structure the recommendations related to this study. Lastly, we will consider the value of this study and guidance on how this research can be progressed in the future.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Student engagement is one of the top buzzwords in higher education across the globe. In the US, it is tied closely with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) designed by George Kuh who argues that the concept of student engagement is clear-cut and easily understood (Kuh, 2008). On the other hand, Trowler (2010) discovered through their thorough literature review that the concept is multi-faceted. While in the US student engagement is predominantly around the aspects of student participation in learning and teaching, in the UK the concept is more focused on student involvement in governance and quality processes through roles as student representatives in courses, and officers within student unions.

It is important to understand that student engagement is multi-layered and that it encompasses different levels within the university. Healey et al (2010, p.22) proposed a framework to highlight the different levels of student engagement:

- Micro: engagement with their own learning and that of other students.
- Meso: engagement in quality assurance and enhancement processes.
- Macro: engagement in strategy development

It could be argued that within these levels there will be a different type of student engagement depending on the involvement of key players and the facilitation mechanisms established. At Micro-level, student engagement will be focused in the classroom such as students co-creating the curriculum. The Meso-level is more focused on student representatives and students providing feedback on their learning experiences, which has an impact of quality processes. However, as Healey et al (2010) highlighted in their research into student engagement, there are little studies at macro-level: strategy development. It could be argued that the reason for this is that in the UK students involved in university strategy development are from the student unions/associations and therefore the impact is unique to the institution.

Little et al. (2009) argues that universities tend to emphasise the passive (consumer) role of students during student engagement discussions, rather than considering them as active (partners) in the overall university community. Baron & Corbin (2011)

support this argument when debating that student engagement has ‘become a quality control indicator and, accordingly, subject to formal quality assurance mechanisms, rather than a subject of meaningful dialogue’ (ibid. p. 765). This highlights the fine line between paying lip service and purposeful discussions when it comes to student engagement.

It is clear from the literature that in order for there to be effective student engagement which is beneficial to both students and staff, there is a requirement for institutions to facilitate and provide support for students to engage (Bovill et al., 2011; Dunne & Owen, 2013; Healey et al., 2014; van der Velden, 2012). However, it is worthwhile to note that this does not mean a consumeristic approach in which students are perceived as customers of engagement, but rather that they play the role of co-producers of engagement (Trowler, 2010). Kahu (2013) concluded in her research into the different dimensions of student engagement that there is responsibility from all participants (the student, the teacher, the institution, and the government) to improve student engagement.

2.1.1. STUDENT VOICE

It is important to distinguish engagement from the “student voice”. Cook-Sather (2006) examined this concept and discovered that there are two underlying premises associated with this term: ‘rights’ and ‘responsibilities’. What this means, is that students have certain rights available to them, and they have responsibilities in regards to their learning experience. Cook-Sather supports the notion expressed by Fielding that student voice efforts cannot be met until there are ‘organisational structures and cultures to make their desired intentions a living reality’ (Fielding, 2004, p. 202). Consequently, Cook-Sather (2006) concludes that the impact and value of student voice depends on change within the organisation. This indicates that organisational structures and cultures can be barriers to the student voice, and in turn student engagement. And the solution that is needed, is a change in attitudes and structures to centre on the student – for long standing institutions, this may not be so easy to do, but since transnational initiatives are relatively new, there is the unique opportunity to centre on the student at the beginning.

Furthermore, The student voice is often associated with student feedback, Czerniawski & Kidd (2011) concluded that the student voice is radical, democratic,

and empowering. Despite the value of this definition where students' actively provide feedback to help improve educational experiences it is a reactive force in which students respond when needed. Unlike the student voice, student engagement covers a great deal more in which both the institution and the students are equally responsible and play roles depending on their strengths to enhance the quality of the selected institution. Therefore, the student voice is part of student engagement.

2.1.2. STUDENTS AS PARTNERS

Another concept that is often associated with student engagement is students as partners. Often these two concepts are confused. As Healey et al (2014) highlight, partnership is a process of engagement but not all engagement is partnership. The authors further go on to create a conceptual framework to highlight that partnership can be divided into two overlapping areas: student engagement in learning, teaching and research; and student engagement in the quality enhancement of learning and teaching practice and policy (Healey et al., 2014). The notion of overlap in regards to student engagement is prominent as the process is not linear, but rather fluid and transformational. For example, a student may not get involved in all aspects of student engagement offered to them, such as representation opportunities, and therefore could be categorised as “disengaged” yet they may be active in their own learning through attendance of courses and interacting with fellow students and the lecturers within the classroom.

Many studies that have focused on the concept of student engagement have analysed it from the institution perspective, for example Gwen van der Velden (2012) considered how organisational culture theory could be used to understand student engagement from a senior management position. Whilst this was a useful insight into how the concept was apparent in two UK institutions, it raises the question as to why there are little studies into how students perceive student engagement.

Evaluating the different dimensions of student engagement, Dunne provides a concise explanation on how student engagement is a transformational process:

“There is a subtle, but extremely important, difference between an institution that ‘listens’ to students and responds accordingly, and an institution that gives students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be

significant, to recommend solutions and to bring about the required changes. The concept of 'listening to the student voice' – implicitly if not deliberately – supports the perspective of student as 'consumer', whereas 'students as change agents' explicitly supports a view of the student as 'active collaborator' and 'co-producer' with the potential for transformation."

(Dunne in Foreword of Dunne & Zandstra, 2011, p. 4)

Unsurprisingly, there is a lot of rhetoric around the idea of student engagement: there is more emphasis from governments, national bodies and institutions to improve student engagement – or how they define it – yet it seems that there is no holistic approach. Baron & Corbin (2011, p. 767) state that, “while universities are pushing for schools and academics to improve student engagement, many of their practices may have actively contributed to an environment of disengagement”. Conversely, this concept of disengagement in regards to lack of active student participation is flawed as students participate to the extent of their circumstances. Not all students will have the opportunity to engage in all opportunities provided to them as they may consider that their perspectives are not willing to be heard, such as Krause (2005) found in her study of 'inertia' among students. Alternatively, rather than focus on disengagement, student engagement should be considered as a scope of involvement that depends on student, staff, and institution attitudes.

2.2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Having analysed the concept of student engagement and the terms that often are associated with it, a conceptual framework has been developed for this study (see Figure 1). It is clear that there are several aspects of student engagement, which could be considered a process where each concept is a certain level of engagement from the students. Having considered models of student participation (see Bovill & Bulley, 2011; Healey, et al., 2014; Rudd et al., 2006) the below framework has been adapted to highlight the various levels of student engagement for this study: University Participation level and Student Participation level. The conceptual framework also identifies four student profiles that are most prevalent in the student engagement literature: consumers, citizens, co-creators and partners. The reason for this conceptual framework is to understand how transnational students engage with the institution and what category they fit into – or if there is a new paradigm. Not only

does the framework consider the different levels and student identities within this phenomenon, but it also highlights that student engagement practices can overlap and therefore multi-faceted.

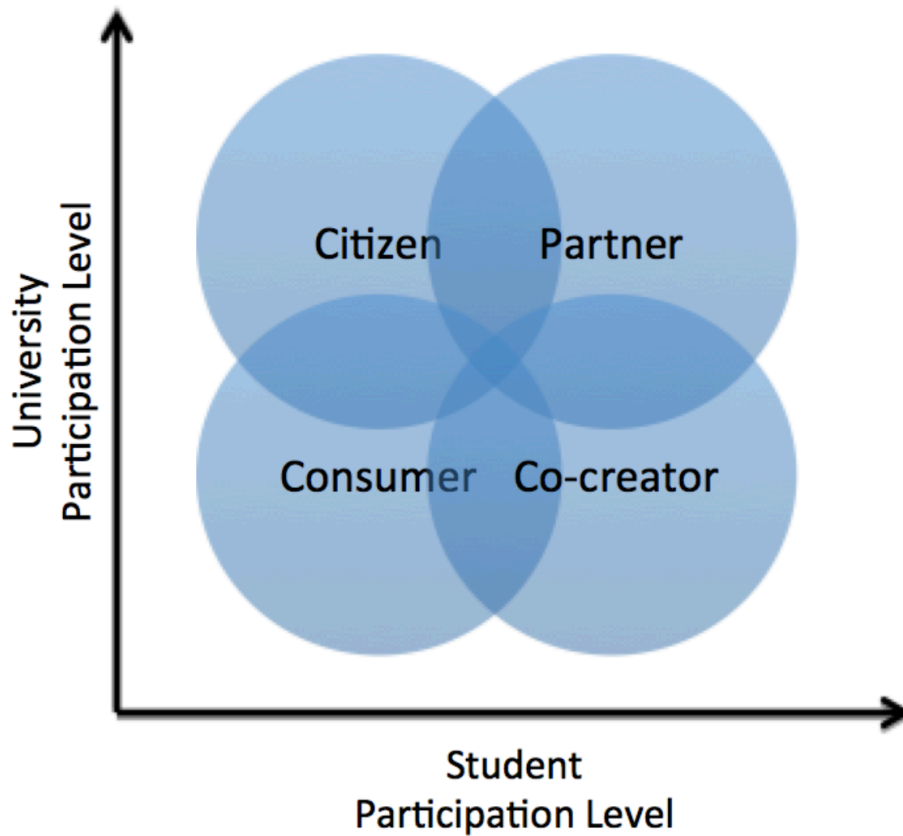


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

For the purpose of this study student engagement is defined as the process of interaction between students, staff and institution for the benefit quality improvement. It is a transformational process which is multi-dimensional concept in which there can be different levels of student engagement and different levels of participation in which student engagement occurs. Having understood the concept of student engagement in the previous section, we shall now consider each of the different aspects of the conceptual framework.

2.2.1. UNIVERSITY PARTICIPATION LEVEL

The university participation level dictates the environment in which student engagement occurs. From the grassroots level of the classroom or course, students will have opportunity to engage with their own learning experience of their degree.

This will include interaction with the curricula and course-level feedback. The higher quadrant focuses on university-wide initiatives, therefore student engagement that happens outside of the classroom. For example student representatives and student unions working alongside university teach staff and management for quality enhancement purposes that affects a large number of students. Also, there are mid-section areas such as student participation at department or faculty level. However, for the purpose of the study the two areas will be student engagement at course level, and student engagement outside and above the course level.

2.2.2. STUDENT PARTICIPATION LEVEL

This axis examines the range of levels of student participation. Rather than having “disengagement”, the lowest level of participation is considered as passive, in which the student makes minimal effort to engage and develop their learning experience. The reason for this decision of wording is that the term “disengagement” is misleading, as a student will always be engaged to some extent through attending lectures or submitting assignments. Active student participation is considered as when a student makes a conscious effort to engage within their learning experience. This can include providing constructive feedback on their courses, or being elected as a student representative.

2.2.3. THE FOUR STUDENT IDENTITIES

It has become apparent that there are several “identities” that students are categorised under within the student engagement literature. These identities reveal the different connotations that students are considered as when discussing what is meant by student engagement. However, as shown in the conceptual framework there is an overlap between these four identities as the concept of student engagement is multi-faceted and transformational, this means that students can fall under several categories (or none!) depending on the context in which the student engagement occurs. For example, a student could be considered as active in regards to extra-curricular activities, yet does not participate within the classroom by not attending lectures. This overlap emphasises that one size does not fit all, in terms of students and how they engage. Rather, students should be considered as individuals, with individual experiences and unique ways of engaging (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013). Yet, so

simplify, and reduce confusions, four overall identities are used, with a note that there will always be nuances in terms of how individual students engage.

2.2.3.1. Students as Consumers

By identifying students as consumers, this highlights the passive nature of the students in regards to engagement with their learning experience. They perceive themselves as external to the organization as evaluated by Naidoo & Jamieson (2007, p. 272) in which “students who internalize a consumer identity in effect place themselves outside the intellectual community and perceive themselves as passive consumers of education.” In other words, this follows in the line of hooks’ (1994) reflection of Paulo Freire’s ‘banking system’ in which students are considered as just repositories of information provided by the lecturer. There is no transformational or reciprocal approach to teaching and learning through this aspect of student engagement. In essence, these students merely consume the service and education that they are provided, rather than being seen as producers of knowledge (Gibbs, 2012).

Additionally, if students are paying fees, they are more likely to be considered consumers, by themselves and by the institution (Voss et al., 2007; Kandiko & Mawer, 2013; Hill, 1995; Athiyaman, 1997). For example, Kandiko & Mawer found in their study that there is a consumerist ethos among fee-paying students, with students’ wanting ‘value for money’. Additionally, universities and faculty are considering the students as consumers by addressing ‘service quality for the consumer’ (Hill, 1995; Athiyaman, 1997).

What the conceptual framework depicts is that student-consumers have a passive role in the university community. This signifies tokenism (Cook-Sather, 2006) and alienation (Kift, 2004; Mann, 2001) that students may feel in regards to their opinions and their overall belonging of the institution.

2.2.3.2. Students as Co-creators

When there is a proactive level of student engagement at course level, students are considered as co-creators. This means that students participate in active and collaborative learning (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Through their analysis, Bovill et al., (2011) identified that there are three areas in which students can be co-creators: teaching approaches, course design and curricula. The researchers illustrate that this approach to student engagement can meet resistance from both staff and students due

to the shift in power dynamics. Despite these critiques, they demonstrate that by empowering students to be active in their own learning, they have a deeper understanding of learning, increased enthusiasm and motivation by both staff and students, and a positive relationship between the teacher and the pupil. For the purpose of this study, all aspects of students as co-creators will be considered in order to reduce complexity.

2.2.3.3. Students as Citizens

When there are passive levels of engagement from students at the university level, often students are considered as citizens (Svensson & Wood, 2007). The university is considered as the authority, whilst the student is the citizen due to the relationship in which the university has the right to provide education to the society through the citizens. This paradigm focuses on the rights and the responsibilities of both parties: the university as an authority can pass or fail students, while the student as the citizen participates in higher education and is obligated to continue and conclude their studies. This metaphor can be seen in the UK through the use of Student Charters in which the rights and responsibilities clearly indicate what is expected by the student, and by the university. However, these minimum standards have little impact on improving or even maintaining quality as Harvey & Green (1993) conclude. Therefore, such a relationship is accountability-led (Little et al. 2009), rather than allowing for enhancing the quality of higher education (Coates, 2005).

