

# International students' emotional engagement with, and well-being during, an online EAP pre-sessional course

Ide Haghi, University of Glasgow, U.K.  
Ide.Haghi@glasgow.ac.uk

*This study investigated students' engagement with an online EAP pre-sessional course from a psychological perspective according to which engagement consists of four dimensions, namely behaviour, cognition, emotion, and conation (Kahu, 2013). This small-scale case study focused on the emotional dimension of engagement in the aforementioned course that is usually ignored in the end-of-course evaluation surveys, which often only ask one question about overall satisfaction with a course. The emotional dimension was measured here in relation to immediate emotions such as enjoyment and interest (Furlong et al., 2003) as well as relationships and sense of belonging (Libbey, 2004). The study investigated how students perceived their emotional engagement with and their well-being during this online course, as well as what factors they considered as contributing to their emotional engagement and well-being while completing this course remotely. In doing so, a group of international students who took the course completed an online survey and attended follow-up focus groups to share their reflections on their emotional engagement and well-being (perceived stress) with a summer pre-sessional EAP course offered at a university in the U.K. The findings suggest that despite considering this online course experience as relatively stressful, the participants perceived emotional engagement with this course as high. However, among different aspects of emotional engagement investigated in this study, the sense of belonging to the course was rated comparatively low. This paper provides insights in relation to students' emotional engagement with similar academic language courses and short courses alike to inform future online course design to enhance the student experience.*

**Keywords:** students' engagement, emotional engagement, student well-being, pre-sessional EAP course, online language course

## Introduction

With the unprecedented circumstances caused by the recent global pandemic, many higher education institutions across the globe experienced an overnight switch to online delivery of the majority of their programmes. While the immediate response to the need for physical distancing at the initial stages of the pandemic was to implement fully online delivery (emergency remote teaching), many institutions have ever since been adopting fully or blended delivery formats and are considering continuing using these formats as uncertainties surrounding the pandemic still persist and the advantages of these modalities begin to emerge (e.g., student mobility). Such an increase in the adoption of online learning has, more than any other time, been accompanied by a demand for greater accountability in higher education. As an indicator of quality of education, student engagement has been explored widely in programme evaluation surveys and research in recent years. Such measures though have been limited to face-to-face university experience (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008) and mostly conducted among students with western educational backgrounds. In addition, while learning engagement has been explored from various perspectives (e.g., behavioural and socio-cultural), the emotional aspect of learning has generally been limited to a single item on surveys assessing overall satisfaction (Kahu, 2013) and most studies have exclusively focused on survey data. In the absence of face-to-face interaction between students and teachers, there is limited opportunity for students to express feelings and emotions about their learning experience in online courses. Given that many students have had to and may need to take such courses for the foreseeable future, it is vital for education providers to explore this aspect of engagement in order to better inform their course and programme design to maintain the educational quality they have committed themselves to providing to their prospective students. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by investigating students' *emotional engagement* with an online EAP pre-session course and their well-being circumstances while completing the course remotely at a higher education institution in the U.K. In doing so, students who took this course were invited to complete an online questionnaire and attend focus groups at the end of the course to share their reflections on their engagement and well-being.

## Literature review

### Student engagement

Students' engagement has been a buzzword in higher education and has been investigated from various perspectives. In the education literature, there are generally four views of engagement: behavioural, psychological, socio-cultural, and holistic (Kahu, 2013). While the behavioural perspective

– an extensively used approach to investigating engagement in higher education – focuses on 'students' satisfaction and institutional practices and student behaviours related to student satisfaction and achievement' (Kahu, 2013, p. 759), the psychological, and sociocultural perspectives go beyond the behavioural aspect of engagement and consider other elements in relation to students engagement such as 'an internal psycho-social process' and 'broader social context on student experience' (Kahu, 2013, pp. 761 & 763). Student engagement has also been explored by combining these three approaches in few studies from a holistic perspective. While a holistic approach would allow for a more comprehensive study of student engagement, considering the multifacetedness of the construct, to maintain a holistic view, it does not consider engagement and 'its antecedents' a criticism also applicable to the behavioural approach (Kahu, 2013, p. 761). In other words, by mainly focusing on the processes involved in creating engagement (i.e., what institutions do to engage students), rather than also taking into account the outcome (i.e., individual psychological states of students while engaging), such psychological states consist of emotion, cognition, and behaviour. All of these dimensions are considered in the psychological approach.

