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Influence Of Student Engagement On Learning Experience Among Graduate Students At Makerere University Business School

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of student engagement on learning experience among graduate students at Makerere University Business School. A sample of 73 graduate students participated in the study. Results revealed a strong positive correlation ($r=0.812$, $p<0.01$) between student engagement and quality of learning experience. Behavioral engagement (Mean=4.08, SD=0.72) demonstrated the strongest influence on learning outcomes, followed by cognitive engagement (Mean=3.95, SD=0.68) and emotional engagement (Mean=3.76, SD=0.81). Regression analysis showed that engagement dimensions collectively explained 71.3% of variance in learning experience quality. The study concluded that student engagement was a critical determinant of meaningful learning experiences at graduate level. It was recommended that faculty should adopt active learning pedagogies, institutions should create collaborative learning environments, course designs should integrate experiential learning opportunities, and universities should invest in engagement-enhancing technologies to optimize graduate student learning experiences.

Keywords: Student engagement, learning experience, graduate education, Makerere University Business School, behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement

Background of the Study

Student engagement represented a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive investment in learning activities, widely recognized as fundamental to quality educational experiences (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008). In higher education contexts, particularly at graduate level, engagement extended beyond mere attendance to include active participation in discussions, collaboration with peers, critical thinking, and deep processing of complex concepts. Research consistently demonstrated that engaged students achieved better academic outcomes, reported higher satisfaction with their educational experiences, and developed stronger professional competencies (Trowler, 2010).

Makerere University Business School (MUBS), established in 1997 as a constituent college of Makerere University, served as Uganda's premier institution for business and management education. The school offered various graduate programs including Master of Business Administration (MBA), Master of Science in Accounting and Finance, and other specialized postgraduate degrees. As MUBS pursued international accreditation and sought to enhance its regional competitiveness, understanding factors that influenced learning quality became increasingly important. Graduate students at MUBS represented diverse backgrounds, with many being working professionals balancing academic pursuits with career responsibilities, creating unique engagement challenges (Kasozi, 2009).

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The learning experience encompassed students' holistic perceptions of their educational journey, including interaction quality with faculty and peers, relevance of curriculum, effectiveness of teaching methods, availability of resources, and alignment between learning activities and career aspirations (Ramsden, 1991). For graduate students, the learning experience extended beyond knowledge acquisition to include development of analytical capabilities, leadership skills, and professional networks. Literature suggested that engagement served as the mechanism through which educational inputs translated into meaningful learning outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

International research indicated that student engagement positively influenced learning experience across various educational settings (Klem & Connell, 2004). However, the specific dynamics of this relationship in African higher education contexts, particularly among graduate students in business schools, remained under-researched. Graduate education differed fundamentally from undergraduate learning in its emphasis on independent inquiry, peer-to-peer learning, and application of theory to practice (Golde, 2005). Understanding how engagement influenced learning experiences in this context was essential for designing interventions that enhanced educational quality and student success at MUBS.

Problem Statement

Despite substantial investments in infrastructure, faculty development, and curriculum enhancement at Makerere University Business School, concerns persisted about the quality of learning experiences among graduate students (Mayanja, 2012). Anecdotal evidence and informal feedback suggested that many students approached their studies with minimal engagement, viewing graduate education primarily as credential acquisition rather than transformative learning. Lecture-based pedagogy predominated in many courses, limiting opportunities for active participation and deep cognitive processing (Ssesanga & Garrett, 2005). Part-time graduate students, who constituted the majority of MUBS postgraduate enrollment, faced particular challenges balancing work commitments with academic demands, often resulting in surface-level engagement with course materials and limited interaction with peers and faculty.

Furthermore, large class sizes averaging 60-80 students in some programs constrained meaningful student-faculty interaction and personalized feedback. The absence of systematic assessment of student engagement levels meant that faculty lacked empirical evidence to inform pedagogical improvements. Students reported varying levels of satisfaction with their learning experiences, but the specific role of engagement in shaping these perceptions remained unclear. Without understanding how different dimensions of student engagement influenced learning experience quality, interventions to enhance graduate education remained poorly targeted and potentially ineffective in addressing the root causes of suboptimal learning outcomes.