It may be worthwhile to note that not all researchers consider student citizenship as passive (Thomson & Gunter, 2005), indeed some emphasise that considering students as citizens helps to promote and maintain democracy within higher education (Boland, 2005; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Englund, 2002) to the extent that collective student bodies such as student unions are deemed as powerful ‘pressure groups’ (Pross, 1986). However, for the purpose of this research, citizenship is considered a passive role in comparison to partnership and co-production.

2.2.3.4. Students as Partners

The highest level of student engagement that is considered in this study is the identifying students as partners. This is the most proactive level, in which the students are empowered to participate in matters to do with their education. Not only are students empowered and proactive, but the staff and institution are as well, as they

understand the value of this level of student engagement. This allows for capacity building and enhancement of the quality of provision. An example of where partnership is evident is through the use of Student Partnership Agreements (SPA) in Scottish universities (see Williamson, 2013). Unlike student charters which were categorised with students as citizens, they do not resemble a contract, but help to aid monitoring of student engagement, quality enhancement and promotes quality processes to students. Therefore they are more improvement-led rather than accountability-led mechanisms of engaging students in quality processes (Law, 2010).

CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 RESEARCH STRATEGY

The selected research strategy for this study on transnational student engagement is phenomenological strategy. Phenomenological research helps to understand a common experience of a group of people and describe what the participants have experienced, how they have experienced it, and the meanings they make of their shared experience (Moustakas, 1994). Bogdan and Taylor (1975) help to illustrate this approach when they said, ‘The phenomenologist views human behaviour ... as a product of how people interpret the world ... In order to grasp the meanings of a person’s behavior, the phenomenologist attempts to see things from that person’s point of view’ (ibid, pp. 13-14). This means that by using this research strategy a greater understanding of the phenomenon that is student engagement will develop through the perceptions of transnational students. The designed conceptual framework has been used in support of this approach by structuring the ‘socially constructed’ student identities that are most known, and relate this to the student engagement phenomena (Denzin, 1994). This approach helps to understand the ‘essence’ of student engagement from participants because the phenomena centres on interaction and participation, thus the approach could be argued as a symbolic interactionism phenomenological approach as discussed by Bryman (2012).

In essence, the strategy for this research is to understand the experiences and perceptions of transnational students. To do this, the opinions of transnational students are fundamental to this thesis, since students are deemed as experts and their views are valid:

“...students are neither disciplinary nor pedagogical experts. Rather, their experience and expertise typically is in being a student – something that many faculty have not been for many years. They understand where they and their peers are coming from and, often, where they think they are going.”

Bovill, Cook-Sather & Felten (2014, p.15)

It is important, when considering the research strategy to understand the researcher’s worldview. Theirs is based on the constructivist approach. This will be evident

through the research in which the participants and their subjective views build up my worldview on student engagement. This is a 'bottom up' approach as the researcher values the opinion and perceptions of the student that is the participant of student engagement.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION

At first, data collection was designed around purposive sampling, since this is often used in qualitative research strategies (Bryman, 2012). This meant narrowing down transnational initiatives to solely business-oriented subjects. However, as access to the students was limited, contact was made to senior academics and managers within the university to provide contact information on the students. In order to alleviate some concerns in relation to authenticity and reliability of this research project, the organisation *sparqs* helped support this study by allowing the researcher to use their name, during primary contact, if the institutional contacts had any concerns.

In total, three institutions provided contact details of students. To ensure anonymity of the institutions as well as the students, all references to the universities were under pseudonyms. University A provided contact details of students studying at two international centres, in Singapore and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). University B provided contact details of students studying at a branch campus in the UAE. University C provided contact details of students studying at a franchised programme in India. Therefore, there were three locations and three different types of transnational initiatives used in this study. This allowed for diversity, whilst maintaining similarity through the parent institution being in Scotland and the subject area being business-related.

All students that were provided by the institution were contacted via email initially, which included information related to this research project, the MARIHE programme, the interview structure and emphasis that the respondents would be kept anonymous. In total, 18 students were interviewed. It is also important to note that two of the respondents were provided with interview questions beforehand, and sent answers back to the researcher. The researcher was unable to contact these students again, but their answers were still used for data analysis. A breakdown of demographic data of the interviewees can be found in Appendix 2.

All interviews were conducted via Skype and lasted between 40-65 minutes. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, with a list of questions designed around the four main identities of the Conceptual Framework (See Appendix 1. for a sample of questions). A semi-structured interview approach was chosen for this study as it prevented pigeon-holing the responses, and provided the interviewee the opportunity to discuss aspects of student engagement that were most relevant to them. The interviews were designed with the purpose of understanding the motives behind student engagement, their perceptions of the phenomenon and how students perceived their identity in higher education.

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

All interviews were audiotaped using a voice recorder application on a mobile phone. Alongside this, additional notes were taken during the interview. The researcher transcribed each interview within a week of the occurrence to ensure that it was still recent, and additional notes could be added. The transcriptions and additional notes were then coded using MAXQDA 10. As Basit (2003, p. 145) notes, ‘coding and analysis are not synonymous, though coding is a crucial aspect’. Primarily, descriptive and in vivo coding techniques were utilised (Saldana, 2012). This then proceeded to categorisation of the codes into the four main identities, however the researcher discovered this did not accurately portray the responses, as the data seemed to signify illustrating the students’ journey of this phenomenon of engagement, and therefore categorisation was redone, to provide the layout as is shown in the following Findings Chapter.

3.4 LIMITATIONS

It is worthwhile to note the limitations of this study explicitly. Due to the length of this Masters’ thesis, a couple of parameters had to be set, in order that what was delivered was as concise and understandable as possible. The first limitation that is important to mention is that only a few Scottish institutions’ transnational initiatives were looked at. Since this study only looked at three Scottish HEIs out of a total of 19, this study has given an insight into Scottish transnational initiatives, rather than fully heuristic. Furthermore, only students from business-related degrees were interviewed, yet there are a range of degrees offered transnationally including engineering and medicine. Another limitation is the number of interviews. As this

research has only interviewed 18 current transnational students, this is only a small number in comparison to the overall number of students on these initiatives.

While the research methodology is appropriate for this study, it is also important to acknowledge its limitations in comparison to quantitative and mixed methods research. Initially, this research was designed to be mixed methods, to provide a broader overview of transnational student engagement. However, given the time constraints and access to transnational students, it was decided that a qualitative method was more appropriate. The author feels that the use of phenomenology was sufficient in achieving the aims of this research, but notes that there is always room for improvement.

CHAPTER 4. INTERVIEW FINDINGS: DESCRIPTION, ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS

4.1. INTRODUCTION

The findings are laid out in a series of categories that were discovered during the analysis through coding. They are: (a) Student engagement; (b) Student identities; (c) Quality; (d) Learning and teaching; (e) Support; (f) Feedback. This approach was preferred to dividing the findings into the four student identities that were depicted within the conceptual framework that could signal that the found categories are separate and mutually exclusive. As mentioned in the conceptual framework, it is rather the opposite as these identities are deeply interrelated.

Each category is presented according to the following structure. First, a description of the empirical results that is associated with the categories. Second, the analysis of the empirical data and how it relates to the objectives. And third, a synthesis to show how the findings relate to the literature and the overall conceptual framework. For the majority of the findings, responses from the individual institutions are non-identifiable. Only when there are significant similarities will the student type be notified, for example a difference of findings between part-time postgraduate and full-time undergraduate students. It is also relevant to emphasise that this is not a comparative study among the participant institutions. Moreover, student's personal characteristics (e.g. gender, age, etc.) did not demonstrate to have any particular influence on their discourses.

The order of the categories has been set in such a way to highlight fluidity between each. They are all interconnected; hence the first major category is indeed *Student Engagement* to understand how students define the concept and provide context for the following sections. *Student Identities*, which are highlighted in the conceptual framework, as well as others that were revealed during the interviews follow this. *Quality* is evaluated to consider what is most important in the eyes of the student, which coincides with *Learning and Teaching*, as this is, arguably, the main reason for studying. We then consider how students are *Supported* during university, by the university, and finally we analyse *Feedback*, which discusses the feedback mechanisms that are used within transnational education initiatives.

4.2. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

This category will consider how students define student engagement, and their overall perceptions of the concept. What will be revealed is, through the respondents' definitions, student engagement is two-dimensional: staff-led or student-led. It will also shed light on why some students have low engagement, particularly postgraduates. It is worthwhile to note that when talking about postgraduates, these students are also part-time, while the undergraduate students are full-time. The concept of alienation will be discussed as a possible reason for low engagement.

4.2.1. DEFINITIONS

This category focuses predominantly on the participants' definitions of the concept 'Student Engagement'. It highlights how students perceive engagement, which does not necessarily refer to how they engage, rather what they consider it to be. This means that all students were asked specifically, 'how do you define student engagement'. The reason for this is that all the data centres on student engagement activities, as it is argued that everything a student does is a form of student engagement.

There are so many definitions of the concept student engagement that all 18 participants were asked for their own understandings of the term. Six of the students' definitions can be summarised as the concept as being **student-led**. For example, one student stated, "*for me, student engagement is how much he or she is engaged to earning the degree. Not just for names sake where he just comes, does the exam, submits the assignment and gets a degree and walks away*". This idea of student engagement directs attention on the student's commitment to their education, which in turn will lead to a feeling of accomplishment. Another student identified that student engagement is significant as it *'facilitates a better atmosphere of learning experience'*. This notion of commitment is also identified as a sense of belonging for one student, as student engagement is based on the community of learning between the students. It can therefore be said that student-led student engagement is proactive and revolves around commitment and the sense of belonging. It also stresses that student engagement predominantly occurs during the classroom, and the overall learning experience.

However, the majority of students' definitions can be summarised as **staff-led** student engagement. This meant that it was up to the teachers or the university to encourage students to participate and get involved. One student mentioned that she believed student engagement refers "*to the extent to which a professor gets the student involved, or ... interacting with the student*". Another student from a different university described the term in a very similar way defining it as "*answering and involving the student into something, so that the student is engaging in a process, in a decision, in a strategy*". This shows that students feel that it is up to the teachers to encourage students to participate within and outside of the classroom. Therefore, it can be said that staff-led student engagement is more passive compared to student-led since there is the expectation from the student that their teachers will provide them with opportunities to get involved.

Following on from this idea that student engagement should be staff-led, three students mentioned that they feel **alienated** from the parent institution. One student explained why he felt (staff-led) student engagement was poor:

"Because you have asked me about the engagement and I don't feel particularly engaged when we are almost treated like second-class citizens because the whole programme is geared towards the students in Scotland. And the lecturers are very open about this, it is not the lecturer's fault from what I understand, it is the university's fault, and it's the model that they operate. The programme is designed and management and operated in Scotland, and we are kind of like bolted onto it. So if you look at the level of engagement on ... the portal [online blackboard] where they are giving up dates and stuff. In 15-20 updates on one sheet, there will be one from the local lecturer. All the others will be from the Edinburgh guy to his students. And it just seems 'well what a wonderful level of engagement they have, that's incredible' and we are really an afterthought and you know, when we're paying significant money for this course... I have had one of the senior lecturers stand up and say how proud he is that they have been established in UAE for 10 years now. You know, it's not good enough is it? Ten years on to still have students that you are not catering to deliberately."

This excerpt highlights the dismay that students feel when staff do not actively try and engage with them. It aligns with the notion of consumerism in the conceptual framework as it shows that if there is low involvement from the university, then there will be low involvement from the students. The perspective indicates that transnational student engagement is low if the institution does not actively pay attention to these students. This concept of alienation and staff-led student engagement will become more apparent throughout this chapter.

These two different themes of student engagement signify that student-led is particularly focused on the level of commitment and belonging of the student in regards to their education, whilst the staff-led theme expands to encompass the whole student experience. There is no significant occurrence in the data to indicate that there is a typical type of student that believes student engagement to be student-led or staff-led.

The idea that student engagement should be staff-led correlates with the literature that in order for there to be effective student engagement which is beneficial to both students and staff, there is a requirement for institutions to facilitate and provide support for students to engage (Dunne & Owen, 2013; Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014; van der Velden, 2012). Furthermore, it also signifies that transnational students play a passive role in their learning as they depend on the faculty to 'lead the way' (Cheng, 2011).

Moreover, Healey et al. (2014) separates student engagement into two areas: learning, teaching and research, and quality enhancement of learning and teaching. What seems to be evident in the transnational students definitions of the concept is that the majority of engagement happens at the micro level in learning, teaching and research. There were very few students that mentioned the involvement of students in decision-making processes or related to the concept to quality enhancement.

4.2.2 LOW STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

What has so far been established is that there is low transnational student engagement if the institution does not actively pay attention to these students. If we identify student-led engagement to centre on belonging and commitment to their studies, there is a minimal level of participation outside of their primary studies. When querying

students about why they do not engage more such as providing feedback or becoming a class rep, many replied that there was ‘no time’, and that external commitments were the priority over their involvement at the university. These students are aware of opportunities to engage such as filling out evaluation forms, or talking to their class rep but they still do not engage.

It seems as if there is a current of **student apathy** when it comes to students not willingly engaging. One student mentioned the reason why they do not get involved more often, ‘*genuinely not everyone is attached to the university [...] I don’t think there is a personal attachment with the university which would make me go, okay let me give some feedback*’. This level of indifference is the opposite of student-led student engagement where it is centred on commitment and belongingness. Here, we see that there is a lack of belonging, which explains one reason as to why students are not engaging. Why is this? It could be argued that if student-led engagement does not work, then staff-led student engagement needs to be established in order to increase the sense of belonging and connection to the overall university life. Furthermore, this concept of student apathy is related to staff apathy because if students do not have sufficient levels of interaction with their teachers or they do not find out how feedback is used, then they will not actively participate in activities other than just passing their courses. Presumably, this will therefore create staff apathy, as the teachers’ will become less motivated to develop student engagement if the students’ are not willing to meet halfway (See Learning & Teaching Category for greater discussion on staff apathy).