Considering the focus of this study – emotional engagement of students in a pre-session course – this study employed the psychological perspective to better understand students' emotional engagement with this online course.

### Emotional engagement

From a psychological perspective engagement is regarded as a single meta construct consisting of four dimensions namely behaviour, cognition, emotion, and conation. The behaviour dimension of the approach overlaps with elements associated to engagement from a behavioural perspective; it mainly focuses on rule following, positive conduct, and participation in curricula and extracurricular activities. The cognition on the other hand, focuses on 'a student's psychological investment in and effort directed towards learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge skills or crafts' (Lamborn et al., 1992, p. 12) and includes students using strategies such as deep learning as well as self-regulation (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). The emotional dimension of the psychological perspective then attaches 'an emotional intensity' to students' experience (Askham, 2008, p. 94). This distinctive component of the psychological approach is a commonly overlooked aspect of engagement, especially in end-of-course evaluation surveys. The emotional dimension is often measured based on immediate emotions such as enjoyment and interest (Furlong et al., 2003) as well as relationships and sense of belonging (Libbey, 2004). While it is argued that the three dimensions of behaviour, cognition, and emotion can adequately capture engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004) from a psychological

view, a fourth dimension is also often attributed to this perspective, namely conation, which considers engagement in relation to belief, courage, energy, commitment, conviction, and change (Riggs & Gholar, 2009).

A review of research literature on engagement from a psychological perspective reveals a few gaps including a lack of an operational definition for the different dimensions (Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003) and that the context of engagement such as engagement with institution, peers, or classroom remains unspecific in the majority of previous studies (Furlong et al., 2003). In addition, not much research on factors affecting the definition of these different dimensions and how they are conceptualized currently exists. Moreover, the relations existing between the engagement data and other valid measures of student learning also remain to be addressed more substantially. In addition, learner engagement in general and from a psychological perspective in particular has yet remained an under-researched area in the context of EAP. Considering the distinct characteristics of EAP courses, especially short courses such as summer pre-sessionals, which are more intensive than degree courses offered throughout the academic year, it is important to explore student engagement in these courses to see how the context of such courses interact with how students engage with their studies within these courses.

This small-scale case study focusing on the emotional dimension of engagement sought to explore this dimension of students' engagement with an online EAP pre-sessional summer course by providing an operational definition for emotional engagement (e.g., joy, interest, sense of belonging) and investigating emotional engagement in relation to a specific context of engagement (i.e., the online course). In addition, to explore factors affecting the definition of the emotional dimension of engagement, factors contributing to emotional engagement of international students with this online EAP course completing the course remotely and from their home countries was also investigated.

### Student well-being

As mentioned earlier, another dimension of students' experiences in the pre-sessional course investigated in this study was their well-being. As a multifaceted construct, well-being has been defined in numerous ways in different disciplines and there is yet a lack of a globally accepted definition (Seedhouse, 1995). While well-being is commonly associated with health (e.g., according to World Health Organization, 2021), there are other perspectives according to which well-being is linked to interpersonal experiences and in relation to personal identity (Galvin & Todres, 2011). In more recent conceptualizations of well-being, the construct has been viewed through a philosophical lens connected to hedonic and eudemonic views where well-being is perceived as the realization of an individual's

true nature or general idea of happiness and pleasure as the main goals of life respectively (Diener, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). In this small-scale study, well-being is associated with personal experiences of health based on Medin and Alexanderson's (2001) definition of well-being. Considering the emphasis on the constantly changing experiences linked to well-being from this perspective, the framework provides a definition which well suited the focus of the study on the transition of international students (mostly non-anglophone) to a new (anglophone) higher education setting, particularly experienced in an online format. Stress, as a variable closely associated to health and well-being (e.g., Robotham & Julian, 2006) and frequently referred to in student–staff liaison committee meetings in the given course, was used as an indicator of well-being in this study.

### Research questions

In this study, students' emotional engagement with the course was measured based on the extent they found *the online course* (the context of engagement) *enjoyable* (e.g., liking, having fun, exciting or boring) as well as *interesting* and their *sense of belonging* (elements) to the course. Since this study focused on students' well-being during the course, in addition to emotional engagement, stress, as an indicator of well-being which is not included in the construct of emotional engagement, was also explored as a separate construct. This was to address the often-overlooked aspect of students' life – which yet 'permeates to their success in the classroom' (Hernandez, 2016, p. 4) and the understanding of which would allow for a safe and compassionate environment in which students can explore their human experience. In the case of this online pre-sessional course, this was even more pressing, given the circumstances where students were completing the course remotely, and in many cases from their home country rather than on a university campus, and where there was less opportunity for students to express their emotional concerns with peers and tutors due to lack of face-to-face contact. The study therefore investigated the stress students experienced in this online course as well as their personal circumstances in which they completed the course remotely.