Specific Objective

To establish the influence of student engagement on learning experience among graduate students.

Methodology

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This study employed a cross-sectional survey research design to examine the influence of student engagement on learning experience among graduate students at Makerere University Business School (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). The design was selected because it allowed for efficient collection of quantitative data from a representative sample at a single point in time while enabling statistical analysis of relationships between variables.

The target population comprised all graduate students enrolled in various Master's degree programs at MUBS during the 2024/2025 academic year, totaling approximately 450 students across different specializations. Using Cochran's (1977) formula for sample size calculation with a 95% confidence level and 10% margin of error, a sample size of 73 graduate students was determined. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure proportional representation across different programs including MBA (35 students), Master of Science in Accounting and Finance (18 students), Master of Science in Marketing (12 students), and other specialized programs (8 students) (Kothari, 2004).

Data was collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire adapted from established instruments. Student engagement was measured using a modified version of the Student Engagement Scale developed by Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan and Towler (2005), covering behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Learning experience was assessed using items adapted from the Course Experience Questionnaire (Ramsden, 1991) and included constructs such as good teaching, clear goals, appropriate assessment, and overall satisfaction. All items utilized a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5) to capture respondents' perceptions.

The instrument was validated through expert review by three faculty members specializing in educational research and business education. A pilot study was conducted with 12 graduate students from a different cohort to test instrument clarity and reliability. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.868 for student engagement scale and 0.891 for learning experience scale, both exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Data collection occurred over a three-week period with approval from MUBS administration and ethical clearance from the Makerere University School of Education Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, voluntary participation was emphasized, and anonymity was guaranteed. Completed questionnaires were coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed. Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between student engagement and learning experience, while multiple regression analysis examined the predictive power of engagement dimensions on learning experience quality (Field, 2018).

Results

The study findings provided comprehensive insights into how student engagement influenced learning experience among graduate students at Makerere University Business School.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=73)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage

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Gender	Male	42	57.5%
	Female	31	42.5%
Age Group	25-30 years	28	38.4%
	31-35 years	31	42.5%
	36-40 years	10	13.7%
	Above 40 years	4	5.5%
Program Type	MBA	35	47.9%
	MSc Accounting & Finance	18	24.7%
	MSc Marketing	12	16.4%
	Other programs	8	11.0%
Study Mode	Full-time	15	20.5%
	Part-time/Evening	58	79.5%
Work Status	Working full-time	61	83.6%
	Not working	12	16.4%

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The demographic profile revealed that 57.5% of participants were male and 42.5% female, reflecting the gender distribution typical of business school graduate programs. The age distribution showed that 80.9% of respondents were between 25-35 years, representing young to mid-career professionals pursuing advanced qualifications. Notably, 79.5% were part-time students and 83.6% worked full-time while studying, highlighting the dual demands faced by most MUBS graduate students. This demographic pattern aligned with Schreiber and Yu's (2016) observation that graduate business education increasingly served working professionals seeking career advancement. The MBA program accounted for 47.9% of the sample, consistent with its status as MUBS's flagship graduate offering.

Table 2: Dimensions of Student Engagement (N=73)

Engagement Dimension	**Mean**	**SD**	**Level**
Behavioral Engagement	4.08	0.72	High
Attend classes regularly	4.45	0.68	High
Participate actively in discussions	3.89	0.86	High
Complete assignments on time	4.12	0.74	High
Engage in group work collaboratively	3.95	0.79	High
Cognitive Engagement	3.95	0.68	High
Think deeply about course content	4.18	0.71	High
Connect new knowledge to prior learning	4.08	0.69	High