Another reason for this student apathy is related to studying in a different country away from the parent institution. This was particularly apparent with students when discussing if interaction with their students’ association or class reps. One student who was asked if they knew who their class rep was responded, ‘*currently no. Could I find out? Probably easily enough.*’ Another when asked about their Scottish students’ association stated, ‘*Because I am in Singapore we may know some of the activities in Scotland (...) But normally I don’t care.*’ This disconnect could be seen as either the student believes they are not represented and therefore they should not pay attention, or they are genuinely just not bothered. This apathy goes against partnership in the conceptual framework and is more associated with consumerism in which the student takes a passive stance and has this level of selfishness. In other words, they do not

want to participate in anything that does not necessarily have tangible gains for themselves.

Part-time postgraduate students were identified as having the lowest level of involvement. All 11 postgraduate students expressed at some point during the interviews that the reason they did not engage more with university life was due to external commitments. This is a more functional reason for low engagement, rather than just student apathy. Several of these students mentioned that if they were doing their undergraduate degree full time, then they would be more involved. For example, one student said, *‘Well, I’m not a full-time... I have a life outside the university so it hasn’t completely absorbed my life. It is something I do outside of my job.’* Therefore, this external commitment factor plays a significant role in attributing why there is a low level of student engagement among postgraduates. Another reason, which is related to the idea that student engagement should be staff-led, is that postgraduate students do not feel that they are part of the community and that the university does not see them as part of the core body of students. One postgraduate student summed this up by saying, *‘we spend very little time with the university, so we are not part of the university. So the university will see us like that.’* This shows that if the student does not feel part of the university, then this further disengages these students. One student representative, who was an undergraduate, was asked why postgraduate students were not involved more, his reply:

“This is the blunt truth okay. Postgraduates are the most ignored student population on the campus. I mean first of all they come in the night [...] The Student President works from 9-5 that’s it [...] Even the careers department goes home after five o’clock. Imagine, postgraduates they want to speak to the careers advisor, they need a job, but they can’t reach the career advisor. And, yeah, they don’t get to participate much in events or be a part of clubs and societies and so on [...] I think that is because the Student President doesn’t represent them.”

This correlates with the idea that student engagement is staff-led or that someone else other than the student should lead it. If services are not available to postgraduate students then they will not get involved with extra-curricular activities or they will feel that they are not part of the overall community. One postgraduate student

mentioned that he believed the services that the university offers were for undergraduate students only. This perception seems to be prevalent among the transnational postgraduate community as they feel that the university only offers them classes and they do not get involved because of external commitments. These findings highlight that the time a student spends on campus or in class, signals how much they feel they are a part of the community, therefore part time students identify as ‘part’ student, while full time students are considered as a ‘full’ student. Thus, these postgraduate students feel that as they are part-time there is no point in putting in the effort of engagement. They also believe that the institution considers them to not engage as much as full-time students, and therefore why would they put in the effort, if they were considered as this stereotype?

In the literature, Baron & Corbin (2011) state that schools and academics may have actively contributed to an environment of disengagement, whether or not it was deliberate. If the environment for postgraduate part-time students is that they do not have services available to them, or that the services mainly focus on undergraduate students, this will encourage disengagement. One study by Devlin, James and Grigg (2008) looked at the impact of students working during their studies. It found similar findings to the above in which postgraduate students level of engagement will be significantly lower because of the external commitments that they face. It is also worthwhile noting that this idea that postgraduate students are not part of the overall student community is even clear in the literature as studies on postgraduate student engagement (or non-traditional students) are few and far between. Transnational postgraduate students are further alienated in that they are very far removed from the present student body at the parent institution campus, therefore it is almost as if these students are invisible to the higher levels of academia and management.

4.3. STUDENT IDENTITIES

This category will consider the four identities that were depicted in the conceptual framework: co-producers; citizens; partners; and customers. This category will also discuss what identities students feel most appropriately suits them, which seem to be either partner or customer. What will be revealed is that students do not identify as a co-producer as they feel they do not have any influence over the curriculum.

4.3.1. STUDENTS AS CO-PRODUCERS

The idea of students as co-producers was very low in the interviews. None of the students believed that they helped to shape the curriculum, as there was often mention of rigidity, or inflexibility (this is further discussed in Quality, and Learning & Teaching Categories).

4.3.2. STUDENTS AS CITIZENS

None of the participants mentioned citizenship as an important role in their studies. Another identity that students felt more apt was family members of the university. They saw the university, and staff, as the parent and they were the children. The five students that used this metaphor were all Indian; this could be due to the strong family culture associated with Indian nationality. During these discussions there was mention of the university '*investing*' in them, and helping them to be '*prepared*' for what comes after graduation.

This metaphor of family could be connected to citizenship in that the university is the authority figure, or parent. When the student does well, they are rewarded with good grades, and they see the purpose of the university is to help train them for employment or adulthood. This metaphor also depicts that the university offers a supportive environment for students to evolve and grow. Boland (2005) argues that citizenship should be changed to partnership to promote democracy and empowerment. However, what is becoming clear is that students consider themselves as inferior to the university and to the staff. This may also be related to the countries that transnational students are studying where they are not democracies such as the UAE.

4.3.3. STUDENTS AS PARTNERS

When students discussed the concept of partnership, quite a few talked about how it should be rather than how it actually is. Several who mentioned partnership used it to explain that it was the opposite of customer to show that they are two sides of a coin. According to the participants there are four themes that define students as partners: cooperation, belongingness, student voice and advocacy.

The first theme the participants defined as partnership was **cooperation**. Six students discussed this theme, for example:

“I will consider myself a partner because if University A wants something from me definitely I will help, and I also in the future I can get something from University A also. So it is a partnership, I do not view myself only. If we grow, we grow together.”

This example shows that to be a partner of the university, students need to be able to cooperate with the institution so that quality enhancement can occur. This concept is generally associated with the macro level of the university rather than just inside the course that the student is studying.

Cooperation is seen as a benefit to students and the university where they can mutually develop. One student explained the difference between partnership and consumerism when saying, *‘I think I would consider myself a partner because it is not one way, it is both ways and if I was a customer I would have just consumed. I would not have given anything back.’* This highlights the give and take relationship that occurs between the student and the university in which there is mutual concession.

The second theme is **belongingness**. This is where the student feels that they are a ‘part’ of the institution and there is a high level of loyalty associated with the term. Controversially, one student who felt that the term customer suited him most explained his reasons as to why he is not a partner:

“A partner cannot give an objective opinion about his or her university because he is a partner, he is a part of it. But if you ask from the customer-student he will say every detail objectively.”

This is a thought-provoking statement as the participant is implying that the customer has more power than the partner. They are able to provide critical feedback, as they are outsiders of the institution. This goes against the overall hypotheses of this research in that customers are more passive and are not as engaged as partners.

This sense of belongingness is on par with the literature. Bowden (2011) generalises that student loyalty is associated with a sense of belonging. Bowden makes this statement in an argument that students are customers and therefore belonging is associated with this identity. However, what is trying to be achieved in this research is to show that if students feel ‘part’ of the university then they are more likely to identify themselves as partners. Baron & Corbin (2011, p.763) illustrates this by

highlighting that ‘the engaged student (...) views him or herself as belonging to, and an active participant in, his or her learning communities.’

The third theme associated with the partnership identity is **student voice**. Three participants explained in order for there to be partnership students need to have ‘*influence*’; are able to ‘*contribute*’ to discussions; and finally, ‘*you are a partner when your opinions matter.*’ This theme indicates that for partnership to be established students need to be listened to and change be implemented because of their feedback. It is argued that this connects to the idea that student engagement is staff-led because if the academic does not listen to the student then there will be no ‘student voice’, or it will fall on deaf ears. Partnership develops student engagement from tokenism to inclusion; student voice is an element of this but not the entirety. This is shown in the literature review, where the concept of student voice is the on the line between consumerism and partnership (see Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2006).

The fourth and last theme of students as partners is **advocacy**. Six students mentioned this when discussing partnership. There are two different types of advocacy that students felt were appropriate to the identity under analysis. The first is that students are represented, so for example if a student is in a representative role then they are more likely to identify as partners of the university. The other type of advocacy is that once the student has graduated and goes into employment they will mention that the university that they have come from, and will therefore be the ‘face’ of the university. For example, one student clarified this theme of advocacy:

“In a way we are representatives for the university. Because, if someone asks me how is the university, so I represent so okay I am the face of University C because I have studied through that university. So the way that I behave, the way I work in the industry, probably in some way I will also represent University C.”

Out of the eighteen students interviewed, only five deemed themselves to be partners of the university. These students were from different institutions and different levels of degree therefore there is no conclusive answer to say what type of student could be associated with this identity. Considering the idea that student engagement is predominantly low outside of the classroom, this could be a significant reason as to

why few believe they are partners. Furthermore, if students feel that they are alienated from the parent institution this will also play a role in the lack of sense of cooperation, belonging, student voice and advocacy: Cooperation due to lack of locality which will be a limitation; Belonging because they feel so far removed from the overall institution; Student voice because they have low levels of representation and feel that their opinions are not being heard by the university back in Scotland; and advocacy because if they do not believe they have representatives, or the students' association is not aware of them, then they will not have a voice in order to be represented in decision-making.

The findings are in line with the conceptual framework as it states that in order for students to be partners, there needs to be high involvement from the university and from the student. The four themes of student partnership show that in order for these to be achieved there needs to be involvement from both parties for effective student engagement. The fact that only a small portion of the students identified as partners suggests that these characteristics are not being met.

4.3.4. STUDENTS AS CUSTOMERS

Eleven students considered themselves to be customers of the university. Discussions on this identity revealed that there are two key characteristics: education as a product, and disengagement.

It is worthwhile to note that during the interviews I asked students if they considered themselves as partners or customers of the university. This was to see how the students perceived their identity. As these two identities are the most talked about when it comes to student engagement I felt that it was important to understand what student identified with. Even though the majority of students considered themselves to be customers, four expressed that they disliked the term but felt resigned to use this identity.

The first theme or characteristic that students associated with the customer identity was the perception that **education is a product** that the student purchases, consumes and utilises. Examples of this are the following:

- *“I feel I am a customer because I basically go there and utilise their services and then I go home.”*

- *“It is an absolute business out there. There is no two ways about that.”*
- *“I don’t think the university expects anything of us except probably the fees.”*
- *“They just sold me their product. They just sold me their education. I’m just studying.”*
- *“If you are talking about the college, then yeah I am consuming all of its services. University C is providing me with something, and I am accessing it and using it and consuming it. So it basically makes me a customer.”*

This emphasises the consumption part of regarding education as a product. For this theme several students emphasised that they are customers because they pay fees. Three students stated that the university was ‘profit-generating’ and they believed this was a reason why they did not have many resources or services available to them such as more contact with professors, greater representation and not much contact with the parent institution. This association with payment of their education implies that they must be customers. However, the level of dissatisfaction that seems to be becoming more prevalent highlights students are unhappy with the (or lack of) services they are receiving for their money.

The second characteristic is **disengagement**. Students feel that they do not spend enough time or have low involvement in the university to be considered anything but customers. One postgraduate student indicated this by saying:

“For this short one year course, you cannot get benefits (...) you know, for the period that you are in, you have no influence so it’s more customer [than partner].”

This relates to what has been previously discussed that postgraduate students have the lowest levels of engagement. Studying for a limited period means that they feel they have no opportunity to influence the learning experience or to be involved in decision-making processes. Furthermore, as they have many external commitments as the majority work while studying, there is a lack of attachment to the university and by only studying part-time they do not see the point in investing more efforts into university life when they are soon to graduate. If we consider, according to students, student engagement is staff-led and that a factor of partnership is representation we can see the polar opposite in the following statement:

“It just feels like a transaction and I don’t think academia should be that way. So I think the university is treating me like a customer (...) If there was more engagement and contribution from the university towards me I would feel like I want to actually recruit students to University A. (...) I would actually say go to Scotland if I were to recommend because it is a great university, the Professors are great but I wouldn’t recommend taking it at an international centre.”

This student clearly states that if the university had involved her more or offered her more services and opportunities then she would not consider herself as a customer and, instead, would have become an advocate for the transnational initiative. This strengthens the case that universities have to take steps in engaging students or else students will consider themselves more like customers which many of the participants feel has negative connotations.

Four part-time postgraduate students implied that they felt that there was a lower standard for entry into the transnational course compared to what would be requested in Scotland, in order to ensure sufficient numbers of entrants each year. Reflecting back on their experience as a transnational student they would have taken the opportunity to study in Scotland rather than transnationally, if they were to do it again.

The idea that education is a product relates to Scott (1998) who claimed that higher education is just another ‘mass production industry’. In other words, transnational education is being churned out to the consumers (the students) with no opportunity for the students to have the opportunity to develop the materials alongside the staff and institution. This follows the universality or ‘McDonaldisation’ of higher education where there is no emphasis on enhancement or, indeed, student engagement (Harvey 1999; Ritzer 1996). The passive nature of students identifying as customers has been highlighted by Naidoo & Jamieson (2007). Students that regard themselves outside of the academia community will be less likely to engage and identify as consumers (ibid.).

4.4. QUALITY

It is now imperative to analyse how students perceive the quality of their education. The transformation of the student will be discussed since this was an important factor

when the participants considered the quality of their education. Next, employability will be inspected. Students also found the quality of the staff was significant, as well as the flexibility of the course; particularly in relation to postgraduate students. Finally, the aspects that students would like to be improved will be considered.

What is noteworthy is that students did not mention the internationality of the university when considering if their education was of a high quality. This did not seem to be an important factor for them. It could be said that one of the reasons they did not bring this up was that they feel that is to be expected and thus there was no need to mention it. It may also be interpreted as these students looking beyond the sheer internationality of their programmes.

4.4.2. TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

One of the most important aspects when students consider the quality of their degree is related to how it transforms them, *‘Actually I feel something change in myself.’* This indicates the student feels that it is a high quality programme because they have seen a development, or transformation, within themselves as a result of studying. Thirteen of the participants indicated this pivotal factor in relation to perceived quality. The fact that the majority of students indicated this shows that they perceive their programme to be of a high quality since they have seen a change in themselves. This relates to the transformative notion of quality in education that enhances and empowers the student (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Harvey, 2006). One student illustrated this:

“After attending and studying the classes I found that it was not a walk in the park, this degree is quite intensive. It requires quite a lot of hard work and it makes you work towards the degree. In the sense that if you do and if you are properly engaged and you are committed to studying then you earn a lot, you gain a lot from this degree.”