In addition, while the study explored what promotes emotional engagement and well-being in the online environment it also investigated what relations exist between the engagement data and other valid measures of student learning (i.e., their pre-sessional end-of-course overall score). The following research questions were formulated to address the aims of this study:

1. What are students' perceived emotional engagement and well-being in an online EAP pre-sessional course?

2. What relations exist between the students' emotional engagement/well-being and their overall achievement score?
3. What are students' perceptions on factors attributing to their emotional engagement/well-being in this online EAP pre-sessional course?

## **Material and methods**

Given the multidimensional nature of the construct under investigation, and in order to address the four foci of the study mentioned in the research questions above, a mixed method approach using explanatory sequential design was used (Creswell, 2017). The sequence consisted of two phases, in phase 1 (the quantitative+qualitative phase) an online survey with rating scale items and short text-based items were used to depict an overall picture of students' emotional engagement with and well-being during the course. This phase was then followed by the second phase (the qualitative phase) consisting of a series of follow-up focus group interviews to provide possible explanation for the quantitative results. The different data sets were then triangulated to address the research questions.

### **Research context and participants**

The pre-sessional academic English course is now a well-established course offered across almost all higher education institutions in the U.K. This is a course that is usually offered prior to the commencement of the academic year and aims at improving international students' academic language and literacy as they are preparing to start their main degree programmes. At the university where the study was conducted, this course is offered all year-round as well as during the summer as an intensive course to prepare those international students who have a conditional offer and need to meet the English proficiency minimum requirement – often by 0.5 to 1.0 score on secure English language tests such as IELTS – for their upcoming degree studies. This study focused on the summer pre-sessional course which was offered online for the first time due to the pandemic. The course is divided into three blocks which last fourteen weeks in total. Depending on their language proficiency, the students start the course in the first, second, or third block.

All students of the online pre-sessional course (n = 900) – predominantly Chinese international students – were invited to complete an online questionnaire and attend focus groups to share their reflections on their emotional engagement and well-being with the pre-sessional course at the end of the course and via email. Seventy-five students ultimately completed the questionnaire and fifteen took part in the follow-up focus group interviews. The students were all international postgraduates from a range of

disciplines. Participation in the study was voluntary and in accordance with the research ethics guidelines in place in the higher education institution where the study was conducted.

## Research instruments

### Survey

An online survey was designed and used in the first phase of this study to collect data related to the perceived emotional engagement and perceived stress during the pre-session course.

The survey consisted of two parts. The first part contained question about students' course results and whether they completed the course in the U.K. or in their home country. The second part consisted of rating items focusing on emotional engagement as well as well-being. For emotional engagement, the revised scale was adapted from the Emotional Engagement Scale (EE scale) from Sun and Rueda (2012) with items related to like, enjoyment, excitement, fun, happiness, interest, and boredom as aspects attributed to emotional engagement; one further item was added to address sense of belonging as another element attributed to emotional engagement (Libby, 2004) which was not included in the original scale. Two additional items were also included in relation to perceived stress related to the course as well as completing the course remotely (online). The internal consistency coefficients – whether a collection of items measures the same construct – of the Likert scale items on the survey was 0.880. In addition to the Likert scale items, open-ended questions were also included in the survey to explore factors students attributed to their emotional engagement and well-being (stress).