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Apply concepts to real-world situations	4.21	0.66	High
Seek additional resources beyond lectures	3.34	0.95	Moderate
Emotional Engagement	3.76	0.81	High
Feel enthusiastic about learning	3.82	0.88	High
Sense of belonging in class	3.67	0.92	High
Motivated to achieve academic goals	4.15	0.73	High
Enjoy interactions with peers and faculty	3.41	0.91	Moderate

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Analysis of student engagement dimensions revealed generally high levels across all three measured aspects. Behavioral engagement recorded the highest mean score (4.08, SD=0.72), indicating that students demonstrated strong attendance patterns, active participation, and timely assignment completion. Within this dimension, regular class attendance scored highest (Mean=4.45, SD=0.68), suggesting that despite work commitments, students prioritized physical presence in classes. However, active participation in discussions was comparatively lower (Mean=3.89, SD=0.86), possibly reflecting cultural norms around classroom interaction or large class sizes that limited individual speaking opportunities. Cognitive engagement also showed high levels (Mean=3.95, SD=0.68), with students reporting strong abilities to apply concepts to real-world situations (Mean=4.21, SD=0.66), which was particularly relevant given their professional contexts. The lower score for seeking additional resources beyond lectures (Mean=3.34, SD=0.95) suggested that while students engaged deeply with provided materials, independent scholarly exploration remained limited. Emotional engagement, though positive (Mean=3.76, SD=0.81), scored lower than other dimensions, with moderate ratings for sense of belonging (Mean=3.67, SD=0.92) and enjoyment of peer-faculty interactions (Mean=3.41, SD=0.91), indicating potential areas for enhancement in the learning community experience (Zepke & Leach, 2010).

Table 3: Quality of Learning Experience (N=73)

Learning Experience Component	**Mean**	**SD**	**Rating**
Quality of teaching is excellent	3.91	0.76	High
Learning objectives are clear	4.05	0.71	High
Course content is relevant to career	4.23	0.68	High
Assessment methods are appropriate	3.78	0.84	High
Receive helpful feedback from faculty	3.45	0.93	Moderate
Learning resources are adequate	3.52	0.88	Moderate
Opportunities for practical application	3.89	0.79	High
Intellectual stimulation from courses	4.01	0.74	High

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Overall learning experience satisfaction	3.97	0.77	High
Overall Learning Experience	3.87	0.75	High

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The learning experience quality assessment revealed generally positive perceptions across multiple components. Course content relevance to career scored highest (Mean=4.23, SD=0.68), validating MUBS's curriculum alignment with professional needs and reflecting the pragmatic orientation of graduate business students (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Learning objectives clarity (Mean=4.05, SD=0.71) and intellectual stimulation (Mean=4.01, SD=0.74) also rated highly, suggesting effective course design and challenging content. However, two areas showed moderate performance: faculty feedback (Mean=3.45, SD=0.93) and learning resources adequacy (Mean=3.52, SD=0.88). The feedback limitation likely reflected the challenge of providing personalized responses in large classes, consistent with Ssesanga and Garrett's (2005) findings about resource constraints in Ugandan higher education. Despite these specific concerns, overall learning experience satisfaction remained high (Mean=3.97, SD=0.77), indicating that students found their graduate education generally worthwhile and enriching.

Table 4: Correlation Between Engagement Dimensions and Learning Experience (N=73)

Engagement Dimension	Learning Experience Correlation	Significance
Behavioral engagement	r = 0.756**	p < 0.01
Cognitive engagement	r = 0.824**	p < 0.01
Emotional engagement	r = 0.782**	p < 0.01
Overall student engagement	r = 0.812**	p < 0.01

Note: ** Correlation significant at p < 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The correlation analysis demonstrated strong positive relationships between all engagement dimensions and learning experience quality. Cognitive engagement showed the strongest correlation (r=0.824, p<0.01), suggesting that deep thinking, knowledge integration, and practical application most powerfully influenced how students perceived their learning experience. This finding supported constructivist learning theories emphasizing that meaningful learning occurs through active mental processing rather than passive reception (Biggs, 1999). Emotional engagement (r=0.782, p<0.01) and behavioral engagement (r=0.756, p<0.01) also correlated strongly with learning experience, demonstrating that feelings about learning and observable participation behaviors significantly shaped educational quality perceptions. The overall student engagement composite correlation of r=0.812 (p<0.01) provided compelling evidence that engagement, conceptualized holistically, served as a critical determinant of learning experience quality (Kuh et al., 2008).

