Student engagement and perceptions of quality in flexible online study programs

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Flexible online studies at VIA UC

- Various designs
- Blended learning

Studies
- Public administration
- Nurse
- Preschool teacher
- Teacher
- Social worker
Research question

How does educational design affect students’ social and academic engagement in, and connection to, their study?

Social engagement is students’ involvement in their study groups and in their collaboration with teachers, fellow students and other staff.

Academic engagement is the students’ work on the subject matter, and application of the academic content in their future professional practice.

Aim

Discuss how educational designs affect students’ social and academic engagement.

Our data collection method is designed to investigate students’ points of view.
Factors that may affect student learning outcome:
- Organization and presentation
- Learning objects and assessment
- Interpersonal interaction
- Use of technology

- Grades
- Critical Thinking
- Ability to apply knowledge
- Self-esteem
- Satisfaction
- Persistence

Engagement

Illeris, 2009
Xu & Jaggers, 2013
Hampton & Pearce, 2016
Method

Collection of empirical data

- 1st step: recording of cooperation
- 2nd step: identifying sequences
- 3rd step: semi-structured interviews of focus groups
Method

- Each of the six FGIs were watched by two members of the research group
- Statements that were related to a theme were identified and put together
- All statements from a theme were finally condensed into cohesive text

Kvale & Brinkman, 2009
Method

• Analysis was initiated by the project group, looking through all recordings, and the group assembled in order to identify themes in the interviews together. (Thematic Analysis, Braun & Clarke 2006)

• Themes identified in focus group interviews with students:
  • Social engagement
  • Academic engagement
  • Guidance and feedback
  • Factors affecting risk of dropping out
  • Quality in online education
Method – video in IRIS Connect
Results – social engagement

- Primary social engagement in study groups
- An advantage for social engagement if students in groups are similar
- Social engagement endangered by non-contributing group members
- Social relations can be built via online meetings (and distance can even be an advantage)
- Working together on study content results in social engagement
- Less social engagement with other students in class (it’s difficult when you don’t meet often …)
- Older students with family: Nice with only limited social “obligations” as online student
- Being lonely and isolated was mentioned
- Some students do not know their teachers very well – because of little contact
Results – academic engagement

Higher when assignments are important in relation to grades and exams (for most students)

Increased when study group members contributed as agreed upon and with increasing age and experience of study group members

Higher when subjects were considered applicable to professional practice

Increased with variation in assignment types and when teachers were engaged and showed understanding for the challenges of being an online student

Fueled by interest in assignments, having a say, intellectual challenges, personal ambitions

Fueled by prospect of better job, higher salary, improved career opportunities

Challenged when study group members have different levels of ambition

Decreased when teachers were not considered sufficiently available
Results – guidance and feedback

Students lacked insight into their own level of knowledge and understanding

Not all teachers mastered online feedback – and there was large variation between teachers in the amount of guidance offered

A call for individual feedback (not only group or class) and formative feedback

A call for more feedback and better feedback
Results – retention

Positively influenced by study group members sharing a similar life world, understanding each other’s situation and challenges

Positively influenced by being in a supportive study group with a positive attitude towards cooperation

Positively influenced by engaged teachers

Negatively influenced when students got the impression that they were overlooked
Results – quality, including structure vs. flexibility

Satisfaction with flexibility (although structure was sometimes insufficient)

Competent, enthusiastic and engaged teachers play an important role for perceived quality
Not all teachers were like that ...

Surprise regarding insufficient control with student activity (e.g. being an author without having contributed)

Listen to us, our requests – and help us study online, e.g. with a guide

Flexibility challenged when online students are treated as ordinary students

Quality not as good as expected ... insufficient information, guidance and feedback
## Discussion

**Social engagement**

- Social engagement found especially in study groups, where students pace and hold on to each other
- When interacting with teachers
- Social and academic engagement seem to be mutually dependent
- Increased student engagement will likely result in increased learning outcome

**Academic engagement**

### Intrinsic motivation

- Working with what is of interest to them personally and academically is important
- Working with self-elected topics and partners in the practice areas motivates

### Extrinsic motivation

- Grades and feedback from teachers
- Better pay and interesting job
Discussion

Guidance and feedback

- Students lack insight into their professional levels
- They prefer more individual feedback (e.g. grades and comments) which may develop their professional skills and knowledge

Retention

- Relations to fellow students and to teachers are of great importance for student retention
- Teachers’ engagement in their subjects is deemed very important.
- Important that all students in an online group have a positive attitude to cooperating.
- They are to have reasonably homogenous ‘life worlds,’ so that they may understand each other’s challenges and the life-work balance involved.

Quality, incl. structure vs. flexibility

- Clear structure seems to be a prerequisite for taking advantage of the flexibility in online education
How to Apply Results

Social engagement:
Structuring online learning around activities taking place in the study groups in greater measure

Academic engagement:
Academic content of the study should be linked even more to students’ future professional practice
Utilize students’ practice experience
Grades and feedback: grades could both be motivation or deterrent.

Guidance and feedback:
Accommodate the students’ needs

Retention:
Study groups could be assembled on the basis of ‘life worlds’ by using surveys, padlet. The education should recognize the special conditions applying to online students by giving clear expectations, clear messages as to when teaching takes place, deadlines for papers to be handed in, semester plan ahead of time etc.

Structure, flexibility and quality:
Offer ‘guides’ that describe how online education may be structured on the part of students and on long stretches of studies as well

Data from only six groups
Only well-functioning groups joined in
References

# Interview Questions

## Table 2: Interview guide used in focus group interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question - subtopics</th>
<th>Interview question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Which elements support students’ social engagement?</strong></td>
<td>How was your study groups formed?</td>
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<td>Do you get to know each other through working on the current assignment?</td>
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<td>What is needed to ensure your social connections in the study programme?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How can assignments support your social engagement?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Which elements support students’ academical engagement?</strong></td>
<td>How has the current assignment supported your academic engagement?</td>
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<td>Have you used the amount of time set for the current assignment?</td>
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<td>Which kind of assignments have supported your academic engagement – and why?</td>
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<td><strong>What may be described as important regarding feedback and guidance?</strong></td>
<td>Did you receive guidance and/or feedback in relation to the current assignment?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What kind of guidance and feedback did you receive?</td>
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<td>To what extend have you used the guidance and feedback offered?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What kind of guidance and feedback gives you the best outcome?</td>
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<td><strong>Which elements affects students’ wish to stay on in the study programme?</strong></td>
<td>What affects your being happy about your choice of study programme?</td>
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<td>Do you feel it difficult to socialize because you are an online student?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Which elements from study activities strengthen social relations?</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Which elements from study activities strengthen academic engagement?</td>
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