

Effectiveness of Engagement Strategies in Enhancing Academic Retention in Higher Education

Abhishek Kumar¹; Repudi Vijayalatha²

¹Research Scholar
The English and Foreign Languages University Hyderabad

²Associate Professor
The English and Foreign Languages University Hyderabad

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Abstract: In higher education, student engagement is mostly acknowledged as critical for assessing academic success and retention. This study investigates the usefulness of several engagement techniques, including peer collaboration, mentorship programs, active learning, and digital tools, in raising tertiary student retention rates. The research emphasises the importance of student-centred methods and intrinsic motivation in maintaining academic involvement, and it is based on constructivist and self-determination theories. The study uses a mixed-methods research strategy, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a thorough analysis. Students are given standardised questionnaires to complete as part of the quantitative component, which focuses on their opinions and experiences on academic engagement strategies. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with academic advisers and professors are part of the qualitative component, which aims to comprehensively understand the institutional strategies and challenges associated with student retention. Utilising a mixed-methods research approach, the study offers a comprehensive analysis using qualitative and quantitative methodologies. As part of the quantitative component, students are given standardised questionnaires to complete that centre on their experiences and opinions regarding academic engagement strategies. The qualitative component includes semi-structured interviews and focus groups with professors and academic advisers to better understand the institutional strategy and obstacles related to student retention. Early results indicate that individualised mentoring, engaging classroom settings, prompt feedback, and extracurricular activities are the best ways to promote community and academic perseverance. This study offers policy recommendations for educational institutions seeking to lower dropout rates and enhance student achievement through targeted engagement interventions. By examining student involvement as a multifaceted construct crucial for sustained academic success in higher education, the study adds to the developing body of literature on the subject.

Keywords: Engagement, Academic Involvement, Retention, Extracurricular, Achievement.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Education has long been seen as the most potent force behind social change, national advancement, and human growth. Higher education has been crucial in India, not just in producing a trained labor force but also in fostering critical thinking, creativity, and leadership, all of which have a direct impact on economic expansion and the health of democracy. However, academic retention, the capacity of institutions to guarantee that students stay enrolled, continue in their programs, and successfully earn their degrees, has been one of the ongoing issues in higher education worldwide, and especially in India. Low completion rates, disengagement,

and student dropout are signs of structural deficiencies in institutional support, teaching, and sociocultural contexts. To promote not only enrollment but also meaningful participation and retention in higher education, the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes learner-centric approaches, holistic development, and creative engagement strategies.

Preventing dropouts is only one aspect of retention in higher education; another is making sure that students feel inspired, appreciated, and intellectually engaged throughout their academic careers. To do this, engagement tactics such as experiential learning, technology integration, peer learning,

interactive teaching approaches, mentorship, and socioemotional support are essential. Engagement increases motivation, fosters a sense of community, and helps students overcome obstacles in their academic, personal, and professional lives. Thus, student involvement has become a key factor in determining retention and performance in higher education institutions amid increasing globalization, digitization, and changing labor markets.

The New Education Policy 2020 highlights the vital role of participation in raising the caliber and applicability of higher education. It is the first comprehensive reform of India's education policies in more than 30 years. The policy advocates for a paradigm change from examination-driven, rote-based systems to competency-based, adaptable, and inclusive learning. It places a strong emphasis on interdisciplinary education, experiential and inquiry-driven pedagogy, technological integration, encouraging research and innovation, and bolstering institutional autonomy, all of which directly affect student engagement and retention. To meet the many requirements of students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, the NEP 2020 also emphasizes the need for individualized learning pathways, academic and career counselling, ongoing formative assessments, and comprehensive support systems.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in India have been under increasing pressure in recent years to address problems such as high dropout rates, low graduation rates, and inconsistent quality of learning outcomes. Many students find it difficult to adjust to the demands of higher education, particularly those from rural, first-generation, or economically poor homes. The issue is exacerbated by cultural alienation, academic unpreparedness, insufficient institutional support, and financial constraints. Therefore, engagement techniques need to be developed as systemic practices integrated into curriculum design, teaching-learning procedures, institutional culture, and policy frameworks rather than as stand-alone interventions. Active learning techniques like problem-based learning, case studies, and group projects, for instance, promote critical thinking and teamwork; mentorship programs offer individual therapy and socioemotional support; and technology-enabled platforms like Learning Management Systems (LMS) and AI-powered personalized learning modules offer flexibility and inclusivity.