One concept that kept reoccurring during discussions of the transformation of the student was that students considered the course to be of a high quality when they found the studying to be **challenging**. Six of the students explicitly used this term and none regarded this negatively. If they find it hard work, then they consider this to be of a high quality.

One student explained that the opposite of transformative learning is prescriptive teaching methods, which correlates with poor quality:

“You know when a programme is of a high quality when you're skills are being challenged. So I wouldn't like it, if all I had to do was rote learning, and then going ahead and just writing all of that down. That is not a very high quality programme. It would be more challenging if I have to use the skills that I have learned during the lecture, and during the course and then I'm applying these skills somewhere.”

This has a connection to how supportive the faculty is, in order for the students to succeed in their studies. Relating high quality to challenging workload distances the students from consumerism because students that are considered as customers in the literature often focus on happiness and easiness. Furthermore, transformative learning relates to student-led student engagement since the students' have to proactively engage with their studies in order to receive the benefits. This aligns with Biggs (1985) argument that increased effort of learners is more likely to produce transformative learning. However, this finding of transformative learning goes against Cheng's (2011) study that indicated students at an English university did not relate transformative learning with quality but rather quality relates to passing examinations.

Additionally when the students were asked if they were satisfied with their education, seven students were positive and equated their satisfaction with how challenging the programme was:

“Being in my final year, it's been extremely challenging, but then at the end of it – at the end of our semester when we put our submissions of the modules, we get the feeling that we have done good and that it's worth it even though it has been hard.”

Therefore, we can see that at least half of the students are content with their education and believe that it is of a good quality. This goes along with quality enhancement literature that equates quality with transformative learning, and challenging the student in their learning (Cheng, 2014; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Harvey, 2006; Gibbs, 2010).

4.4.3. PRACTICALITY OF KNOWLEDGE

Students find that the more practical the content is, and applicable it is to the business world makes the programme of a high quality.

“So, it really builds my knowledge, along with that, it also gives me know-how of what is expected of me in the professional world, that is what I feel has been the learning outcome.”

Students who feel that the course does not offer practicality are often dissatisfied. Five postgraduate students from different universities expressed that they felt that the programme could have a higher quality if the material was more based on the business world and was more practical-based.

“If we have lecturers who come from the academic world and also come with a business background so they can give, so it’s a nice combination between academics and business reality.”

The fact that only postgraduate students seem to mention that they feel the programme could be improved by being more practical could be related to the fact that they are all working. Therefore they have experience of working compared to younger undergraduates, and thus they expect a higher level of practicality that they can apply to their work-life.

4.4.4. STAFF

Several students explained that their teachers are what make the course of a high quality. One student demonstrated that teachers are extremely important:

“The curriculum can be of a top notch quality, but the way that the faculty is handing it and dealing with it, and portraying it to us is what makes it high quality.”

Students feel less inclined to engage when there is not a rapport with staff and therefore this will have an effect on the perceived quality of the programme. As one student said, the motivational staff are a *‘force that tells you to wake up every day and do it because it matters.’*

This dependence on academics rather than on the individual’s own learning signifies a passive view of quality. It relates to staff-led student engagement in which the staffs play a primary role in leading the students through their learning experience. Research

studies on students' perceptions of quality have also shown that its dependence on the teachers is an important criterion for quality (Cheng, 2011).

4.4.5. FLEXIBILITY

Students perceive quality to also be associated with flexibility. As all the participants are studying business, quite a few are studying a comprehensive course that provides a certain level of flexibility whether that is part-time study or a variety of subjects available. For example, one student who was asked how she would perceive quality in a degree programme explained: *"I think it's a combination of what is included, or how many areas it covers."* This indicates that quality varies among individuals, and therefore if a course is flexible and offers a range of avenues then it is more likely that the majority of students will be satisfied. As Cranton (2000, 2006) explained, transformative learning relies on the individual discovering their unique learning patterns, thus flexibility can support this.

4.4.6. ASPECTS TO BE IMPROVED

Considering the four aspects of perceived quality that have just been discussed (Transformative learning, Practicality of knowledge, Staff and Flexibility), students mentioned these as being the areas for improvement. Some students were asked how they would improve the quality of their degree, and all four of these aspects were raised as areas for improvement. For example one student responded that she would like more practical coursework such as internships. This relates to practicality of knowledge as she felt that the current programme did not have enough relevancy for her future career. Several students raised the issue of rigidity within the programme, which impacted on the quality; they felt that the course that was designed in Scotland did not address the needs of the students in the UAE and therefore was not relatable. Furthermore, several students would appreciate more engaging teachers as they found that quite a few of the staff were not equipped with teaching skills, despite being experts in their fields.

Finally, one factor that several students raised that has not been discussed yet is the **calibre of peers**. Quite a few students noted that they perceived their peers not to be of the same level of experience as them. They expressed that this had an impact on their learning experience, as group work is a big portion of the assessments that they are required to do. One student highlighted this:

“So when we talk about the class experience, you know, the lecturers are fantastic, they have great backgrounds and profiles and they are very credible. And they stand there in front of a group of 30-80 people and ask a question and I’ve looked around the room and it’s just embarrassing. I feel sorry for the lecturer and it’s detrimental to my experience.”

This highlights that the quality of peers is an important element to the overall quality and to help support the individuals learning experience. Six students expressed this at some point during the interviews. The perceived low calibre of peers has an impact on the students’ perception of the quality of the programme/institution. If students feel that their peers are of a lower standard than they are, or a more passive, then students will consider themselves as customers since it creates passive involvement. Co-production is very limited if the majority of the class is not engaged, and it tarnishes the proactive student’s experience and overall perception of quality at the institution.

4.5. LEARNING & TEACHING

4.5.1. INTERACTION WITH TEACHING STAFF

The first important section to discuss in the Learning & Teaching category is how students interact with their teaching staff. This is crucial to understand how students engage with the academics in their learning. There is four sections that this section has been split into which will be discussed in the following order: Proactive engagement with teaching staff; Passive engagement with teaching staff; teacher engagement; and staff apathy.

4.5.1.1. Proactive Engagement with Teaching Staff

Students’ mentioned that they proactively sought out interaction with teaching staff. Eight students’ discussed how they proactively engaged with the academic staff, in which they chased things up rather than the engagement between the two parties being staff-led where the academic initiates interaction. This centred on the student having a problem, and proactively seeking the attention of the teacher to help resolve the issue. One student explained that this level of engagement varied from student to student:

“It depends on student to student [...] If I have any doubt I raise my hand. They give every student a chance to speak, but there are a couple of students

who are really shy and don't want to speak in front of everyone, so they don't speak. But then I, personally, I'm the kind of person who can go and right away interact with the faculty. So I just raise my hand and I let them know whatever doubts I have."

As the majority of students that mentioned proactive engagement with teaching staff are class reps, it could signify that they already have relationship with the academics and therefore feel more comfortable to take the first step. However, as discussed in the Student Engagement category, the majority of transnational students feel that student engagement should be staff-led, and therefore a few students were not happy with taking the initiative for communication with the teaching staff, and would have liked more engagement led by the teachers.

4.5.1.2. Passive Engagement with Teaching Staff

In terms of interaction with teaching staff, eight students' referred to passive student engagement. One student stated that, at his centre, students' want to be '*spoon-fed*' information. This refers to the students' definition of student engagement being staff-led as they will not interact unless the academics' provide them opportunities to. For instance, one student described her lectures in the following way:

"On my course [...] we have basically two hour lectures for all our module, and it's mostly the lecturer using his or her powerpoint, you know, there is limited class discussion as such, most of it is the lecturer just delivery."

This excerpt reflects the 'banking' concept (Freire, 1993) of education, in which the teacher is the narrating subject while the students are the patient listening objects. The fact that at least half of the participants mentioned this form of lectures indicates a consumeristic identity.

4.5.1.3. Teacher Engagement

Rather than the last two sections that considered how students engage with the teaching staff, Teacher engagement focuses on the students' perspective of how academics engage with them. **During classes**, students' noted that the lecturers often make the effort to engage with the students. However, depending on student apathy, and the engagement levels of the students the level of discussion can vary. One student described it as 'banging your head off of a brick wall' when the lecturer tries

to get the class to develop discussions but there is little response due to lack of engagement from students. Despite this, eight students' believed that the teachers did make an effort to engage during classes.

Outside of class, teacher engagement depends on how approachable the academic is. Communication via **email** was often mentioned by the students and signalled two opposing results. The first, implies that the teacher is approachable, and even though it lacks the face-to-face interaction – which student perceive to be more beneficial to them - students' still consider email communication to be helpful in their studies. For example, *'If we have the tiniest of doubts we can just send them an email and they promptly respond.'* The majority of students felt that academics were approachable via email, and discussions usually led to setting up meetings. However, the second implication of email that a small number of students' mentioned was that they would be provided with an email address but would never get a response. One student described this as the *'not so open door policy'*, meaning that responses were often delayed or they did not reply. This signifies that email is either a stepping-stone (to a meeting) or a dead end.

The level of interaction between the teachers and the students, outside of class time, depends on the rapport developed. One student when talking about flying faculty mentioned that it was difficult to engage with them, as they *'don't have a rapport developed before class.'* However, students that are in regular contact with their lecturers often mentioned the rapport developed, and how easy it was to talk to the academics:

"We have based the rapport over the two years that we have been together [...] they [the teachers] play an important part in actually helping you out by making it a little more jolly and lively in the college, and it becomes stress relieving to talk to these faculties, and to remember what we have done in previous years. So yes, that is a very cordial teacher-student relation [...] they do make us come together and work."

It is worthwhile to note that all of the students who believed they had built up a rapport with faculty members were all undergraduates and/or class reps. This may be due to having more time to communicate with staff, outside of class, compared to postgraduate, part-time students' who do not have the luxury to spend more time

interacting outside of class due to external commitments. For the students' that did mention rapport and more positive comments on interactions with teaching staff, the most important factor seemed to be the individualism. Students appreciated being talked to as individuals rather than just a number, which is often the case for student-customers. This individual level of interaction implies a level of collaboration and partnership.

4.5.1.4. Staff Apathy

Staff apathy pertains to when there is very minimal engagement from the academics. Six students referred to staff apathy when talking about interactions with faculty members. There are several examples that indicate a certain level of staff apathy. The first is that students are discouraged from contacting teachers outside of formal appearances such as lectures. One student explained:

“There is a model, I’ve discussed with somebody actually, they have this ‘we will send out a death spot for you to find you if you dare to contact us outside of our working hours or by any other means stipulated in the course handbook.’ Not literally, I’m joking but they are very strict with their means, the methods in which they are to be contacted by [...] There hasn’t been much liaison, much contact, other than essentials.”

When I asked the student to clarify, he said that communication is ‘discouraged, put it that way.’ This highlights that in some cases there is little engagement between the students and the faculty. This evidences a student-customer identity due to low engagement from both parties. By discouraging students’ to contact them, and to only interact during class time signifies that academics are apathetic to engagement with students: they are not motivated or enthused to develop a relationship. In order for partnership and co-production to be developed, interaction is crucial between staff and students, and this apathy indicates that not only can some students have low engagement or disinterest in the experience but also the same applies to teachers.

4.5.2. INTERACTION WITH CLASSMATES

When students considered how they interact with their fellow classmates, the majority mentioned **group work**. Since more than half of the students stated group work as the primary method of interaction with classmates, this shows that group assignments are

an essential part of the student's learning experience. This evidence highlights that students are committed to their learning, and do not do much engagement outside of their classes, for example, *'I wouldn't say I have a lot of interaction with people outside of class.'* In terms of student engagement, this shows that students do not have much interaction outside of class, which directs them to the lower half of the conceptual framework.

Moving on, seven undergraduate students' mentioned **informal interactions** in regards to fellow classmates. The fact that all seven of these students are undergraduate indicates that the younger cohorts are more willing to have fun and be sociable, and that university also means social activities as well as studying. For instance, one undergraduate student summed this up, *'everyone is always up for having fun, you know, it's an undergrad degree.'* In comparison, the older and more advanced the student is, such as a postgraduates, means that the primary focus is getting through their degree and thus social activities are less important and interaction with classmates will be mainly to do with their studies such as group work. This shows that student engagement varies depending on the student. Sincerity in their studies is prevalent across all studies levels, but social interactions are more common for undergraduates.

Several students mentioned **peer support**, this is considered as less formal than group work, but as the focus is support through academic studies, it is not evaluated as informal. One student explained the importance of supporting each other when he mentioned, *'I guess everyone feels they are on the same boat.'* Since peer support revolves around academic learning and supporting each other in terms of their studies, this shows that transnational student engagement is centred on the student's learning experience. It shows that academic studies is the most important factor of their education, and therefore they try to help support each other:

"We are always bonded and united when it comes to academic learning."

In contrast to informal interactions among undergraduate students, several postgraduate students' mentioned that there was **low interaction** with their peers. This relates to the perceived low quality of peers and that there is no time for more interactions due to external circumstances. For instance:

“Unfortunately I don’t have much interaction, because we are all part time. Most of us are part time on my course and people are working. Half an hour before the class is when you will see people on campus, and that’s when you will interact.”

This highlights that postgraduates are committed to their learning, yet it is not the most important factor in their life, therefore they do not spend much time immersing themselves into the student life. Excluding group work, this indicates that for postgraduate students, the study life may be a lonely journey.

4.5.3. CO-PRODUCTION

So far, there have been very little discussions around co-production in the findings. As mentioned in Student Identities, no student identified as being a co-producer. This section of Learning & Teaching will go into the reasons why there is very little co-production. Reiterating the Conceptual Framework, co-production is defined as the students being proactive within the classroom alongside their teachers; there is little involvement from the institution as the responsibility is with the academics that are present during the students’ lectures and tutorials.

All students were asked if they had any influence over curriculum on their courses. Despite this, none believed they had any sort of influence besides having the opportunity to ask questions. For example, one student responded when asked if they have influence over the curriculum:

“Absolutely, yes you can because I can ask any questions. I mean of course the programme is fixed but I can divert and ask questions and divert a little bit if it’s within the topic of course.”