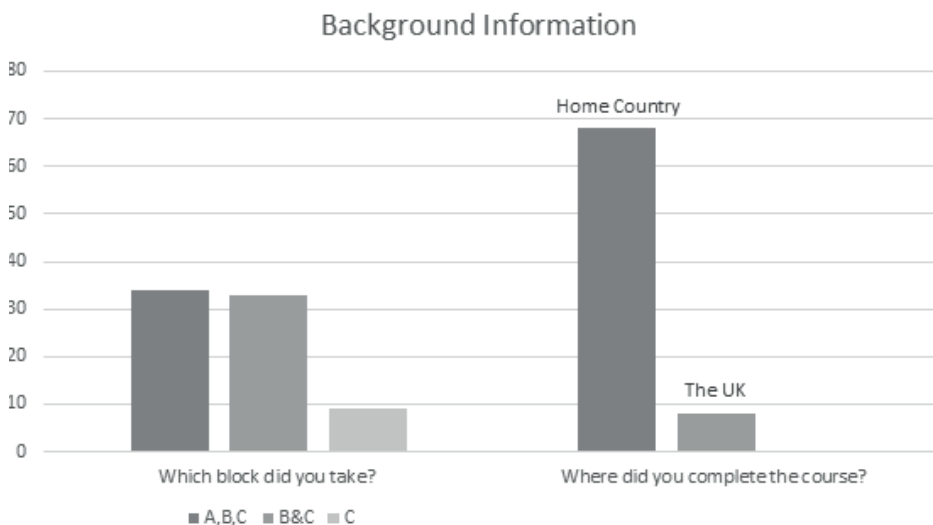
### Focus group interviews

Following the survey stage, students who had indicated in the survey to take part in the follow-up focus group interviews were invited to the online focus group interviews. The interview schedule was developed based on participants' responses to the survey particularly to the open-ended items in order to further explore factors they indicated had affected their emotional engagement and well-being during the course. Ethical approval prior to both data collection phases was also granted by the research ethic committee at the institution where the study was conducted.

## Results

With 75 out of 900 students responding to the survey the response rate in this study was  $E = 10\%$  at the 95% confidence level ( $E$  between 1% and 10% deemed acceptable by survey researchers [Dörnyei, 2007, p. 74]) to generalize the findings to the target population.

As mentioned above, the first part of the survey collected demographic information, namely, whether the participants were based in the U.K. during the pre-session course, which of the three blocks of the course they completed, and what their final overall course grade was. As seen in Table 1, the students who took part in the study had attended either all blocks or had joined the course in the second or third blocks. The majority of them were taking the course from their home countries. Figure 1 details this demographic information.



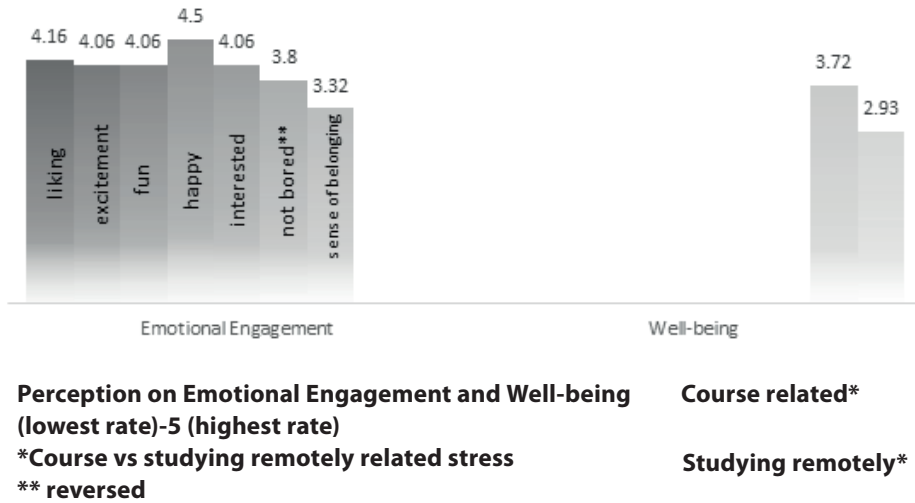
**Figure 1 Demographic information**

The second part of the survey and the follow-up focus group interviews then focused on the emotional engagement with and the well-being of students during the pre-session online course. The results obtained from these are presented below and in relation to each of the research questions:

*What are students' perceived emotional engagement and well-being in an online EAP pre-session course?*

As shown in Figure 2 below, the students seemed to be emotionally engaged with the course, with all emotional engagement scales rated above the mid-point except from the sense of belonging which was rated lower than the other sub-constructs and close to the mid-point. These results also showed that despite being positively emotionally engaged, the students seemed to be quite stressed mainly in relation to the course with overall emotional engagement rated as 4.0 and well-being (perceived stress) as 3.32. In addition, in relation to well-being the rating scale results showed that





**Figure 2 Emotional engagement and well-being (perceived stress) survey scores**

students attributed most of the stress to their experience of the course rather than to studying remotely.