The NEP 2020 clearly envisions a student-centric learning ecosystem in which students actively participate in creating their own understanding rather than being passive consumers of knowledge. To promote participation, curiosity, and the application of information in real-world contexts, teaching approaches must be rethought. The policy's emphasis on experiential learning through fieldwork, internships, and community involvement creates opportunities for in-depth education and ongoing motivation, both of which enhance retention. Similarly, the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), credit transfer, and degree programs' flexible entry and exit points recognize students' varied learning paths and reduce the rigidity that often drives

students to drop out when life circumstances impede their academic progress.

The NEP 2020 is a strong proponent of fairness and inclusivity, another crucial aspect of engagement. Institutions cannot effectively engage students if they disregard the socioeconomic, linguistic, cultural, and gender-based barriers to involvement. As a result, the strategy emphasizes helping underprivileged populations through inclusive campus environments, remedial education, and targeted scholarships. These steps guarantee all students' success and continued participation in addition to facilitating access. Additionally, the strategy promotes inclusivity and reduces alienation among students from vernacular backgrounds, another factor associated with academic retention, by encouraging the use of Indian languages in higher education alongside English.

Student participation is linked to the broader institutional ecosystem beyond the classroom. Promoting athletics, the arts, cultural events, and wellness programs as essential elements of higher education is part of the NEP 2020's vision for holistic student development. Student satisfaction and commitment to the school are greatly increased by a lively campus life that attends to their intellectual, emotional, and social requirements. Peer learning networks, student-led clubs, and mentoring programs all help reinforce a sense of community, a crucial indicator of retention. The NEP 2020 emphasizes that involvement encompasses all aspects of the student experience and is not restricted to pedagogy by acknowledging these dimensions.

NEP 2020 emphasizes how technology integration in higher education increases participation opportunities. The rapid adoption of digital tools, online resources, and blended learning approaches during and after the COVID-19 pandemic has shown how technology can make education more individualized, participatory, and accessible. Teachers may monitor student progress, identify at-risk learners, and create interventions that improve retention with the help of learning analytics, adaptive learning platforms, and virtual collaborative tools. Nonetheless, institutions must strike a balance between technological innovation and fairness and inclusivity in order to address the digital gap.

Thus, academic readiness, socioemotional support, socioeconomic stability, institutional practices, and legislative frameworks are interconnected and contribute to academic retention rather than being viewed as a single problem. The key that unites these disparate components is engagement techniques, which enable educational institutions to create environments where students feel encouraged, challenged, and equipped for success. The NEP 2020 offers a comprehensive framework for rethinking higher education, prioritizing engagement in institutional culture and pedagogy. The core causes of student disengagement and attrition are immediately addressed by its emphasis on holistic, multidisciplinary, and flexible education.

The capacity of engagement techniques to establish inclusive, inspiring, and student-centred learning environments makes them effective in improving academic

retention in higher education. With the implementation of the NEP 2020, Indian higher education is at a turning point, where conventional methods must give way to creative, learner-driven strategies that respect local contexts while adhering to international norms. To ensure that higher education fulfils its role as a catalyst for individual empowerment, social equity, and national development, it is not only necessary but also timely to examine the connections between engagement strategies and retention within the NEP framework. Therefore, paper aims to investigate how engagement tactics, informed by the NEP 2020 principles, can improve retention in higher education and help create a society that is inclusive, egalitarian, and knowledge-driven.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Papageorgiou et al.'s 2025 Systematic Review of Undergraduate Mathematics Student Engagement Synopsis: This 2025 systematic review offers transferable findings despite being discipline-specific: in undergraduate STEM settings, well-structured active learning, regular low-stakes assessments, and solving problems together consistently boost engagement and learning outcomes. To evaluate persistence and retention, the evaluation also identifies shortcomings in measurement and design and recommends a prolonged follow-up. Implication: Research from STEM and math classrooms supports formative assessment and active learning as engagement techniques that, when maintained throughout programs, are likely to increase retention.

Prananto et al., 2025 Student Engagement and Perceived Teacher Support (Systematic Review)

This systematic review summarizes empirical research on how student participation in higher education relates to perceived teacher support. It demonstrates that emotional and behavioral engagement, which in turn predicts persistence and retention, is strongly predicted by teacher support (clear communication, timely feedback, autonomy support). To enhance retention outcomes, the review situates the findings within the framework of Self-Determination Theory and suggests faculty development focused on need-supportive instruction. Implication: Investing in teacher preparation is a proven way to increase student engagement and lower dropout rates.