This shows evidence that there is no co-production besides being able to slightly deviate from the class schedule to ask for clarification. Another student described that the students *‘don’t have any control unless we ask them via email if we need any clarifications.’*

One of the biggest reasons for lack of co-production was to do with **rigidity**. Thirteen of the participants explained that the curriculum is fixed, and there is no flexibility. This rigidity seems to result from the curriculum being designed in Scotland and then

transferred to the transnational initiatives with very little input into the context where the students are. For instance:

“The experience over here, they pitch it well. The delivery, the biggest think is just feeling like I am paying to get the degree. Have I learned stuff? Yes, yes I’ve certainly learning and I’ve developed. But I’ve got a big problem with the way they position the whole thing, adding on knots and crosses. You know it’s like this is the course for Edinburgh being delivered in Dubai.”

This indicates universality since the same curriculum is being delivered at the different hubs of the university. As shown in the above quote, this rigidity results in low engagement from the students – and arguably the staff – and also little opportunity to adapt or co-create within the learning environment.

Three students believed that there was **no need** for them to have the opportunity to co-produce the curriculum. One student responded, *‘this is a certain level of education.’* This implied that as the student was studying a postgraduate course he felt that he did not have the power to shape the curriculum. This relates to empowerment and whether or not the student feels comfortable in their self to understand that they can have influence. Analysing the definition of student-led student engagement, this expression of ‘no need’ indicates that there is a low level of student engagement within the classroom and therefore students are more considered as customers within the Conceptual Framework. It also relates to the staff-led student engagement since they trust the academics to deliver what is needed, and are not aware that a dialogue can be created, for example:

“We don’t get that sort of flexibility as such. Well, I haven’t experienced that sort of flexibility yet. Usually our lecturers have been, you know, the professor is coming in and doing what they are supposed to be doing.”

Additionally students were asked if they could have any influence of changing **assessment** methods. Ten of the students responded that they were not even aware that there could be the possibility to change assessment methods such as doing an individual essay compared to group-work or even changing the subject of the assignment to something that they are interested in. Again, there was expression of rigidity and that the assignments were universal across all centres, including the

parent university. This reflects similarities with Dobos' (2011) research on academic perceptions of offshore campuses where transnational academics were found to have very little input into assessment design as it was strictly controlled by the parent institution.

Having such low co-production examples within the sample of transnational students highlights that there will inevitably be low partnership engagement since it is often seen as the step up from co-production in the classroom. As Bovill (2013) explains, co-creation is developed when staff and students having a certain amount of control over curriculum design decisions. The findings of this study suggest that transnational students do not have any control over the curriculum. Consequently, if there is only passive engagement at the micro level this will signify low transnational student engagement at quality enhancement and strategic levels of the institution as well.

4.5.4. ROTE LEARNING

Having established that there is little to no co-production of the curriculum, seven students considered rote learning negatively. Rote learning to the participants is considered as lecturers reading from the slides, or theory-based without bringing real-life examples for illustration. This correlates with the perception that quality is related to how challenging a student finds the course.

I asked one postgraduate student if the reason for passive learning and just wanting to pass the exam is because the programme was part-time. He argued:

“No, absolutely not. If you look at part-time, I would expect that they are least actually, because why would you want to study while working? If I wanted to do something just to pass exams why would I do that?”

This student was expressing that part-time students are the most engaged in their learning, because they already have so many other commitments that if they wanted it to be easy they would just not choose to study. Considering that when students were defining student engagement (see Section 4.2.2), it was found that postgraduate part-time students have the lowest level of engagement, this is a contradiction. But it also highlights that part-time students demand deeper knowledge during their classes in order to ensure that it is worth their time. Therefore, rote-learning is regarded as poor because, in the words of a student, if *‘everything is just according to the book, I can*

read the book myself.' This implies what would be the point of coming to class when they could learn the materials independently.

There seems to be low engagement from academic teaching as well. If there is rigidity, this may be a reason for low co-production and for rote learning. However, one student indicated that there is staff apathy in regards to students scoring well:

“Unfortunately, we are told here that it is not about the grades, you just have to pass. And that saddens me because I’m not saying you have to be an over-achiever, but when your own Professors tell... well when you hear certain people that represent the university say that you just have to pass, it doesn’t make you proud about the degree that you are getting [...] I just think it should be more challenging and competitive and I think, you know, having comments like that undersells the brand.”

What this quote highlights is that if there is low staff engagement, this will affect the participation levels of the students; if there is passive learning and students do not find it challenging there will be low student engagement. This all directs the students to the identity of customers. Additionally, the only student, who expressed that knowing just how to pass the exam was sufficient, also described his degree as just a piece of ‘paper’. Therefore this suggests that students who define themselves as customers perceive the non-financial value of their education as low.

All seven students that regarded rote learning negatively were postgraduate students. This reinforces that postgraduate students demand a deeper level of knowledge and relates to quality as practicality of knowledge. Furthermore, since there is no opportunity for students to co-create the curriculum due to rigidity this states that if the majority of the classes are rote learning then students will be passive and there will be little engagement. In regards to what this means for student engagement, it could be argued that students’ involvement will vary from student to student, hence the overlap of identities in the Conceptual Framework. Student engagement is multi-faceted as is learning styles.

4.5.5. SELF-EFFICACY

A number of students talked about terms related to self-efficacy during the interviews. There were two sets of differing opinions among the students. The first group

regarded independent study negatively as they expressed they would like their learning to be more of a teacher-led approach. One student in the UAE compared his previous study in Malaysia and highlighted his desire for a more teacher-led approach to his learning:

“In Malaysia I get more experience and more knowledge. But the postgraduate in Dubai I didn’t get so much knowledge because [...] mostly Masters focuses on self-studying. Like self-searching such as looking for interesting topics to work, so I get more knowledge in Malaysia in Bachelor [sic].”

This student shows that he felt he learned more during his Bachelors in Malaysia, as there was less independent study and more rote learning. The second group, which was the majority, expressed that self-efficacy in their studies and being able to research was a key strength of studying a transnational degree. One undergraduate student explained that she preferred her final year, since she had to do more independent research:

“Maybe because fourth year is very individual and research based, I feel like there is a lot more learning that has happened for me.”

It is interesting to note that the few students that expressed that they did not like independent study were postgraduates, whilst the students’ who explicitly mentioned they enjoyed this element were mostly undergraduate students. This shows a conflict with the findings of rote learning since the majority of students against this were postgraduate. However, this highlights that the interviews were semi-structured and therefore some students expressed opinions on one subject whilst others’ talked about a closely related subject. This conflict emphasises that students have independent learning styles in which some students will thrive from independent study, while others will not.

4.5.6. CONTENT TO CONTEXT

Another aspect of learning and teaching that students’ mentioned was putting the curriculum content into the context of where the transnational initiative is based. As a transnational degree translates to a Scottish degree being delivered in a different

country there should be a certain level of equivalence. Students appreciate when the lecturers **localise** the content of the class, such as:

“They [the lecturers] try to insert some Dubai content and yeah they actually mix some Dubai facts or UAE facts in general, because they say ‘you don’t live in Edinburgh to actually understand what this is about’ you know, so they really do that. I think they have done a good job in that.”

Adapting the content to the context allows students to take advantage of learning an international degree but still have relevancy for the area that they live in. This relates to the practicality of knowledge and flexibility of quality as it shows that the material that the students learn is adapted for them as well as being useful if they choose to have a career locally or internationally. Ziguras (2008) suggested that lecturers at transnational initiatives should adapt content so that students could relate it to their experiences. The findings suggest that this is an important factor for transnational students, despite selecting to study an international degree rather than a domestic curriculum (Dobos, 2011; Pyvis and Chapman, 2004).

However, the majority of students expressed a level of **universality** in which the content that they learn is the exact same as would be delivered in Scotland. The following is an extreme example of when the universality of the curriculum does not suit the local context of the transnational course:

“We had a visiting lecturer from Edinburgh and she came to give a lecture on the international marketing course [...] You know the content was fine, she delivered it very well, a lecture she has done several times over if not more. But the relevance! [...] As she is standing in front of 40 odd people in Dubai, where some of the ladies are cover and guys are coming in the kanduras, so it’s multinational but you know there’s not that many Christians and people from the West. So she stands in front and just goes on for two hours about pork, about bacon, about campaigns around vodka, and you know, I mean literally so so insensitive. I mean when you are talking about engaging students, that’s offensive, which is the opposite of true engagement and it’s just incredible.”

This highlights the criticism around transnationally degrees, which are considered as a new form of colonialism (Wang, 2008). By not considering the local context this develops low engagement, as students feel alienated from the content, as they cannot equate what is being taught to their own experiences and social contexts (Ziguras, 2008). At the extreme, as shown above, students can be offended if there is not sensitivity. One student expressed that even though she is studying a Scottish degree, she always prefers to relate it to her local culture and context. Another student said that they did not mind that the content was universal across all centres because this was one of the characteristics of an international degree, however, his thinking was in the minority of the students interviewed. Other research studies on transnational education have expressed this key challenge of ensuring the curriculum is of an equivalence to the parent institution yet adapting for the local context (Shams and Huisman, 2011). As shown, this study has similar findings that students are feeling this challenge, which will definitely have an impact on engagement.

4.5.7. INTERNATIONALISATION

Another aspect of learning and teaching which was important to the interview participants was internationalisation. This is an obvious aspect since all the students are international students (non-Scottish) studying a transnational degree. Thirteen of the participants discussed elements of internationalisation at some point during the interviews. There are four key elements that students talked about: English competency; Flying faculty; Diversity of Peers; and Cultural Differences.

The first aspect of internationalisation that five students discussed was **English competency**. These discussions centred on the student's perception of the lack of English-language competency in their peers and their teachers. One student described that the low English language skills of his peers affected his learning in group-work activities:

“You know, it's a group exercise so it's not great because of the level of their education, the level of their basic English isn't there. And English isn't their first language – not a problem at all – but you would have thought that being on a Masters programme in a British university, Scottish university, you'd have certain standards. And those standards haven't been met.”

Another student from a different institution talked about the English skills of her peers in similar terms:

“I’d like to think for a non-native English speaker I have a pretty strong command of the English language. But there are some colleagues of mine within the programme I am not really sure how they have qualified in terms of writing the essays in order to gain entrance onto the programme.”

This is related to the calibre of students to be improved in the relation to the Quality category. If students question the competencies of their peers this will have an affect of the engagement since they will be less inclined to participate in group-work activities, which is a core component of a Business-related degree. Furthermore, they will consider themselves to be customers of the university since they will see the poor competency skills of their peers as the university trying to admit students for fees only.

The second of aspect that students talked about was **flying faculty**. This is a phenomenon most associated with transnational initiatives (Smith, 2014), where academics fly to different international centres for a short period of time to teach before returning to the parent institution. Several students mentioned these members of staff during the interviews. University A solely has flying faculty that provide intense weekend seminars, while local counsellors are there to help support the upcoming exams. One student explained: *‘I like the fact that a lot of Professors were flown in from Scotland and you got that interaction as well.’* Students were found to appreciate academics coming from the parent institution to teach them, as they felt more connected to the university. However, even though this could help remove barriers between the parent institution and the transnational centre, one issue that seemed to be reiterated was that students were discouraged from contacting these ‘flying faculty’ outside of class. This will be discussed in more detail in the Interaction with Teaching Staff.

The third aspect of internationalisation that students discussed was the **diversity of peers**. All students studying at University A and University B mentioned, at least once, the diversity of their peers. University C students did not mention diversity, however all of them are Indian and the university is based in India. Five students

mentioned the lack of diversity at the University B campus in Dubai, as the majority of students are Indian. One Indian student who was asked about her experience said:

“It’s been nice, although I would say that the nationalities weren’t really diverse. So, you know, it was still very much like an expatriate community, so many South Asians around you, so let’s just say environmentally I have been around these people all my life.”

One non-Indian student reinforced this opinion of a strong Indian community at the campus, but said he often felt excluded because he was not Indian. He explained that he felt that interaction with his peers was ‘not good’, and this had an impact on his learning. This shows that even though the degree is based internationally, this does not necessarily mean a very diverse group of students in regards to culture. However, all students from University A expressed that they believed their cohorts to be very diverse and international. However, they often felt that there was an issue with English competency as discussed previously. This aligns with the transnational literature (Wilkins et al., 2011; Summers & Volet, 2008), which expressed that typically students do not mix with others from different cultural backgrounds. Transnational initiatives offer the opportunities for multi-cultural engagement, but if there is a low level of diversity this can prove difficult.

The last aspect of internationalisation that is significant in the findings, is that the majority of Indian students related the **cultural differences** of studying at a Scottish institution to their prior education, that was mainly Indian. They believed that the Scottish transnational curriculum was more challenging and required more independent study compared to ‘*receiving everything on a silver platter*’ that they were used to. As Challenging and Independent Study have been discussed as relating to good quality, it could be stated that Indian students find Scottish education to be quality, which encourages them to engage more and feel less like customers.

4.6. SUPPORT

This overarching category considers all the support mechanisms and services that the students are aware of. During the interviews, I asked a question on both support and services in order to reveal what students find the most important. By considering the support mechanisms and services that students are aware of, this will shed light on

what is missing. The reason for services being within the Support category is that students regarded these as the same.

4.6.1. ACADEMIC

Academic support relates to what assistance students receive for their studies. Academic support refers mainly to problem solving, in which the student has an issue in regards to their studies and the faculty or institution is able to resolve the issue. An example of this is assignment feedback or guidelines for writing. One student described the benefits of academic support:

‘That is how I feel that such opportunities allow for enhancing a lot of improvication [sic] in our learning. I could term it as the value of our distinct learning and, yes it is somewhere not present but they [the support] have already had an impact on our learning.’

Six students mentioned that academic support helped their learning experience. This relates to self-efficacy that even though the student has to conduct independent study, by having academic support available when needed is important for guidance. Reflecting on the Conceptual Framework, academic support is situated in Students as Co-producers as it is focused at the micro level of student engagement.