*What relations exist between their emotional engagement/ well-being and their overall achievement score?*

**Table 1 Correlation between emotional engagement/well-being and overall course score**

Correlations		Overall scores	Perceived enjoyment	Perceived stress
Overall scores	Pearson correlation	1	-.101	.107
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.391	.407
	N	75	75	75

As seen in Table 1, the relationship between overall final course grade and overall emotional engagement score was measured using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (measuring the strength of the linear correlation between two variable). Preliminary analysis was performed to ensure no violation of the negative correlation between the two variables,  $r=-.10$ ,  $n=75$ ,  $p<.391$ , with low levels of emotional engagement associated with low course grades. But the strength of the correlation is low. As for the correlation between overall course grade and overall stress score, it was  $r=.10$ ,  $p<.407$  which while showing a positive correlation, meaning that the higher

the stress the higher the final scores, is yet with a small strength suggesting the degree of stress often associated with university experience (Whitman et al., 1985, p. 85–91) and positively affecting performance (Schafer, 1996).

*What are students' perceptions on factors attributing to their emotional engagement/well-being in this online EAP pre-sessional course?*

**Table 2 Factors fostering emotional engagement, students' perceptions (n=72)**

Themes	Token
Communication with peers	28
Communicating with tutor (to receive support from tutors)	28
Sense of learning and achievement	12
Liking the course content and structure	8
Interest in certain tasks/activities	7
Extracurricular activities including opportunities to know the local culture	5

Regarding factors fostering emotional engagement, six themes emerged from the analysis of short text responses to the open-ended item in the survey. As shown in Table 2, among these elements some relate to those attributed to emotional engagement from a psychological perspective. Liking the course content and its structure and interest in specific activities/tasks, relate to immediate emotions such as enjoyment and interest which are attributed to emotional engagement (Furlong et al., 2003). In addition, interaction opportunities with peers and tutors, which have been argued to ultimately contribute to sense of belonging (Finn, 1993) is another element linked to emotional engagement from the psychological perspective. Regarding interaction opportunities with the tutor, the majority of responses highlighted the support students often seek in such interactions and the importance of such support in relation to how they feel. In the follow-up focus group interviews, the participants mentioned the care they received from their tutors in their one-to-one tutorials, an important contributor to their feelings as it made them feel less distressed and more assured. A student described such feeling as, 'it is good to have interaction [with the tutor] to double check what I need to do, just a reassurance. So, interaction with the tutor for a quick double check of something, would be very helpful and reduce stress'.

The responses to the open-ended questions and focus group interviews therefore suggested that such support not only made them feel good about their experience, but it did also reduce their stress.

As for interaction opportunities with peers and making a bond, some students indicated there was not enough opportunity to do so. As a student put it,

In face-to-face courses, we can study together, travel together, but in an online course we can only study together, and this made me feel not being able to connect with others [peers] in a 2-hour live session. So, as we couldn't interact with other students socially outside the class time, as persons than just classmates, this affected my sense of belonging. For instance, being able to go to the library with other classmates would make me feel more like a university of [X] student than just the student of Zoom university!

Other elements were also indicated to be contributing to the students' emotional engagement which have been previously attached to other dimensions of engagement in the literature such as sense of achievement which belongs to the cognition dimension in the psychological perspective or extracurricular activities which is attributed to the behaviour dimension from a psychological perspective. Such results evidence the interconnectivity of the different dimensions of students' engagement and the need to consider them in conjunction with each other (Kahu, 2013). It also shows how students' educational backgrounds can potentially affect the way different aspects of engagement are formed in diverse backgrounds prior to their studies in anglophone universities and therefore perceived distinctly by students from different educational backgrounds.

In relation to course-related stress and stress related to studying remotely, a number of factors emerged from the analysis of open-ended items on the survey.

**Table 3 Factors contributing to stress, students' perceptions (n=50)**

Themes	Course/SR related	Token
Unfamiliarity with online platform	Studying remotely	34
Specific tasks (e.g., extended essay, seminars, etc)	Course related	25
Deadline for essay (time difference issues)	Studying remotely	16
Difficulty with independent learning and self-discipline (in the absence of teacher and peer pressure)	Studying remotely	8
Difficulty concentrating at home (not a study environment)	Studying remotely	8
Internet connection issues		6
Workload	Course related	6

As shown in table 3, both course-related and studying remotely (SR) factors were mentioned by students in relation to stress. More than half of the responses regarded unfamiliarity with the online platforms via which the course was delivered as a factor causing stress. A closer analysis

of the responses showed that this was mainly to do with navigating through Moodle and accessing course materials. The analysis of focus group responses further explained these results and suggested that students found text-heavy instructions on Moodle difficult to follow and at times 'confusing'. Consequently, not being able to easily follow such instructions made students feel distressed since understanding the instructions was vital for them to be able to complete weekly tasks and meet their submission deadlines. A student in the focus group mentioned,

I had difficulty using Moodle and although we were sent some induction via email, we received many of these and it was sometimes confusing. Sometimes, I couldn't understand them and that would make me stressed. So, an easy introductory video of say how to use Moodle would be very helpful.