Undergraduate Retention Activities: Difficulties and Successful Strategies, Gonçalves et al., 2024. After reviewing institutional retention initiatives, Gonçalves et al. found that multi-layered strategies (early alert systems, mentorship, and curriculum modification) worked well. They also highlight implementation issues, such as equitable targeting of at-risk students, staff buy-in, and data integration. Crucially, the evaluation records instances in which initiatives increased retention only in conjunction with modifications to institutional policy and resource distribution. Implication: To sustain retention gains, engagement strategies must align with institutional capacity and equitable objectives.

Gallup Meta-Analysis, 2024 A moderately positive effect on first-to-second-year retention (effect size ~ 0.4) is

reported by Gallup's meta-analytic synthesis of program assessments of strengths-based development (e.g., Clifton Strengths, assets methods). Higher student confidence, improved advising interactions, and greater academic integration are all benefits of the evaluation. Implication: To increase short-term retention, institutions can implement scalable engagement tactics, such as strength-focused coaching and advising.

Li et al.'s 2023 meta-analysis of the factors influencing student engagement to determine the variables that consistently affect student involvement (behavioural, emotional, and cognitive), Li and colleagues conducted a thorough meta-analysis that synthesized dozens of higher education studies. They demonstrate that student psychological characteristics (motivation, self-efficacy) and institutional/instructor practices (feedback, active learning) are among the most significant, reliable determinants of academic outcomes. When relating engagement to retention, the review emphasizes context-specific variation and advocates for multidimensional engagement measurement. Implication: Compared to single interventions, multi-pronged engagement strategies (pedagogy + psychological support) are more likely to increase retention.

III. OVERVIEW

Improving academic retention, motivation, and overall learning outcomes all depend heavily on student participation. This study evaluated participation across seven aspects in accordance with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: pedagogical, technical, experiential & skill-based, holistic & transdisciplinary, social & emotional, institutional & infrastructural, and policy & governance. The goal was to assess how various tactics impact undergraduate (UG) and graduate (PG) students' academic experiences.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A sample of 75 students, including both undergraduate (UG) and graduate (PG) students, participated in the current study. This sample was selected to present a balanced perspective from both advanced and early-stage students, who might offer more in-depth analyses of academic involvement. To ensure representation across all academic levels, participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The data gathered covered seven important aspects of student participation aligned with the New Education Policy (NEP 2020).

A standardized Three-Point Likert Scale questionnaire was used to gather data. Agree = 3, Neutral = 2, and Disagree = 1 were the response categories used in the scale's design. This approach enabled the researchers to record students' degrees of agreement with the propositions, as well as their levels of neutrality or disengagement with them.

The 35 items in the questionnaire were divided into seven engagement dimensions:

- Educational Involvement

- Involvement with Technology
- Skill-Based and Experiential Engagement
- Multidisciplinary and Holistic Involvement
- Emotional and Social Involvement
- Infrastructure and Institutional Involvement
- Participation in Policy and Governance

Every dimension was carefully designed to assess multiple aspects of student participation, from institutional infrastructure and policy-level changes to classroom pedagogy and technology support.

Following the collection, the data underwent a methodical quantitative examination. For every item and every dimension, the researchers calculated mean scores, percentages, and frequencies. Both macro-level insights (dimension-wise trends) and micro-level analysis (question-by-question) were made possible by this method. While the mean scores indicated the overall degree of agreement within each engagement dimension, the frequency counts and percentage distributions together provided a clear picture of how many students agreed, remained neutral, or disagreed with each item.

Table 1 Data Summary

Dimension	Total Agree	Total Neutral	Total Disagree	Avg. Mean Score
Pedagogical Engagement	205	98	72	2.36
Technological Engagement	226	65	84	2.38
Experiential & Skill-Based Engagement	215	123	37	2.47
Holistic & Multidisciplinary Engagement	193	108	74	2.32
Social & Emotional Engagement	219	98	58	2.43
Institutional & Infrastructural Engagement	210	115	50	2.44
Policy & Governance Engagement	202	120	53	2.41

V. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Responses from each of the seven engagement dimensions were analyzed, and the results showed both regions that performed well and those that needed more support.