However, two students questioned whether academic support provided actually helped them. As one student expressed, ‘I’m not sure if it supports me.’ This questions whether the academic support, such as feedback, is meaningful to the student, or whether it is just tokenistic (Bovill et al., 2011). Moreover, one student commented on his perception of lack of academic support:

“If something is not well understood or communicated by the lecturer, would they be amenable to additional time? I’m not sure. It’s not requested, we just have to figure it out for ourselves.”

This reflects the customer identity as having little to no engagement from staff outside of the classroom to offer students additional support if needed.

One important element of academic support that the majority of students felt important to mention when reflecting on the support the university offers them was the **library**. Rather than consider this as a facility, they discerned the library as an

environment embodying academic support. For example, one student equated the library as the biggest source of help in her studies:

“See with regard to the modules, we have the library which has been a big source and a really big help because Indian courses are very minimal, and describing the library, you know, you really need to have a really big economical and financial pocket for the, and the college has provided with basically everything we need to base our modules on. So that’s the biggest source of help.”

Another student who perceived the library to be extremely important in terms of support explained that there was not a physical library for the students at her international centre. Because there was not a physical library she argued that the centre was *‘not well equipped to serve the needs of the students.’* This highlights that unless there is sufficient academic support provided to the students, engagement in learning would be low. The findings suggest that a library helps participants identify as students by cause of establishing a learning and supportive environment.

4.6.2. EXTRA-CURRICULAR

Extra-curricular support includes events and activities outside of the curriculum. Six of the students mentioned extra-curricular activities when examining support that the university provides them. One student mentioned that these activities *‘relieve stresses’*, and are classified as *‘emotional support’*.

Extra-curricular support also included social activities provided by the local Student Representative Council. However, one postgraduate iterated that these activities were only available to undergraduates. This emphasises the divide between undergraduates and postgraduates, and shows that postgraduate students predominantly focus on their studies rather than encompassing the full student experience. Therefore, postgraduate students are less likely to engaging in activities outside of their present studies. This will be due to external commitments, as well as a level of alienation because they believe other support is only for undergraduate full-time students. In order for an improvement in postgraduate student engagement, there needs to be awareness raising that extra-curricular support is available to them, as well as an examination into what postgraduates extra-curricular needs are.

Additionally, it became apparent that support in the form of extra-curricular activities is low across all levels of education when an undergraduate student stated:

“In other support, unfortunately in some areas they are very slow: they lag. I don’t know why but I don’t think they are very supportive in certain areas such as extra-curricular activities. They are very supportive academically, but when it comes to other activities it takes a while to get things sorted.”

This highlights that there seems to be a lack of extra-curricular opportunities for transnational students compared to those that live in Scotland. One of the reasons for this could be that within Scotland, the Students’ Association or Union provides an abundance of extra-curricular activities for students, especially undergraduates. If the Students’ Association or Union is not well-established at the transnational initiative it will therefore mean a lack of extra-curricular activities.

4.6.3. FINANCIAL

During the interviews very few of the participants mentioned financial support. For these three students financial support consists of scholarships and flexibility of paying fees if there are mitigating circumstances. The fact that there was so few that mentioned this, with only one student indicating that she was not aware of any financial support suggests that all of the students pay fees and they have no additional support available to them. This reflects the paradigm of consumerism as the participant is paying for the education.

4.6.5. POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Students were asked what university policies and procedures they were aware of. The reason for this question to find out how well they knew the processes within the university and to examine macro level student engagement: engagement in strategy development (Healey et al. 2010). Only four students were aware of policies and procedures, and they were explicitly on plagiarism.

The remainder of the participants were not aware of any policies and procedures that affected them. One student stated, *‘no because we are not full-time students, I don’t think any of the policies affect us.’* Another student implied that the university’s policies and procedures do not affect them because they are studying outside of Scotland. This is concerning and emphasises that transnational students are alienated

from the parent institution, which affects their engagement outside of the lecture theatre. It also underlines that the citizenship identity is not valid for these students since they are not aware of their rights and responsibilities. The fact that the majority of student representatives were not aware of any policies and procedures also indicates that there is no macro level student engagement.

4.6.6. SERVICES

The most prevalent services that the participants use are facilities and careers service. Seven students talked about the careers and employability services that the institution offers them. This is understandable regarding that employability seems an important factor of the participants as shown in the Quality category. Half of students that noted these services portrayed that the service was lacking. For example, one student expressed that the employability services were lacking due to low alumni involvement.

One undergraduate student explained that she did not use the services because she was only on campus just for classes:

“Unfortunately, I would say since I don’t stay on campus for long, I don’t utilise their services. For example, I know they have a recreation area and gymnasium but I honestly don’t use much of these facilities because my duration on the campus is very less.”

This highlights that it is not just postgraduate students that only focus on their studies and do not utilise the facilities and services available to them. Since there was little discussion on services, it implies that overall transnational student engagement is low outside of their learning experience.

4.7. FEEDBACK

4.7.1. TYPES OF FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

The most common type of feedback mechanism utilised by the participants were **evaluation forms**. The majority of students stated that they had, at some point, filled out an evaluation form on their class or module; or that they were aware that there was evaluation forms that the university provided in order to obtain the student's feedback. These feedback forms are predominantly for individual modules, rather than the complete year or degree experience.

Three students relayed that they were not aware of any evaluation forms that they can provide feedback on their experience. For the students that do fill out some sort of form, seven students mentioned that they rarely complete them. One student mentioned, *'I just get too lazy'*, while several others questioned the value of their input. This means that they had filled out forms at the beginning of their studies but had not received any response so therefore believed that there was no point to putting in the effort:

"I fill [surveys] out. But I fill them out very rarely because I feel that they have no effect. I feel bad, but I feel they are just giving them for the sake of giving out, saying 'yes, we are considering you and we want student engagement.'"

This superficial engagement relates to the tokenism of the student voice, in so far to say that students provide their feedback but do not know if they are listened to or not. Moreover, the lack of motivation to fill out evaluation forms signifies as consumerist identity among the respondents due to passivity.

Only two students mentioned that feedback mechanisms were **anonymous**. However, one student at university B highlighted that this was superficial in relation to dropboxes:

"[There is] a dropbox near the reception. So you can just anything in. But students are again scared. [...] You know why? There is CCTV right above it. So even if they want to say, Professor I don't like this person, or I don't like this, they will be like 'oh my god there is a CCTV on top of me now, I'm not going to do that'. So, there is this whole vibe of intimidation when it comes to

speaking out what you really want, compared with speaking out what you want them to hear.”

This emphasis that students feel intimidated, and are too scared to provide feedback is concerning. This aligns with students as citizens, in so far that the university is the authority that has surveillance on them. It could be argued that this authoritarian role of the university may also be due to the setting in the UAE, which, to an extent, does not have a democracy.

A very small number of students mentioned that they provide **positive feedback**. This means, that students will let the professors or university know what they like about their experience, rather than focusing on the aspects that they dislike. One student mentioned that positive feedback was only provided when specifically asked what they like about their experience:

“I think no one really wants to talk about it unless there is an issue, and no one really gives positive feedback unless you ask, so ‘what do you like about this?’ So, I don’t think it was encouraged, and when it was encouraged, I think, there was people open to giving positive feedback. So I think it just depended on when you asked them, it was on that.”

This highlights again the concept of staff-led student engagement and passive involvement levels because students will only provide positive comments if they are explicitly asked. Moreover, it shows the need for training on what feedback mechanisms are for, rather than just an avenue for complaints. As one student explained, ‘rarely people fill out a form for just positive things.’ The fact that positive feedback is rarely given highlights that there is low co-production and partnership in the student-staff relationship.

For the remainder of students that provide feedback, it became apparent that these mechanisms were mainly used for providing **negative** comments. Several of the students noted that they the only time that they have provided feedback is to relay something that they were unsatisfied with, for example:

“Genuinely not everyone is that attached to the university. I filled it out once only because I had an issue with the subject, so I was like ‘I want to give this

feedback'. Otherwise I don't think there is a personal attachment with the university which would make me go, okay let me give some feedback."

Students that identify as consumers will generally not provide feedback unless they are extremely aggrieved with the service (Singh, 2002). The above quote aligns with this model, rather than using feedback mechanisms for the development of provision and for quality enhancement purposes. The focus on feedback mechanisms being used as complaint tools is also evident when the students' discussed the role of class representatives as *'firefighters'* and *'mediators'* (The role of class representatives will be discussed in the following section). This reinforces the fact that within partnership there is a focus on improving and enhancing quality rather than students as customers where there is apathy and the minimal amount of feedback provided is more about the superficial aspects (Healey et al. 2011).

4.7.2. CLOSING THE FEEDBACK LOOP

Closing the loop refers to when students are informed of the results of their feedback (Powney & Hall, 1998). All four students from University C mentioned that they were aware of how their feedback was used, only one student from University B was aware, and no students from University A. This could be due to the culture at the institution, since at University C students described themselves as family members of the institution and all were in a representative role, so they have high levels of engagement and are often in communication with the faculty.

The only **formal process** for students to find out how their feedback has been used is through the student representative meetings. One student described that during these meetings, minutes are taken which is a good resource for students to see progress.

Informally, those that have seen change from their feedback have been **intangible**, so they see it rather than formally being notified, *'If what you observe, you know; if what you don't observe it, you don't know.'* This is not necessarily unfavourable because at least they see there is a change, which will influence students giving feedback in the future. It is also important to mention that the students that mentioned that there were results from their feedback, was only in regards to negative or constructive comments. This confirms that students rarely provide positive comments.

Eleven of the students were **not aware** of how their feedback is used. There was a sense of apathy, as seven of these students were not bothered by the fact that they were not made aware of how their feedback was used, for example a student that was asked if they knew how their feedback was used replied, *'No. I'm not actively asking questions about it, not chasing it, no.'* This signifies a lack of engagement from the students and the institution as students' are rarely using feedback mechanisms and when they do, they are not aware of how it is used. Powney & Hall (1998) analysed that the lack of closing the loop will result in passive learning, and that students who are informed of how their feedback has been used will have improved learning experiences. What is evident for the respondents of this research is that the low use of effective feedback mechanisms has a consequential effect on the engagement levels of students.

One student explained that bureaucracy affects closing the loop, as she believes that, *'professors can't be the change.'* This relates to the alienation that has been discussed previously, in where there is a lack of communication between the parent institution and the transnational centre.

4.7.3. STUDENT REPRESENTATION

This section of the feedback category analyses student representative structures at the transnational initiatives. Out of all the respondents, seven were in some sort of representative (rep) role, whether that is as a class rep, or as a member of a Student Representative Council at the institution.

4.7.3.1. Reasons for Becoming a Student Representative

The seven student representatives were asked during the interviews to explain the reasons for volunteering for this role. There were three main reasons: insight, personal development and empowerment.

Several of the reps explained that one of the key reasons for becoming a student rep was because it allows them to have **insight** into the operational side of the department/university. They believe that this insight gives them skills such as presenting oneself at meetings and being able to know who does what in the university in order to develop a relationship with the staff. Furthermore, this insight

makes it easier for the reps to implement change as they are aware of whom to talk to, and they have developed a rapport with the faculty.

Two of the student reps assessed that one of the reasons for becoming a rep was due to **personal development** reasons. This reason centres on the student build on their CV and engage in as many opportunities as possible:

“Do not just pass through the university, let the university pass through you.”

Student engagement is high among student reps, as there is a willingness to get involved as highlighted by the above quote. By taking up every opportunity this allows them to develop and increases engagement activities.

The final reason noted was **empowerment** of the student or the collective body of students; in other words, to become a ‘change agent’:

“The very first year when I realised that there are many changes that can be done in the organisation by the stance taken by the council wish to make it easier not only for students but for faculty, to remove those barriers that are there between the two. I did want to be like a change agent, and that is how I got involved.”

The majority of the student reps mentioned this reason during discussions as to why they became a rep. At the core, this reason centres on leadership and being a guide for fellow classmates. It also has emphasis on taking on more responsibility. However, considering that responsibility signifies using extra time, one of the reasons why there are so few reps is because transnational students have so many external commitments and no time for extra-curricular engagement activities.

Two students also mentioned that one of the reasons for becoming the class rep was due to peer pressure. As one student explained, ‘*I was chosen [...] I didn’t have an option.*’ This highlights that some students are reluctant to engage to the extent as reps, as it is often associated with being the mediator and can be considered as a lot of extra work, which many of the students have already mentioned they do not have due to external commitments.

4.7.3.2. Reasons for Not Becoming a Student Representative

On the other hand, students that did not become student reps shed light as to the reasons why they chose not to. The main reason is that it is too much responsibility. The majority of students that mentioned why they were not reps were part-time, and they see the role as another commitment that they cannot afford to take:

“Well, hang on, under what circumstances are you asking me that question because in reality it wouldn’t work out. I think you would have to be a full time student to have the commitment to do that. To take on all that, I mean, I’m just one person and look at how much bitching I have done in the last 30 minutes and you know, there’s 80 of me. Take that on, you know, analyse that and prepare that to affect some change... That takes some commitment, so in principal yes I would like to, in reality, not going to happen.”

This highlights that the role of rep is regarded as being time-consuming, and therefore students’ do not wish to take up this role due to external commitments. Furthermore, as this quote shows, students regard the role of rep as someone who hears complaints from students constantly, and therefore they do not wish to take on the responsibility of listening to other students issues and taking this forward with the faculty. Possibly, one of the reasons for students having so many issues that reps have to deal with could be due to the lack of effective feedback mechanisms put in place by the institution. The question is, how can these students that have low engagement levels be supported to engage more in an extra-curricular capacity? Regarding that students believe in staff-led student engagement outside of the classroom, this shows that the onus is on the faculty and the university to provide opportunities and support for students who may wish to engage more.

4.7.3.3. No Awareness of Student Representatives

Additionally, seven students were not aware of any student representative. All students from University A did not have any sort of representative, except group leaders for assignments. The lack of awareness of student representatives was due to three factors. The first, the respondents were part-time and therefore did not spend much time with colleagues to find out who the rep was. The second reason was that they believed there was nobody in such a role. And finally, one student mentioned that they had applied to be a student rep but then had heard nothing back from the

administration. This signifies that there is a certain level of apathy from all parties: students, staff and the university. In the UK, the QAA Quality Code states that ‘arrangements should exist for the effective representation of the collective student voice at all organisational levels’ (QAA, 2012, p.10), while in Scotland sparqs supports institutions to ensure effectiveness of student engagement in quality processes. However, it is becoming clear that the levels of student engagement that are apparent in Scotland, particularly in regards to partnership working, has not reached transnational initiatives. What this signifies, is that transnational students seem to be invisible in the policy discussions and therefore this is having an impact on student engagement.