Other stressors related to studying remotely were deadlines and difficulty with independent learning and concentrating at home. As for the deadlines, time difference between the university's local time and that of students seemed to have caused issues which resulted in experiencing stress. As a student remarked in the focus group interviews,

The deadline time was not suitable for students in different time zones. So, in my case the deadline was 4 or 5 am [in my time zone] and I wanted to work till the last minute, and this would mean working the whole night before the deadline which made me very stressed.

They also seemed to find the increased degree of independent learning and self-discipline in the absence of peer pressure and support – which they would otherwise get in a face-to-face situation with more opportunities to communicate with peers before and after class on campus – as another factor contributing to their stress.

In addition to the stress factors related to studying remotely, some factors emerging from the data were directly linked to the course. Half of the participants referred to specific tasks as a source of stress and these were mainly high-stake assessed tasks. Among these tasks, two specific ones were referred to repeatedly were the extended essay and the seminar discussion tasks. With the essay it was the high-stakeness of the task that caused stress than stress related to the online course. With the seminars, however, in addition to its stake being high, the weekly seminar practice which led to the final seminar presentation was also considered a stressful experience. One main reason some students mentioned for 'unfamiliarity with group work skills resulting in them feeling stressed when asked to work in groups' was that they did not feel confident in working in groups, especially at the beginning of the course. The discussion in the focus group explained some of the causes of stress related to working in group

for seminars, especially when students do not have as much opportunity to bond with their peers outside class as they would have in a face-to-face course. As a student mentioned,

We need to have a chance to get to know each other before being sent off to have a study group work. For our seminar discussions, however, we didn't really spend enough time to discuss the topic so that if the topic is new to any of us [we need to] have a chance to learn more about it and be able to discuss it in the seminar. We only spend an hour before the live session which I think was not enough. This lack of understanding makes me feel stressed. And this one hour is not enough for us to know each other well.

Other course-related stress was workload, which considering the intensive nature of the pre-session courses is an expected and as mentioned earlier a possibly 'positive' stressor associated to university experience.

## Discussion

This study sought to investigate emotional engagement with and well-being during a pre-session EAP course delivered fully online. The results showed that overall, students perceived their emotional engagement positively and while indicated degrees of stress, this did not seem to negatively affect their performance or their emotional engagement with the course. In addition, among emotional engagement factors, sense of belonging seemed to be perceived less positively than other engagement elements (i.e., enjoyment and interest). The analysis of responses to the open-ended item on the survey and the follow-up focus group interviews offered some explanations for such observations. The need for more interaction opportunities with peers and tutors, as the most frequent factors contributing to emotional engagement perceived by students, was one major reason why students did not feel a strong sense of belonging to the course. Interaction opportunities with peers and tutors have been argued to ultimately contribute to sense of belonging according to Finn's (1993) participation-identification model. Considering the reduced opportunity available to students to interact outside class in online courses, it is therefore important to provide them with ample opportunities such as timetabled social live sessions to provide synchronous communication to establish relationships with peers and the course in general. In addition, to foster sense of belonging by providing opportunities for students to establish a bond with peers, where possible, students can remain in the same group (in blocked pre-session courses for instance or study groups) throughout a short course such as a pre-session summer course.

Regarding factors students attributed to their emotional engagement and well-being the findings showed a range of factors. As with the emotional engagement, while some elements attributed to emotional engagement such as liking the course content and structure, interest in certain tasks/activities and sense of belonging were the same as those suggested in the literature regardless of delivery mode (face-to-face or online) or educational level and background (school and higher education; international and home students), some factors overlapped with other aspects of engagement including sense of achievement and being involved in extracurricular activities which belong to cognition and behaviour dimensions of the psychological perspective to engagement respectively. Such findings support the current argument in the literature regarding the multifaceted nature of student engagement (Kahu, 2013) and how these various aspects of the construct interact with each other and are perceived distinctly by different cohorts of students. Given the diverse educational background of international students, it is imperative to further investigate how students' educational backgrounds determine the factors students attribute to various aspects of engagement.