The Experiential & Skill-Based participation dimension had the highest level of involvement, with an average mean score of 2.47. This proves unequivocally that learning that is hands-on, practical, and directly related to real-world applications increases student engagement. Project work, internships, and research participation are examples of activities that offer chances to combine theory with practice, which improves confidence and employability in addition to strengthening academic recall. The continuously high degree of agreement among these categories indicates that maintaining long-term academic motivation is mostly dependent on skill-based education.

Social & Emotional Engagement had a mean score of 2.43, making it the second strongest dimension. This emphasizes the value of a nurturing learning environment where kids gain from mentoring connections, peer learning, and productive teacher-student interactions. This kind of involvement helps build resilience and academic confidence in addition to knowledge acquisition. The results show that social connection and emotional health are essential foundations of a successful higher education.

The importance of classroom and laboratory facilities, e-libraries, and student support services in maintaining motivation and retention is shown in Institutional & Infrastructural Engagement, which came in second with a mean score of 2.44. Adequate infrastructure shows the

institution's dedication to student success in addition to offering tools for efficient learning. The comparatively high answers here attest to the fact that institutions with the necessary resources are better able to foster regular participation. With a mean score of 2.38, technological engagement was also found to be a significant factor in learning. Students gave learning management systems (LMS), multimedia materials, blended learning, and virtual simulations high marks for their ability to enhance idea memory and make learning more engaging. A tiny portion of pupils, however, expressed no opinion, pointing to potential differences in either digital tool proficiency or technological access. Reducing this digital gap may increase participation even further.

Holistic & Multidisciplinary Engagement, on the other hand, had the lowest mean score (2.32), even if it was still favorable overall. Although many students did not firmly believe that multidisciplinary courses and the integration of the arts, humanities, and sciences were immediately beneficial in increasing participation, they did appreciate the significance of such courses. This can be due to a lack of exposure to multidisciplinary forms or a preference for depth over breadth in a particular discipline. Although NEP 2020 places a high emphasis on interdisciplinary and holistic learning, its actual implementation still seems to be in a transitional stage.

Lastly, the average mean score for Policy & Governance Engagement (NEP 2020) was 2.41, which indicates moderate levels of benefit and awareness. Students realized that reforms like the National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF), credit transfer, and alternative entry and departure options may provide more adaptable and employable career paths. In order to fully reap the benefits of NEP 2020 changes,

institutions may need to improve their communication and implementation strategies, as the replies also indicated that adoption and practical awareness of these policies are not yet ubiquitous.

VI. DATA ANALYSIS

The results demonstrate that students are most engaged when their education is experiential, skill-driven, and socially supported; strong secondary support is provided by institutional amenities and technology. Even while they show promise, policy and comprehensive improvements need to be more visible and integrated into the educational experience. The findings collectively confirm that in order to promote more engagement and long-term academic achievement, higher education must prioritize practical relevance, emotional health, and institutional support.

VII. CONCLUSION

The study's conclusions highlight how important engagement tactics are in determining academic retention in higher education. According to the statistics, student involvement is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by a variety of elements, including pedagogy, technology, experiential learning, institutional support, social-emotional aspects, and policy frameworks like the NEP 2020. The most influential of the seven variables evaluated was experiential and skill-based engagement, suggesting that students are most driven when learning is applicable, hands-on, and related to real-world situations. Strong outcomes in social and emotional engagement also emphasize the significance of supportive teacher-student interactions, mentorship, and a sense of belonging as important factors in student persistence.

Technological tools and institutional architecture were also identified as potent enablers, indicating that digital platforms, e-libraries, and well-equipped facilities greatly enhance motivation and retention. However, the necessity for fair distribution and inclusive practices is highlighted by differences in access to technology and unequal use of services. Despite being in line with NEP 2020, holistic and multidisciplinary interaction received lower scores, indicating that either students are still adjusting to this paradigm change or that educational institutions need to improve the way these approaches are designed and implemented. Although students value the freedom and opportunity provided by NEP changes, understanding and incorporation into institutional practices are still lacking, as seen by the modest scores for policy and governance engagement. This study shows that improving retention necessitates practice-oriented, inclusive, and student-centered approaches that meet both academic and socioemotional demands. Higher education institutions are successful when they can foster situations where students feel encouraged, challenged, and inspired to keep going. In order to ensure that higher education in India not only retains students but also gives them the tools they need to succeed in a world that is becoming more complex, it will be essential to improve experiential learning, mentoring programs, infrastructure investment, and policy knowledge.

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