4.7.3.4. The Role of Student Representatives

All students were asked to comment on what they believed were the duties of a student representative. Eight students indicated that the key role was to be the **mediator** between the students and the faculty. In other words, they consider the rep is the person that takes student issues to the faculty, for example one student expressed:

“I think whatever conflicts, or whatever haphazard that happened between the colleagues and the college [...] I am the one who is supposed to actually end it, or take the necessary actions under the guidance of my senior authorities, the teachers. That is the basic fundamental thing that I am supposed to do and play a role so that conflicts don’t rise and lead to further aggravated issues. Just the medium between classmates and the faculty.”

It seems that a lot of the role focuses on fire fighting rather than, figuratively, gardening – growing the positive aspects of the student experience. But instead there is more attention paid to the weeds rather than the flowers. This indicates that transnational student reps and arguably students are predominantly focusing on the issues that occur, rather than nurturing the positive aspects of the learning experience. Moreover, this identifies a consumer approach to student engagement, as students are only speaking up when they have an issue with the service, rather than enhancing the experience by informing faculty of positive aspects and how to improve the quality of provision.

Another major factor in the role of student rep is to attend **meetings with faculty**. Several of the reps mentioned this, in support of the claim that reps are mediators. Meetings with the faculty were seen as the platform for bringing forward issues that the students had raised. These meetings can be every month or every semester, therefore there is not set format across the three transnational initiatives.

However, one student mentioned that it could be difficult to mention issues related to a specific staff member when they are present at the meeting. This relates to the lack of training, as only a handful of the reps have received any sort of training, and very few are aware of the training provision that has been developed by sparqs for Scottish higher education institutions. For example, sparqs has created the ABCD of effective feedback: Accurate, Balanced, Constructive and Depersonalised (see Glasgow University SRC, 2012). Examining the responses from the participants of this research it is apparent that training of reps is not sufficient as the reps struggle to provide effective feedback that can help establish a dialogue and enhance quality processes for the students.

4.7.3.5. Students' Association/Union

In Scotland, all matriculated students are members of their university's Students' Association or Union. However, in regards to transnational students, this awareness is very low. Only two of the participants were aware of the Scottish Students' Association. One has great respect for them, however he is very engaged in the student movement due to his position for running as President at the transnational campus. The other student knew how the students' association worked but did not believe they represented his centre, *'I pay scant attention to them because I am not in Scotland.'* The fact that only two students are aware of their Students' Association highlights the invisibility of transnational students, and the lack of student engagement. Transnational students' feel so far away from Scotland, that they do not believe that the Students' Association represents them, and - presumably - the Students' Association may not be aware that they exist, and therefore focus on representing students in Scotland. This may also be a reason for low student engagement at transnational initiatives, as students' associations are typically the bodies that promote student engagement. Hence, if students' associations are not aware of these students, and are not in touch with them, low student engagement is inevitable.

In total, twelve students were not aware of any representative body that represented them. The only students that were aware of such bodies were student reps. In University B and University C there is a student union/organisation that is established at the transnational initiative, therefore the student reps are often in contact with these agencies. These representative bodies were, presumably, established to promote engagement at the centres, however, as apparent in these findings, there is still low student engagement.

CHAPTER 5. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

5.1. INTRODUCTION

The overall aim of this research is to advance the understanding of student engagement in transnational education initiatives from a students' perspective. This section will summarise the research findings, alongside the literature review, and offer conclusions based on the results. The previous chapter – Findings – was very large and therefore needs to be summarised. This will be organised by considering the research objectives as stated in the following:

- Identify the various levels of student engagement;
- Outline the different identities that students can have in regards to student engagement;
- Explore student views and practices related to student engagement, by focusing on students at transnational education initiatives;
- Critically evaluate transnational student engagement practices in line with the overall sector;
- Create a framework for transnational student engagement based on the empirical results.

After summarising the first four objectives, other significant findings that were discovered during the study will be introduced. As the final objective pertains to creating a Transnational Student Engagement Framework, this shall be covered in the Recommendations section of this Chapter. Lastly, we will consider the value of this study and guidance on how this research can be progressed in the future.

5.2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.2.1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 1: LEVELS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

The literature identified various levels of student engagement; in essence highlighting that the concept is multi-faceted (Trowler, 2010). The literature details various levels of student engagement through the role of the student, such as the passive recipient (Singh, 2002) or as proactive partner (Wisker et al. 2003; Cheng, 2011; Healey et al. 2010; Cook-Sather, 2006; Bovill, 2013).

In practice, according to the students of this study, there are two distinct aspects of student engagement: student-led and staff-led. The findings illustrates that student-led

engagement is predominantly on learning and teaching, and the level of commitment and belonging of the student in regards to their education; staff-led engagement expands to encompass the whole student experience.

The literature indicated that student engagement occurs at all levels of the university (micro, meso and macro) (Healey et al. 2010), yet for the students of this study, the concept generally focuses on the micro level in learning, teaching and research.

As discovered, students take either a passive or more active role when it comes to engaging. Yet, this study has also considered the role of the university and staff when it comes to transnational student engagement. Wilson and Vlăsceanu (2000) detail that when universities participate in transnational initiatives they either take a passive or proactive role, or can be seen as either the 'sender' or 'receiver'. However, the findings have found that the three 'sender' institutions take a more passive role, and hence student engagement is not the equivalent of what is delivered in Scotland and the UK (Trowler, 2010; Deem & Lucas, 2007; Cahill et al., 2010; Whittaker, 2009; Williamson, 2013).

In conclusion, the literature has expressed a variety of levels associated with student engagement, but for the most part, transnational student engagement is low and passive. The only students that have reasonably active levels of engagement are the ones that are in some sort of representative role. However, transnationally, there is no comparison as to what occurs in Scotland, as previously mentioned.

5.2.2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IDENTITIES

For this objective, the literature that was reviewed helped to create the Conceptual Framework (See Section 2.2) which highlighted the four main student engagement identities that are most known: consumer, citizen, co-creator and partner. The two most common identities in the literature, consumer (or customer) and partner, were also the two identities that the students of this study recognised and identified with. The other two, citizen and co-creator were not acknowledged in the findings, indeed there was very little evidence of co-creation according to the respondents.

The findings show that there were four key factors in relation to the identity 'partnership': cooperation, belongingness, student voice and advocacy. This related to the literature, particularly the factors, cooperation, belongingness and advocacy.

However, as shown in the literature review, student voice can be considered as tokenistic to some extent, depending on if there are meaningful discussions and actions taken due to the student voice (Cook-Sather, 2006; Dunne & Zandstra, 2011). Only a few students deemed themselves to be partners with the university. Considering the literature and the findings together, it can be concluded that these four factors are not being met.

Summarising the students' definitions of the identity of consumer, we can see that it has two significant characteristics: that education is a product, and that there is disengagement. This aligns with Scott (1998) and Naidoo & Jamieson (2007) who reflect on the passive nature of student customers due to the rise of neo-liberal governance and marketisation of higher education in recent years.

The key finding, in relation to student identities, is that the transnational students that participated in the study felt resigned to the identity of consumer, although they were reticent to use it. This evidences that students want to be considered as something more substantial and be more engaged, but there is a distinct lack of opportunities and support to help develop this.

5.2.3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 3: TRANSNATIONAL STUDENT VIEWS

The interview questions that were delivered to the interviewees were roughly designed around the four identities in the Conceptual Framework. However, through analysis it became apparent that there was fluidity in terms of the student journey. Hence why the findings were designed to show this rather than separate the four identities of the conceptual framework.

There were several significant findings that highlighted the transnational student views on student engagement. The first, detailed that postgraduate students are likely to be the most passive of students due to external commitments and lack of services catered to their needs.

Another key finding evidenced that the students associated challenging studies as being of a high quality. In terms of consumerism, where students are often portrayed as wanting easy assignments and rote learning, the majority of students do not want this, which signifies that passivity is not necessarily linked to easiness. Furthering this

notion, students often referred to aspects of their engagement around the concepts of self-efficacy and transformative learning.

The final significant finding, showed that there is very little in the way of student representative structures and a significant lack of communication between students, staff and the university at transnational initiatives, according to the interviewees. Since the students mainly engage within the classroom and their overall studies, there is very little participation at higher levels. This may be exacerbated due to the lack of representation and communication.

5.2.4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 4: TRANSNATIONAL PRACTICES IN RELATION TO OVERALL SECTOR

As this research was not a comparative study with student engagement perspectives at parent institutions in Scotland, it is difficult to exactly relate the findings to the overall sector. This is indeed one of the limitations of this study. Nevertheless, The Student Engagement Framework's (sparqs, 2011) six features of effective student engagement will be used to compare the findings in relation to the overall Scottish higher education system. These features will be considered, since the Framework was created after substantial data collection from all stakeholders across the country, and therefore provides a thorough reflection of student engagement in Scotland. In summary, it will emphasise that there is very low student engagement compared to the overall sector.

5.2.4.1. A Culture of Engagement

In Scotland, there is a culture of student engagement where students are mainly considered as partners (Healey et al., 2010; QAA, 2012; Trowler, 2010; Williamson, 2013), and students are involved at all areas across the higher education system as shown in the Quality Enhancement Framework. However, as shown in the study, there seems to be a culture of lack of engagement at the transnational initiatives. Students are not aware that they have influence, or power as is evident by the minimal level of student representative structures (see Section 4.7.3) and because of this study showing that students feel and are portrayed as passive consumers of transnational initiatives (see Section 4.3.4).

5.2.4.2. Students as Partners

In Scotland, as noted in the previous feature, students are considered as partners. Student partnership agreements are established at institutions to highlight partnership working between the students, through the students' association and the university (Williamson, 2013). However, students of this study are consumers, and are even resigned to identify as customers (see Section 4.3.4 and 4.5.3). Therefore, according to this study, transnational student engagement is low.

5.2.4.3. Responding to Diversity

In Scotland, there are mechanisms for inclusion of and response to diversity (sparqs, 2011; Connelly & Kinloch, 2013; Lowe & Gayle, 2007; Wimpenny et al. 2005). The interviews provided very little evidence of diversity support for the variations of students studying at transnational initiatives. An example of this is evident through the content to context illustrations within the findings chapter (see Section 4.5.6).

5.2.4.4. Valuing The Student Contribution

In Scotland, recognising, rewarding and accrediting of student efforts are at the forefront of engagement activities (Gallagher & Feutrie, 2003), through such initiatives as the Higher Education Achievement Report (Millar, 2012), which records extra-curricular activities on students' transcripts. However, there was no apparent evidence of this in the findings.

5.2.4.5. Focus on Enhancement and Change

The Quality Enhancement Framework, established in 2003, ensures that in Scotland there is a culture of quality enhancement. Despite QAA making frequent visits to transnational initiatives (QAA, 2014; QAA, 2011; QAA, 2009) the findings of the study highlight that there are very few quality procedures in place due to lack of evaluations forms, student representation and closing the feedback loop (see Section 4.7.2).

5.2.4.6. Appropriate Resources and Support

This refers to the meso and macro levels of student engagement, which in Scotland is supported by the Scottish Funding Council and through sparqs. However, the transnational students of this study had very little awareness of university policies and procedures (see Section 4.6); several even said that they did not know where to find this documentation.

5.2.5. OTHER SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS: THE APATHY CYCLE

A recurring theme throughout the analysis of the interviews was apathy. This meant that there was student apathy, as they ‘did not care’ about getting involved. Apathy, in this case, also refers to **lack of engagement**. However, there was also implied apathy from staff and the university, as perceived by the students. In order to understand this apathy, and how each stakeholder relates to the other two parties, a diagram has been created to show the relationships, and how apathy is connected between the three parties.

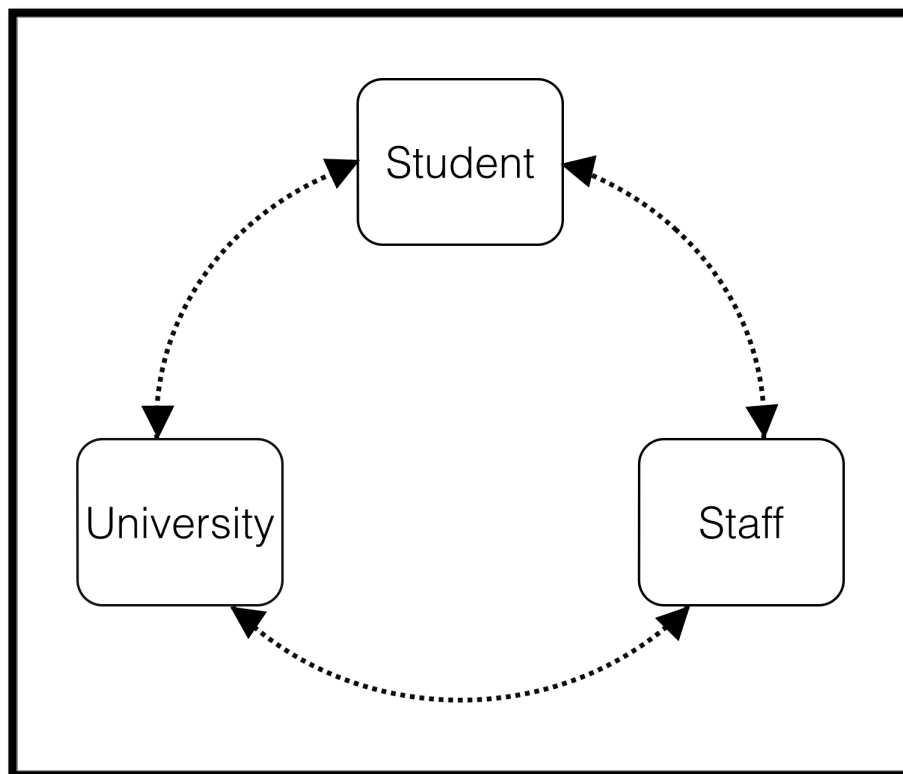


Figure 2. Transnational Apathy Cycle

5.2.5.1. Student Apathy

The topmost stakeholder in this cycle is the student. This has been designed as such since this research has singularly analysed the students’ perspectives on student engagement, this means that the cycle has been constructed to illustrate this perspective. It is also important to note that this diagram may have differed if the other two players were interviewed.