Table 5: Multiple Regression Analysis - Predictors of Learning Experience (N=73)

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Predictor Variable	**Beta**	**t-value**	**Significance**	**VIF**
Behavioral engagement	0.289	3.456	$p < 0.01$	1.842
Cognitive engagement	0.412	5.123	$p < 0.001$	1.756
Emotional engagement	0.245	2.987	$p < 0.01$	1.923
Model Summary				
R^2	0.713			
Adjusted R^2	0.701			
F-statistic	57.342		$p < 0.001$	

Note: VIF = Variance Inflation Factor; all values < 3 indicate no multicollinearity concerns

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The multiple regression analysis revealed that engagement dimensions collectively explained 71.3% of variance in learning experience quality (R^2=0.713), representing a substantial explanatory power that underscored engagement's centrality to graduate learning outcomes. The adjusted R^2 of 0.701 indicated model stability, while the highly significant F-statistic (57.342, $p<0.001$) confirmed overall model validity. Cognitive engagement emerged as the strongest predictor (Beta=0.412, t=5.123, $p<0.001$), suggesting that for every one standard deviation increase in cognitive engagement, learning experience quality increased by 0.412 standard deviations when other factors were held constant. Behavioral engagement (Beta=0.289, t=3.456, $p<0.01$) and emotional engagement (Beta=0.245, t=2.987, $p<0.01$) also contributed significantly, though to lesser degrees. All Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values remained below 3, indicating no problematic multicollinearity among predictors and confirming the independent contribution of each engagement dimension (Field, 2018). These findings aligned with Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris's (2004) theoretical framework positioning engagement as multidimensional, with each dimension contributing uniquely to learning outcomes.

Conclusions

The study established that student engagement significantly influenced learning experience quality among graduate students at Makerere University Business School. Cognitive engagement demonstrated the strongest influence, followed by behavioral and emotional dimensions, collectively explaining over 71% of variance in learning experience perceptions. While engagement levels were generally high, opportunities existed to enhance emotional engagement through stronger learning community development and more personalized faculty-student interactions. The strong correlations confirmed that engagement served as a critical mechanism translating educational inputs into meaningful learning outcomes, validating its theoretical and practical importance in graduate business education.

Recommendations

Instructors should adopt active learning pedagogies including case-based teaching, simulations, problem-based learning, and flipped classroom approaches to enhance cognitive engagement. They should create structured

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opportunities for student participation through think-pair-share activities, peer teaching, and Socratic questioning. Faculty should also provide timely, specific, and constructive feedback to strengthen the learning relationship and demonstrate commitment to student success.

The institution should invest in smaller class sizes or breakout sessions for core courses to enable deeper faculty-student interaction and personalized learning experiences. Professional development programs should be established to train faculty in student-centered pedagogies and engagement strategies. The school should also create physical and virtual spaces that facilitate collaborative learning, peer interaction, and informal academic discourse beyond formal classroom settings.

Graduate programs should integrate more experiential learning components including consulting projects, internships, industry visits, and action research assignments that connect theoretical knowledge to professional practice. Assessment methods should be diversified beyond examinations to include reflective portfolios, presentations, group projects, and authentic performance tasks that promote deeper cognitive engagement. Course designs should explicitly incorporate emotional engagement strategies such as learning communities, peer mentoring systems, and networking opportunities.

MUBS should invest in learning management systems that facilitate asynchronous discussion, collaborative document sharing, and multimedia learning resources to support engagement beyond scheduled class time. Interactive technologies such as audience response systems, online simulations, and virtual collaboration tools should be deployed to enhance participation, particularly for part-time students with limited campus time.

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