As for factors contributing to stress, the results from the survey indicated that course-related stress was perceived to be the main reason for stress students experienced during the course than any related to studying remotely. This is while the results of the open-ended items on the survey and the focus group interviews suggested more stressors attributed to studying remotely than course related. In fact, only two aspects of the course (i.e., specific tasks such as essay and seminar discussion, and workload) were referred to as sources of stress. Such findings suggest that the amount and significance of stress caused by these factors were different. It also shows the link between emotional engagement and elements from other dimensions of engagement such as sense of achievement as all tasks referred to as inducing stress were assessed works. The results of the correlation between overall course scores also showed a positive relationship between stress and performance albeit at a weak level. Such findings correspond with the previous literature where one of the main student stressors is linked to assessed work (Abouserie, 1994; Aherne, 2001).

Regarding the pedagogical and course design implications for summer EAP pre-session courses and short courses alike, the following suggestion can be recommended. First, more scaffolding and guidance especially at initial stages of the course are needed, both in terms of using the online platform (online competence) and the course materials as well as in skills required to work in groups. In addition, a gradual move to independent study experience (e.g., providing an initial guide on choosing optional materials) would help students better immerse into the course and adapt skills required to perform competently as a postgraduate student in the course. Considering the international students' diverse backgrounds and

distinct educational experiences, it is inevitable to have students who are not familiar with the educational practices in which collaborative learning is actively practised and learning requires utilizing group's competencies (Bennett & Dunne, 1992; Galton & Williamson, 1992; Webb & Palincsar, 1996) – an aspect of education experience and a set of study skills which may not be commonly practised in students' local context. Considering that for the majority of pre-sessional students, taking these courses prior to their main degree programme is potentially the first encounter with such mode of learning, and when done online with less opportunity to be exposed to this mode via broader university experience, it is imperative to provide additional scaffolding at initial stages of these courses to provide a smoother transition and a less distressing experience for these international students.

Second, when offered online, the instructions and guidance should be presented via multimedia means such as videos, illustrations, and less dense texts which are accompanied with images. Use of various forms of media including visual and auditory has been argued to be an effective way in engaging learners with learning particularly in an online environment (Lange & Costly, 2020). Visual and auditory media facilitate the transfer of information from working to long-term memory. They also improve attention and engagement among students (Lange & Costly, 2020). While in EAP, traditionally, course materials tended to be dense long texts and often not engaging for learners (Kohnke, Jarvis, & Ting, 2021), considering the proliferation of multimodal texts new generations of students have access to beyond academia, it is imperative to benefit from the merits such modes of communication offer. In addition, as pre-sessional EAP students are predominantly second-language learners of English at the outset of their higher education experience in an English-speaking context, using multimodal materials including videos, audios, images, infographics, etc., which improve comprehension among language learners (Bicen & Beheshti, 2019; Hafner & Miller, 2018), enables EAP teachers to provide additional scaffolding, especially at the initial stage of the pre-sessional course.

Finally, as shown above, the data from the survey and follow-up focus groups suggest that with those continuing EAP courses that are offered in short blocks (e.g., blocks of four to six weeks), changing student groups in each block – especially when offered online and where there is less opportunity for students to maintain relationship with peers outside class as they would do in a face-to-face situation – does not provide students with adequate opportunity to establish a relationship with their peers, which in this case seemed to reduce their sense of belonging to the course. The results also revealed that more opportunities for synchronous interaction with peers and tutors, among other factors, would play a key role in improving emotional engagement. Therefore, it is suggested that where

possible, students remain in the same class group or in the same study group throughout a block of a course so that they have more opportunity to establish a bond with their peers.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that more research is needed to explore engagement among higher education students in online courses as the model of delivery seems to contribute to how students emotionally engage with the course. Other factors such as students' educational background' can also determine what factors students attribute to various aspects of engagement. Further research is therefore required to closely examine the interaction between these different aspects of engagement (e.g., emotion, cognition, conation) to better understand different aspects of the multifaceted construct of students' engagement and ultimately allow for more engaged pedagogical practices (Riener & Willingham, 2010) which in turn can provide opportunities for more inclusive education.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant for authorship and/or publication of this article.