Since the majority of the students considered student engagement to be staff-led, student apathy will be high if there is little interaction with staff. This means that if students do not have sufficient levels of interaction with their teachers or they do not find out how feedback is used etc., then they will not actively participate in activities other than passing their courses. As the research has found that there is an element of alienation in regards to transnational students, this indicates that because transnational students are so far removed from the parent institution, there will be low interaction and this will exacerbate student apathy since there will be a level of disconnect from the overall university community.

5.2.5.2. Staff Apathy

Moving on from student apathy, staff apathy will occur if students are not actively participating in classes. For example, several students mentioned that on their course there is very little debate between students and academics. Additionally, the use of ‘flying faculty’ means that there is less opportunity for rapport to develop between students and staff. This will signify that staff have little time to develop relationships with the transnational students and will, inevitably, spend more time on the students in Scotland due to extensive contact between the parties.

Furthermore, staff apathy will become apparent when there is rigidity in the curriculum. As most of the respondents indicated that there is little flexibility in the curriculum due to it being designed in Scotland, teaching faculty appear to have little room for innovation, which may lead to apathy as creativity is stifled.

5.2.5.3. University Apathy

Through the Quality Enhancement Framework, including the work of sparqs and the Enhancement Themes, universities are under pressure to develop and enhance student engagement practices. In regards to transnational initiatives, the students of this study mentioned feeling alienated from the parent institution. Thus, the university will pay more attention to students in Scotland and little emphasis is on transnational initiatives.

Developing this notion, this means that if there are not effective feedback mechanisms in place between the university and transnational students, there can be a sense of ‘out of sight, out of mind’. This study has shown that students perceptions of communication between staff at transnational initiatives and the parent institution is

lacking, which will imply that pressure on the university to improve student engagement practices is insufficient.

5.2.5.4. Who Has The Power to Break the Cycle?

Having created this apathy cycle from the findings of this study, the key question that arises is: who has the power to break this apathy cycle? How can this apathy be transformed into engagement? The findings indicate that transnational students' feel that they do not have the power for change. Rather, students' define student engagement as staff-led, ergo they look to the staff (and, arguably, the university) to put in effect student engagement practices. This falls in line with the literature, which signifies that the power lies with the staff and the university (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Baron & Corbin, 2011; Kahu, 2013). If further studies, into transnational staff perspectives, support the claim that academics have little opportunity for flexibility, the context of transnational initiatives stands in the way of engagement, and there is the lack of communication between the transnational initiative and the parent institution, this points to the university as having the power to break this cycle.

At first, a solution to this cycle of apathy should be for the three stakeholders to commence meaningful discussions on what support is needed from each other, and how they all believe engagement should increase. Another consideration is that the power to break this cycle may be with a stakeholder that is not in this cycle, such as government, students' associations and the Quality Assurance Agency. Ultimately, meaningful dialogue between all stakeholders – inside and outside – of the apathy cycle needs to take place, to acknowledge this apathy and work towards developing engagement.

5.3. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to mention that this study has only looked at the students' perspective of a limited number of transnational initiatives. Thus, the recommendations that follow have been developed in mind of what was discovered in this study and are to be seen as a starting point to improving the situation, rather than the sole solution. The main audience of these recommendations is the university leadership and academic staff. However, the recommendations are also relevant for student representatives, alongside this thesis to raise awareness of transnational students.

Before embarking on this voyage of student engagement discovery, one could direct practitioners and students to the sparqs Student Engagement Framework (sparqs, 2011), which has been designed specifically for Scottish HEIs. Rather than create a new framework that may become lost in the constantly expanding amount of guidance literature out there, this framework has been adapted to contextualise what is needed for transnational students in the form of an action plan. Ultimately, this transnational student engagement action plan has been designed to be a stepping-stone to the established student engagement framework (sparqs, 2011), in order to raise transnational student engagement practices to the same level as across Scotland.

There are five key elements of student engagement within sparqs' Student Engagement Framework, and these have been used as headings to help support and enhance transnational student engagement. Each element will begin with a brief description, followed by how it relates to the findings of this study. The recommendations per element will be provided as bullet points in order to allow flexibility for universities who use this framework to develop solutions to enhance student engagement at transnational initiatives.

1. Students feeling part of a supportive institution:

This element considers aspects that focus on increase the students' sense of belonging, and feeling supported by the university to help improve participation. This is particularly relevant to transnational students, since the findings indicated that there was a lack of sense of community among the respondents, which signified why so few of the respondents could be considered as partners. Furthermore, the findings highlighted the lack of support infrastructure and students' awareness of support mechanisms at transnational initiatives. It is strongly suggested that the following be put in place in order for transnational students to feel part of a supportive institution:

- Universities should support students' association/union to reach out to transnational initiatives in order to develop extra-curricular activities.
- Pastoral care, and counselling services should be available to all students.
- Provide opportunities for students to visit the parent institution in order to improve sense of community and visibility, alongside reducing alienation.
- A general induction should be provided to all transnational students.
- Students should be made aware of financial support, including mitigating circumstances policies and procedures.

- Opportunities for cohesion of group-work across transnational initiatives, for example: students in UAE working with students in Scotland on the same module together.

2. *Students engaging in their own learning:*

This element helps to encourage students to become partners in the learning process, by providing key learning and skills development opportunities. As shown in the findings, students are most engaged in their academic studies. However, there was note of too much rigidity and not enough adaptability of the content to the context of the students' surroundings, which decreased engagement, and as shown in the Apathy Cycle, did not encourage staff engagement either. It is strongly suggested that the following be put in place in order for transnational students to become more engaged in their own learning:

- Flexibility in the curriculum is needed, so that students can help design and create (co-creators).
- Focus on context to content: adapt coursework for the location of the transnational initiative.
- Develop academic support channels such as library and online. Ensure transnational students are made aware of these support mechanisms.
- Further training of academic counsellors at transnational centres is needed to offer sufficient academic support to students.
- Academic feedback, not just a grade, should be offered to all students, for all assignments.

3. *Students working with their institution in shaping the direction of learning:*

This element relates to opportunities available to the students to provide comments on their learning experiences, as a group or individually. As shown in the findings, there are very few formal and informal methods for transnational students to provide their opinions on their experience, and communication channels between the students (and arguably, the staff as highlighted in the Apathy Cycle) and the institution. Partnership working between these stakeholders cannot occur until the following recommendations are put in place:

- Creation of incentives for evaluation forms to increase participation.
- Creation of additional mechanisms for students to provide feedback on their learning to help improve developments (formal and informal).

- Ensure feedback mechanisms have the opportunity for students to express positive aspects of their learning experience.
- Closing the feedback loop: Ensure students know where and how their feedback is being used.

4. *Formal mechanisms for quality and governance:*

This element focuses on student representative, and the student representative bodies. This allows students to be engaged at the meso and macro levels of the university. As shown in the findings, many of the students are not aware of their membership to the Scottish students' association/union, and indeed many students' associations/unions are not aware that transnational students exist (see NUS, 2014, p. 10). Therefore, the following recommendations have been suggested to improve transnational student representation at quality and governance levels of higher education institutions:

- Provision of training and support for student reps. Particular attention needed for developing student representation of postgraduate part-time students.
- Provide induction pack to transnational students on their membership of the Scottish students' association/union.
- Commence dialogue with students' association/union on transnational students.

5. *Influencing the student experience at national level:*

This element considers opportunities for students to shape education policies, related to them, at national level. In support of the previous element, this element considers aspects to improve overall visibility of transnational students at national level. The findings did not explicitly state national engagement, yet several believed that they were not represented in Scotland because they were not living in Scotland, despite studying a Scottish degree. Furthermore, the raising the awareness of transnational students at national level may help to break the apathy cycle within universities, as there will be pressure from the sector to improve engagement practices. The following has been suggested to help improve this:

- Greater visibility of transnational student in national discussions is needed alongside the growth of internationalisation in Scotland.
- Recommend sparqs to initiate conversations around support for transnational students.

This action plan is to be used as support alongside sparqs' Student Engagement Framework. The above framework has been designed to be generic, to allow for the diversity of students studying at transnational initiatives. The hope is that after implementation of the recommendations in this transnational student engagement action plan, then student engagement practices will be enhanced to the same level across the Scottish sector and national initiatives and conversations will have more of an impact on transnational students in the future.

5.3.2. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

There are two possible opportunities to expand on this research. The first is to obtain a more in-depth knowledge of transnational student engagement by interviewing staff and university management. Additionally, research could be undertaken to find out what perceptions there are about transnational students at the parent institution, to compare the results on alienation and apathy.

The second opportunity for further study is to expand on this research on student perspectives on student engagement. The design of the interview questions and the conceptual framework were created for adaptability, so that they can be applied to research on any type of student, not just transnational. Therefore a comparative work could be employed to find out how different students' perceive student engagement differently, either across HEIs or systems.

5.4. REFLECTIONS

In essence, what I have tried to accomplish in this research is to shed some light on a small, almost invisible, type of student – transnational – as well as consider how actual students define student engagement. Eighteen transnational students, from various backgrounds and level of study, participated in in-depth individual interviews to examine their experiences related to student engagement. The majority of transnational students' consider student engagement to be staff-led, and it has been found that there is very little engagement between students, staff and the parent institution at transnational initiatives as illustrated in the Apathy Cycle.

More often than not, the concept of student engagement is enshrined in empty rhetoric and seen as a nice-to-do rather than an important part of university life that is embedded and utilised as a tool for change. Though this research may be

disheartening – to an extent – because it has identified such low levels of student engagement at transnational initiatives, I hope that this helps spur on discussions around this activity. Furthermore, I believe that this study lays emphasis on the fact that student engagement does not just mean undergraduate, 18-21 year olds living at the parent institution. Student engagement encompasses all types of students, hence why it is often called multi-faceted. My contribution to this field, as small as it may be, is to create a dialogue in the hope that student engagement can become less passive and more active for all types of students.

One student expressed that, in hindsight, she wished she had studied her programme in Scotland rather than transnationally. Let's begin the conversation so that this student would choose the transnational programme again.

CHAPTER 6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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CHAPTER 7. APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. SAMPLE OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Section 1:

1. Age:
2. Title of degree
3. Undergrad or post grad
4. Duration of degree
5. Place of study
6. Are you native to the country you are studying in?
7. Have you completed any higher education degree prior to your current programme (if so, where):
8. Are you a student/class representative?
9. Why did you choose this course?

Section 2:

1. Describe what a typical class or lecture is like?
2. How do you interact with your lecturers/teachers (inside and outside of class)?
3. How do you interact with your fellow classmates?
4. Describe what the phrase “student engagement” means to you.
5. Are you satisfied with your degree?

Section 3:

1. Do you fill out evaluation/feedback forms on the teaching/modules? Please explain.
2. Can you give an example of what sort of feedback you have provided?
3. When you provide feedback is it mostly positive or negative?
4. Do you offer solutions to issues that you face in order to improve the course?
5. Do you find out how your feedback has been used? Please explain.
6. What do you feel is expected of you as a student?
7. What do you expect from your lecturers/teachers?
8. What do you expect from your university? Is this different from what you expect from your teachers?

Section 4:

1. Excluding evaluation forms, what other opportunities do you have to provide feedback on your educational experience?
2. Can you have influence over what your lecturer teaches?
3. Is there any opportunity to change assessment format? If yes, what? If no, would you like this? Please explain.
4. What support does your university offer you?
5. Are you aware of any policies and procedures within your university?
6. What services does the university offer you?

Section 5 (to be completed if the student is NOT a student representative):

1. Do you know who your student representative (or class rep) is? What do they do?
2. Would you ever consider becoming a student representative? Please, explain.
3. Are you aware of what your students' association/union does?
4. Have you made contact with your university based in Scotland, outside of your classes?
5. In your opinion what makes a program high quality?
6. Do you feel your degree is of a high quality?
7. Would you consider yourself a customer or a partner?
8. Do you feel part of the university community?
9. How do you think this degree relates to the same degree being taught in Scotland?

Section 6 (to be completed if the student IS a class rep):

1. In your opinion, what makes a program high quality?
2. What made you decide to become a student representative?
3. What do you do as a student representative?
4. Have you received any training as a student representative? Explain.
5. Are you in contact with other reps, including your students' union/association back in Scotland?
6. Are you aware of what your students' association/union does?
7. Would you consider yourself a customer or a partner?
8. Do you feel part of the university community?
9. How do you think this degree relates to the same degree being taught in Scotland?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

APPENDIX 2. BREAKDOWN OF RESPONDENTS' DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Student	University	Level of Study	Sex	Age	Country of study	Native to country of study?	PT/FT	Class rep?
1	A	PG	M	39	Singapore	No	PT	No
2	A	PG	M	33	Singapore	No	PT	No
3	A	PG	M	40	UAE	No	PT	No
4	A	PG	M	41	Singapore	No	PT	No
5	A	PG	M	42	Singapore	Yes	PT	No
6	A	PG	F	27	UAE	No	PT	No
7	A	PG	M	36	Singapore	Yes	PT	No
8	B	PG	M	35	UAE	No	PT	No
9	B	PG	F	24	UAE	Yes	FT	No
10	B	PG	F	42	UAE	No	FT	No
11	B	UG	M	20	UAE	Yes	FT	Yes
12	B	UG	F	21	UAE	No	FT	Yes
13	B	UG	F	21	UAE	No	FT	Yes
14	B	PG	M	22	UAE	No	FT	Yes/No*
15	C	UG	F	20	India	Yes	FT	No
16	C	UG	M	24	India	Yes	FT	Yes
17	C	UG	F	21	India	Yes	FT	Yes
18	C	UG	F	20	India	Yes	FT	Yes

*One student mentioned that he had signed up to be a class rep, but had never heard anything back from the university.

Acronyms:

- PT = Part-time study
- FT = Full-time study
- PG = Postgraduate
- UG = Undergraduate