## References

- Abouserie, R. (1994). Sources and levels of stress in relation to locus of control and self-esteem in university students. *Educational Psychology, 14*(3), 323–330.
- Aherne, D. (2001). Understanding student stress: a qualitative approach. *The Irish Journal of Psychology, 22*(3/4), 176–187.
- Askham, P. (2008). Context and identity: Exploring adult learners' experiences of higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 32*, 85–97.
- Bennett, N., & Dunne, E. (1992). *Managing classroom groups*. Simon & Schuster Education.
- Bicen, H., & Beheshti, M. (2019). Assessing perceptions and evaluating achievements of ESL students with the usage of infographics in a flipped classroom learning environment. *Interactive Learning Environments, 30*, 498–526.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage.
- Diener, E. (2023). Happiness: The science of subjective well-being. In R. Biswas-Diener & E. Diener (Eds.), *Noba textbook series: Psychology*. DEF.



- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford University Press.
- Finn, J. D. (1993). *School engagement and students at risk*. National Center for Education Statistics.
- Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(1), 59–109.
- Furlong, M., Whipple, A., St Jean, G., Simental, J., Soliz, A., & Punthuna, S. (2003). Multiple contexts of school engagement: Moving toward a unifying framework for educational research and practice. *The California School Psychologist*, 8, 99–113.
- Galton, M., & Williamson, J. (1992). *Group work in the primary classroom*. Routledge.
- Galvin, K., & Todres, L. (2011). Kinds of well-being: A conceptual framework that provides direction for caring. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 6(4), 10362.
- Hafner, C., & Miller, L. (2018). *English in the disciplines: A multidimensional model for ESP course design*. Routledge.
- Hernandez, P. (2016). *The pedagogy of real talk: Engaging, teaching, and connecting with students at risk*. Sage.
- Jimerson, S. R., Campos, E., & Greif, J. L. (2003). Toward an understanding of definitions and measures of school engagement and related terms. *Contemporary School Psychology*, 8, 7–27.
- Kahu, E. R. (2013). Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(5), 758–773.
- Lamborn, S. D., Brown, B. B., Mounts, N. S., & Steinberg, L. (1992). Putting school in perspective: The influence of family, peers, extracurricular participation, and parttime work on academic engagement. In F. M. Newmann (Ed.), *Student engagement and achievement in American secondary schools* (pp. 153–181). Teachers College Press.
- Lange, C., & Costley, J. (2020). Improving online video lectures: Learning challenges created by media. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 17, 16. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-020-00190-6>.
- Libbey, H. P. (2004). Measuring student relationships to school: Attachment, bonding, connectedness, and engagement. *Journal of School Health*, 74, 274–283.
- Medin, J., & Alexanderson, K. (2001). *Health and health promotion: A literature study*. Studentlitteratur.
- Riener, C., & Willingham, D. (2010). The myth of learning styles. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 42(5), 32–35.
- Riggs, E. G., & Gholar, C. R. (2009). *Strategies that promote student engagement* (2nd ed.). Corwin Press.
- Robinson, C. C., & Hullinger, H. (2008). New benchmarks in higher education: Student engagement in online learning. *Journal of Education for Business*, 84, 101–109.
- Robotham, D., & Julian, C. (2006). Stress and the higher education student: A critical review of the literature. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 30(2), 107–117.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2001). To be happy or to be self-fulfilled: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 141–166.

- Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(4), 719.
- Schafer, W. (1996). *Stress management for wellness*. Harcourt Brace College Publishers.
- Seedhouse, D. (1995). "Well-being": Health promotion's red herring. *Health Promotion International*, 10(1), 61–67.
- Sun, J. C., & Rueda, R. (2012). Situational interest, computer self-efficacy and self-regulation: Their impact on student engagement in distance education. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 43, 191–204.
- Webb, N. M., & Palincsar, A. S. (1996). Group processes in the classroom. In D. C. Berliner & R. C. Calfee (Eds.), *Handbook of educational psychology* (pp. 841–873). Macmillan.
- Whitman, N. A., Spendlove, D. C., & Clark, C. H. (1985). Student stress: Effects and solutions. (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Research Report, no. 2). ERIC Publications.
- World Health Organization (2021). *Health promotion glossary of terms 2021*. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/350161>.

## Biography

Ide Haghi is a lecturer in English for academic study in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Glasgow. She is a convenor for the TEAP course in the MA TESOL programme and a lecturer in the TEAP online course. She also teaches on other TESOL courses as well as EAP programmes. She is currently conducting research on EAP programme evaluation with a particular focus on the psychological engagement of students with these programmes. She is also supervising PhD students researching university academic literacy provision within and outside the U.K.